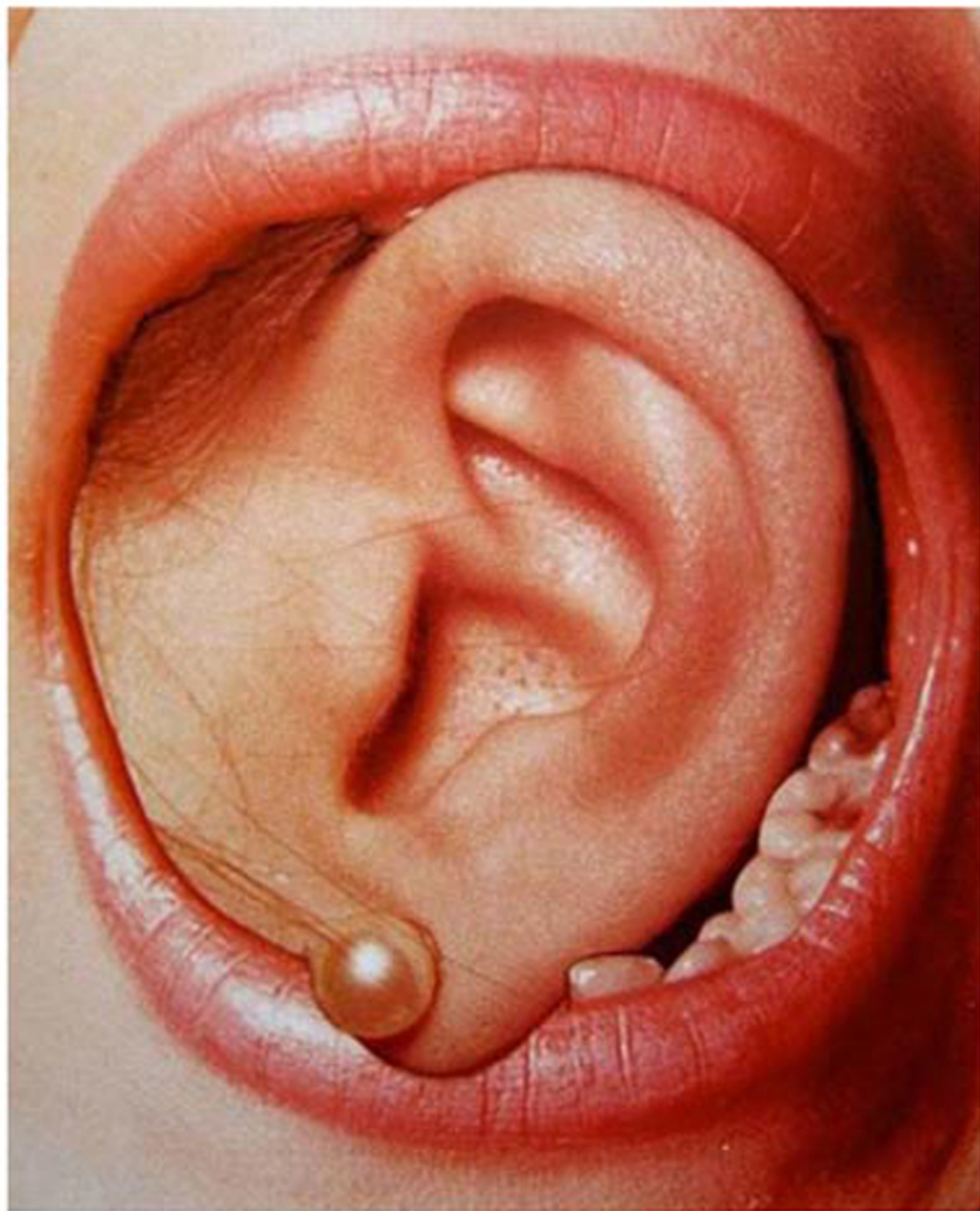


frieze

Penelope Slinger

Riflemaker, London, UK



Penelope Slinger *I Speak What I See*, 1973

If you have never heard of Penelope Slinger, you're forgiven: her last solo exhibition in the UK was nearly 40 years ago. In 1969, when she was 21 and fresh from a diploma at Chelsea College, several of her '3D objects' were included in the group exhibition 'Young and Fantastic' at the ICA, alongside artists like Clive Barker, who presented his sculpture *Homage to Magritte* (1968). Slinger also appropriated the iconography of Surrealism and, over the next ten years, she gained critical attention for her provocative collage books. There were two major exhibitions of her

work at Angela Flowers Gallery, the second of which, in 1973, was the subject of an article by Laura Mulvey in the feminist magazine *Spare Rib* celebrating the artist's 'graphic images of phantasy which only a woman could have produced'. Yet when Slinger left the UK in 1979 – heading first to New York and then later to the Caribbean, where she made paintings about the ancient Arawak culture – she fell into relative obscurity. It was 30 years before she was 'rediscovered', when she was included in two major group exhibitions in the autumn of 2009: 'Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism' at Manchester Art Gallery and 'The Dark Monarch: Magic and Modernity in British Art' at Tate St Ives. Only now is she enjoying a renaissance of her own: her solo exhibition at Riflemaker, titled 'Hear What I Say (1971–1977)', ran concurrently with a second, 'An Exorcism Revisited', at Broadway 1602 in New York.

Seventeen photographic collages and 11 sculptures were spread across two floors, with some of the more provocative works hung downstairs, although the division was subtle, since Slinger's naked, nubile body features recurrently. The politics of eroticism courses through them all. Take the collage *Giving You Lip* (1973), which is as punchy as the title suggests: a seductive open mouth, the hallmark of the femme fatale (and complete with Marilyn mole), has been cut-and-pasted to reveal a recess of further mouths within, closing in on a central pout. It should be enticing – a pair of lips puckering towards a kiss, caught in split-second frames – yet the image is horrific, a mouth that seems to be suffocated by mouths, an orifice choked by all the projected fantasies of the onlooker. The work belongs to a series of collages made that year, including *I Hear What You Say* (used to great effect for the catalogue cover), which comprises a delicate ear positioned within an open mouth, a pearl-studded lobe overlapping the lower lip like the tip of a tongue. These are pithy works in which the scoured line to the lips – a remnant of the razor blade – reminds the viewer that Slinger can bite.

The puns are more laboured in the sculptural works, such as *Key-Chained* (1973), which has chains hanging from a mannequin's head like Cleopatra braids, while a small key is glued to her lips. Slinger's imagination seems to have worked best in photo-collages, which could remain porous to her filmic influences. A participant in the all-women theatre group *Holocaust*, and the art director for Jane Arden's film *The Other Side of the Underneath* (1972), she was also the partner of filmmaker Peter Whitehead, who published her books. The second of these, *An Exorcism* (1977), was represented here in a number of works that show how Slinger used Max Ernst's great photo-romances, such as *La femme 100 têtes* (*Woman with 100 Heads*, 1929), to model her own *mise-en-scène*, which she staged in the abandoned mansion Lilford Hall, using the stately architecture as a foil for her physique in the manner of early female Surrealists like Claude Cahun. These are oneiric images that are best seen, as intended, in a cascade of illustrated pages. However, when mounted on the wall, they become historical objects that give

a more vivid sense of the moment when, as Mulvey recognized, artists like Slinger used sexuality 'not just to portray its conventional surface but to express the hidden desires and fears which warp and govern it'.

Eleanor Nairne