ISSUE 18
Summer 2019

OSMOS

MAGAZINE

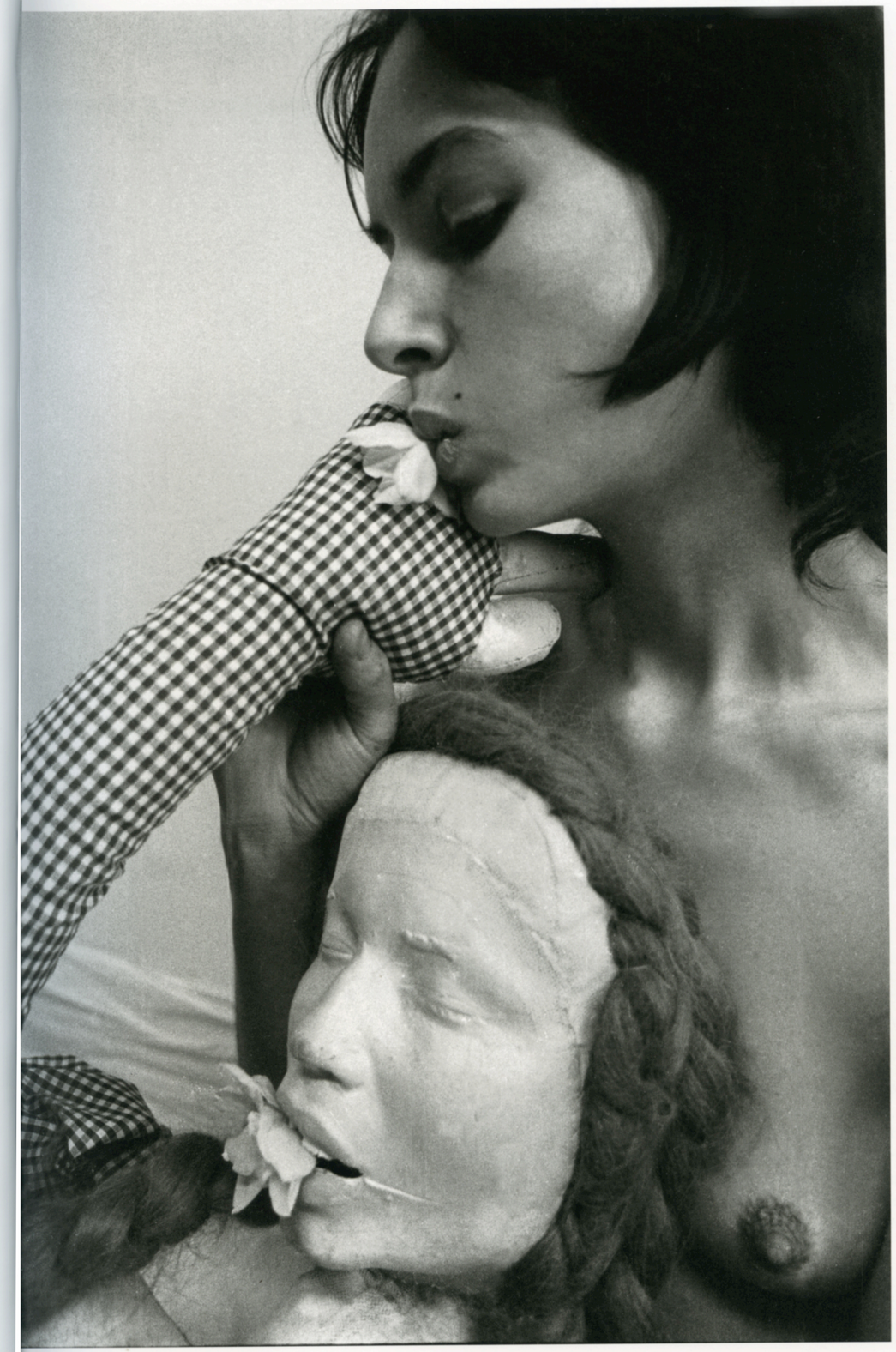


BETWEEN EXORCISM AND ECSTASY UNRAVELING PENNY SLINGER

BY **HELENA SHASKEVICH**

In 2014, we were introduced to Penny Slinger's work in an exhibition of her black-and-white photo-collages at Blum & Poe in Los Angeles. On another trip to Los Angeles in 2018, we encountered Slinger's color collages in a group show at Anat Ebgi. The two galleries happen to be located across the street from each other. A year later, in New York, Alison Gingeras curated *Penny Slinger Inside Out* at Fortnight Institute and a screening program at Anthology Film Archives, which is located on Second Street, just behind OSMOS. In the exceptional motion pictures created by Jane Arden, Niki de Saint Phalle, and Penny Slinger—artists who share "overlapping concerns" in their experimental narratives, personal histories, and professional collaborations, we follow the protagonists "on their peregrinations to self-knowledge, [and] we become privy to an alternative history of second wave feminism." The way Slinger has celebrated parallelism and collaboration for decades seems to have inspired the way her work is being shared today: face-to-face in Los Angeles and back-to-back in New York. In the following essay, Helena Shaskevich reminds us that politics in the age of #MeToo makes Slinger's approach ever more pressing.

CAY-SOPHIE RABINOWITZ



Penny and Doll, 1971
Rag Doll with latex life mask, hair and mixed media (made as prop for play *The Four Little Girls*)



Behind the Leaves, 1975

In the artwork, Penny Slinger spirals in the air, vacillating between lifeless corpse and graceful ballerina, performing a complicated dance of identification and disidentification with the viewer. Featuring multiple photographs of the artist's altered face silkscreened on Plexiglas and hung from the ceiling, the piece's deadpan photographic style evokes the visual language of bureaucratic documentation. Slinger displays herself alternately tearing, lacerating, shrouding, or veiling her face, ultimately sculpting her image into a palimpsest that registers her internalization of everyday violence and trauma. First displayed in her 1969 thesis show at the Chelsea College of Arts, Faces marks Slinger's entry into the 1970s London art scene and suggests the remarkable aesthetic prescience she would develop as she addressed some of the most critical issues of her time.

