BONE OF CONTENTION
RICHARD MEYER ON LYNDÁ BENGLÍS’S CONTROVERSIAL ADVERTISEMENT

“Vulgarity is gendered, of course.”
—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,” 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 male 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 the December 1974 issue, the five editors denounced Benglis’s ad as “an object of extreme vulgarity,” which “brutalized” both themselves and their readers. In part because of the controversy it provoked at the time, the ad has reemerged in recent years as something of a “bad girl” icon, one increasingly shown in museum and gallery exhibitions and reproduced in revisionist accounts of 1970s feminist art and performance. But if the ad is regularly displayed and reprinted, this is not to say that it is closely considered 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 metaphorical fusion of the Duchampian bride and bachelor,” or (subvert[ed]) the psychic symbology of the penis itself. The high-mindedness of such prose robs the image of its sexual awareness and graphic immediacy. An object of extreme vulgarity” seems to me closer to the mark, in part because it retains some sense of
the ad’s radical confrontation with both art and feminism in 1974.6

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.”6 Within this context, the dildo ad was more likely to be seen as an attack on feminism than as 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 Nemser it was “in the end . . . another means of manipulating men through the exploitation of female sexuality.”10

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 art-star 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 devoting 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 acknowledgment 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.

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. Appearing 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 (admiringly) 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

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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 has it 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 resonate in exhibitions, books, and art magazines including this one. Recently the ad has also been updated and retouched by younger artists. In 2000, a female artist with a slender, slightly deflated dildo recached 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 her color photographs in the context of an art magazine. The results in each case were disappointing. In 1974, sexuality, self-promotion, and the links between them were emerging as critical issues within contemporary art and criticism. 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.”

As I see it, she really succeeded.


NOTES
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, brutizing ourselves and, we think, our readers.” Lawrence Alloway, Max Kozloff, Rosalind Krauss, Joseph Masheck, and Annette Michelisen, “Letters,” Artforum, December 1972, 4.
6. As Susan Erin Richardson 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 alliance.”
8. In a 1979 interview, Benglis recalled her relation to feminism in the following terms: “When I went to California in the late ’70s and got involved with the feminist movement there, with Marin Shapero [sic] and Judy Chicago and their students, I felt I wanted to present a more humanistic situation.”
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12. Note that Benglis said her ad mocked “machismo,” not as it sometimes has been reported, “masochism.”
16. Although the title white text includes the words “courtesy Paul Cooper Gallery,” there was no Benglis show up at the gallery at all, nor did she cover any of the costs of the ad. According to Benglis, Artforum insisted that the name of the 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.”
20. Prior to the pupa and dildo ad, Benglis produced two