

MARGO LEAVIN GALLERY

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Friedman, Martin. "Up Against The Wall with Lynda Benglis." *Art in America* (December 2009), p. 102-109.



UP AGAINST THE WALL

BY MARTIN FRIEDMAN

Director of the Walker Art Center from 1961-1990, Martin Friedman organized the landmark 1971 exhibition "Works for New Spaces," for which Lynda Benglis created a major piece on-site. Recalling the circumstances surrounding the making of Adhesive Products, as her work was titled, Friedman here draws upon interviews and exchanges carried on with Benglis since 2005.

BEGINNING IN 1967, Lynda Benglis found herself commuting between the floor and the wall. A 1964 graduate of Sophie Newcomb Memorial College at Tulane University, New Orleans, and a student at the Brooklyn Museum Art School in 1964-65, Benglis was already regarded by 1967 as a highly original artist, best known for wall-mounted relief sculptures that she termed "paintings." These were elongated, lozenge-shaped, richly detailed

WITH LYNDA BENGLIS

objects constructed layer by layer with a brush. The medium was encaustic, the forms organic, with oblique allusions to primordial life, and a fleshy, sexual character. But in 1967, Benglis decided that the floor offered greater possibilities. This was no coincidence, since the idea of floor art had become widespread. Every artist, it seemed, was doing it on the floor. Not only doing it, but often making a mess in the process. The results

of their efforts, usually large-scale installations made for specific sites, acquired lofty appellations such as "Distribution Works," "Scatter Pieces" and "Anti-Form." More like a seismic shudder than a movement, floor art was manifested in so many variations that it took on the character of an anti-authoritarian impulse, with the common denominator being that, one way or the other, the pedestal was to be banished.



Previous spread, view of Lynda Benglis's wall sculpture *Adhesive Products*, commissioned for the exhibition "Works for New Spaces," at the Walker Art Center, 1971.

This spread, works in the exhibition by Dan Flavin (above), Robert Irwin (opposite top) and Dorothea Rockburne (opposite bottom).

All photos this article Eric Sutherland, from "Works for New Spaces," 1971, courtesy Walker Art Center.

Floor works varied from orderly configurations of discrete forms to anarchic accumulations of discarded materials unlovely and quickly thrown together, like playgrounds of detritus. They could be found in unheated warehouses, artists' lofts and, occasionally, on the pristine floor of a courageous museum. At the orderly end of the scale were Carl Andre's thin plaques of metal and lengths of low-stacked bricks; Joel Shapiro's anonymous, small-scale houses—virtual neighborhoods of them underfoot; and Eva Hesse's translucent, soft-edged containers of cast resin. At the opposite end were Richard Serra's scatterings of hot lead, Barry Le Va's glass shards and red powder on floors coated with mineral oil, and Robert Morris's agitated sweepings that brought to mind desiccated landscapes.

Fugitive in nature, some floor works vanished immediately after their making, while others went through modifications over days, weeks, even months. Implicitly, they assailed Minimalist orthodoxy. They represented a willful disregard of the art market, in that few of these deployments of wood, steel, coiled wire, rocks, islands of earth and sand, and broken glass were saleable. Artists were broadly rebelling against materialism and consumer culture, even though many were profiting nicely from the gallery system. Loyal

dealers rolled their eyes and offered thin-lipped smiles as they showed these uncommon wares.

Benglis's first floor sculptures, made of congealed latex rubber, were poured. They suggested extra-long corridor runners in vivid, striated hues. Irregular-edged shapes that looked as though a giant roller had pressed them flat, they could in fact be rolled up like carpets and easily transported. In the 2005 exhibition "Extreme Abstraction," at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, in Buffalo, the museum's 1968 Benglis floor work *Fallen Painting* some 30 feet long and 6 feet wide, was shown in a gallery with an epic Morris Louis stained canvas painting on the wall [see *A.I.A.*, Oct. 2005]. The connections between them were striking.

