

ARTFORUM

NOVEMBER 2004

BONE OF CONTENTION

RICHARD MEYER ON LYNDA BENGLIS'S CONTROVERSIAL ADVERTISEMENT



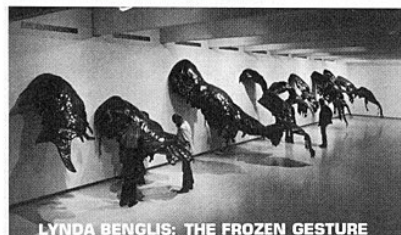
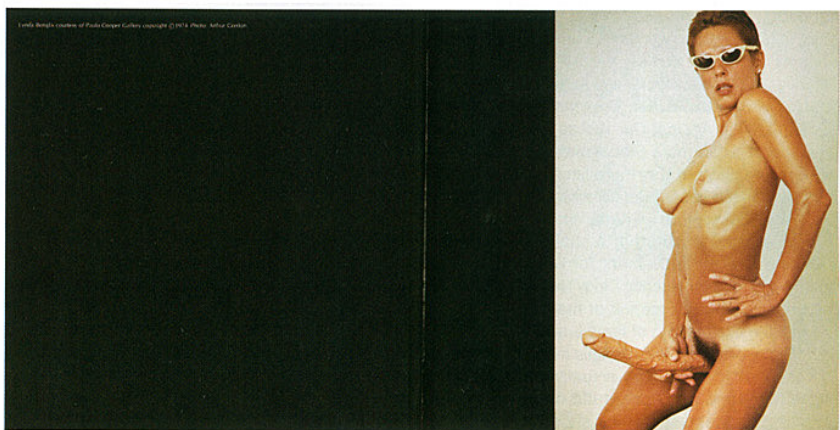
"Vulgarity is gendered, of course."¹

—T.J. Clark

WHEN I TEACH AMERICAN ART of the 1970s, there is one work that always stops the class cold: Lynda Benglis's ad from the November 1974 issue of *Artforum*. College students who respond matter-of-factly to other controversial works from the period—Vito Acconci masturbating beneath the floorboards of the Sonnabend gallery or Chris Burden's having himself shot with a .22-caliber rifle—are visibly (and, on occasion, audibly) taken aback by the image of Benglis, naked and greased with oil, extending a dildo from her vagina. In contrast to the photographs that survive of Acconci's *Seedbed*, 1972, or Burden's *Shoot*, 1971, Benglis's image does not document a performance so much as it enacts one, a performance of pornography that doubles as a brazen commentary on the marketing of contemporary art and the public exposure of the artist.

Beyond an expanse of black space and some tiny, white text on the upper-left side of the two-page spread, there is nothing to see but the naked artist and her latex manhood. No other figures, no background incident, no narrative context, no cautionary label. Much of what we do see mimics a *Penthouse* centerfold: the close-up framing of the tanned-and-toned female body, the bikini lines marking off the areas of supreme visual interest, the fantasy props of sunglasses and suntan oil, the surface appeal of glossy paper and glistening skin. But Benglis also measures some distance from mainstream porn through her defiant, hand-on-hip gesture, her short-cropped hair, her natural (and by *Penthouse* standards, modest) breasts, and above all, by the way in which she wields her dildo as a cock. The artist described her spread at the time as the "ultimate mockery of the pinup and the macho,"² and it's not hard to see what she meant. She presents the dildo less as an object to be inserted into her body than as an extension of it—a massive if patently artificial erection. The dildo is, in fact, double-headed, but Benglis's pubic hair occludes the second head, and it is that occlusion that makes the thing look so outrageously long. The artist uses her store-bought sex toy both to mime the manly gesture and to reveal, even ridicule it as utterly false.

The publication of the ad thirty years ago this month famously provoked a furor within the art world, polarizing critics, including feminist ones, and outraging five of the six associate editors of *Artforum*, two of whom (both women) resigned in the extended aftermath of the episode. In a letter published in



ROBERT FUGLESTADEN
The artist's 1974 advertisement for *Artforum* is a landmark work of feminist art. It is a performance of pornography that doubles as a brazen commentary on the marketing of contemporary art and the public exposure of the artist. The artist described her spread at the time as the "ultimate mockery of the pinup and the macho," and it's not hard to see what she meant. She presents the dildo less as an object to be inserted into her body than as an extension of it—a massive if patently artificial erection. The dildo is, in fact, double-headed, but Benglis's pubic hair occludes the second head, and it is that occlusion that makes the thing look so outrageously long. The artist uses her store-bought sex toy both to mime the manly gesture and to reveal, even ridicule it as utterly false.



