

OLGA BALEMA

**SELECT PRESS
2015–2023**

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OLGA BALEMA
Holland Cotter, "What to see in N.Y.C Galleries in January"
NY Times, January 2024

What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries in January



By Holland Cotter

Published Jan. 4, 2024 Updated Jan. 11, 2024

This week, Holland Cotter revisits El Museo del Barrio's collection and sees works by G. Peter Jemison at 47 Canal as well as a group show at the Institute for Studies on Latin American Art.

CHINATOWN

Olga Balema

Through Jan. 13. Bridget Donahue, 99 Bowery, Manhattan; 646-896-1368, bridgetdonahue.nyc.



Olga Balema's "Loop 51125," from 2023; polycarbonate sheeting, acrylic paint, solvent. via Olga Balema and Bridget Donahue, New York; Photo by Gregory Carideo

Olga Balema's "The Third Dimension" is the punkest show in town. In the same way that 1970s punk rock was stripped down, anti-virtuosic (no ostentatious guitar solos) and anti-establishment, Balema's clear plastic sculptures are blunt-but-beautiful statements that challenge both the art market's ravenous appetite for painting and the rampant virtue signaling among many of art's players (including artists and critics).

What there is to see here — or not see, since the gallery initially seems empty when you enter it — are 11 sculptures Balema made by bending translucent polycarbonate sheets into geometric forms. Some of the works lean against the wall; all are mysteriously titled "Loop" (2023) and assigned a number. They're a bit like soap bubbles, threatening to vanish at any moment.

What makes Balema's efforts art and not mere provocation are context and history. Her work is clearly in conversation with "heroic," masculinist, minimalist sculpture crafted in marble, bronze or steel. Its virtually see-through, plain plastic materials may goad some viewers to call it the emperor's new clothes, except that the empty-gallery-as-philosophically-significant-void is yet another celebrated trope in art history, particularly when enacted by male artists. (It's become a signature gesture for Balema, whose last exhibition at Bridget Donahue in 2019 was an artless web of elastic bands stretched across the floor, titled "Brain Damage.")

In the current moment, this show speaks powerfully to the utopian promises of avant-garde art. Who gets to be free? In music, punk rock and free jazz answered this call; in visual art, we have this. **MARTHA SCHWENDENER**

OLGA BALEMA
Interview by Ross Simonini, Olga Balema
Art Review, February 2023

Pondering
the orb
since 1949

ArtReview



Tomorrow's artists today!



Courtesy the artist

The Interview
by Ross Simonini

Olga Balema

“There is no ‘outside of language’ for me,
there is always a lot of language going on in my head,
even if it’s nonlinear or incoherent”

The work of Olga Balema offers a satisfying defiance. She maintains a fluid approach to every aspect of her art: titles, forms, expectations and materials, which are occasionally actual fluids. Most often you will find her work resting on the ground, slumped or flat, and settling into the architecture.

Her recent show *Formulas*, at Croy Nielsen in Vienna, is a collection of tilelike works, placed on the floor, where they appear to have been broken, then reassembled into elegantly inelegant collage. Her work *brain damage* (2019) is an installation of sundry spindly threads, stretched at ankle level: a patternless and beguiling web. Another work, *Motherfucker* (2016), exhibited at

the Baltic Triennial in 2018, features sagging breasts affixed to crudely painted ripped maps. (Balema was born in Ukraine, in 1984, and moved to the United States while a teenager.)

For me, Balema’s works have always been characterised by mystery, especially her ongoing series of clear acrylic sculptures. Almost entirely transparent, they rest quietly between the wall and floor, without any interest in announcing their form. Looked at from a certain angle, in a certain light, they would not appear to exist at all.

This translucence is often accented by Balema’s modest installations and bare context. Many of her works are untitled, and in the past

she has not been particularly vocal about her work, doing no interviews and making few written statements. But in line with her resistance to consistency, other work carries elaborate titles (eg, *Manifestations of our own wickedness and future idiocy*, 2017), and at times in the interview below she even responded loquaciously.

Initially when I reached out to Balema about an interview, she turned me down. But eventually we began to speak: first over the phone, then in a series of email exchanges. During this time, she was busy, intermittently sick and installing multiple shows around the world. Our exchange occurred over three seasons.

