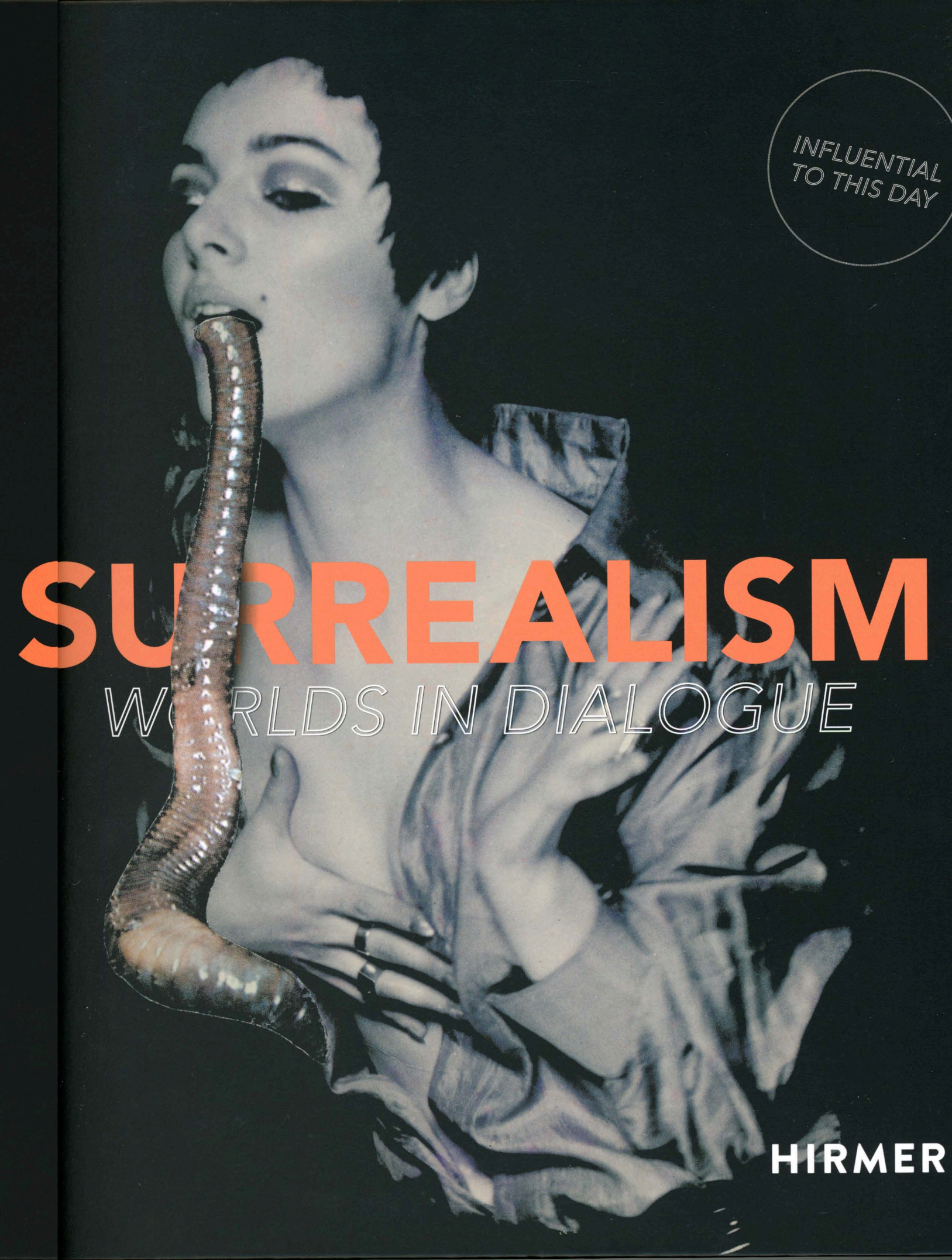
INFLUENTIAL
TO THIS DAY
SURREALISM
WORLDS IN DIALOGUE
