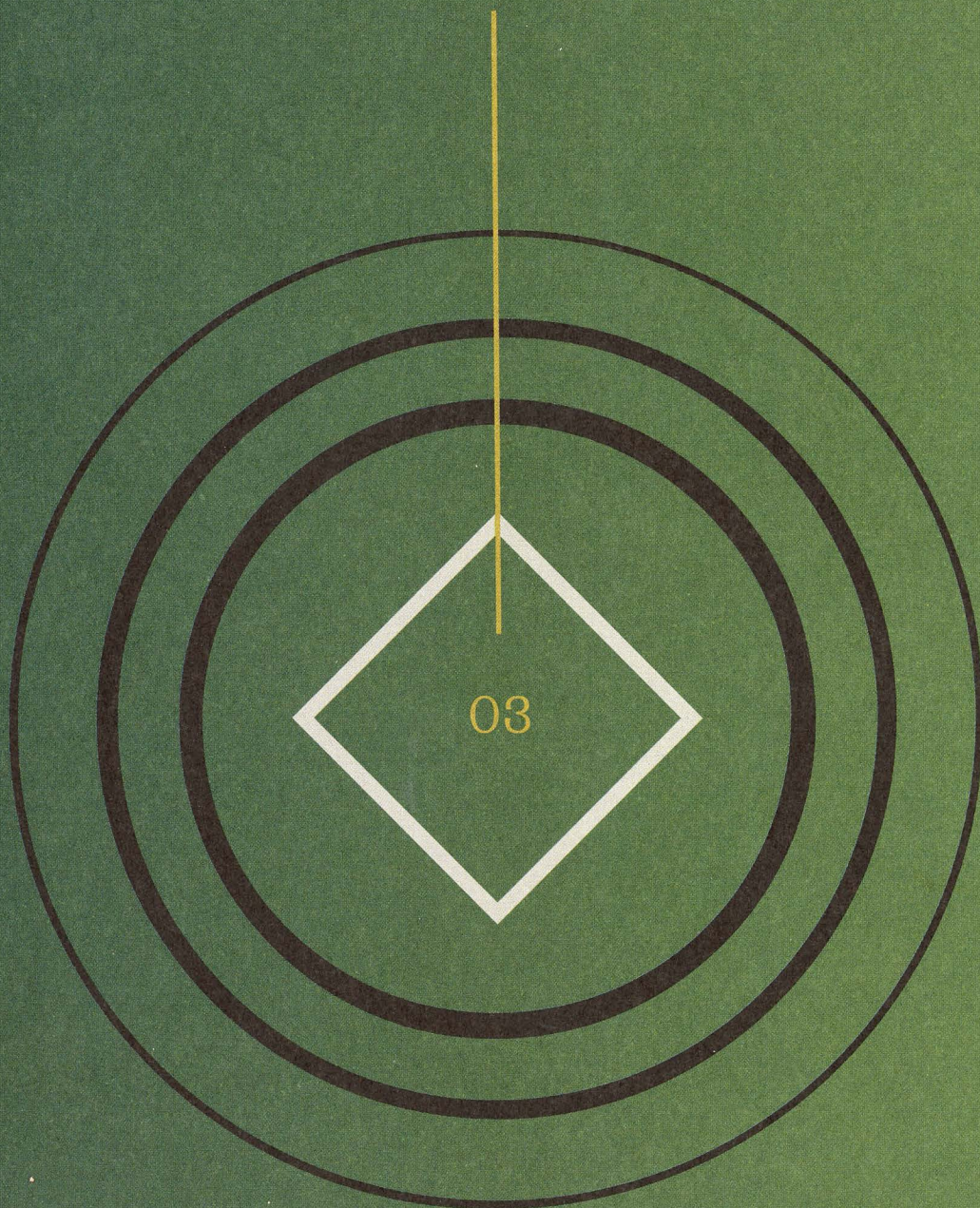


Another Gaze

A feminist film journal



**Remembering Agnès Varda,
Barbara Hammer, Carolee
Schneemann, Camille Billops
Astra Taylor, Akosua Adoma
Owusu, Ericka Beckman,
Jane Arden, Penny Slinger,
Mati Diop, Ana Mendieta,
Lina Wertmüller, Margarethe
Von Trotta, Ulrike Ottinger, Hito
Steyerl, Catherine Breillat,
Gloria Camiruaga
Projecting Politics, Grieving
Through Cinema, Other/Worldly
Images, Lost and Found
in the Archive, Feminism and
Violence, Fan Subtitles**

