

Lynda Benglis

les presses du réel

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Medusa in Ecstasy

To Pi and other extraordinary creatures



The Statue of Liberty, New York
Mary A. Benglis and Lynda Benglis boarding for
Athens, 1966

p. 133
Kastellorizo, Greece, August 1997

"The Medusa originally incarnates horror. According to the first references found in texts dating from the beginning of the 8th century BC, and in sculpture in the second part of the 7th century BC, catching sight of her is fatal to the human eye. Almost always pictured frontally, her face reveals features that are originally masculine: a beard, bushy eyebrows, and warts. Yet she gradually transforms, softens, feminises and, in the middle of the 5th century BC, she takes on an attractive and seductive persona. These two aspects, like an optical illusion with dual interpretation, betraying her dual nature, would be regularly depicted in subsequent centuries. The powers attributed to her by legend are both deadly and beneficial. Just like angels, she exists in two registers, two sexes and two worlds: thanaturgic and thaumaturgic, from the under world and from this one. She unites what fairytales dissociate: she is Beauty and Beast." Jean Clair¹

In the early 1970s, Lynda Benglis adopted the "frozen gesture" as the metaphorical terminology that best encapsulates her art². From the early ominous cantilevered installations resembling wings, waves or stalactites petrified in space, to the glaringly provocative 'Sexual Mockeries' series via mermaids, serpent-like textures or forms and recent icy crystallised columns, she delights in ceaselessly stupefying her audiences. Sculptures or creatures, procedures or gestures are amongst her primary interests. Turning to age-old myths and forms and translating them into contemporary language and materials, Benglis creates physically engaging work. Here, always, the arresting encounter between Perseus and Medusa is re-enacted. *For Darkness: Situation and Circumstance*, a poured phosphorescent polyurethane foam installation at Milwaukee Art Center in June 1971, sets the scene in Medusa's cave. This essay attempts to dwell on certain situations and circumstances to uncover some of the complexities in Benglis's work and thrust it back into overdue limelight.

Kastellorizo and Greek Diaspora

Biographical context might at first glance appear simplistic but it pervades Lynda Benglis's practice as such a significant *leitmotiv* that taking it as a base for exploration might offer further insights. It has indeed been noted that:

"Her Greek grandmother first took her to see the Acropolis when she was eleven and also taught her to crochet, a skill that Benglis includes among the arts. When asked if there exists in her work any formal or emotional relationship to ancient Greek or Byzantine art or to Greek folk art, she listed (in this order): the Caryatids on the Acropolis, 'the [Greek] holiday cookies' (*kourambiethes*), the braided Easter bread, and 'the gold and gilded elements of the Greek Orthodox religion'.³

Greece has been a constant muse and source of inspiration for Lynda Benglis whose paternal



1. Jean Clair, *Méduse. Contribution à une anthropologie des arts du visuel*, Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1989, p.11. [Author's translation]

2. Coined by the artist herself and used as the title of the seminal text written by Robert Pincus-Witten for *Artforum* in November 1974.

3. Lynda Benglis quoted by Thalia Cheronis Selz, "Artists' Profiles", in *Modern Odysseys. Greek American Artists of the 20th Century*, Queens Museum of Art, New York, 1999, p. 30. Edited by Peter Selz and William Valerio.

family were immigrants from Kastellorizo, a south-eastern Greek Island off the southern shores of Turkey, near Rhodes. However, as a first-generation American, Benglis's father was intent on integration. Brought up in Lake Charles, Louisiana, Lynda Benglis's knowledge of and interest in her Greek roots grew through her closeness to her paternal grandmother Mary (Marigo) Stenos Benglis. They made several summer trips to Europe together. In 1973 she uses a photograph of herself, taken in 1952, wearing the *evzone*, the traditional Greek soldier's uniform, for two exhibition invitation cards. One was in July for Jack Glenn Gallery in Corona Del Mar, California and one was later, in December, for The Clocktower in New York where she emphasises the old fashioned border of the original photograph. She announced this gesture proudly in a telephone call to her family, as recorded in the video *Disclosure* (1973). This was the first statement in the 'Sexual Mockeries' series: announcements or invitation cards that functioned in tandem with her Polaroid collage series and videos made between New York and Los Angeles in the early 1970s. She stands beside a Porsche in a similar pose in the James Dean-esque photograph which she used to advertise her exhibition at Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, in *Artforum* magazine's April 1974 issue. The alliance to images epitomising Greek tradition and to Hollywood Americana reflects her cultural backgrounds. Choosing the *evzone* costume was no doubt a statement of support for Greece, where a military dictatorship had meant troubled times since 1967. Benglis also expressed strong socio-political views about the United States with criticism of the Vietnam War, Richard Nixon and gender imbalances. Benglis is dressed up in a man's costume that incorporates a skirt in what Susan Krane described as "doubly androgynous autobiographical family photography"⁴. Applying role-play and identity swaps in a manner characteristic of Marcel Duchamp or Andy Warhol, she famously insisted on penetrating and highlighting masculine stereotypical representations.

