

PERFORMING AROUSAL

Precarious Bodies and Frames of Representation

Edited by
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& Yana Meerzon

What is the connection between arousal and precarity in performance?

Drawing on the complicated relationship between arousing images and their frames of representation, *Performing Arousal* is a collection of essays that considers arousal as a mode of inquiry and encourages new ways of staging and examining bodies in performance across artistic disciplines, modern history, and cultural contexts.

A multidisciplinary examination of arousal as a project of social, scientific, cultural, and artistic experimentation, the collection explores the relationship between arousal and the precarious body and discusses how our perception of arousal has transformed over the last century.

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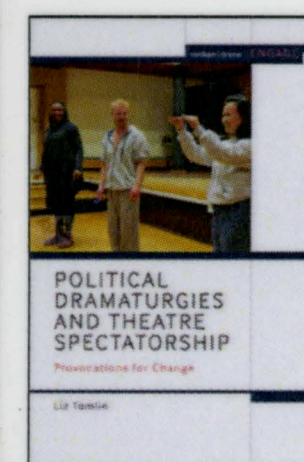
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Blood and Desire

Collaborating through Arousal

Alissa Clarke

In 1970, artist and LSD proponent Amanda Feilding (1943–) drilled a hole in her head to access a state of bliss.¹ Meanwhile, feminist sex positive artist Penny Slinger (1947–) sought ecstatic liberation through self-exorcism. Echoing the emphasis in the long 1960s on the revolution of the self, both artists pursued joyful self-transformation via radical means. Slinger's surrealist, sexually transgressive photo-collage series, *An Exorcism* (1969–77), dissects her experience of gender while mapping a passionate history of intimacy and betrayal between the artist and her lovers, Peter Whitehead and Susanka Fraey. It was first published as a book and exhibited at the Patrick Seale Gallery and Mirandy Gallery in London in 1977. Atmospherically suggestive of a gothic romance and mystery psychodrama starring the three lovers, the viewer follows Slinger's sexual and emotive journey as a spiritual pathway of self-discovery toward ebullient feminist rebirth. Feilding also perceived her "destiny" as determined by this "auto-sculpture" of her head, which "expanded my consciousness" by "enlarging the area of contact between bloodstream and braincells" (Feilding 1978). Despite the oft-cited ability "to get permanently high" through trepanation (Mellen 2015 [1970]: 15), Feilding experienced a gentler pleasurable release: "a 'relaxing' . . . like the tide coming in, a lifting" (Speed 2016). Feilding and Slinger's determined pursuit of these liberating pleasures and their desire to disseminate them were fueled by the arousing heat of making important new discoveries and modes of representation.

Indeed, focused on raising awareness of the benefits of the process, Feilding's actions were captured by "a self-portrait of an auto-sculpture" (1978): her notorious fifteen-minute art film, "Heartbeat in the Brain" (1970). It was screened at galleries, including the Suydam Gallery in New York in 1978 and the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London in 2011. The Suydam screening was part of Feilding's "Special Project Exhibition" of stills from the film at P.S. 1 (now affiliated with the Museum of Modern

Art) entitled *Trepanation for the National Health* (1978). Reflecting emphasis within performance and conceptual art of the period on the overlap between life and art, she presented her subsequent decision to stand for British parliament in 1979 and 1983 as part of the artwork. The artwork's title served as her platform (*I Am My Own Laboratory* 2018). Due to Feilding's belief that trepanation should be available as a medical procedure via the National Health Service (1995 [1993]: 122–3) and concern that the film could encourage self-trepanation, *Heartbeat in the Brain* remains unreleased. It is accessible in part via Eli Kabillio's 1998 documentary, *A Hole in the Head*, and Oliver Hockenhull's 2018 documentary on Feilding, *I Am My Own Laboratory*. This chapter examines the artwork by piecing together the footage available in Kabillio and Hockenhull's films, along with Feilding and her former partner Joe Mellen's published reflections on *Trepanation for the National Health* (TNH).