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Into The Shadows and Back Out Again: Penny Slinger's Violent Seductions

BY ADINA GLICKSTEIN

Around 1980, Tot Taylor, the co-founder of London's Riflemaker Gallery, found a shabby, coverless book in the sale bin at the Photographer's Gallery bookstore. He was transfixed by its contents: collages of women's bodies woven into the architecture of a luxurious Victorian house, with pasted-in shreds of colour bringing alive everything from butterflies to scenes depicting BDSM. The book was *An Exorcism* – a cycle of works made between 1970 and '77 by Penny Slinger, a mixed media artist and filmmaker whose moment of notoriety in the art world had, by then, already faded. But Slinger's photo collages, with their marriage of occult imagery and sexual transgression, are just as striking now as they were to Taylor nearly 40 years ago. Slinger scandalises, but *thoughtfully*: like Artaud's theatrical language of cruelty, her works across various media mobilise shock to evoke the depths of a subjectivity hidden by gendered marginalisation.

Taylor recounts this incident in Richard Kovitch's documentary, *Penny Slinger: Out of the Shadows* (2017), which seeks to bring Slinger's work back into the public eye. After falling out of favour thanks to an exhibition gone wrong in the late '70s, Slinger's outlandish constructions continue to inform the fighting spirit of feminist artmaking, yet her influence is under-acknowledged. Screened alongside a collection of works by Slinger and her contemporaries at Anthology Film Archives this January, then across the UK in July, Kovitch's film explores Slinger's provocative sensibility, along with the hostilities of the '70s art world which kept her from gaining wider prominence. Many of her films that screened at Anthology are also excerpted in the documentary. Cinematic exhibition of Slinger's works is rare; throughout her career her films have primarily been reserved for the gallery circuit, which enabled her to screen them alongside complementary collages, sculptures, and installations. But as the documentary's appraisal of art-scene politicking insinuates, this was also central to her downfall: the commercial galleries of the '70s weren't prepared for Slinger's experimental marriage of multiple media and confrontational sexual content.

Slinger's shocks and seductions draw on the legacy of Surrealism, but recasts its aesthetic eccentricity

1. Laura Mulvey, *Impending Time: Mary Kelly's Corpus" in Visual and Other Pleasures.* 154. to probe the female psyche. In a film documenting Slinger's 1969 exhibition, the camera is positioned in front of a mirror made from fragmented triangles. A masked woman – Slinger herself – moves across the image in a series of jumpy, single-frame shots. Her body parts are misaligned, cut across the mirror's angular seams. In 'Rhythm of Two Figures' (1969), a series of still images move between the regions of two intertwined

2. *Spare Rib, issue 17, November 1973.* 21. bodies, as contorted as they are intimate. The film contains several other such dyads: two masked women; a shadowy male figure set off against a white-painted woman. Both films are silent, asking us to draw our own aural conclusions. In Slinger's jarring arrangements of bodies, I read the reluctance of the straight feminist, grappling to reconcile her own desire with the power politics of heteronormative visual culture.

Can shock be a pathway to liberation? Slinger appears, often naked, in her own collages, emphatically foregrounded as both image and image-maker. In these constructions she challenges the objectifying workings of the gaze, concurrently theorised by the likes of Laura Mulvey. But where the classical narrative films that Mulvey analyzes render their spectator complicit in misogynistic ways of looking by collapsing the spectator's gaze with that of the male protagonist on-screen, Slinger's films and collages lay bare an intersubjective network of looks. Eyes, mouths, and yonic voids are cut and pasted both on paper and in cinematic montage, rebuking the classical, misogynistic organisation of spectatorship. Disembodied, they form the focal points of these collages, and, by flirting with abjection, make it impossible for the spectator to look passively. Overflowing with affect, they draw the viewer's attention sharply to the politics of visibility: their strangeness asks us to consider the strangeness of all looking relations, including and especially those inherent to the patriarchal vernacular of representation that presided at the time.