Elsewhere, she has related her 'Sparkle Knot' series "to the floral wreaths from May Day celebrations that she saw left withering on the doors of Greek houses during her summer visits".⁵ A certain "Grecianicity" suffuses Benglis's take on architecture, sculpture, crafts, traditions, food and decoration. Perhaps even her doses of kitsch can be associated with the American adoration for Greek temple revival style or the Americanised Hellenism. Universally known Greek words seep repeatedly into her titles, from *Perseus* to *Heraklion*, to the alphabet and cosmological names such as *Chiron* and *Andromeda*. Deeply conscious of ancient continuities, she revisits her heritage during her visits to Kastellorizo and becomes increasingly familiar with the limestone landscapes of the Aegean Islands and the Mediterranean underwater world. This island, also called "Megiste" or "Megisti" (the name of a gold-leaf Torso in 1978), is renowned for its Blue Grotto, Parastas Cave.

4. Susan Krane, *Lynda Benglis: Dual Natures*, Atlanta, The High Museum of Art, 1991, p.39.

5. *Op. cit.*: Krane, p. 34.

p. 134-135

For Darkness (Situation and Circumstance), 1971

Polyurethane foam with phosphorescent

pigments (destroyed)

309,9 x 1036,3 x 762 cm

Installation at Milwaukee Art Center

p. 136-137

Annie Leibovitz, *Lynda Benglis off the coast of San Pedro, Pacific Ocean*, 1974

Materials and Metamorphosis

Benglis pushes the capabilities of any material she utilises to their limits, testing the laws of gravity and invading space with extraordinary expanding forms. Her intense fascination for materials has led her from paint to wax, metals, glass, ceramics, paper, fabrics, video and a multitude of plastics – forever experimenting with the latest invention. Confirming the artist's intrinsic attachment to the process of making, one can also note the variegated underlying and unhidden structures such as chicken wire, steel mesh, gesso and cotton, as well as the active techniques of casting, firing, metallising, knotting, pouring and so forth. Benglis deliberately chooses not to carve into stone or wood, she works with the material from the inside outwards in a constant exteriorisation of form. Benglis began her exploration of plasticity with her use of rubber and wax which reminded her of death rituals, masks and skin. She enjoys the fact that “these materials have a lifelike quality. They can imitate, they have a memory.”⁶

In 1957, Roland Barthes analysed contemporary trends through the lens or language of classical mythologies and celebrated the qualities of plastic:

“Despite having names of Greek shepherds (Polystyrene, Polyvinyl, Polyethylene), plastic, the products of which have just been gathered in an exhibition, is in essence the stuff of alchemy. [...] So, more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation, as its everyday name indicates, it is ubiquity made visible. And it is this, in fact, which makes it a miraculous substance: a miracle is always a sudden transformation of nature. Plastic remains impregnated throughout with this wonder: it is less a thing than the trace of a movement.”⁷

Initially Benglis's poured installations of the late 1960s were made with natural pigmented latex but soon she explored new plastic substances for their exciting malleability, expansiveness, translucency or adaptability to a change of location. The poetic-sounding list – including acrylic, polyurethane, polypropylene, synthetic rubber, polyethylene, nylon and vinyl – culminated in the 1971 installation titled *Adhesive Products* in homage to a supplier firm in the Bronx. Benglis appropriated the sticky, forming but nonetheless formless possibilities of plastic in situ at the Walker Art Center to signify a modern environment as alluring or haunting as a primeval cave dwelling.

