

LOOKING LONG AND HARD

GROW-A-PECKER
JUST ADD WATER!

Amaze Your Friends!

Watch It Grow 100 Times Its Size!

AFTER 24 HOURS

AFTER 8 HOURS

AFTER 4 HOURS

NON-TOXIC
NON-EDIBLE

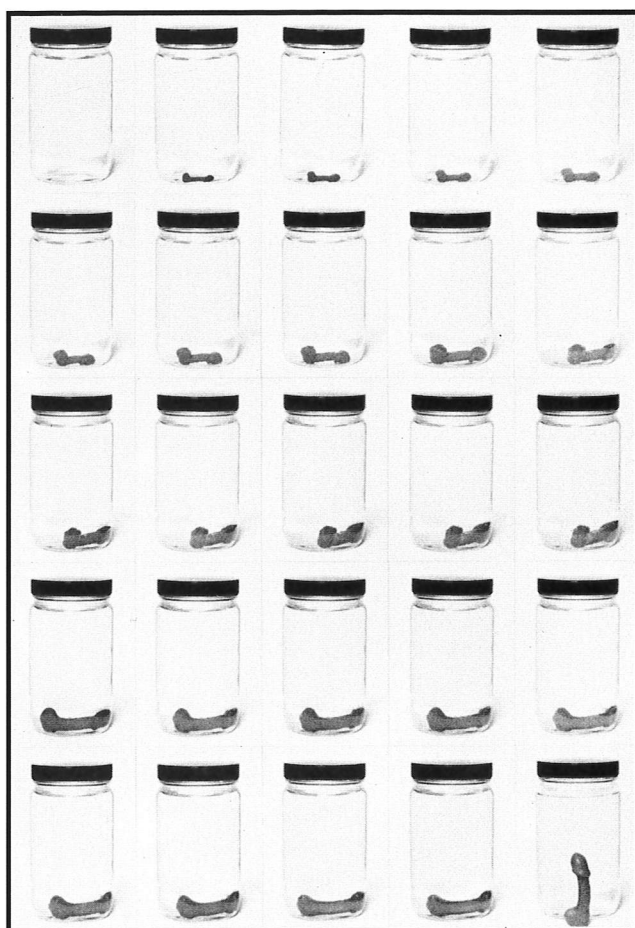
NOT RECOMMENDED FOR CHILDREN

IT'S MAGIC!

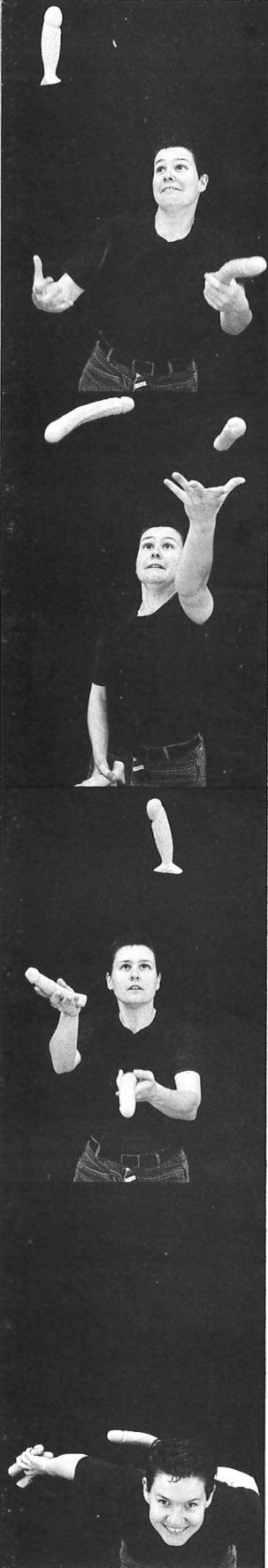
IT'S MAGIC!

INSTRUCTIONS: Put GROW-A-PECKER in a jar, bowl or bottle. It will grow within a few hours. Remove water and it will shrink to its original size. Can be used again and again.

