

A Vivisection: interview w/ Penelope Slinger (2019)

"When Englishness goes weird, something very interesting happens."



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No, this has nothing to do with cocktails. It is, rather, a re-edited early version of an interview with the feminist surrealist artist [Penny Slinger](#) (above) that I wrote for the [Guardian](#) in 2019. I thought it worth re-publishing now to coincide with Tate Britain's [Women in Revolt!](#) show, in which Slinger plays a key part.

Who is Penny Slinger? Well, precisely. Back in the late-60s, Slinger looked poised to become one of *the* most famous figures of the British counterculture: ICA shows, Observer profiles, Rolling Stone write-ups, etc. For various reasons - some predictable (misogyny; patriarchy; artworld stupidity), some *less* so (falconry; self-immolation; tantric sex) - it never quite happened for her. She abandoned mainstream art in 1982. And wasn't really heard of in the art world until the late 2009s when she appeared in the group show *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists & Surrealism* at Manchester Art Gallery and began to be championed by a new generation of curators. I first encountered her art at Riflemaker in London and was *transfixed*. Then I heard a rumour that she was alive and well in rural California and... well you can see why I thought she might have a story to tell.

So I was elated to secure the first interview she had done with a British mainstream publication in over 30 years(!) But for 100 tedious reasons, the piece lost much in the editing process and ended up being pulled from the print edition. "Am I just still too controversial after all these years?" Slinger emailed afterwards. I was left with a feeling I'd messed it all up. But what is the point of having your own newsletter if you can't use it to right such historical wrongs? Well, here is a version which I feel does better justice to Slinger's art and life, both equally extraordinary, I think. And to judge from the general uptick in Slinger appreciation (fashion collaborations; Tate acquisitions), I am hoping that the grand museum retrospective that she dreams of will happen sooner rather than later.

“My dream now would be to have the whole trajectory of my life and art recognised and to be able to show all the aspects of who I am”

Interview with PENELOPE SLINGER (June, 2019)

by Richard Godwin



“I REALLY thought I was destined to be the most famous woman artist there had ever been,” says Penelope Slinger. “A lot of my energy was in that direction and a lot of the liberties that I took were in the name of my artistic mission.”

Slinger, 72, is recalling the brief zenith of her fame, when she emerged from the late 1960s London counterculture, fully intent on becoming “Lady Picasso” – artist and muse all in one. Those liberties included procuring bits of human bodies from teaching hospitals to use in her sculptures; providing “erotic art” for men’s magazines even at the risk of being dismissed as porn; and also, producing some of the most beautiful, disturbing, memorable images of the period, all painstakingly photographed, developed, cut out by hand, and

arranged in nightmarish compositions. Here are erotic wedding cakes. BDSM vivisections. Vulvas in mouths. Eyes in vulvas. Freudian dolls houses. Worms, nuns, roosters, waves, roses, gates, executions, all at play in the deep, dark antechambers of the English psyche.

Slinger had her champions back then. "This book will become as important on your bookshelf as Sgt. Pepper is on your record rack," was how Rolling Stone magazine described her first major work, the book *The 50% Visible Woman* (1971). Laura Mulvey, the critic who coined the term "male gaze", celebrated Slinger's distinctly female eroticism in *Spare Rib* magazine. She crossed paths with the leading lights of the period - Peter Brooke, Mick Jagger, Jane Arden - and lived as provocatively as her art suggested, at one point sharing a Soho attic with a cast of falcons.

Which makes it all the more surprising that she should have disappeared so suddenly from view - her name all but erased. Between her last solo show in New York in 1982 and her re-emergence at the *Angels of Anarchy* show of female surrealists in Manchester in 2009, the art world pretty much forgot about Penny Slinger - and Penny Slinger pretty much forgot about the art world too. "When you're trying to do something new, it very often doesn't get accepted at the time you're doing it," she smiles. "Some people did at the time. But probably most people weren't ready for it."

Still, it seems the world is - perhaps - ready for Slinger now, as a wave of shows and collaborations suggest. Like a lot of so-called "disappearing artists", Penelope Slinger never actually disappeared and nor did she ever stop making art. But unlike a lot of disappearing artists, she has, miraculously, managed to reappear again - slight lisp and English teeth still fully intact after years in exile, and ready to put body and psyche on the dissection table once again.