Interestingly, the area around her childhood home in Lake Charles, now known as part of “Cancer Valley”, developed petrochemical refining industries after World War II and was a key focus in *Blue Vinyl* (2002, directed by Judith Helfand and Daniel B. Gold), a film documenting “poison plastic”. Sensitivity to the future hazards of pollution appears premonitory in the hands of the artist from Louisiana. Her tsunami-like cantilevered installations of the early 1970s hover terrifyingly in space.

6. Lynda Benglis in Erica-Lynn Huberty, “Intensity of Form and Surface: An Interview with Lynda Benglis”, *Sculpture*, vol 19, no 6, July-August, pp. 31-37.

7. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1957. Translated by Anne Lavers, New York, The Noon Press, 1991, p. 97.

References to the forms and drama of natural phenomena such as floods, storms, volcanoes, explosions, and mysterious rock formations forecast catastrophes to come. The visible world is petrified. Medused. With her helping hand it morphs from liquid, moving and living to solid and frozen. Early on Benglis indicated that: "My work duplicates natures as it flows freely. In a sense I'm mocking nature with plastic; creating an abstraction from nature with a commercial material."⁸

Her interpretation of metamorphosis, her sculptural gesture, engages the spectator in all the sensual and frightening physicality of the moment and captures what might be the essence of being and becoming. Materialisations as an oracle of bad news more recently appear in *Medusa* (1999, bronze) from the Hot Spot series, a gnarled maelstrom of matter, a compact cell of worms which points to destructive forces of change, decomposition and illness. Legends and myths are embraced for their plasticity; they act as vehicles or recipients for ever-changing signs, symbols and meanings.

Icons, Knots, Columns, Torsos: Classical heritage revisited

A 1964 lecture given by Dan Flavin on the icon had a lasting influence on Lynda Benglis's practice⁹. At the time it materialised into the totem-like series of wax paintings – which she called her "icons of painting" – as she engaged with the legacy of Abstract Expressionism and began her subversive questioning of the rigour (or classicism) of Minimalism. The latter was played out most visibly in her regular dialogue and one-upmanship with Robert Morris through videos, Polaroid collages and magazines in the early 1970s. Benglis considers these a sub-text to her sculptural work and insists that the photo-gestures were staged and selected for their utmost classicism.¹⁰ Morris's critical texts for *Artforum*, "Anti Form" (1968) and "Notes on Sculpture" (1969), were the chosen ground for their playful competition. Benglis's integration of these art historical debates in her practice was humorous and visceral. Mischievously titled after the Greek alphabet, or the international phonetic alphabet adopted by the military, Benglis's Knot series must be a pun on the systemic works described by Barbara Rose in *Investigations in ABC Art* (1965)¹¹. Personally tangled, handmade rather than industrial, the Knots resemble handwriting and signatures, bluntly reclaiming the artist's gesture and physical involvement in the making of their art. Yet she ironically appropriates a form of humanised serialisation and repetition. These sculptures that turn in on themselves may also be a comment on contemporary psychological research in relation to knots by Jacques Derrida.¹² In popular culture, knots in a handkerchief function as a memory trigger. Benglis's highly personalised syntax refers as much to types of knots made by sailors, fishermen or rock climbers, to specific human beings, to the bulbous dough shape of the Greek cookies, as to artworks by Richard Tuttle, Eva Hesse and Robert Morris¹³.

8. Lorraine Haacke, "Benglis Stresses Space", *Dallas Times Herald*, 29 May 1970

9. *Op. cit.*: Krane, p. 34. Of course, these artworks simultaneously dialogue with the carnivalesque folklore in Louisiana, military codes and Incan Qipu knots.

10. It is interesting to note some of Robert Morris's works in relation to Classical discourse: *Site*, performance with Carolee Schneemann in 1964; *Labyrinth*, 1974.

11. Barbara Rose, *Art in America*, October–November, 1965, pp. 55–72. Undoubtedly Benglis is also conscious of exhibitions or texts such as Lucy Lippard's *The Dematerialisation of the Art Object*, 1966 and *When Attitudes Become Form* curated by Harald Szeemann in 1969.

12. Jacques Derrida, *Psyché: Invention de l'autre*. Paris: Gallilée, 1987.

13. The simple knot called bowline is sometimes nicknamed the «King of Knots». Lynda Benglis made a black, white and grey polyurethane pour called *King of Flot* which was cast as *Quartered Meteor* after she received the Guggenheim Grant in 1975.

