Choreographing the Lesbian Possibility: Barbara Hammer's *Double Strength*

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ABSTRACT:

The early work of Barbara Hammer, American lesbian experimental filmmaker constitutes an approach to filmmaking as embodied practice, where aesthetics originates with touch and sensuality/sexuality and the viewer's reception is expected to be sensual as well as visual. "Choreographing Lesbian Possibility" offers a reading of her 1978 film *Double Strength*, a collaboration with trapeze artist, Terry Sendgraff, arguing that Hammer's work with body-in-movement and body-as-movement allows her to formulate an epistemology and a politics based on bodily knowledge and the language of the body. The question is what kind of politics emerge from such body-centered film practice. Jean-Luc Nancy's commentary on performance, Giorgio Agamben's work on gesture as the key to the cinematic and his argument for a politics where means are not programmed to serve specific ends, Kalpana Rashita Seshadri's formulation of the notion of exceptional movement and Laura Marks' concept of haptic visuality provide key theoretical reference points.

KEYWORDS:
body, movement, doubling, lesbian aesthetics, haptic visuality, means without end.

IMAGES:

Fig. 1
Barbara Hammer, still from *Double Strength* (1978), 16 mm, color, 16 m

Fig. 2
Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, untitled (Moore with mirror image), ca. 1928 (in: Tirza True Latimer, *Women Together, Women Apart. Portraits of Lesbian Paris,* Rutgers University Press, 2005, 94)

Fig. 3
Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, untitled (Cahun with mirror image), ca. 1928 (in: Tirza True Latimer, *Women Together, Women Apart. Portraits of Lesbian Paris,* Rutgers University Press, 2005, 95)

Fig. 4
Split Britches, http://splitbritches.wordpress.com/touring/performance/

Fig. 5
Fawn Yacker, *Can You See Me Flying* (1990), color, 28 m, http://vimeo.com/19240433

Fig. 6
Barbara Hammer, still from *Double Strength* (1978), 16 mm, color, 16 m

Fig 7.
Barbara Hammer, still from *Double Strength* (1978), 16 mm, color, 16 m

Fig. 8
Barbara Hammer, “Double Cross”

I have permission from the artist to use all images by Barbara Hammer.

Choreographing the lesbian possibility: Barbara Hammer's *Double Strength*

Doubling

A split screen divides the visual space: two photographs, each a portrait of a woman, are facing each other in a mirror refection. The women's bodies are similarly clothed and arranged in mirroring poses, so that the two photographs create a symmetrical double portrait (fig.1). As each of the women poses gazing at the camera, we are invited to think about the photographer whose role the two women may have played in turns. These mirroring images/roles and the title, *Double Strength,* establish the structural and metaphorical principle of Barbara Hammer's film in which repetition-as-doubling is the determining figure.

Made in 1978, *Double Strength* is, to use Hammer's own words "a poetic study of a lesbian relationship." Filmed by Hammer and Terry Sendgraff, a trapeze artist and Hammer's lover at the time, the film is a montage of clips of two women flying on Sendgraff's suspended aerial apparatus; Sendgraff performing acrobatic movements indoors and climbing a tree outside; some photographs of both; and fragments of footage from the women's private archive. The soundtrack consists of highly contrasted music pieces which define the sections of the film and the voices of two women talking about their relationship (but not directly commenting on what is present on the screen, the visual and the soundtrack levels related to each other only insofar as the general subject of the film is concerned).[1] The back-and-forth of the image alternating between the two women and the voices that address each other shape the film in a series of imperfect mirrorings.

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Doubling is of course one of the classic forms of lesbian art. Two female lovers are often figured as reflections, sometimes substituting for one another, their voices or perspectives becoming intertwined or interchangeable. Structurally, this often manifests itself as a confusion of personal pronouns, indeterminacy of the narrative position, or as one speaking in place of the other or giving voice to the other. Perhaps most famously or most dramatically, Gertrude Stein writes the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in her partner's name, a trick that the reader is meant to be unaware of until the last sentences of the book retroactively complicate the apparently simple telling of a life story.[3] The joy of discovering

[1] As a matter of fact, the voiceover was recorder later, after the filming, and the voices, which seem to be those of Hammer and Sendgraff, belong to Hammer and Gloria Churchman (Hammer's later partner and collaborator on another film).

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[3] Gertrude Stein, *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas,* in: *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein,* ed. Carl Van Vechten, Vintage Books, 1962, 1-238.

oneself in the other may be the underlying impulse of these substitutions, but the implications of such doubling are in fact quite complex and manifold, serving not only as a structural device but an epistemological tool.[4]

In *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* Stein's "joke" radically destabilizes the concepts of representation, voice, and identity. Writing *as* Alice, Stein experiments with seeing herself the way Alice may be seeing her, as well as experiments with reconstructing, from her perspective, Alice's self-understanding. This disruption of the unity of self and representation allows for a distancing from her own point of view in speaking of their life together, for a dislodging of the centered gaze of the portraitist (in ways not only cubist, as has often been pointed out, but in fact anticipating such postmodern experiments with "portraiture" as John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"). Obviously there are dangers implicit in these types of experiment, such as projection and appropriation, but, arguably, the text draws attention precisely to these mechanics of (self-)portraiture, demonstrating how problematic/impure self-representation (self-portrait) is (as it always involves others) and how problematic portraits are (as projections of the artist).

As a naïve reader embarks on *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* she soon discovers that what announces itself as an *autobiography* seems in fact Toklas' *biography* of Stein (we learn much more about Stein's pursuits than about Toklas herself and the book is thematically arranged around interests which we can identify as Stein's). When in the end we discover that Stein is the author of the text, that she wrote Toklas' *(auto?) biography,* still the book remains a text largely devoted to Stein and thus, in the end, her own *autobiography*. Stein can only write her (auto)biography as the (auto)biography of the other/her lover. The interdependence, or doubling, as I have been calling it using Hammer's visual metaphor, invades the (auto)biographical on all levels: Toklas's autobiography can only be written by Stein and as such is really a biography; or, her biography of Stein is in fact Toklas's own autobiography, while Stein can write her own autobiography only by writing the (auto)biography of Toklas. Lesbian doubling undoes the auto/bio distinction (the distinction between representing oneself and another) and serves as a critique of (self)representation; it problematizes the traditional concept of the author, making the authorship split or double; it also undermines the (auto)biographical claims to truth, as there is no authorial guarantee and no authorization and any truth offered by the text is of uncertain provenience.[5] The text which on some level infamously reproduces patriarchal norms (Alice the wife, Gertrude the husband in a patriarchal household) and the attendant model of authorship (the (husband) author having the voice, to the extent that the (wife) companion cannot speak for herself[6]) at the same time undermines them: the "I" is contingent on the other; there is no Stein without Toklas, as there is no Toklas without Stein.[7] As the work of love that *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is, it

[4] See also my "Gender Traveler: H.D. in Europe," for a discussion of such doubling or reversal in H.D.'s fiction (in: *Traveling Subjects: American Journeys in Space and Time*, ed. Dominika Ferens, Justyna Kociatkiewicz, Elzbieta Klimek-Dominiak, Wydawnictwo Rabid, Cracow, 2004.)

[5] The later echoed in the text when Alice "begs" Gertrude to have been born in California.

[6] Yet, if Alice had no part in actually writing the text of *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, she was indispensable for its reproduction; as Stein points out in this very text, Toklas copied all of Stein's writing and was the only one—Stein not excluded—who could decipher what Stein has written.