With a recent exhibition at the Fortnight Institute and the screening of Richard Kovitch's 2017 documentary *Penny Slinger: Out of the Shadows* at Anthology Film Archives, her thoughtful and challenging work is receiving an overdue historic reckoning. Kovitch's documentary lays the groundwork for this reassessment. As he weaves together Slinger's art and biography, Kovitch reveals the deep ideological continuity in her work: a vigorous dedication to the liberating potential of pleasure and psychic excavation. From her 1969 series of photo collages, *50% The Invisible Woman*, to recent photographic projects like the *N series*, Slinger unravels personal and collective histories of trauma and repression. As ambiguous erotic relations morph into macabre fantasies, they give birth to a spiritual and sexual awakening. Broached but never fleshed out in the Fortnight exhibition or Kovitch's documentary is a deeper reading of Slinger's work within

the social and intellectual milieu of 1970s London. Bringing feminist politics to bear on Surrealism as she excavates her own psyche, Slinger's collages, sculptures, films, and videos beg to be recontextualized and brought into dialogue with a larger body of second-wave feminist practices.

Born in London during the conservative post war years, Slinger realized at an early age the liberating capacity of art. During the mid-1960s she entered the arts program at the Chelsea College of Art, crediting it experimental atmosphere with her artistic awakening. While a student there, she began exploring diverse media and artistic styles, discovering kindred spirits in the Surrealists and Max Ernst. Attaining early critical acclaim with her thesis, Slinger was invited to participate in the *Young and Fantastic* show at the Institute of Contemporary Art the year she graduated. Like many of her contemporaries, including Laura Mulvey and Mary Kelly, Slinger grew interested in the intersections of feminism and psychoanalysis.



Spirit Impression-14, 1974

Bookended by her incredibly sensuous and gorgeously colored *1968 Mirror Series* and her bare and distorted 1974 "Spirit Impressions" series, Slinger echoes the language of analysis as she adopts mirrors and feedback loops as tools and reflection and refraction as her aesthetic and methodological strategies. Despite their similar interests, Slinger's aesthetic approach visibly puts her at odds with the increasingly conceptual practices advocated within feminist art discourses in the UK during the 1970s. Unlike Mulvey and Kelly, for whom distancing and denial were fundamental to disrupting normative gender constructs, Slinger openly and joyously embraced visual pleasure as a feminist politics. It is precisely this notion that visual, intellectual, and erotic pleasure can be liberating that characterizes some of her best work. Yet it also created an impasse for many early critics. Today, as the #MeToo movement spurs a tepid model of public sexual expression and feminist discourses entertain a revived interest in Andrea Dworkin's work, Slinger's embrace of pleasure feels more relevant than ever.



All Seeing I, 1973