

Die Kraft



des Alters

represented woman as a subject. In 1973, Penny Slinger slipped naked into a wedding cake, spread her legs, placed a large eye across her private parts and called the collage *ICU, Eye Sea You, I See You*. The eye stares back at the viewer. It represents female sexuality that no longer passively “tolerates,” but actively looks out onto life. Slinger explains: “When I was growing up in England in the 50s and 60s, women hardly owned their sexuality at all. Men were the sexual beings and we were the ones who just had to open our legs and close our eyes and think of England. There wasn’t any pleasure for us and, therefore, we were only firing on a couple of cylinders. As I grew up, I thought: ‘No, this seems completely wrong to me—we need to be able to claim our right to our own full psychosensual, sexual selves.’”³

Women often have to fight for their right to enjoy their sexuality well into their senior years, as exemplified by a court case in Portugal. A botched gynecological operation left a woman in such severe pain that she could no longer have sex. She sued. However, the Portuguese court reduced her compensation payment on appeal, claiming that the plaintiff was already fifty and had two children when she had the operation, and that sex was therefore less important than when she was younger, its role in life decreasing with age. The woman took the case to a higher authority. The European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg ruled that the judgment was discriminatory. The Portuguese judges had ignored the psychological and physical importance of sexuality for women, since a sex life is a human right for older people too.⁴ Chapeau!

On the one hand, the Portuguese judgment reflects a common prejudice held by broad swathes of the populace: menopause spells the end of a woman’s sex life. On the other hand, the European Court of Human Rights’ revocation of this discriminatory judgment reveals a shift in values. This can also be seen in other isolated examples, such as the public appearances of Brigitte Macron, sixty-four, with her husband Emmanuel Macron, who is twenty-five years her junior, or Vivienne Westwood, seventy-six, with her husband Andreas Kronthaler, fifty-one. The term “cougar” is sometimes used to categorize women who seek out younger men, whether for a relationship or for casual sex. The concept was popularized, above all, by the American TV series *Cougar Town* (2009–2015).

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Penny Slinger, “‘Being different is just who you are. What you do with it is up to you,’” interview with Anna McNay, *studio international*, April 9, 2015.

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<https://saudeglobaldotorg1.files.wordpress.com/2017/07/judgment-carvalho-pinto-de-sousa-morais-v-portugal-decision-to-reduce-compensation-awarded-to-50-year-old-woman-was-discriminatory-1.pdf>; siehe auch <https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/menschrechts-gerichtshof-urteil-sex-101.html> (accessed on August 30, 2017). My thanks to the Viennese lawyer and art collector Alexia Stuefer for this reference.

fig. 1

Hannah Wilke, *Super-T-Art*, 1974, courtesy of Hannah Wilke / Donald Goddard / Sammlung Verbund / Sammlung Verbund Collection



fig. 2

Hannah Wilke, *Intra-Venus Series No. 3*, aus der Serie *Performatist self-portrait with Donald Goddard*, 9. August 1992, from the series *Performatist Self-Portrait with Donald Goddard*, August 9, 1992, Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles

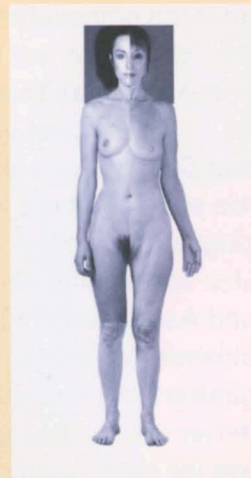


fig. 3

Penny Slinger, *My Body*, 2015, Courtesy of the artist

designed to evoke sexual desire. What did the artist do when, at the age of forty-seven, she was diagnosed with lymphoma? In the early 1990s, her sexy body began to change visibly, as disease and aging took their toll. Nevertheless, no amount of vanity in the world could curb her erotic desire. Although it no longer reflected the usual ideals of beauty, she continued to use her own body in her art right up to her death in 1993. These are moving and radical photographs. As before in *Super-T-Art*, in her *Intra-Venus Series* (1991–93; fig. 2), the artist adopts the Botticelli pose. Naked. Bald and bereft of her beautiful long hair, exhausted and surrounded by hypodermic needles, tubes, a toilet bowl, hospital slippers, and a wheelchair.