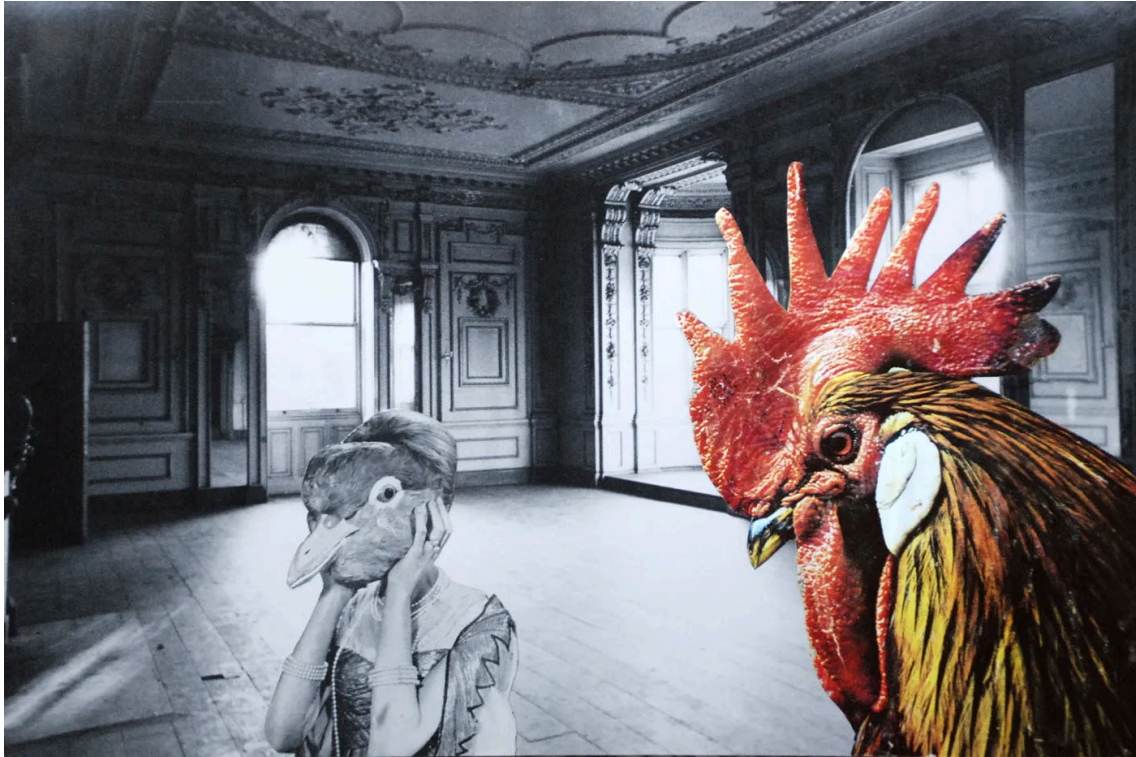
Slinger's extraordinary life is the subject of a new documentary, *Penny Slinger: Out of the Shadows*, a five-year labour of love for director Richard Kovitch. It's exactly the film anyone curious about Slinger's life might have hoped for, documenting her extraordinary journey from ordinary suburban English childhood, through the darkest excesses of the late-20th century counterculture into exile and finally, late-in-life reappraisal. Female audiences in particular have responded with tears of recognition at her journey – and

anger, too at how she has been written out of art history. Curators such as Maxa Zoller and Anke Kempkes identify her as a “missing link” between male surrealists like Salvador Dali and Max Ernst and feminist pioneers like Cindy Sherman and Louise Bourgeois. It’s not hard to situate her as an antecedent of the punkish provocations of Sarah Lucas and Tracey Emin, while her use of her own body recalls Frida Kahlo. Slinger also emerges as a distinctly English surrealist, notably in the country house setting of her collage series, *An Exorcism* (1977). And as the critic Michael Bracewell says in the film: “When Englishness goes weird, something very *interesting* happens.”

Slinger herself proves wise, funny and an eloquent appraiser of her own work. In the absence of much official recognition, she has curated her own [archive](#) carefully – she still has all the original negatives from her painstaking collages (all done in the days before any form of digital manipulation) as well as the scandalised press cuttings from the 1970s. She speaks like someone who has “done the work” as a Jungian might say. I don’t detect much regret or animosity.

Nevertheless, she retains the magnificent entitlement of someone who doesn’t so much step across boundaries as refuses to acknowledge their existence. “My dream now would be to have the whole trajectory of my life and art recognised and to be able to show all the aspects of who I am,” she says. “A nice museum show or something like that. I’d like to put a firm stake in the ground for my relevance and wisdom as being indisputable.”

Contemporary viewers who come across Slinger’s work now are often astonished that they’ve never heard of her – this was certainly my reaction on first encountering the *Exorcism* images at Riflemaker gallery in 2014. Slinger’s explorations of feminine desire, subjugation and rebirth feel eminently *now*: the woman designed a [tantric tarot deck](#), how hip can you get? (I am just waiting for her rooster image to be turned into a meme.) And yet her art is also curiously out of time, communicating with the precision of a dream.



