



Miss Lynda

RICHARD MEYER on *Lynda Benglis's Klaus 1975*

All good art is an indiscretion. —Tennessee Williams

IN 1977, THE NEW ORLEANS MUSEUM OF ART organized an exhibition titled “Five from Louisiana.” The show featured a handful of artists from the state who had, as the exhibition catalogue put it, “gained national and international reputations, and have received honor and distinction on the contemporary art scene today.” The post-Minimal sculptor Lynda Benglis (a Port Charles, Louisiana, native living by then in New York City) was among them. Five authors were engaged to write essays or conduct interviews for the catalogue, each on or with a different artist. In something of a coup for the museum, the playwright Tennessee Williams agreed to contribute the text on Benglis. One problem immediately presented itself. By his own admission, the playwright knew almost nothing about the artist or her work.

Rather than deny this fact, Williams dramatizes it to great effect at the start of his essay: “Of course, I was a bit mystified when I received an invitation to write a critique or impression of a painter-sculptor as advanced in her art as Miss Lynda Benglis. . . . The only plausible explanation that occurred to me was that the persons in charge of the exhibition at the New Orleans Museum of Art preferred a simplistic approach, rather than a sophisticated one.”

An equally plausible explanation—that the museum wished to capitalize on

Williams’s famous name and writerly genius—remains unspoken. Rather than analyzing Benglis’s art, the playwright turns next to the artist herself or, more precisely, to his encounter with the artist at a meeting arranged by the museum:

It was agreed that Miss Benglis and I would meet at my hotel in New York. First of all let me say it was a delightful meeting. She is charmingly direct and informal. My favorite drink, Johnny Walker’s Black Label, was also hers and she also preferred it straight. In the course of her talk, she did not put down other painters. (It has been my unhappy experience that those who practice in the same field of art, literary or plastic, are often unable to understand each other’s work, and in extreme cases, you feel that they tolerate each other’s existence with reluctance.)

Although she had brought with her a lot of brochures containing colored and black-and-white photographs of her work, she was hesitant to show them, seemed more inclined just to talk. Of course I knew how she felt. Revealing your work to someone not yet acquainted with it is, to a shy artist, about as embarrassing as undressing completely on a boulevard at high noon. I almost had to snatch the brochures and reviews from her hands.

Williams is charmed by Benglis’s direct manner, her refusal to promote herself at the expense of other artists, and, not least, her preference (mirroring his own)



Opposite page: Lynda Benglis, *Secret 3*, 1974–75, twenty color Polaroids with frame, overall 10 x 36 1/2". This page: Lynda Benglis, *Secret 5*, 1975, eighteen color Polaroids with frame, overall 10 1/2 x 32 1/2".

for Scotch whiskey straight up. When the artist seems reluctant to share her exhibition brochures, Williams identifies with her (“Of course I knew how she felt . . .”) and acknowledges the anxiety that such moments of professional self-revelation may entail.

Rather than claiming critical authority, Williams freely acknowledges his lack of familiarity with works as “avant-garde . . . [as] those of Miss Benglis.” In an endearing moment, he praises the artist’s metallic knots—looping, intricately tied sculptural forms fashioned from flexible copper, aluminum mesh, and cotton bunting—before saying to her, “I could not even tie a shoe-lace.” Benglis’s response? “She confessed that she couldn’t either.” In this sociable context, the “confession” that one is unable to tie one’s shoes is cause not for embarrassment but for convivial banter and mutual recognition.

Williams concludes his essay with a flamboyant (even for him) declaration: “Miss Lynda, I love you and thank you for the roses!” While expressing his ardor directly to the artist, he also shares that expression with every reader of the essay. Because the catalogue was published as a supplement to the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, a newspaper with an estimated audience of one million at the time, there were a great number of readers with whom Williams shared the love.

I have dwelled on Williams’s essay at some length because, though published some thirty years ago, it offers a fresh approach both to Benglis and to the task of art criticism more broadly conceived. Putting aside the labors and language of “critique,” the playwright fashions an “impression” of his newfound acquaintance with both the artist and her work. By admitting from the start what he does not know, Williams invites readers to share in the conversations and discoveries that follow. Forget about relational aesthetics, here is a model of relational art writing, one in which the critic is willing to meet (both literally and figuratively) the artist halfway. It is a model that allows for personal as well as professional affiliations, for exchanges of affection as well as of information.

EMBOLDENED BY WILLIAMS’S EXAMPLE, I will admit to feeling “a bit mystified” by the photographic selection that appears on the preceding pages. Scanned from Polaroids taken by Benglis in 1974 and 1975, the pictures focus (and occasionally lose focus) on several roses in bloom, a flower garden, the face of a man, a hazy silhouette, and an outstretched hand caressing a blossom. In several cases, the surface of the picture bears swirling traces of moisture or physical touch. In others, a spot or section of the photograph has been bleached



This page, above: Lynda Benglis, *Secret 4*, 1974–75, twenty-two color Polaroids with frame, overall 10 1/2 x 39 1/4". Below: Lynda Benglis, *7 Come 11: Uno*, ca. 1974, copper on plaster, cotton bunting, and aluminum mesh, 51 x 29 x 14". Opposite page: Lynda Benglis, *Secret 2*, 1974–75, twenty-four color Polaroids with frame, overall 10 1/2 x 43 1/4".

by light. In their apparent simplicity and snapshot casualness, the Polaroids seem far removed from the post-Minimal, process-oriented sculpture Benglis was making in the early to mid-1970s: the phosphorescent pours of pigmented polyurethane, the floor puddles of Day-Glo foam, and the metallized knots bathed in hot glue, plaster, and paint. Nor do the Polaroids recall the single image for which Benglis remains best known: the unforgettable photograph of the artist, naked and greased with oil, wielding a large dildo. Published as a full-color spread in the November 1974 issue of *Artforum*, the photograph provoked a furor within the art world that has shadowed Benglis's career ever since.