[7] In fact, Stein also repeatedly references Toklas' ways of knowing which are unavailable to her. She also suggests a kinship between their aesthetics: Toklas' tapestries share Stein's pragmatic simplicity and the tendency to subvert the distinction between high and low arts. She also recognizes a uniquely Toklasian set of metaphors—such as those related to food—which she elucidates for the reader (such as, for example, the significance of serving scrambled eggs to a guest (*Autobiography,* 65)).

can be read as a gift as well as testimony: not just giving voice to the other but replaying the dynamic of intimacy and love.[8]

A modernist visual parallel to Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is provided by the work of Claude Cahun (Lucie Schwob) in life-long collaboration with her partner Marcel Moore (Suzanne Malherbe) (fig.2 and 3). The two artists posed for each other and photographed each other, and collaborated on several projects. Much of Cahun's and Moore's work is focused on portraiture and reveals the type of doubling of author and sitter I have described in relation to Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Tirza True Latimer makes a persuasive argument for reading their work as a collaboration (against the tendency to read Cahun as the author) or what she calls "an exercise in double vision."[9] Latimer demonstrates how in fact "many photographs thematize or formalize the joint character" of the artists' work (Latimer, 71).

Interestingly, Cahun and Moore also undertake the project of autobiography (which, as has been often argued, is most often the first genre to be adopted by minoritarian artists seeking their own self-definition) and manipulate it in a way that, as Latimer puts it, "radically transforms both the structure and the discursive function of the biographical genre" (Latimer compares their work to Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, a fictional biography of her lover, Vita Sackville West (Latimer 80)). Their *Aveux non avenus*, argues Latimer, is an anti-biography, opposing the model of the genre established by Rousseau, where the author is the unique point of origin, the text, in turn, ratifying his authorship (Latimer 85). Cahun and Moore's text, conversely, "sets out to dismantle both a literary genre, autobiography, and its subject—the authoritative self whom the artist's signature authenticates" (Latimer 80). In fact the two artists seem to produce each other in turn ("je suis l'ouevre de ta vie," Cahun is quoted saying to Moore (Latimer 71)). By implication, this act has consequences which go beyond the private sphere, by defying not only "the symbolic," but also "the capitalist economy" in which art functions (Latimer 81).

What makes the work of Cahun and Moore even more relevant to a discussion of Hammer is its performative character. With its archeology of posing, with the sometimes elaborate settings, with the masks and costumes Cahun dons as she puts on an act in front of Moore's camera, this work is very much a record of staged performances. In fact, the art of photography, as Latimer argues, can itself be related to the performative: after Roland Barthes, she prefers to read it as *theater*, that is, as coproduction between a performer (usually, thought not always Cahun) and director (most often Moore).[10]

A contemporary example plays with this tradition, demonstrating another, perhaps more unsettling aspect of such doubling. In a still that advertises a 2007 performance by *Split Britches,* a lesbian duo composed of Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver, Shaw is photographed sitting on a chair, in drag (as she usually performs) and staring down at her audience; behind her there is a shadow which we expect to be hers but which is a woman in a dress, standing next to a chair (fig.4)—most likely the shadow of Weaver. This doubling is perhaps more elusive than the ones discussed above, even if produced within the same dynamic of a collaborating lesbian couple. What it suggests is, in fact, a possible doubling *within* the subject, as if Shaw's reflection revealed the (feminine) other she contains or is, or, alternately, the other she internalized (and is unsuccessfully turning away from). With a characteristic confusion of pronouns, Ashbery describes a similar moment in "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror":

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[8] For more examples of such creative doubling among the women of Modernism, see Shari Benstock's seminal *Women of the Left Bank. Paris 1900-1940,* University of Texas Press, 1986.

[9] Tirza True Latimer, *Women Together, Women Apart. Portraits of Lesbian Paris,* Rutgers University Press, 2005, 78.

[10] See Latimer for a discussion of other examples of erotic/creative doublings in Modernist women's art.

You feel then like one of those
Hoffmann characters who have been deprived
Of a reflection, except that the whole of me
Is seen to be supplanted by the strict
Otherness of the painter in his
Other room.[11]

Split Britches clearly exploit this doubling for comic effect. There is a good dose of self-irony contained in the image of Peggy Shaw, passing as a man, accompanied by a ghostly female shadow. The female "other" self, the one she disavows here, follows her around like a doppelganger. The interior split, the difference within, is perhaps one of the more interesting versions of the doubling under discussion.

The doubling Hammer works with belongs to this tradition: *Double Strength* is a collaboration which grows out of lesbian intimacy. In this installment of "making movies out of sex and life,"[12] the (double) subjects of representation are also objects of desire. The "authorship" of the film hinges on the complex interaction between Hammer and Sendgraff as they take turns photographing, filming and performing for each other. In their attempts to define the nature of their intimacy they are both authors and objects of scrutiny, performers and viewers. Obviously the film "belongs" to Hammer whose name figures as the film's author, and it is Hammer who had the last word as the film's editor, but arguably it is both their arts—Sendgraff's aerial movement and Hammer's filmmaking—that produce the film, as well as serve as its subject. Art is also their means of relating to each other: there is an erotic charge to their performances, as they each in turn take and relinquish control of the products of their creativity, their mutual representations. The complexity of the process is perhaps most succinctly captured by Hammer in her commentary on the film when she speaks of the two artists "reclaiming [their] mutual projections" (*Making Movies* 129).

This productive tension works against the appropriation of the story by just one of its authors and informs Hammer's effort to recapture the lost intimacy in a way that would not make it merely her own narrative. When reflecting on *Double Strength* thirty years later in *Making Movies...* Hammer still borrows metaphors from Sendgraff's art to understand the nature of their intimacy. She speaks of weightfulness of gymnastics and weightlessness of bodies on trapezes and uses those references to bodies and gravity as metaphors for personal interaction: the insight about physical weight and space is applied to the emotional weight and space within a relationship and translated into merging and maintaining a separateness. Weight and weightlessness—as stability and movement, attachment and freedom—those determinants of Sendgraff's art—acquire a peculiar twist in a film which attempts both to represent a romantic bond and to examine its dissolution.

Since Sendgraff had been Hammer's teacher, *Double Strength* is Hammer's way of acknowledging a debt (as well as representing a competition between the two artists and their arts). But Sendgraff's contribution to Hammer's art goes well beyond that of trapeze training. The philosophy of her work with the body and aerial movement must have provided a powerful incentive for Hammer for thinking through the problems of the body and movement, and the political implications of working with moving bodies. I will focus on these aspects of their cooperation (and competition) in the film and demonstrate their continuing relevance for Hammer's work.

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[11] John Ashbery, "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,* Penguin Books, 1975, 74.
[12] Title of Hammer's 2010 book, *Making Movies Out of Sex and Life,* Feminist Press, 2010.

the body

> However, no one has hitherto laid down the limits to the powers of the body, that is, no one has as yet been taught by experience what the body can accomplish solely by the laws of nature, in so far as she is regarded as extension. No one hitherto has gained such an accurate knowledge of the bodily mechanism, that he can explain all its functions; nor need I call attention to the fact that *many actions are observed in the lower animals, which far transcend human sagacity*, and that *somnambulists do many things in their sleep, which they would not venture to do when awake*: these instances are enough to show, that the body can by the sole laws of its nature do many things which the mind wonders at.[13] (italics mine)

In this often quoted passage Spinoza famously reminds us of the powers of the body. Reacting to the perception that the mind can control itself and the body (with which it is identical), Spinoza claims the body, human or animal, has certain powers inaccessible to the human mind, in fact has power over the mind. Thought may be governed by what the body registers. As Spinoza observes, often people "think that they speak from free mental decision when in fact they are unable to restrain their torrent of words" (Spinoza107). Thus the conviction that we have (rational) control over our bodies, over our speech and actions, is self-delusion: "those who believe that they speak, or keep silent, or do anything from free mental decision are dreaming with their eyes open" (Spinoza 108).

