

Article

An Unlikely Match: Modernism and Feminism in Lynda Benglis's *Contraband*

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Abstract: In 1969, Lynda Benglis withdrew her large latex floor painting, *Contraband*, from the exhibition *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*. Looking beyond the logistical problems that caused Benglis to pull the work, I suggest that it challenged the conceptual and formal parameters of the exhibition from its inception. Taking hints from feminism, modernist painting, camp aesthetics, psychedelic imagery, pop, and minimalism, Benglis's latex pours unify an array of movements, styles, and political positions that have often been treated as antithetical. Although the refusal of traditional binaries was typical of the neo-avant-garde, Benglis's work was "contraband" because it challenged the inflexible dictum that feminist art and modernist painting are mortal enemies. With *Contraband*, she drew on abstract expressionist techniques for communicating feeling by exploiting the dialectic of spontaneity and order in Pollock's drip paintings. Simultaneously, she drew attention to gender through sexed-up colors and materials. Rather than suggesting that gender difference is repressed by abstract expressionist painting's false universalizing, Benglis shows that modernist techniques for communicating feeling are crucial for the feminist project of understanding the public significance of seemingly private experience.

Keywords: Lynda Benglis; *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*; abstract expressionism; post-minimalism; abstract art; feminism; modernism; formalism; American art



Citation: Bivens, Becky. 2024. An Unlikely Match: Modernism and Feminism in Lynda Benglis's *Contraband*. *Arts* 13: 106. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts13030106>

Academic Editors: Elyse Speaks and Susan Richmond

Received: 23 November 2023

Revised: 20 May 2024

Accepted: 28 May 2024

Published: 8 June 2024



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When Lynda Benglis was invited to participate in the Whitney Museum's 1969 exhibition, *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*, she was a burgeoning artist who had only just begun showing her work in New York.¹ She planned to exhibit *Contraband*, a thirty-three-foot-long swirling mat of liquid latex that—with its firetruck red, deep electric blue, tangerine, lime green, and lemon yellow—looks something like Crayola soup. *Contraband* was part of a series that Benglis referred to as "fallen paintings", all of which were fashioned from poured latex, and all of which took hints from feminism, abstract expressionist painting, camp aesthetics, psychedelic imagery, pop, and minimalism. Although Benglis's participation in *Anti-Illusion* could have jumpstarted her career, she ended up pulling out of the show at the last minute for a variety of reasons, some of which were logistical. An installation shot of the artwork captures the work hanging from a makeshift ramp, its lower half spilling onto the floor of the museum.² Here is how critic Vivien Raynor reported the incident in 1974:

In Benglis's case, success began with disaster. . . . Pouring a new work in her studio, she delivered it (the poured paint, after it set, could be rolled up and transported) only to find it couldn't fit anywhere in the museum. Placed with the other pieces, its bright colors disrupted the gray tone of the exhibition; deposited in any of the building's open areas, it was a traffic hazard. Rejecting as "totally dishonest" a proposal to hang on the wall a work designed to be viewed on the floor, she exacerbated the tension by her own eccentric behavior. "I'd had no showing experience and I was just this mad girl. . . . I wore a hat all the time and couldn't rationally deal with anyone. So, finally, I pulled out of the show". (Raynor 1974, p. 50)

One way to approach Benglis's conflict at the Whitney is detective-like: what were the *real* causes behind her decision to pull the work? This angle, however, has its limitations. For one, several of the major actors, including the exhibition curators Marcia Tucker and James Monte, are now deceased. Further, a close look at Benglis's way of telling the story shows that it has changed over the years. Whereas the artist cites an array of motives in her discussion with Raynor (logistical problems with the size of the work, her behavior, and its color), by the time she told the story to Carter Ratcliff in 2002 she focused less on the large size of the piece and more on the issue of color and illusion:

"The problem", the artist told me years later, "was that I was interested in that black stone floor at the Whitney and having my piece pop from the floor—having the contrast you get from bright colors against a dark background. It would have looked really very electric. But Jim and Marcia said, this show is called *Anti-Illusion* and you're interested in illusion. We can't put a piece like yours in front of the Robert Ryman paintings, which would be all white on a white wall. We can't put it near the Richard Serra, which is made of lead. They offered to build a ramp for it, near the entrance to the museum, to sort of get it off to one side". (Ratcliff 2002, p. 7)

Barry Schwabsky, rehearsing the event in *Artforum*, adds that Tucker, for her part, emphasized that the work was hard to accommodate because it "was just too big" (Schwabsky 2002, p. 33). Tucker confirms as much in her 2008 memoir, writing that she had expected something like the "fifteen-foot-wide poured-latex paintings we'd seen in [Benglis's] studio, lying on the floor like a psychedelic carpet" and not a "forty-foot-long Day-Glo path" (Tucker 2008, p. 84). In short, there is no archival evidence that can settle the question of why the artist withdrew the work. We cannot know whether Benglis would have shown her work at *Anti-Illusion* if its dimensions had been fifteen instead of thirty-three feet, or if the "real issue" was actually color, or her behavior, or some combination of the above.³