Bravo #2, 1975–1976

Copper, steel, tin, and zinc on plaster, cotton bunting and aluminium screen

132,1 x 53,3 x 76,2 cm

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchased with funds from the Burroughs Wellcome Purchase Fund and the Neysa McMein Purchase Award

In 1972 Benglis was invited to California to take part in Feminist art activism yet she was intent on avoiding any alliance to a particular camp, preferring to make her mark from within the art world rather than from any marginal stance. She actively sought to absorb the tactics or promotional ammunitions used by male artists in the official, still male-dominated, art territory. Experiencing the performance-orientated West Coast art scene at first hand, she integrates the self-affirming tricks of Peter Alexander and Ed Ruscha for instance, continues to refer to with action photographs of Jackson Pollock or Richard Serra, allied herself to Feminist *mise-en-scène* such as Judy Chicago in a boxing ring and imported herself back to New York as “macharina”. Pushing the boundaries of what could acceptably be done by a woman artist to promote her art, she played the game with Robert Morris all the way and climaxes in November 1974 with the photo-gesture *à la* plastic dildo in *Artforum*. She has stripped down to a bare minimum in another punch to the art world and its preconceptions, creating an absolute uproar with incredible repercussions. It was the final straw that eventually leads five editors to resign. Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson create the journal *October* in 1976. Critics, feminists, school teachers and librarians, fellow artists and countless other readers write in to the editor to express their passionate views – for or against Ms Benglis. Writer Monroe Denton vividly likens this controversy to the scandal surrounding Edouard Manet’s *Olympia* in 1863¹⁴. In the context of 1970s New York – surely reputed for being liberal and avant-garde – the reaction is surprisingly disproportionate. That such an action/image could have such explosive power is fascinating; a sign of Benglis’s finger on the pulse or clairvoyance. The censorship that ensued is startling – as if it was the excuse for a number of simmering debates and schisms to occur. Arguably this bold demonstration of independence and irreverence towards the establishment and other factions has had a lasting impact on Benglis’s career as it met with widespread incomprehension and little support from her peers. Horror incarnate according to some, it obsessively (though not always, of course) overshadows any presentation of her work as a sculptor as if her career had literally frozen still at that particular moment. One year later, in her November 1975 solo exhibition at Paula Cooper Gallery in New York, she presented a surprisingly theatrical installation, *Primary Structures (Paula’s Props)*. Unlike any work she made before or after¹⁵, it could be considered a gesture of defiant frivolity and kitsch in reaction to the fierce criticisms she had suffered the year before. She assembled cast metal columns, luscious velvet drape, real and fake plants (not dissimilar to institutional critique by Marcel Broodthaers, *Un Jardin d’Hiver* at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 1974) and other decorative details such as a miniature Porsche car. Benglis continued to expose the rigorous and austere conventions of Minimalism praised in the exhibition *Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculpture* at the Jewish Museum in New

14. Monroe Denton, “Inherent Voices”, in *ARTI*, magazine issue devoted to Lynda Benglis, May-June 1997, pp. 75-87.

15. Except perhaps for *Louisiana Prop Piece*, 1977, an intervention in collaboration with Ida Kohlmeyer at the New Orleans Museum of Art. They peopled the familiar collection displays with borrowed floats (which apparently were often made by the Greek community) from the carnival.

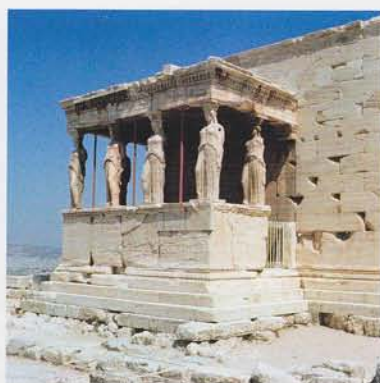
Sparkle Knot IV, 1972
Acrylic paint and sparkles on plaster, cotton
bunting and aluminium screen
73,7 x 50,8 x 24,1 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Cheim & Read,
New York

York in 1966. Boldly returning to the unfashionable technique of casting, or frozen metal, she makes a deliberate tongue-in-cheek reference to Robert Morris's hailed industrial I or L-beams. Her broken pillars refer to the shift of art off walls and pedestals to the floor, but imply problems with this new canon by relating them to a *tableau* of a civilisation in decline. Again, she makes a sour comment on the concurrent political situation in Greece and the United States.