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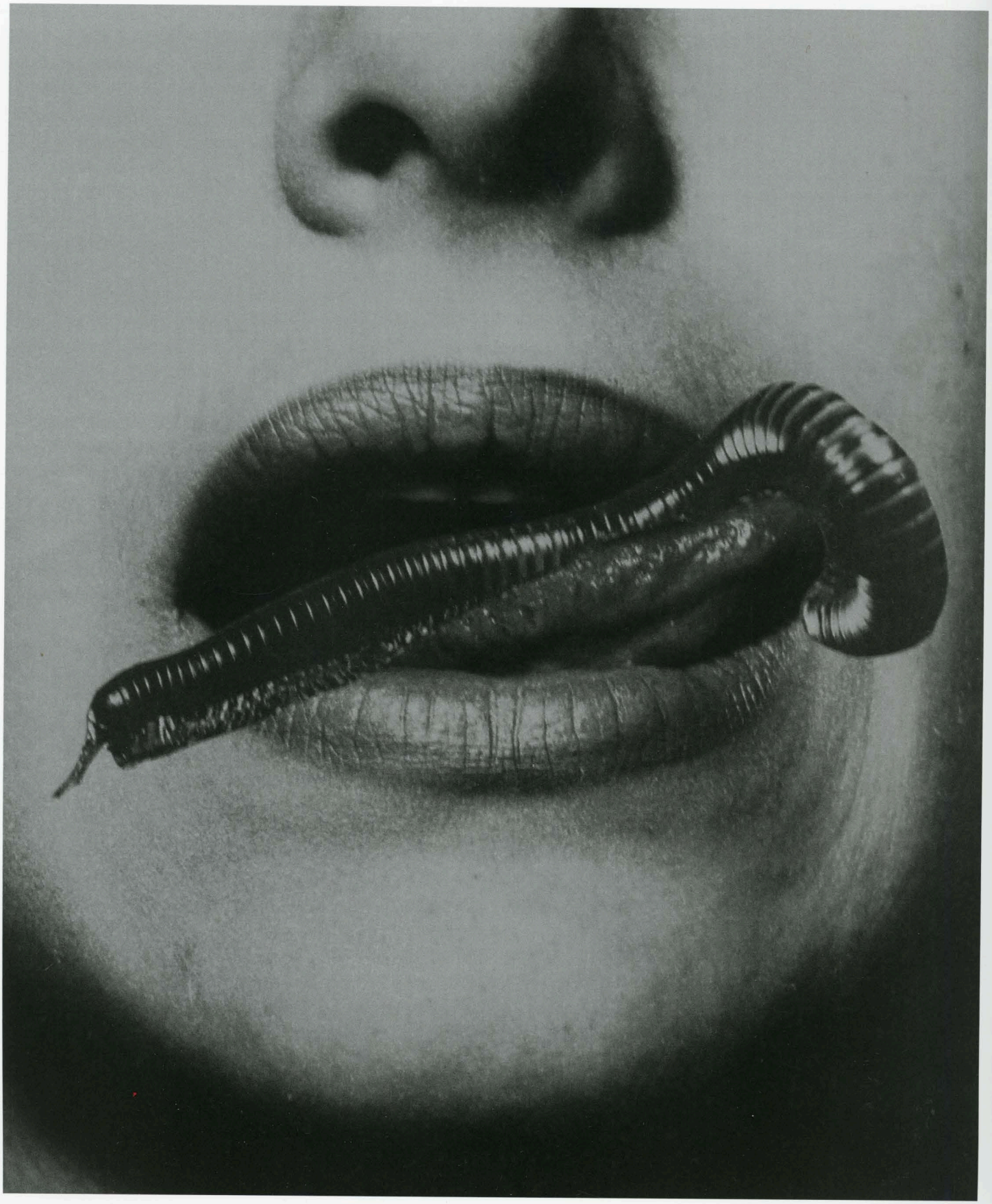


