

# Pat Oleszko's "Fool Disclosure"

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View of Pat Oleszko's "Fool Disclosure" at SculptureCenter, New York, 2026. Courtesy of the artist and David Peter Francis, New York. Image courtesy of SculptureCenter. Photo by Charles Benton.



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## SculptureCenter, New York

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Pat Oleszko's figurative, larger-than-life inflatable pieces fill the ground floor of SculptureCenter, a former streetcar repair shop that retains its gritty industrial architecture, to spectacular capacity. They occupy the floors and corners, and hang from the forty-foot ceiling. Oleszko deserves this ample space—as she does her presentation in this year's Whitney Biennial. For six decades, the artist has addressed such topics as gender politics, gentrification, war, and organized religion with vividly colored inflatable sculptures activated in performances everywhere from burlesque clubs to white cubes. Straddling the aesthetics of the Bauhaus and *Sesame Street*, the cartoonish pieces displayed here are replete with her signature body (bawdy) humor and formal play. Among the characters included are Bluebeard's wives; *Duh Nincompope* (1999); the former states of the Eastern Bloc (*The Domino Effect*, 1990); "Mis Ills" (2007) from the ongoing War on Terror; and *Womb with a View* (1990), a nude woman with a vagina one can peer into, as in Niki de Saint Phalle's *Hon* (1966).

These gently swaying inflatables are a sculptural tour de force—or in Oleszko's parlance, a tour de farce. But one medium cannot tell the full story of a career spanning sculpture, performance art, street theater, craft, and costume. That narrative is fully explored in the exhibition's basement galleries. As the archival images, posters, and screening program included here reveal, the artist's body, and the public's reaction to it, has been central to her work from the outset. She studied sculpture at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where she traded the welding torch for a sewing machine. "I

started just hanging my sculptures on myself," she said. "At that moment, my art walked out the door and I began using all the world as a stooge."<sup>1</sup> Around this time she started performing as Pat the Hippy Strippy in burlesque shows. Wearing her signature soft sculptures, her practice moved fluidly between performance art and cabaret.

After moving to New York in 1970, Oleszko started exploring sexuality and gender stereotypes with a deceptively lighthearted touch. "Making a joke out of it," she said, put her "in control of the situation." In 1971, she showed a series of soft sculptures on mannequins titled "New Yuck Women," on view in SculptureCenter's basement galleries. These caricatures of women included a *Women's Libber* with tie-dyed breasts and a protest sign, a *Sally Sex-retary* whose busty figure was hardly hidden by a sheer blouse, and a *Playboy Bunny*. In her "Patty Cake" performances, begun the following year, Oleszko wore a padded suit to give the appearance of a more voluptuous physique while she burst out of a sculptural confection. The act made its way from clubs to museums to the cover of *Esquire* magazine. As the exhibition's brochure text (written by the artist) states, it "becomes [her] bread and butter piece until it becomes too politically incorrect even for her."<sup>2</sup> The artist leaves it up to the viewer to infer what changed—the feminist mores of the time, or her own priorities as a woman and performer.

In dividing this exhibition between sculpture and performance, however, it can be difficult to reconcile the cheerfulness of the 1970s objects and the emotional complexity of their activation. The eight-minute video *Patty Cake* (1976), in the screening program, communicates a sense of exhaustion absent from the pastel costume on the ground floor. Oleszko performs highly choreographed, seductive moves until they begin to seem mechanical. There is a similar discrepancy between the sculpture *The Handmaiden (Japan)* (1976) and the video in which Oleszko performs with it. The former is a full-body garment whose numerous arms terminate in stuffed white gloves, suggesting a woman rendered monstrous by her many responsibilities. Yet in the video *Handmaiden: Git Yer Hands Off Her* (1980), the costume is the central prop in a vaudeville act about sexual harassment. "Look at all the fingers," she chants in a voiceover while prying the hands away from her body, "how they want to linger! Hands off her, get your hands off her." In the triumphant conclusion, Oleszko, fully nude, is finally free.

Other films shown here underscore the daring, intensely physical dimensions of Oleszko's public performances, from dragging her inflatable sculptures through downtown 1980s New York to role-playing on the roadside for tourists. A welcome trend of the past decade has been the celebration of politically engaged work by diverse artists, yet few have embraced humor like Oleszko—an artist as comfortable crashing a parade or getting arrested at the Vatican as staging exhibitions in museums and galleries. Her wittiness, as well as the depth of her political commitments, feels like a breath of fresh air. Occasionally, such work runs the risk of being too direct. The thirty-year-old *Knee-o-Fashism: Wendy Wear-With-All and Her Sole Sister, Ms. Trixie* (1994)—a pair of spiked heel boots festooned with a pair of stuffed, severe-looking characters—feels more innovative than her recent papier-mâché protest sculpture *DUMP DA TRUMPTY ON HIS GREAT THRONE* (2025), with the would-be king sat atop a toilet.

Giving over the SculptureCenter's sprawling ground floor to these inflatables amplifies their value as standalone, sellable sculptures. Such institutional validation is welcome for an artist whose first-ever commercial exhibition took place in 2024 and whose last solo museum exhibition was mounted in 1991. One wonders how much more could have been shown if the artist received more support along the way. Solving a space problem common to New Yorkers—she could not maintain or store all the work made over decades—Oleszko has performed several site-specific "ritual cleansings," in which she destroys her artworks. The film *Patty's Inferno* (2008) documents one such event. The inflatables, she found, were not so easy to burn. "[The material] melts and smells and is an ecological nightmare," Oleszko said. Having dodged the fires, these works take pride of place in this exhibition. Performance, once so integral to them, is relegated to the underground floor. Seeing the inflatables again as I left the gallery, I thought of them as hollow approximations of a body, but also as survivors: hopeful analogs for artists persevering in a world on fire.

#### Notes

- 1 Artist quotes here and below are from Pat Oleszko, "Everything Was Perfect," interview by Gyula Muskovics, *ON MIND*, August 14, 2024, <https://thekitchen.org/on-mind/everything-was-perfect-interview-with-pat-oleszko/>.
- 2 SculptureCenter, "Pat Oleszko: Fool Disclosure" gallery guide, 18: [https://www.sculpture-center.org/files/Pat\\_Oleszko\\_Fool\\_Disclosure\\_Gallery\\_Guide.pdf](https://www.sculpture-center.org/files/Pat_Oleszko_Fool_Disclosure_Gallery_Guide.pdf).