

## What Lynda Benglis Wore

posted by **JEN GRAVES** on THU, JUL 2, 2009 at 2:28 PM

A very well-groomed woman sits silently behind the desk at [Susan Inglett gallery](#) in Chelsea, with a large glass box on a shelf above her head. The box is empty except for a giant lead double dildo, lying on its side like a barely contained animal.



We may as well say that this is Rosalind Krauss's dildo.

Here's the story: In 1974, when the artist Lynda Benglis knew she was getting a review in *Artforum*, she bought a centerfold ad. It cost her about \$3,000. In the centerfold, she pictured herself—now famously—naked except for sunglasses, her body oiled, [sporting an enormous dildo](#) (or at least

one visible end of a double dildo, that is).

It was part of a game of one-upsmanship she was playing with fellow artist Robert Morris, according to an exhibition at Susan Inglett this summer. Morris had produced a poster image of himself [flexing his biceps and wearing S&M gear](#); Benglis had made other images provocatively using her body as a putative advertisement for her art, too (both at right).



But while Morris's poster hadn't made a ripple, Benglis's ad in *Artforum* exploded as soon as it hit in the November issue. A man walked into the Philadelphia Museum of Art and hurled one of Benglis's sculptures on display to the floor in protest.

At *Artforum*, five editors—most prominently Krauss, one of the most respected historians of late 20th-century art—got very, very pissed. They wrote and published in the next issue a letter denouncing Benglis's centerfold, calling it "an object of extreme vulgarity"—not the first in the magazine's history, but "it represents a qualitative leap in that genre, **brutalizing ourselves** and, we think, our readers."

Krauss and another editor resigned, split off from *Artforum* to create *October*, an exceedingly somber and dense quarterly still in print today that, in its first issue, promised to be "plain of aspect" (check) and to "restore (to criticism)...an intellectual autonomy seriously undermined by emphasis on extensive reviewing and lavish illustration" (check, but to what end? Only academics read *October* these days).

When curator and art historian Robert Storr visited Seattle last year, [he accused Krauss of having been a hypocrite](#) for letting Morris's ad pass but flying into a rage over Benglis's.

"Ros didn't mind when Bob put in a photo of himself all buffed up, because she was living with him and she liked his work, but that a beautiful woman would be sassy enough to show up him at his own game..."

Back to our dildo—it's a work of art Benglis made in the summer of 1974, one in an edition of five casts of a work she made earlier in 1974 called *Smile*. That work preceded the *Artforum* episode, but the edition of five was too perfect: Benglis quickly realized that she wanted each one of the already created casts to refer to each of the five offended *Artforum* editors. Each is made in a different metal (bronze, tin, aluminum, lead, and gold plate); Benglis hasn't said which metal corresponds to whom. So we may as well say that lead is for Krauss—hence, Rosalind Krauss's dildo.

The rest of the exhibition, called *Lynda Benglis / Robert Morris: 1973-1974*, is made up of the ads by Morris and Benglis, a few sculptures, and videos, and, best of all, letters sent to *Artforum* in response to the dildo ad. *New York* magazine has a few choice responses listed [here](#), and here's another one of my favorites:



"I am not a prude, but this is not even 'Erotica,' it is 'Dirty-ca.'" —Art dealer, Israel

What's most amazing about the responses is that several of them came from middle-school and high-school principals: *Middle schools were subscribing to Artforum????* There's even a local angle: **The head librarian of Mercer Island High School** wrote a letter in typical polite Seattle style, inquiring delicately about whether this was merely a "bad error in judgment"?

The artist Elizabeth Murray called the editors' response "fascistic." (I'm inclined to agree with her, minus the hyperbole; like [Richard Meyer](#), I've always been drawn to the ad.) Dorothy Sieberling, writing a piece called "The New Sexual Frankness: Goodbye to Hearts and Flowers" in *New York* (a caption described the ad as a "bisexual shocker"), explained, "One person's hell may be another person's health." And from the

*New York Times* report at the time: "'What it turns out to be in practice,' John Coplans, the editor of *Artforum*, said, 'is that the California intellectuals say the advertisement is a woman expressing herself. In New York, the intellectuals are more Victorian.'"

Two of Benglis's pieces are at Seattle Art Museum in *Target Practice: Painting Under Attack, 1949-78*, a gaudy, glittery knot hanging on the wall (above left, titled *Chi*), and a dried puddle of poured paint on the floor. She was originally scheduled to be here to talk about the show last week, but had to cancel, and the museum is still trying to pin her down for a visit. Maybe we'll hear more about this, or simply more about where the dynamic artist's head is today, if she does visit (no luck yet, according to SAM).

Anyone in New York this summer, don't miss the show.