On the restoration of Greek democracy in 1974, Benglis started to make frequent visits to Greece and finally invested in a family home in Kastellorizo in the late 1970s. In 1979 she was impressed by the exhibition *Mer Egée. Grèce des îles* on the art of the Aegean islands at the Musée du Louvre in Paris¹⁶. Ancient Greek sculpture and architecture increasingly seep into her work. Idols, or rather the Greek *Εἰδωλά*, is the word she uses as the title of two solo exhibitions in 1982 (Paula Cooper, New York and Fuller Goldeen, San Francisco). The Torsos, Lagniappes, Peacocks and Pleat series all link back to "Greekness" of sorts. Benglis explores the depths of the Mediterranean Sea (she has a passion for scuba-diving) and the legends of the Odyssey and produces totemic fragments of bodies – aquatic and human – with seductive movements. *Knossos*, *Siren*, *Minos*, *Mer*, and *Chicago Caryatids* hypnotise the viewer with sensual curves and alluring shiny surfaces. Benglis has fully grasped the power of the fragment and the metaphors of charm. In 1979, Benglis posed, fully clothed, amongst her Torsos for the invitation card of *Lynda Benglis: New Works* at Dart Gallery in Chicago as if she has become one of the Caryatids. As if in some sort of continuum, more recently, she created a monumental polyurethane homage to the classical trio of *The Graces* (2003). Reminiscent of the *Wings* and *Primary Structures*, these tormented architectural vessels spin upwards bearing creepy crystalline icicles worthy of a science fiction movie set. These express grandeur and anguish simultaneously as the material appears to pulsate or melt in confrontation with the naked eye.

Passages in Narcissism

In 1972, Benglis videotaped a visit to Lake Charles, showing her father in his office managing a construction materials business, the family home and the highway. *Home Tape Revised* includes footage of her grandmother with Benglis's voice-over relaying that she's 89 and when asked to say something to the camera responds "I love you Lynda [in Greek *S'Agapo*]. I love you too much". The videos and photo-gestures are obsessed with notions of self to critique societal constructs of femininity. The self-promotional, self-admiring puns announce the publicity-driven art of the 1980s by the likes of Jeff Koons as well as the provocations of the YBAs. Testing the possibilities of the new medium, Benglis also questions notions of time, illusion and reality in a manner not dissimilar, for instance, from



16. *Op. cit.*: Krane, p.50.

Porch of the Maidens, Erechtheion, c. 421-405 BC
Acropolis, Athens, Greece
Courtesy of The Bridgeman Art Library

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Heraklion, 1978
Gold leaf, oil based sizing and gesso on plaster,
cotton bunting and chicken wire
119,4 x 66 x 29,2 cm
Private collection

Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno's investigation in *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* (2006). Rosalind Krauss comments on Benglis's video *Now* (1973) in her essay *Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism*:

"The two profiles, one 'live', the other taped, move in mirrored synchrony with one another. As they do, Benglis's two profiles perform an auto-erotic coupling, which, because it is being recorded, becomes the background for another generation of the same activity. Through this spiral of infinite regress, as the face merges with the double and triple re-projections of itself merging with itself, Benglis's voice is heard either issuing the command 'Now!' or asking 'Is it now?'"¹⁷

In the double-page spread of *Artforum* in November 1974, Benglis appears as a dildo-wielding temptress, threatening castration or ecstasy should she remove her sunglasses. The evil eye and petrifying glare of the Medusa remains playfully unseen. The object-sculpture is fake, erect, double-sided, plastic; this prosthesis later ironically becomes a series of metal casts titled *Parenthesis* and *Smile*. Such an empowering gesture might be compared to Hélène Cixous' 1975 call to action: "Women must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement".¹⁸ This image mimics the classic masculine representation of the Satyr as opposed to that of Baubo. Satirical eroticism and tongue-in-cheek commentaries on the power struggles in the arts and entertainment sector continue in the video Benglis made in collaboration with Stanton Kaye, *The Amazing Bow-Wow* (1976-77). In a farce of the Oedipus complex, Babu thinks he castrates the hermaphrodite dog called Bow-Wow to prevent him/her from seducing Rexina. In 1993, Benglis made a double-page intervention in a catalogue¹⁹ repeating the layout used in 1974: a black strip occupies two thirds of the space and a photograph on the right (in this case Bow-Wow). Both instances are reminiscent of Archaic black or red decorated pottery.

