

Another Gaze



By [Sophia Satchell Baeza Essays, Portrait of a Filmmaker](#) June 26, 2019

The Visible Woman: In Conversation With Penny Slinger

Penny Slinger is a British-born multimedia artist, whose dynamic body of work weaves together elements of eroticism, feminism, spirituality and surrealism. Working predominantly across the mediums of collage, performance, sculpture and film, Slinger dredges up imagery from the murky depths of the subconscious. Her practice is wide-ranging and often hard to pin down, though common motifs thread through it – masks, eyes, mouths, birds, and empty, abandoned houses. Slinger’s images of spatial enclosure – her dolls houses, ‘Head Boxes’, and collages set

in derelict country estates – evoke the psychic spaces of the unconscious. Often hidden under lock and key, these places are pregnant with interpretative possibility. In the mid ‘70s Laura Mulvey would hail Slinger’s art as showing people “how powerfully a woman is able to transform Surrealism.”¹

Slinger started directing short experimental films in the late ‘60s. Some of these early works document performances and installations, explore bodily rhythms and movement, or animate her collages using time-lapse photography. Others emerge from intimate collaborations with friends and lovers, like the haunting and unfinished *Lilford Hall* (1969), made with her then-partner, filmmaker and falconer Peter Whitehead, and her creative alliance with Jane Arden, the Welsh playwright, actor and director. In 1970, Slinger joined the radical feminist theatre group Holocaust, founded by Arden and Sheila Allen. With Holocaust, Slinger co-created ‘A New Communion for Freaks, Prophets and Witches’ (1971), a collaborative piece of theatre that aimed to explore women’s oppression and the feminine psyche under patriarchy. The following year Slinger would star in Arden’s controversial film, *The Other Side of the Underneath* (1972). Pushed to “the limits of psychic disintegration” following the emotional fallout from the film, Slinger began working on *An Exorcism* (1977), a widely celebrated series of collages rich in archetype, dream imagery and eroticism.² Like Carolee Schneemann and other pioneers of feminist body art, Slinger uses her naked body to unmoor female sexuality and desire from the twin forces of repression and oppression.

Out of the Shadows, a recent documentary by writer-director Richard Kovitch, sheds light on Slinger’s important contributions to the London art scene of the ‘60s and ‘70s, and to feminist art more broadly, while movingly and systematically tracing the series of events that led to the making of *An Exorcism*. [The film will screen at London’s ICA on 29 June](#), followed by a Q&A with Slinger and Kovitch. *Out of the Shadows* will also be showing around the UK throughout

July. The exhibition, *Penny Slinger: Tantric Transformations*, [which opens at Richard Saltoun Gallery](#) also on **29 June**, focuses on the artist's long-standing interest in Tantra.

This interview took place in March 2016 and again in June 2019. A longer version will appear in the third issue of *Another Gaze*, out next month.

Another Gaze: In a sense, your new exhibition picks up where *Out of the Shadows* left off: with your interest in Tantra. How were you first introduced to Tantric art, and what impact did this have on your practice, and overall outlook?

Penny Slinger: My first introduction was at an exhibition called 'Tantra' at the Hayward Gallery in 1971. The show was a total eye-opener for me. It was at a time when I was thinking "where do I fit into art now?" Surrealism, which I loved, was no longer an active movement, so I felt I could no longer access the participation and exchange with other artists that one could have got at the heyday of Surrealism. There weren't really any movements that I could identify with. When I went to this exhibition, it was as if I'd come home. I felt that sense of recognition, of feeling such a resonance with the imagery, which seemed to come directly from Surrealism. All of this just felt so familiar, and yet it was a world I didn't know anything about. It also made me understand abstraction for the first time. I'd never really been able to get a handle on abstraction because all the people at art school who were making abstract art never seemed to have a good reason for it.

In the exhibition, I stood in front of this Yantra, this mystic diagram, and it was five downward pointing triangles with a dot in the middle and a symbolic lotus around the edge. It was just called 'To Her'. Looking at this, I felt like I gained an understanding of this homage to goddess energy. This seemed to me to be the evolution of Surrealism, and the direction I wanted to explore. Surrealism dealt so much with the subconscious and the unconscious but Tantra seemed to be dealing with the higher roles and the super-conscious. It took years for me to find someone

who would have experience in this realm of Tantra, and who would know about the art and philosophy.



Penny as Shakti, 1976. Photo by Nik Douglas.

