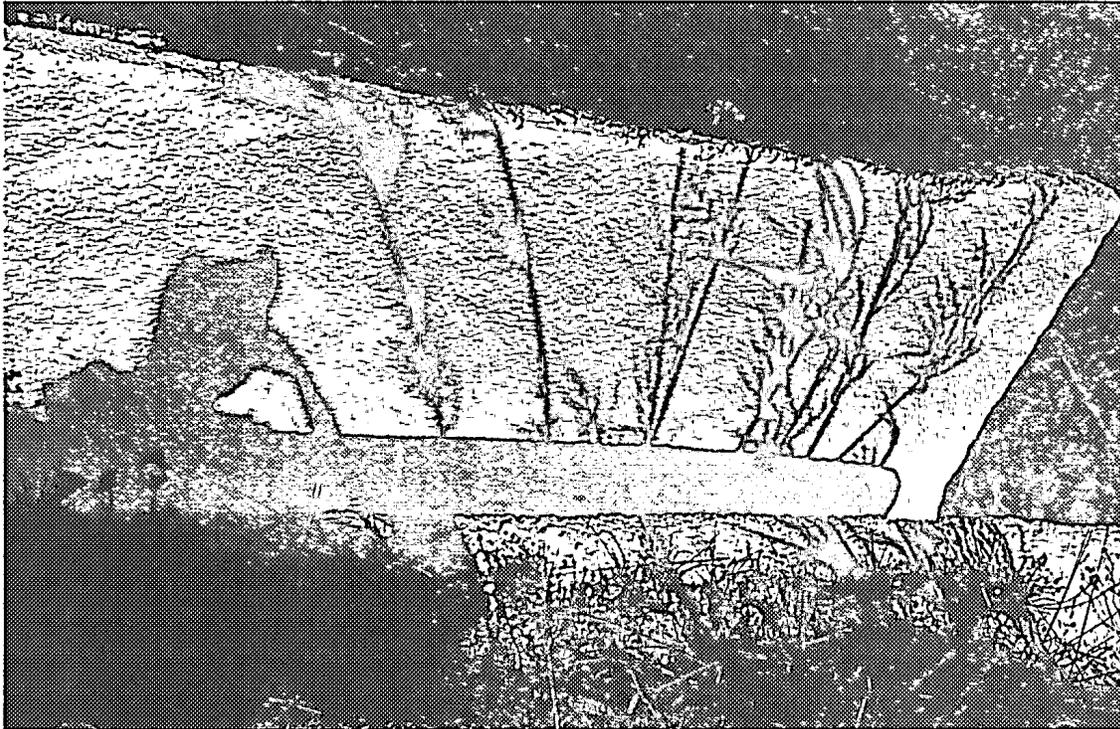


From an artistic perspective, I was interested in seeing the documentary image spatialized as installation, but I also wanted to bring the documentary image into the gallery space. This formal strategy, which seems to melt time and distance, allowed me to comment on notions of diasporic subjectivity and to produce an intervention into the representation of Palestinians and Israel-Palestine in the North American context. If I can be trusted as a fair judge, the piece has popular appeal precisely because, not in spite, of its experimentation, as people were fascinated to observe where and how the two screens linked up and from which location Jihad was speaking at any particular point.

In response to the last question, I'm currently inspired by works by Christopher Chong, Harun Farocki, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and particular an amazing documentary installation I saw by Amar Kanwar at the 2007 Documenta at Kassel, Germany. This was an eight-screen video installation that uses documentary footage, drama, and text to discuss violence against women—and resistance against it—in the context of struggles around nation in India.

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Barbara Hammer, *Bamboo Xerox* (1983)
16MM FRAME ENLARGEMENT, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