The project of understanding Benglis's experience at the Whitney, then, is less about archival work and more about interpretation. After all, *Contraband's* self-conscious title encourages us to think of it as an illegal or smuggled good, regardless of what actually happened. Although the incident has not been studied in depth, several authors have already suggested that something about the work itself violated the reigning curatorial parameters of *Anti-Illusion*. In her 2013 monograph on the artist, *Lynda Benglis: Beyond Process*, Susan Richmond claims that there was a "fundamental difference in how Benglis and the curators perceived the work". In what follows, I build on Richmond's assertion that "[i]llusion and allusion were, in fact, germane to Benglis's conceptualization of her practice" (Richmond 2013, p. 22). Indeed, Benglis's embrace of illusion and allusion amounts to a continuing commitment to a specifically modernist method of transforming materials to fashion a work of art. Benglis went out of her way to insist on the work as a *representation*, an aesthetic status that encompasses the allusion and illusion to which Richmond refers. I justify my claim about the centrality of representation by examining the ways that *Contraband* represents "nature" in particular, suggesting that it underscores Benglis's difference from the other artists at *Anti-Illusion*. Bill Bollinger's enormous boulder—we will see that Marcia Tucker considered it the exhibition's "flagship" piece—stands for the show's anti-modernist and anti-aesthetic tendency to allow materials to follow their own volition. This anti-aestheticism, however, was not only typical of anti-form art and its instantiation at *Anti-Illusion* but also alien to Benglis.

In interpreting *Contraband*, I suggest that the artist's alternative vision entailed transforming her materials into an image by swirling, marbleizing, nudging, and pooling poured liquid latex until it cohered into an artwork that eschewed the shy, reticent, or repressed versions of authorship that dominated *Anti-Illusion's* curatorial vision. *Contraband's* thirty-three-foot expanse of Day-Glo makes a statement about the importance of making a statement. Benglis's object declares, in other words, that a distinct and individual vision of the world ought to remain vital even in the wake of abstract expressionism. Anne Wagner borrows the biblical adage, "In my Father's house are many mansions", in her 1996 study

Three Artists (Three Women). I extend Wagner's insight that modernism offered a home for many women artists by suggesting that Benglis's engagement with abstract expressionism was something other than mere critique or "failure or false consciousness" (Wagner 1996, p. 16). More specifically, I claim that *Contraband*—with its provocative color, inimitable forms, and enormous size—indulges something like what T. J. Clark calls "lyric", in his essay "In Defense of Abstract Expressionism". Benglis's insistence on representation is a means for her to achieve the very "metaphors of agency, mastery, and self-centeredness that enforce our acceptance of the work as the expression of a single subject" that Clark wants to defend (Clark 1999, p. 401).

The consequence of all this is to make something of what is often said about Benglis's contribution to art history: namely, that she put the legacy of modernist painting—especially abstract expressionism—in conversation with feminist concerns. This is the subject of this essay's conclusion. In my view, the artist's withdrawal from *Anti-Illusion* becomes an occasion to understand the relationship between modernism's "lyric" approach to self-expression and Benglis's feminism. With help from Elise Archias, I contend that Benglis's feminism is not strictly expressed through caricaturing abstract expressionism as reified machismo (Archias 2023). Rather, the artist mines abstract expressionist and formalist conceptions of material transformation as intentional and even aggressive in order to articulate a feminist defense of authorial voice. To be sure, parody and camp are intrinsic to Benglis's sensibility—a quick glance at her Pop colors or cursory knowledge of her own self-styling make this obvious. Yet her relationship to abstract expressionism is not primarily about parody or an excess of self-consciousness (neither, for that matter, is her feminism). Instead, her modernist commitment to the transformation of materials to create evocative imagery that makes a big, bold, and even personal declaration of her aesthetic vision is consistent with her feminist commitment to making a statement.

A brief note on my methodology: Susan Richmond's study helpfully maintains a focus on the artist's practice as a whole rather than sidelining it in favor of the controversy surrounding Benglis's notorious 1974 *Artforum* advertisement. Rather than discussing the artist's relationship with Robert Morris or the magazine editors' subsequent reactions to the piece, Richmond shifts attention away from the "he-said she-said" of historical memory by placing the advertisement in the context of the artist's "sexual mockeries" photographic series (Meyer 2004). While recognizing the power of "memory as a form of gossip" to create an "exchange not of facts but of points of view", Richmond nonetheless suggests that such accounts "diminish the power and significance of Benglis's ad, specifically by foreclosing further consideration of other relationships, subjects, and experiences that have informed its production" (Richmond 2013, p. 9). By focusing less on what happened at the Whitney and more on how the artwork challenges the discursive parameters set by the show itself, I hope to likewise broach the matter in a scholarly way—a way that recognizes that provocation is central to Benglis's work and, accordingly, treats it interpretively. Indeed, we might even say that Benglis, with her outrageously gendered self-presentation—"I was just this mad girl", she says, evoking the hack sexist trope of the irrational and angry woman—was already rehearsing something like an early version of the *Artforum* controversy at the Whitney.