WHEN I TRAVEL TO UNIVERSITIES AND LIBRARIES, I CHECK TO SEE WHETHER THE NOVEMBER 1974 ARTFORUM IS IN THE STACKS. MORE OFTEN THAN NOT, THE PAGE I'M LOOKING FOR HAS BEEN RIPPED OUT.

the December 1974 issue, the five editors denounced Benglis's ad as "an object of extreme vulgarity," which "brutaliz[ed]" both themselves and their readers.³

In part because of the controversy it provoked at the time, the ad has resurfaced in recent years as something of a "bad girl" icon, one increasingly shown in museum and gallery exhibitions and reproduced in revisionist accounts of '70s feminist art and performance. But if the ad is regularly displayed and reprinted, this is not to say that it is closely con-

sidered or fully reckoned with. Critics and curators tend to look through or past the image to find the message they want it to provide, whether it be that Benglis "explicitly collapsed the phallus with the penis" or crafted "a metaphoric fusion of the Duchampian bribe and bachelor," or "subvert[ed] the psychic symbology of the penis itself."⁴ The high-mindedness of such prose robs the image of its sexual lawlessness and graphic immediacy. "An object of extreme vulgarity" seems to me closer to the mark, in part because it retains some sense of

Spreads from *Artforum*, November, 1974. Top: Advertisement by Lynda Benglis. Bottom: "Lynda Benglis: The Frozen Gesture," by Robert Fuglestad-Witten, 1974.

the ad's radical confrontation with both art and feminism in 1974.⁵

By her own account, Benglis "wanted more playfulness" with gender roles and sexually explicit imagery than the women's movement typically permitted at the time.⁶ In the early '70s, American feminists tended to frame pornography as oppressive if not outright dangerous to women. In 1974, Robin Morgan (editor of the women's-lib bestseller *Sisterhood Is Powerful*) coined the influential phrase "pornography is the theory, and rape the practice."⁷ The following year Susan Brownmiller described pornography in *Against Our Will* as "the undiluted essence of anti-female propaganda."⁸ Within this context, the dildo ad was more likely to be seen as an attack on feminism than a manifestation of it. To *Artforum's* associate editors, for example, the Benglis spread constituted "a shabby mockery of the aims" of "the movement for women's liberation," while to feminist critic Cindy Nemer it was "in the end . . . another means of manipulating men through the exploitation of female sexuality."⁹

But who, precisely, was Benglis manipulating and to what end? In contrast to virtually every other ad in the magazine, her spread did not announce a current or upcoming gallery show.¹⁰ Instead, it announced the space of advertising—the front pages of the issue just before the table of contents—as a site of pornographic exposure. In doing so, the ad implicated not only *Artforum* but the broader network of art marketing and publicity of which the magazine, as well as the artist herself, was part. Benglis's self-described satire of "the artstar system, and the way artists use themselves, their persona, to sell the work,"¹¹ struck a particularly raw nerve with *Artforum's* editorial staff, several of whom were already troubled by the influence of gallery advertising on the magazine's editorial content.¹² To their eyes, Benglis's ad personified the threat posed to serious art criticism by commercialism. In their protest letter, the aggrieved editors wrote that:

The advertisement has pictured the journal's role as devoted to the self-promotion of artists in the most debased sense of that term. We are aware of the economic interdependencies which govern the entire chain of artistic production and distribution. Nonetheless, the credibility of our work demands that we be always on guard against such complicity, implied by the publication of this advertisement. To our great regret, we find ourselves compromised in this manner and that we owe our readers an acknowledgement of that compromise.¹³

Benglis's ad was not simply lewd and offensive. It also "compromised" the credibility of the editors by likening their work to the crassest form of solicitation. One of the editors who signed the letter, Rosalind Krauss, would later put the point succinctly: "We thought the position represented by that ad was so degraded. We read it as saying that art writers are whores."¹⁴ The ad was degrading



not—or not only—because it presented the artist as a sexual commodity, but because it implied that the art writer herself was for sale on the open market.

