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ART BOOKS | OCTOBER 2024

Penny Slinger's *An Exorcism: A Photo Romance*

This psychoanalytic photo-roman, originally published in 1977, exposes the artist's body as a site of testimony, introspection, and emotional processing.

By Jenny Wu

An Exorcism

A Photo Romance



Penny Slinger

“Listen to a woman speak at a public gathering,” Hélène Cixous wrote in 1976, around the time the artist Penny Slinger was preparing to publish the first edition of her photobook, *An Exorcism*. “She doesn’t ‘speak,’” Cixous writes, “she throws her trembling body forward ... She lays herself bare.” In Slinger’s psychoanalytic photo-roman, originally published in 1977 and rereleased by Fulgur Press in 2024, the London-born, Los Angeles-based photographer likewise exposes her body as a site of testimony, introspection, and emotional processing by posing, alongside the filmmaker Peter Whitehead (her then-partner) and the actress Susanka Fraey, for a sequence of ninety-nine erotic collages set in an abandoned English country house.

*An Exorcism: A
Photo Romance*
Penny Slinger
Fulgur Press,
2024

In the new, clothbound, 192-page edition, sized the same as the original but now in a vertical format, Slinger pairs her images with descriptive, confessional text. The book opens on an exterior shot of the mansion in black-and-white. We see its façade through a fence, framed between dark, inky trees; then, in three successive frames, the house appears to approach the viewer, increasing in size as it fills the frame. Next to these images, Slinger’s enigmatic first sentence — “It was Autumn when he said he’d try to take me there” — sets a wistful tone for the rest of the book, in which “he” reappears as a paternal figure who troubles the first-person narrator: “Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!” Slinger later writes. “His name is on every portal.” In the image accompanying this passage are three shaded arches; over the center arch, the word “Daddy” is inscribed in Gothic font. Beneath it, the silhouette of an uncannily tall man looms over a towheaded girl in a white frock. The narrator wonders how she can endear herself to this father and “make him open every door” — ostensibly the doors in the mansion, which symbolize various forms of privilege and self-knowledge. Architectural metaphors proliferate as our protagonist comes of age, entertains wild fantasies with grotesque and beautiful chimeras in the dilapidated house, endures the betrayal and condemnation of her lovers and a tribunal of robed “Patriarchs,” and stumbles out of the nightmare like a fitful somnambulist.

As these metaphors suggest, *An Exorcism* contends not only with gender and bodies but also with figures of containment. The mansion—a real place in Northamptonshire called Lilford Hall—plays an important role here. Boasting derelict rooms and desolate facades, this five hundred year-old structure, itself a collage of Tudor and Jacobean architecture, was only ever occupied by two families, from 1473 to 1711 and from 1711 to 1949, respectively, before it was commandeered for wartime activities during the mid-twentieth century and since abandoned. In the press materials for the first edition of *An Exorcism*, Slinger's gallery called Lilford Hall “a token of maternity” and a “symbol of the author herself, both in her beauty and her spiritual disintegration,” explicitly comparing the house to the artist's body and implicitly comparing the edifice's use and decay to the reproductive cycle. However, far from simply illustrating such reductive correspondences, *An Exorcism* goes further to describe a peculiar and antagonistic relationship between the heroine and the house, one that underscores what readers of Cixous, like the scholar Ceylan Ertung, have identified as the double “entrapment” of women within their bodies and domestic space.

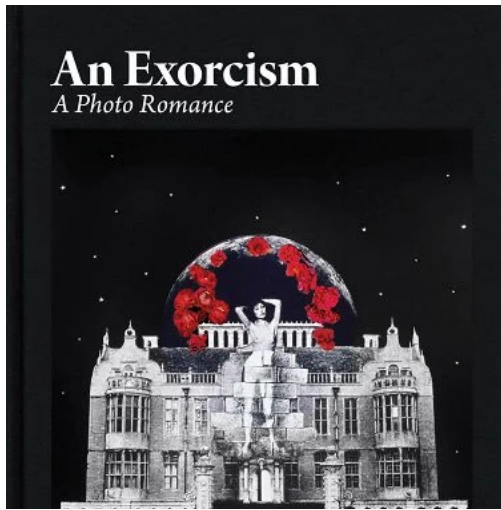
Throughout the book, Slinger “throws” herself against the architectural elements of Lilford Hall, defying metaphorical containment—and physics—by manipulating photographs of her body, making it float in a collage titled “The Novice,” cutting it up and hanging parts of it on the fence in “Shrine,” or projecting it, large and translucent, onto the house's bleak exterior in “A Difficult Position,” all in an affront to the repressive orthodoxy of institutions

like marriage, compulsory heterosexuality, and female chastity. In Slinger's writing, too, Lilford Hall's outmoded décor becomes an enemy reminiscent of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's proto-feminist short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892): "Feeling my way along the wall in the darkness," Slinger writes, "my searching fingers clutch upon silk brocade. Brocade which peels and hangs from the wall like dead bark from trees." Slinger's exploration of the mutually constitutive relationship between women and domestic architecture is neither alienating in the sense of Louise Bourgeois's *Femme Maison* sculptures, in which dollhouse-sized edifices obscure the identifying features of mannequin-like women, nor self-effacing like Francesca Woodman's "ghost photos," blurry self-portraits shot in decaying interiors in the various cities where the young artist went to school.

Slinger's project instead seeks to locate lasting liberation within domestic space and within the body, infiltrating and reclaiming the very structures of her oppression. What's distinctive about *An Exorcism* is how candidly Slinger shows her hand as she arranges these imagined scenes: about one hundred pages in, following a sequence of collages that feature her protagonist bound and humiliated, she writes, "I'm bored with being the victim of this sado-masochistic fantasy," and begins to change the subsequent scenes in the heroine's favor.

Slinger deftly distills a web of literary symbols into a cohesive expression of catharsis, one that is particular to her situation and ultimately rooted in the period and culture in which *An Exorcism* was first conceived. Today, the book stands as a testament to the psychological turmoil that many women experimenting with new media and performance in the 1960s and '70s experienced, when faced with the undue burden of navigating sexism and censorship on top of their art careers (another of Slinger's erotic photobooks, *Mountain Ecstasy* (1978), was seized and burned by British customs en route from the printers, and encounters with misogynistic gallerists prompted her to retreat from the artworld for three decades, from 1982 to 2009). For a present-day reader, *An Exorcism* may feel dated, if only because its emphasis on gendered anatomy—and the "feminine mystique" Slinger's text ascribes to her protagonist—reinforces a myth of difference derived from biology, but the personal-is-political approach Slinger takes in her work remains audacious and

worthy of emulation, and her surreal imagery continues to fascinate, like a recurring dream one has yet to decode.



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Jenny Wu is a writer and educator based in New York.

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