My first encounter with these objects was at the Bykert Gallery, on East 81st Street. Benglis's contribution to a 1969 group show there, which also included works by Chuck Close, Richard Van Buren and David Paul, was a floor piece, which, as Klaus Kertess, then Bykert's director, reminded me recently, was a single shape of successive pours of Day-Glo colored latex in magenta, red-orange, yellow, blue and green [*Bounce*, see p. 98]. The form was flat and vaguely triangular—echoing the corner of the room—with amorphous edges. On the strength of the Bykert showing, I invited Benglis to make a piece for an exhibition, "Works for New Spaces," which I was organizing for the May 1971 opening of the new Walker Art Center, where I was director. The building's design—high, loftlike spaces in helical sequence—was by Edward Larrabee Barnes.

The artists I had approached were invited to walk through the museum during its construction and think about what they might make. The show would include both established artists and those new on the scene. The idea was to bring many works into existence. Some pieces, such as a row of giant blue galvanized cubes by Don Judd, were made for specific spaces in the building but fabricated elsewhere. However, most of the exhibition's 22 works were made on-site.

A number of painters and sculptors arrived a month or so before the May 18 opening date and immediately converted their assigned spaces into workshops: cutting, stapling, gluing and shaping sheets of cardboard (Robert Rauschenberg); stretching yards of theatrical scrim illuminated from behind by fluorescent lights (Robert Irwin); assembling thick sheets of smoky glass coated with silver alloy that made them equally reflective and transparent (Larry Bell); suspending a folded gold rectangular metal plane in mid-air electromagnetically (Siah Armajani); festooning vast bolts of paint-spattered canvas (Sam Gilliam, in the atrium). It was a heady time at the museum, with all kinds of comings and goings.

The Walker had booked a number of rooms in the nearby Maryland Hotel, a decrepit hostelry torn down just a few years later. There, after a day's work, night-long partying began, as East Coast met West Coast, occasionally joined by the locals. There was instant camaraderie.

SOON AFTER THE 1969 Bykert show, Benglis pretty much abandoned floor art and returned to the wall, but in a radically different way. Whereas the lozengellike paintings were relatively decorous, protruding from the wall only slightly, the





This spread, Benglis making *Adhesive Products* at the Walker.



work that followed was anything but polite. These new pieces, polyurethane shapes formed on armatures, jutted aggressively from the wall, erupting into the observer's space.

Dan Flavin, one of the more established artists in the exhibition, was among the first to be invited to participate, and he selected a gallery space that he intended to bisect with an 81-foot light-filled tunnel, its ceiling gridded in colored fluorescent tubes. This left wide corridor spaces on either side, one of which was assigned to Dorothea Rockburne, the other to Benglis. Rockburne's piece, inspired by set



theory, was a riff on Minimalism. It consisted of heavy chipboard rectangles soaked in crude oil and toned with graphite; these leaned against the wall.

Having some idea of what Flavin was up to and its possible effects on the space she had been assigned, Benglis decided to avoid color altogether. The components of her work were to be black. There would be plenty of color, she reasoned, primarily a greenish glow, emanating from the end of Flavin's tunnel. In fact, after she and Flavin saw each other at a New York opening prior to her making the Walker

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piece, she thought Flavin might be avoiding her, fearing that "I might give him a black eye or something," as she has told me, because he had usurped her assigned space by suffusing it with the greenish light. Benglis decided that she would make use of that tonality. The shadows cast by her poured units would, according to the principles of complementary color, take on a reddish cast, an idea she liked.

Benglis conceived her piece as nine sculptural "incidents," "three-dimensional brushstrokes," as she describes them, formed of a viscous polyurethane solution that hardened on being poured. The process of the piece's making would be its subject. There would be no drawings, she decided, characterizing the poured forms themselves as drawings. In my opinion her idea was perfect, and I encouraged her to proceed.

The next step was to order the industrial materials that would serve as the medium for the proposed work. Awaiting her when she arrived at the Walker were 20 large drums of the polyurethane mixture and sacks of black iron oxide powder to be incorporated in the brew, mixed to the right consistency in batches. The museum's new terrazzo floor was covered with heavy brown cardboard for protection.