A HOLLYWOOD CREATION MADE IN TAIWAN



PHOTOGRAPHS BY LISS PLATT



Looking Long and Hard is an installation containing forty-six black and white photographs of dildos and penis-shaped novelty items. In a romp through art and photo history, these penis substitutes are subjected to a multitude of compromising situations. Welcome to my playground.

The images in the installation are grouped into five categories: 17th Century Still-Life, Advertising/Product photography, High Modernist photography, Trick photography, and Structuralist photography. The series based on 17th Century Still-Life painting contains seven prints of various sizes hung salon style. These photo tableaux mimic common themes of the genre: Abundance, Vanitas, and Attributes of Science. The seven images that parody Advertising/Product photography highly aestheticize and beautify crude gag gifts by mirroring them against a reflective black surface. The series subtitled 'The Thing Itself' plays off the formalism of High Modernist photography. It is comprised of ten photographs of penis-shaped candles in various states of detumescence. In the Trick section, trick photography is literalized in the representation of magic tricks: dildos are juggled, levitated, and sawed in half. Finally, Structuralist photography's science-like scrutiny is employed to watch a 'pecker grow'.

Issues I've explored in earlier works provide context for this piece. Through both photography and video I have examined the construction and representation of gender in biological, psychological, and photographic discourses. My interest has been in subverting discourses that

authorize fixed subject positions for women. I see *Looking Long and Hard* as an outgrowth of these concerns. Although this piece shares a strong deconstructive approach with my earlier work, it abandons the contemplative tone and takes an aggressive, even cocky, stance.

Looking Long and Hard has three basic aims. First, it examines the power inherent in representation: who gets to represent and how representation constructs particular subjectivities. Second, the piece parodies the conventions of art history to subvert and demystify this privileged site of representation. Third, it provides me with a space to play out my transgressive desires and to take up new positions of power.

A representation stands in for - in fact, replaces - the original object, causing the original to lose currency. We can think of the actual dildo as a representation - it substitutes for the penis. In many ways this representation is an improvement over the real. Dildos come in an assortment of colors, shapes, sizes, and textures. They're always ready for action. Perhaps most importantly, they aren't attached to any *body*, which makes them available to *anybody*.





All that can be swallowed, sucked, drunk, or chewed finds grace within the still-life.

- Pierre Skira

Still-Life: A History

But why photograph the dildos? The act of representation is an act of power. Historically, it has been a patriarchal privilege. Through the conflation of the penis and the phallus (power), the implication has been that one needs a penis to represent. In a literalizing move, I supply the requisite penis. But it is significant that I supply it in the form of the dildo substitute - for this is a penis that I (and my female viewers) can actually possess. This gesture is an attempt to denaturalize gender: to transcend anatomy as the marker of power.

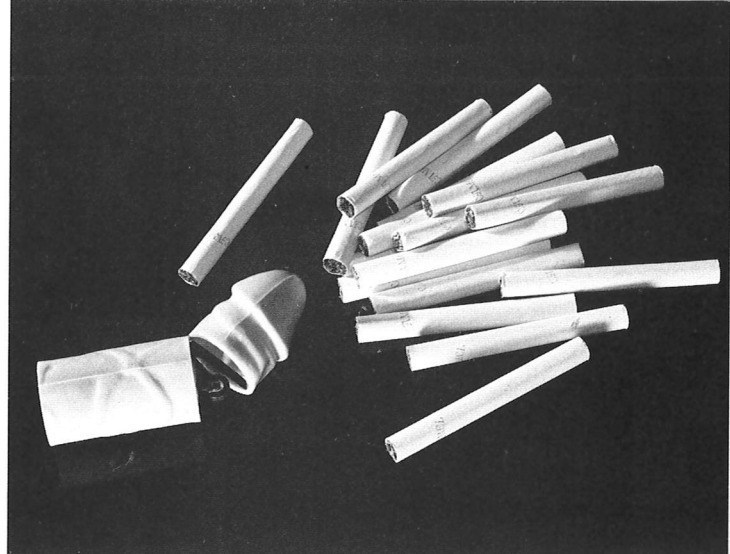
While it is the dildo/penis in the photographs that allows me to represent, at the same time it becomes the object of my gaze. As an artist and photographer, it follows that the gazes I assume come from the history of art and photography. But my sense of exclusion from that history, as a woman and a lesbian, manifests itself in an irreverent stance. There is a playful absurdity in placing the dildo/penis everywhere, in every representation - a joyous indulgence in excess. There is also a mischievous pleasure in treating vulgar sex toys

