

REVIEW ESSAY

About *Maya Deren's Sink*

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Maya Deren's Sink (2011). Dir. Barbara Hammer. United States, HD video, 30 minutes, Color/B&W/sound by Meredith Monk. Film.

This room, housing the flesh, is home for the heart: point of return and point of departure; contains those objects which, the sight fallen or fixed upon, are thresholds for the quick heart's eye. The real thing, caught in the hand, through which the heart takes flight...The breath caught in the early morning because the heart's eye saw something which the hand could never hold...

This is what Maya Deren wrote in her apartment at Morton Street in an article that remained unpublished until her biographers decided to resuscitate the above extract in *The Legend of Maya Deren* (1988).¹

Half a century after the death of Deren, who film history remembers as "the Mother of the American Experimental Cinema," another personal belonging of hers emerged from the same apartment. It was her bathroom sink from the 1940s that Barbara Hammer discovered by chance at Anthology Film Archives. This discovery triggered Hammer to undertake her "Grand Tour" in quest of the old residences of the artist in Los Angeles and Greenwich Village. First, Hammer sought to explore the material aspect of these places: the objects, the furniture, the walls. But her vision eventually rose above the physical reality to grasp what *the heart's eye saw and which the hand could never hold...*

Hammer perceived the sink more as an artifact to be preserved than a home accessory and immediately envisioned it as a projection screen. She placed it in a dark and undefined space and filmed it, at times alone in the darkness, at times illuminated by the exhumed images of Deren, cast by a video projector. This series of projections echoes the performances that Hammer developed in the late 1970s when she projected her films on a weather balloon hanging from the ceiling, attempting in this way to "change the shape of film."² In *Maya Deren's Sink*, images of Deren are projected on another curvilinear surface, that of the sink, and become deformed and three-dimensional. Furthermore, Hammer repeated these video-projections *in situ* in the old apartments of Deren whereby everything became a potential projection screen: the images of Deren's face slip across the walls, dimple on the curtains, pleat between the angles of the floor and the walls. Blending into the bumpy ground of these objects, the images undergo an *anamorphosis*. They once again animate the interiors as they did six decades ago, when Deren was organizing screenings of her films at her Morton Screen studio. In the absence of a constituted distribution network

for experimental film practice in the mid '40s in the United States, Deren frequently transformed her home and studio into a private screening room.

The apartments of Deren have become well known. It was at North Kings Road that she filmed with the filmmaker Alexander Hammid, then her husband, the renowned *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), a "home movie," with "home" referring both to the film's independent means of production and the intimate *topos* of filming. The apartment in Morton Street was later both her home and studio; it also served as set for the films *A Study in Choreography for the Camera* (1945), *The Private Life of a Cat* (1945) and *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946).³ In a quest for background details, Hammer filmed the interiors by projecting images from Deren's films across the walls. This unexpected juncture of a former space projected back onto its present double produces a strange disorientation.

Today everything seems different and nothing resembles the analog images of Deren in black-and-white. The painting by Paul Klee, *Fetische*, once hanging in the living room at Morton Street, is now replaced with all kinds of objects and plants. The shelves once filled with shells, stones and primitive objects brought back from Haiti are now empty; the floral wallpaper is painted over. Hammer's imagery plunges the viewer into an anachronism, as if the past were always distorted and redefined by the present.

Maya Deren's Sink joins an expanded practice of recycled images in contemporary cinematic production, but the use of "found footage" is limited. It's through Bekka Lindstrom, an actress who physically resembles Maya Deren that Hammer creates her own iconography—inspired by and quoting the films of Deren—by filming the artist's doppelgänger at different angles. She films Lindstrom in Morton Street and at North Kings Road, introducing new images that, superimposed on those familiar images of Deren, blur the real and the non-real, the original and the replica. Furthermore, this quotation goes beyond the visual realm and affects the text when a voiceover repatriates multiple passages from Deren's theoretical writings on film. The writings, dating from the '40s and '50s and elaborating Deren's theories on the poetics of film and film as an artform, correspond to the technological context of the time. Revisiting the material in the age of technological growth and the new media haze, Hammer reanimates Deren's esthetic beliefs by combining them with digital technologies, thereby opening them up to new paths of reading. Thus, in opposition to an overwhelming linearity that would institutionalize the past, Hammer reclaims the extension and contemporaneity of ideas by projecting them into the present.