The famous example of the sleepwalker and the less known but equally if not more relevant example of the animals quoted above gesture toward the kind of knowledge which, by its very nature, cannot be verbalized. It is this knowledge, I argue, that Sendgraff's art seeks and exemplifies in *Double Strength.*

In the voiceover, one of the women's voices describes the way she relates to the other as "emotional and *body-wise*" rather than intellectual. This bodily aspect of the relationship is also very pronounced in the film, whose rhythm is motivated by the movement of the women's bodies more eloquent by far than the words uttered in the voice commentary. In this way, the film is very different from Hammer's other collaborations, for example *Two Bad Daughters* (1988) made with Paula Levine, which is language-driven and focused on theorizing femininity and playing with critical terms in feminist theory. Language that accompanies the images of *Double Strength* is often halting and felt to be inadequate. The two women grope for words as they attempt to verbalize the physical experience of being together, the sensual contact and response. One of them complains: "the words don't seem to be able to expla… say what it's like… ." Language flounders. Obviously, the question implicitly posed by the film is: if language cannot do justice to the experience the film is trying to represent, perhaps film image can? or both Hammer's and Sendgraff's arts combined: light and movement, the camera and the body?

The unease caused by the difficulty of finding adequate language seems literally released in the film by the image of the flying body: the body, often naked, propelled through space, free, graceful, competent. We are wooed by its movement, enticed by its power. There is a contrast between what we hear and what we see on screen so that that the effect is a rather dramatic split, a separation of language and the visual. As the image of the flying body further underscores the hesitancy of language, we are encouraged to focus on the images of body movement. That is quite a feat, considering that we are conditioned to take for granted the

[13] Baruch Spinoza, *The Ethics and Selected Letters*, Part III, "Concerning the Origin and Nature of the Emotions." Proposition 2 (105-108), trans. Samuel Shirley, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis/Cambridge, 1982, 106.

authority of language *over* what we see: ever since the introduction of sound, filmmakers have been acutely aware of the power of spoken word to overdetermine their meanings.[14]

Sendgraff's powerful body—mature, robust, strong, and competent— is at the center of the film, as the object of desire and the object of aesthetic pleasure. Its nakedness could make it vulnerable and exposed, and yet it is entirely in charge; not so much undressed as having no need for clothes: to clothe it would be like dressing the *Vitruvian Man*. If viewers find this nakedness problematic—and some members of Hammer's audience did express discomfort with the nudity in *Double Strength*[15]—this cultural encoding of nakedness as shameful is clearly being projected onto Sendgraff's body, for that body seems to reveal its crotch the way I reveals its foot, as if entirely innocent of cultural norms. Another norm we are confronted with as viewers is that of age. Traditionally, naked female bodies have been present in film (and art) only when very young and adhering to the restrictive heteronormative western standards of beauty. Also when watching moving bodies performing gymnastic feats, we are accustomed to seeing young, or very young bodies in tight costume: thoroughly covered and yet revealing their perfect shapeliness. Here the woman is not young and her body is beautiful but not according to normative beauty standards. In fact, it seems that her maturity is part of the film's fascination.

Hammer's comments on filmmaking repeatedly reminds us that the body and sexuality are the locus of her aesthetics.[16] *Double Strength* performs the work of "reclaiming and reconnecting" to the body which is one of Hammer's entry points into her project of inventing lesbian art: "As we reclaim and reconnect to our body as a source of lesbian imagery including erotic visualization, we bring to cinema a power and force, that of our unique selves" (*Making Movies* 130). The trapeze-swinging, tree-climbing, powerful, and playful body that is the key image in *Double Strength* can be read as a way of inventing a lesbian dictionary in collaboration with Terry Sendgraff, one of Hammer's teachers on the subject, and an authority on matters of the body, her own life-long professional preoccupation.

Terry Sendgraff is a California-based artist who invented the so-called single-point trapeze, a trapeze which can rotate as well as swing,[17] and a technique or style of working with it she calls "motivity" (which means: energy that produces motion). Sendgraff came out of dance, gymnastics, Tai Chi, and skating, but in her thirties she proceeded to experiment with her own forms of movement, including aerial movement, which allowed her to explore space beyond that available to movement on the ground. As she observes on her webpage, her invention of "motivity" runs parallel to similar experiments with improvised movement which led to founding of the Motional Improvisation and Action Theater.[18] For years Sendgraff led "motivity" workshops, teaching students with the use of the trapeze but not merely trapeze skills: she describes her approach to teaching as "holistic" and leading to an experience of oneself, and of oneself in relation to others and the environment, with improvised, free movement at the core. In Fawn Yacker's film about Sendgraff, *Can You See Me Flying*, she describes her method:

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[14] See, for example, the early debate on the introduction of sound into film in *Close Up* (1927-1933), ed. James Donald and Anne Friedberg, 1999, now made available online by the Media History Digital Library, at http://mediahistoryproject.org/.

[15] She records these responses in her 1982 film *Audience*.

[16] "Lesbian sexuality is directly connected to lesbian artmaking. In fact, lovemaking and artmaking are interchangeable pleasurable activities" (*Making Movies* 119).

[17] "The device is now widely used in companies practicing circus arts; in aerial dancing, such as Orts Theater of Dance; and by dance companies whose members may have lower-body disabilities, such as AXIS Dance Company," Marcia Sanderson, "Flying Women," *Dance Magazine,* March 2002, 49.

[18] http://www.terrysendgraff.com/motivity.html Accessed Feb 2, 2014.

> sometimes students . . . are concerned with external things, with learning tricks and not in the mood to come in contact with themselves or make contact with another person and that's where the transformation really comes from: from contact, from being in touch, so to speak, with oneself or with others. Not pretending. Not avoiding.[19]

Instead of focusing on the result that they want to produce and the "tricks" of the trade, instead of using their bodies as a means to an end, the students are encouraged to allow the body to take them where it will.

Hammer seems to take a similar route with her experimental cinema when, seeing how rife history of filmmaking is with misrepresentations of women and lesbians, she forges her aesthetics out of the raw material of intimate sensations: "As outsiders, as women and as lesbians, we gave form to our feelings ... and this process of making a pattern for interior sensations both vague and defined became an important part of my personal aesthetics" (*Making Movies* 101). The immediacy of Sendgraff's performance which comes from working with her own body is thus clearly something Hammer's early work aspires to. Coming, no doubt, out of the deep sense of misrepresentation, out of the awareness of the pervasive, indelible heteropatriarchal coding of all media based on language or image, Hammer seeks a more immediate access to the self and self-representation. The body is the obvious locus. As Jean-Luc Nancy observes in relation to dance, the performing body produces meaning independent of any medium, free of the effects of signification of the medium itself. The body is the dancer's *means* of expression. Therefore, "[t]he means and the end get closer, even overlap each other. . . . . [T]he dancer is an artist who is, if I may say, particularly self-referentiated [*autoréférencié*]. By this I mean neither narcissistic, nor autistic, nor egocentric, but in an immediate relation to oneself: in-mediate, without mediation by a medium and yet neither simply immanent in the strict sense of the term (like water in water...), but taking oneself as one's own medium." [20] Giorgio Agamben, understanding the body as the dancer's medium, argues that dance can be thought of as a "means without end": "If dance is a gesture, it is so . . . . because it is nothing more than the endurance and the exhibition of the media character of corporal movements. *The gesture is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such.* It allows the emergence of the being-in-the-medium of human beings and thus it opens the ethical dimension for them" (Agamben, "Notes" 58): in dance perceived as a means without end, as pure mediality, an aesthetics opens out into an ethics (and a politics).