Writers for cult publications have perceived Feilding as operating on similar societal margins and so portrayed her explorations sympathetically. However, freakish curiosity and fear marked journalistic and populist representations of her actions until quite recently. In 1996, Feilding established the Foundation to Further Consciousness, later retitled the Beckley Foundation, to focus on conducting scientific research into psychoactive substances and campaigning for global drug reform. From 2016, her work received positive publicity through governmentally approved trials on LSD and psilocybin, conducted in partnership with University College London (UCL). This increased respectability has been accompanied by extensive enthusiastic profiles in UK-based and international news forums, with the *New Statesman* dubbing Feilding the “acid countess” (Chakelian 2019) and *The Face* celebrating her as the “doyenne of psychedelics” (Cartwright 2019). These profiles have embraced Feilding's cutting-edge expertise in psychedelics, but also her apparent bohemian eccentricities, elite titled background (Feilding is the Countess of Wemyss and March, and the Beckley Foundation is situated on her landed family property), and previously more marginalized positioning. Yet, this doesn't negate the transgressive power of Feilding's earlier self-penetrative act.

The shift in perception toward Feilding has been matched by the resurgence of interest in Slinger. Between 1969 and 1978, Slinger's striking surrealist explorations through photography, painting, film, sculpture, and Xerox experiments challenged gendered and heterocentric norms, attracting extensive critical acclaim within the British art world. With an exuberant feminist sex positivity at their heart, and often centered around her (frequently nude) form, they advocated for the freedoms and joys found through generous excessive sexual pleasures that Slinger regards as

“feminine” but could be adopted by any gender. However, as a consequence of Slinger's deliberate withdrawal from the art world and fame, that significant first body of work has been almost completely absented from feminist art and British countercultural histories. Its rediscovery from 2009 onward, initiated by Manchester Art Gallery's *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism* exhibition, has been explicitly highlighted in the extensive recent exhibitions of her work and cinematically depicted in Richard Kovitch's excellent documentary, *Penny Slinger: Out of the Shadows* (2017).

Numerous news forums and art, new age, and scientific magazines have published profiles of Slinger and Feilding, and Feilding has contributed to academic medical publications on psychedelics.² However, this is the first substantive academic investigation of *An Exorcism* and *TNH*. Reflecting Feilding's own identification as primarily an artist (*I Am My Own Laboratory* 2018), this is also the first academic work to treat Feilding as such. Hence, it is not within the remit or interest of this chapter to consider the validity of trepanning as a medical process, which has been discussed extensively elsewhere, including by Feilding and Mellen. Christopher Turner stresses that “Feilding wasn't interested in performing the operation as an extreme form of body art . . . because she believed it would have a life-changing effect on her” (2007/8: 65). Yet, clear comparisons can be drawn between *TNH* and Orlan and Marina Abramovic's life-changing body art practices. Recognizing the important contribution that Feilding offers to the field of contemporary body art and that Slinger's work has made to feminist sex positive art, this chapter seeks to build on this necessary resurgence of interest in Feilding and Slinger's innovative practice.

The creative processes surrounding *An Exorcism* and *TNH* can be fruitfully viewed through Ara Osterweil's depiction of the “alternative models of affective labor and creative collaboration” evident in the American underground film and art world of the 1960s and 1970s, which were rooted in “queer modes of friendship, work, sex, and intimacy that were as historically significant as the radical articulation of bodies taking place” within the artwork (2014: 15). Slinger and Feilding's loving and labored connections through blood and desire with a tightly interwoven series of lover-collaborators provide a fascinating example of how such alternative models of collaboration were mirrored by the British counterculture. Aided by documents from De Montfort University's Peter Whitehead Archive³ and interviews with Whitehead, Slinger, and Feilding, conducted by myself and others, this chapter will examine the collaborative processes and interactions surrounding *An Exorcism* and the film and exhibition from *TNH*. It will demonstrate how these collaborations were led by fearless female experimentation and direction of their own transgressive images, which

have frequently been absent from histories of the British counterculture. It will highlight some of the ways in which Feilding and Slinger were working with similar concerns to other contemporaneous artists, who have received greater critical attention, and anticipate the practice of later artists. It will argue that Feilding and Slinger's experiments facilitated groundbreaking representations of alternative states of being, gender, sexuality, and arousal.