NAVELS AND CUTS: SURREALISM'S LINEAGES AND LEGACIES

Patricia Allmer

Max Ernst's lithograph *La mort d'un arbre* (The Death of a Tree; p. 65) was published in 1974 (the year of Surrealism's 50th anniversary, and two years before Ernst's death) as the frontispiece to Jean-Michel Folon's book of the same title. Ernst's image is simple and linear, a sand-coloured landscape slanting downwards across the frame, a pale-orange sky, a construction resembling a circus tent to the extreme left. A crude, three-branched tree,

Fig.1: Penny Slinger, ***100 Words a Minute***, 1973, Photo collage, 17 x 20 cm, BLUM

Fig. 2: Caravaggio, ***Incredulitá di san Tommaso*** (The Incredulity of Saint Thomas), 1601, Oil on canvas, 107 x 146 cm, Schloss Sanssouci, Potsdam

a strange fish-like form clinging to one branch, stands centrally atop an incomplete regular arc suggesting a hill, a white bird's head with a single red eye to the right (perhaps another avatar of Ernst's bird alter ego 'Loplop'). A long, twisted, wire-like form lies across the foreground of the image, resembling a disconnected telephone handset cable, a long worm on which the bird seems about to pounce, or a severed umbilicus, perhaps the remains of one of the tree's lopped branches. The prominence of this foregrounded form distinguishes this work from other Surrealist representations of trees – René Magritte's *Arbre et lune* (Tree and Moon, 1948; p. 69), for example, or Ernst's earlier *Forêt* (Forest, 1925; p. 64) – or of the desert (like Yves Tanguy's *Compositions surréalistes* of 1929 and 1939; pp. 73, 74) – and emphasises the fundamental ambiguity of the image. Ernst's *La mort d'un arbre* is, indeed, replete with ambiguous, uncertain forms, its possible meanings shifting according to how the viewer interprets each element, just as each element prompts a different reading of each of the others. If, for example, the worm or cable is read as an umbilicus, the hill along which it rests suddenly resembles the gentle curve of a pregnant (or recently pregnant) female belly, the bird's head and eye a breast, the entire landscape becoming allegorical of a woman's body after giving birth, the tree apparently sprouting from what would be her navel and thus resembling a branching umbilical cord, its severed extension lying on the ground beneath it. The death of the arbo-