Obviously Hammer works with the camera and thus is sentenced to mediated representation, and yet, the desire for immediacy pervades *Double Strength* and much of her early work. It manifests itself in the attempts to merge with the camera, to become one with it, to become a kind of witnessing cyborg or, by placing the camera between two love-making bodies (in *Dyketactics*), allowing the camera to be another body. Detached from its function as a medium, a tool, and become its own being, an eye and a body, between two other bodies, the camera registers what no one else can see. In one of the moments of pure cinematic brilliance, which is also clearly a moment of competition between the two arts, motivity and film, the camera in *Double Strength* seems to liberate itself in flight. When the two women take turns filming each other on the trapezes, swinging and performing trapeze acrobatics, the camera seems to join in, filming upside down, as if it was another body released from all constraints. Filming the scene from odd angles, often "losing sight" of the bodies it is

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[19] The film is available on Vimeo. Fawn Yacker, *Can You See Me Flying*, http://vimeo.com/19240433; accessed 27.11.2013

[20] Mathilde Monnier and Jean-Luc Nancy, "Alliterations: Conversations on Dance/2005" in *Dance*. ed. Andre Lepecki, Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2012, 68.

supposed to be filming, forgetting about all laws of framing and capturing odd collections of fragmented objects, now it is the camera that seems to be showing off, until it is less the flowing trapeze movement and more the movement of the camera, and the—sometimes almost abstract—juxtaposed visual patterns, that determine the dynamic of the scene. At this moment of anarchy, as we try to flesh out the abstractions and wonder where the camera may be, the non-verbal, in fact, non-representational film "language" takes over.

The centrality of the body in Hammer's early films—the body as the source of its own language, as the locus of knowledge, as the key to aesthetics—involves also an exploration of the body's means of communication: touch. Touch figures prominently also in Hammer's discussions of lesbian identity. She observes that her discovery of lesbian sexuality was accompanied by an "[i]ncreased awareness of touch": "after becoming a lesbian my sense of touch was heightened as my hands seemed to be like sexual organs" (*Making Movies* 131). Touch, Hammer argues, is the primary sense that we tend to lose with age: children know touch first and learn to see later, preserving, however, a strong connection between the two senses; with age, "[w]e grow to be sighted, non-touching adults. We 'lose' touch with an important sense connection" (*Making Movies* 131). Hammer's lesbian film gives priority to "sensuality, the experience of touch and sensation . . . heightened for . . . a woman loving a woman" (*Making Movies* 99). This, in turn, is to affect the audience of her film in an immediate, physical manner—a wish Hammer expresses repeatedly, arguing that women do respond to visual eroticism and indeed, as a number of her viewers confirm, they do.

Such privileging of touch may seem a paradoxical decision for a filmmaker, who works with vision, light, and movement. But then, Hammer insists that seeing *is* touching. She advocates what Laura Marks has termed "haptic visuality": seeing where "eyes themselves function as organs of touch."[21] Seeing—even mediated seeing—affects the body and brings bodies in contact. In her work she aims to re-establish a connection between the two senses—one of which atrophies with age—making the juncture of sight and touch central to her work: "I believe that the basis for a lesbian aesthetic is the perceptual connection between sight and touch" (*Making Movies* 131). In reference to one of her films, *Sync Touch* (1981), she says that it "reconnects sight and touch and proposes the screen to be a tactile place" (*Making Movies* 131). Hammer wants her "sensual imagery" to "evoke physical sensations in the audience" (*Making Movies* 99). Her films thus aim to reconnect us with reality and ourselves through seeing-as-touching.

The haptic project of Hammer's early films has its political as well as epistemological dimension; she argues that the re-appreciation of touch could inflect the way we perceive the world and, consequently, change our world-view. If, to be political, art has to actively involve the audience, Hammer believes, that in the case of film, that means engaging the viewer on a *somatic* level: "Active cinema is a cinema where the audience is engaged *physically*, involved with the sense of their bodies as they watch the screen. In passive cinema the audience is a spectator to the whims and fancies of the director. It's as if a dreamlike somnambulance takes over..." (*Making Movies*, 128). Lesbian cinema of the body is then Hammer's wake-up call: the viewers awake to the awareness of their bodies. The question is: what kind of politics emerge from such body-centered practice?

body as movement

Hammer and Sengraff both work with non-verbal tools: Sendgraff's medium is her body and gravity, Hammer's the body of her camera and light. What their two arts also have in common

[21] Laura Marks, *The Skin of Films: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses,* Duke University Press, 2000, 162.

is movement: with cinematography—from Greek *kinema* (movements) and *graphein* (writing)— Hammer is "writing movement"; with choreography—from Greek *choreia* (circular dance) and *graphein*— Sengraff is producing "dance writing." It is the combination of body and movement, the body in movement and, even more importantly, body *as* movement that is being examined by both artists in *Double Strength*. I will now look at the ways they conceive of these terms—making reference to their other projects, as well as to *Double Strength*—and speculate about the significance of how they engage moving bodies in their feminist, political interventions.

Sendgraff's work as a teacher of "motivity" can be described as freeing the body for movement or allowing the body to generate its own movement. Arising out of the need of the body, the movement is neither pre-scripted, nor aiming at any specific effect. Akin more to physical therapy or yoga than to traditionally defined arts, "motivity" seems to be available to anyone, irrespective of the level of one's bodily ability and skill. One of the aspects of Sendgraff's concept of body movement, which is also very visible in *Double Strength*, is pleasure: the pleasure of flying on the trapeze, of feeling one's body move. In *Double Strength* and video recordings of her work[22] Sendgraff seems to perform her aerial acrobatics for her own satisfaction, and not as a demonstration of technical mastery, strength, or beauty. As a matter of fact, what we witness is hardly a performance: there are none of the flourishes, none of the gestures that routinely accompany prescripted choreography and gymnastics. And the viewers, instead of judging skill, are freed to identify with the pleasure, to experience the response of their own bodies. In his commentary on the defining qualities of dance, Jean-Luc Nancy observes that because of the unmediated character of dance, it has a peculiar effect on the audience: "…dance is an art whose spectator does not solely—nor even especially—look at: its gaze becomes *interior gesture*, quiet tension of its own muscles, inchoative movement. Hence, no doubt, the fact that the sight of the dancer or of an acrobat, has been a frequent example in research on empathy" (Monnier and Nancy 68).

In *Double Strength* the viewer's identification becomes perhaps even more powerful, when the film takes the acrobatics outside the studio and the images of trapeze-flying give way to those of Sendgraff climbing a tree. Tree-climbing is the childhood activity most of the film's viewers are probably able to identify with first-hand, and the women of the audience may also remember it as a particularly "tomboyish" pastime, one perhaps considered "inappropriate" for girls and even a potential sign of future gender trouble, anyway, always mildly transgressive as considered to be the domain of boys. Not surprisingly it is in childhood that Sendgraff finds the origins of her adult preoccupation with aerial movement. She remembers: "as a child... I loved to climb trees, jump out of them, pretending I could fly" (*Can You See Me*).[23] Interestingly, Sendgraff immediately contrasts this image of pleasure in movement with a reference to the mastery required for practicing sports, mentioning her parents were golf professionals and champions (her father "quite the performer"). Perhaps suggesting the price at which such mastery was achieved Sendgraff immediately follows this comment with the observation that her mother was an alcoholic. Sendgraff herself—apparently in reaction to this personal cost of the professionalization of sport performance to

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[22] See, eg. Yacker's *Can You See Me Flying*.

[23] *Can You See Me Flying.* The tree-climbing in *Double Strength* is reminiscent of Maya Deren's *At Land* (also known as one of the early avant-garde films to include a "lesbian scene"). The film's androgynous protagonist engages in climbing and crawling: Deren's impressive, fit, nimble body, does not speak but performs somewhat mysterious physical activities. In Deren the character seems not entirely human, perhaps a mermaid, as she seems to have been washed up on the shore by the sea's ebb-tide. She seems to belong to a separate world, unseen by other humans that appear in the film and she only touches—lovingly, erotically—two women, to then impishly steal a chess piece from their chess board). She is an androgynous spirit, a Puck perhaps (in fact, the most convincing Puck I have ever seen was performed by an androgynous, pre-adolescent girl).

her parents and herself as a child—claims she prefers to use movement not as performance but play, not competition but cure: "I found the *movement-play* my healing, my sort of self-therapy, even when I was little, so I was happy that I had myself and my friendship with my body" (*Can You See Me Flying,* italics mine). Engaged in such *movement-play*, the body (interestingly split off from the self as a potential interlocutor) becomes the source of knowledge apparently otherwise not accessible. Defined in opposition to competitive performance and directed toward the self and not the viewer, Sendgraff's movement is neither institutionalized as sport, nor codified as pre-scripted dance choreography; it does not aim at recognition as much as at contact with one's own body, drawing on the body's knowledge to cure the mind. Spontaneous as it is, however, this movement is Sendgraff's life-long vocation, requiring discipline, practice, and consistent effort.

