

IMPULSE

At Fool Capacity: Pat Oleszko's Lexicon of Misbehavior

April 1, 2026 | Almog Cohen-Kashi

Punning has been the engine of [Pat Oleszko](#)'s practice since the 1970s. The New York-based artist shows how a single phonetic slip can topple authority, stretching language toward absurdity by collapsing form and folly. At SculptureCenter, Oleszko's first institutional survey traces her playful rhetoric through five decades of inflatables, costumes, sculptural hats, video work, and performance documentation across two floors.

The exhibition's title, [Fool Disclosure](#), operates as a master pun. Recalling the familiar phrase "full disclosure," the title performs a slight aural substitution that destabilizes the meaning of the original expression. "Full disclosure" signals transparency, implying that nothing is withheld or distorted; however, that promise dissolves when "full" becomes "fool," proposing an alternative mode of revelation expressed through exaggeration, caricature, and absurdity. More than just clever wordplay, this phonetic slip introduces the question: what happens when truth is delivered not by an officially sanctioned voice, but by a licensed deviant?



Pat Oleszko: *Fool Disclosure*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2026, installation view. Courtesy the artist and David Peter Francis, New York. Image courtesy SculptureCenter, New York. Photography: Charles Benton. Works (left to right): *WarUSaurUs*, 2007. Nylon and blower, 7 ½ x 11 x 7 feet (229 x 335 x 213 cm). Courtesy the artist and David Peter Francis, New York. *General Dismay*, 2007. Nylon and blower, 4 x 3 ½ x 10 feet (122 x 107 x 305 cm). Courtesy the artist and David Peter Francis, New York. *Miss Ill Cluster*, 2007. Nylon and blower, 8 x 6 x 6 feet (244 x 183 x 183 cm). Courtesy the artist and David Peter Francis, New York.

Massive, bulbous inflatable sculptures overrun the ground floor, with some suspended from the ceiling. At the center is *Miss Ill Cluster* (2007), an inflatable bundle of upright grey missiles cinched together with a hot pink band. Each missile is inscribed with a “miss” pun: “miss deed,” “miss represent,” “miss fit,” “miss hap,” “miss tify,” “miss demean her,” “dis miss,” “miss chief,” “miss treat,” “miss conduct,” and more. Playing upon this feminized form of address, the modular “miss” puns transform the logic of militarized aggression into wordplay, embedding critique directly onto softened weaponry. Certain puns hint at the failures of rigid structures of authority that misidentify, misvalue, and misplace individuals to show how easily misrecognition occurs when a person is misnamed or miscast. Other puns target institutions that misrule, mislead, and mismanage—often not by mistake.

As puns accumulate, interpretation slows, and language thickens into mass. While each pun may be legible on its own, together they exceed interpretation due to repetition without reprieve. As one circles this sculpture, reading ceases to function as a process of resolution, instead becoming a taxing activity. The weight of this task is not about language itself, though; it is about systems of recognition failing under excess. There is a sense of metaphorical heaviness produced from meaning

accumulating faster than it can be processed. In this way, the sculpture critiques not only language but also the systems that depend on it.



Pat Oleszko: Fool Disclosure, SculptureCenter, New York, 2026, installation view. Courtesy the artist and David Peter Francis, New York. Image courtesy SculptureCenter, New York. Photography: Charles Benton. Works depicted: *Rose*, 1989. Fabric, fiberfill, wire, artificial roses, and Velcro, 80 x 30 x 36 inches (203.2 × 76.2 × 91.4 cm). Courtesy the artist and David Peter Francis, New York. *Big Pussy*, 1989. Nylon and blower, 13 x 4 x 11 feet (396 x 122 x 335 cm). Courtesy the artist and David Peter Francis, New York.

Miss Ill Cluster operates in conjunction with *General Dismay* (2007), *WarUSaurUs* (2007), and *3 Miss Ills* (2007), all drawn from *The Department of Corrections* (2007), a performance done in response to the Bush administration's attack on Iraq and the resulting "War on Terror." Nearby is the costume *Rose* (1989), positioned in front of an oversized feline inflatable, *Big Pussy* (1989). *Rose* carries the original pun associated with Marcel Duchamp's alter ego Rose Sélavy—which sounds like "Eros, c'est la vie" ("Sex, that's life")—while also paying homage to the burlesque performer Rose La Rose, Oleszko's mentor. By binding linguistic wordplay and burlesque spectacle, Oleszko stages the costume as a site where language and the body perform in tandem. Rather than resolving as a joke, the costume becomes an anchor that sits between Dadaist conceptualism and popular performance traditions, grounding innuendoes in physical form.