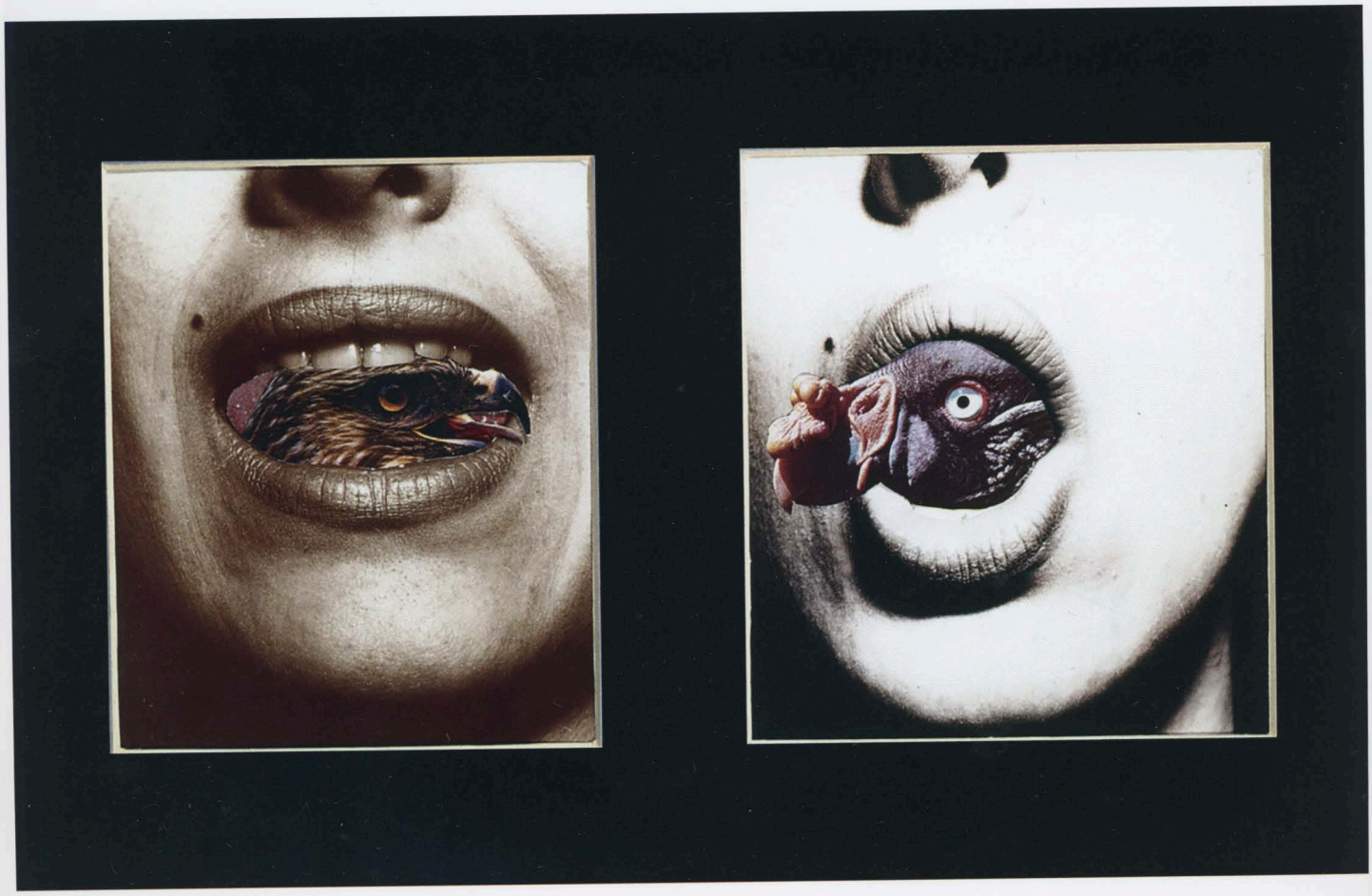


Fig. 3: Penny Slinger, ***Conference of the Birds***, 1973, Two photo collages, BLUM

real, the image suggests, is the birth of the umbilical. In this reading, *La mort d'un arbre* offers a male vision of artistic creation in terms of female reproductivity, its apparently arid desert-hued landscape actually a terrain of fertility and birth – perhaps of the Surrealist legacies potentially bequeathed by an artist facing his own imminent mortality, implicit in the work's title. The productive collocation, via the procedure of the cut, of tree, navel, and umbilicus (and, as we'll see, related organs of reproduction), provides the basis for the following discussion of Surrealism's history and legacies.

Ernst's ambiguous umbilical form is echoed in several other works on display in *Surrealism – Worlds in Dialogue*, as is his presentation of female reproductive power as a form of (male) creativity. Penny Slinger's works, in particular, extend and challenge the prominence in art by male Surrealists like Ernst of such appropriations of female reproduction. Slinger (b. 1947) incorporates into her collages umbilical forms that ask pointed questions about patriarchal society's constructions of women. In *The Larval Worm* (1969/2014; p. 72), Slinger's eyes are closed in apparent ecstasy, her hands strangely mannequin-like in their angular posturing, as a huge earthworm protrudes from her open mouth. *100 Words a Minute* (1973; fig. 1) repeats this collocation, replacing the earthworm with a millepede, its proximity to Slinger's tongue offering a disturbing commentary on typing speeds and the misogynist stereotype of female garrulousness. These collages contrast with analogous works by male artists – for example, the grossly extended forked tongue/pair of male legs of the Dantesque Lucifer in Salvador Dalí's *Divina Commedia, No 27: Un Diable logicien* (Divine Comedy, Canto 27: The Logician Devil; p. 60) of 1960, an illustration for Canto 27 of the *Inferno*, commenting on the debate in that passage of Dante's poem about sin and the logic of non-contradiction.