Kalpana Rahita Seshadri's develops a theory of what she calls "exceptional movement" to comment on such non-competitive, non-codified movement as informs Sendgraff's "motivity." "Exceptional movement," such as the practice of yoga, combines the seriousness of commitment, with a separation from the world, and thus is "an exercise that alters a mind-body relation."[24] Her main example of the body performing "exceptional movement" is Philippe Petit, the tightrope walker best known for walking on a rope strung between the Twin Towers in New York. Similarly to Sendraff, Seshadri opposes the power and "exuberance" of "exceptional movement" to the strict parameters of institutionalized movement (such as sports). And, similarly to Sendgraff, she recognizes its playful, intuitive quality (in an interview quoted by Seshadri, Petit speaks of working in "a kind of intuitive, child-like way"). While institutionalized movement is easily appropriated by the state and thus lends itself to cultural nationalism, "exceptional movement" successfully evades appropriation. Following Agamben's lead in the area of political ontology, Seshadri argues: "when a certain kind of agile and exceptional movement, playful yet rigorous, exuberant yet ascetic (let us call it studious mischief) is actually practiced, it is invariably effected as a nuanced 'profanation'—an ethicopolitical challenge to the dominance of the economy and its means-end-logic" (Seshadri 203). Thus there is an ethics and a politics to "exceptional movement," even if it is a peculiar politics: as in Agamben's *Means without End,* in Seshadri's *HumAnimal* "political paradigms are sought in experiences and phenomena that usually are not considered political or that are considered only marginally so."[25] Acrobats, tightrope walkers, trapeze artists—those of "lowly professional status," performing acts which require "a low threshold skill, characteristic of play and doing tricks," as opposed to the moving bodies in "sports, games, or art"—are more likely to perform genuinely "exceptional" movement, which eludes capture and appropriation (Seshadri 219). Sengraff's *movement-play* which liberates bodies to produce a new knowledge and which *Double Strength* registers with an intimate, loving camera, represents such body-politics unassimilable to available paradigms. It is "lesbian" insofar as the representation is permeated and motivated by the reciprocal desire of the two women (and, potentially, structured by the desire and identification of the women viewers), but it is also larger than the lesbian paradigm (and undermines the label of "lesbian essentialism" occasionally applied to Hammer's films[26]).

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[24] Kalpana Rahita Seshadri, *HumAnimal*, University of Minnesota Press, 2012, 248. Much of Seshadri's book is concerned with race studies, but her claims about modes of resisting regulatory regimes are illuminating also in relation to nonheteronormative art.

[25] Agamben, "Preface," *Means Without End. Notes on Politics,* trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, University of Minnesota Press, 2000, ix. Quoted in Seshadri.

[26] The problem of Hammer's reception exceeds the scope of this paper, however, it is worth noting here that Hammer's aesthetics and politics have long been under (occasionally rather vicious) attack for what her critics saw as naively utopian and reductive positions (for an example of such critique of *Double Strength* see for example, Andrea Weiss, "Women I Love and Double Strength: Lesbian Cinema and Romantic Love," *Jump Cut*

In her project to account for those special cases when the body moves "without reference to the institutions that have historically capitalized on it" (Seshadri 220), before "the incalculable exuberance of the body is channeled into quantifiable and measurable expertise" (Seshadri 221), before it is disciplined and given institutional, "legitimate" outlets, Seshadri insists on movement as internal to the body, as a modality of the body, thus paralleling the idea represented by Sengraff's carefully chosen term: "motivity." "Motivity" is "energy that produces motion": not motion itself, but the power, the energy inherent in the body which becomes realized as movement. To quote Seshadri again, "...I here seek to avoid thinking of the body as an inert entity that is capable of moving. Rather I approach the (able or disabled) body *as* movement—as life that is always already movement. This 'fact of life,' I suggest, is most apparent in the flash of agility" (Seshadri 197). In that sense Hammer's film may serve as an uncannily apt illustration of Seshadri's thesis. We see bodies in flight which do not move their limbs. Apparently inert, yet they are in motion. Unlike the walking, running, swimming bodies, which are visibly put in motion by the effort of their limbs in Hammer's film the body is motionless and still it flies like a bird that glides without moving its wings, like a skater in those moments between jumps and steps, when her figure, frozen as in a photograph or a tableau vivant, is propelled on the ice as if by an invisible force. If we adopt Seshadri's argument, the thrill of those images comes from the recognition of the invisible powers of the body. Gertrude Stein teaches a similar lesson: "a motor goes inside and the car goes, but my business my ultimate business as an artist is not with the where the car goes as it goes but with the movement inside that is the essence of its going" (*Lectures* 194-5). The body flying on ice or on the trapeze is a perfect illustration of the "fact of life" Seshadri speaks about when she says that "life is always already movement," that body *is* movement. "In agile movement, when the body is in aerial flight and appears more bird than human, or at the trapeze when it claims kinship with a squirrel, a spider monkey, the body reveals its mutability, its fundamentally protean character" (Seshadri 197).

Seshadri's animal metaphors, Sendgraff's trapeze swinging, and even more so, the Sendgraff's body draped on a tree limb, like the Seshadrian *HumAnimal*, suggest yet another direction in which the images of naked women swinging on trapezes may be taking us. Perhaps the best illustration of that possibility is provided by Sendgraff herself in another project, one that she calls "her favorite performance," staged in the San Francisco ZOO and titled "Please Don't Feed the People. An Afternoon in Captivity (the Creation of Irene Isaacson's)." In this happening, a group of women were locked up naked in cages in the ZOO and, climbing the wire netting, produced imitations of monkey sounds and movements. Sendgraff recollects: "There were people outside looking at us, staring at us, 'What are these women doing, is this some kind of feminist protest?'" (*Can You See Me Flying*). Interestingly, the visitors in the ZOO do not associate the nakedness of the caged women with the "nakedness" of animals but double-code it as a reference to female exploitation and a protest against it: women are trapped by the society, like animals are trapped in the zoo? put on display to be gazed at? Perhaps. The audience rightly felt they are witnessing some kind of political statement, but the event bears meanings that go beyond or modify classic feminist protest; in fact, the event may be also more than and not quite animal rights protest. It does confront the audience with the "inhumanity" (sic) of keeping animals in the cage by

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24-25, March 1981, 30-32). Needless to say, this text proposes a re-reading of Hammer from a different perspective, suggesting, with a number of contemporary artists and critics (Liz Rosenfeld, Greg Youmans, Elisabeth Freeman, to name just a few), that there is much to be gained from what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls a "reparative" reading and from, as Freeman puts it, "mining the present for signs of undetonated energy from past revolutions." See: Liz Rosenfeld's film *Dyketactics Revisited* (2005); Greg Youmans' "Preforming Essentialism: Reassessing Barbara Hammer's Films of the 1970s," *Camera Obscura* 81, Volume 27, Number 3, 101-135; Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalites, Queer Histories,* Duke UP, 2010.

substituting humans for animals. But the way Sendgraff describes the affective charge of the performance suggests an additional, surprising aspect of the event: the pleasure of becoming-animal, of having unprecedented access to movement. Sendgraff recollects: "It was the most profound experience because I had such a sense of freedom, I can't begin to explain. And what I liked most about it was getting into the feeling of movement .... and it was just so much fun" (*Can You See Me Flying*). Paradoxically, she feels free in the cage: perhaps because becoming-animal releases her from the need to perform; the "audience," become spectators in the zoo, frees her to go wild.

