

The Kiss

Kindness and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss.

—Psalm 85:10



They were young and beautiful and kissing, two brown-skinned girls on a red leather banquette; kissing as people do when they are hungry and soaring and, usually, alone. They weren't alone, wedged there between the thick seats and small

tables at the Lenox Lounge in Harlem. Nobody barked, "Get a room!" Life swirled easily about them, dollar bills passing from hand to hand across the crowd to the fellow behind the bar; beers all around or cocktails and high-pitched chatter, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for two girls on a banquette to be drinking each other in, one long gulp, then another; a taste, a tease, a head thrown back in laughter and an arm bent high to catch her stiff-brimmed hat before it fell. That was election day, an age ago, it seems. Like the sailor kissing the nurse in Times Square on V-J Day in Eisenstaedt's storied photograph, like the boy gripping his girlfriend's bottom as she leaps to embrace him in a shadowed hall on the day Stalin died in Komar and Melamid's luscious painting *Thirty Years Ago 1953*, those amorous girls in an Art Deco bar were the iconic image of social happiness, November 4, 2008. For a moment, a few hours, the world, or at least Harlem, was passionate and in love. Not with Barack Obama, with itself—each one with the friend or stranger by his side and beyond to the next one, and the next after that, a common love expressed commonly, in hands squeezed or swinging hugs or deep, public kisses. "Love is in the air, people," a drummer on the uptown 1 train had announced earlier in the day, and later it was in the streets. A million glances were exchanged that electric night; a million fingers brushed lightly against each other. Zing! Who knows how many awoke the next morning in the arms of someone no longer a stranger? If there were none, it wouldn't matter; that it was possible was the thing. People were alive and in love with possibility.

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Komar & Melamid, *Thirty Years Ago 1953*, 1982-83, oil on canvas, 72 x 47 inches



Election Night 2008 in New York City



"The Kiss at Times Square"
Photograph by Alfred Eisenstaedt, 1945