A Process of No Process

ROSS SIMONINI *You said you were late to our conversation last week because you were installing video chat software. Did you manage to avoid video during the pandemic?*

OLGA BALEMA *I had to install it on my phone, my computer doesn't have the right headphone jack. But yes, I was not zooming much during the pandemic.*

RS *Do you use your computer much for your art?*

OB *Some email. I write on the computer.*

RS *Your work Computer [2021], a vast floor collage, somehow led me to assume that you weren't much of a computer person.*

OB *I'm not anti, I just don't really get excited for new technology and try to keep the same devices for as long as I can. I did use a computer to make that work, an old, kind of dirty computer.*

RS *That title does a lot of work for the piece. Are you careful about titles?*

OB *Yes. There were a lot of titles swirling around in my mind. And *Computer* seemed like a nice followup to *brain damage*. I usually come up with titles during the making of a piece, or after, which is why a lot of things are not titled. If I'm struggling too much, I just leave it untitled. I feel like if I do have a title, I want*

it to add something to the piece. *Computer* added a sense of humour that maybe would have been lacking otherwise.

RS *What kind of writing are you doing on the computer?*

OB *Lectures, job applications, grant applications, interviews, press releases. Descriptions of my work for myself and the public. Emails.*

RS *You mentioned interviews. Have you done others?*

OB *This is my first 'real' interview. But I have done some fake interviews with myself. There is also a conversation I once did with another artist.*

RS *Do you read about art or artists?*

OB *Yes, sporadically. Recently I read a Duchamp biography I found on the street in my neighbourhood. Since I'm not moving around as much, I'm trying to buy more books. Reading about other artists can be really inspiring, but it's also a double-edged sword, because you can end up getting swept up in ideas that have nothing to do with you. Getting hijacked for a second. For example, I did a lecture on the artist Maria Nordman at Dia [Art Foundation, New York]. I was supposed to deliver it in April 2020, so I was doing my research for it in the month before that. Then the pandemic hit and I put it aside and did not think about it for another year. In the meantime I was working on *Computer* and I was noticing that I had some*

ideas in my head about it, some concerns that even though related to my past work somehow sat weird. Thoughts about how the audience would almost be finishing the work by wearing it out through movement, that without the audience the work does not really exist. Which partially came from working with a public institution and becoming more aware of how the audience in a way bears a lot of responsibility for its longevity and continued existence. But also in combination with other aspects of the piece, like bringing the piece outside and frottaging the sidewalks in New York. Here I recognised echoes of Nordman's ideas, especially once I took up preparing the lecture again. It was an instance of not intentionally taking someone else's work as a reference point, but the idea operating in a deep background.

RS *Does social conversation feel laboured for you?*

OB *I mean... I don't think I would be described by most people as someone who loves to talk.*

RS *You sound like someone who doesn't think in language.*

OB *I would say that, but when I observe myself, I realise there is no 'outside of language' for me, there is always a lot of language going on in my head, even if it's nonlinear or incoherent. It shapes how I see.*

RS *Do you think with your hands?*



Computer, 2021, mixed media, 425 × 100 cm. Photo: Rob Harris.
Courtesy the artist; Bridget Donahue, New York; and Camden Art Centre, London

OB I think with everything: my hands, my brain, my eyes. I can't say that I only think with one part of my body. A lot of the work happens through association or a kind of visual or textural rhyming in the studio. Physically making things does help in that process. I can't say that I have a set process of how I do things. Sometimes I come up with something I want to do in my head, and then I try to do it and then it kind of doesn't work out and I go from there. Or it does work out and then it's there. Or I abandon it. So it's a process of no process.

RS *Are you resistant to pinning down your process?*

OB I'm just trying to be honest. A lot also depends on circumstance and factors outside of my control, like the aesthetics of the places I am showing, shipping constraints, etc.

RS *Do you purposely avoid repetition?*

OB I used to. There was a lot I wanted to try, and I made this resolution that I would keep my practice very open, make each body of work different from the previous. I found a lot of pleasure and energy in not being consistent, or maybe in trying to figure out a consistency that was more of a feeling than a set of visual attributes. Also I thought it was important that the work was difficult and uncomfortable to absorb. So I really made an effort towards this. Now I am making an effort to stay in the same register a bit more.