Lover-Collaborators

Feilding and Slinger's lover-collaborations embodied the "new forms of relationality and resistance," aligned by Osterweil, with these alternative models of collaboration (2014: 11). Dutch guru-figure and initiator of the modern trepanning movement Bart Huges guided fellow trepanation enthusiast Joe Mellen, as well as Feilding's experiments into the expansion of consciousness via LSD and then self-trepanation. Feilding's curiosity about this expansion was interwoven with the "great love affair" that she had with the married Huges in 1966 (Turner 2007/8: 65). Brought together by closely shared motivations, Feilding then began an openly overlapping relationship with Mellen. The two raised a fledgling pigeon, "Birdie," in 1969. Birdie treated Feilding as first "his mother and then his mate" (Feilding cited in Perry 1998: 116), becoming the third collaborator in the mix. Yet, prior to all of this, according to the avant-garde documentarist Peter Whitehead, Feilding was Whitehead's lover. Whitehead was later intensely enticed by Mellen and Feilding's trepanation experiments. This intensity was equally evident in Whitehead's relationship with Slinger. Slinger's girlfriend, Susanka Fraey, was also drawn into that impassioned exchange. As this section outlines, these intense interwoven relations blurred sex, love, and labor, fueling innovative resistant artistic practices.

As has been frequently stressed before, "the early counterculture, for all of its exuberant, visionary idealism, was the 'territory of men'" (Lemke-Santangelo 2009: 2). Peter Whitehead's behavior seems to epitomize that territory and its territorialization of the female body. In interviews, books, and films, he reveled unabashedly in the role of phallogocentric voyeur and repeatedly highlighted his dedication to a lifelong pursuit of an enthralling muse (Whitehead 1997). This pursuit underpinned Whitehead's explanation of the overlap in themes between *An Exorcism* and the autobiographical, Freudian, rape-revenge fantasy pop-art film, *Daddy* (1973). *Daddy* was created with his next lover-collaborator, French artist Niki de Saint Phalle, and involved a performance by a further lover-collaborator, Mia Martin (Clarke 2019). Whitehead described these relationships, saying, "[I] lived

everything with Penny before I went to Niki, and then I lived it all out with Niki before eventually collapsing and ending up with Mia. So one way or another I was being initiated . . . by these creative goddesses" (2016a). Whitehead's heterocentric, romanticized depiction of love places the idealized female Other on a pedestal as muse. Yet, his emphasis on being initiated by these women begins to reorientate the perceived power dynamic in these artists' relationships with Whitehead and suggests its reorientation in other comparable countercultural lover-collaborations.

It also highlights a mutually invigorating overlap of sexual and creative motivations and reflects Whitehead's fascination with finding points of confluence with his lover-collaborators. As theatre director and performer trainer Phillip Zarrilli explains ensemble creative processes: "we are first and foremost sentient beings who can and do have an effect on one another simply by being in/sharing a space and process together" (2013: 371). That effect was felt by Whitehead when just sharing space with his future lover's practice. Hence, he portrayed his interest in Slinger as first awakened by seeing her work on display in 1969 in the ICA in the *Young and Fantastic* exhibition curated by Roland Penrose. That interest deepened into arousal when the two met, which Slinger attributes to "getting their inspiration from a similar source," describing how "we melded everything about ourselves really, we had such a vision to co-create" (2016). The seeds of *An Exorcism* stemmed from a co-creative desire to produce two sets of interwoven collages (one by each lover-collaborator), which never came to fruition. However, that shared vision provoked arousing inspiration, generating interwoven creative projects for Slinger and for Whitehead via *Daddy*. Similarly, Feilding and Mellen mutually supported one another's perforations, and while Feilding produced *TNH*, Mellen wrote his cult autobiography, *Bore Hole*.⁴

Such exciting cross-fertilization is embedded in Slinger's predilection for collage, which "take[s] elements that are familiar, but you recombine them in a way, which is unsettling and unfamiliar," creating a "relationship between things that opens you up into a new world" (Slinger 2016). Feilding's *Heartbeat in the Brain* similarly adopts careful and surprising recombinations of images. Footage of hair shaving and drilling are interwoven with those of the fledgling pigeon, Birdie, "nestling against her cheek" and "soar[ing] into the sky symbolising . . . freedom and release" (Blackwood 1983). This juxtaposition dislodges a fetishized focus on her bloodied form and underscores the intent of the film. Both Feilding and Slinger utilize what James M. Harding describes as the collage's "highly self-conscious or metacritical technique of radical juxtaposition. Its signature gesture is that of disrupting conventional meanings by an act of recontextualization that juxtaposes seemingly incongruent objects, images, ideas, or performative acts" (2012: 23). Just as Harding associates this

form with feminist avant-garde practice, so Slinger and Feilding deploy it to produce a radical aesthetic embedded in transgressive images that play with and explode gendered and specied expectations. It enables them to recreate and represent their bodies on their own terms.