In addition to this unforgettable ad, the November 1974 issue included a five-page article entitled, "Lynda Benglis: The Frozen Gesture," by contributing senior editor Robert Pincus-Witten. The dual appearance of ad and article was by no means coincidental. As Benglis later recalled, "Pincus-Witten came to me to say that he would like to do an article on me. I was receptive. And with that, I decided that I would like to do a *piece* for *Artforum*, a work, within the context of the magazine."¹⁵ Benglis conceived the photograph as a project for *Artforum*, initially proposing that it appear as a centerfold insert to Pincus-Witten's article and offering to pay for its printing. The magazine rejected her proposal on the grounds that its editorial pages were not for sale. Its advertising pages, however, were. Benglis paid \$3,000 for a two-page color layout, twice the going rate at the time. The fee was doubled as a result of the risk *Artforum* was taking in terms of potential problems with its printer.¹⁶ Once it became clear that Benglis was going ahead with the ad, the magazine nixed its plans to reproduce one of her artworks on the cover.¹⁷

In a recent conversation, Benglis affirmed her view that the *Artforum* spread was "a work, not an ad," albeit one that necessarily took up residence in the ad pages of the magazine. "I knew from the beginning what I was doing," Benglis told me recently in regard to the dildo photograph. "I had a formal need to make that picture."¹⁸

The "formal need" fulfilled by the photograph comes into clearer focus once the image is reunited with the article it was meant to accompany. Appear-

ing almost fifty pages after the ad, Pincus-Witten's feature opens with a memorable two-page spread of its own. Its left page reproduces *Adhesive Products*, 1971, a massive series of black, polyurethane foam sculptures that seem to reach out from the other side of the wall to grasp at gallerygoers. The right page offers a nude photograph of Benglis, framed from behind, turning to meet the viewer's gaze while cocking her right arm over her head. The photograph, which Pincus-Witten described (admirably) as a form of "media exploitation," originally appeared in May 1974 as the announcement for a Benglis show. Shot at the artist's request by the celebrity photographer Annie Leibovitz, the image recalls a famous Hollywood pinup of Betty Grable from the 1940s.¹⁹ Where Grable wore a white, one-piece bathing suit, however, Benglis is shown bare-assed, with her jeans pulled down beneath her knees. Her expression is uncertain, unsmiling, just slightly uncomfortable. Even as she inhabits a recognizably cheesecake pose, Benglis conveys no ease or pleasure. The apparent passivity of the pinup photograph throws the full-throttle defiance of the dildo ad into even greater relief. Benglis was thus doubly exposed in the pages of the November 1974 *Artforum*. Readers who had seen her frontally naked were now offered a view from the rear. And those who may have been baffled, outraged, or aroused by the ad could now read about the work of the artist who appeared in it.

Given the context, we might take the phrase "the frozen gesture" to refer to Benglis's sexualized appearances before the camera. In the article, however, "the frozen gesture" refers most directly to the formal properties of Benglis's post-Minimal sculpture, to the polyurethane foam *continued on page 249*

pieces that congealed into layered glops on the floor or were suspended, like *Adhesive Products*, from the wall; to the metallized knots bathed in hot glue, glitter, paint, and foil; and to the pigmented latex pour pieces that hardened into groovy carpets of Day-Glo plastic. As Pincus-Witten saw them, these works extended the gestural vocabulary of Abstract Expressionism into “the total environment” while manifesting a Pop sensibility that embraced “the commercial and the commonplace.”¹² The notion of vulgarity surfaces repeatedly—yet never derisively—in this account of Benglis: “She takes pleasure in vulgarity, which is central to Pop,” or “this seeming vulgarity fascinates Benglis,” or Benglis “wishes to ‘question what vulgarity is. Taste is context.’” Vulgarity is presented as an arena of fascination and formal investigation, a terrain to be explored across a range of materials and mediums, from the “spangle and sparkle” of liquid metal to the “tawdry cosmetic colors” of pigmented foam to the “ironic self-parody” of the pinup announcement. By demonstrating the rigor with which Benglis “violates ‘adult’ notions of taste and artistic decorum,” Pincus-Witten provides a valuable context for the dildo ad. (In a priceless moment, he also cites a 1971 article on Benglis entitled, “Latex—One Artist’s Raw Material,” from the journal *Rubber Developments*.)

Far from a one-off publicity stunt, the dildo ad was part of a wider investigation into the visual and material appeal of vulgarity.¹³ Whether sculpting polyurethane foam or simulating commercial porn, Benglis was testing the limits of taste and tastelessness within contemporary art. In 1975 she made the association between the *Artforum* ad and her sculptural practice explicit by casting the double-headed dildo in bronze, tin, aluminum, lead, and gold plate and then displaying several of the casts against purple velvet. According to the artist, she made five casts in all, one for each of the *Artforum* editors who had denounced her work.

I have always been drawn to the dildo ad—to its wildly inappropriate, chick-with-a-dick flamboyance, to its refusal to resolve comfortably into either a feminist critique of pornography or a pornographic critique of feminism, to the way it jumps from artist’s project to advertisement to historical artifact and back again. When I travel to different universities and libraries, I sometimes check to see whether back issues of *Artforum* are in the stacks. If so, I go visit the November 1974 issue. More often than not, however, the page I’m looking for has

been ripped out. People tear pages from magazines because they want to keep the pages for themselves or because they want to destroy them. In this case, it is hard to say which motivation might be at hand.