Slinger's *The Safe Period* (1969/2014; p. 139) collages together a photograph of Slinger's friend, the actress Susanka Fraey, in a bathtub, with an image from a medical illustration representing the growth of a foetus. A hand extends towards the apparently exposed womb, reaching for the umbilical cord (which twists back across the child's body), evoking Caravaggio's St Thomas (c. 1601; fig. 2) touching the resurrected Christ's wound in order to affirm its reality. Slinger comments on this work:

> The collage was a result of my musings on the nature of woman, on her worldly aspirations and her biological programming. At that time the pill had only just emerged in the market (I got on the pill at age sixteen). Before that it was so hard for women to experience any sexual freedom without the serious risk of pregnancy. Many employed the use of the so called 'safe period' to prevent pregnancy, but it was pretty hit and miss. That is why I made this piece with its ironic title. I was saying that the only 'safe period' was when the woman was already pregnant [...]. All this on the heels of a statement one of my art college professors made. I wondered why the female students seemed to get less attention when their work was often superior to the male students? The response was, 'Well the girls often get married and have children, so there seems no point.'[1]

Women producing art, Slinger's professor suggested, contradicts the female reproductive potential. Slinger's insistently oral and declarative images play on male fantasies in

[1] Email from Penny Slinger to Patricia Allmer, 20 January 2024.

which this tension between an implicitly male-owned aesthetic production and female reproductive power conflates with (again, mainly male) notions of the female-as-image and the woman's voice (a connection we can see clearly in the 1973 collage pair *Conference of the Birds* (fig. 3), where, in contrast with Ernst, the birds connote femininity). Slinger displaces and condenses the ambivalent play of word and image (bird as image of freedom or entrapment, sublime and articulate beauty or speechless twitterer) in the political construction of gender. Umbilical forms represent, in her Surrealist pictures, both growth and regeneration (*The Larval Worm*) and morbidity and mortality, their ambiguity implicitly threatening, the intrusive links between invertebrate animal forms and the female figure evoking abjection, the disturbing crossing of socially taboo borders.

When used by an explicitly political woman artist like Slinger, such umbilical images suggest an alternative line of cultural inheritance to that conventionally recounted in histories of Surrealism, one that challenges received narratives by reinserting into them that which has been repeatedly repressed, excluded, written out – the significant presence and contribution of women artists in the history of Surrealism – and of the symbolic return of these repressed, excluded artists in the thematic concerns with female reproduction in works (like Ernst's *La mort d'un arbre*) by men. This double process – historical exclusion and symbolic return – is evident in critical attempts to narrate Surrealism's history. A special issue of the *Journal of General Education* titled 'Surrealism: A Celebration' marked the movement's 50th anniversary in 1974 (the year of Ernst's dead tree) and contained the essay 'Views on Surrealist Art' by the Surrealist artist, writer, and historian Marcel Jean (1900–93).[2] Jean's essay imagines the genealogy of Surrealist painting as a tree:

> The historian is often tempted to see the succession of events and personalities of the past as a diagram showing links that would represent influences between artists, or as a sort of genealogical tree. I claimed to be no more than a storyteller, yet I seem, a little to my surprise, to be describing surrealist painting as such a tree, of which Chirico would be the trunk.[3]