Women at the Helm

In *The Explicit Body in Performance*, Rebecca Schneider pointedly argues that “when women as active agents picked up the avant-garde tradition of transgressive shock, as they began to do with a certain en masse fervor in the 1960s, the terms of transgression necessarily shifted. Female transgression presented a structural impossibility—almost a double shock. After all, men [are allowed to] transgress, women resist” (1997: 4). Slinger’s sexually explicit and sometimes harrowing images overtly delight in that double shock, while the shock of Feilding’s images is a by-product of her single-minded, self-administered pursuit and promotion of a modified skull. Just as Whitehead emphasized employing the camera as a microscope, sometimes on himself (1997), Slinger and Feilding’s transgressions involve sexual, intellectual, artistic, visceral, spiritual, and psychological penetration and revelation, enabled by a fearless embrace of embodied risk and precarity. It is unsurprising that Slinger literally walks a form of tightrope nude in a number of images in *An Exorcism*.

Tracing the agonizing disintegration of her lover-collaboration with Whitehead in *An Exorcism*, Slinger explains,

[I] wanted to turn my inside out and spread my guts on the floor for my inspection and that of others, no holds barred, so that they could move out of the shadows and into the light to be fully exorcised. I wanted to show that it was okay to feel these things, to let others know that they were not alone in these kinds of experiences. (Cited in Stief 2016: 331)

In an eviscerating image marked “Primal,” Slinger does just this, with her mouth frighteningly agape and the skin on her torso replaced by an overlaid pink rib cage through which a large serpent bursts and weaves, and her entrails ooze out into her crotch. Positioned both as an exploded Eve ripped asunder by the deceptive satanic male and as a painful adoption of phallic womanhood, the head of the serpent glides around the entrails and priapically replaces Slinger’s genitalia. Slinger’s powerful dissection of her experiences eclipses her lover-collaborator.

These resistant forms of relationality place women at the helm. Thus, Whitehead is similarly eclipsed by Feilding. He is replaced by her next lovers, Bart Huges, Joe Mellen, and Birdie, and all are swayed by her compelling presence and actions. In 1962, Amanda Feilding was an art student and, according to Whitehead, his lover. Strikingly portrayed as a mysterious femme fatale, sculpting multiple white birds of prey and constantly unseating Whitehead’s expectations, Feilding makes a memorable impression in Whitehead’s fictionalized 2014 autobiography, *Fool That I Am . . .* She continues to destabilize and entice Whitehead via other means five years later. After fascinatedly filming her then lover-collaborator, Mellen, talking about his third of four attempts at self-trepanation, Whitehead notes in his diary that Feilding is determined to produce her own borehole. He excitedly declares that he will “film the whole process. It will be the film of the century” because “LSD and trepanation . . . must certainly be part of the new crusade” (Whitehead 1967).

While an over-inflated interpretation, the impact of trepanation on countercultural thought should be highlighted and Feilding’s presence at the center of this “crusade” underscored. In *99 Balls Pond Road: The Story of the Exploding Galaxy*, Jill Drower, a member of this titular psychedelic, interdisciplinary, London-based arts collective, points to the counterculture’s wholehearted pursuit of “altered state[s] of consciousness,” often through drugs or a spiritual journey (2014: 30). The latter frequently involved exoticized exploration of different branches of Eastern philosophical thinking:

[F]ew people had researched Eastern mysticism in any great depth. One exception was Amanda Fielding,⁵ who had traveled widely in the Middle East and studied comparative religion and classical Arabic. . . . She was one among a small group of informed people who believed in trepanation, a great talking point in the late sixties. . . . [M]any found the arguments convincing, but few had the courage to try. (Drower 2014: 31)

That sense of Feilding’s courageous conviction is enhanced by Mellen’s depiction in *Bore Hole*, of how, when making his second attempt at self-trepanation,

Amanda agreed to help me. I cannot praise her too highly for her courage and coolness in an emergency. I can certainly say that no one else would have done it. . . . However, Amanda is someone apart from the rest and she agreed to help without hesitation.