When the ad is torn away, what is revealed is the next page in the magazine, which happens to be the masthead and table of contents. Where the artist and her latex member once appeared, we now see the names of the magazine’s staff, including the associate editors, and the titles of the featured articles, including “Lynda Benglis: The Frozen Gesture.” Like the notorious image it has forced from view, the torn page exposes the connection between advertising and editorial content. It reveals the intimate proximity of commerce and criticism within the pages of *Artforum*.

Even as the ad is cut out of its original context, it continues to resurface in exhibitions, books, and art magazines including this one. Recently the ad has also been updated and retooled by younger artists. In 2000, a female artist with a slender, slightly deflated dildo reenacted the Benglis spread and published it as a half-page ad in *Artforum*. Last year, a curator and her boyfriend purchased three pages in the September 2003 issue to showcase his color photograph of her ass and her short essay—“Totally My Ass”—on same. The results in each case were disappointing. In 1974, sexuality, self-promotion, and the links between them were emerging as significant issues within contemporary art and criticism.¹⁴ Thirty years and countless full-color ads and naked artists later, these issues need to be reconceived rather than simply restaged.

Yet even after all these years, the Benglis ad still works as both a formal experiment and a critical provocation. Here, in the words of the artist, is why: “I was studying pornography. I was really *studying* pornography and I really wanted something that alluded to it and mocked both sexes. . . . I wanted it to be ambiguous enough that it couldn’t be said *what* it was. And so that’s what I strove for—what I really tried to do.”¹⁵

As I see it, she really succeeded. □

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NOTES

1. T.J. Clark, *Farewell to An Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 394.

2. Lynda Benglis, quoted in Lucy Lippard, “Transformation Art,” *Ms.*, (October 1975), 34.

3. At length, the passage reads as follows: “In the specific

context of this journal, it exists as an object of extreme vulgarity. Although we realize that it is by no means the first instance of vulgarity to appear in the magazine, it represents a qualitative leap in that genre, brutalizing ourselves and, we think, our readers.” Lawrence Alloway, Max Kozloff, Rosalind Krauss, Joseph Masheck, and Annette Michelson, “Letters,” *Artforum*, December 1974, 9.

4. Chris Straayer, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-Orientations in Film and Video* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 83; Nancy Spector, “Performing the Body in the 1970s,” in Jennifer Blanding, *Rrose is a Rose: Gender Performance in Photography*, exh. cat., (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1997), 169; and Amelia Jones, “Postfeminism, Feminist Pleasures, and Embodied Theories of Art,” in *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*, ed. Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer, and Arlene Raven, (New York: Icon Editions, 1994), 33.

5. As Susan Erin Richmond notes in her excellent dissertation on Benglis, “Though feminism has now claimed the image as one of its own, Benglis’s advertisement initially signaled her unwillingness to accommodate such an allegiance.” Susan Erin Richmond, “Put-ons and Take-offs: Lynda Benglis, Feminism, and Representations of the Body, 1967–1977” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Austin, December 2002), 10.

6. In a 1979 interview, Benglis recalled her relation to feminist art in the following terms: “After I went to California [in the early ‘70s] and got involved with the feminist movement there, with Marion Shapiro [sic] and Judy Chicago and their students, I felt I wanted to present a more humorous situation. I appreciated the revered attitude and the seriousness, but I also wanted more playfulness.” Benglis goes on to discuss the dildo ad, among her other “sexual mockeries,” in terms of this more playful, less reverential attitude toward gender. Earlier in the same interview, Benglis describes the *Artforum* ad as “mocking sexuality, machoism, and feminism.” “Interview: Lynda Benglis,” *Ocular* 4:2 (Summer 1979): 34, 32. Note that Benglis said her ad mocked “machoism,” not, as has sometimes been reported, “masochism.”

7. Robin Morgan, “Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape,” (1974), reprinted in Morgan, *Going Too Far: The Personal Documents of a Feminist* (New York: Random House, 1977), 169.

8. Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975), 394.

9. Alloway et al., “Letters,” 9, and Cindy Nemer, “Lynda Benglis: A Case of Sexual Nostalgia,” *The Feminist Art Journal*, Winter 74–75, 7.

10. Although the tiny white text includes the words “courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery,” there was no Benglis show up or upcoming at the gallery nor did her dealer cover any of the costs of the ad. According to Benglis, *Artforum* insisted that the name of a gallery appear somewhere in the ad so that readers would not think that the artist was advertising herself. With Cooper’s permission, Benglis included the dealer’s name but did so in “white [print], very very small, on black glossy ground, and the figure was on the other side of the page.” Benglis, quoted in Amy Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962–1974* (New York: Soho Press, 2000), 392.

