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OY/YO Forever

by THE EDITORS



Deborah Kass, OY/YO, 2015. Brooklyn Bridge Park. Photo: Etienne Frossard, © Deborah Kass, courtesy Two Trees Management Co.

artcritical backs the call, initiated by artist Marina Adams, to make OY/YO, the public sculpture by Deborah Kass, a permanent feature of the DUMBO riverbank. The work, commissioned by Two Trees Management Company, is scheduled to remain on view at Brooklyn Bridge Park through August 2016.

We support making it permanent for the excellent reasons given by Ms. Adams in her petition to Mayor Bill de Blasio, which we invite our readers to sign:

OY/YO, by Deborah Kass has instantly become a beloved icon, a Statue of Liberty, an I Love NY for the 21st century. It speaks directly to the many communities that make NYC the greatest city in the world. OY/YO has been acclaimed by the New York Times and gone viral on Instagram. New York Magazine calls it perfect public art. It is both a tourist attraction and an integral part of the Dumbo neighborhood and waterfront. (On top of that it is one of the only public sculptures made by a woman!) NYC loves OY/YO and we want to keep it permanent and public so we can continue to enjoy it.

There may be more public sculptures around by women than Ms. Adams implies (there are at least four in New York City by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney alone, to name one artist) but we won't quibble on that front, especially as there are for sure nowhere near enough. This week, Philadelphians saw the temporary removal of Robert Indiana's LOVE from the park that bears its name. Indiana's iconic sculpture, a forebear (see below) of Kass's street-smart monument, will take up temporary digs in Dilworth Park as Love Park undergoes renovations. It is rare when a work of public art touches the public's hearts this way, and should be cherished.

But we acknowledge strong arguments against routinely making temporary public art interventions permanent simply because they resonate and are popular. One is that doing so might inhibit future temporary interventions; another is that it might aggrandize gestures that would be sweeter if they were simpler from artists invited to make temporary works but secretly hopeful of winning the bonus prize of permanence. There is always, however, an exception to prove a rule. The Eiffel Tower, initially reviled, was designed to be temporary. What would Paris be without it?

For the record, in November of last year, shortly after it was unveiled, OY/YO was an ARTCRITICAL PICK. Here is what David Cohen said of it:

OY/YO can be read two ways in more ways than meet the eye. Of course, the bright yellow typographically-symmetrical eight-foot-high aluminum letters, sited in DUMBO's Brooklyn Bridge Park, read in different languages from Manhattan or Brooklyn, in Yeoman Yankee slang as well as Spanish if you face east and Yiddish if you have your back to Kings County. It's a gentle joke about multiculturalism and borough rivalry perhaps, although kvetching is pretty much universal and non-denominational throughout greater New York. Deborah Kass offers both a recall and a riposte to Brooklyn's lost Domino sign and the Queens waterfront's repositioned "Pepsi" through the democratizing while lost in translation reverse legibility of OY/YO. But the real genius of this at once layered and brazen concrete poem is the way it works for different crowds without anyone getting patronized: Kass speaks the language of art historical appropriation to critically savvy insiders – recalling her classic Jewish feminist deconstructions of Warhol, this time she riffs off of Robert Indiana's LOVE and Ed Ruscha's OOF – but she equally presents an upbeat, innocent originality to Joe Public, lounging in the park or stuck in bridge traffic. A knowingly classy graphic for a gentrified sometime slum, OY/YO is a two-way mirror of an only-in-New York variety.

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