1. *Contraband at Anti-Illusion, or Benglis v. Bollinger*

When the elevators opened onto the Whitney's fourth floor, visitors to *Anti-Illusion* were presented with a big boulder placed in front of a white wall bearing only the exhibition's title. According to Tucker, the artist, Bill Bollinger, had removed it "with considerable difficulty and at great expense, from the World Trade Center's excavation site". Since Tucker and Monte wanted the work to "epitomize what was found on the other side" of the wall, it can serve as a synecdoche for the exhibition's central gambit, which was to avoid presenting artworks that somehow manifest the a priori vision of the artist (Tucker 2008, p. 83). Along these lines, while Bollinger chose the rock, he certainly did not carve it. "Most of the artists in this exhibition have chosen to slip around style", Monte wrote in his catalog essay. Acknowledging that style is "difficult to ignore or defeat", he nonetheless insisted

that the artists in *Anti-Illusion* at least tried to defeat style by emphasizing “individual acts” (Monte and Tucker 1969, p. 13).

Bollinger’s big boulder, with its Duchampian provocation, caused a stir in the press.⁴ That it did so makes it consistent with the exhibition’s press release and catalog, both of which are saturated with a hyper- and wide-eyed enthusiasm for the new. Their first show as young curators at the Whitney, Tucker and Monte thought that Bollinger’s boulder nicely complemented the sort of “open-minded” liberal embrace of possibility that, already the province of youth, was also very much the province of their generation. “Was it a work of art if the artist had simply found it and transported it to the museum? We thought so”, Tucker later reminisced. “[W]ho said art had to be made rather than found? We were sure that the boulder would be a perfect introduction to the show because it raised so many questions about what it was doing there” (Tucker 2008, p. 83). The press release likewise borrowed a description of anti-form art that made much of its newness. Artists’ “radical disenchantment with the present role of art in society” encouraged “a groping towards an expectant new form of creation”. The author continued, claiming that the show’s “artist-innovators are turning out products that are . . . recognized by no known bureau of standards . . . yet reveal the shape of a new movement that makes earlier aesthetic revolutions look tame”.⁵

If hindsight makes it easy to recognize that *Anti-Illusion* was a bit tamer than the press release claims, critics at the time were skeptical as well. Lawrence Alloway, for example, found the show’s disheveledness cultivated, even tasteful. “The fourth floor of the Whitney has never looked as good as it does now”, he remarked. *Anti-Illusion*’s emphasis on process meant that a fair number of artists were commissioned to install in situ, and Alloway found that the result was a preponderance of artworks that, despite their claims to be less self-important, were delicate in their visual response to their environment. Citing Carl Andre’s wall-length alignment of orange Styrofoam blocks, Rafael Ferrer’s heap of hay, grease, and sliced steel, Richard Serra’s floor-bound castings of molten lead, and Barry LeVa’s smattering of flour dust along the floor, Alloway found that the works “possess the hangarlike space easily” (Alloway 1969, p. 740). The surviving installation photographs suggest a restrained elegance that is communicated through understated artworks whose imprecise geometry converse with the Whitney’s gridded ceilings and black slate floors. In one such image, we can see that one edge of Robert Rohm’s untitled gridded string sculpture is pulled taut and runs neatly up and down the wall from floor to ceiling, while its upper third droops and slouches such that it traces the outlines of elegant, curvilinear forms.⁶

Although there are no color photographs of the show, the surviving black-and-white images do it a kind of justice. Paint added to a surface was a rare sight, with most artists refusing to alter their materials’ natural color. Consider, for example, the splotchy blue-gray surface of the four leaning lead plates in Serra’s *One Ton Prop* or the unfinished plywood of Bruce Nauman’s *Performance Corridor*. Eva Hesse’s *Expanded Expansion* also used “only colors and shapes intrinsic to the materials” (Monte and Tucker 1969, p. 31) (its luminous drapery is fabricated from fiberglass, polyester resin, latex, and cheesecloth). There are, of course, some exceptions to this rule. Keith Sonnier inserted whimsical shine by adding colored neon, using pink in *Double Loop* and green in *Lit Circle*. Furthermore, Hesse’s *Expanded Expansion* is arguably an object that—insofar as it looks like more than the sheer accumulation of the artist’s process—ends up straying from *Anti-Illusion*’s central idea even as Hesse relied on an economy of color that is consistent with the show as a whole. We might allow for exceptions, then, while also granting that the exhibition’s rule was to prioritize the unaltered, raw state and natural volition of the artistic materials, rather than the aesthetic vision of individual artists.

One way to sort out Benglis’s challenge to the exhibition is to draw out a comparison between *Contraband* and the show’s flagship piece, Bollinger’s big boulder. To be sure, the flaunted artifice of Benglis’s color could not be more different from Bollinger’s literal

earth tones. This difference not only underscores the two artists' distinct approach to representing nature, but it also demonstrates why Benglis's artwork was so contentious.

