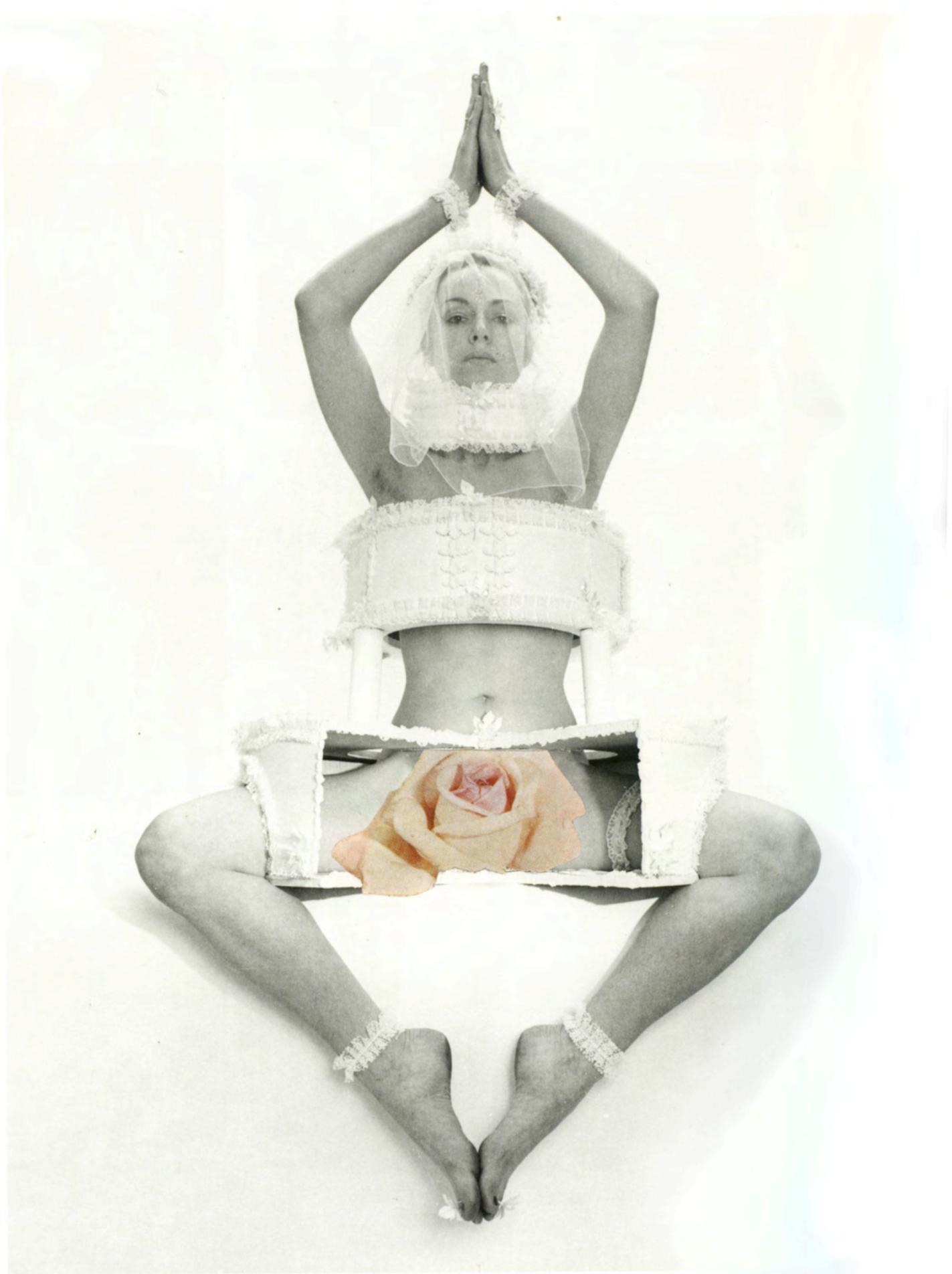


Gabriele Schor

FEMINIST AVANT-GARDE

Art of the 1970s

The SAMMLUNG VERBUND Collection, Vienna



PENNY SLINGER

EXORCISM EXERCISES

Angela Stief

Penny Slinger, a native of England who lives and works in California, is one of several artists who built sizable oeuvres in the 1970s but, due to an unfortunate double bind of discrimination against women and feminist indifference, failed to attract the attention they merited; these artists are only now being rediscovered. In her early work, which survives in the form of collage series, photographs, artist's books, and assemblages, Slinger unflinchingly explores the dark sides of life, death, and the abysses of the human soul. As early as the late 1960s, her work staked out a resolutely emancipated stance; she proposed a thorough revision of the perspective in which female artists, and women more generally, were seen and saw themselves. Slinger sought to challenge the predominance of the "male principle," as she called it, and shone a light on the diverse facets of female nature. Another project that was part of Slinger's sometimes-difficult life as a young artist in London was the liberation of female sexuality from the constraints of a repressive environment. She took a critical view of the nascent feminist movement, championing the distinctive appeal and charms of femininity and insisting that women should not become like men.

