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LAST CHANCE

Art or Ad or What? It Caused a Lot of Fuss



Susan Inglett Gallery, NYC

The top portion of the "Benglis ad," a color photograph of Lynda Benglis that appeared in Artforum magazine in 1974.

By **ROBERTA SMITH**

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It all began with a woman with a phallus. She was Lynda Benglis, a 32-year-old rising star in the New York art firmament of the early 1970s, Post-Minimal division. The instrument in question was a large, cast-latex double-headed dildo that Ms. Benglis held defiantly between her thighs in a now infamous color photograph. Visible from the knees up, she is nude except for a pair of cat's-eye rhinestone sunglasses and a diamond stud earring, her body oiled, her cropped hair stiffly moussed.

And "it"? It was the historic dust-up that ensued when this photograph appeared, in 1974, in Artforum, the leading art magazine of the time. Ms. Benglis called the image a "centerfold" and considered it a work of art; others called it an ad, since Paula Cooper, Ms. Benglis's dealer at the time, made arrangements for its placement; still others said it was pornography and unsuitable for an art magazine.

But there it was in the advertising section in the front of the magazine, many pages ahead of an article on Ms. Benglis's work by Robert Pincus-Witten, the art critic who coined the term Post-Minimalism. She had originally wanted the photograph to run as part of the article, but the editor, John Coplans, refused.

The "Benglis ad," as it is usually called, is central to "Lynda Benglis/Robert Morris, 1973-74," an informative, fascinating and often hilarious exhibition at the Susan Inglett Gallery in Chelsea. With a sheaf of unpublished letters to the editor, it fills in history that you probably missed even if you were around the first time. (I worked for Paula Cooper until a few months before the ad ran and was writing short reviews for Artforum.)

The exhibition has been organized by David Platzker, Ms. Inglett's husband, a dealer in rare catalogs and art-world ephemera who owns a bookstore-cum-gallery called Specific Object on West 26th Street. Combining art with papers drawn mostly from Ms. Benglis's files, Mr. Platzker elaborates several rings of context around the ad, starting with Ms. Benglis's friendship and loose collaboration, in video, with the older sculptor Robert Morris. Two videos, one by each artist,

indicate the fruitful way they passed video material back and forth, incorporating one another's additions into new pieces. The layered images and convoluted narratives now seem very much of the present.

Also here is Mr. Morris's incendiary poster for his April 1974 exhibition at the Sonnabend and Castelli galleries, which many people have seen as a catalyst to the Benglis ad. The poster shows him naked to the waist, wearing only a German Army helmet (Nazi vintage), mirrored aviator glasses, steel manacles and a spiked collar. (The collar and cuffs are linked by heavy chains that he clutches in his hands, as if he were Atlas about to shrug.)

But as this exhibition demonstrates, Ms. Benglis's ad was also preceded by three other images of herself that increasingly flouted gender and sexual stereotype. One, an announcement card for a show at the Clocktower in 1973, used a childhood portrait for which she wore the national dress of Greece (her family's country of origin) — the boy's costume, since the girl's was too small.

In an ad in the April 1974 Artforum she appears in a jacket and jeans, leaning against her silver Porsche, in a pose of slouchy West Coast male-artist cool. The third photograph, by [Annie Leibovitz](#), for the card announcing Ms. Benglis's May 1974 exhibition at Paula Cooper, shows her from the back. She's in [Betty Grable](#) mode, except she wears jeans that are dropped around her ankles.

As the show progresses, the Benglis ad — photograph by Arthur Gordon — takes over, and we see that reaction was swift and divided. Several of the magazine's associate editors, all well-known art critics, stormed and huffed at Mr. Coplans's acceptance of the ad, and simmering feuds escalated into schisms. Two of the critics, Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson left to found the redoubtable, strait-laced and theory-driven magazine October. (Another wrinkle: it turned out that Ms. Krauss took the photograph of Mr. Morris in chains.)

Before leaving, Ms. Krauss and Ms. Michelson joined three of their colleagues in a strongly worded, strait-laced letter to the editor. It appeared edged in black on the letters pages from the December issue, included here. It is amazing to read critics of new art sounding like [National Endowment for the Arts](#)-baiting senators, 15 years before [Mapplethorpe](#). (On the same page, Mr. Coplans, one assumes, insinuates the pedigree of Ms. Benglis's action by including an uncaptioned photograph of the Comtesse de Castiglione, the 19th-century French beauty who may have

been the first woman to self-consciously orchestrate images of herself for the camera, from pose to attire to maquillage.)

And a letter from the critic Peter Plagens, a regular contributor, adds levity, feigning shock and concluding with the funniest line of the whole tempest: "On the other hand, anyone who could win Eydie Gorme and Steve Lawrence look-alike contests simultaneously can't be all bad."

Readers were similarly divided, and the letters from outside that deluged the magazine, most of them never published, make for some of the Inglett show's best moments. Questions are asked, fingers are shaken. Subscriptions are canceled, some by librarians at Midwest high schools. Female artists approve enthusiastically and sometimes eloquently. Reading all this, you see how the ad became a lightning rod for conflicting views of feminism, pornography, editorial (and critical) responsibility, art-world economics, reputation-building and artistic license.

What was all the fuss really about? Well, for one thing, Mr. Plagens was right. It really was an amazing photograph. I remember the shock of seeing it and am always surprised at how shocking it remains. It is laugh-out-loud thrilling, and the phallus is the least of it. If this item continues to

startle rather than look ridiculous, it is because everything around it is so perfect: the shiny leanness of Ms. Benglis's androgynous torso, the saucy tilt of her hips, the slight flaring of her fingers at her hip, the angle of her head, her full, undulant [Man Ray](#) lips reiterated by the curves of the cat's-eye sunglasses. Everything communicates fully and pictorially.

The most startling phallus in the picture is perhaps the metaphorical one that results from this fine-tuned perfection: the sense of empowerment, entitlement, aggressiveness and forthrightness so often misunderstood to be the province of men. This more than any object, penile or otherwise, is what Lynda Benglis waved at the art world.

Mr. Platzker's show concludes with the mission statement of the first issue of October. But this is not the whole messy story. For that, consult Amy Newman's oral history of Artforum's early years, "Challenging Art: Artforum, 1962-1974." Ms. Newman's book neatly splices together interviews with 30 people who worked at, wrote for or avidly read the magazine — Ms. Benglis included — and is wonderfully alive with the energy of art critical infighting. This exhibition could be published as an appendix to that book.

"Lynda Benglis/Robert Morris: 1973-74" is on view through Friday at the Susan Inglett Gallery, 522 West 24th Street, Chelsea; (212) 647-9111, inglettgallery.com.