ARTS

"Dream, dream, dream. Dreams transform into thoughts, and thoughts result in action."
DR. A.P.J. ABDUL KALAM FORMER PRESIDENT OF INDIA

From Vietnam War to Trump, lipstick statue endures as symbol of protest

BY HANNAH LIU AND EMILY AKBAR
STAFF REPORTERS

Yale's iconic lipstick sculpture returned to Beinecke Plaza last Friday after 56 years — or at least a replica of it.

As part of a rally that protested Yale's negotiations with the Trump administration to settle an investigation into the University's admissions practices, student organizers installed a cardboard recreation of "Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks" on the plaza. The original statue was created by Claes Oldenburg '50 in 1969 as a symbol of anti-war protest during the Vietnam War and has followed Yale through its history of student protest. It stayed on Beinecke Plaza for several months until early 1970.

"We were really pleased that it was resurrected as a symbol, actually, in circumstances that are not terribly dissimilar from what they were when we did it 57 years ago," Sam Callaway '64 ARC '69, who was part of the group that commissioned the original statue, said in a phone interview.

The art piece was originally commissioned by a student-faculty group called the Colossal Keepsake Corporation and installed on Beinecke Plaza as a surprise gift to the University. It juxtaposes a lipstick, a playful feminine cosmetic item, with tank tracks, a masculine symbol of military machinery.

Since 1969, the Lipstick has been adopted as a symbol by different social and political movements, including the women's rights and gay rights movements, Stuart Wrede '65 ARC '70, who was also part of the Colossal Keepsake Corporation, said in a phone interview. Now, in the face of both a president who has shown unprecedented hostility to higher education and Yale's efforts to strike a deal with his administration, the sculpture has reemerged as a symbol of student protest.

"It's become a kind of universal symbol of positive dissent," Wrede said. "Internationally, it became famous after the events in '69 — not just because it's a very wonderful piece of sculpture with such a rich amount of associations, but because it was very specifically designed for a significant site, to achieve its effective protest."

The Friday rally was also intended to violate Yale's protest policies that require registration for demonstrations and permission for erecting sculptures in outdoor spaces.

Siena Grouf '29, a student organizer who spoke at the Friday demonstration, wrote in a text message to the News that "our demands have been same for decades" throughout the history of student protest at Yale: "that an educational institution like Yale not be complicit in violence abroad, that dissent is protected, and that students, faculty and New Haven community members have a voice in how the university is governed."

While the symbolism of the Lipstick has endured, the sculpture itself has undergone several relocations since 1969.

That year, the board members who commissioned the piece presented Yale with a deed of gift requiring that the sculpture remain on Beinecke Plaza and be maintained by Yale, according to Wrede. Yale never formally accepted the gift, he said.

In 1970, the sculpture was moved from the plaza to a workshop facility after being heavily covered in graffiti and posters. There, it was restored by Oldenburg from its original wood and vinyl to aluminum, fiberglass and steel materials.

Several years later, under pressure from the History of Art Department and the Yale University Art Gallery, Yale requested the return of the sculpture. It was donated to the gallery and loaned to Morse College in 1974 under Master Vincent Scully '40 GRD '47 '49, a faculty member of the Colossal Keepsake Corporation.

Wrede said that during its extended time at Morse, the statue lost its historical context and was seen as somewhat of a pop-art symbol for the residential college, rather than a symbol for free speech and anti-war dissent.

"Oldenburg designed this specifically for Hewitt Quadrangle, you call it Beinecke Plaza, and that was essential to the success of the meaning of the whole thing as a protest against a conservative university and the Vietnam War," Wrede said. "It was shocking to us six years ago that no one at the University knew about its history."

Beinecke Plaza is the colloquial name for Hewitt Quadrangle.

After instances of vandalism last year, the sculpture was relocated, against the wishes of Wrede and the alumni who commissioned it, from Morse College to the YUAG, where it now remains.

Wrede and Callaway have since advocated for the statue to be transferred back to Beinecke Plaza, a place that they said highlights the message of the Lipstick against the grandeur of the classical plaza.

Yale College Council President Alex William Chen '28, who attended and helped organize the demonstration, said there is "striking symbolism" in the Lipstick's emblematic return to Beinecke Plaza.

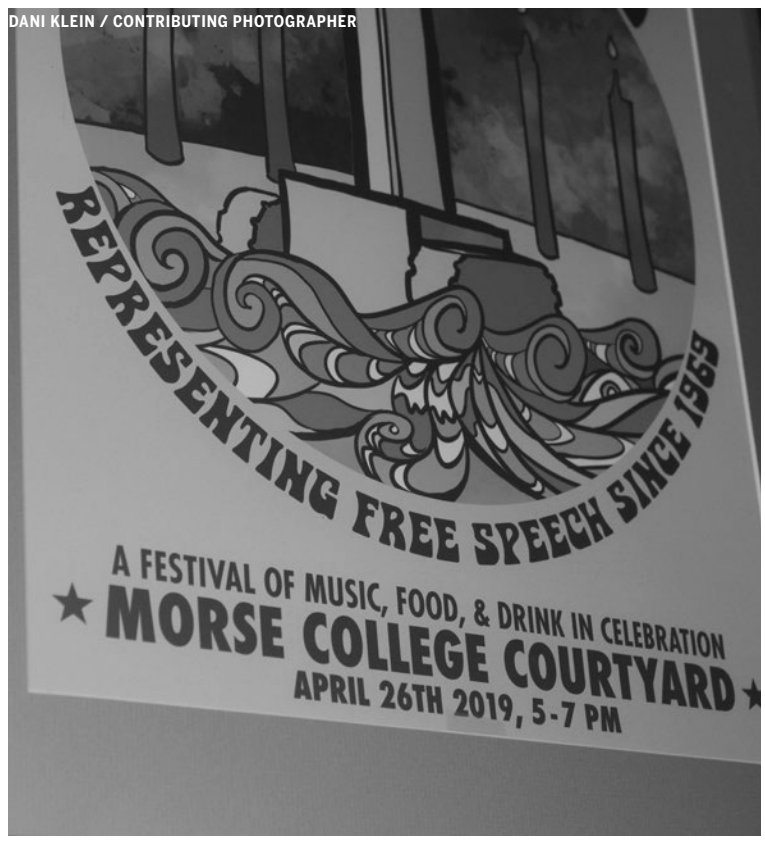
"We want students to know that there is a rallying point behind this, and harkening back to the Lipstick is such an important thing," he said.

Oldenburg, the creator of the Lipstick, died in 2022.

Contact
HANNAH LIU *at*
hannah.liu@yale.edu,
EMILY AKBAR *at*
emily.akbar@yale.edu.



ALEX HONG / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



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A cardboard replica of "Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks" was erected on Beinecke Plaza last Friday during a rally protesting Yale's negotiations with the federal government. It was not the first time the sculpture emerged as a symbol of student protest.