

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Linda Yablonsky, 'Playing Nice', *ArtForum*, April 11, 2014



Right: Artists Mickalene Thomas and Lynda Benglis with dealer Ludovica Barbieri. (All photos: Linda Yablonsky)

YOU KNOW IT'S SPRING in New York when the sea of black that describes the art world's rigorous dress code changes to color. "Red and racy" was the *mode d'access* last Tuesday night for the New Museum's annual benefit gala, which appeared to put the institution in the black. All the same, guests approaching Cipriani Wall Street were instantly outclassed by two gleaming red Ferraris sitting nose-to-nose on the sidewalk. (Ferrari was the evening's corporate sponsor.)

Loiterers Instagrammed the cars like mad. All of them were men. "Figures," said Massimiliano Gioni, the museum's associate director, joining the human red carpet going through the door. Inside the Greek Revival temple of lucre—the banquet hall was once the New York Stock Exchange—everyone admired everyone else's way with red: Yvonne Force Villareal in bright red lipstick and red dress; Judy Hudson in a luminous red wig; Donald Baechler in the red jacket he'd picked up for \$70 at a Banana Republic sale minutes before cocktail hour. "It's so much fun just standing here and looking at the people," Mary Heilmann said. "We don't even have to go in."

But we did go in, and all was glitter, glamour, and glory for the evening's honorees, Annabelle Selldorf and Lynda Benglis. Toasting, or rather roasting, Selldorf, Robert Gober and Donald Moffett performed a deadpan comedy act accompanied by slides. Speaking of a Selldorf-designed cabin in Nova Scotia accessible only by boat, Moffett said, "Picture two middle-aged gay guys from New York wilderness camping." Gober had the punch line. "It has all the conveniences of living on your own island," he said, "and none of the prestige." Not a dot of red on her, Selldorf confessed, "I felt so moved, but then I realized it was April Fools' Day." Nobody's fool was also in the room, namely Benglis. Gioni introduced her by bringing up the one thing that the seventy-two-year-old artist will never, ever live down: her naked, suck-my-you-know-what, double-dildo ad for herself in the November 1974 issue of *Artforum*. Weren't those the days! "It was huge," said Gioni. "Not the dildo—the ad." Directing his remarks to his museum's trustees, he added, "The lesson we all have to learn is that she did it, and we

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didn't. And she did it before anyone else. She took painting off the wall and put it on the floor. If only she had been a guy. It would have been much less intimidating."

At that, Benglis strode to the stage and proceeded to thank everyone—everyone at her table, that is—by promoting their friendship and services. In a dizzying, free-associated acceptance speech that rivaled Jodie Foster's 2013 Golden Globes address for its baffling opacity, Benglis went on a verbal tour of her life that began in the quarry lands of New Jersey—via Greece—with stops in Santa Fe, Long Island, and back again to her friend from New Jersey, a budding Tony Soprano who loves art. "Visit the quarry," Benglis commanded. "He'll give you contracts. But don't forget to bring your lawyers."

"Lynda Benglis!" bellowed former Phillips auction house chief Simon de Pury. "I loved your acceptance speech! It was the best ever—ever!" (Applause.) Departing from his occasional duties as a DJ, de Pury urged bids from the likes of Aby Rosen, Alberto Mugrabi, and Charlotte Ford for the live auction of two commissioned portraits, each to be painted from life by two artists who never paint from life—Alex Katz and Takashi Murakami—the latter of whom doesn't paint. Murakami pulled in the bigger bucks—\$350,000—from David Heller, vice president of the New Museum board. And then, as if none of this had been amusing enough, the gala's hosts—*W* magazine's editorial chief Stefano Tonchi and actress Greta Gerwig—brought on the entertainment. She was Lykke Li, a young Swedish pop star with a Bergmanesque demeanor, who rocked out for a crowd learning her name for the first time.

The following night, star curators substituted for the merely rich at Capitale, where Van Abbemuseum director Charles Esche received this year's Audrey Irmas Award from the Bard College Center for Curatorial Studies. "This is like last night's afterparty," Selldorf chortled, approaching the reception table with collector Catherine Orentreich, a gala veteran. Maja Hoffmann also bore the afterglow of happiness, having met Pharrell Williams at the MoCA gala in Los Angeles a few days earlier. "He was so nice!" she said.