The performance in the ZOO thus contextualizes Sengraff's free, or "exceptional" movement, and reframes it in a broader, social or political context. Indeed, movement as practiced by Sendgraff—which in Hammer's film appears (but only *appears*, I want to argue) to be contained to a private sphere—carries the potential for a different kind of politics. Sendgraff herself describes "motivity" as a form that "blends that which is personal, political, and spiritual,"[27] and a number of artists/activists who "trekked to her studio . . . .lured . . . by the promise of flight,"[28] have come to use "motivity" toward more explicitly political ends. In an article on Sengraff and her followers, Marcia Sanderson describes ways in which Sendgraff's single-point trapeze has lent itself to explicitly political interventions, such as, for example, an inquiry into the nature of public spaces.[29] One of Sendgraff's students, Joanna Haigood, an environmentalist, creates site-specific performances as commentary on urban environment. For example, she has performed aerial acrobatic movement on the face of the San Francisco Ferry Building clock. An illustration in Sanderson's article shows a Chaplinesque image of three women, one performing a handstand on top of the clock, over the "XII'th" hour, another apparently walking on the clock's face, passing the number "IX," and the third one flying off the face of the clock, like a bird dipping for pray (Sanderson 50). They "use" the clock the way birds would; the image suggests the familiar animal irreverence for the city's human-made objects and the human symbolic significance of those objects (in this case an irreverence toward the public display of an enormous time-keeping machine and perhaps, more broadly, toward measuring time as a policing mechanism in an economy which makes use of human bodies). Even if the most famous image of a human figure dangling from a clock is that of Harold Lloyd in *Safety Last* (1923), one is reminded here of another early film, Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) and his performance of the mechanization of the human body by the time-keeping industrial machine. Haigood's performance resists that appropriation and has the effect of mocking the time-keeping technology. The contrast between the moving, swinging bodies, obeying their own physical rhythms, and the finiteness and rigidity of the clock underlies the power of the body to keep its own time.[30]

Jo Kreiter, another site-specific artist inspired by Sendgraff, works on "abandoned industrial cranes, and rooftops, and vertical walls of neighborhoods" to produce "political statements"(Sanderson 50). As she puts it: "It's about getting the strength to be articulate on

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[27] http://www.terrysendgraff.com/motivity.html

[28] Rachel Howard, "Terry Sendgraff," *Dance Magazine,* August 2005, 60.

[29] Marcia Sanderson, "Flying Women" in *Dance Magazine*, March 2002, 48-51.

[30] This may or may not have been Haigood's intention and I suggest but one possible way of unfolding the potential meanings of her performance. As Alana Gereck rightly observes, in her review of *Site Dance. Choreographers and the Lure of Alternative Spaces*, in contemporary site performance, "some practices explicitly attempt to disturb corporate control of public spaces, others make a partner of business by, for example, christening new corporate buildings with commissioned dances" (*Dance Research Journal*, 44/2, winter 2012, 116). As a matter of fact Haigood's performance was commissioned by the San Francisco Art Commission's Market Street Art in Transit Program and is said to have "complimented the building's architecture" and to have been "influenced by the inherent mechanics of the city's most famous clock" (http://www.zaccho.org/). At the same time, however, as the contrast with the "mechanical" body of Charlie Chaplin suggests, those free-flying bodies subvert, even as they exploit, the time-keeping mechanisms.

the precipice" (Sanderson 50). Another trapeze-flyer inspired by Sendgraff and interviewed by Sanderson, Amelia Rudolph, works with a company of "dancers/climbers/adventurers" (Sanderson 50) producing a type of mongrel genre "informed by aesthetics, non-traditional relationships with gravity, ecology, natural and built spaces, community and human relationships."[31] Interventions produced by these offspins of Sendgraff's "motivity" are a type of mobile "squatting," a dynamic means of "occupying" public spaces. The ability to fly, to be weightless, to be freed from gravity that normally keeps us "in place" feeds the political statement, or politicizes their performance: they refuse to be tied down (also by taking their performance out of the institution of the theater) and like the military flying column—created ad hoc, with little equipment and high mobility—they momentarily invade alien territory.

Such repurposing of objects and spaces has been defined by Giorgio Agamben as "profanation." The "passage from the sacred to the profane" which returns objects back to free use, can "come about by means of an entirely inappropriate use (or, rather, reuse) of the sacred, namely, play"[32]:

> ... play frees and distracts humanity from the sphere of the sacred, without simply abolishing it. The use to which the sacred is returned is a special one that does not coincide with utilitarian consumption. In fact, the "profanation" of play does not solely concern the religious sphere. Children, who play with whatever old thing falls into their hands, make toys out of things that also belong to the spheres of economics, war, law, and other activities we are used to thinking of as serious. .... This, however, does not mean neglect (no kind of attention can compare to that of a child at play), but a new dimension of use, which children and philosophers give to humanity. ... Just as the *religio* that is played with but no longer observed opens the gate to use, so the powers [*potenze*] of economics, law, and politics, deactivated in play, can become gateways to a new happiness. (Agamben, *Profanations*, 76)

Perhaps in the hands of Barbara Hammer, this advocate for "the revolution of fun"[33] experimental film and its disregard for Hollywood rules can also be read as such a profanation of the film industry-as-*religio*. This lens would in fact free the "experimental" or the "avant-garde" from the charge of elitism and the difficulty which significantly narrows down its audience. In fact, Hammer's own definitions of experimental film point toward this uninhibited, child-like quality. Having shown one of her films to third-graders, she discovered the children had no difficulty viewing and commenting on it (*Making Movies* 198), which suggests that the perceived "difficulty" of experimental film may rather point to a learned inability by film audiences to read conventions other than those of Hollywood narrative, a type of loss of visual literacy reinforced by the (also non-cinematic) feedback we receive for watching commercial cinema.

If there is difficulty in Hammer's work, it may in fact be of a different kind. As Sendgraff observes, giving in to the body's desires, doing what the body wants to do, without planning or censoring is "difficult for an audience to view, because traditionally the audience comes to be entertained, to see a final product," while improvisation is a process (*Can You See Me Flying*). Process, improvisation, are difficult to watch. And, conversely, as one of the participants in a Sendgraff workshop observes, being watched by an audience prevents her

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[31] Amelia webpage, at http://bandaloop.org/about/amelia/ (Accessed Feb. 6, 2014)

[32] Giogio Agamben, *Profanations,* Zone Books, 2007, 75. Quoted in Seshadri, 240.

[33] It is worth noting the quality of "exuberance" that characterizes Hammer's work as an artist—both the restless energy of countless projects and the persistence with which she speaks of "fun," of pleasure, of the centrality of "play" to her project.

from fully exploring what the body wants to do. She says that being watched makes the trapeze-swinging "less playful" (*Can You See Me*). Perhaps here lies the difficulty of Hammer's art. There is an irresolvable tension between performing for the public and letting one's body do as it pleases. And while Hammer's work is obviously highly crafted there still remains the inassimilable base of the resistant body (with all its repulsiveness and beauty, with all the sense-lessness of its actions). We can only identify, but that can be a source of a variety of emotions, some of them potentially difficult, we are consequently forced to confront.