Her humanistic approach is as prominent in the videos and photo-gestures as it is in her sculptures. She qualifies her art as "proprioception" and insists on the importance of the term "configuration" or "configurative"²⁰. The early wax paintings and the Knots directly reference the human body and the scale or tangling capacity of the artist's arms. Her particular brand of sensual post-modernism strives to magnify the spectator's own perceptual experience. Protrusions, erections, pours and expansions have an anamorphic effect that demands attention. Here is an Epicurean invitation to self-awareness.²¹ Bulging and convex, her forms perform a 20th century *entasis* not far removed from the pulsating suggestiveness of ancient Greek columns.

"At one point, you seized me to take a step. Helping me over a fissure in the rock. You were holding me, I was in you. You were holding me close, experiencing my body. Touching me, and I could feel my form emerging once more." Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, 1982²²



17. Rosalind Krauss, *Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism*, 1975

18. Hélène Cixous, *Laugh of the Medusa*, 1975. Sigmund Freud, *Medusa's Head*, 1922.

19. *Sex-Quake Show: art after the apocalypse*, New York, 1st Art-Genes Portable Museum, 1993.

20. Many considerations in this essay stem from conversations with the artist in Dublin, October 2008, and in East Hampton, January 2009.

21. Benglis mentions her interest in hypnotism, the tale of Bridey Murphy and the process of going back into the mind and exploring states of being.

22. Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, 1982. Translated from the French by J. Collie and J. Still, The Athlone Press London, 1992, p. 96.

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Rhodos, 1978

Gold leaf, oil based sizing and gesso on plaster, cotton bunting and chicken wire
141 x 66 x 27,9 cm

Satyros, Archaic neck amphora (detail)
Signed by Smikros, c. 510-500 BC
Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Metallized Glory: Byzantine, Baroque and Rococo too

A silver ewer in the shape of a mermaid reproduced on an invitation card to Lynda Benglis's exhibition at Paula Cooper Gallery in 1978 is accompanied on the back by a quotation from *An Interpretation of Universal History* by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega & Gasset, praising the forgotten merits of "flounce" or decorativeness.²³ *Flounce*, a gold gilded Torso, dates from the same year. Benglis's attraction to shiny, metallic surfaces expanded in these years to obsession as she developed the Pleat series. Despite continued criticism, she thrust forth with determination and habitual provocation, finding her equivalent to Picasso's post-World War I return to classical bathers in the 1920s, or the concurrent new spirit in painting in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in gilt extravagances.

Connected but diametrically opposite to the putrefied bodily fluids seized as *Eat Meat* or *Come*, these billowing drapes and bows are sprayed with flamboyant gold, silver, bronze or aluminium and probably stem from a multitude of exquisite and fanciful influences. Significantly, Benglis made the first of numerous trips to Ahmadabad in India in 1979 for a residency with the Sarabhai family, renowned for their textile-making industry. This series of frozen fabrics developed through the 1980s, reaching elaborate heights in the early 1990s. Often named after cars such as *Passat* or *Diablo*, the Pleats directly refer to the contemporary automobile industry and artworks by her peers incorporating hoods or other parts (such as John Chamberlain or Richard Prince). Benglis delves into notions of excess, mass-production, materialism, capitalism and wealth. Once again, her take is a wrestle with metal mesh, expanding it like an accordion and giving it a form which is then metallised much like the Knots. Synchronously, fragments of Byzantine, baroque, mannerism and rococo intermingle theatrically with a form of classicism. Benglis describes having been startled by the energy exuding from the *Victory of Samothrace* (Musée du Louvre, Paris) when she travelled around Europe in a Volkswagen with Klaus Kertess following her Cologne solo show in June 1970. Byzantine art has ancestral relevance for her and indeed some inspiration must have been drawn from sacred objects and spaces, such as reliquaries decorated with a plethora of precious materials and shimmering mosaics in churches. The Pleats share the Byzantine quest for transcendental monumentality.