The painter Bill Jensen had been in Minneapolis that year as a visiting artist at the University of Minnesota. Hearing of Benglis's need for an assistant, he got in touch with her, so he was on hand when she arrived. They had already discussed various means of supporting the polyurethane pours and settled on a system of wooden armatures. Aided by the Walker's crew, Jensen constructed nine T-shaped armatures of 1-by-2-inch strips of wood.



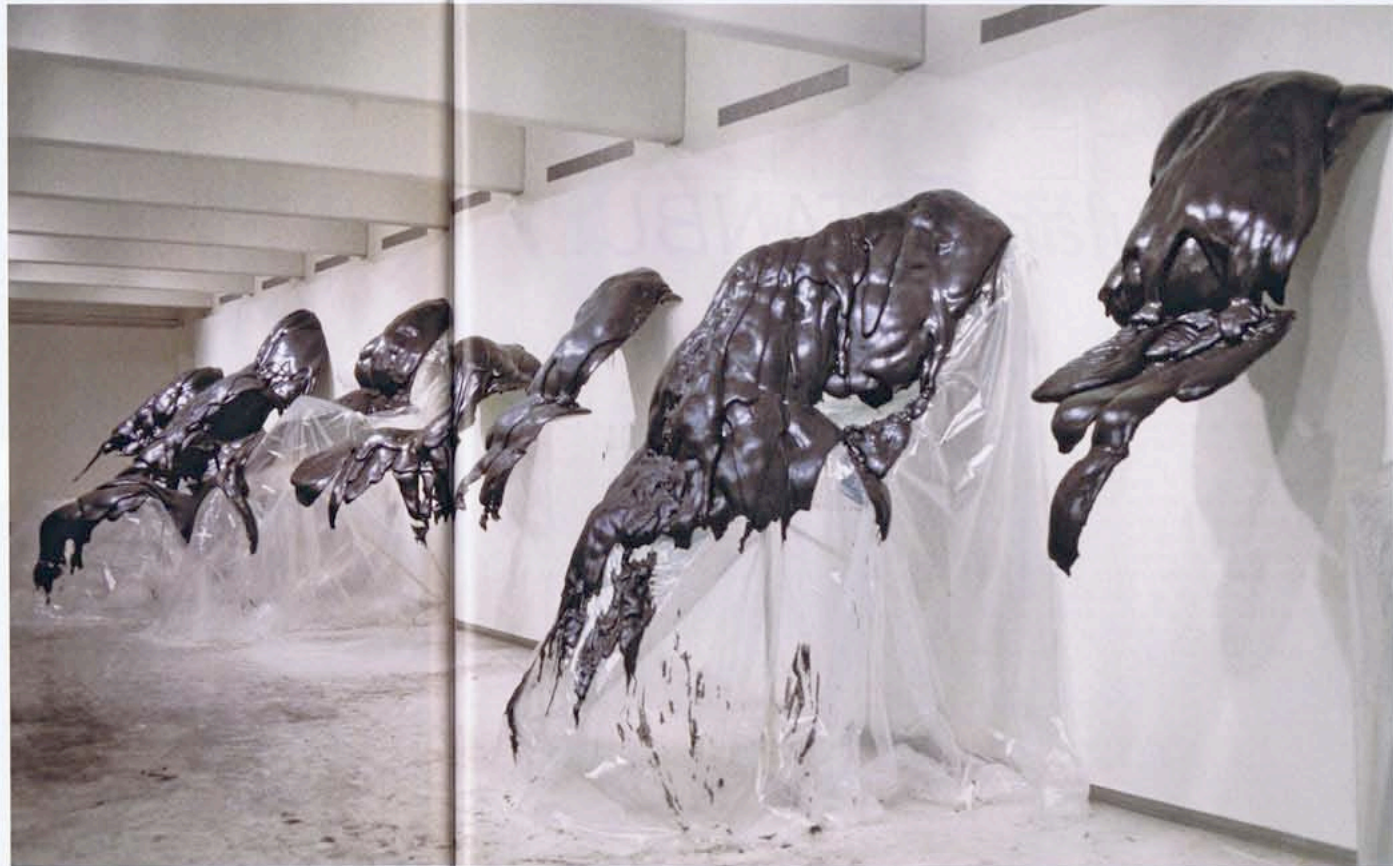
These were covered in chicken wire and draped with large sheets of plastic. As Jensen recently told me, these underpinnings for the poured pieces were deceptively simple in appearance and, because of the considerable weight they would have to bear, required lag-bolts, washers and other means of attaching them to the wall.

