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## Monumental Mistake

### All Ears: The Talk in New York



View of the Vessel in the Public Square and Gardens Looking South from 33rd St. Courtesy of Forbes Massie

By  Linda Yablonsky

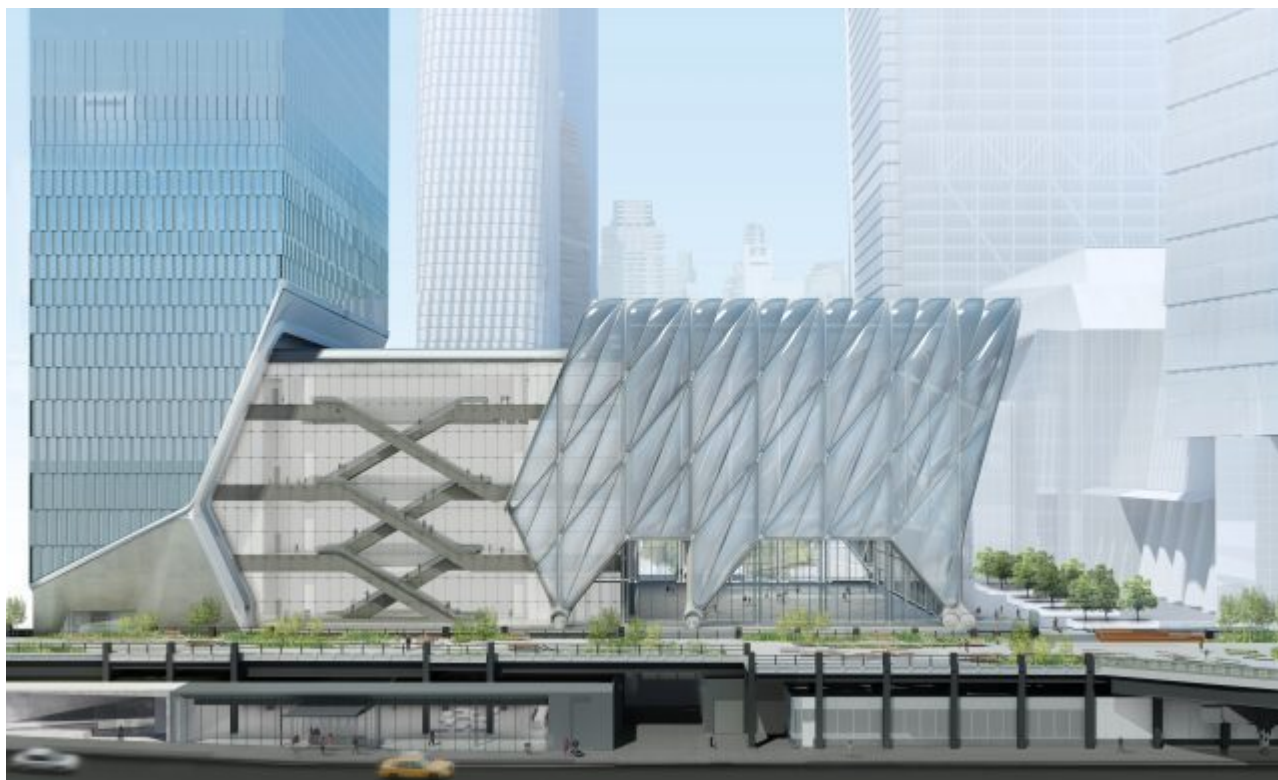
columnist

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The best I can say about last week's [Armory Show](#) is that it briefly steered conversations away from Donald Trump.

During a dinner celebrating inspired [new ceramic sculptures](#) by [Francesca DiMattio](#) at [Salon 94](#) Bowery, there was talk of [The Shed](#), a multidisciplinary arts center currently under construction on city-owned land next to the dehumanizing West Side development known as [Hudson Yards](#).

Discussion focused on [Vessel](#), a colossally scaled ribcage of 154 crisscrossing, tenement staircases dreamed up for the site by the English designer [Thomas Heatherwick](#). This atrocious work of art, scheduled to open to the public next year, has cost more than \$150m. To my mind, the money would have been better spent on shelters for the homeless, which the 150-foot tall, steel Godzilla may well become.



Rendering of The Shed. Image credit: Diller Scofidio + Renfro in collaboration with Rockwell Group

The addition of this overbearing jungle gym to an already oppressive property is not just a scandal but completely pointless: The Shed could have—and should have—been the area's primary public attraction.