One day Jane Arden told me, “You must meet Nik Douglas, he’s the only liberated man!” It took a while to meet Nik but when I did it was as if all the pieces fell into place. Nik had a guru, was skilled in all kinds of yoga, had been living in India, and knew Sanskrit and Tibetan. This is what I’d been waiting for. I started to tell him experiences I’d had that I didn’t really have any frame of reference for. It was as if I now had a way of joining the dots and connecting to the lineage of an experiential tradition outside any of the religious forms. I was looking for something that integrated my spiritual path with my secular path, my senses with my understanding of spirit. When I met Nik we got together, and that relationship lasted 20 years. Several books and art

came out of that connection and collaboration. I was so excited to come out of the dark confines of psychological exploration into this Technicolor world.

AG: How did Tantra intersect with your evolving exploration of female sexuality?

PS: For me this was the saving grace! Tantra is very female-centric. We were no longer stuck with the idea of a subservient feminine, but were actually offered the idea of an active feminine principle, which was like an energy that lived inside both men and women. It went beyond sexual dualism. The symbolism of Tantra focused on the union of Shiva and Shakti, the male and female principles. It seemed to completely transcend the binary system of gender we were stuck with in the west. Tantra means to expand and to weave, so you could weave together all the threads of existence, all the material-physical aspects as well as the more celestial-mystical aspects into one fabric. There was nothing that you had to deny or avoid. For me, this felt like the key to resolving the ultimate guilt and shame around sexuality and to seeing it as all part of one path in life.

I wanted to share that with others, which is how *Sexual Secrets* (1979), a book that Nik Douglas and I made, came about. Modern Tantrikas have really grabbed onto the sexual side, at the loss of the rest that Tantra has to offer. Really, Tantra embraces everything and doesn't deny anything. It provides all the tools for being a fully realised being who can live out their full potential. That's why I so willingly embraced it and spent many years studying it, practicing it and trying to embody it in many ways in my art and life.

AG: You first came to filmmaking at art school. What was it about the medium in that period that attracted you?

PS: I've always considered myself a multimedia artist. I had this speech impediment that made me shy so doing performing arts was a way of dealing with that head-on, and expressing myself was an important part of my self-healing too. But I'd been a lot more inspired in a sense by many

of the films I saw coming up in the '60s and '70s, when I was often at the BFI and was watching a lot of Surrealist films and new types of filmmaking. I found film more inspirational than a lot of work coming out of the other plastic arts. Film seemed to me a good way of incorporating a lot of other art forms under one umbrella. There wasn't a film camera at Chelsea Art School, so I borrowed the 16mm camera from the Technology Institute over the road. When I left Chelsea, I got into the Royal College of Art's film course. I didn't take up the appointment because I met Peter Whitehead and started making films with him instead.

AG: You expressed in *Out of the Shadows* the fact that you “wanted to be my own muse”. How have you gone about that in your work?

PS: This all came from when I was at art school, studying the history of art and looking around at the general climate in the art world. I did feel from a young age that I was meant to be this very famous artist! Woman has always been present throughout the history of art, very often unclothed, and always as the muse. This muse is usually depicted through the eyes of a male artist. The presence of female artists is so minimal throughout the entire history of art. I made a decision right then not to settle for this. I want to be my own muse and I want to be on both sides of the equation! I'm going to be the one who creates the art and the one who inspires the art. A lot of the images in my book *50% the Visible Woman* (1971)³ focus on how woman is seen in society and throughout artistic institutions. I made that one of my primary studies when I came out as an artist.

AG: How did you come to meet Jane Arden?

PS: When I was a student at Chelsea, I had a close friend called Liz Danciger. I got to be friends with her because in our school year composed of roughly 60 students we were the only ones putting our hands up – the only ones with something to say. After I left art school I was trying to see where I fitted in. Liz came to me one day and said, “You know there's this meeting Jane

Arden is going to be having about a women's theatre group." I'd been to these Women's Lib meetings and not felt attracted [by them]. I didn't feel it was my thing because it wasn't embodied enough. It wasn't sexy. It was very dry, and it was too intellectual. I said, "Okay, I'll come with you." When Jane started speaking it was like a different language. This was a language I could respond to. It was visceral. It was very much about doing something totally creative and coming together. A pooling of all our creative energies and the co-creation which came out of that. That's what I felt I was looking for.

AG: When you started working on 'A New Communion for Freaks, Prophets and Witches', did you have any premonition that the project was headed in this dark direction?