Speaking about *Contraband*, Benglis has said that the work "bespeaks of nature" (Whitney Focus 2009). What role did nature play in *Anti-Illusion*? It was not explicitly thematized by critics or the curators, but Bollinger's boulder stands, roughly, for nature as an actor in the creation of art rather than the intentional actions of the artist. This claim for nature as the relevant actor appeared in at least one other work. Rafael Ferrer arranged fifteen slabs of ice and leaves outside the entrance to the museum, such that the action of the materials—the ice melted and the leaves blew away—was considered central to the work itself. If Ferrer distanced himself from representing or altering nature by allowing the materials to scatter, pool, and spread on their own, Bollinger distanced himself from representing nature by limiting his actions to the realm of conceptual decision-making (as in R. Mutt's familiar "he CHOSE it"). Indeed, Bollinger's heavy-handed refusal of artifice seems to ask if the work of art can exist entirely outside the hand of the artist. The work tries to answer the question with a yes and succeeds, although we can allow for the (literal rather than aesthetic) significance of Bollinger's choice to pull the rock from the World Trade Center excavation site. Very much in the midst of being built during the summer of 1969, Bollinger invites his audience to attend to the Twin Towers' decidedly financial set of associations. This is not just any boulder; it is a one-and-a-half-ton piece of the foundation of an icon of postwar American economic power.

Contraband shares in but also complicates these associations. In keeping with Richmond's suggestion that "illusion and allusion" are important to the latex pours, we might argue that Benglis comfortably evokes and thus represents nature while Bollinger strives to present it like a heavy and inalterable fact. Writers have often found associations between the latex pours and the natural world. Richard Marshall remarks that Benglis's "hardened liquid forms"—he has the latex pours as well as her slightly later polyurethane foam pours in mind—"evoke external references to bodily functions, volcanic eruptions, and oceanic phenomena" (Marshall 2004). To be sure, the piece looks like a river. The pooling of the liquid latex (especially Benglis's decision to allow it to ooze outwards at its two extremities), its long thin shape, and finally the use of blue all work together to suggest the movement and flow of water. The artist has remarked that the piece is named after Contraband Bayou in her hometown, Lake Charles, Louisiana. Today, the bayou receives the city's municipal waste.⁷ The work's preternaturally bright hues suggest toxic waste or oil slicks, making it illusory in the "looks-like" sense of the term. "I was water skiing from the age of thirteen over the local rivers and lakes and they were polluted with oil slicks", Benglis explains. "So large works like *Contraband* (1969), which was one of the biggest latex works I made, reflected that way in which the chemical color collected over the surface of the water" (Bonacina 2022, p. 16).

Bollinger and Benglis are also interested in making big gestures. Tucker explains that Bollinger exerted "considerable time and expense" getting the boulder to the Whitney's fourth floor. Even as he distances himself from the piece by not making it, the grandness of his gesture is impossible to ignore. Just as sources often cite the size of Bollinger's boulder (at some point in the literature its one and a half tons change to two), big numbers also frequently pop up in Benglis's latex pours. The caption of a widely circulated photograph from 1969 reads, "Lynda Benglis painting the floor with 40 gallons of latex";⁸ the artist recently told an interviewer that she "ordered hundreds of pounds of fluorescent pigment in 50-gallon drums" to dye the pieces (Bonacina 2022, p. 16); another article informs the reader that she pours the latex from "22-liter cans, the heaviest she can swing" (Dubrowin 1971, p. 11). Added to this is the expansive length of the work, and, of course, the almost offensive optical vibrations of her unapologetically loud and oftentimes clashing Day-Glo palette.

The point of Benglis's big-ness is different from Bollinger's, however. Here we can leave Bollinger's boulder behind in pursuit of a reading of *Contraband* on its own terms. Ultimately, Benglis wants to declare that her artwork is made. This declaration—aggressive as it is—is not a statement that Benglis makes with ease. Rather, it is something like the

challenge of the work, which is to declare its made-ness at a historical moment when it was under enormous pressure. There are all sorts of ways that Benglis sets up made-ness as a challenge in *Contraband*. Indeed, artifice becomes something to prove in spite of the odds set against it. The *Anti-Illusion* catalog shows her pouring from the very twenty-two-liter buckets mentioned above. An imprecise tool, the buckets mean that she does not have especially fine control over compositional incident. Thus, if figures emerge amongst the swirls, such visages are like the unintentional but recognizable images we perceive in passing clouds. That the work lies on the floor also thwarts the viewer from quickly perceiving figures emerging against a background (such perceptions only emerge after one gets acquainted with the work). Furthermore, if Benglis controls her composition in *Contraband*, she does not do so at the level of intricate detail but rather through roughly balancing areas of color such that no one color dominates too much. This is most obvious at one end of *Contraband*, in which its finger- or tendril-like ends separate as the artist displays the array of her palette. Other aspects of the work further distance Benglis as its origin. The areas of unmixed Day-Glo color create a production-line aesthetic, just as the colors themselves are saturated with broad cultural associations. One thinks of the attention-demanding, garish hues in advertising or the free-floating optical and hallucinatory imagery of psychedelic culture, for example.