RS *And why do you want that?*

OB I think the shift has been gradual and more internal. I was becoming overwhelmed with the amount of work I was doing and exhausted from the adrenaline rush of constantly trying to do something different and letting too many ideas in. The work became more reduced and quieter because I hit a point at which I was mentally unable to do things like going into the metal workshop and facing the fumes and dust. Also, practically, in New York it's a true feat to have access to production facilities, especially if you want to do the work yourself and can't pay a lot of money. So I think it's partially an adaptation to moving to a very expensive, visually stimulating, loud, crowded city and a response to a need to feel more grounded. That said, 'same register' doesn't mean repetition. I'm still searching for things. It's important for me that the work feels alive.

RS *Have you felt much resistance to that kind of experimental approach?*

OB No, not too much from the people I work with. I established this way of working early on as part of my practice, so I assume the people who would resist just did not approach me.

RS *Your most recent work at Barbara Weiss in Berlin is working with the same materials and gestures as brain damage. What does that kind of recapitulation do for you?*

OB The works at Barbara Weiss were ones I made in 2019 and did not install. So I was engaging with the same body of work, rather than repeating.

RS *Do you often show older work?*

OB I do, and I find it very rewarding, especially when I have not seen something for a long time. It often informs my current work and helps me to understand new ideas I have. I would love to do a show of just older works and see how they all speak to each other and interrelate.

RS *Repetition seems to create what we call style. How do you define style?*

OB At its best iteration, it's being able to work with your limitations. At its worst, it's being contrived.

Mrs. Hippy

RS *Do you enjoy making your work?*

OB Sometimes.

RS *Do you prefer the work you made with enjoyment rather than work in struggle?*

OB It depends on when you ask me. Maybe when I'm first showing it I prefer the work I made with enjoyment, because maybe I'm more confident in it. But with some distance it ends up not mattering.



brain damage, 2019 (installation view, Bridget Donahue, New York, 2019).
Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York







above *Formula 15*, 2022, foam, latex, 25 × 24 cm. Photo: Kunst-dokumentation.com.
Courtesy the artist and Croy Nielsen, Vienna

preceding pages *Manifestations of our own wickedness and future idiocy*, 2017,
Rowlux paper, steel, photographs, 254 × 518 × 203 cm. Courtesy the artist;
Bridget Donahue, New York; Croy Nielsen, Vienna; Fons Welters, Amsterdam;
and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles

RS *While working, is there a feeling you find yourself returning to more often than others?*

OB One of my favourite feelings when I work is when I have had a new idea and am rushing to execute it in one way or another. It feels very urgent in a fun way.

RS *When you were young, did you know you'd be an artist?*

OB Maybe from the age of thirteen I wanted to be an artist. But before that we moved around a lot, and things were looser for me. I moved to the US when I was fourteen and decided to study art once I was in college. Or 'decided' is maybe too strong a word. I started creeping towards becoming an artist. I had some really great teachers, Lee Running and Isabel Barbuzza, who blew my mind with what sculpture could be and were generally very encouraging.

RS *What were you making at thirteen?*

OB Drawings of dolphins and celebrities. I used makeup like eyeshadow and lipstick for drawing, to be experimental. I also made collages with iridescent stickers in order to put them on a copy machine and see how the iridescence would be reproduced by the machine. It was exciting to see the different images I would get from the same image sources.

RS *Where were you before the US?*

OB I was born in Lviv, Ukraine, and we moved to Karlsruhe, Germany, in 1991. We stayed there

for a year and moved back to Lviv, lived there for two years and then moved to Leipzig in Germany. After that we spent some time again in Lviv before moving to Ames, Iowa, in the US.

RS *How did all these places affect you differently?*

OB I had the idea to reinvent myself each time I moved, but I always stayed the same, except for the usual changes one encounters when growing up. It wasn't always easy to adjust to constant change. Some places were more hostile than others. When I lived in Leipzig I was the most unhappy, but I also developed my interest in being creative then. I had a lot of time to myself and I would try to learn how to play guitar and record myself singing. I also spent a lot of time at music stores, listening to CDs at listening stations. There was a store called Mrs. Hippy that my friends' older friends shopped at. It smelled very strongly of patchouli and a lot of goths shopped there. I wasn't really allowed to buy stuff there, but I loved to go and look. There were a lot of different subcultures around like goths, punks, ravers, also neo-Nazis. Some of my schoolmates were already going to the Love Parade in Berlin at the age of thirteen. When I moved to Iowa at fourteen the scene was very different. The kids were much more wholesome in general, less angsty and edgy, more into sports and watching movies.