Once again I took a trip before going to work and once again things didn't go as planned. Amanda was rotating the trepan, pressing with all her might on the point on the top of my head as I knelt. (2015 [1970]: 92)

Regarded by Mellen as "my guru of the Unconscious" (2015 [1970]: 96), Feilding's directive power and leadership clearly inspired the trepanation scene in countercultural poet, activist, performer, and playwright Heathcote Williams's 1970 play *AC/DC* (1973). An old Etonian schoolfriend, Williams published Mellen's interview with Bart Huges in the winter 1966/7 edition of the literary journal *The Transatlantic Review*, for which Williams was an associate editor. *AC/DC*'s character Sadie displays a scroll created by Huges that rationalizes trepanation and then determinedly bores with a drill into Perowne's head, which Williams likens to "fucking Perowne in the head with her astral dildo" (cited in Wardle 1973: xi).

Slinger similarly guides proceedings in *An Exorcism*. Whitehead describes its pictorial representations of his relationship with Slinger as "totally us. Totally autobiographical." Yet, he eventually realized that he "was intruding" because, in countercultural parlance, "it was her trip" (2016b). Slinger's trip inside the self reflects Feilding's assertion that "I very early on became my own laboratory" (*I Am My Own Laboratory* 2018). Highlighting the benefits of self as a testing site, Slinger explains that she used her own body as a model in these and many other images because "there's a different kind of energy loop . . . feedback loop" when being both artist and canvas, enabling rigorous reflexive self-investigation (2017). It points to a self-sufficiency echoed by Slinger's image, "Self Contained." In the background, a penis penetrates a vulva, while in the foreground, a bear-headed pregnant Slinger with a penis (presumably Whitehead's) claims access to both genitals and the capacity for self-fertilization. Feilding's self-penetration with a phallic dentist's drill mirrors such self-containment.

Yet, just as the foreboding darkness in "Self Contained" suggests a critique of complete self-sufficiency, Slinger and Feilding's processes didn't absent the lover-collaborator. Whitehead shot a number of the base photographs collaged by Slinger for *An Exorcism*, and Mellen filmed Feilding's auto-sculpture, helped create the musical score for the film, assisted Feilding in displaying the images in her exhibition, and acted as her election agent when she ran for parliament. However, Slinger explains that Whitehead "took the pictures of me, with my direction" (cited in Phillips 2012), and Feilding clearly remains the conductor of all of the different elements in *TNH*. Mellen demonstrates how Feilding brought the same methodical precision of her processes of sculpting to her own act of auto-sculpture and its documentation:

Amanda is a very thorough person. . . . She had seen the hash I made of my early attempts and she was determined not to make the same mistakes. She . . . wanted to do it herself so that she would be in complete control throughout.

Gradually over six months she prepared herself. When the day came she . . . laid out all the instruments on a table covered with a white sheet. She wore a simple long white dress with a bathcap plastered down over her hair to prevent any getting in the wound and infecting it, and she set up the camera for me to film the proceedings. (2015 [1970]: 103)

Whitehead and Mellen function as supportive laboratory assistants for these women's self-sufficient artistic and ecstatic journeys into the self.

The points of confluence that resonate between Slinger and Feilding allow the spectator to further drill down into these journeys. One of the few scenes in *An Exorcism* to display impassioned desire between Slinger and Fraey, rather than betrayal, shows a double image of the couple standing in a naked embrace under the scrutiny of a large blue eye. Its title is a quotation about lesbian love from Djuna Barnes's celebrated queer novel, *Nightwood* (2014 [1936]: 151): "on her mouth you kiss your own." The doubling and focus on the eye/I positions the other as another self. This blurred relation between self and other is recalled by Slinger's narrative of how, when hearing on the art scene about Feilding's bold act (without knowing that Whitehead and Feilding had supposedly once been lovers), she "had a pain in [her] head for days, thinking about it. But it was part of her journey" (cited in Bernstein 1971: 48). Slinger pays tribute to that journey in one of her Headbox sculptures entitled *Trepanation—Homage to Amanda Feilding* (1971/2). Echoing Feilding's positioning of her self-trepanation as auto-sculpture, Slinger's Headboxes work with a mold of her own head. With this particular sculpture, a plain mold of her head is trepanned by a drill that bores through the top of the box and into the representational skull within. Two lines of bloody paint drip down her forehead. A large mold of a brain sits in front of the head, and a shadowy outline of Slinger's face is traced onto the Perspex box front with a circled cross indicating the place that the drill should penetrate. Williams describes *AC/DC*'s trepanation scene as "an obvious metaphor for direct brain to brain contact" (cited in Wardle 1973: xi). Similarly, Slinger's representational act of accepting the drill in the Headbox evokes an empathetic opening up to Feilding and the process that she has followed, as well as a drilling down into Slinger's self for understanding. The box intertwines Slinger's and Feilding's personal and artistic journeys.