Given that Benglis indulges all of these distancing devices, it may seem strange to find that she not only insists that her work has never been about process but also that she has always been invested in “making an image”. Her language is strong:

I was making an image; I wasn't involved with a process that could be labeled “process” one, two, three. I wasn't involved with “process” at all. Nor alluding to it. You have to remember that many of the artists who were involved with “process” were involved with an enclosed deductive system of logic. I've always been involved with the idea of an induction in logic, an open-ended system, not a closed system. . . . I think so-called “process artists” had definite steps and that the process and the work were one. The process could not be clearly read in any of the works that I've done. The process was always hidden. The process was transformed by the image. I have always been interested in imagery. (Varian et al. 1969)

Benglis's desire to make an image contradicts the method of working that Robert Morris laid out in his 1968 essay “Anti Form”. (Given her 1970 decision to title a polyurethane foam sculpture after Carl Andre, it is also possible that Benglis had Andre in mind when she refers to “‘process’ one, two, three”). An important precedent for *Anti-Illusion*, the essay eschews image-making by suggesting that “[d]isengagement with preconceived enduring forms is a positive assertion. It is part of the work's refusal to continue estheticizing form by dealing with it as a prescribed end” (Morris 1993, p. 46). Unlike Morris, Benglis was committed to working in dialogue with her materials to create evocative imagery (if not to reproduce the spitting image of a picture in her mind's eye). Further, whatever the signs of “process” and refusal of compositional and visual control in her work, the quotation shows her insisting that she was still invested in working with her unruly materials such that “process” ends up being about the transformation of materials into an aesthetic object rather than an end in itself.

Of course, the evidence that Benglis wanted to transform her materials into an image must be rooted in her work and not her words. The way that *Contraband* does this is through cultivating an aesthetic of aggression. Benglis courts aggression, in part, by simply relying on the rhetorical significance of the abstract expressionist gesture. Michael Leja, for example, has written that abstract expressionism was understood from the beginning “as a male domain, ruled by a familiar social construction of ‘masculine’ as tough, aggressive, sweeping, bold” (Leja 1993, p. 256). The curator Susan Krane further suggests that Benglis's early works caricature abstract expressionist machismo through their “excessive, colossal simulations of the revered autographic gesture”. At the same time, she adds, they capitalize on abstract expressionism's “raw physical and emotive power” (Krane 1991, p. 24). Indeed,

pictures of Benglis at work, published in *Life* magazine, make her debt to Jackson Pollock particularly clear. The sheer cultural weight of the reference to Pollock is enough to heavily associate her work with aggression. Benglis, with her “mad girl” persona, is just as eager to denaturalize and critique aggression’s association with masculinity as she is to take its expressive and physical power for herself. Seen in this register, *Contraband* reads like a river of rage, or an outpouring of loudly colored and forcefully felt emotion.

Benglis’s use of color is also central to her modernist commitment to transforming materials into an “illusion” or “image”. Her commentary on *Bounce*, another latex pour, demonstrates this commitment. The material, she explained, was “down on the floor”, but “the color was up” (Pincus-Witten 1974, p. 57). Both *Bounce* and *Contraband* rely on reflected light to achieve a weightless, atmospheric experience of color that disengages itself from the material substance of the liquid latex. Benglis leaves materiality behind by way of her bouncing, elevated color—thus securing the transformation of low to high. The artist’s penchant for sudden and aggressive aesthetic shifts like these is at the heart of her practice.

Style—what Monte insisted the artists of *Anti-Illusion* were out to avoid—was really Benglis’s bottom line. Her work adapted a certain version of modernist painting, and particularly Pollock’s legacy, that consisted in an assertive and even aggressive articulation of her authorial voice. If Morris was focusing on matter and material volition rather than his own actions, Benglis was holding on to what T. J. Clark has referred to as “lyric” in his essay “In Defense of Abstract Expressionism”. By “lyric”, Clark explains, “I mean the illusion in an artwork of a singular voice or viewpoint, uninterrupted, absolute, laying claim to a world of its own. I mean those metaphors of agency, mastery, and self-centeredness that enforce our acceptance of the work as the expression of a single subject” (Clark 1999, p. 401). Clark’s description of lyric is not without bite, for sure. One senses that his defense of “self-centeredness” may not be without reservation. Yet Benglis’s self-consciousness (her references to medium-specificity and opticality, for example, or her camp cultivation of offensive color combinations that end up intellectualizing and interrogating “good taste”) means that she too comes with Clark’s capacity for reservation. Her defense of lyric comes down to a prizing of voice, one that turns out to be significant for feminist art history.

2. *Contraband* and Feminist Art History

Indeed, Benglis’s formal aggression is crucial for building a feminist analysis of her modernist conception of voice—one that calls into questions post-structuralist readings that treat it as synonymous with the call to mastery and domination. I am thinking, for example, of Craig Owens’s brilliant and canonical essay “The Discourse of Others”, in which he rejects modernist “narratives of mastery, of man seeking his telos in the conquest of nature[.]” “What function”, Owens asks rhetorically, “did these narratives play other than to legitimize Western man’s self-appointed mission of transforming the entire planet in his own image?” Benglis’s work offers a kind of alternative to Owens by suggesting that “master narratives” can have a productive function for feminism. She does this by seeking what Owens calls a “telos”—by dominating and redirecting the natural volition of her materials. In this respect, it is worth noticing that Owens folds two meanings, one political and the other aesthetic, into his critique of master narratives. Indeed, he quickly shifts from questioning the “Marxist master narrative” to “representation” itself, in particular the notion that “the world exists only in and through a subject who believes that he is producing the world in producing its representation” (Owens 1983, pp. 65–66).⁹ That *Contraband* demonstrates Benglis’s investment in representation—that this was the point of her work’s courting of “illusion and allusion” and, further, why the artist was at pains to explain that she was “making an image” and “wasn’t involved in process at all”—is another way to say that her formal aggression stages the very narratives of transformation that Owens refuses. When the critic Robert Pincus-Witten wrote that Benglis’s “formal volatility is her primary message and strength” (Pincus-Witten 1974, p. 54), he might well have been describing her transformation of the contingent and chaotic realm of pooling, liquid latex into abstract forms that tell us about the significance of all that primordial goo. Her “volatility”, or what I have called aggression, is crucial for her “voice”, which is akin to

Clark's "lyric" because it too evokes the impulse to build a world shot through with desire and future-oriented vision.