My most formative years were spent in Ukraine. It's where I first thought, spoke, heard

and saw, learned how to exist and relate to people, I'm not sure how to encompass that experience, because it's the most distant and also most present. The tragedy of the war has made this distance/presence most palpable. I am safe from physical violence, but to know what a place looks, feels, smells, sounds like and now it is being blown up sent me into a different corner of reality, one I was unable to imagine before. And even with that understanding I can't begin to approximate the reality and distress my family and the Ukrainian people are experiencing in the face of the brutality and violence of the war.

RS *Do you consider your history and identity to be a significant part of your work?*

OB I think it shapes the why and the how, but maybe not *what* I make. By that I mean my history and identity are not the subject matter of my work. My work concerns itself more with formal explorations, materials that I encounter in my present, art-historical concerns, feelings, etc. But I think how things end up coming out or what I am interested in has to do with my history and identity. I would not believe myself if I said my work has nothing to do with my history. There is no escaping yourself. It comes through.

Ross Simonini is a writer, painter, and composer. He is the host of ArtReview's podcast Subject, Object, Verb



Computer, 2021, mixed media, 425 × 100 cm.
Photo: Rob Harris. Courtesy the artist;
Bridget Donahue, New York; and Camden Art Centre, London

OLGA BALEMA

Joseph Elmer Yoakum, “ New York Galleries: What to see right
now”

NY Times, July 2019

New York Galleries: What to See Right Now

Joseph Elmer Yoakum's delirious vistas; Olga Balema's discreet sculptures; and a 12-artist show, "Just Painting," rich with visual echoes.

July 18, 2019

Olga Balema

Through July 26. Bridget Donahue, 99 Bowery, Manhattan; 646-896-1368, bridgetdonahue.nyc.



Olga Balema's "12," from 2019, consists of elastic band, paint, glue, nails and staples. Credit Olga Balema and Bridget Donahue, NYC

Sometimes in art, it's not a question of how much you can get away with but how little. Olga Balema takes this second approach in her provocative show "[Brain Damage](#)" at [Bridget Donahue](#).

“Brain Damage” is so spare it feels initially like entering an empty gallery. (Photographs of the show also create this illusion.) Along the floor, however, Ms. Balema has stretched, twisted and tacked together a network of thin white elastic cords. Most are laid out in geometric fashion, suggesting a jerry-built network, like a homemade circuit board or an energy grid. The show’s title echoes the uncanny presentation, which is simultaneously pared down and dense since you have to step carefully around the elastic cords to avoid wrecking the installation.

The show relies on multiple historical precedents: a 1942 exhibition [Marcel Duchamp created by winding a mile of twine around a gallery](#), as well as the rope and yarn sculptures of post-minimalists like Richard Tuttle and Fred Sandback and the tradition of empty-gallery exhibitions by Yves Klein or Douglas Huebler. Made by a woman, “Brain Damage” is perfect for our moment, though. Taut, tough and a bit neurotic, it’s like a feminist homage and response to these historical — and historically male — gestures, standing boldly among them while suggesting in both words and materials the fragility and psychic damage of our own chaotic times.

MARTHA SCHWENDENER

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/18/arts/design/what-to-see-in-art-galleries.html>

OLGA BALEMA
Quinn Latimer, “Olga Balema”
Artforum, April 2015

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PURCHASE
ARCHIVE

- January 2017
 - December 2016
 - November 2016
 - October 2016
 - September 2016
 - Summer 2016
 - May 2016
- All back issues



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OPENINGS

Olga Balema

QUINN LATIMER



Olga Balema, *Long Arm* (detail), 2013, latex, aluminum, 11' 5 3/4" x 4' 11" x 3' 3 3/8".

AN ARM STRETCHES across a concrete floor, a *Lonely Arm*, 2013. Salmon-colored, latex, it is not, in fact, an arm; it is a glove. Still, the allusion to an arm animates it, narrates its—what—well, technically *material* loneliness. In another white cube, another city, painted-metal and foam-and-latex biomorphic shapes—“Her Curves,” the exhibition’s title tells us, wittily—are leaned and loosed, approximating a brilliant, laconic apparatus, almost ergonomic. Matte and pastel or high gloss and jewel tone, the discrete sculptures shape and are shaped by the room. Like garments or stains or husks—material fragments at once body and chair and dress, all those things that might hold *her*—their minimalism is not predictably haunted by but *hunting* the human body (consider, for example, the narrative of a lonely glove scouring some surface for an arm to attend to).