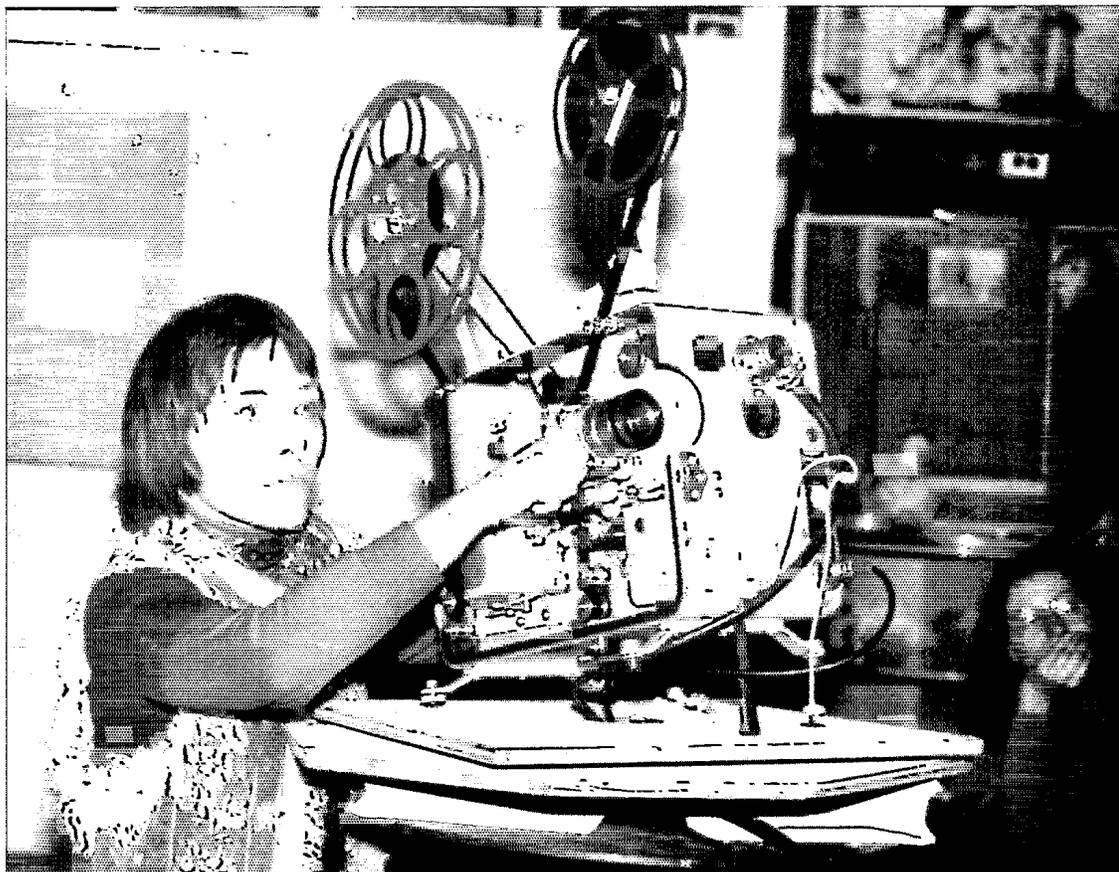
BARBARA HAMMER

During the past year I have been organizing both my film and paper archives. In shaking the archive, what has broken free is an understanding of how experimental filmmaking has been both a way of working through my personal experiences and a way to challenge the conventions of film as a way of changing society. This response is a retrospective gesture that reconsiders the meanings embodied by my archive and re-views a few of my films.

In addition to sniffing and examining my films for the fatal vinegar syndrome that marks film deterioration and organizing my papers into file crates by decade, I began reading about the ideology of archiving. Ann Cvetkovich writes of “films’ and videos’ archiving capacity to create fantasy and facilitate memory and mourning by aiming for affective power rather than factual truth.” When sorting the film cans, I began revisiting my emotional and intellectual strategies for making this archive of 80-plus films and videos from 1968 to the present. Sometimes emotional states were the very basis and inspiration for my filmmaking: the relationship break-up in *Double Strength* (1978), the placement of my grandmother in a nursing home in *Optic Nerve* (1985), and now, my own experience of cancer and chemotherapy in my new digital experimental film *A Horse Is Not A Metaphor* (2008).

My work has challenged masculine dominance as well as produced tensions between under-represented identities and experimental film techniques. My first films were Super-8 expressions of living in the heterosexual community. With the dawn of my feminist consciousness, I made *Schizy* (1968) about the interior state of being a woman filmmaker living in a man’s world. After coming out as a lesbian in 1970, I was even more excited about putting my newly-found physical, kinesthetic, and emotional sense of being on the screen. My strategy then and throughout the ‘70s was to put a “lesbian” body on the screen, to bring a lesbian subjectivity to film, to question heteronormative experimental film. This strategy worked for me but not always for lesbian audiences who hungered for representations with which they could identify in Hollywood-type narratives. Thus began my struggle to introduce an audience of newly emerged peoples with

Barbara Hammer, *Available Space* (1978-79)
FILM PERFORMANCE AT A SPACE, TORONTO, 1979, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



“out” lesbian identities to experimental film in the hopes that they would find a mirror to their own ‘experimental lifestyles’.

I concluded that representations and complex juxtapositions were not enough to effect political change or to lead to acceptance and celebrations of difference. And so another strategy was born: I would *engage* with the audiences and bring new physicality to the projections that I hoped would move them into another space. In retrospect, I believe the goal of this work was to achieve an interactive populism where the audience would participate in creative social processes in what Nicolas Bourriaud has since called “relational aesthetics.” Below I reflect upon my strategies in three films that literally strove to change the shapes of my cinema.