Of the 94 ads published in the November 1974 issue, eighty-one were for gallery shows, four for art schools, three for art books, two for art museums, two for art auctions, one for an investment group looking to purchase art, and one, of course, for Lynda Benglis.

11. “Interview: Lynda Benglis,” 32.

12. Rosalind Krauss has described how she and fellow editor Annette Michelson “felt that both in terms of length and content, the editorial space was being pressured by the demands of advertising.” Krauss, quoted in Newman, *Challenging Art*, 388.

In an article that revisits the history of *Artforum*, Janet Malcolm notes that “[John] Coplans, who became editor

in 1972 and was trying to keep the magazine financially afloat (when he took over, *Artforum* could barely pay its printing bill) was felt to be selling out to advertisers by turning down articles on (unmarketable) film and performance in favor of articles on (marketable) painting and sculpture.” Malcolm then quotes Krauss directly: “Yes . . . That’s how we felt. And one of the things that Annette and I have done with *October* [the journal they cofounded in 1976] is to free ourselves from that. We’ve never had a single piece of gallery advertising.” Janet Malcolm, “A Girl of the Zeitgeist,” *The New Yorker* (October 1986); reprinted in *The Unraveled Clinic: Selected Writings by Janet Malcolm* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 233.

13. Alloway et al., “Letters,” 9.

14. Quoted in Malcolm, “A Girl of the Zeitgeist,” 233.

15. Benglis, quoted in Newman, *Challenging Art*, 390. For information on the complex negotiations between Benglis and *Artforum* in 1974, I have drawn on phone conversations with Benglis (July 26 and Sept. 26, 2004) and Robert Pincus-Witten (Sept. 23, 2004) as well as Newman’s book, Richmond’s dissertation, and Susan Krane’s catalogue essay, “Lynda Benglis: Theatres of Nature,” in *Lynda Benglis: Dual Natures*, exh. cat. (Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 1991), 39–42, 59–60.

16. According to an article on the Benglis controversy that appeared in *New York* magazine early in 1975, such problems did indeed come to pass: “*Artforum*’s printers in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, refused to make plates for the ad, insisting it was offensive to the workers in the plant and would jeopardize their standing in the community. ‘If we’d had any doubts about running it in the first place,’ says *Artforum*’s Managing Editor, Angela Westwater, ‘this forced us to be positive about our stands. We told the printers, ‘We don’t want you censoring our material,’ and we insisted they consult a lawyer about their position. The lawyer told them they had to print the ad.” Dorothy Sieberling, “The New Sexual Frankness: Goodbye to Hears and Flowers,” *New York*, Feb. 17, 1975, 39.

17. On the removal of Benglis’s work from the cover, see Richmond, “Put-ons and Take-offs,” 8, n. 14; and Newman, *Challenging Art*, 392.

18. Lynda Benglis, telephone conversation with the author, July 26, 2004. Benglis did not herself shoot the photograph that appears in the spread. Instead, she paid the fashion photographer Arthur Gordon to do so. Gordon is credited in the small white text on the upper left-hand side of the spread.

19. The pinup photograph appeared as the gallery announcement for *Lynda Benglis presents Metallized Knots* at the Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, May 24–29, 1974. The pinup flowed in part from friendly competition between Benglis and Robert Morris concerning publicity images. In April 1974, Morris created a poster for his show at Castelli-Sonnabend in which he appears oiled and stripped to the waist, sporting a heavy length of chain-link, a spiked metal choker, a steel helmet, silver wristbands, biker sunglasses, impressive biceps, and a full beard. The poster was reproduced in the September 1974 issue of *Artforum* to accompany a five-page article by Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe entitled “Robert Morris: The Complication of Exhaustion.” Although uncredited at the time, the photograph for the poster was taken by Rosalind Krauss. To my knowledge, this fact was never mentioned during the ensuing controversy over the Benglis ad.

According to Morris, “I had a certain amount of verbal communication with Lynda [regarding the poster] . . . and there was some competition between us. But we kept the final results a secret from each other.” “Collage,” *Art News* 73, no. 7 (September 1974): 44. A series of complex relations between privacy and publicity, between secrecy and exposure, shaped this episode in ways that remain fairly (and perhaps necessarily) opaque to outsiders.

20. Robert Pincus-Witten, “Lynda Benglis: The Frozen Gesture,” *Artforum*, November 1974, 55.

21. Prior to the pinup and dildo ad, Benglis produced two