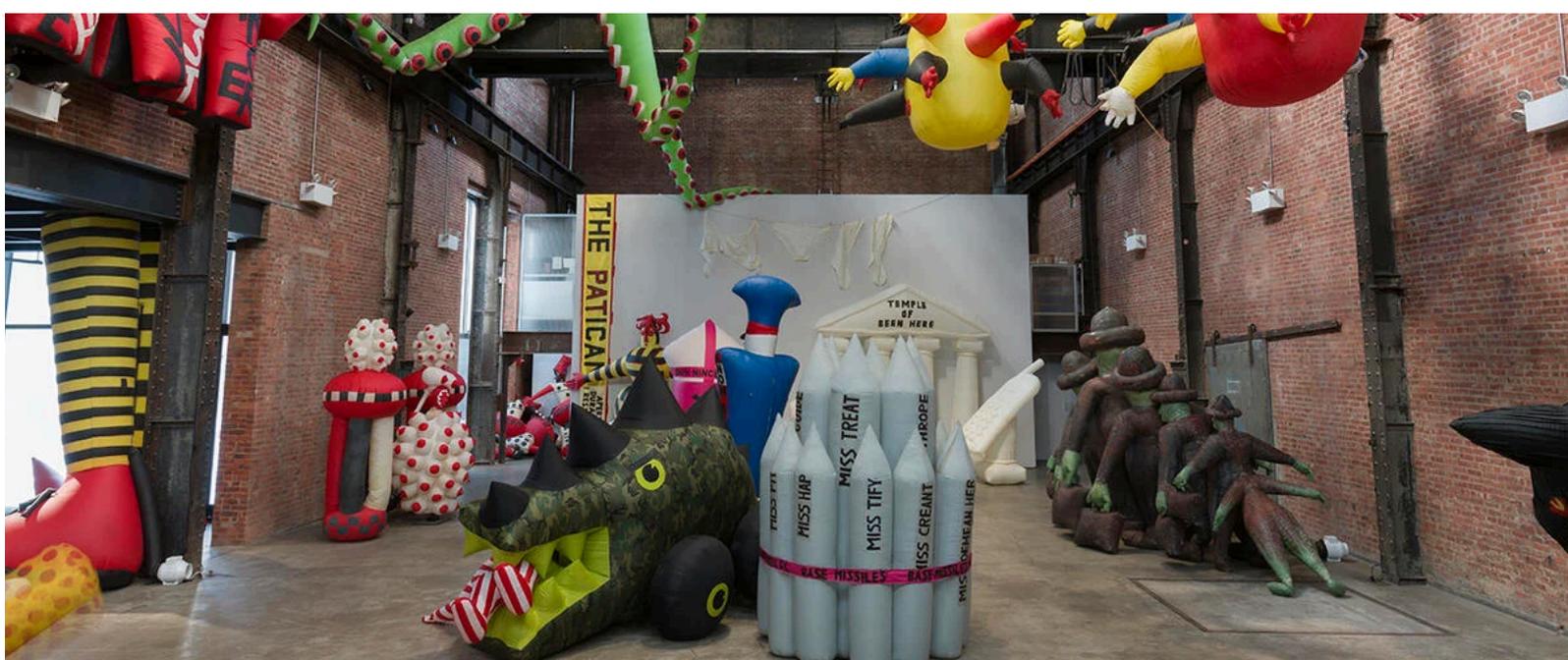


BY CASSIE PACKARD IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 09 MAR 26



Pat Oleszko's Badly Behaved Blow-Ups

At SculptureCenter, New York, the artist's inflatables, costumes and performances lob critiques with an absurdist flourish



A woman taking up space: we love to see it. At 4.8 metres long and 2.6 metres high when fully inflated, Pat Oleszko's *Womb with a View* (from *Nora's Art: P'at Too*) (1990) – the title a characteristic millefeuille of puns – is a supine blow-up with giant breasts, splayed legs and a vulva that, when partly unzipped, doubles as a peep-show theatre. (Women are so often societally reduced to sex organs that the lack of head and arms feels pointedly unremarkable.) Its contents? *Red Dick* (1993), a striped inflatable penis. When the *Womb* appeared on the streets of Prague in 2007, Oleszko installed herself inside; evoking medieval carnival traditions such as the Feast of Fools, she was clad in papal regalia and armed with a squirt gun of 'holy water'. (Oleszko was arrested nearly a decade earlier for a related performance outside the Vatican, where modern-day authorities did not take kindly to her subversive blessing.)