Available Space (1979)

In the ‘70s, I used 16 mm films, slides, and audiotape in performances that I created with Terry Sendgraff under the team name *Double Strength*. While living with Terry in a small one-bedroom Berkeley apartment, I had a dream “of Pyramid Lake, Nevada, of space, of freeing the rectangular film screen to a more liberated space, of escaping the confines of the frame, the ‘domestic house.’”⁵ I went to Pyramid Lake on my BMW motorcycle with a 16mm camera, tripod, and 30-foot cable release on the back rack. Once there, I began to film images of myself tethered to the camera but exploring whatever I could find within the cable’s range. On the way back to California I saw several dilapidated houses that drew my attention. I went inside and filmed myself, pushing the edges of the frame in a metaphoric struggle to find some shape other than the proscriptive rectangle of the camera shutter and the screen.

The film is broken into eight segments to be projected on different surfaces. When I performed this film, it was projected from a mobile table that I could roll through the space, twirling and tilting the projector. I projected the film on the walls, floors, and ceilings. I projected onto a corrugated metal garage door across the street from the gallery at New Langton Arts in San Francisco and out the door onto a bank of snow at A Space in Toronto. The last section of the film was projected onto a paper scroll with an image of me cutting through it. Then, in performance, I actually did cut through the paper and walked toward the projector, absorbing the light with my body until no image or light could be seen.

My strategy with *Available Space* was to make the audience move their bodies while watching the film, presenting the idea that film could be more than a rectangle of projected light on a screen. The concept was that audience activity leads to political activity. By viewing outside the box, we might begin to see outside the box, to see other possibilities and to try something new ourselves. As we move, twist, and turn, to see the projection, there is more blood circulating, more oxygen pumping, more brain activity in our bodies. When art stimulates us internally, we can learn to make better political and social judgments in the external world.⁶

Bamboo Xerox (1983)

Behind my desire to “activate” the audience is a distaste for sutured, hegemonic cinema. By this, I mean a cinema dominated by both narrative and documentary traditions, cinema that hypnotizes its audience through invisible editing, illusionist sound, and 3D perspective. With *Bamboo Xerox*, I found another strategy to move my audience and break illusions. I photographed bamboo (my favorite grass) from my backyard and then xeroxed both sections of

⁵ Description from Canyon Cinema online catalogue: www.canyoncinema.com.

⁶ With *Moon Goddess* (with Gloria Churchman, 1976) and *Pond and Waterfall* (1980), I also made films to be projected on 12-foot inflated and suspended weather balloons. The audience would walk around or lie under the balloon, seeing curved and sometimes doubled images.

living bamboo and the photographic stills of the bamboo. After editing the film, I had the entire six-minute film blueprinted as a black and white scroll. I stretched the scroll horizontally around the theater space so that the audience could see the film frame by frame before they saw the projection. Perhaps the audience could break the illusionist ritual—or at the very least experience a different way of seeing a film. We live in a hetero-normative society where difference is more condemned than celebrated, and by showing the same film in two different ways (there could be many more ways, too!) I hoped the audience would embrace a multi-level view of the world.

Two decades later, I continued this project of printing the frames of film as a strip. This time I turned a six-inch piece of 16 mm film that I had hand painted, scratched, and treated with acids and salt crystals into a 2 x 23-foot scroll. With both of these scroll strips, I hoped to break down the mystique of film; I wanted the film to lose its “aura,” the customary role, as Walter Benjamin tells us, wherein art plays a ritual function to legitimate traditional social formations.⁷

Sanctus (1990)

In *Sanctus*, I used an optical printer to refigure 1950s motion x-rays shot by Dr. James Sibley Watson and his colleagues in Rochester, NY. Again, I wanted the audience to be aware of their bodies while activating their minds. These precious x-ray images the doctors were watching with enthralled amazement were made by rays of light that damaged the body. I wanted the spectator to not only see our inner fragility as fluids and tissues swam together in hollow internal places but also to sense the danger involved in the process of making these pictures. Dr. Watson and the three men who worked with him all died of cancer.

The clinical x-rays shifted in meaning according to uses of the medical gaze, which shifted in 19th century to privilege pathological anatomy. Although the cinefluorographic production of x-rays is not the result of any one man’s work as is often thought, the manner in which the x-rays are “read” has been limited to a singular, rather than a multi-perceptual, approach. In reworking the footage through multiple passes in the optical printer and creating juxtapositions with varied (medical, scientific, philosophical) textual fragments within the image, I attempted to use a language of multiplicity to question the unitary concept of creation as well as the epistemology of scientific method.

My goal with each of these films has been to activate the cinema audience through physical movement (*Available Space*), contrasts between artifice and material reality (*Bamboo Xerox* and the film strips), and multilayered images that question unitary and problematic origins (*Sanctus*). By creating new physical projection systems or deconstructing the film projected on the screen, I hope my audiences will leave the theater invigorated enough to challenge the status quo in a polluted, violent and war-ravaged world that so desperately cries for salvation.

This essay has been expanded from *The Experimental Lecture*, which I presented and performed at Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, November 16, 2007.

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⁷ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217-51.