The problem raised by experiments with "exceptional" body movement is precisely that of preserving the unassimilable, of eluding capture. What are the conditions under which the body can do what it wants? Hammer knows, better than anybody else, the extent to which queer bodies have been deprived of this freedom, misused or made invisible by the very medium she works with. Agamben argues, more broadly, that all of our gestures have lost their (child-like and animal-like) innocence and power, precisely because they have been appropriated and assimilated towards (economic, political) ends which are not ours.[34] The metaphor Seshadri uses to illustrate this appropriation of the body is that of the already mentioned figure of Chaplin, the "clockworked Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times* who, upon exiting his factory job, cannot stop his hands from performing the mechanical action of using a wrench." (Seshadri 223) The body has been corrupted precisely when it has become a means to an end: "when bodily movement is programmed for and tethered to an end and thereby becomes predetermined, it looses all expressivity and gesturality" (*HumAnimal* 223-4). How does one "free means from ends"; how does one "redeem the gesture from its destiny" (Agamben, "Notes" 54)?

Interestingly, Agamben argues for the liberating potential of film—particularly early film of the silent era. The poster advertising Sendgraff's performance in the San Francisco ZOO (fig. 5) may in fact serve as an excellent illustration of Agamben's argument which addresses the turn of the 20th century and early experiments with the moving image. The poster alludes to film, and more specifically to the pre-cinematic: experiments in producing motion out of still images (or arresting movement on frames of film). The artist separates human/animal movement into its constituent parts, its basic "gestures." We are reminded of Muybridge's horses but also of the exploitation of modern photographic technology by the medical establishment (both of these discussed by Agamben in his writing on film and researched by Barbara Hammer in conjunction with *Sanctus* (1990) and *Dr. Watson's X-Rays* (1991)). The poster (which could be titled "we are animals" or, to use Seshadri's coinage, "humAnimals") shows humans and animals leveled as objects of the (scientific) gaze, capturing the essence of their movement in a way we could not with bare eyes.[35] It shows the human/animal arrested in the film frame, but it also implies the human/animal can be freed to move on film. Agamben comments on this duality of stasis and motion in relation to the image: "Every image, in fact, is animated by an antinomic polarity: on the one hand, images are the reification and obliteration of a gesture (it is the *imago* as death mask or as symbol); on the other hand, they preserve the *dynamis* intact (as in Muybridge's snapshots, or in any sports photograph)" (Agamben, "Notes" 55). According to Agamben, in modernity the static fixity of the image has been broken, and we learned (through film, among others) to recognize movement in an image that is apparently static: by seeing the reproduction of body in motion

[34] Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesture" in *Means without End. Notes on Politics,* trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 2000.
[35] Barbara Hammer's important predecessor, the first avant-garde American filmmaker, Maya Deren, has argued that the essence of film is to capture what cannot be seen with bare eyes. See: Maya Deren, "Cinematography: the Creative Use of Reality," *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney, New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1978, 63.

we learned to see the body *as* motion. Film has taught us to see that every image is both movement and rest. With the advent of new technologies, argues Agamben, all images became "as frames from a lost film," parts of a larger moving whole. Consequently, in every image "there is a spell that needs to be broken," "as if from the whole history of art, a mute invocation were raised towards the freeing of the image in the gesture" (Agamben, "Notes" 55-6). [36] According to Agamben, it is film that responds to that call: "Cinema leads images back into the realm of gesture." What is more, this fact lends an ethical and a political dimension to film: "[b]ecause cinema has its center in the gesture and not in the image, it belongs essentially to the realm of ethics and politics (and not simply that of aesthetics)" (57).[37]

Double Strength with its naked flying bodies is also a liberation of gesture in a more literal sense.[38] Bodies unclothed and thus free of the determinants of class, position, that is, determinants of social status, norms and categorizations; bodies that flee, eluding capture, arrest, appropriation; bodies that do not promise to produce or reproduce (lesbianism also being an illegitimate (sexual) use of the body not defined by its productivity), but take pleasure in their own movement and each other: those bodies "shed the limitations of their identity":

> humAnimal power...can be discerned only if we approach the body in its dynamism, in time, when silence (or rest) shows itself *as* the very heart of all that is in movement. The wonder of any-body's movement (that it moves by itself); where the human being is concerned, however, such wonder is often remembered and recalled in exceptional and agile movement. In acrobatic movement, but also in movement that has been lost and recovered, the body moves in ways that defy expectations; thus, it appears to shed the limitations of its identity and shows itself as a gift of power. (Seshadri 196-197)

The relationship between stillness and motion is an important topic in Hammer's book. As always, she maps out the abstract concept with embodied examples: making movies and making love. Her aesthetics is, as usual, intertwined with erotics, so that the two spheres supplement and illuminate each other. In a chapter titled "Stillness in Motion: A Study of Relationship and Film" (*Making Movies* 92-98) her perception of time and space is illustrated by reference to an erotic engagement: stillness in a relationship can be experienced as peaceful stability and reassurance, but it can also signify a trap, an end to growth, a "stifling boredom." The meaning of stillness is relative. Indeed, as Hammer observes in a comment which characteristically imperceptibly shifts back from the terrain of personal experience to that of film theory: "Space and time exist only in relation to a particularizing consciousness" (*Making Movies* 94). And there is another type of stillness, she says, that is necessary for the

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[36] "Free the humans!" is the mute invocation of the San Francisco ZOO poster, as it illustrates their capture by arresting their freedom in the static frame. Interestingly, in Polish the noun "frame" is the same as "cage": *klatka*.

[37] Agamben elucidates this argument with reference to the ancient Roman scholar Varro, who insists on the distinction between "acting" and "doing/making" (one related to *poiesis* the other to *praxis*). Gesture is neither acting not making; it breaks the false alternative which paralyzes morality. Through gesture fact becomes event. ("Notes" 56-60)

[38] Making a reference to the succession of the sequences of the film, Hammer says: "After the easy swinging begins the new space, the lesbian space that has been hidden and distorted" (*Making Movies* 129). The "easy swinging," allowing the body to do what it wants to do, comes as close as it is possible to bringing out the lesbian space prior to the distortion by the heteromatrix, prior even to all conceptualization. At least, this is the fantasy, for, after all, our bodies are not innocent and are trained to know what to do. Perhaps the *pointlessness* of the movement that does not serve any purpose protects it from being captured by the forces of normativity. This nonproductive movement, like children's play, does not *mean* anything, does not *count* for anything.

movement of creativity. This “plateau of stillness where I exist alone,” says Hammer (*Making Movies* 95), is the space of the creative act. Like still images that appear as motion when light is projected through them, the stillness is grounds for movement to occur: “In the stillness of my center, images come one after the other with the appearance of motion, of fluidity, of continuance. There is this flow, this continuity, this progressing which eventually makes the work, but it is all contained in the stillness and cannot be without it” (*Making Movies* 95). “As I say a motor goes inside and the car goes on, but my ultimate business as an artist was not with where the car goes as it goes but with the movement inside that is of the essence of its going,” says Getrude Stein by way of explaining her creative process (*Lectures* 194-5). It is such movement in stillness that is also the source of power for Seshadri, and Agamben, for whom this is where an aesthetics becomes an ethics and a politics.

In this stillness which produces the moving image, the lover/other is replaced by the self, or the self becomes its own lover in a narcissistic doubling within. I am, Hammer says, on “a long date with myself” (*Making Movies* 95), when “the swirl” of outside motion is turned off “like a faucet” so that the “inner images might flow” (*Making Movies* 94). “In stillness alone I find the motion for the moving images in film” (*Making Movies* 95). After the doubling where the two were one, comes the doubling where one is two. This internal split—“the internal difference where the meanings are,” as Emily Dickinson put it[39]—is necessary to make the film (or any articulation, for that matter) possible. Interestingly, its visual representation in *Double Strength* takes the body of the other, the lover, as its figure, in an image which can be read as registering the “doubleness” (or even duplicity?) of the other/lover, or, alternately as allowing the lover her own enabling separation and “internal difference.” In one of the most impressive moments of filmic eloquence, Hammer uses the optical printer to double or split the image of Sendgraff (fig. 6).