While some of her contemporaries, including Carolee Schneemann, struggled with reception in certain feminist circles because of the sexual nature of their work, Slinger's films somehow evade this line of criticism. Mulvey herself has acknowledged that her early writings – contemporaneous with Slinger's films – encourage a certain "repression of the discourse of the body and sexuality altogether" in their rejection of the over-sexualised female representations that dominated classical narrative cinema.¹ Yet in a 1973 issue of *Spare Rib*, Mulvey lauds Slinger's work for "making phantasy and dream into the discourse of art" by "using sexuality not just to portray its conventional surface but to express the hidden desires and fears which warp and govern it."² Her affinity for Surrealist imagery, by Mulvey's account, prevented Slinger from simply re-staging the objectifying gaze, so normalised in conventional portrayals of heterosexual pleasure: by including fantastical imagery, she lays bare the webs of repression and desire that, for psychoanalytic film theorists like Mulvey, serve as scaffolding to a sexist film grammar.

Here, sexual fantasy is suffused with a sense of cruelty. As Slinger explores the visual politics of desire, it's impossible to mistake the bodies on-screen for passive objects of display. She is interested in the violence intrinsic to film and collage, media reliant on cutting-up. Montage necessitates a butchery of bodies, but Slinger's compositions sever the sight lines of the male gaze: her fractured women illuminate the violent, possessive reduction at play in conventional cinema's way of imaging desire. Forty years down the line, what comes across as cruelty might be reconsidered in a different light: is this affective punch simply an expression of the discomfort of watching oneself be seen?

'Mouths and Masks' (1969) culminates in a head-on shot of a woman's face – one of the few in the film to be glimpsed unmasked. At moments it seems as though her gaze is directed at the spectator, but as the sole light source illuminating her face moves in a circle her eyes recede into darkness. A white plaster cast appears over her face, which appears to melt and undulate in an unsettling play of shadow. The surface of this face is endlessly malleable, distorted by the same light that enables its visibility. But the two dark circles remain anchored as the focal point of the shot. Slinger is behind this mask, a strange reflection of the transfixed viewer. In a satisfying twist, she positions herself as the opposite of Surrealist film's most notorious female character, the victim of ocular mutilation in *Un Chien Andalou*. Defiance is visible in her heavily made-up eyes – she looks with active force, as both subject and author of her own visual representation. The spectator's ability to fix her as the object of their gaze, troubled by the dance of light, is teased and foreclosed. Slinger alone controls the conditions under which she can be seen: into the shadows, and then back out again.



Another Gaze: You first started making films in the late '60s. What was it about the medium that attracted you?

Penny Slinger: I became interested in film while I was an art student at Chelsea College of Art, I think because it felt like an incredible, all-inclusive envelope. I've always considered myself a multimedia artist. As a child I had a speech impediment that made me shy so doing performing arts was a way of dealing with that head-on, as well as an important part of my self-healing.

I was a lot more inspired by many of the films I saw coming up in the '60s and '70s, than a lot of the work coming out of the other plastic arts. At that time, I often went to the BFI and watched a lot of Surrealist films and new types of filmmaking. I remember feeling very early on that the medium was wasted whenever it was fixated on a linear process, on the storytelling model. With my filmmaking I wanted to take people into a timeless place, which I guess is a more surreal approach.

There wasn't a film camera at Chelsea, so I borrowed the 16mm camera from the Technology Institute over the road. I later got into the Royal College of Art's film course. During the holidays, I went to work for [the production company] Vaughan Rogasin Films because I wanted to find out what it was like to work on the other side of the camera. During that time, I met the filmmaker Peter Whitehead and he asked me to go off with him to make films. I went to the head of the Royal College of Art's film school and asked him whether I could postpone my appointment for a year. He told me that I'd have to reapply, but that it was much better to go out and make films in the real world. So, of course, I never went back.

AG: You often collaborate with lovers and partners in your work. Why is collaboration important to you? Can psychosexual tensions be productive for artmaking?

PS: No woman is an island. I've always been interested in collaboration because it's part of the whole dynamic of being an artist. I felt that our cultural idea of The Artist who creates great work but is starving in a garret was the wrong mythology to propagate. I always wanted to integrate my life and my work intimately. The pieces of art I was creating were totems of my life experience. All the important relationships in my life have been the raw materials. I wanted us all to get into this melting pot together and see what we could create, both with our life and with our art, as a dynamic and ongoing process. Peter Whitehead was a major collaborator. The collaboration we envisioned didn't quite happen along the lines we wanted. A lot of that was to do with a strange power dynamic of who was in charge and never being able to resolve that fully. To his credit, when our relationship ended and I was working for many years on 'An Exorcism', a film that helped process a lot of that relationship, Peter was still willing to be the model for me: to be a male muse. We put ourselves right on that frontline, exposing ourselves to reveal the intricacies of our relationships, even when we were no longer in one together.