PS: No, it felt like the right thing to be doing. It felt powerful and transformative, a kind of alchemical process. I was studying Jane's techniques because it felt like she was a strong woman and also very sensitive – someone who could hold a space for others to open up. The workshops were about trying to look into the psyche in order to find one's wounds and, instead of covering them up, opening them up and unearthing them. It was about finding out what was going on a subconscious level and bringing that up to the surface. And then we crystallised that process in these performance pieces.

In the morning, we'd do a workshop on a certain theme, like our "relationship to Daddy". Then we'd break for lunch, come back afterwards, and smoke some marijuana, which was still new to me at that time. When I was at art school I hadn't smoked because I associated it with people who dropped out. I saw a lot of the students who were smoking, but who weren't really engaged. I thought I was going to be Lady Picasso. The first time I smoked anything was with Peter Whitehead in Morocco. I smoked some *kif* with him and it was like the whole space we were in – this beautiful hotel, La Mamounia in Marrakech – just opened up, beautiful and liquid. But that was the only time I tried it. The next time was with the women's theatre group. I realised that this was a wonderful tool for creativity, for probing and for lifting and for hacking things open. I

never really associated [drugs] with recreation after that, but with *re-creation*, with really getting to the heart of things as an ally, a true ally.

Though *The Other Side of the Underneath* came out really heavy, the theatre production did have some humour. It was all done with attention to the vignette, with this vaudevillian element. A lot of that was lost in the film, which went into a much darker area. Jane had a great sense of humour and a great wit.



Still from *The Other Side of Underneath*

AG: Over the years, many have understood some of the strategies employed in the film as being fundamentally exploitative, like the use of hallucinogenic drugs to manipulate performances, playing people off against each other in psychodramatic situations, or incorporating mentally handicapped and vulnerable performers into a party sequence which is now infamous.

PS: It's always been a little bit of a hard thing to look at, the question of whether Jane was being exploitative or whether this was a solid, genuine attempt to bring all this up for the healing of

everyone involved. But the reality is that no healing really came from it. I don't know whether I'd ever say that it was a deliberate attempt to use people. Jane wasn't strong enough – though she came across as super strong – to be able to manage it all. She had disintegrated into herself by the end of the film. That's why everybody was left flailing. Not because she deliberately wanted to use people and throw them away. Although there was a bit of bad feeling at the end of the theatre production because whenever she did interviews, she'd talk about it as "I directed this, that and the other", and not describe it as the collaborative project it was. And because of that, it was a challenge for me to decide whether to do the film or not. But there was enough there that I felt was real, strong, and important that I decided that I *would* do it. I thought that I would do my part but keep my psyche a little intact. But of course, it didn't work out like that. I can't do things in halves, so I went all the way with it!

AG: You then starred in *Vibration* (1975), a short experimental video on Sufi meditation which Bond and Arden made after *The Other Side of the Underneath*. Did it act as a form of catharsis?

PS: What *Vibration* represented, as far as I can see, was a form of healing after the disintegration of it all. Jane went to the Sufis to try to heal herself with meditation. The film came out of her experience with that. I would say that was the end of the healing process for Jane, but that healing didn't really spread to anyone else in the same way. I wasn't a part of the whole fabric of that film, I just had that part to play along with Sebastian [Saville, Arden's son]. Jane asked me to do this heart meditation, but I wasn't part of the creation of the film. It was all part of her healing. That was another thing that I really related to Jane: that she had this whole social/political side, but also a strong mystic and spiritual element. I've always juggled and played with these [sides] too. Tantra was the spiritual path that came out of that for me, while for Jane it was the Sufis.

Whatever the fallout, it was a very brave and cutting-edge activity that we were involved in, and the intention was to bring attention to the plight of women. For me, this went on through the whole process of working on *The Exorcism* project, and exploring the notion of the death and rebirth of the Self. I feel that I did get to resurrect and rebirth myself from it, so I didn't get stuck in that darkness.

Featured image: 'Celestial Tabernacle' from *An Exorcism* (Penny Slinger, 1977)

¹ Laura Mulvey, "The Hole Truth", *Spare Rib* 17 (November 1973), 37. ² [Penny Slinger, *An Exorcism*](#) ³ *50% the Visible Woman* (1971) was Slinger's first published book. Inspired by the collage books of Max Ernst, it brings together photo collages – often of the artist's own body, as well as 'found images' – with poetry printed on transparent flysheets. The juxtaposition of image and text, overlaid atop of one another, interrogates the objectification of women in art and culture, and was originally submitted as part of Slinger's final year thesis in 1969.

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