Of course, what voice means within modernism is contested (this is inevitable, given the variety of artistic practices that are routinely described as modernist). As my citation of Clark suggests, I have something specific in mind in thinking about Benglis's modernist version of voice. Consider, for example, the way that Anne Wagner understands Lee Krasner's voice: she finds her negotiating her relationship with Pollock and gender by speaking in the third person—through an "autobiography that rarely if ever says 'I,'" that "strains the relations between author, narrator, and principal character to a real extreme".¹⁰ (Krasner's relationship to Pollock and the abstract expressionist construction of voice was of course mediated by her marriage to the artist—Benglis's relationship to Pollock was bound to feel more free.) We might contrast Krasner's "fictions" of self to the version of interiority on display in Melvin Edwards's early sculpture—an interiority that is closer to Benglis's voice. For Elise Archias, Edwards does not represent the interior by stressing the fictional character of the self. Rather, he sees "'the tension between inside and outside' as a source of truth" (Archias 2023; Stimson 2013, p. 7).¹¹ Part of the value of Edwards's interiority is its usefulness for "constructing a more just social order", one that sees "'interior' feeling" as an indication of values and desires that are built from but also exceed psychological experience. In making this point, Archias refers to the writings of Adrian Piper and Lorraine O'Grady (Berger 1990; O'Grady 1992). Both were quick to question the post-structuralist refusal of voice. "We should note these artists' suspicions in the 1990s about poststructuralist intellectuals (often white and male) advocating for a dissolved subject with no interior", Archias writes, "and therefore nothing authentic to say or to construct politically in the name of progress (now maligned as a myth)". This conception of the subject was a loss for "women, blacks, and other historically marginalized categories of person[s]" at a moment when they "were beginning to have more influence on both art and politics in the U.S. and in the decolonizing southern hemisphere" (Archias 2023).

I would like to suggest that Benglis rehearsed an early version of this critique of the post-structuralist subject at the Whitney. Seen in this light, Benglis's description of herself to Vivien Raynor as a "mad girl" reads like an invitation to see that bold formal declarations of authorship (call it her "aggression") had a value in the late 1960s especially. In other words, Benglis's abstract expressionist voice—akin to what Clark calls "lyric" and Archias calls "interiority"—was a means to speak without also presenting her womanhood as necessarily conditioned by anonymity. Indeed, abstract expressionism's array of conventions for representing the "personal" and "feeling" (the look of spontaneity, the inimitable contours of pooled liquid paint, the embodied quality of gestural mark making) become tools that she knowingly deploys. "Technique is just a means of arriving at a statement", Pollock famously remarked (Chipp 1968, p. 548). Benglis's techniques are very much means of making a statement—with the statement being the important thing rather than technique for its own sake.

This reframing of the usefulness of mastery or aggression or voice for feminist art history can perhaps help us to make sense of Bibiana Obler's recent remarks on Benglis. "In 2016", Obler writes,

I walked into a room studded with large-scale paper-on-chicken-wire relief sculptures in the exhibition 'Lynda Benglis: New Work' and was somewhat perplexed by my response: I am in the presence of a master. What does it mean to perceive Lynda Benglis, that avatar of 1960s and 70s iconoclasm, as a master? And why would I, trained and invested in feminist art history and highly skeptical of such value judgments, want to use this label? (Obler 2022, p. 37)

For Obler, "mastery" is a concept that is broad enough to speak to the breadth of Benglis's oeuvre while also bringing the particularity of her achievements into view.¹² We might also add that something about Benglis's practice shows that valuing her brand of mastery is not inconsistent with an investment in feminist art history. To say as much is to suggest that Benglis's work challenges art historical lineages that find feminist com-

mitments in models of art-making that reject the master-narrative idea by embracing a passive relationship between the artist and materials. We saw such passivity described in the *Anti-Illusion* catalog, but it was also articulated by Rosalind Krauss a few years later. In her 1973 essay “Sense and Sensibility, Reflections on Post ‘60s Sculpture”, Krauss contends that the rising anti-illusionism of art in the 1960s carried with it a new theory of the subject, one that was counter to abstract expressionism’s essentially private conception of the subject. According to Krauss, the older, modernist view held that inner life is organized like a Renaissance picture. Just as figure and ground are differentiated within a unified, bounded plane, the subject’s consciousness is also “the ground for all relatedness, for all differentiation, for the constitution of perceptual wholes” (Krauss 1973, p. 46). For Krauss, figure and ground come with both spatial and temporal associations—figures are both on top of and after the ground—and consciousness itself is like the ground. It is the already given, constituting base from which sense experience is organized. The notion that consciousness comes before sense experience and is essentially not constructed from without but is rather the product of an inner, private life is (for her) captured above all in abstract expressionist painting, which is the last breath of the Renaissance, illusionistic tradition. Certainly, Marcia Tucker and James Monte’s *Anti-Illusion* catalogue articulates a theoretical position that is, though less worked out, consistent with Krauss’s. For Krauss, Tucker, and Monte, a different version of subjectivity was needed, one that accompanied the rejection of humanism, illusionism, and interior, private life.

