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Oy or Yo? Sculpture With Something to Say Lands at Brooklyn Bridge

By JONAH BROMWICH   NOV. 10, 2015

The sculpture "OY/YO" by Deborah Kass was placed in Brooklyn Bridge Park on Monday and will stand until August. Credit Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

BROOKLYN — The rude interjection is a staple of New York life. Now, the landscape of the city will itself heckle residents and tourists, with a brash new sculpture in Brooklyn Bridge Park that yells "YO" if you are looking at it from Manhattan or "OY" if you are gazing out from Brooklyn.

The sculpture, "OY/YO," is the first of this size from the artist Deborah Kass, who describes herself as a "total, absolute, 100 percent provincial New Yorker." It was commissioned by a Brooklyn developer, Two Trees Management Company, and was placed in the park on Monday.

"The fact that this particular work resonates so beautifully in so many languages to so many communities is why I wanted to make it monumental," Ms. Kass said.

Ms. Kass said she first created "OY" as a painting in 2011, as a homage or spoof of Edward Ruscha's 1962 painting "OOF." She later added "YO" as a separate painting at a friend's suggestion. Credit Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

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The work also took shape in prints and sculptures — the "YO" was added as a separate painting at a friend's suggestion — before eventually finding its way to its current larger-than-life dimensions. (The sculpture is about 8 by 17 and a half feet.)

Ms. Kass was tickled when asked about the language choice. "When doesn't it occur to me to use the word 'Oy'?" she said, laughing.

Ms. Kass is well known for her loving takes on the modern art canon. Much of her work makes reference to that of other artists, including Gertrude Stein, Andy Warhol, Jackson Pollock and Frank Stella. The Brooklyn Bridge Park sculpture, along with the reference to Mr. Ruscha, is reminiscent of Picasso's 1901 painting "Self-Portrait: Yo Picas-so" and Robert Indiana's iconic "LOVE" sculpture.

Ms. Kass's new sculpture is made of simple aluminum and paint. It will sit on the park's renovated Main Street Lawn and stand until August. Ms. Kass said the sculpture might reflect Brooklynites' "exasperation" with the neighboring borough that many older residents still refer to simply as "the city." But she quickly recanted, saying that the sculpture was best left open to interpretation.

"It's an open-ended question that people need to answer for themselves," she said.

Peter Sokolowski, the editor at large of Merriam-Webster, said that both words had long histories, though "oy" only became "a naturalized citizen of English" in the 1890s. He dated the use of the English word "yo" to as far back as the 15th century, when it was in use in Middle English. Mr. Sokolowski was enthusiastic about both words. "I love dictionary definitions of monosyllabic interjections," he said.

Two Trees has commissioned several other works of art for Brooklyn, by artists including Grayson Cox, Allen Glatter and Tom Otterness. Lisa Kim, the development group's cultural affairs director, who commissioned the piece, said Ms. Kass was a perfect fit given her combination of fine art bona fides and popular appeal.

"She has a great art-world following, but her work can really translate in the public sphere," Ms. Kim said.

And, she added, "How much more succinct and iconic of a New York and Brooklyn phrase can you get than 'oy' or 'yo'?"

Ms. Kim would not comment on the price of the commission but did say that "we had a good budget for the project."

Ms. Kass said that the sculpture was relevant to any diverse setting in America, particularly cities with large populations of blacks, Latinos and Jews, groups she called the "heart and soul of this country." But she could not help but remark upon how fine a home Brooklyn made for the piece.

"This is New York, baby. We've got it all. And the sculpture covers it all," she said.