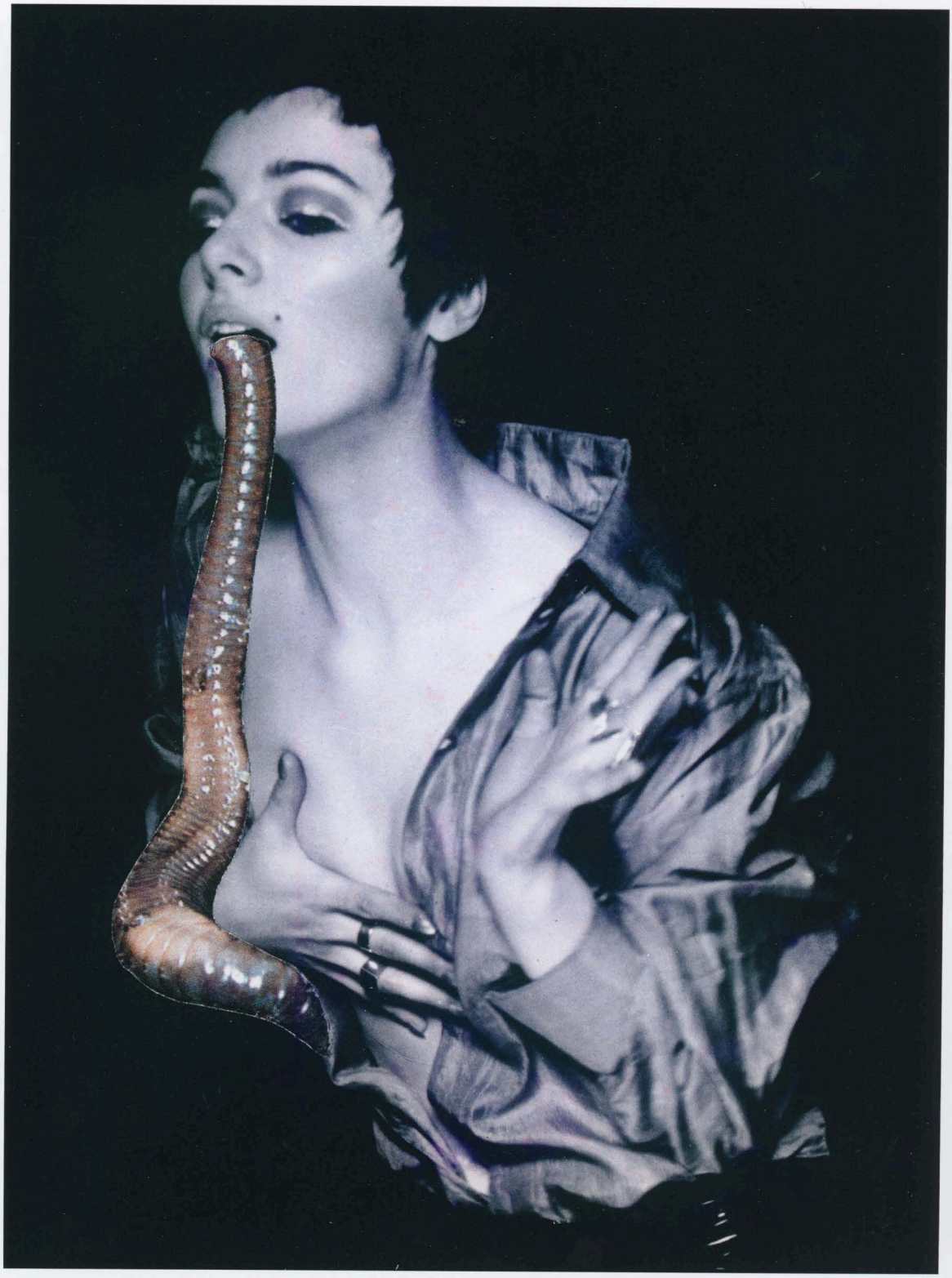
Expanding on this arboreal metaphor to map the movement's wider genealogy, Jean offers a canonical list of exclusively male painters culminating in Arp and Ernst, whom he designates the 'true ancestors of Surrealist painters'. The lineage continues through speculation about aesthetic proximities that mutates into a paternal line (and, in doing so, easily traverses national borders): 'Miró is very near Arp, and Arp is in his turn, in his *Concretions*, not far from Tanguy; but neither Miró nor Arp is Chirico's son. It should be admitted that they are adopted children; such children become, by law, legitimate heirs.'[4] This peculiar male-only family romance (where are the mothers bearing all these 'sons'?) expands to include a Belgian contingent: 'However with the two main Belgian Surrealist painters, Magritte and Paul Delvaux, the genealogist may feel reassured. They evidently belong to the family.'[5] Jean is, of course, not alone in fantasising an exclusively patrilinear line of Surrealist descent. A similar strategy of erasing and appropriating female reproductive power is evident in Salvador Dalí's account of his meeting the figurehead of the French Surrealist group, André Breton (1896–1967), becoming a Surrealist artist and thereby joining the genealogy of the movement: 'We had met in 1928,

[2] The special journal issue was edited by Robert Lima and based on a conference he organised at Pennsylvania State University, 7–9 November 1974.

[3] Marcel Jean, 'Views on Surrealist art', *Journal of General Education*, 27 (1), 1975, 7–22, 11.