Krauss does not explicitly describe her account as a feminist one, however. Hal Foster would later connect Krauss’s conception of the anti-humanist subject in minimalism to early feminist art’s articulation of the subject. In *The Return of the Real*, Foster articulates such a lineage when he writes that “feminist art begins where minimalism ends” because “minimalism. . . put the question of the subject in play”—a putting into play that allowed for the recognition of gender as a performance (Foster 1996, p. 247n37). Minimalism’s conception of the subject, with its embrace of the death of authorship and its notion that the viewing subject and her determining context are constitutive of the work itself, was certainly present in *Anti-Illusion*. Indeed, the exhibition applied the concept of performativity to the realm of materials themselves. Benglis’s work shows us that the anti-aesthetic position of minimalism and post-minimalism tends to get stuck in treating personal feeling as false or always-already constructed. Abstract expressionism, on the other hand, sees that seemingly personal feeling can be a potential resource for the expansiveness of understanding, with its sense of clarity and insight. Finally, accepting abstract expressionism’s usefulness would mean challenging Lucy Lippard’s 2007 assertion that feminism’s contribution “was to *not* make a contribution to Modernism” (Cotter 2007). Benglis’s work, I would like to suggest, uses modernism to contribute to the feminist pursuit of voice.

It is worth noting that since the structuralist and post-structuralist turn (which both *Anti-Illusion* and Krauss articulated so clearly), scholars have felt the need for a fuller conception of the feeling subject. Archias’s defense of Edwards’s interiority is exemplary. Eve Meltzer’s contribution is also important in this regard. Her 2013 *Systems We Have Loved: Affect, Conceptual Art, and the Anti-Humanist Turn* is an important book that asks art historians to shake off their commitment to systemic analysis at the expense of attention to feeling. Meltzer encourages readers to reconsider thinking about feeling as a mere effect of pre-existing systems, and further, to move beyond thinking about representations of feeling in mid-century art as evidence of one’s subject position (as opposed to a more nuanced conception of feeling that sees it as about or in dialogue with the world rather than the consequence of being steamrolled by it). While I share Meltzer’s critique of systems analysis and commitment to increased attention to the emotions, I do not accept (as she does) Brian Massumi’s post-structuralist conception of affect as a “theoretical no-bodies land” beyond “theories of signification that are still wedded to structure” (Massumi 2002, p. 4; Meltzer 2013, p. 24). My sense is that rather than turning away from both signification and structure at once, we can imagine emotion *as* signification—as desire shot through

with ideas about how these structures can change. Meltzer is one of the many art historians who feels the need to hold modernist ideas about the subject and emotion at a distance.

Amy Sillman's "Ab-Ex and Disco Balls: In Defense of Abstract Expressionism II" goes farther than Meltzer by explicitly reclaiming the modernist movement for queer sensibility. Her defense is helpful partly because it is not without reservation. "Maybe it's possible for me to look at AbEx through rose-colored glasses because I came along too late to actually have to date any of those artists and I didn't have to sit on their laps at the Cedar Tavern. They all probably *were* horrible in real life", she concedes (Sillman 2011, p. 321). She thus maintains the critique of machismo while also insisting that abstract expressionism is open for campy and tender reactivation. She questions the ongoing essentializing of abstract expressionist painting ("I thought we were past simple butch and femme role-playing by now" (321) and points to a long list of artists (Kenneth Anger, Carolee Schneemann, Paul Thek, Yayoi Kusama, Hélio Oiticica, and Leidy Churchman) inspired by "painting as a nudie activity" (325), "Ab-Ex's" embrace of "tenderness, tragedy, contingency, and inverted color schemes" (321), and its "rhetorical position of speaking from the gut, Walt Whitman style" (321). Sillman is keen to show abstract expressionism's usefulness for treating the body as a non-essential and plastic form open to transfiguration. Benglis's bodily visual excess makes sense as an instance of this sort of queer formalism.¹³ Her feminism is most rooted in her commitment to abstract expressionism's way of "speaking from the gut", particularly its mode of using form to give meaning to felt experience. We might say that Benglis appropriates the abstract expressionist aggressive stance and uses it to insist on the importance of voice, feeling, and seemingly "private" experience. This paper argues for the direction staked out by Meltzer and Sillman but pushes it further. It says that even the old modernist notion of "voice" is crucial for the feminist project.