as revered art objects. The high degree of aestheticization common to all the images glorifies the object while poking fun at its historical configuration. The object glorified is the dildo, which invokes, but ultimately replaces, the penis. Thus, my attempt is to elevate the dildo at the expense of the penis.

Each art historical mode I have chosen offers a specific site of mocking intervention.

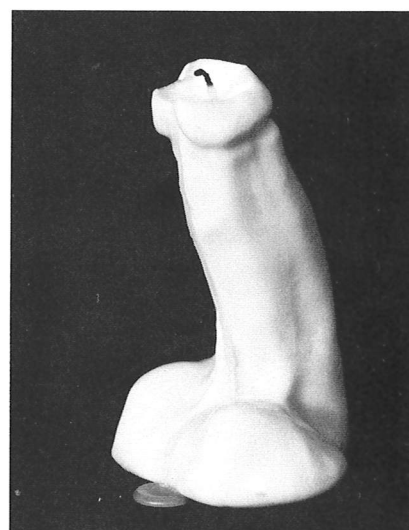
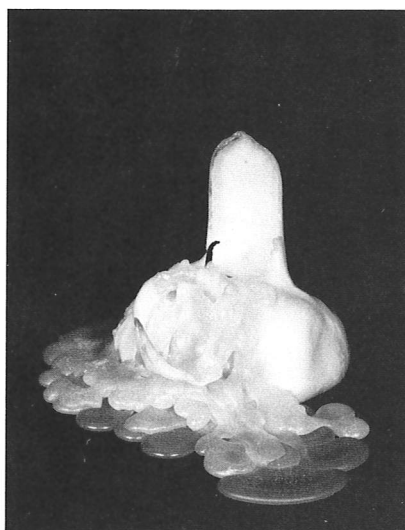
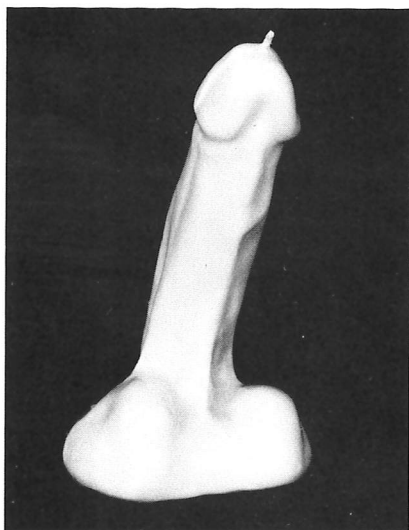
The series based on 17th Century Still-Life painting invokes the bourgeois practice of recording and displaying one's possessions. The bourgeois were motivated by a desire to place on view the trappings of their recently acquired class. The objects selected for the painting - luscious and rare commodities - therefore function as allegorical portraits of the values, morals, and social status of their patrons: predominately Western European men. To install the dildo within this tradition is to uncover the penis implicit in these representations. But a dildo can be purchased. Thus, these photographs also posit gender as a class, with ownership a matter of buying power rather than birth-right.