Coming out of art school, I saw how isolated lots of the artists and their activities were, and how that created these 'ego shells'. I want to bust through those shells, which is why I deliberately engaged in the women's theatre group, Holocaust [with Jane Arden], because I wanted a dynamic where I could dissolve those boundaries, and bring my creativity into a collective role.¹ I wanted to be able to find that linkage, which is hard to find through love, but which you can find through shared creativity. When you get to a really nice lucid place in collaboration, ego boundaries fall away. You bring in essence rather than artifice. I love that.

AG: You shot a film in 1969 with Peter Whitehead, titled 'Lilford Hall', which was never completed. The silent outtakes from

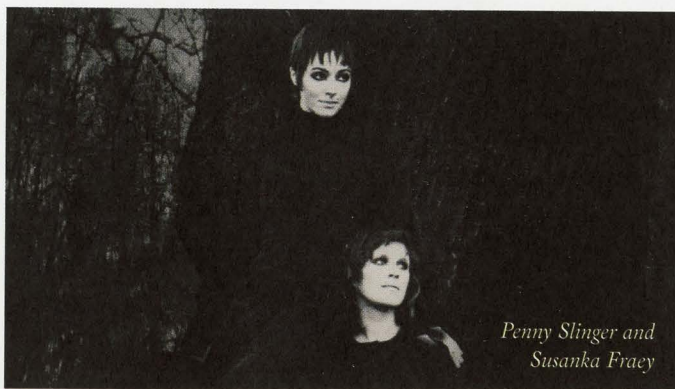
this unrealised project first screened in a gallery setting at Blum and Poe gallery in 2014. How did the footage resurface?

PS: Peter passed away recently

and I'm so grateful to have had the chance to reconnect with him. We hadn't seen each other much over the years as our lives went in different directions but [in around 2012] he told me he had the Lilford Hall footage in his archive. In 1969, we shot all this footage in Lilford Hall, a stately home in Northamptonshire, but it had never really seen the light of day. We managed to dig it out, make digital copies, and it was shown at Blum and Poe Gallery and at the Hayward Gallery in 2015. It came out of the can without sound and unedited, but I liked it just as it was. I wanted to show it like that in a gallery context. It has this very *Last Year in Marienbad* [Alain Resnais, 1961] feeling because of the repeated shots. It puts you in this time loop: a time out of time. I find it an interesting document, partly due to the fact we could never really crystallise it into anything. It has that loose, dreamy mood to it.

AG: You work a lot with images of mirrors and masks. Were you drawing on particular influences? What ideas were you trying to explore?

PS: My interest in masks drew inspiration from Jean Cocteau; Georges Franju's *Eyes Without a Face* [1960]; and *The Face of Another* [Hiroshi Teshigahara, 1966]. I was also looking at the history of mime and [the mime artist] Lindsay



Penny Slinger and
Susanka Fraey

Kemp. It was a very direct reflection of my real fascination with how we are seen and how we see ourselves: what are the masks we wear to deal with the world.

I made this life cast of my face, made masks from that life cast and had different women wearing my mask. It was like we were one person. Mirroring came into that too: the idea of Self and Other had been an early fascination. This also tied into the notion of seeing myself as my own muse, and then seeing another woman as a reflection of myself and extending that like an infinite mirrored tunnel. I was fascinated not so much with the myth of Narcissus and falling in love with one's own image, but more an idea of self-reflection and self-inquiry.

AG: And then in *The Other Side of the Underneath* (Jane Arden, 1972), you devised a scene using broken mirrors (with Susanka Fraey). Can you speak a bit about what you were trying to achieve with that scene?

PS: In my final year at art school I did a lot of work with mirrors in my painting and printmaking. For example, I created a sheet of fabric onto which I stuck a series of mirrors. I then manipulated this flexible mirror board to see the model, or myself,

in these mirrors in a fragmented and reunified way. It was a way of making instant collage. When we went into the film with Jane, we took some of that idea into what we had done live as theatre, and that



Lilford Hall (1969)

was myself and Susanka, who had been my friend and muse right from when I met her at Chelsea. Again, it was about 'Self/Other' reflections, exploring who has the power and the transference of power, love and hate, and all those things that were reflected in the scene.

AG: In *Out of the Shadows* (2017), Richard Kovitch's documentary about your life and work, you said you "wanted to be my own muse", and this has recently become a bit of a tagline in recent interviews and exhibitions. How have you gone about that in your work?