The artist Olga Balema calls such works, her works, with their deft conflation of the interior and the exterior, “semiabstract.” On view at High Art, Paris, in 2014, they might be construed as totally abstract were it not for the figurative bent of their titles and the corporeal metaphors of their forms, which, taken together, call Balema’s works to “her” side. If one has only language to express the pointedly physical nature of these works, and the collusion between the lexical and the corporeal that intimately forms them—the desire to describe the body, in both text and space—then so be it, for one is always in language in Balema’s work, called over to *its* side (my metaphor reaching again for the body, like the artist’s long *Lonely Arm*). The language of art history, yes—her High Art show conjured the polymorphous perversity of a ménage-à-trois among Lynda Benglis’s poured sculptures, Bruce Nauman’s psychological cast fragments, and Alina Szapocznikow’s Pop-inflected, very material feminism, while offering an art-in-the-age-of-the-Internet riposte to the “living brushes” of Yves Klein’s *Anthropométries*, 1958–62. But also present is the lexicon in which we parse and picture and narrate the physical and psychic body—its contents and discontents. Consider how writing runs through Balema’s work in her poetic press releases, which set the scene (of her concerns): “In a living room. / Legs crossed to form a point of departure, she follows the lines as they travel along biologically. / Surprised, a word spills from her mouth.”

Born in Ukraine and based in Amsterdam and Berlin, Balema earned her MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 2009. Among these disparate sites, her concern with communication—and the imaginative, ideological, and material space between subject and object—likely emerged. Nevertheless, it’s the body—literary, technological, biological, and largely female, it seems, and filled with desire—that illuminates Balema’s work with a kind of philosophical consciousness that is rare, welcome. Her sculptures

and paintings break down the predictable binaries of subject/object, matter/language, body/writing, instead looping through and among them, nonhierarchically.

See “Body of Work,” her exhibition at Galerie Fons Welters in Amsterdam in 2013, which featured a constellation of rusted-steel objects laced with white, wispy 3-D-printed textiles that stood out against them like gnomish signs; latex gloves conjoined with word-smearers; fountain-like buckets filled with soaked, text-strewn T-shirts; and prints on canvas communicating such unfluent, enigmatic sentiments as I DREAMT I HELD YOU IN MY / AND I HUNG MY HEAD AND I / YOU ARE MY SUNSHINE, MY / BUT NOW YOU’VE LEFT ME, A / ND LOVE ANOTHER (*You Are My Sunshine*, 2013). The etymology of the show was the cadence of the error-filled T-shirts the artist first saw in Shanghai—but that proliferate across the non-English-speaking world—adorned with text directly (mis)translated from Chinese. The strange, sad language that results cancels the clichés of the original writing—wonderfully—while suggesting a translation process that can’t quite decode and compress the distance between the need to communicate and one’s means, between culture and meaning, between representative models and individual bodies.

“The libido is defined as an energy of strange material consistency,” philosopher Catherine Malabou writes in her essay “Plasticity and Elasticity in Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*”:

It is often presented as a substance that is neither liquid nor solid but something in between. “Fluid” or, precisely, “plastic” are terms often used by Freud to characterize this type of amazing materiality. The libido is sometimes compared to a river. . . . At other times, Freud uses the metaphor of protoplasmic liquid, which is a little thicker than sheer water. . . . The plasticity of the libido thus designates the double ability to cling to the object and to abandon it.

Why do I keep coming back to this passage when thinking about Balema’s series of untitled floor pieces made since 2013, transparent rectangular plates containing water, concrete, and steel, among other materials? They were shown at 1646 gallery, in The Hague, in 2013, and paired by the artist with a passage from Vladimir Nabokov’s 1924 story “*La Veneziana*,” which ecstatically describes merging with the material qualities of paintings. The works’ plastic packaging, which holds them together—modernist landscapes and speculative specimens of refuse both, Petri dishes all—glimmers and warps under the gallery lights. The abject compositions are watery orange or pink grounds; poles and fabric litter them, are suspended expertly within them. At once haptic and sealed off, the works change over time, the materials shifting, decomposing. Malabou writes, “The time of materiality would be prior to the time of pleasure.” If there is a libido at work here, it is in the pleasure and pain of decay, and in that decay’s framing. The sovereign bodies of Balema’s works are mirrors to our matter, their silence beckoning forth our language to describe them, and us.

Quinn Latimer is Editor in Chief of Publications for Documenta 14 and the author of Rumored Animals (2012) and Sarah Lucas: Describe This Distance (2013).

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