How can we interpret her response to her own sick, aging body? Wilke's last photographs widen our narrow horizons regarding female sensuality. All through her life, her erotic aura was important to her and now, in the face of death, she refused to renounce this.

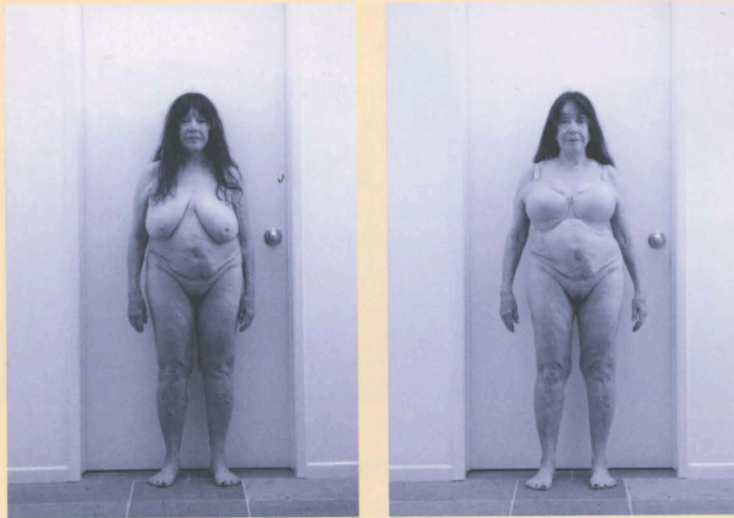
Penny Slinger's art has always revolved around female sexual self-awareness. Even at the age of sixty-nine, in the series *My Body* (fig. 3), she uses her own body, presenting it naked and juxtaposed with her younger self: "I present myself naked, in body casts and assemblages in one series, and in life-size photographic print multimedia collage in the other. My body has aged, but it is still my body, not that different from how it was fifty years ago. I want to exhibit how I am still using myself as my own muse, and I am still relevant, fully embodied in my matured transmission and transition."¹⁵ She further explains

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Penny Slinger in an email conversation with the author, July 2017.

fig. 4

Eleanor Antin, *CARVING: 45 Years Later*, 2017, ca. 500 Fotografien (Detail: erster Tag und letzter Tag), c. 500 photographs (detail: first and last day), courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York



passionately: "Especially as someone who has used her own image in her work throughout her life, I have an archetypal image of myself, which tends to be timeless. The mirror no longer reflects that exactly, so I am having to adapt to that. But I am determined to own myself in all aspects and phases of my being, and to manifest that in a way that acts as a blueprint to encourage others to do the same. Our definition of beauty can do with an upgrade that embraces quality of being, depth of experience, not just the attraction of surfaces. For I feel it is the wisdom of the feminine, not just the feminine, that is of deepest significance to cultivate at this time. And that wisdom needs a voice and a platform."¹⁶

Not being ashamed of the aging female body but, the exact opposite, introducing it self-confidently into their art, is something that several feminist artists have in common. In 2017, Eleanor Antin repeated a piece from the early 1970s by going on a diet for several weeks and documenting this in photographs of her naked body taken from different angles. As in the earlier work, the many photographs are arranged in a grid and have the same small format. Antin called her photographic performance *CARVING: 45 Years Later* (fig. 4). She shed the first few kilos quickly and then took around five months to lose the rest. Antin likens her eighty-two-year-old body to a "sculpture" that she "carves" into the desired shape. Her motives were the same as in the 1970s: a criticism of the prevailing ideals of beauty, including the persistent tyranny of slimness. By using her aged

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Quoted from Slinger 2015 (see note 3).