The lyricism, dynamism, abundance and physicality in her work toy with Baroque sensibilities. These convoluted Pleats borrow heroism from its excessive sweeps and fabrics. Sentiment is enflamed. Benglis continues to create abstract forms which are configurative, full of character or presence. She wishes her sculptures to be vessels of life. Oozing folds cascade, buckle or pinch; their movements are mesmerised in stasis. As they do in Bernini's *Vision of St Teresa*, 1645-52, ecstasy and *jouissance* spring to mind. Bernini's Baroque chapel offers an all-encompassing experience which teeters between the



23. 17th Century English, 31.5 cm high, Collection of Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio (accession #1976.26a-c). This vessel could be filled with rose water which poured out of the mermaid's breast to wash diner's hands. Both this decorative object and the quotation were introduced to Benglis by artist Ron Gorchov.

Winged Victory of Samothrace, c. 220-190 BC
Musée du Louvre, Paris
Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*
(detail), 1647-1652
Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, Italy/ Alinari/
The Bridgeman Art Library

chilling realisation of death, elation at the possibility of salvation, mysticism and eroticism. Benglis seeks to freeze the intensity of the moment. Beauty and abject horror merge in these spectacular frozen gestures – stilled for permanent contemplation.

Eccentric Abstraction

Benglis now splits her time between New York, East Hampton, Santa Fe, India and Greece. Amalgamating attributes from all these environments and other cultural discoveries in peripatetic or globe-trotter fashion, she creates her synthesis, her own – rather eccentric – *concelto*.²⁴ As Susan Krane described: “Benglis typically proceeds from an embryonic image held in the mind’s eye. She has always been an empiricist.”²⁵ The idea or feeling becomes object. Her imagination is rendered visible as she exercises convexity, configuration or proprioception – she acts from the centre outwards, from the mind to form. A philosophy course she took in Louisiana had a lasting impression on Benglis, guiding her decision to become an artist. This early training in Greek philosophy, logic and abstract thinking turned out to be essential to her artistic development. Through form and gesture, her art powerfully and abstractly seizes the eternal sexually-charged tensions between attraction and repulsion, contraction and expansion, explosion and implosion, the sublime and *terribilità*.²⁶ According to Heraclitus, everything flows. According to Lynda Benglis too. Her materialisation of pantheistic notions encompasses essential metaphorical, psychological, ecological, corporeal and cosmological statements.

Benglis chose to express herself through sculptural media first and foremost, yet she was pioneering in her use of time-based media in the early 1970s. These experiments and her observation of the innovations intrinsic to the medium of video were undoubtedly of key importance to her investigations in sculpture. In an age of increasing media culture, her signature frozen gesture can be said to materialise the potentialities of the pause mode. She appropriates this function of freezing time, this often blurred, abstract snapshot of reality. Though not a performance artist herself, she comments on this new wave in art and creates her own arresting spectacles in the process of happening. Performance is turned sculpture. Movement, flux is revealed in an eternal performance. Benglis strikes with illusion, with eccentric abstraction.

24. Lucy Lippard curated the anti-Formalist exhibition *Eccentric Abstraction* in 1966. Although it did not include work by Benglis whose professional career was only just beginning at the time, her work has since often been usefully associated to Lippard's expression.

25. *Op. cit.*: Krane, p. 21.

26. *Op. cit.*: Krane, p.32-33.

**This book is published on the occasion
of the exhibition *Lynda Benglis***

Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Netherlands
(curated by Diana Franssen)
20 June – 4 October 2009

Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Ireland
(curated by Caroline Hancock)
4 November 2009 – 24 January 2010

***Le Consortium, centre d'art contemporain,
Dijon, France***
(curated by Franck Gautherot and Seungduk Kim)
2 April – 20 June 2010

***Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design
(RISD), Providence, USA***
(curated by Judith Tannenbaum)
1 October 2010 – 9 January 2011

New Museum, New York, USA
(curated by Laura Hoptman)
9 February – 1 May 2011

This book is published with the support of
Etants donnés: The French-American Fund for
Contemporary Art, a program of FACE

Cheim & Read, New York
Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles
Locks Gallery, Philadelphia

This project is made possible by
Bank of America Merrill Lynch

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First published in English in 2009 by Les presses du réel,
Dijon

© Les presses du réel, 2009

© Lynda Benglis. DACS, London/VAGA, New York 2009

© the Authors for their texts

Printed and bound in Italy

Publisher

Les presses du réel
35 rue Colson, 21000 Dijon, France
+33 3 80 30 75 23
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