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## LYNDA BENGLIS/ROBERT MORRIS: 1973–1974

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SUSAN INGLETT GALLERY

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*by kriston capps*

NEW YORK CITY Let's not fault *Artforum* for being unreasonable. It would tarnish any art magazine's credibility to allow artists to purchase editorial space within its pages. But that was not the specific complaint offered by the magazine's editors when, late in 1974, Lynda Benglis purchased a front-of-the-book centerfold in which the artist, naked but for pair of cat-eye shades, brandishes a double-pronged dildo in a sexually explicit pose. In industry terms, Benglis's photo spread might be described as an advertorial -- part artwork in itself, part advertisement for the show that was reviewed in the same issue. Five of *Artforum*'s editors had another term for it: "extreme vulgarity." They weren't concerned with selling pages to artists to use as self-promotional workspace; Benglis had placed an art ad earlier that year, a round in a game of public oneupmanship between Benglis and artist Robert Morris. But her November '74 image was too blunt. In a pithy editorial note published the following issue, then-editor Rosalind Krauss and her confederates wrote off Benglis's ad buy as pornographic: "[I]t represents a qualitative leap in that genre, brutalizing ourselves and, we think, our readers." The art world loves its intrigues, so it's not a surprise that an incident that viewers in the know would regard as inside baseball would wind up as fodder for a gallery show. But "Lynda Benglis/Robert Morris: 1973-1974" curated by Specific Object/David Platzker for Susan Inglett Gallery finds the broader context for the story -- and its place in the social moment.



Arguably, Krauss deserves top billing with Benglis and Morris: Her role in the kerfuffle is not to be underestimated. Prior to the Benglis ad, Morris had created a gallery show poster in which he appeared, nude from the waist up, hands bound by heavy chains and wrist restraints, wearing aviators and a German military field helmet. Krauss, who was

living with Morris at the time, took that photograph. The same month the poster came out, Benglis ran an ad in *Artforum* full of L.A. machismo: The aviator glasses and slicked-back hair are back again, as she leans casually against a Porsche. When Benglis copped a dildo later in the year, the photo was no more sexually illicit than the gay S&M image that Krauss captured for Morris-though she and four other editors decided Benglis had pushed too far. Some readers agreed -- and this is where the exhibition shines -- as their arguments are presented in never-before-seen letters to *Artforum*, mounted along the gallery walls. Here the *Artforum* editorial panel finds common cause with one Daniel Steward, a reader from Seattle, who describes Lynda Benglis (disapprovingly) as an "athletic sexplextus." For the defense, an amicus curiae filed by Jennifer Bartlett, Vito Acconci, Germano Celant, and Nancy Kitchell-via telegram from Milan-reads, "WE ADMIRE LYNDIA BENGLIS WAY OF BYPASSING EDITORIAL CENSORSHIP." Artist Larry Bell damned *Artforum* with this faint praise: "Many thanks for finally printing something outside of your normal drivell . . . if this is a new policy of the publication please consider this letter a request for subscription, if not forget it." And one art historian offered that Benglis had nothing on a painting by prototypical gender bender Duchamp that played on Ingres's Turkish Bath, which Duchamp signed "Marcellus D. Marcellus"-an obscure Latinization for "big mallet." The work in the show can't compare with the letters, contemporary reviews, and other archived materials. Benglis's latex pour pieces, of the sort that were reviewed in the pivotal April '74 issue, are displayed, as are some video collaborations between Benglis and Morris. The show also features one of the five metal, curved, double-pronged dildos cast by Benglis, a series called Smile. (After the fact, she designated one for each of her five *Artforum* interlocutors.) In this historical context, the works seem like the supporting materials that illustrate the letters, not vice versa. If there was ever a so-called "Artforum moment" between 1962 and 1974 (as Amy Newman deemed it in her 2003 book, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-1974*), it ended not with the departure of Krauss and another editor (in 1976) to start October, but with notices from several middle and high school principals to cancel their subscriptions following the Benglis ad. That there was even a time when *Artforum* was delivered to grade schools seems surprising now. But there was also a time when the image of Madonna shocked the nation, and the Benglis contretemps illustrates the same uneasy revolution: the depiction of sexual liberation. That push to reveal sexual iconography as the country experienced its own political and sexual awakening translated into several forums: feminist identity politics, but also television, fashion, and yes, *Artforum*.

*[Lynda Benglis/Robert Morris: 1973–1974; installation view courtesy Susan Inglett Gallery]*