To return to Benglis: she has never been an artist that one wants to pigeonhole. Indeed, part of Opler's point in calling her a "master" is to draw attention to the virtuosity of her contribution, particularly her "importance to multiple movements" and "formal prowess". *Contraband*, like much of Benglis's work, addresses feminism without being reducible to it (in the same way, it addresses art history without being reducible to it). In so doing, she partakes in the aggressive assertion of voice on the precipice of a historical moment, namely the birth of second-wave feminism, that wanted to carve out a space for women to speak and be loud. I find myself thinking of Louise Fishman's 1973 "Angry Women" series. Fishman, for her part, insists on the centrality of Willem-de-Kooningsque gestural mark making to the enterprise of declaring one's anger. Benglis is not so specific as Fishman—or de Kooning for that matter. Still, we might indulge in Fishman's and Benglis's similarities briefly, among them the willingness to make something ugly, the insistence on voice, and, finally, the sense that abstraction and a previous moment in art history have something to offer that project. It seems more than coincidental that Greenberg, in describing the beginning of abstract expressionist practice in the early 1940s, praised artists (he mentions William Bazotes) for "daring to hint at illusionist space", and, in so doing, say "something personal, therefore new, therefore worth saying" (Greenberg 1986, p. 121). Through her evocation of Pollock and her courting of illusion, we can see Benglis suggesting that it was time to say "something personal" again. Her abstractness and repeated references to impersonality means that her brand of the personal is more an idea or a gesture—she is impersonally personal. The artist is not necessarily asking us to think about her own particular aggression so much as she is asking us to think about the idea or practice of having a demanding voice. Benglis prefers to filter her statement—which is really to insist on the importance of aggressive statement itself—through the rhetorical manipulation of cultural codes and the abstract means of modernist aesthetic categories.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: Data is contained within the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest or private gain from this article.

Notes

- 1 This essay stems from research I began in 2008 as a Master's student at the University of Chicago. I have benefited from generous feedback and support from Christa Robbins, Matthew Jesse Jackson, Elise Archias, and Blake Stimson. My thanks to Daya Gao for her assistance with references.
- 2 The photograph, a Polaroid, is in the Whitney's archives for the exhibition. See [Anti-Illusion \(2024\)](#): Procedures/Materials.
- 3 Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe and Dave Hickey have also acknowledged Benglis's difference from the sort of process art that Monte and Tucker described. In a 2009 essay, Hickey builds on the cheeky quality of the work's title as he suggests that Benglis "out foxed them all" by using a maximalist palette at a moment when "colourlessness [. . .] was hilariously presumed to be the colour of thought and intellect". Gilbert-Rolfe writes that the artist withdrew "her work from a show at the Whitney in 1969 because they wanted her to put it somewhere else so that the gray and white works of the others wouldn't be polluted by colour allowed her to demonstrate Minimalism's and post-Minimalism's difficulty with seduction and ambiguity as opposed to aggression and purity, in short to blow away Minimalism's failure to address complexity and replace it with something a little more adult", ([Gilbert-Rolfe 2010](#), p. 4; [Hickey 2009](#), p. 18).
- 4 See, for example, Alfred [Frankenstein \(1969\)](#), p. 28.
- 5 The press-release quotes Thomas Messer in the spring 1969 *Art in America* special issue, "Impossible Art—Why it is". See [Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials](#).
- 6 The show's full roster included Carl Andre, Michael Asher, William Bollinger, John Duff, Rafael Ferrer, Robert Fiore, Phillip Glass, Eva Hesse, Neil Jenney, Barry LeVa, Robert Lobe, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Steve Reich, Robert Rohm, Robert Ryman, Richard Serra, Joel Shapiro, Michael Snow, Keith Sonnier, and Richard Tuttle.
- 7 The story of how Bayou Contraband got its name is a provocative one. By December 1817, the pirate Jean Lafitte had settled the tributary and built "a depot at its head for the stowing of the goods these pirates smuggled into the country and also as a depot for the African slaves they imported". Because Benglis had already taken to calling her latex pours "fallen paintings"—the term plays on the trope of the fallen woman—, the suggestion that we could think about the latex pours as objects or as people was already there. Thus the multiple associations of *Contraband* extend to include not just natural processes and toxic spills but also the 19th-century use of the term contraband to refer to the enslaved ([Block 1979](#)).
- 8 The photograph is featured in *Frieze* ([Hoby 2020](#)).
- 9 Owens attaches this view to Martin Heidegger ([Owens 1983](#), p. 66).
- 10 I do not mean to suggest that Wagner's reading of Krasner casts her as a dissolved subject. Wagner has Krasner moving between and mediating voices rather than dissolving the notion of voice altogether. In her preservation of voice Krasner is still very much a modernist, and Wagner helpfully demonstrates her likeness to Arshile Gorky's fictions of self ([Wagner 1996](#), p. 156).
- 11 Archias builds on Blake Stimson's account of the postmodern loss of the Enlightenment tension between privately felt desire and public political commitment, a tension that when treated reflexively and given communicable form corresponds to a conscientious form of citizenship. "The rich interior specificity of self, given form by the intertwined activity of sustained reflection and public exchange with others about that reflection that was the core dream of the Enlightenment, has been reduced to a mechanical mirror image or 'subject position,' to the lesser, delimited reality of a plotted coordinate in a discursively constructed world", he writes ([Stimson 2013](#), p. 7). For "the tension between inside and outside", see p. 186.
- 12 Obler describes five aspects of Benglis's mastery, "(1) engagement with past masters; (2) importance to multiple movements; (3) formal prowess; (4) grappling with big questions; and (5) subversion" ([Obler 2022](#), p. 37).
- 13 For more on queer formalism, see [Doyle and Getsy \(2013\)](#); [Simmons \(2013, 2022\)](#).

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