PS: This came from when I was at art school, studying the history of art and looking around at the general climate in the art world. I did feel from a young age that I was meant to be this very famous artist! Woman has always been present throughout the history of art, very often unclothed, and always as the muse. This muse is usually depicted through the eyes of a male artist. The presence of female artists is so minimal throughout the entire history of art. I made a decision right then not to settle for this. I want to be my own muse and I want to be on both sides of the equation! I'm going to be the one who creates the art and the one who inspires the art. A lot of the images in my book *50% the Visible Woman* (1971)² focus on how woman is seen in society and throughout artistic institutions. I made that one of my primary studies when I came out as an artist.

AG: How were you first introduced to Tantric art, and what impact did this have on your art practice and general outlook?

PS: My first introduction was at an exhibition called "Tantra" at the Hayward Gallery in 1971. The show was a total eye-opener for me. It was at a time when I was thinking "where do I fit into art now?" Surrealism, which I loved, was no longer an active movement, so I felt I could no longer access the participation and exchange with other artists that I could have got during its heyday. There weren't really any movements I could identify with. When I went to this exhibition, it was as if I'd come home. I felt that sense of recognition, of feeling such a resonance with the imagery, which

seemed to come directly from Surrealism. All of this just felt so familiar, and yet it was a world I didn't know anything about. It also made me understand abstraction for the first time. I'd never really been able to get a handle on it because all the people at art school who were making abstract art never seemed to have a good reason for it.

In the exhibition, I stood in front of this Yantra, this mystic diagram, and it was five downward pointing triangles with a dot in the middle and a symbolic lotus around the edge. It was just called 'To Her'. Looking at this, I felt like I gained an understanding of this homage to goddess energy. This seemed to me to be the evolution of Surrealism, and the direction I wanted to explore. Surrealism dealt so much with the subconscious and the unconscious but Tantra seemed to be dealing with the higher roles and the super-conscious. It took years for me to find someone who would have experience in this realm of Tantra, and who would know about the art and philosophy.

Then one day Jane Arden told me, "You must meet Nik Douglas, he's the only liberated man!" It took a while to meet him but when I did it was as if all the pieces fell into place. Nik had a guru, was skilled in all kinds of yoga, had been living in India, and knew Sanskrit and Tibetan. This is what I'd been waiting for. I started to tell him experiences I'd had that I'd never really had any frame of reference for. It was as if I now had a way of joining the dots and connecting to the lineage of an experiential tradition outside any of the religious forms. I was looking for something that integrated my spiritual path with my secular path, my senses with my understanding of spirit. When I met Nik we got together, and that relationship lasted 20 years. Several books and art came out of that connection and collaboration. I was so excited to come out of the dark confines of psychological exploration into this Technicolor world.

AG: How did Tantra intersect with your evolving exploration of female sexuality?

PS: For me this was the saving grace! Tantra is very female-centric. We were no longer stuck with the idea of a subservient feminine, but were actually offered the idea of an active feminine principle,

going to be Lady Picasso. The first time I smoked anything was with Peter Whitehead in Morocco. I smoked some *kif* with him and it was like the whole space we were in – this beautiful hotel, La Mamounia in Marrakech – just opened up, beautiful and liquid. But that was the only time I tried it. The next time was with the women's theatre group. I realised that this was a wonderful tool for creativity, for probing and for lifting and for hacking things open. I never really associated [drugs] with recreation after that, but with *re-creation*, with really getting to the heart of things as an ally, a true ally.

Though *The Other Side of the Underneath* came out really heavy, the theatre production did have some humour. It was all done with attention to the vignette, with this vaudevillian element. A lot of that was lost in the film, which went into a much darker area. Jane had a great sense of humour and a great wit.

AG: Was something lost in the translation to film, or were you still able to retain a sense of this collaborative, feminist coming together?

PS: I don't think it was the translation to film that caused that loss. It was much more to do with the intention of the film. The play was a big pot that we all poured everything of ourselves into; that goeey, rich, visceral material that we had all invested in from our raw experiences. At the time, I felt that Jane was holding this crucible and allowing all this to happen. It was very much a self-manifesting process for everybody in the group. When we went on to make the film, partly

because we went on location to Wales, where Jane was brought up, but partly too because Jane suddenly realised that this could be a vehicle for her to express her own journey, so it

somehow became less to do with the archetypes that all of us were bringing, our shared experiences, and more to do with Jane's experience. It became less exciting and interactive. The end result was not, for me, as transformative as I hoped it would be. We were left in the darkness, and so was Jane. It did not have that desired therapeutic effect.