Alternating with extreme close-ups of Sendgraff’s body, which also produce almost abstract results, the doubled or split images of Sendgraff performing dance-like acrobatic movements against a white wall allow her body to unfold like a plant and fold back in. Sometimes the body almost overlaps with its double, becoming almost identical with itself, but the point of the sequence is, clearly, to show we are not, that we are two, or many. The music which accompanies this scene, almost perfectly synchronized with Sendgraff’s movements, makes her seem to be dancing with her double—on “a date with herself.” Interestingly, this stunning sequence is ushered by a brush with mortality, as the film radically shifts in tone.

the split

The celebratory quality of the first part of *Double Strength* subsides when the film turns to a meditation on loss. The soundtrack accompanying the image of Sendgraff in the tree shifts from the recording of birds (which provided a sound bridge to take us from the studio into the garden) to more ominous music and a recording of women’s voices speculating on death. This shift feels quite abrupt, but in retrospect one realizes that the film has been haunted by absence from the start. There has been something ghostly about the voices of two lovers addressing each other that were entirely dissociated from a screen bodily presence. There is an absence already inscribed in those loving confessions. They are what poetics defines as an apostrophe, an address: as Jonathan Culler reminds us, an apostrophe is an attempt to make present one who is absent or dead and thus a paradoxical marker of absence itself.[40] This

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[39] Emily Dickinson, “There’s a certain Slant of Light” (258), *Collected Poems,* ed. Thomas Johnson, Little, Brown ad Company, 1960, 118.

[40] Jonathan Culler, “Apostrophe,” in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, Cornell University Press 2002, 135-154.

intrusion of the subject of death in the midst of life embodied, peculiar *memento mori*, is a particularly unsettling moment in the film, and only partially justified as a metaphor for the dissolution of a relationship. What then is the motivation for this invasion of death in life, for this particular instance of a disconnect of image and sound?

If the film was thus far a celebration of the erotic bond it was also a celebration of Sendgraff's art: its exuberance, its freedom, its connection with the body, that is, qualities which Hammer has often defined as artistically desirable. Yet, as has already been pointed out, by recording Sendgraff's performance, Hammer's film mediates that performance, thus, arguably, erasing what it most desires. Sendgraff's art is ephemeral: unlike film, it exists only at the moment when it is being performed (unless registered on film) and, what is more, due to its improvisatory character, it is not repeatable. A number of dance critics have commented on this fleeting quality of performance: Andre Lepecki links it to the Derridean *trace,* the mark of absence, the originary lack, the erasure located at the origin of discourse.[41] Peggy Phelan writing about the ontology of performance speaks of presence plunging into disappearance and makes a claim for embracing that quality.[42] To record a performance is to arrest it, to capture and appropriate it, to introduce mediation.

So there is an ambivalence to the act of filming: Hammer cannot film Sendgraff's "motivity" and preserve what it is. Obviously she "saves" the performance, registering on film what would otherwise "plunge into disappearance." And indeed, responding to Jean-Luc Nancy's praise of the unmediated character of dance, the dancer Mathilde Monnier points out that this quality of her art is also a source of a peculiar melancholia: the dancer always faces "the fear of loss, the perpetual incompleteness," which is why, she explains, recording apparatus is so often used with dance pieces (Monnier and Nancy, 68). Hammer's film saves Sendgraff's performance from loss, completes it. But it also destroys the immediacy it desires. Thus what Hammer does in relation to Sendgraff by filming Sendgraff's work is both enabling and controlling, preserving and destroying. In fact, capturing Sendgraff's performance is the same as/parallel to the attempt to capture, arrest an intimacy. Perhaps the intrusion of death in the midst of life testifies to this ambivalence which is at the core of filmmaking: to preserve is to capture, to *frame* in one's own order of signification. So when the film turns to a meditation on loss, it is a double loss, as its strength was a double strength. It becomes a film about a disappearing intensity, "truth," beauty, excitement, love—in an aesthetic as well as erotic sense.

Infected by death, the images that follow seem robbed of the earlier vitality. The film moves toward stillness, composed more and more out of still photographs which alternate in representing one then the other woman in a way that mimics the classic shot-reverse-shot editing but lacks the continuity, the fluidity such editing creates. Unmotivated by dialogue or movement, arbitrary, metronomic, the images flash on the screen, creating a sense of disruption rather than continuity. The movement has been arrested. Remembering a conversation about *Double Strength* she had in Germany, Hammer recalls there is a German word meaning "to take something in process and make it static" which, she says, is "a perfect description of the relational and film process/technique in *Double Strength* (*Making Movies* 114). The disintegration of the relationship infects the material film, which also disintegrates, becomes spotted, marked. A swath of black scars the image of Hammer who seems crucified against the bars of a fence, her body scarred like a female St. Sebastian (fig. 7).

Interestingly, among the drawings she made at the time of her relationship with Sendgraff, Hammer unearthed an image of a double crucifixion, as if the process of doubling—life doubled, double death—once begun, could not cease (fig. 8). As in the image

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[41] Andrew Lepecki, "Inscribing Dance," *Of the Presence of the Body*, Wesleyan, 2004, 133-4.

[42] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked,* Routlege, 1996, 146.

from *Split Britches* with which I begun, there is always the doubling, one cannot be separated from the other, even when they cannot reach each other anymore ("sorry, we are unable to complete the call": the disconnection signified in the film by the ringing of an unanswered phone), even as they double-cross each other.

As Laura Marks observes, haptic visuality is itself strangely related to loss. "Tactile visuality is still not touch. Often there is a mournful quality to the haptic images I have described, for as much as they might attempt to touch the skin of the object, all they can achieve is to become skinlike themselves. The point of tactile visuality is not to supply a plentitude of tactile sensation to make up for the lack of optical image. . . . . . Rather it is to point to the limits of sensory knowledge. . . . . What is erotic about haptic visuality, then, may be described as a respect of difference, and concomitant loss of self, in the presence of the other" (Marks, 192-3). But this loss of self, observes Marks, is not a shattering of the self (as in Hegel, Freud, and Lacan) but is "mutual embodiment, dynamic, rather than destructive" (Marks, 193). Thus again we enter the realm of mutuality, or doubling, and a way of thinking beyond the singularity of the creative "I." As Irit Rogoff observes, mutualities create an open ended field of creativity and "to speak of mutualities is to think against the grain of ideological mobilisations that are grounded in the pursuit of an end, of a conclusion, of a resolution."[43]

On a certain level, *Double Strength* is a film about what Hammer has "learned" from Sendgraff, a tribute to Sendgraff's art. Or since, as the film argues, it is difficult to tell the two women apart in this erotic-artistic relational/film project, the film is about what they discovered at the juncture of their two, very mobile, arts, arts whose essence is movement. Sendgraff remains a presence—or shadow—in much of Hammer's later work. In *Double Strength* she is the embodiment of the dream of immediacy, of being one with one's body, and of the utopian wish for unmediated representation.

As Hammer is inventing lesbian cinema in the 1970s, with few avant-garde women filmmakers as predecessors and no explicitly lesbian cinema of any kind in the United States, she must be acutely aware how our bodies and our movements have been put to the service of heteropatriarchal norms, how coded the images are of women's/lesbian bodies in the history of film. Andrew Lepecki speaks of the "choreo-political" as the realm where the significance of movement is seen beyond performance, beyond the stage (in the case of his discussion, beyond dance): "the choreo-political questions remains [sic], of identifying what forces and apparatuses, non-metaphorically and daily, choreograph subjection, mobilization, subjugation and arrest; of figuring out how to move in this contemporaneity; and of understanding how, by moving (even if still) one may create a new choreography for the social" (Lepecki, *Dance* 21). Barbara Hammer's *Double Strength* is such an attempt—one of the earliest there are in film—at choreographing the lesbian possibility in the world of heteropatriarchal norms.

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[43] Irit Rogoff, "We - Collectivities, Mutualities, Participations" at: http://theater.kein.org/node/95, accessed Dec. 10, 2014.