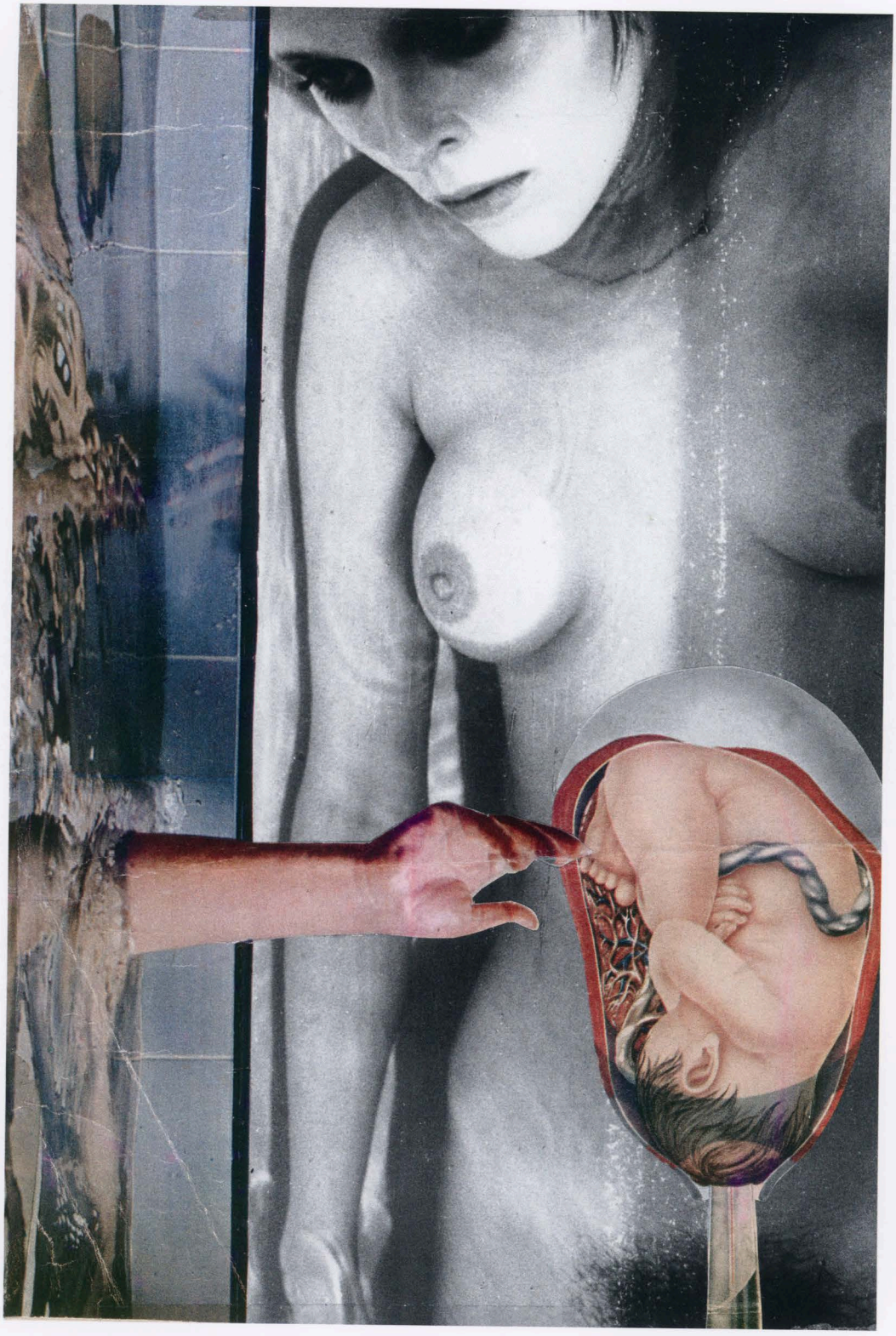
[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.