Beyond its apparent disjunctiveness, *Klaus 1975* has stumped me for another reason as well. Prior to their scanning, sequencing, and titling for publication in 2010, these seven pictures have never existed as a discrete portfolio or unified grouping. All the pictures in *Klaus 1975* are details from assemblages Benglis created—all under the series title "Secret"—in 1974–75. Each individual *Secret* consists of a field of up to thirty Polaroids arranged in a square or rectangular grid; Benglis thought of the assemblages as visual poems in which the Polaroids functioned as units (or *words*, as it were) within the larger syntax of the work. The subjects chosen flowed from the artist's everyday life and immediate surrounds—a flower, a friend's garden, a nightstand, a bare foot, a floor lamp, a man's head resting on a pillow, a hand grasping an avocado.

Although at least one *Secret* was exhibited in 1975, the series has rarely been displayed or discussed in the decades since. I first saw reproductions of it only a few weeks ago, when I received the 450-page catalogue of the Benglis retrospective currently on view at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin through January 24. Until recently, then, the assemblages have themselves remained something of a secret. Even in the catalogue, the series is reproduced but nowhere discussed.

The restricted visibility of "Secret" has, in turn, shaped the creation and slightly ambiguous status of *Klaus 1975*. The latter work exists as an individual artist's project—although the artist herself has described it as a collaboration

with her gallerist, John Cheim, since it was he who encouraged Benglis to revisit "Secret" and helped select and sequence the pictures for publication. For the purposes of scanning, each Polaroid was temporarily removed from the framed assemblage of which it is part. Once scanned, the pictures were returned to their respective *Secrets*. *Klaus 1975* exists as a project, then, only within the pages of this magazine. The assemblages on which it draws remain in the collection of the artist. If Benglis worked closely with her current gallerist to create *Klaus 1975*, so, too, did she "collaborate" with her own personal and professional history, her own "secrets."

The title of this grouping refers to Klaus Kertess, the art dealer and critic whose face we see in the third picture in the series. Kertess





hired Benglis in 1966 as the gallery assistant (or “secretary,” as the position was then known) for his newly opened Bykert Gallery on Fifty-seventh Street in New York. She worked at the space for two and a half years, during which time she began to exhibit her art publicly. Several of her early hot-wax paintings were featured in group shows organized by Kertess, who also appears in various contexts and poses (upright and lying down, clothed and shirtless, on the floor and in bed) in “Secret.”

At some point toward the end of her employ at the Bykert Gallery, Benglis and Kertess became sexually involved. This is difficult to write about since art criticism generally (and with good reason) shies away from exposing such intimacies. I mention the relationship here both because it is thematized within the *Secrets* on which *Klaus 1975* is based and because, like those works, it blurs the boundary between public and private knowledge, between the professional sphere of the art world and the personal relations that unfold within it. The first *Secret* in the series breaches that boundary with particular force. It offers a grid of thirty Polaroids, nine of which show Kertess resting his head against various surfaces—a pillow, a mattress, a wooden floor, and a white backdrop. These views are punctuated by pictures of individual flowers; a bud vase; a floor lamp; a dusky sky; a pink rose in front of a man in a partially unbuttoned shirt; the midsection of a man’s naked body; and a close-up of an erect penis. While we may assume that the penis belongs to Kertess, because he is the only

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identifiable person in the larger work, we cannot know this for certain. When I mentioned this issue to Benglis, she proposed that I refer to the picture simply as a “floating member.”

I like the ambiguity of that phrase, the way it slips free of secure identification. The same sense of pleasurable uncertainty runs throughout the *Secrets* and, by extension, the pictures in *Klaus 1975*. Benglis approaches secrecy not as a mode of absolute concealment but rather as a form of private knowledge that may be rendered in visual terms so as to be shared with others. In this sense,

the subject matter of the artist’s *Secrets* (e.g., flowers, food, men) is neither scandalous nor meaningless. It is instead a reminder that the texture and syntax of everyday life may also be the makings of art.

Williams ends his catalogue essay on Benglis by thanking her for the roses she brought on the occasion of their meeting. Were he still alive, the playwright might also appreciate the roses that appear in the preceding pages, as well as the flowers (and other pleasures) that populate the *Secrets*. “Thank you, Miss Lynda,” he might say, for giving us those, too. □

“Lynda Benglis” travels to Le Consortium, Centre d’Art Contemporain, Dijon, France, April 2–June 20; the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, October 1, 2010–January 9, 2011; and the New Museum, New York, February 9–May 1, 2011.

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