Spectator as Collaborator

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty to unpack the sensoriality of the American underground's art practices, Osterweil presents the spectator as an "embodied participant in a corporeal *mise-en-scène* that encompasses not only the activities documented by the camera, but the 'chiasmic intertwinings' of the bodies around and behind it" (2014: 12). Such embodied spectatorship can be traced through visceral reactions of excitement and repulsion provoked by *TNH*. One reviewer of the Suydam's screening of *Heartbeat in the Brain* records how "[m]inutes flitted by like hours as [Feilding] lost pints of very Technicolor blood. Behind me, there were sounds as of ripe plumbs thudding on turf as the audience thinned out" (Haden-Guest 1978: 13). It foreshadows responses to Orlan's later plastic surgery operation performances, which ironically replicated elements from famous paintings of idealized women (*The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan*, 1990–3). *TNH*'s 1978 screening of *Heartbeat in the Brain* at the Suydam and immersive exhibition of three layers of large graphic stills covering P.S. 1's gallery walls anticipate Orlan's embrace of the bloody medical spectacle and her emphasis on the body's capacity to be perpetually reconfigured. Carey Lovelace describes how, during the live satellite transmission of Orlan's *Operation Number Seven*, "the gallery empties of a third of its audience" while "the surgeon is sawing away, methodically scraping out flesh from below the hairline" (1995: 13).

A recurring fascinated disbelief in Feilding's daring actions, as situated completely beyond the bounds of social normativity, can be viewed in writings on Feilding from across the last fifty years. It surpasses responses to Orlan and the acts of perceived self-violence in Abramović's oeuvre. Indeed, Abramović's celebrated, risk-based, solo performance, *Rhythm series* (1973–4), which tested her "personal limits" by exploring loss and management of control (Richards 2010: 90–2), has been increasingly integrated into and rationalized as part of a now canonical history of body art, where Feilding's work is barely considered.

Yet, this pertinent comparison with Abramović's practice also reveals further dynamics of embodied participation in the corporeal *mise-en-scène* of *TNH*. Conceptualized through comparative Eastern philosophies, Abramović highlights the "energy exchange" with the spectator that should result from endurance-based performances, "induc[ing] conditions that deliberately alter customary ways of perceiving the world" (Richards 2010: 81). For both Feilding and Abramović the energy exchange with a collaborator also facilitates the self to negotiate those conditions. Feilding points out how making the film "helped to detach [herself] from the natural

reluctance [she] felt to be subject to such a happening" and aided immersion in the embodied action (*A Hole in the Head* 1998). Both Mellen, behind the camera, and the spectators that she anticipated experiencing the film became her enabling collaborators. Just as in her 1981 *Documentary Study: The Head of the Medusa*, Orlan recorded viewers' responses to the performance installation displaying her menstruating vulva with painted pubic hair, Feilding analyzed her exhibition as "both the stage and stimulus for the 'play' of other people's reactions" (1978). Hence, *TNH* enabled the continuation of Feilding's arousing journey of research and discovery and maintained her position behind, as well as under, the microscope.

"Dynamic Progressive Eroticism"

Slinger maintains her own exciting process of examination and questioning, in collaboration with the viewer, throughout *An Exorcism*. Photographed in Lord Lilford's derelict Northamptonshire stately home, the house is positioned as a seat of disintegrating patriarchal power and as representative of Slinger's psyche and body (*Penny Slinger* 2017). The viewer follows Slinger testing out and exploding gendered roles and behaviors within this disintegrating seat, as she interrogates: "what's mine? What's the projections of my partner? What's the projections of society? How can I unravel all of this?" (Slinger 2017).