When I ask where she thinks her artistic impetus came from, she can't precisely say – she was “completely out of leftfield” in the context of her family. She was born in 1947 and grew up in suburban Surrey – her father, a former RAF officer, ran a pub. She served notice of her talents at four, when she drew the first “really accomplished” drawing of her parents. They were completely naked. Then, when she was nine, she was expelled from her convent school for waving a sanitary towel out of a bus window on the way home from a swimming class. Her parents took her to a child psychologist in despair – but they were informed that she wasn't mad. She was simply an artist. “Even though my parents didn't really understand me and how I came to be, they did recognise my gifts and my talents and that I had something special,” she says. She counts herself lucky: “So many people have parents who don't support them.”

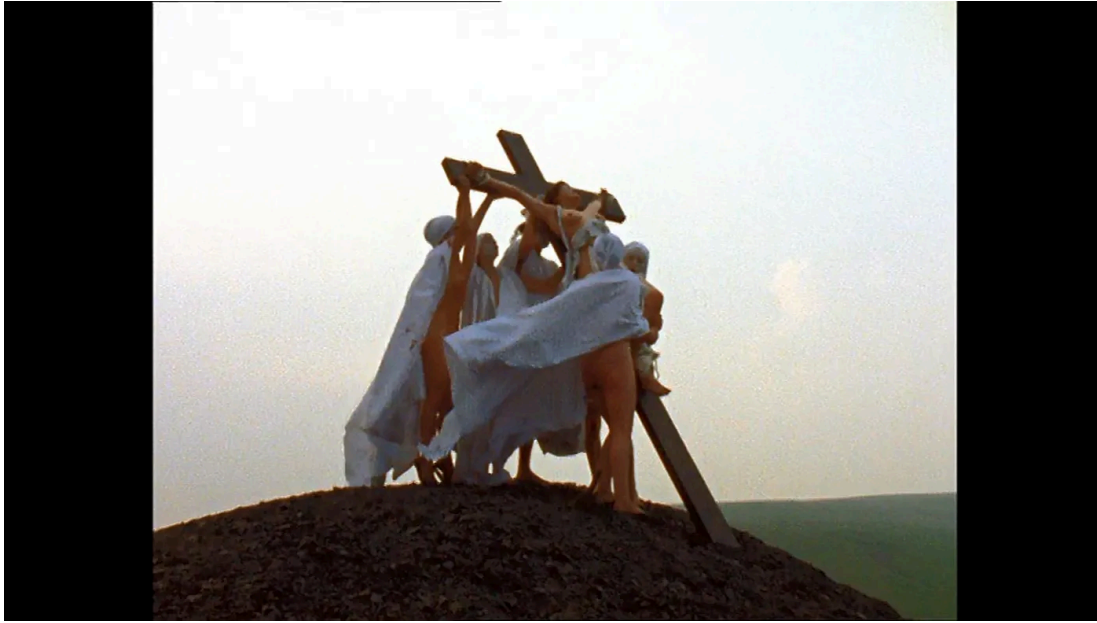
After studying at art school in Farnham, she arrived at the Chelsea College of Art in 1966, where she went on to write a thesis on the German surrealist Max Ernst. His use of collage and treatment the human body as a “symbolic domain” were a key influence. At Chelsea, she met the collector Roland Penrose who

would go on to become her patron, and entered a relationship with the filmmaker Peter Whitehead, who had documented the Rolling Stones and made the quintessential Swinging Sixties movie, *Tonite Let's Make Love in London* (1968). He was also a falconer. For a spell, they kept a flat in a turret on the corner of Dean Street and Carlisle Street in Soho, surrounded by his birds of prey. "It was a fun time. We definitely had lots of *different experiences*" she says. In the film, she recalls that her biggest fear was that she wasn't mad enough.



Her work was soon identified as part of the feminist movement - but she says she never really related to political feminism. “[The movement] was more concerned with trying to get the same sort of power and rights as men - that’s definitely one side of things,” she says. “But I always felt my contribution was more rooted in the body and the being, the qualities of the feminine that had been ignored and subjugated.” Hence, all the nudity in her work - she is turns abject, erotic, provocative and dreamlike. But this was always a means to an end. “I’m more interested in the nature of the psyche, of stripping away not just to the naked body but taking those layers away and seeing what’s going on underneath.”

It was a lot of fun - ICA shows, Observer Magazine profiles - until it wasn’t. As Whitehead devoted more and more time to falconry, Slinger joined Holocaust, a women’s theatre group led by the director/experimental filmmaker [Jane Arden](#). Slinger took part in Holocaust’s “cabaret of the inner feminine” to rave reviews in Edinburgh and London. Arden then took the group to her hometown in Wales to make the experimental psychological nightmare, *The Other Side of the Underneath* (1972). It is one of the most disturbing products of the era - an exploration of schizophrenia and tortured sexual guilt - and, among other things, quite a bad advert for LSD. “It’s rather heavy to say the least and it’s not really redemptive,” says Slinger. “I feel everybody gets left in the darkness floundering at the end of that film.”