While Still-Life painting showed what the owner was



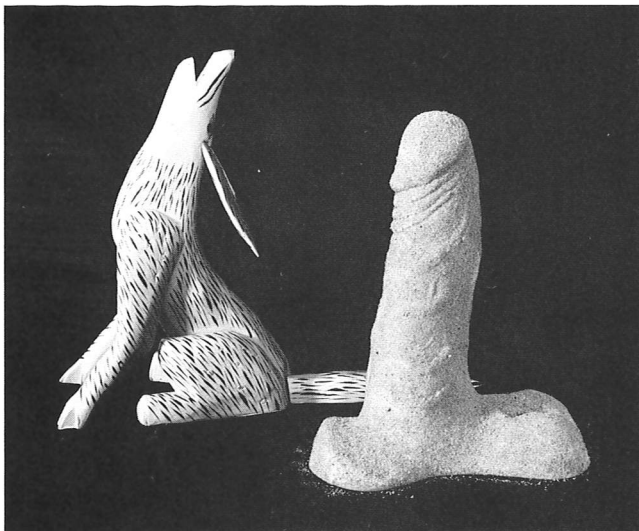
already enjoying, advertising images show what one *could* enjoy. The products sold in advertisements are often represented phallically through narrative and composition. The product photography series parodies the way this creates desire. In my photographs I supply literal penis substitutes, in the form of novelty items, to compete with the symbolic penises already present. It literalizes the assumption that the penis is the root of all *lack*, while it offers up a substitute as the product to satisfy that ultimate desire.

The Thing Itself



A glorification of 'product' is paralleled in High Modernist photography's celebration of 'objectness' and form. The candle series, 'The Thing Itself', is prototypical Modernist photography and a direct reference to Edward Weston's photographs as well as the ruminations in his daybooks. Here the title is used ironically, because the power of Weston's toilets, peppers, and nudes is derived from the symbolic transformation they purport to deny. In this way, I expose that the 'Thing Itself' is not the penis but the power conferred on it. My candles intentionally demystify Weston's formalism by insisting on content. Although stylized and aestheticized, there is something pathetic in the way they perform their detumescence and collapse all over themselves.

The trick section is also about performance, for magic tricks are about the performance of illusion. But illusion is doubled up and literalized in these images: trick photography is employed to represent magic tricks. Thus, these are the most unnatural representations. They speak most clearly to the denaturalization at play in *all* the work. Here I substitute the dildo/penis for the objectified woman. It gets levitated and sawed in half.



Through a sleight of hand, I reverse the roles and become the magician.

The aim of Structuralist photography is to image an object through a process. It privileges representation as a way of knowing and quantifying. In this series, I turn my lens towards a growing 'pecker'. Not only do I see how it grows, but I grow my own.

While my objective is to parody these art and photo historical conventions, my images, nonetheless, end up with the look and feel of high Modernist Photography. I was trained and indoctrinated in photography through this tradition. It *was* photography. Thus, the photographs in *Looking Long and Hard* reflect my desire to take up the position of my predecessors, to be a part of that history. I've always taken pleasure in the way high Modernist photography *looks* - the fine grain, luscious tonal range, and the detail. I, too, want to make gorgeous pictures for photo connoisseurs to drool over. But when a female photographer, and a (barely) butch lesbian at that, tries to insert herself in Modernism, why do the photographs look this way? The images are not quite right. They're too self-conscious. They're polluted by my penis substitute. It is impossible for me to completely *become* a Modernist photographer. My attempt to do so, my mimicry, becomes a performance.



This performative aspect is important. I see my 'butchness' (my slicked back, close-cropped hair, policeman's shoes, and can-do attitude) as a performance of power socially coded as male. These photographs function as an extension of that. The dildos are part of my costume - the phallus I need to transform my camera into a cock. This affords me the pleasure of transgressing the role of the lesbian feminist artist by playing the master. I get a piece of the action. I get to access the gaze. I get to control and aestheticize.

But what does it mean to aestheticize a crude sex object? Aestheticizing the dildo takes the sex out of it.

In the process, it sexualizes me as the image-maker by begging the question - 'what kind of woman has so many sex toys'. There is a certain pleasure in having what I'm not supposed to have: a collection of dildos. But it's not just having the dildos that offers transgressive pleasure, it's the particular use I've put them to. At the same time, I'm a bit uneasy with these transgressions. I've always tried to be a good girl (as much as a butch dyke could be). Perhaps that's another reason why I don't dress up *in* a dildo, I dress *it* up, beautifully.

