

# ArtReview

I wanted to be my own muse



Penny Slinger





## Penny Slinger

by J.J. Charlesworth

The invite card for *Secrets*, opening in London on Tuesday, 27 September 1977, reads, 'This exhibition features the latest work of PENNY SLINGER, including unique doll's houses, psycho-surrealist body-prints, the original photo-collages of "AN EXORCISM"... and a new series of collages which explore Tantric erotic themes. This exhibition is the last public showing of her work in this country.' For the 30 years that followed, the artworld would hear nothing more of Penelope Slinger. Departing first for New York, then the Caribbean in 1979, and moving finally to California during the 90s, Slinger continued to make art, but ceased making it in the artworld.

It's now a decade since Slinger's work of the 1970s was brought back from obscurity by curators and artists in the UK, beginning with 2009's *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism* at Manchester Art Gallery. But despite that, and the fact that Slinger is championed by, among others, Punk artist Linder Sterling – who credits seeing Slinger's photobook *50% The Visible Woman* (1971) as a key influence on her own confrontational photomontage – little of her work from the later 70s has been shown in public until now. This July, an exhibition at London's Richard Saltoun gallery puts the focus on Slinger's 'Tantric' collages and Xerox works from the period, many of which were shown in that exhibition of 1977, before Slinger turned her back on the artworld.

Throughout the early 70s – from leaving Chelsea college in 1969, just as 'Swinging London' was burning itself out – Slinger created books, photocollages, sculptures, objects and films that articulated a visceral, often traumatic vision of female experience, and the bodily and psychological violence experienced by women in a male-dominated world. Drawing on the visual strategies of Surrealism, whose first (male-dominated) generation was by then dying away (André Breton died in 1966, Slinger met an elderly Max Ernst in 1969), Slinger seized Surrealism's fascination with the subconscious and sexuality, while inverting the Surrealists' often misogynistic and objectifying celebration of the passive female 'muse'. Claiming

herself as both subject and object, Slinger declared, 'I wanted to be my own muse'. In the space of a few years, Slinger created images and objects that, retrospectively, seem to have anticipated later feminist theories about the gendered self's relationship to language, childbirth and abjection.

If Slinger's early work confronted misogyny, it did so by a militant celebration of female sexuality. These were the years following the showing, in 1970, of Allen Jones's grotesque bondage-culture sculptures of women – the notorious *Chair, Hatstand and Table* (1969) – which had provoked outrage. 'From the rippling courtesans of Titian... to the fetishised club girls of Allen Jones', *Arts Review*'s Peter Fuller observed in 1971, 'women have always been painted by men, from the man's point of view, and new theoretical developments, actively being put into practice by women, have shown that that point of view has been humiliating and oppressive'.

Fuller was right to note the 'theoretical developments' shaping early feminism. By 1973, Laura Mulvey, in her second article for the recently launched magazine *Spare Rib* (the first a takedown of Jones's work), would bring her own strongly psychoanalytical take to Slinger's work. Writing about *Opening*, Slinger's second solo show at Angela Flowers Gallery – objects and photocollages in which Slinger played imagery of food, mouths and vaginas against an iconography of bridal virginity and passivity – Mulvey argued that 'Until women can confront their own unconscious phantasies, as long as they continue to be captivated by those of men, they will be out of touch with the content of their own minds and victims of the repression which allots them their place in society even to their own satisfaction'. Mulvey's Freud-heavy take on Slinger found rich pickings in the iconography of Slinger's work, but when discussing the concluding page of *50% The Visible Woman*, Mulvey was uncertain: 'The last image is of a woman-man, a hermaphrodite. Called a "compromise to form a solution", it tries to resolve the dilemmas of the birth trauma, the relationship with the mother, the Oedipus complex and the vicissitudes



of female development through a phantasy image, a disavowal rather than an affirmation of femininity.'

It's perhaps that tension, between a critique of female oppression and the celebration of female sexuality, that meant that Slinger's work didn't align easily with the socially and politically oriented feminism of the mid-70s. Slinger's claim to her own autonomy led her to places feminist criticism has debated fiercely ever since. For while Mulvey was writing about Slinger in *Spare Rib*, Slinger was promoting her work by posing naked with it for a feature in British soft-porn magazine *Knave*. It was, she explains on a video call from her home in California, "a conscious act to intervene in those venues where men habitually wanted to be titillated, to show that a woman was also an articulate subject". (It was a gesture similarly taken up a little later, by artist Cosey Fanni Tutti, member of the art group COUM Transmissions, whose own work in pornography would later become the subject of the media furore surrounding the group's show *Prostitution*, at the ICA in October 1976 – a show met with outrage by moral conservatives and some feminists alike.) Slinger recounts wryly that Victor Lowndes, then head of Hugh Hefner's UK Playboy Clubs, huffed at this transgression: he 'liked his pornography straight'.

So while Slinger has been celebrated as part of a generation of radical female artists (she featured in Alison Gingeras's curated section for 2017's Frieze London, *Sex Work: Radical Politics and Feminist Art*), she can't easily be bracketed as an 'early feminist' artist, any more than she can be placed within the last moments of the 60s counterculture. If Slinger's trajectory through the 1970s remains elusive, it's perhaps because of the way it was tangled up with how art and the politics of liberation in London evolved at that time; of how the culture of sexual liberation informed the women's liberation movement and how this

then evolved into feminism; and of the diverging perspectives of a generation that believed that the real revolution was the one inside one's own head – an outlook that, for many like Slinger, involved a turn to new forms of expanded consciousness, looking towards non-Western forms of mysticism and spiritualism.

