

Caroline Koebel

www.carolinekoebel.com

"Barbara Hammer: Una presencia necesaria / A necessary presence," catalogue essay printed in Spanish and English, *Festival Internacional de cine lésbico y gai de Madrid / Madrid's International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival*, Madrid, Spain, 2008, pp. 114-115.

Barbara Hammer: A Necessary Presence

Who was it first made that construction, If so and so had not existed, we would have had to invent her? –Kevin Killian

Is it happenstance that Killian's sentiment comes out of a poem entitled "Claude Cahun," that other inimitable 20th c. artist who Barbara Hammer also brings to visibility through *Lover Other* (2006), her experimental documentary on Surrealist WWII resistance artists Cahun and her step-sister/lover Marcel Moore? Like Killian's embrace of Cahun as a necessary presence, Hammer's cinema ode *Lover Other* illuminates Cahun's centrality to her own life-long artistic project. With Cahun already having done the work of her own invention, Hammer mines and constructs memories of her so that she is able to be re-invented for the present. Across time Cahun and Hammer rebel as a fact of life: aesthetic experimenters, sexual pioneers, gender radicals, anti-authoritarian militants who understand the primacy of pleasure in the pursuit of all things egalitarian and humane.

That both Cahun and Hammer espouse their points of view through the photographic image, still and moving, witnesses their savvy comprehension of the power of representation to displace old totems with new configurations of libidinal energies. Additionally, the two often spiral outward from their own images as modes of engagement with socio-cultural and political issues,— exploring how performance of self enables comprehension of the other. It is no wonder that their self-images double, mirror and multiply through a vast array of aesthetic and conceptual strategies. The duet puts Emma Goldman's maxim "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution" to the test. New Cahun scholarship combined with Hammer's on-going exegesis of lesbian vision and avant-garde film/video intensifies dance floor moves of creative interferences to conventional paradigms of power.

Hammer began as a maverick of the short film format and indeed, as Chuck Kleinhans points out in his article "Barbara Hammer: Lyrics and History," her subsequent long format films reference the structure of her shorts. Her films from the 1970s remain alive in their induction of the viewer into a cinematic sphere of mischief, eros, and the magical capacity of the moving image to convey and create an arresting beauty. In this regard, Hammer is comparable to Kenneth Anger, whose early works also remain a force of queer cinematic sexuality.

I picked up a trashy erotic thriller the other night. Each male-female sexual transaction left me dumbfounded, with the typical scenario being that the married money man and his nanny mistress stage a quickie in which he "lunges deep inside" her and she "explodes." Using such cliché as "explode" to describe male sexuality is banal enough; *how*, I ask, does the overworked verb describe female orgasm? Co-authored by men for a female audience, the book's popularity as a *NY Times* bestseller attests to the capacity of its readership to cross-identify with the dominant perspective.

The next day it came to me clear and simple: these bestselling authors (and more importantly, their readers) need turn to Barbara Hammer for guidance in female sexual pleasure, straight and lesbian. Studying *Dyketactics* (1974) for openers would teach them a thing or two. Clocking in at four minutes, this 16mm film testifies to the potential of the medium to convey great depth and vibrant texture in little time, not to mention the sense of existing outside temporal constraints altogether. *Dyketactics* begins with a dense montage of women's nude selves in dance and frolic (with 110 shots, Hammer calls it her "lesbian commercial"). The film shifts from "nature" of the northern Californian outdoors to a domestic intimacy, featuring Hammer and Poe Asher in intense lovemaking. Medium shots of their bodies coalescing interplay with close-ups of clitoral stimulation of one woman, nipple sucking of the other. Set against a soundtrack of Moog Synthesizer electronic music Hammer composed "just playing around one day at Mills College in Oakland," the women's screen selves convey indivisibility and multiplicitous release.

The title *Dyketactics* is prescient of art making that would manifest some decades later as "tactical media" epitomized by the Yes Men, the Pink Bloque, and other collectives. French sociologist Michel de Certeau published his pioneering *The Practice of Everyday Life* at around the time Hammer released her film. He argues for resistance to authoritarian paradigms to emerge out of tactical as opposed to strategic practices.

Tactics, he writes, are for those who lack the privilege of place, space and ownership (property). Tactics have to do with seizing opportunity, lightness of foot, whimsy of mind, and courage of spirit: voilà Barbara Hammer. No need to explain here the scant resources—and therefore the urgency to be tactical—attributed to the lesbian experimental filmmaker of the early 1970s. In fact, it was this void of gay female aesthetic presence that propelled Hammer into her far-reaching tenure as a self-professed “lesbian feminist avant-garde filmmaker”—she wanted to get the image bank started. Carolee Schneemann articulates a related position for making her radical heterosexual lovemaking film *Fuses* (1964-67): to give primacy to the female body as an organ of sexual pleasure independent of any utilitarian reproductive capacity. For Hammer and Schneemann to make such explicitly sexual films at this time was no less than transgressive.