Hammer's intention to examine the ways history is *written* is articulated in her interview with Elisabeth Lebovici for *Mousse Magazine*,⁴ where she states that in making *Maya Deren's Sink* she reached into the archives of the everyday to study how Deren kept her diaries, what kind of spaces she lived in, and, by extension, how the everyday life of an artist unfolded at that point in time. Ultimately, Hammer is concerned with how we conceive and build up an archive *a posteriori*. As an artist and activist Hammer is highly committed to the field of history writing and, in particular, to the erased history of the oppressed which is evident in her films *Nitrate Kisses* (1992), *Tender Fictions* (1995), *Resisting Paradise* (2003), and *Lover/Other* (2006). *Maya Deren's Sink* clings to the unseen—the anthropology of domestic life, the routine, the intimate everyday rituals—exploring how these aspects form part of the practice of an artist and her forming of an esthetic. The example of Deren's diaries is illustrative of this concern, and in the film we learn that she kept three simultaneously.⁵ Indeed, the simultaneity with which she kept a record of her thoughts resonates with her

conception of cinema as a powerful instrument that is capable of making perceptible—reflecting the theories of Einstein—a relativistic universe. Deren's film *At Land* (1944) is a direct result of this conception. Through the film's creative elements, photography and editing, Deren fabricated the illusion of a tactile simultaneity of an individual traveling across a "20th century-minded time and space" continuum.⁶

In *Maya Deren's Sink*, Hammer explores the same power of the filmic instrument to transform into image the invisible, the undocumented, and that which was until now undervalued as mere accessory. Curiously, with regard to Deren, few facts seem to have escaped the existing historiography of her life; one thinks of works such as the legendary and ambitious biography *The Legend of Maya Deren, A Documentary Biography and Collected Works*.⁷ This chronicle is a lengthy project; the first two volumes appeared in the 1980s and totaled 1200 pages, and there is still another volume to follow. Facing the hierarchical dilemma inherent in the act of archiving, Deren's biographers seem to have chosen to exclude almost nothing by retracing the life of the artist in its smallest details. In the 1970s, when this edition was being prepared, Hammer was herself playing the archeologist. As she wrote in her own biography, *Hammer! Making Movies out of Sex and Life* (2010), and due to her interest in the neglected history of women artists, Hammer exhumed at Boston University Library the tapes of many of Deren's lectures which she presented to her students at Binghamton.⁸

With her new "essay documentary," Hammer has sought to revisit the vocabulary introduced by the title of Deren's biography in order to redefine the documentary in her own cinematic terms.⁹ To explain the title, Deren's biographers argue that the word *documentary* was used to emphasize their commitment to the original materials while the word *biography* was intended to honor the life.¹⁰ Hammer herself has often challenged the parameters of the documentary form such as in *History Lessons* (2000). With *Maya Deren's Sink* she goes a step further, appropriating the bathroom sink to confirm and reaffirm the term *Legend* as, in other words, the story of a person converted into myth whose life was distorted and amplified by popular imagination. Accordingly, the images of Deren are deformed when projected on the curvilinear surface of her former sink, just as her memory, like a never-ending worksite, is deformed and refracted through the many documents available to readers and researchers who rewrite her history like a palimpsest. *Maya Deren's Sink* follows this same registry, and its flux of images—soft or sharp, inversed, saturated, superimposed, sometimes psychedelic, out of a thick patina—draws the viewer toward the sensation of a ghostly Deren, more liquid than solid, that metamorphoses in the flow of the Heraclitean dictum: "Into the same river no man can step twice."

Furthermore, the *Legend* meets its original oral tradition since, in her film, Hammer makes the walls speak. The artist superimposes the speaking portraits of several witnesses onto the frames found hanging in Deren's old apartments, including Carolee Schneemann, Catrina Neiman, Judith Malina and Jerry Tallmer.¹¹ Through the rising of these collective voices, history is re-articulated, not by Deren's unanimity but through its rich polyphony. Through this vocal montage, the narrators transcend their individuality to become part of a collectivity tied together by the anecdotes of Deren's life. The history Hammer offers is voiced in plural and sculpted sometimes by harmony, sometimes by dissonance. At the end, when the closing credits appear, moments of doubt and hesitation ebb and flow: "The

rumor that I've heard... , I don't know the story... , I don't remember where I've heard it... , I don't know who told me or how I know it... ," etc.

It is by suspending doubt at the end of her film that Hammer destabilizes our trust in the document: what if everything we've heard and witnessed was merely the flit of an unverifiable rumor?

Sink! we hear voices repeat throughout the film at the sight of the bathroom sink. Sink! repeats Hammer and, without a doubt, she hints: Sink! in the abyss like an Atlantis.

Notes

1. Excerpt from Deren's article "The Home through the Heart's Eye" destined for *Flair* Magazine. See Clark, Hodson and Neiman, *The Legend of Maya Deren*, 131. Although Deren's article was never published, it was previewed in the *Flair* pre-publication issue, 1950, and is going to be reprinted in *Ritual*, Volume II of *The Legend of Maya Deren*.