The film created an unhealable rift in Slinger and Whitehead's relationship. Arden directed Slinger to have sex with another man in the film. Whitehead asked her not to, but Slinger was committed to the process and did it anyway and Whitehead couldn't quite forgive her. The film had a still darker legacy. Arden herself died by suicide in 1982. And there were still darker consequences for Sally Minford, the cellist who provided its soundtrack. Her husband, Martin, objected so strongly to the whole project that he set himself on fire and died as a result of his injuries. "That was terrifying," says Slinger. "They were a family. They had a little girl. They lived in a gypsy caravan. She thought there was too much darkness and manipulation in the film and he did that as a protest."

The self-immolation had a huge impact on Slinger. "That made me feel that I had to salvage my relationship with Peter as I felt this death was a direct result of my participation in this film. I didn't want that to happen to Peter so I just tried to hang on to him after that. Unsuccessfully. He couldn't forgive me."

She and Whitehead travelled to Iran with the theatre director Peter Brooke; then they went to stay with Mick and Bianca Jagger in the South of France, where another film failed to get off the ground. "Everything was falling apart" Eventually they went their separate ways. But she would pour her pain and

trauma into the collages that made up her book *An Exorcism*, which would appear in book form in 1977, and is now recognised as her masterpiece.



She used Lilford Hall, a derelict estate in Northamptonshire, as a stage-set for a psychodrama featuring herself, Whitehead and her fellow Holocaust member Suzanka Freay as models. You don't need to know the backstory to find these images deeply affecting, unsettling, darkly amusing and harrowing. And there is, finally, redemption.

Whitehead died earlier this month. It is clear from his testimonies in *Out of the Shadows* that Slinger had an enormous impact on him. And yet none of the recent [obituaries](#) of Whitehead mention Slinger at all. But at least Kovitch's film provided an opportunity for reconciliation. "We managed to connect up again over recent years and had some important times together, which was quite healing for both of us," says Slinger. "The rift that occurred between us was quite devastating in both of our lives. He's a special person and he will always have that special place in my life." She points out that a lot of the photographs used in *An Exorcism* were taken as her relationship with Peter had ended.

“He agreed to be that for me even as I was working through the trauma of our separation, which is kind of interesting and noteworthy.”



After An Exorcism, Slinger moved to New York, where she developed her interest in Tantra that had been sparked by a 1971 exhibition at the Hayward Gallery. In 1979, she co-authored the book [Sexual Secrets: The Alchemy of Ecstasy](#) with her partner, Nik Douglas, which went on to sell over one million copies in 20 languages. In the end, the art world was too conservative and patriarchal for her. After her 1982 New York show, more than one collector pulled out of buying her art after learning that no, she didn't come free with

the work. “None of them bought anything. They all thought I went with the art and that I would be available as my art was erotic.”

So she went away.

For 15 years, she lived in Anguilla in the Caribbean, where she painted the local Arawak people. In the 1990s, she moved to northern California where she deepened her interest in mysticism before her early surrealist work began resurfacing in the late 2000’s. I remember Googling her name after the Riflemaker show, coming across a kooky New Agey website called the “Goddess Channel” [[now defunct, sadly!](#)] and wondering if she was the same person.

But this is all part of her journey. “If I had had more of a receptive audience for what I was doing, I probably wouldn’t have moved to a desert island. But that’s what happened in my life and I don’t regret that path as it was a rich one.” Her forthcoming exhibition at Richard Saltoun gallery, is the first to reappraise her Tantric work, which she sees as a logical progression from surrealism.

Does she have any lingering resentments? “I don’t really believe in holding on to resentments – as you only hurt yourself,” she says. “And I’m trying to something about it now! Often artists can’t get any recognition until they’ve died and that’s a sorry state of affairs.”

She recently moved to Downtown L.A. to work “full-throttle” on her presence in the art world – and to bring things full circle. She recently completed a stop-motion animation based on the original Exorcism series; she has all the original images still. “I wanted to take the viewer on a journey that is more comprehensive than any that has been realised before.” And she has come back to exploring her own ageing body, using herself as her own muse.

“This body is a body of experience. It has value. It has depth and breadth and its beauty is substantial and I want to be able to confront and display that at this time in my life. It’s not over.”



END NOTE: I highly recommend Richard Kovitch's [documentary](#) if you want to learn more. You can lose hours on [Penny's](#) own wonderfully curated website. And she's on [Insta](#) too!



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