Double Strength (1978) is a richly textured film about the growth of a relationship (between Hammer and acrobat Terry Sendgraff), its subsequent demise, and the transposition of feelings of love and loss into language. The women in voice-over narration recall their comings not as “explosive” but as “deep rushings, continual...” and “an eternity that goes on and on and on....” This sense of timelessness is accentuated by the feel of Sendgraff as possessing other-worldly qualities. *Double Strength* speaks metaphysics to the human bond. Aided by Hammer’s cinema art (her mobile camera, her framing, her multiple imaging), Sendgraff swings through the interior air without bounds and spins out of and back into herself—a gesture that suggests the disillusion of the subject brought on by a merging with the other (such as in a love relationship) but is ultimately affirming of a comprehensive self-identity. This film in particular shifts the ground under the viewer’s feet. It collapses distance between the myriad contagious motion depicted within and the supposed stable coordinates of the one looking from without. *Double Strength* presents a dizzyingly electrifying experience.

Through an encyclopedic interweaving of American author Willa Cather’s closeting, sage lesbian elders recounting the mafia-operated bar scene of the 1930s, the groundbreaking 1933 U.S. gay film *Lot In Sodom*, accounts of lesbian and gay Berlin culture and its criminalization under the Nazis, the blues of Bessie Jackson and Ma Rainey, and portraits of a quartet of couples, the essay film *Nitrate Kisses* (1992) links the complex relationship between the contemporary gay male subject and historical representations to lesbian erasure from and reinscription into history. In this regard,

Nitrate Kisses opens Hammer's oeuvre to the direct consideration of gay male identity and sexuality, an inclusive move resonating with the transition by Marlon Riggs from *Tongues Untied* (1989, featuring an all male cast) to the video *Black Is...Black Ain't* (1994, introducing a plethora of female voices) completed after his death. As the Adrienne Rich epigraph preceding the title orients, "...whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language—this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable," *Nitrate Kisses* is an act of decoding, retrieval, translation, and re-cognition. Like the battle cry "we will not be silent/silence=death" of the GLBT and AIDS movements, the film is a head-on collision with silence as an instrument of oppression. It is even more political, therefore, in this instance to show queer sex in graphic splendor.

Hammer writes in "The Colonized Lesbian Body" about *History Lessons* (2000), "I was trying to find lesbian representation from the beginning of film, 1896 until Stonewall, 1969." To make this tour de force of lesbian iconography culled from seemingly unlimited sources, Hammer partnered with archivists such as Ann Maguire at the Prelinger Archive and Szu Burgess at the Lesbian Herstory Archive. In the film's topsy turvy sphere First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt has equal footing with early sadomasochistic erotica and antiquated sex education films whose politics of ignorance eerily segue into the position of contemporary America's fundamentalist conservatives. Popular 1950s songs re-purposed from hetero-normative to queer by Lisa Ben, a lesbian cabaret performer in Los Angeles in her mid-80s when befriended by Hammer, feature on the soundtrack of *History Lessons*.

In addition to *Nitrate Kisses* and *History Lessons*, Hammer's trilogy of 16mm films on lesbian and gay histories also includes the autobiographical *Tender Fictions* (1995), which foregrounds the filmmaker in near continuous voice-over narration. She makes the sound of her own voice all the more dynamic by manipulating it to embody contrasting forms, as she explains to me via email, from the lower range of "the masculinized voice of theory, to the hyper feminized voice of the socialized female youth" used to recount childhood stories. The point made in *Nitrate Kisses* of sanctioned history's unkindness towards the preservation of lesbian lives is uncannily resonant here. Hammer's film becomes a defiant self-proclamation of her own existence (in a twist of Descartes's revelation, *Tender Fictions* seems to assert "I speak my name, therefore I am") and by extension, a clarion call to all gender and sexual nonconformists to occupy representational space as fully and multitextually as possible. In 1970 in the midst of San

Franciscan labor, student, Black, and women's rights movements, Hammer turns 30 and hears the word "lesbian" for the first time. Soon after in *Tender Fictions* a mesmerizing montage of the filmmaker jack-in-the-boxing out of various fields of flowers is accompanied by her voice repeating, "I is a lesbian couple," one among many examples of Hammer evolving a film language. It is possible to debate the existence of a "lesbian aesthetic" in avant-garde cinema culture thanks to Barbara Hammer.

Caroline Koebel is a filmmaker, writer and curator in Brooklyn, New York. Her films and videos have been screened across the USA and internationally, including recently at Ladyfest Toronto, Abstracta in Rome, Pantheon Fest in Cyprus, Optica in Gijon-Asturias, and Anthology Film Archives in NYC. www.carolinekoebel.com

© Caroline Koebel 2009

All rights reserved