AG: Over the years, many have understood some of the strategies employed in the film as being fundamentally exploitative, like the use of hallucinogenic drugs to manipulate performances, playing people off against each other in psychodramatic situations, or incorporating vulnerable performers into a party sequence which is now infamous.

PS: It's always been a little bit of a hard thing to look at, the question of whether Jane was being exploitative or whether this was a solid, genuine attempt to bring all this up for the healing of everyone involved. But the reality is that no healing really came from it. I don't know whether I'd ever say that it was a deliberate attempt to use people. Jane wasn't strong enough – though she came across as super strong – to be able to manage it all. She had disintegrated into herself by the end of the film. That's why everybody was left flailing. Not because she deliberately wanted to use people and throw them away. Although there was a bit of bad feeling at the end of the theatre production because whenever she did interviews, she'd talk about it as "I directed this, that and the other", and not describe it as the collaborative project it was. And because of that, it was a challenge for

me to decide whether to do the film or not. But there was enough there that I felt was real, strong, and important that I decided that I *would* do it. I thought that I would do my part but



keep my psyche a little intact. But of course, it didn't work out like that. I can't do things in halves, so I went all the way with it!

AG: You then starred in *Vibration* (1975), a short experimental video on Sufi meditation which Bond and Arden made after *The Other Side of the Underneath*. Did it act as a form of catharsis?

PS: What *Vibration* represented, as far as I can see, was a form of healing after the disintegration of it all. Jane went to the Sufis to try to heal herself with meditation. The film came out of her experience with that. That healing didn't really spread to anyone else in the same way. I wasn't a part of the whole fabric of that film, I just had that part to play along with Sebastian [Saville, Arden's son]. Jane asked me to do this heart meditation, but I wasn't part of the creation of the film. That was another thing that I really related to Jane: that she had this whole social/political side, but also a strong mystic and spiritual element. I've always juggled and played with these [sides] too. Tantra was the spiritual path that came out of that for me, while for Jane it was the Sufis.

Whatever the fallout, it was a very brave and cutting-edge activity that we were involved in, and the intention was to bring attention to the plight of women. For me, this went on through the whole process of working on 'The Exorcism' project, and exploring the notion of the death and rebirth of the Self. I feel that I did get to resurrect and rebirth myself from it, so I didn't get stuck in that darkness.

AG: You sometimes appeared naked alongside your artwork in pornographic magazines. I'm thinking, for example, of the 1973 issue of *Knave*, where you appear next to your sculpture, 'Fruit of My Womb'. Why were you interested in placing yourself, and your art, in the context of men's soft-porn magazines?

PS: Yes. At that time, I saw that there wasn't any erotica for women available. It was all for men. I've always loved the naked body and think it's one of the most beautiful things we have as humans. I didn't want to ignore this genre, because it's very important for people. It's a basic instinct. Our sexual energy is the same energy that gives

us energy for liberation and inspiration! If that energy is blocked and stifled, we don't get very far. I put myself in this context of being naked in these magazines, but with my artwork, and some of my own commentary. So men came and took a look, and maybe they were attracted to me, but then they always saw what I had to say, and I think it made them think again. I wanted to make people aware that I am a subject not an object. I have many levels. Just because I look a certain way doesn't mean I'm not the full package. I wanted to stir that all up a bit.

AG: There seems to be a big 'gap' in your career'. Why did you leave the art world, and how does it feel being back in it?

PS: I didn't deliberately leave, but I was frustrated with the art world, through some direct experiences. Other opportunities arose for me to share my ideas in different ways. There's a certain kind of elitism in the art world; only a certain number of people will come to an art gallery and witness the work. When I discovered Tantra, I thought the information needed to be shared on a wider level. That's why I became interested in publishing. I had a new partner and spent 15 years living in the Caribbean.

Several opportunities came up to get my work back out there, like the 'Angels of Anarchy' exhibition, which was the first exhibition of women surrealists in this country, and the 'Dark Monarch' exhibition at Tate St Ives in 2009. Then Tot Taylor approached me with Rifle-maker gallery. The door opened gradually and started picking up momentum.

Now I'm at a confluence where, for the first time, women artists are being seen as important. There is a certain amount of looking back at why they have been missing. It feels like the right moment to be back.