

FEATURE - 27 SEP 2017

## Who Owns What? Who Can Speak for Whom?

A survey of international writers, curators and artists in response to recent controversies surrounding appropriation



Deborah Kass, *VOTE HILLARY*, 2016. Courtesy: the artist, Paul Kasmin Gallery, Brand New Gallery, and the Artist Rights Society

To investigate appropriation today means not only to examine the foundations of contemporary art but also to explore complex recent debates around the subject. With this in mind, the October issue of *frieze* includes a themed section with contributions from novelist Hari Kunzru, artist and writer Coco Fusco, theorist Diedrich Diederichsen, artist Renée Green, musician and critic Vivian Goldman, poet Claudia Rankine and filmmaker Alix Lambert.

As a supplement to the printed section, which moves through recent controversies surrounding appropriations, the intertwined histories of music, sampling and influence, and the potential biases of artificial intelligence devices, frieze.com has invited a cross-section of international artists, curators and writers to respond, via statement, image, or film, to the questions:

*When are acts of 'appropriation' warranted in art and culture, and when are they not? Who owns what, and who can speak for whom?*

John Keene

Candice Breitz

Kenneth Goldsmith

Khalil Rabah

Sarah Schulman

Bárbara Wagner & Benjamin de Burca

Victor Ehikhamenor

Monira Al Qadiri

Deborah Kass

Ho Tzu Nyen

Yoshua Okón

### **Deborah Kass**

Deborah Kass is an artist who lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. Her work is held in the collections of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Museum of Art, The Jewish Museum, and the Smithsonian Institute, amongst others. Kass's work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, and has been included in the Venice Biennale and the Istanbul Biennale. In 2012, The Andy Warhol Museum staged 'Deborah Kass, Before and Happily Ever After, Mid-Career Retrospective'. Kass was inducted into the New York Foundation for the Arts Hall of Fame in 2014; presented with the Passionate Artist Award by the Neuberger Museum in 2016; and was the Cultural Honoree at the Jewish Museum in 2017.

As an artist and American citizen I believe in the bedrock principle of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. Free speech is protected under the law.

The question is: In the age of Trump, what are the consequences of inappropriate, insensitive or offensive speech? It is striking how the repercussions of questionable speech vary wildly depending on who is being spoken about, who is the audience and, most importantly, who is doing the speaking.

Just like our new administration, the art market continues to ruthlessly marginalize and devalue the voices of specific groups of citizens (women, LGBTQA, indigenous Americans, and people of colour) to ensure the financial supremacy

of the very few – 99.5% of whom happen to be white men. In my work I use appropriation to interrogate the mechanisms of power and value in the asset class of post-war art and its official record, art history.

When men paint women in overtly sexist ways, as they have for centuries, there is barely a whisper of protest. When white men culturally appropriate from less powerful classes, they face little pushback. Sometimes they do, but then they apologize and are congratulated with institutional prizes as a result. The question of free speech, cultural appropriation and representation remains one of privilege and power, which still reside firmly in the hands of white men.