2. Hammer and Lebovici, *Mousse Magazine*. Back in the late '70s and early '80s, Hammer expanded her artistic practice by a series of performances, making her breakthrough from the movie screen and into the architectural space of projection. Using one or more moving projectors, the artist projected her films around the screening room and on inflated weather balloons, thus challenging in a radical way the film's spatial frame and horizon while, at the same time, stimulating the audience in an active, physical participation. *Available Space* (1979) was the first of her experiments. Recently, a series of new works have followed, among them: *Moving Projector* (2009), *Balloon Projection* (2009), and *Changing the Shape of Film* (2009). These works are part of Hammer's retrospectives in MOMA, New York (2010), Tate Modern, London (2012), and Jeu de Paume, Paris (2012). See Hammer, *Hammer!*, 80–84, as well as the artist's personal website: <http://barbarahammer.com/multimedia/performances>.

3. The home, as the intimate geography of creation, is an important component in Barbara Hammer's own practice as an independent artist and is, as she states, inevitably implicated in the production of her work. Furthermore, this resonates with her initiative to visit and film the interiors of Deren's apartments. The home is for Hammer a place of "creative freedom", where "you can break taboos without being ... arrested." See Hammer and Earnest, "Time is an Emotional Muscle."

4. Hammer and Lebovici, "The Screen as the Body."

5. Deren kept several diaries and notebooks at different periods throughout her lifetime. More specifically, we know the existence of three diaries dated ca. 1931–36 and a journal she kept before and while in Haiti, dated ca. 1947, preserved at the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University where the Maya Deren Collection is housed. Furthermore, excerpts of her notebook in Haiti have been published in *October* journal, 1980. On Deren's notebook, 1947, see Neiman, "An Introduction," 3–15. For a published transcript of Deren's journal see Deren, "From the Notebook," 21–46.

6. Deren, "Program Notes," 2.

7. *The Legend*, initially conceived as a Maya Deren "Reader," was eventually expanded to become the most extensive collation of documentary biography ever compiled on a woman filmmaker. It is a women's collective project, undertaken in the midst of the second-wave feminist movement in the United States, and part of a wider reevaluation of historiography at Berkeley in the early '70s. This unparalleled biography brings to light exhaustive archival material as well as new, unpublished data on Deren's expanded activity, thus establishing her legend; Clark, Hodson and Neiman, *The Legend of Maya Deren*, xiv–xvi and 1–4.

8. Hammer, 168.

9. On Hammer's metadocumentary and "essay documentary" practice, see Hammer, 241–45.

10. Clark, Hodson and Neiman, 1984, xv.

11. Those who tell the story of Deren's life in Hammer's film have their own histories; Carolee Scheemann has raised questions about body, sexuality and gender through her pioneer and expanded artistic work in the visual arts. Catrina Neiman, writer and archivist and specialised in artists' writings, is one of the editors of *The Legend of Maya Deren*. Jerry Tallmer, prolific NYC journalist and critic, is a founder of *The Village Voice*, where he was an associate editor and drama critic at the time when Deren briefly contributed in the publication in 1960/61. Judith Malina, writer, actress and director, is a founder, together with Julian Beck, of the radical experimental theatre troupe *The Living Theatre*. It is worth noting that Maya Deren gave, in April 1959, a lecture at the Living Theatre in New York entitled "Moving-Pictures: Motor-Driven Metaphysics." On Deren's lecture, see Butler, "Motor-driven metaphysics," 1–23.

References

- Butler, Alison. "Motor-driven metaphysics: movement, time and action in the films of Maya Deren." *Screen* 48, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 1–23.
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Media

- At Land* (1945). Dir. Maya Deren. United States, 15:00 min., 16mm, B&W/silent film.
- Available Space* (1979). Dir. Barbara Hammer. United States, 20:00 min., 16mm film, Color/silent. Performance and film.
- History Lessons* (2000). Dir. Barbara Hammer. United States, 16mm film, 66:00 min., Color/sound. Film.
- Lover/Other* (2006). Dir. Barbara Hammer. United States, 55:00 min., Video, Color & B&W/sound. Film.
- Maya Deren's Sink* (2011). Dir. Barbara Hammer. United States, 2011, HD video, 30:00 min., Color/B&W/sound by Meredith Monk. Film.
- Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). Dir. Maya Deren. United States, 13:45 min., 16mm, B&W/silent film. Second version with sound by Teiji Ito (1959).
- Nitrate Kisses* (1992). Dir. Barbara Hammer. United States, 67:00 min., 16mm film, B&W/sound. Film.
- The Private Life of a Cat* (1945). Dir. Maya Deren. United States, 1945, 29:00 min., 16mm, B&W/silent film.
- Resisting Paradise* (2003). Dir. Barbara Hammer. United States, 80:00 min., 16mm film, Color/B&S/sound. Film.
- Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1945–46). Dir. Maya Deren. United States, 14:30 min., 16mm, B&W/silent film.
- Tender Fictions* (1995). Dir. Barbara Hammer. United States, 58:00 min., 16mm film, Color/sound. Film.