In location and through its use of a playful British humor and irony, *An Exorcism* offers a peculiarly British take on the "radical narcissism" that Amelia Jones famously argued was utilized by contemporaneous body artists, like Hannah Wilke and Carolee Schneemann, in their nude self-portraits. Slinger "flamboyantly objectifies the (her) body but also simultaneously performs her body/self as subject" (Jones 1998: 17). Indeed, Slinger labors "not to have one's sexuality objectified, but to subjectify it, and to reclaim it as subject" (Slinger 2017). Thus, in "Petals Blush," we witness Slinger's masturbatory bliss as she strokes her vulva, and vibrant yonic roses cascade across the floor, creating a burst of light and color that pushes back the shadows of the room. She joyously constructs what art critic Peter Fuller described as a "dynamic, progressive eroticism" (1971), reminiscent of Schneemann's sensorial film *Fuses* (1964–7). *Fuses* displays the artist having sex with her lover, composer Jim Tenney. As Osterweil beautifully evokes, Schneemann immerses the viewer in "an experience of sensory abandonment," as "painted, collaged, scratched, dyed, baked, stamped, and dipped in acid, the skin of the celluloid bristles and bursts with the affective contagion of desire" (2014: 157). This rich representation of Schneemann's



Figure 3.1 *Old Fashioned*, 1969–77. Copyright Penny Slinger. All Rights Reserved, DACS/Artimage 2021. Photo: Penny Slinger and Peter Whitehead.

desire is enabled by the generous “lyric, energetic partnering” with Tenney (Schneemann 2003 [1977]: 26).

Similarly, and recalling Feilding’s guidance of Mellen’s actions, Slinger directs a submissively, and sometimes sacrificially, denuded Whitehead through a number of psychodramatic scenes, provoking Whitehead’s intellectual and embodied understanding of the problems of the objectifying gaze. Reflecting my earlier emphasis on Whitehead facilitating Slinger’s self-directed journey and Tenney’s generous investment in Schneemann’s vision, Whitehead explains: “I am not an exhibitionist. I wouldn’t have done it for anyone other than Penny” (2016b). And yet, Slinger’s direction also playfully facilitates both herself and Whitehead to creatively and sexually investigate their shared attraction to bisexual exploration and performance of multiple gender and sexual roles (Whitehead cited in Paul 1995; Slinger cited in Oakes 1974: 95). In “Old fashioned,” a grinning Slinger adopts uber femme, stylish, full BDSM gear, and Whitehead coolly appears as a makeup-garnished nude pinup with a fur stole coyly covering his genitals (see Fig. 3.1).

The “redemptive humour” (Slinger 2016) of these images is undercut elsewhere by Slinger’s investigation of the mutual oppressiveness of gendered power dynamics, laying emotional responses and desires far more painfully bare than in Schneemann’s *Fuses*. However, we journey through this

oppression to “Emergence.” Developing on a visual trope seen throughout *An Exorcism* of the house door as a vaginal entrance, in this later scene, Slinger serenely emerges through that door, as if giving birth to herself in an act of creative self-origination. A tiny, nude Whitehead is enwombed in her belly—his projections and perceptions finally contained by her own. Arousal and desire are exchanged for a momentary fulfillment.

Ecosexual Intertwinings

The trailblazing ecosexual pursuit of loving interdependence between genders, sexualities, species, and environments evident in Slinger’s later work, such as the *Mountain Ecstasy* collages (1976–8), is innovatively initiated in *An Exorcism*. Exploring this innovation alongside the equally striking ecosexual concerns of *Heartbeat in the Brain* reveals further intersections between Feilding, Slinger, and Whitehead’s practices but also intensifies the transgressive resistance of Feilding and Slinger’s actions.

In *Fool that I am . . .*, Whitehead described viewing images of Feilding’s sculptures in 1963/4 of “erotic figures of birds that are birds and yet aren’t birds . . . fragments of birds struggling to unite into a whole bird . . . half of a bird copulating with its ‘other’” (2014: 242). These depictions could be attributed to Whitehead’s fantasized memories of the period and his pursuit of birds of prey alongside and in connection with his female muse (Whitehead 1997). Whitehead introduced Slinger to the process of keeping falcons when they lived together, and he eventually became a professional falconer for the Saudi Arabian royal family. Strong blurred points of confluence with Whitehead are suggested by Feilding’s relationship with Birdie and by Slinger’s perception of the line of influence from Max Ernst’s surrealist bird and human ravishments in his collage novel *Une Semaine de Bonté* (1934) to *An Exorcism*. These clearly evoke shades of Feilding’s erotic coupling bird sculptures recalled by Whitehead.