Designed by architects [Diller, Scofidio + Renfro](#) and the [Rockwell Group](#), it is utterly unique in the world: a building that expands and contracts as needed to accommodate its [exhibitions and performances](#). (One program includes a collaboration between the promising duo [Gerhard Richter](#) and [Steve Reich](#).)

Originally conceived to sit within a landscaped garden, The Shed is now wedged between glass towers and the wretched [Vessel](#). Heatherwick's gargantuan structure is a plug-ugly insult to New York and to The Shed. It also overwhelms a plaza paved with stones by [Lawrence Weiner](#) that read *IN FRONT OF ITSELF*. The phrase, descriptive as well as poetic, nails the building's ability to alter itself as well as public space with an economy of expression that has much to teach the forces behind [Vessel](#). If only they were listening.

Here is the central problem: a public sculpture on private property, and therefore not subject to public review. Then again, examples of great public art are few, and even they can cause uproar before gaining wider acceptance.



View of Yinka Shonibare, *Wind Sculpture (SG) I* (2018). Photo credit: Christina Horsten

Think of the ongoing controversy surrounding the monument [Jeff Koons](#) has designed for a public plaza in Paris. [Bouquet of Tulips](#) (conceived in 2016) was intended to be a gesture of solidarity after a series of terrorist attacks in Paris. But this is a city that also gave one of its own, artist [Daniel Buren](#), a very hard time when it saw his [Les Deux Plateaux](#) (1985-86) installed in the courtyard of the Palais Royal. And let's not forget that, in advance of its arrival in New York Harbor, many people hated the Statue of Liberty as well.

Let's face it. This is not a great time for art, outflanked as it is by the daily turmoil of current events. Yet, there are reasons to be cheerful.

The [Public Art Fund](#) and the [High Line](#), the pedestrian parkway bordering The Shed, are non-profits that have done much to give an aesthetic lift to public spirits. (Witness [Wind Sculpture \(SG\) I](#), a colorful sail by [Yinka Shonibare](#) currently flying over Fifth Avenue on Doris C. Freedman Plaza, southeast of Central Park.) However, both of these agencies commission temporary exhibitions, not permanent intrusions on the cityscape.

Also consider "[Outliers and American Vanguard Art](#)" (until 13 May), a game-changing exhibition organized by curator [Lynne Cooke](#) for the [National Gallery of Art](#) in Washington, D.C. By making a strong case for the inclusion of so-called "outsider art" in the Modernist canon—something already supported by a healthy market for it—the show should help to settle a long-simmering, academic debate over whether to admit the self-taught into the elitist (and historically male) club of contemporary art.

Cooke was in the dense crowd at [Gagosian](#) for the opening of an [exhibition](#) by Koons (until 21 April), an artist who may well be considered an outlier for his continued resistance to working inside any fashionable box.

Though the gallery's main exhibition space is devoted to the seven "[Easyfun-Ethereal](#)" paintings that Koons made in 2000 for the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin, the work eliciting the greater gasps and groans from spectators was a new sculpture in a front room, visible from the street.

[Woman Reclining](#) (2010-14) is a recently-completed black granite sculpture that Koons based on a 1950s ashtray of his grandfather's, a beloved memento of the artist's childhood. (His 1988 sculpture, [Woman in Tub](#), was inspired by the same



object.)



Jeff Koons, *Woman Reclining* (2010-14) © Jeff Koons. Photo credit: Ron Amstutz. Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian

Some may remember *Woman Reclining* from the [2014 Koons retrospective](#) at the [Whitney Museum](#), where it was shown as a static piece. Now the figure fans itself, rocking its hefty, raised legs.

With a bed of red begonias at the bottom end, the sculpture strongly resembles nothing so much as a sarcophagus. It suggests, at least in the current #MeToo climate, that it is intended to bury, not praise, the sexism of the original knick-knack. Or, the work could set the cause of feminism back decades: it's easy to read as an outrageous objectification of a nearly featureless, dark-skinned woman on her back, legs up. Then again, she could represent the revenge of the maid in Manet's *Olympia* (1863) - move over, white mistress! Typically for Koons, you can read it several ways at once.

Meanwhile, the imbalance of power in the culture that spawned the ashtray lives on.

\*Linda Yablonsky is writing the first book to take full account of the life and career of Jeff Koons for [Henry Holt & Co.](#), publisher.