

SPEARS

Article of the Week



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Penny Slinger, Judy Chicago and Feminist Art Today

Anthony Haden-Guest, Tuesday, 20th November 2012



Two recent exhibitions prompt Anthony Haden-Guest to reflect on the extent to which female artists both have and have not become more prominent in our lifetime

A GENERATION AGO, successful women artists — that is to say artists who had strong dealers, were collected and seriously reviewed — were rare birds. And it may just be darkly coincidental, though some believe institutional stress played a part, that many of the more formidably gifted among them — Eva Hesse, Pauline Boty, Yayoi Kusama, Hannah Wilke, Ana Mendieta and Lee Lozano to name a few — fell prey to cancers and other physical and psychological

troubles, or otherwise had their careers prematurely curtailed.

But now? Flip open any shiny international art magazine, rifle through to where shows are reviewed and advertised, and you are likely to see almost as many woman artists as men. It's not level-pegging, but it's getting there.

So there's been a fundamental change? Case closed? Not exactly.

An occasion to examine this issue has been provided by a London gallery with a spirited and edgy programme, Rifleman on Beak Street, Soho. Rifleman, so-called because it still looks a bit like the gun shop it once was, is co-owned by Virginia Damtsa and Tot Taylor and has held recent shows of a couple women artists. Penny Slinger and Judy Chicago both came to (lots of) attention in the 1970s for the unapologetic femaleness of their work, but they are otherwise extremely different.

It so happens that I knew Slinger back in the day. She was a Surrey girl who first made her presence felt in London 1971 with 50% The Visible Woman, a book of collage poems in which she used the language of Surrealism for a few-holds-barred exploration of female erotic fantasy. It was applauded by Rosie Boycott's magazine, Spare Rib, and by such trenchant critics as the late Peter Fuller.

Slinger was soon a noticeable figure in those bygone days of Swinging London. It was a time at once given to radical gestures and possessed by an optimistic insouciance, and it seemed characteristic that Slinger should have presented a writer with a copy of Visible Woman with a curly wisp of black body hair taped beneath her name on the title page, like a carnation on a lapel.

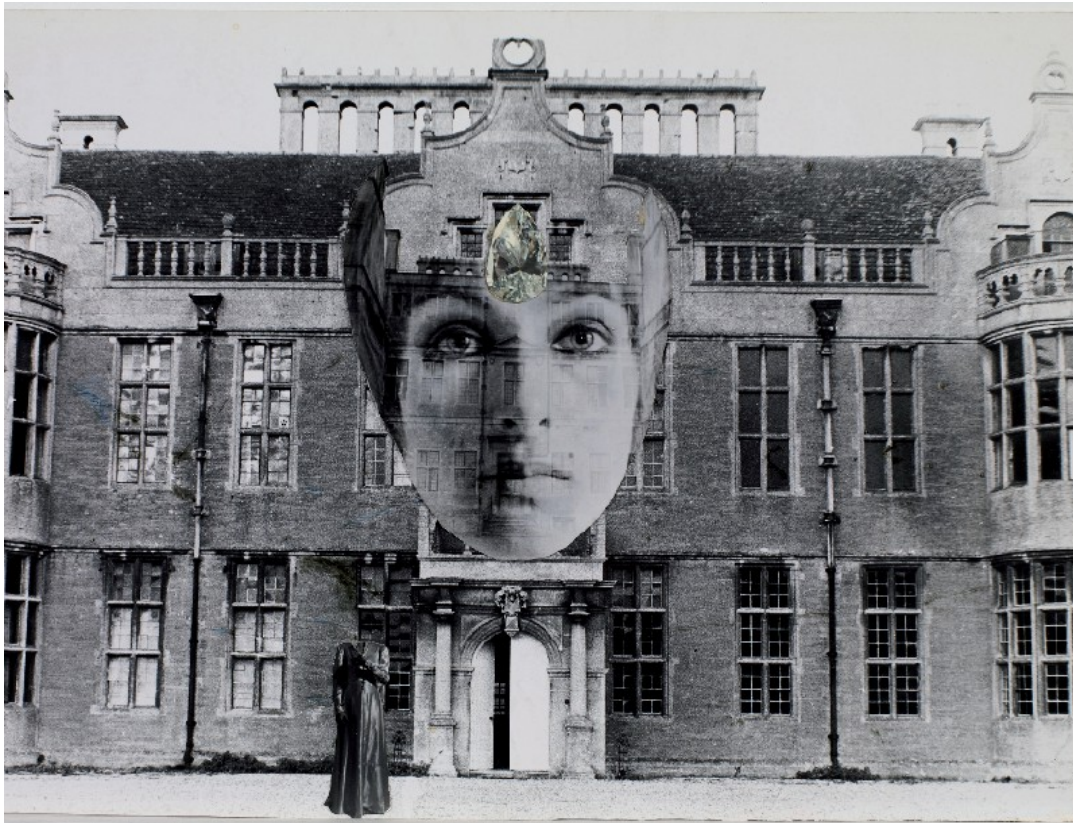
Slinger drew her parents naked when she was three or four. 'And that was kind of an omen for how my work would be received by my parents for the rest of my life,' she says. 'Because I did this very accomplished drawing for my age, so they were very proud of it. But at the same time it did show them naked and fully endowed, so therefore it was very embarrassing for them.'