Penny Slinger, ***The Larval Worm***, 1969/2014
C-print from original collage, 40.6 x 30.2 cm

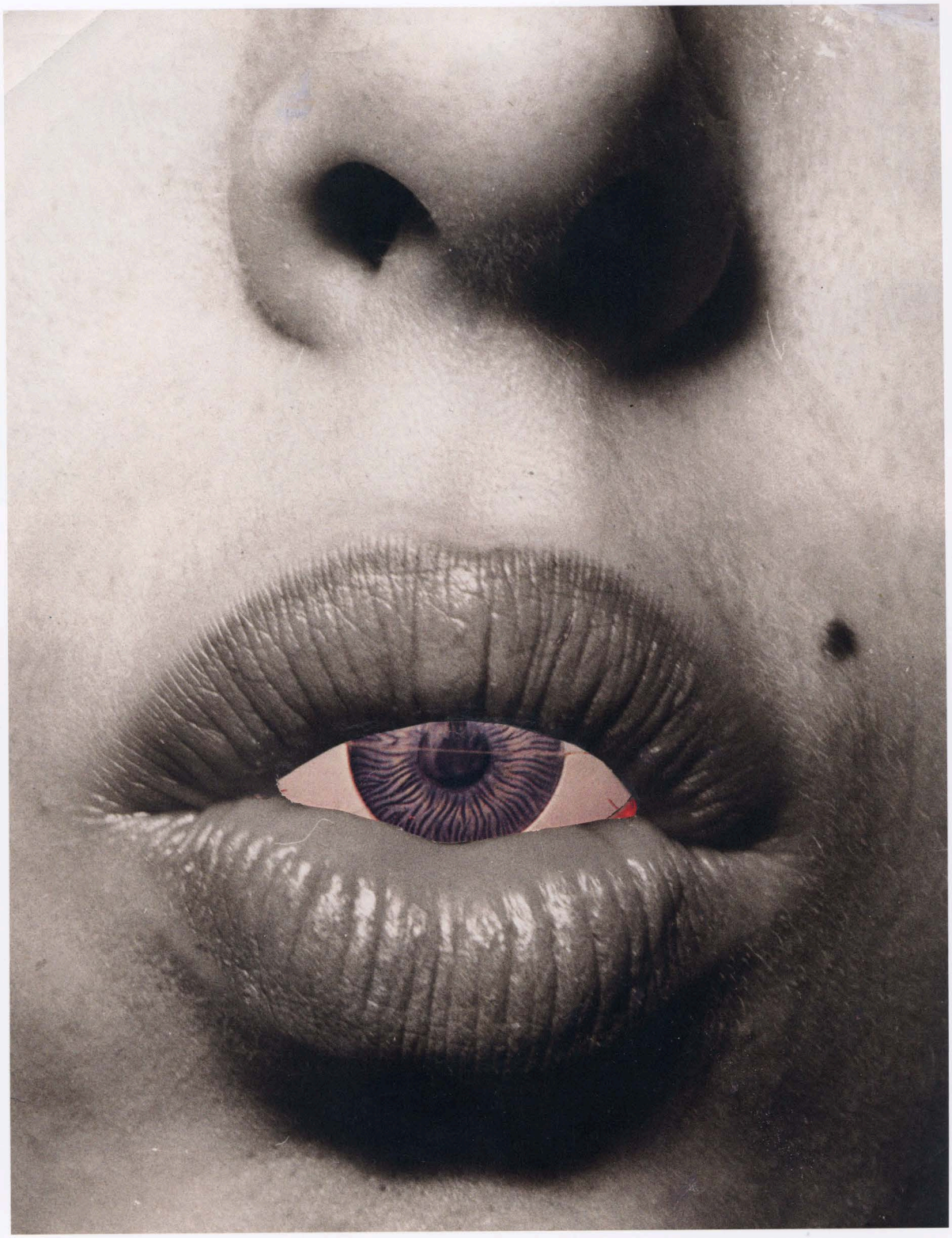
Penny Slinger, ***Flying in Dreams***, 1969/2014
C-print from original collage, 40.6 x 28.9 cm



Penny Slinger, ***The Safe Period***, 1969/2014
C-print from original collage, 40.6 x 26.9 cm

Penny Slinger, ***Bitter Lemons***, 1973
Painted wax life casts in plexi box, each 8.9 x 5.7 x 5.7 cm

Penny Slinger, ***Consider the Lillies***, 1973
Photo collage, 38.1 x 28.6 cm



Penny Slinger, ***I Speak What I See***, 1973/2024
Injekt Print (giclée) archival paper and ink, Hahnemühle paper, 40 x 30.5 cm