Yet the diagnosis of woman's emotional disposition and inner life Penny Slinger offered in the assemblage *Exorcism House* (pp. 338–339), created in 1977, can only be described as traumatic. The scene is a dollhouse in which little stories about helplessness and an existence at the mercy of an ominous power unfold. The viewer can open the dollhouse to venture a glimpse behind the façade, peering into rooms in which Slinger used dolls and various props to stage micro-narratives that translate desires, menaces, repressed fears, and the demands of the libido into tableaux. A psychoanalyst might have a field day with these scenes fraught with symbolism and besotted with violence. Like those in

collage series such as *Tribunal, An Exorcism* (p. 333), they are steeped in a gloomy surrealism. The artist said about her aesthetic strategy, "I wanted to make sure I took a deep and penetrating look, right through the surface and into the inner workings of the psyche."¹ To grasp these structures and break their power, she gave exemplary expression to psychological injuries and painful experiences. Slinger explained her approach, which aimed at an archetypal knowledge, as follows, "I wanted to turn my inside out and spread my guts on the floor for my inspection and that of others, no holds barred, so that they could move out of the shadows and into the light to be fully exorcised. I wanted to show that it was ok to feel these things, to let others know that they were not alone in these kind of experiences."²

The individual plots that play out in the rooms of the *Exorcism House* are devastating: a monstrous male creature, its jaws wide open with voracious lust, is about to break into a cell in which a doll is trapped, stripped bare, her hands and feet tied up with rope. In another room, the bride's dream reveals itself to be a blind chimera, the product of a deranged imagination that alienates a woman, her soul shattered, from her everyday life. A naked woman has fallen headlong down the stairs. In another room, a romantic starry sky arches over a scene dominated by a tortured body without head or arms; red spots marking the genitals indicate its permanent availability. And last but not least, the largest room in the house is occupied by an oversized erect silver penis adorned with pearls. A token of virility and hypertrophic glorification of the male sex, it dominates the action. It is the key to a false world that is committed to abusing womanhood, a world that—*per aspera ad astra*—stands in urgent need of Slinger's secular exorcisms.

PENNY SLINGER
Promised a Bed of Roses, 1973

B/W photograph and collage
40.6 x 30.4 cm
Unicum
SV_551_2013

The artist's critical study of psychological trauma, discrimination against women, stereotyped social roles, and romantic clichés was part of an effort to analyze the unconscious mental mechanisms and social conditionings that controlled life in the 1970s and left the modern individual adrift. As early as 1974, the artist made plans for a happening entitled *Opening* in which she examined the theme of self-abandonment with the means of art, using her own body as a vehicle of expression and upending the traditional format of the exhibition opening. The idea behind *Opening* revolved around the interplay between food and body, rituals that involve food and eating, and the eroticism of ingestion—in short, around processes of opening, identification, and assimilation. The artist had a wedding banquet with fruit arranged and presented herself as the wedding cake. The event was also captured in a series of photographs (pp. 330, 334–337). In a move characteristic of her art, Slinger put herself at the center of the production, noting that she herself was her best material.

Simultaneously occupying the positions of performer and character, she undercut classical subject-object relations and the role of the muse traditionally assigned to women. To make the happening a special experience for her spectators, she invited them to come dressed up as bride and groom in order to participate in this thoroughly humorous *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Penny Slinger's art has always been propelled by an interest in performance, but unlike most theatrical, film, and performance art formats, it never involved her playing the part of someone else. Her goal was to bring the many different facets of her own self to bear in aesthetic creations and visual productions that negotiate femininity at the intersection between personal freedom, intimacy, and social convention.

ANGELA STIEF is a freelance curator and publicist in Vienna and Berlin.

1 "Penny Slinger: Eine somnambule Kunst des Exorzierens. Ein Gespräch mit Angela Stief," in *Obsessionen I*, ed. Oliver Zybok and Angela Stief, *Kunstforum International*, no. 225 (March–April 2014), pp. 141–49.