Yet, contrasting the phallogentric seduction and control suggested by Whitehead’s alignment of women with birds, Slinger demonstrates the damaging consequences of a relationship with any species rooted in manipulation and nonconsensual domination. In “Arena Union,” transgressive interspecies couplings and hybridizations are presented within a Bosch-like “Garden of Earthly Delights.” Fish, fowl, human, and nonhuman animal mingling occurs in a violent collision of body parts, pointing to a frightening collapse of boundaries through cruel behaviors. It foreshadows the questions fueling Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth M. Stephens’s ecosexual performance art: “How can humans join together with nonhumans to create

mutually sustainable relationships and communities that flourish in the face of extinction?" (2012: 64).

Heartbeat in the Brain's representation of Feilding's egalitarian "passionate relationship" with Birdie does, however, appear mutually sustainable (Feilding cited in Perry 1998: 116). It also anticipates Schneemann's erotic exchange of deep kisses with her cat in the two series of photographic reliefs, *Infinity Kisses I & II* (1981–7 and 1990–8). Feilding explains that Birdie "was the emblem of the expanded consciousness and of the Holy Ghost. He was like being a part of the cosmic orgasm. And so, I wanted to make a film that flew on the wings of Birdie" (cited in Perry 1998: 116). Slinger's sensual depiction of herself in *An Exorcism* as a bird-woman hybrid, with feathers painted onto her face or donning an owl mask as Athena, goddess of wisdom, similarly symbolizes heightened powers of perception and an ability to cross borders of reality. Focusing on Birdie's role in *Heartbeat in the Brain* provides a surprising further reorientation away from the spectacle of blood toward desire, love, and an ecosexual, interrelated world. It significantly develops upon Huges's argument that, within a trepanned society, "the increase in common sense will result in an increase in cooperation" (1995 [1966/7]: 102). Feilding and Slinger's deliberate editing of such complex cross-species couplings into the reflexive frame of representation presents feminist collages that reconfigure those areas of confluence with Whitehead absolutely on their own terms.

Conclusion: Between Self-sufficiency and Connectedness

This chapter has walked its own tightrope between unpicking acts and images of gendered self-sufficiency and self-determination, as well as chiasmatic intertwining and loving artistic collaborative processes helmed by women. In doing so, the chapter has repositioned the power balance in Feilding and Slinger's relationship with Whitehead and also Mellen and has demonstrated that all of these women's self-sufficient and collaborative modes of creation were underpinned by fearless experimentation. It has examined how that experimentation led to innovative acts and representations of embodied, gendered, sexual, and specied transgression, including an act of body modification that drilled down to the heart of countercultural discourses regarding spiritual self-discovery. It has, thus, served to join the voices of individuals—like the Exploding Galaxy's Jill Drower—who have worked to challenge the male-centric focus of British

countercultural histories. Moreover, dissecting these women's innovative acts has contributed to the reconsideration of Slinger and Feilding's practice, including repositioning *TNH* and its surrounding processes primarily as art and recognizing their significant contribution to feminist performance art history. This chapter has highlighted that arousal motivated all of these transgressive acts and images, which stemmed from desire either for another or for modes of psychological, sexual, visceral, intellectual, artistic, and spiritual penetration and revelation. Tracing all of this through this chapter provides another opportunity for those arousing images, and the loving and labored interactions between and within self and other, to proliferate.

Notes

- 1 I am very grateful to Ramsay Burt, Steve Chibnall, and, particularly, the editors, for their insightful comments on drafts of this work.
- 2 See Feilding's (2017, <https://beckleyfoundation.org/amanda-feilding/>) and Slinger's (2014, <https://pennyslinger.com/recent-press/>) richly populated websites for further details.
- 3 Materials have been drawn from archival boxes PW/PE/0002-0003f and PW/F/0030.
- 4 As their letters reveal, Mellen was in conversation with Whitehead during 1967 about the possibility of Whitehead publishing *Bore Hole*.
- 5 This is a common misspelling of Feilding's name.

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