Everyone is so nice these days. Isn't it grand? Lauren Cornell was so nice to Bard CCS director Tom Eccles that it made her nervous: Before presenting the Irmas award to Esche, a slip of the tongue caused her to describe Eccles as "sexsucksful," underscoring Bard's reputation as "the Wild West of the humanities," as Eccles put it. Eccles then commanded the bully pulpit to call for women museum directors and curators to be paid equally to men. Esche had to follow this. He began in a humble enough fashion, expressing surprise that anyone would come to a dinner honoring someone who has never worked in New York. After that he took off the gloves, lambasting his colleagues for creating their own fiefdoms instead of community, and not building on each other's work. "What we do isn't about art but its relationship to the world," he said, venting his frustration over curatorial hegemonies that neglect the social function of art or cave to the popular.

Talk about never eating lunch in this town again. Heated conversation followed at tables around the room. "He's being unnecessarily adversarial," said Fionn Meade. "It's not about art versus commerce, or us and them." Another wag (an artist) dismissed the whole thing as "institutional narcissism." It was left to Bard president Leon Botstein to right the ship. "Can art ever really change the way we live?" he asked. "Art is a space where we can reimagine society. But nothing we do is so important that if we stopped doing it, anything would be different."

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The following night it was back to the business of art. Adam Lindemann's Venus Over Manhattan gallery showed the whole sweep of Raymond Pettibon's "surfer" paintings, and Larry Gagorian opened pop-up shows for Urs Fischer in opposite ends of town. Adam Pendleton took up the art-as-social-revolution mantle in his bang-up show of silk-screened black mirrors at Pace, LA's favorite son Roy Dowell animated Lennon Weinberg with collaged paintings and sculptures that brightened every eye in the place, and Nate Lowman parted the social seas at Maccarone with expert, new cutaway paintings in sweet, springtime pastels. Nice! Before heading to Maccarone's boisterous dinner for him at her Chinatown walkup, there was just enough time to check out the Fischer exhibition on Delancey Street, where bronze casts of the clay sculptures from his retrospective last year at LA MoCA were on show amid the counters and offices of a recently abandoned branch of Chase Bank. Dan Colen skateboarded to dinner; Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn took a chauffeured car. Artists Jack Pierson and Rob Pruitt broke bread together, Stella Schnabel paired off with Mirabelle Marden, Arden Wohl climbed into Hanna Liden's lap, and the party went late.

The 1980s came a-calling on Friday, when the return of Colab's seminal "Real Estate Show" brought a Lower East Side that no longer exists to James Fuentes. The decade showed its face once more on Saturday—along with the '70s, '90s, and '00s—for a bracing sale at Metro Pictures and Paula Cooper to raise money for endowed scholarships and the new John Baldessari Studio at the California Institute of the Arts. (The sale, a first for the school, began in February at LA's Regen Projects and will continue next month with an auction at Christie's.)

Have any other art schools turned out as many Conceptual artists? Wrangled by Tony Oursler to make donations that former REDCAT director Clara Kim curated for the sale, many (including Allen Ruppersberg, Liz Glynn, and B. Wurtz) showed up for the opening reception, following New Barbarian from one gallery to the other as the four-person collective sang a chorale in silver robes and wigs.

Mostly, though, the evening was full of reminiscence. Oursler fondly recalled a 1976 visit from Philip Glass while John Cage was in residence. Josephine Meckseper remembered Michael Asher's "weird laugh." In the '80s, said Adam McEwen, "I heard that someone had taught a class in joint-rolling," and surely many moods have been altered under the fluorescent tubes of the storied institution's classrooms. But teaching at CalArts changed not just Pat Steir's mood but her life. While a guest of Bruce Nauman's in the early '70s, she said, she met Sol LeWitt—and the two lived together for the next ten years. "Funny how things have changed," said Thomas Lawson, CalArt's dean for the past twenty-three years. "Now we're going to have a studio building named for the school's first post-studio artist."

But he was just being nice.

<http://www.artforum.com/diary/id=46211>