Five years later, taking up a dare from her schoolmates, she waved a sanitary napkin out of the window of a convent school bus. She was seriously reprimanded for sinfulness, a concept with which she had

little familiarity at nine. A few naughtinesses later, the Mother Superior decreed that she should finish her schooling elsewhere.

Fast forward to 1969. At art college Slinger focused on Surrealism, in particular the collages of Max Ernst, which were to have a formative influence on her adult work. She treats the female body without soft-core accommodations to the traditional male gaze, but in a way that is both starkly up-front and symbol-heavy, as if in a dream.

Then Slinger discovered Tantric art at a show at the Hayward Gallery, and her eroticism became infused with mysticism. *Sexual Secrets*, a work of 1979 which she produced with Nik Douglas and for which she made 900 drawings, sold a million copies. She and Douglas moved to the Caribbean, and Slinger later relocated to Southern California.



Penny Slinger's photographic collage *Self-Image* (1977).

[Read more by Anthony Haden-Guest](#)[Read more about why art by women still sells for less](#) **JUDY CHICAGO WAS** born into a political family in Chicago and took the name of her hometown after the deaths of her father and her first husband. She went to Los Angeles to become an artist. 'By the early 1960s I was exhibiting in

the burgeoning LA art scene,' Chicago says. 'But I came right up against all the reactionary sexist stuff. I was told over and over that you can't be a woman and an artist, too. So for the first ten years, I excised my work of any content or imagery that would make it clear that I was a woman artist.'

Chicago did well within these constraints, in part by making constrained art. She had work in *Primary Structures*, the 1966 show at the Jewish Museum which established the power and significance of Minimalism in art, so she seemed set. Then she chucked it.



Chicago's Bigamy Hood (1965/2011), sprayed on a car bonnet

'I hung out with the guys, but after a decade of it I just got sick and tired of it,' Chicago says. 'And I decided that I just wanted to be able to be myself as an artist. But I didn't know how, because I had disconnected myself from my early impulses. At the time I was tremendously anxious about it and I felt that I couldn't do it in LA, because that was my community, as marginal as I was.'

Chicago went to teach in Fresno, California, where she coined the

phrase 'feminist art'. In 1974 she began work on what would be her most famous piece, *The Dinner Party*. Over five years this would evolve into a triangular table, with 39 places set for women chosen from myth or history, the shape being a reference both to a woman's sex and to the notion of equality.

The Dinner Party is represented by some Anglo-specific pieces at Riflemaker. 'Like a dinner party set place and runner drawings for Mary Wollstonecraft,' Chicago says. 'And a glass piece called *Mary, Queen of Scots*, which is a re-interpretation of a work from the early Seventies. And two out of a series that were actually inspired by a tree in Hampstead Heath.'



Judy Chicago's *Mary Wollstonecraft Placesetting* from *The Dinner Party* (1974-79)

IT IS TERRIFIC to see the work of Slinger and Chicago forefronted, because it is so thought-provoking, especially about the evolving state of play in the war (or not, as the case may be) between men and women, particularly as reflected in the art world. My certain memory is that the art world was more relaxed than the social jungle at large, which resonated with dumb jokes about bra-burners and underarm hair. It was the world of art that gave us such unshrinking violets as Carolee Schneemann, creator of Meat Joy, and Valie Export, whose best-known work was Genital Panic.

Slinger, then London-based, was inclined to agree. Not so Chicago. Recalling the LA art world, she says: 'It was not a hospitable environment for women. I remember in 1970 or '71, when I had started the first feminist art programme in Fresno, and my students and I did a presentation at the University of Berkeley. And some guy got so freaked out that he jumped up on the stage and started to pummel the girls.

Maybe it was not so visible to people that were not involved in it directly, but there was a lot of hostility. And there was a lot of — for me personally — anxiety in challenging the art scene and the art community where, despite the obstacles, I had made somewhat a place for myself.'

And now? Surely the war is over? Not so, thinks Chicago.

'It can appear as if everything has changed and that we have really achieved the post-feminist heaven because there's no question that there are many more women exhibiting all over. But by and large, it's all entry-level. If you look at the statistics at the top, which is where, of course, art history is controlled — that is major exhibitions, permanent collections and monographs — there's been almost no change whatsoever.'

So it's Cindy Sherman and Zaha Hadid, and that's it?

'Right. That's absolutely right.' [Read more by Anthony Haden-Guest](#)

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