Pat Oleszko, 'Fool Disclosure', 2026, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist; David Peter Francis, New York and SculptureCenter, New York; photograph: Charles Benton

Womb with a View, along with video documentation of the Prague Quadrennial activation, features in 'Fool Disclosure' at SculptureCenter, the consummate absurdist's first New York institutional solo show in over three decades. Oleszko, whose work across performance, costumes and language has long refused the reactionary severing of 'art' from 'life', is frequently framed as a breakout artist finally receiving recognition in her late seventies. Gallery representation is indeed a recent development, and the exhibition's downstairs screening room includes gut-wrenching footage of the artist's tear-streaked face as she incinerates artworks that exceed her personal storage capacities (*Patty's Inferno*, 2008). Yet Oleszko's work has been screened, performed and shown – in venues ranging from behemoths like New York's Museum of Modern Art to such 'alternative spaces' as *Esquire* magazine spreads – since the 1970s, a period that saw a surge of experimentation at the intersection of wearables, performance and gender politics.



Pat Oleszko, 'Fool Disclosure', 2026, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist; David Peter Francis, New York and SculptureCenter, New York; photograph: Charles Benton

Burlesque shows, where gender and power structures are toyed with, were one such venue. For Oleszko, performing burlesque as a student laid the groundwork for pieces like *Patty Cake* (1972), in which the artist shimmied out of a three-tiered fabric cake dripping with rosettes; a 1976 performance video is on view along with the soft sculpture-cum-ensemble. Mannequins lining SculptureCenter's arched corridor sport the elaborate get-ups Oleszko wore to embody feminine stereotypes such as *Sally Sex-retary* and *Women's Libber*, part of her sociological project 'Act Three: The New Yuck Women' (1971). Costume-making enabled the artist to sculpt at a large scale, treating her own body as an armature, as if puppeteering herself. Like a court jester, a puppet may utter truths that others can't; to embody one is to authorize such speech while exposing the social forces (say, structural sexism) that seek to pull our strings.



Pat Oleszko, 'Fool Disclosure', 2026, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist; David Peter Francis, New York and SculptureCenter, New York; photograph: Charles Benton

Around 1980, Oleszko began making inflatables; putting her sewing talents to work, she scaled up her sculptures while keeping them lightweight and portable for guerrilla performances and protests. Three decades worth of oversized blow-ups – all moonlighting in performances and films, some of which play downstairs – overtake the museum's top floor. These works quiver, swell and sag with the blowers' rhythms; the string of interchangeable businessmen that comprise the monstrous *Yupasaurus* (1987) (a dinosaur that gentrifies all it touches, and which also features in the short *The Free Little Pig*, 1989) bathetically brandish their briefcases. Unexpected animacy – the misbehaviour of objects – is equal parts joke and imminent threat.

Ball's Cabaret Voltaire (1916) to Niki de Saint Phalle's *HON – en katedral* (SHE – A Cathedral, 1966), to The Yes Men's *Survivaball* (2006). That 'Fool Disclosure' arrives at a moment when activists don inflatable frog costumes to protest the US government's surreal cruelty towards immigrants only underscores the ongoing relevance – and renewed urgency – of Oleszko's tactical frivolity.

*Pat Oleszko's **'Fool Disclosure'** is on view at SculptureCenter, New York, until 27 April*

Main image: Pat Oleszko, 'Fool Disclosure', 2026, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist; David Peter Francis, New York and SculptureCenter, New York; photograph: Charles Benton



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