Once the forms had been affixed to the wall, some of them extending 5 or 6 feet into the room, Jensen joined Benglis in the pouring process. Because the translucent plastic was so thick, it was impossible to discern the underlying structure. The pouring was largely intuitive, he says. By occasionally lifting the plastic sheets and tilting them, Benglis was able to modify the flow.

When I visited the gallery a few days after work on the piece had begun, I found the slim, curly-haired Lynda, wearing a snoutlike protective mask, perched on a perilously high ladder, pouring bucketfuls of viscous mixture over the framework. Periodically she would climb down and step back to examine the results. Gravity and the hardening properties of the polyurethane took over. Sometimes she would add more polyurethane to an element or two on the following day. She was constantly balancing the piece, moving from one component to another. Despite the seeming randomness of shaping the work, there was logic behind its formation. "In making these pieces I turned myself inside out," she says. "I was the paint. I was the material itself." She adds, "These had to be more than the effects of simple gestures. They were about density, surface and form."

The fabrication went on for a week and a half. Each resulting unit differed from its neighbors in scale and positioning, and there was an undulating feeling to the entire piece—a rising and falling, a sense of continuum. When the armatures were removed, the effect was strongly improvisational and expressionistic. It was possible to walk not just around the elements but under some of them, so considerable was their overhang. They looked like something from a Japanese sci-fi movie—a line of monster insects, their proboscises pushing their way through pristine walls and into the gallery.

Rather than devise some exotic name that might touch on the mystery and wonderment of the piece, Benglis decided to call it *Adhesive Products*, after the company that supplied the material. It was a work of the moment that could never be reconstituted in precisely the same form, since chance was so much a part of it. Though she made other pieces like it, it was singular in its scale and effect and, once destroyed, was never re-created.



Right, view of *Adhesive Products* under construction.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN, director emeritus of the Walker Art Center, has lived and worked in New York since 1990, consulting with museums and writing about contemporary art. His latest book is *Close Reading: Chuck Close and the Artist's Portrait* (Abrams, 2005).

QUITE APART FROM SCI-FI associations, there was an urgency to the work, with its energy and tumultuous character. It captured the zeitgeist of the early '70s, a time of artistic as well as social rebellion. Like many innovative artists of her generation, Lynda eschewed making literal anti-war pieces, but the tension of the period permeated her work.

When, a few years ago in New York, Lynda and I reminisced about *Adhesive Products*, I confessed that I had been worried about whether the "Works for New Spaces" exhibition would even happen. Given the volatility of the times and suspicion of museums as symbols of the establishment, would the artists I invited stick with the

project? The effects of the 1969 March on Washington against the Vietnam War still resonated. The Walker, with its new building, could well be a target for protest. The war was on everyone's mind, and even if the participants in the show didn't choose to make their feelings the subject matter of their work, they could issue incendiary statements or take actions that would be far from helpful to the artistic project at hand.

Two artists in "Works for New Spaces," Robert Morris and Dan Flavin, had removed pieces from other exhibitions. Flavin, along with other American artists, had withdrawn from the 1970 Venice Biennale. Morris, protesting the American invasion of Cambodia, among other iniqui-

ties, insisted on closing his one-man exhibition at the Whitney that year. There were myriad organizations pressuring artists to force changes in museum policy. Would the Walker be next? I wondered.

So where was Lynda during all this? Not on the barricades. Tempted as she was to make revolution, she was at the beginning of her career. She chose work over protest.

Her piece for the Walker, *Adhesive Products*, may not have had much to do with the Vietnam War or other social issues, but it was revolutionary in its own way. Its scale, energy, originality of form and immediacy made it an icon, not only among her own works but also of the period. ◻