

## Chloë Bass: The Parts

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Installation view: *Chloë Bass: The Parts*, Brooklyn Public Library, New York, 2021. Courtesy Brooklyn Public Library. Photo: Gregg Richards.

As the city continues its reopening from the pandemic, a set of public art installations in two locations in Brooklyn keep the experiences of the past year in the present. Chloë Bass's *The Parts*, organized by the Brooklyn Public Library's curator for visual art programming Cora Fisher outside the Central Branch in Grand Army Plaza and the Center for Brooklyn History in Brooklyn Heights, addresses both the isolation brought on by the pandemic and the trauma and exasperation of Black and brown Americans brought on by police killings.

Alongside the green landscaping that flanks the Central Branch building across from Eastern Parkway, a progression of colorful window films printed with centered texts followed by aluminum signs that resemble pedestrian street signs, also printed with alternating text and images, lead down to the Plaza. After these first three works, each named generically *6 Parts*, *9 Parts*, and *8 Parts* (all works 2020/2021), the installation continues around the sidewalk along Flatbush Avenue. A final work appears on the library's electronic sign in front of the entrance's sweeping staircase; it is closest in materials and medium to the digital origins of the installations in Instagram posts Bass published during the pandemic. The post for what is installed at the library as *9 Parts* notes in its caption that the black slides with white type in the carousel are a "rehearsal" for a billboard, tying these works to Bass's 2019–20 *Wayfinding* installation of mirrored billboards in St. Nicholas Park in Harlem (commissioned by the Studio Museum in Harlem).

The signs in *The Parts* do not literally mirror the viewer's image back to them, though they do reach out to passersby with a quiet force (I first encountered these signs on my way to Prospect Park, knowing I would have to double back to read them). Standing at a height that seems totemic but not monumental, relatable but attention-getting, they each project a public address on an intimate scale, either through Bass's short, poetic texts or through more gnomic photographs of deserted indoor and outdoor spaces taken during the pandemic. And while this address imparts what can be assumed to be Bass's personal experiences, the signs are written in a style that mostly avoids the first person (a notable exception arrives in *8 Parts* when the text recounts how the artist's mother left her a touching, but perhaps slightly overblown, voicemail apologizing for any time she had embarrassed or betrayed her); they speak instead in the register of aphorism, description, or interrogation.

These *Parts* represent the incommensurate work of understanding experience as it was and is lived. Aphorisms like "Contentment can come in as many different forms as disappointment" (*7 Parts*) open a space of universal meaning, unmoored from a temporal context. Other fragments recall the progression of the pandemic and the weathering of its isolation in a shared second- or third-person voice: "[Y]ou imagine that you might be able to become a different or better self..." (*7 Parts*).

“We played in cold parks ... believing warmth would kill the spread” (8 Parts). Another sign points to both a shared past and present, referencing ice cream cones eaten last summer as pandemic consolation while directly across the sidewalk a Mister Softee truck regularly parks along the curb.



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Hanging outside the Center for Brooklyn History, the two double-sided flags that together are titled *4 Parts (May 31st)* speak in a different tonal register. Whereas signposts guide us along a path, flags announce an affiliation, signal information through shorthand symbols, or delimit a territory. These accomplish all three tasks. They lay out exhaustion and rage at systemic racism in America, with references to the murder of George Floyd. One flag asks, presumably of the expectation of Black and brown Americans to explain racism to their white neighbors, “When is the burden of explanation lifted so that we can get on with the burden of living?” Bass describes these emotions as irreducible: “But there’s no way to simplify down from *help* ... no duality of meaning, no poetry, no trick.” And so, differently than the signs in Grand Army Plaza, these flags mark a sharper limit to my own identification with the texts as a white reader—though not my ability to understand what “help” means if I hear it.



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*The Parts* brings the past into the present by making it intelligible through a framework fragmented by the private and the public. Its codes are poetic and straightforward, narrative and philosophical. As Bass writes on one sign in *9 Parts*, “It takes a particular kind of present to reveal almost any excavation of the past as frighteningly prescient.” I’m almost tempted to read the choice of “present” as a perverse pun, a half-hearted attempt to see a silver lining to the pandemic as giving us, *presenting* us, with an opportunity to assess how we were living before, and how to better move forward after, which is always now. Like the unseen images that the colorful signs in the library’s windows each describe, the past is something we create through the tools we have available to us in the present. Though shared, my past and present may not resemble yours. “How much of sight,” Bass asks us, “is invention?”