If a pun forces the reinterpretation of a word by substituting one meaning for another without radically changing the sound, a costume performs a similar operation visually. Oleszko first encountered this logic as an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, where a professor told her class to create a gift with wrapping that reflected the nature of the gift itself. In response, Oleszko

made a Hells Angels-style belt for her “motorcycle freak” teaching assistant. She then packaged the belt—an identity marker adorned with his name in studs—in a coffin and buried it. Oleszko recalls this formative moment as “the first time that [she] correlated what people wore with what they thought.”[1] This project revealed to Oleszko that identity could be staged and exaggerated through clothing, shaping how a person is understood socially, even as the body underneath the costume remains the same.



Pat Oleszko: *Fool Disclosure*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2026, installation view. Courtesy the artist and David Peter Francis, New York. Image courtesy SculptureCenter, New York. Photography: Charles Benton.

The majority of Oleszko’s costumes included in this exhibition are installed under an arched corridor in the basement. These nine costumes from the series *Act Three: New Yuck Women* stage a range of stereotypes of New York City women. *Sally Sex-retary* (1971), *Playboy Bunny* (1971), and *Upper East Side Swinger* (1971) stretch social norms with their inflated breasts and padded asses, using humor to amplify quotidian absurdities and map social hierarchies. Each costume transforms the wearer into a pedestrian sculpture, a walking exaggeration that both inhabits and distorts everyday urban life. While the costumes in this exhibition remain stationary, video works in a nearby screening room, and archival materials show them in motion, in public space among people.

Outside this exhibition, Oleszko still wears many of her costumes, like *Lady Liberty* (1976), which she excluded from this presentation to wear during protests.[2] This deliberate choice of protest attire underscores how absurdist spectacle can operate politically to ridicule power and diffuse fear. Oleszko's strategy recalls the logic of the court jester, whose foolishness permits them to speak truths that state-sanctioned voices cannot. Humor in this context does not soften critique; rather, it disarms authority long enough to expose its structure.



Pat Oleszko, *The Fall of Democracy*, 2025. Fabric, polyester, artificial leaves, and parchment. Hat: 15 x 11 ¼ x 12 inches (38 x 28.6 x 30); Each bracelet: 6 ½ x 10 x 6 ½ inches (16.5 x 25 x 16.5 cm).

Much of Oleszko's work in this exhibition predates recent political developments by decades, yet the dynamics of power they address remain strikingly consistent. *The Fall of Democracy* (2025) embodies this continuity. Its form, an Ionic column, compresses the rhetoric of Oleszko's full-body costumes into a concentrated site of critique perched atop the head. This sculptural hat evokes neoclassical architecture's long association with white supremacist ideologies, in which Greco-Roman forms have served as a visual shorthand for civilized society. Neoclassical architecture has been used to promote imperial order by proposing a Eurocentric, white image of American democracy, from its early adoption by figures such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson to its recent revival under Donald Trump.

Fixed to the back of the hat is red and yellow tape printed with the words "danger" and "caution," tied into a neat bow. Below the hat is an accompanying pair of gloves with two fallen Ionic columns serving as the cuffs. Hands attached to these columns hold leaves made from the Declaration of Independence between their fingertips. These leaves, however, bear the names Alex Pretti and Renee Good, two American citizens killed by federal ICE agents in Minneapolis in January 2026. Together, the hat, gloves, and inscribed leaves so clearly visualize how the architecture of democracy holds the evidence of its own failure.

Punning in Oleszko's work tests how systems endure by pushing such structures towards distortion. Throughout her practice, this operation repeats across her different materials: puns inflate language, inflatables overfill sculpture with air, costumes excessively inundate the body with identity markers to the point of caricature, and so on. In each case, meaning is not replaced but stretched and swollen until interpretation itself begins to slip. Oleszko treats words, bodies, and sculptural form as containers that she pushes well beyond their limits. The moment before collapse is when a container reaches fool capacity—the threshold of how much absurdity a system can hold before buckling. Now the question left is not what authority looks like, but how long it has been holding its shape under pressure.

Pat Oleszko: *Fool Disclosure* is on view at SculptureCenter from January 29 through April 27, 2026.