

# Felt Lox and Plaster Tomato Sauce: The Ethics of Sculpture

Fawn Krieger Interviewed by Miriam Katz

I first encountered Fawn Krieger's work in the "Analogous Logic" exhibition at Brooklyn Fireproof last July. The group show featured several of the artist's minimalist sculptures composed of stark, industrial components instilled with a subtle emotional tenor. A sheet of matte white vinyl softened the angular particle board in *Ecke* (2007); oozing fixative mollified the harsh concrete and battered wood in *Basement* (2007). These minute interventions appeared to tame the materials and expose a hidden vulnerability, revealing the artist's rare ability to integrate both sensitivity and strength into her work. At the core of Krieger's artistic identity lies a fierce insistence on "locating [her voice] in all of its manifestations." I spoke with the sculptor in her Long Island City studio this past September as she was preparing a commissioned project for Art in General.

**Miriam Katz:** Tell me about the project you're working on for Art in General.

**Fawn Krieger:** The project is called *COMPANY*, and it's inspired by Claes Oldenburg's installation *The Store* from 1961. It's been interesting going through the challenges of having a really explicit conversation with another artist's project. One of the first questions that sprung up for me was where I adhere to his telling of the story and where I depart from it. *The Store* didn't feel right to me as a title for my project, and I started thinking a lot about what a store is now. The opening line of my proposal to Art in General was: "Public is the new private, company is the new store." Renaming the project was important to me because I thought of it as some sort of reincarnated or reassigned commercial space. The concept of the work is loosely structured around the question of when consumer impulse replaces intimacy and how merchandise rises in this pivotal way to become the thing that keeps us company.

**MK:** Can you say something about the kinds of objects you're making for this project and the various levels of intimacy contained in them?

**FK:** For one thing, something I feel really strongly about generally is what happens to sculptures when they get spoken of as objects. I prefer to think of them as subjects, not separate from us, but rather part of us. But with this project, I find myself using the term “objects,” and I think that has something to do with the commodification of them, and being extremely conscious that these are not only products that will be consumed, but that they’re made for the express purpose of participating in this overt commercial context.

Another thing I’ve been thinking about a lot lately is this notion of “power-objects.” I guess it became especially apparent when I was at the Met a few months ago giving a tour of pieces in the collection that included 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century African Boli figures, objects made with sacrificial and natural materials such as bones, blood, fur, earth, crops, or ground rhinoceros tusk. These Boli figures are considered to be power objects, and somehow that made me think about how objects begin to be imbued with and also omit a particular kind of energy that communicates or facilitates some kind of magic. For *COMPANY* I’ve been making objects such as green cards, an oil drum, batteries, a bagel with lox, a high-heeled shoe, and a replica of The Declaration of Independence, and I’ve been thinking about these objects as fuel—as generators and conductors of power. Some of these objects are connected to people; they signify individuals and become symbols of intimacy. In that sense, they very much relate to the ancient definition of a power object, a container for energy that transmits energy.

**MK:** The press release on the Art in General website says that you’re selling the objects for between \$2 and \$2,000. Are you selling them simply to create a parallel to Oldenburg’s project?

**FK:** One reason to sell them is that when objects are bought, other objects will be brought in to replace them. I love the idea that the conversation is constantly changing. It’s not just about replenishment though. I love collaborating, and I think of the curator and staff as an integral part of the creative process. I’m obviously not going to be there all

the time, so if somebody buys something, others will be able to move things around and make everything fit again—they will help cultivate the content. I also like the idea that once objects are purchased and taken away, I will need to make more, which demands an attendance to people's needs for these objects.

**MK:** How do you choose your materials? In what way are the materials related to the objects they represent?

**FK:** My friend asked me something similar before you got here—she wanted to know why the computer was made out of wood and the TV was made out of papier-mâché. The first response I had was that it somehow feels connected to time—how the time embodied in the material relates to the object's accumulated memory. The physical presence of an object multiplies when its material is in sync with its meaning—when it knows itself. Sometimes materials function as signifiers—they act as stand-ins for the thing itself. I think about the time held in the objects that I'm referencing and what these objects mean to us in terms of their levels of immovability within our culture. How ephemeral are these things, how flexible, how heavy, how deeply rooted are their histories with us, and where did their intentions begin?

In a way, it comes down to thinking about the hand, which signifies choice, action, touch, intimacy, violence, power, potential, and communication, [the hand] as a record keeper of time, as opposed to history books or newspapers. Making is our timekeeper. Matter is our extended, collective body. But then sometimes it's more practical. For example, it's easy to convey the consistency of tomato sauce with plaster. And in some cases, I'm playing with Oldenburg's materials and his craft. The objects that excite me most in terms of making are the ones for which I'm pushing myself to discover new ways of using a material. It's as if I'm giving myself an education; the goal of achieving a particular object helps me to get to know a wide variety of materials and techniques.

**MK:** The last time I was here you mentioned that you thought being a sculptor was an ethical choice.

**FK:** And a political choice.

**MK:** Yes—can you talk about that?

**FK:** I think this goes to the very heart of my artistic identity, so as much as it's something I think about often, there are sometimes no words to fill certain pockets. One reason that I believe in sculpture so much and why I choose to identify myself as a sculptor is because I feel that sculpture is, in a way, the discipline of being. It describes physical presence and it demands physical presence. Another thing is that, in many respects, I feel connected to sculpture because it feels like the medium in which I can locate the most non-physical source. It allows me to locate energy and feel energy. And to make that more concrete, I think about sculpture as being the antithesis to negative space. And negative space not just as in physical absence, but as in negativity, and how any gesture to make something physically present can be a form of adding positive and transforming negative into positive. So it's also a medium that I see as having deeply healing properties. It's fascinating to me how much people walk by sculpture to look at a painting or a photograph. There are many reasons why this might be the case, but I can't help but feel that it's because sculpture demands an awareness of your body and the bodies around you—and an awareness of sculpture as body. In some ways, I don't feel that it's always the most natural way of making for me, in the sense that I'm not formally trained in how to build. A lot of my construction choices are pretty idiosyncratic and immediate. But I believe in the identification of sculptor, and I believe in what's possible with physical form.

**MK:** There's a real strand of hope in your vision of sculpture.

**FK:** Yes, hope. And also loss.

**MK:** Can you explain that?

**FK:** I often think about the memory in my hands—how they remember loss and love and trauma and fear. I feel like I belong to this history of art-making that is a kind of offering or gesture outward that asks for contact on the other side of the exchange. This history has a personal component—a history of sacrifice and loss and a deep need for connection and contact that at times wasn't met, or wasn't met in a way that I had imagined. And then I think it also belongs to another kind of history outside of me that's collective, like the Boli figures and rituals of offering or exchange, where fear and generosity meet.

**MK:** What makes the things you put into the world sculptures? What makes them different from other objects?

**FK:** I think intention is always the difference. For me, that means that I can easily perceive a car as being art, as much as I can perceive someone's art as not what I call art. Ultimately it comes down to the energy that's invested in and pushed through the object.

**MK:** I know that you write a lot about your work—why is that necessary for you?

**FK:** It's definitely related to my work. I can't imagine not demanding from myself everything that I possibly can to articulate, to find a language, and to make that available to the world. For me, it is such a necessity that if I don't have words, I find them. And those words don't necessarily describe my work, but they engage it and have a conversation with it. The relationship with writing is very much like an actual relationship. It's constantly shifting, and its parameters need to be redefined so I don't lose myself in it, and also so I don't lose *it*. I think it changes when I need it more or less. But it feels very important for me to be fiercely insistent about my voice—insistent on locating and taking responsibility for it in all of its manifestations.