Slinger explains that she had remained distant from the feminist movement, which was for her "more intellectual and less visceral, and more interested in the politics of the exterior than the interior". But the 'interior' was nevertheless political – though how to politicise it was the issue. Through 1971 and 72, Slinger had been involved with the Holocaust theatre group, formed by the actor, screenwriter and theatre director Jane Arden. Arden's radical and often extreme approach, heavily influenced by the antipsychiatry ideas of R.D.

Laing, sought out women's oppression in the subconscious traces of social conditioning, and a form of performance that dramatised repressed desire and cathartic speech.

Holocaust would produce the play-happening *A New Communion for Freaks, Prophets and Witches* at London's Open Space Theatre in 1971. The next year Arden adapted the play into a film, the harrowing and often shocking *The Other Side of the Underneath*, a stream-of-consciousness, surreal narrative about a woman's descent into madness. The filming of it, in and around an old farmhouse in Wales, where the cast worked and lived, is notorious for the way in which Arden pushed the limit between fiction and reality, often to the serious distress of its cast. Slinger recalls that while *New Communion* took "more of the positive, affirmative form of a cabaret, the film ended up as more of a vehicle for Jane to work through her personal issues". Like many of the cast, Slinger fell out of touch with Arden after *The Other Side*.

If Arden's extreme – and eventually self-destructive – dismantling of 'repressive' subjectivity (Arden committed suicide in 1982)

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preceding pages Penny as Shakti, 1976. Photo: Nik Douglas

above Offerings at Twilight, 1976, photomontage on board, 51 x 69 cm



Self Impressions-5, 1974, Xerox self monoprint, 48 x 29 cm





*Open Invitation – Ready for Consummation*, 1973,  
archival photo print, 51 × 65 cm. © the artist.  
Courtesy Richard Saltoun, London,  
and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, New York & Tokyo



*Bouquet*, 1976,  
Xerox self body print with collage, 20 × 50 cm





*Lotus Feet*, 1976, photcollage  
with Xerox body prints on paper, 42 × 30 cm

was typical of the more apocalyptic side of the counterculture, then it would lead many to look for alternatives. For Slinger, that had meant a growing interest in the philosophy and art of Tantra, following the Hayward Gallery's show *Tantra* in 1971. It's not surprising that this major exhibition of Tantric art and artefacts should have had such an effect. If the counterculture of the 1960s had opened a window to Westerners to other cultures, with other philosophical and spiritual traditions, the *Tantra* show, with its celebration of Tantra as a 'cult of ecstasy, focused on a vision of cosmic sexuality', reached an audience that probably wasn't really looking for po-faced, colonial ethnography. (The catalogue, reprinted twice, sold over 10,000 copies.) Though the artworks and artefacts shown included painted mandalas, sacred diagrams, ceremonial vessels and bronze deities, the show's emphasis on sex, and particularly a more celebratory vision of the female 'Goddess', could not help but present an alternative to buttoned-up Western attitudes to sex and spirituality.

By the mid-1970s, Slinger was working on collages that would become the series *Mountain Ecstasy*. Mixing pornography and images from Tantric art, Hinduism, Ancient Egypt, images of animals and nature, they are still startling for their high-colour, psychedelic intensity. They're deliberately heterogeneous, hybrid accumulations of everything un-Western and antipatriarchal. Four years after *Opening*, Slinger opened a new show of the Tantric works with gallerist Patrick Seale, in 1977. But after a dispute with him, Slinger took the show down mid-run, hired the Mirandy gallery at short notice and rehung the works as the show *Secrets*. It did not sell, and soon after Slinger gave up on the London artworld, leaving for New York with her partner Nik Douglas.

Slinger's turn to what would become the 'New Age' movement of the 80s – she and Douglas went on to publish a hugely successful illustrated guide to Tantric sex, *Sexual Secrets: The Alchemy of Ecstasy* (1979) – might also be seen in the context of the split that occurred

in alternative culture, feminism and contemporary art at the turn of the 1980s. It is striking to consider how 'New Age' thinking and alternative spiritualism became as mainstream as they have done in the decades since, but how in the face of that, Western contemporary art cleaved further towards critical and political discourses that tended more towards deconstruction than towards affirmation, towards the analytical rather than the spiritual. It's not at all surprising that, after Slinger's failed art exhibition, the following year the *Mountain Ecstasy* collages were published as a book of the same title by the nascent fantasy and science-fiction art imprint Dragon's Dream, founded by prog-rock-album-cover-art legend Roger Dean. Nor, perhaps, is it surprising that on the way back from the printers in Holland, the book was seized by UK customs and pulped as 'pornography'. Outside the licensed, privileged limits of the artworld, they were suddenly nothing more than 'subculture'.

I ask how Slinger thinks these works will be received this time around. Slinger's enthusiasm for showing them is tempered by a pragmatic awareness that not everyone will "get" them. She finds that a "sort of new secularism is very present in the UK", and that when one talks about Tantra, "people sometimes turn their noses up to it". I might admit to being one of those secularists. At the same time, at a time when debates over feminism, gender and sexuality rage with a renewed intensity, it's possible also to look at Slinger's works in light of the 'sex-positive' feminism of the intervening decades, and consider how they might relate to the kind of embodied vitalism that often informs current antidualistic, ecological thinking about the human body, the mind and the environment. Slinger's works may be of their time, but after four decades they might still be ready to connect with the present. **ar**

Penny Slinger: *Tantric Transformations* is on view  
at Richard Saltoun, London, 28 June – 24 August



above *At the Feet of Kali*, 1976–77, photcollage on board, 59 × 42 cm  
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