2 Ibid.



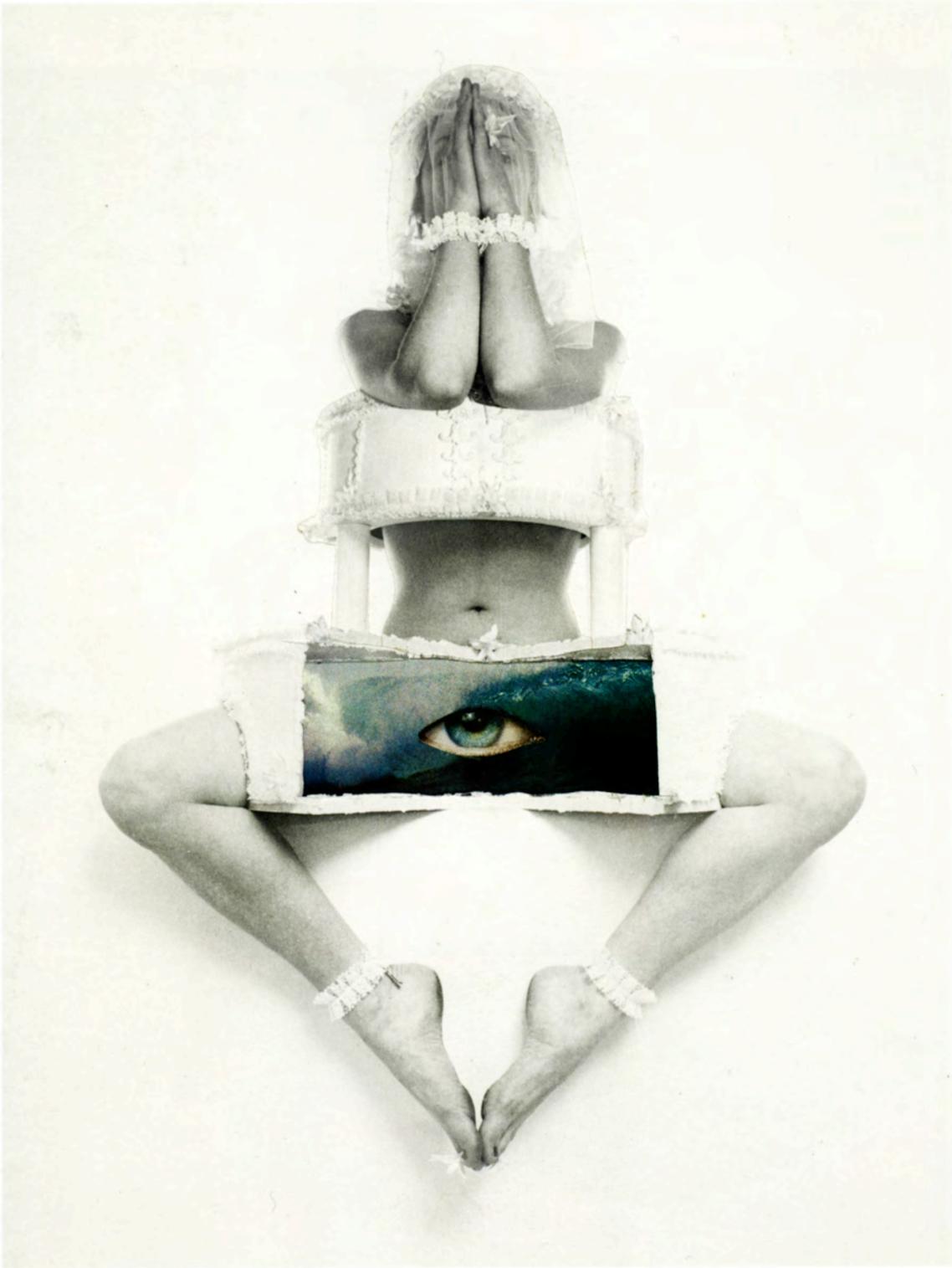
PENNY SLINGER
Tribunal, An Exorcism, 1977

Collage
32.3 x 48.2 cm
Unicum
SV_610_2014



PENNY SLINGER
Wedding Invitation - 2 (Art is Just a Piece of Cake), 1973

B/W photograph
40.6 x 30.4 cm
Unicum
SV_550_2013



PENNY SLINGER
ICU, Eye Sea You, I See You, 1973

B/W photograph and collage
40.6 x 30.4 cm
Unicum
SV_552_2013



PENNY SLINGER

Bride and Groom – Ceremonial Cutting of the Cake, 1973

B/W photograph

40.6 x 30.4 cm

Unicum

SV_549_2013



PENNY SLINGER
Having Our Cake and Eating It, 1973

B/W photograph
40.6 x 30.4 cm
Unicum
SV_548_2013

Pages 338/339

PENNY SLINGER
Exorcism House, 1977

Wooden doll house, various
objects and materials
66 x 58.4 x 36.8 cm
Unicum
SV_547_2013

