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Queering the wild zone with experimental filmmakers: Barbara Hammer, Liz Rosenfeld, and Wu Tsang.

> I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with the freedom and culture merely civil…
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> Thoreau, "Walking"

Recently Jack Judith Halberstam announced a new era in critical theory. "[W]e might call it 'wild theory'" s/he says, "within which thinkers, scholars, and artists take a break from orthodoxy and experiment with knowledge, art, and the imagination, even as they remain all too aware of the constraints under which all three operate" (Halberstam, "Charming for the Revolution" 7). Indeed, the concept of the wild or wildness appeared recently in the work of a number of queer theorists, noticeably enough to merit it the tag of a new theoretical strain. In the introduction to Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's *The Undercommons,* Halberstam notices that the undercommons is a place of "wildness," it is a type of "dis-order" as may "show up in jazz, in improvisation, in noise": "[l]istening to cacophony and noise tells us that there is a wild beyond to the structures we inhabit and that inhabit us. And when we are called to this other place, the wild beyond, ... we have to give ourselves over to a certain kind of craziness" ("The Wild Beyond" 7). Halberstam argues with Moten and Harney that for such dwellers of the undercommons as black people, the indigenous peoples, queer people, or poor people, this place outside is preferable to the inclusion "inside" when not on our own terms: "we cannot be satisfied with the recognition and acknowledgment generated by the very system that denies a) that anything was ever broken and b) that we deserved to be the broken part; so we refuse to ask for recognition…" ("The Wild Beyond" 7). That is why, Halberstam explains, "Fanon,

according to Moten, wants not the end of colonialism, but the end of the standpoint from which colonialism makes sense":

> In order to bring colonialism to an end, then, one does not speak truth to power, one has to inhabit the crazy, nonsensical, ranting language of the other, the other who has been rendered a nonentity by colonialism. Indeed, blackness, for Moten and Harney by way of Fanon, is the willingness to be in the space that has been abandoned by colonialism, by rule, by order. ("The Wild Beyond" 8)

Learning from Fanon via Moten and Harney, but extending the undercommons beyond the single kind of otherness, Halberstam argues that there is something to be said for abandoning ourselves to the wild, residing in the space beyond the margins of the norm, rather than engaging in a head on attack on the hegemonic order.

The late José Esteban Muñoz is another critic who adopts the category of the wild zone. In his discussions of the queer commons he uses Wu Tsang's film *Wildness* (2012) as an example of a narrative of the making of a temporary utopian wild space. The film focuses on a group of queer performers taking over one night at the Silver Platter, the Latino gay bar in Los Angeles to stage their art projects and queer parties. Muñoz sees the film as a story of an attempt to create a utopia, and even if that attempt fails, it still provides grounds for a critique of the existing status quo. The community of queers creates a wild zone, a brown undercommons that provides a momentary stay against anti-immigrant sentiments, homophobia, and the pressures of gentrification. Importantly, the film orchestrates a "movement beyond the singular individualized subjectivity" (Muñoz, "The Queer Commons). It works with contact, encounter; with human/non-human collectives.

In the Fall term of 2013, José Muñoz and Tavia Nyong'o offered a course at the Tisch School for the Arts at New York University titled "Topics in Queer Theory: Wildness." Their description of the course suggests the range of issues that are mobilized when the term "wildness" is employed as a lens in contemporary theory. Here is their description:

> This course will employ wildness and the wild as critical tropes that potentially open a conversation across queer studies, ecology, aesthetics, animal studies, disability studies, and critical race studies. Wildness will function as a heuristic approach to multiple modes of queer relations, including human relationality, but also relations between the human and the non-human, the organic and the inorganic. Why has wildness arisen as an aspirational or experiential state of mind and being in a range of recent art, subculture and politics? How does it connect us to materialisms, both new and historical? What's queer about the wild, and what's wild about queers?

Similarly to Halberstam, Muñoz and Nyong'o employ the concept of the wild to move beyond a single form of social exclusion and single discipline. In fact their "wildness" can be read as the marker of a moment in queer studies when the discipline is moving beyond the narrowly defined concern with non-normative sexuality, both embracing and inflecting other fields. There is a recognition that intersectionality and relationality are needed as modes of thinking about queerness and that in addition to race, class, and disability which are the necessary modalities of sexuality, one needs to broaden the scope of theorizing to include the non-human, both organic and inorganic (Wu Tsang's *Wildness* makes a place (a bar) one of the characters: it is the narrator of the story). "Wildness" appears as a provisional key term at a moment when the term "queer" may have actually outlived its usefulness. As queer theory became a type of critical omnibus in the humanities, says Halberstam, critics, dissatisfied with the amount of work expected of the term "queer," as well as with its growing association with the more assimilationist versions of the lgbt movement, decided "wildness" or "the wild" may better perform the work they need to express their critical positions.

An early American definition and philosophical exploration of the concept of the wild space, or wildness, may, of course, be found in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (included on Muñoz and Nyong'o's reading list). Thoreau locates wildness in a walk in the woods, juxtaposing the process of walking with that of being settled in the village, the former a symbolic departure from the "civilized" world, the later a fulfilment of social obligations ("Walking" 292-9). He observes the word "saunterer" is "beautifully derived from idle people who roved about the

country, in the middle ages, and asked charity, under pretense of going *a la sainte terre*—to the holy land" ("Walking" 597). Like all creatures of the wild, the idle saunterer exists outside the norm. He or she also exists outside the economy, by refusing to partake of the regimes of production (may in fact trick others into giving her money).[1] And he or she does not own the land he or she roams (Thoreau was also, of course, the archetypal squatter: he built his cabin in the woods out of the materials at hand which he "claimed by squatter's right" ("Economy" 44)). Thoreau's walking—both impractical and nomadic, that is, having no established destination—is an exemplary instance of what Giorgio Agamben calls a "means without end."[2] *Sans terre,* Thoreau points out, also stands for "without land or home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere" ("Walking" 597). To have no home is, of course, potentially very rich in significance, such as not being attached to a doctrine, not representing anything, perhaps, even, having no fixed identity, but open to a becoming. Indeed, according to Thoreau "foresters" (those who roam the woods) are "outlaws" who steer clear of the public highway. And even if the lure of settlement—with the rewards of safety, belonging, and material possessions—is always present, Thoreau's call is to "shake off the village" (the word "villager" apparently related to "villain" ("Walking" 603)).

What many discussions of wildness seem to have in common is the embodied character of the experience of the wild, which is not surprising, considering that the body, insofar as it remains independent of the control of the mind, is that aspect of the wild we always carry with us and therefore, perhaps, most readily available to us. Embodied activities, such as, for example, dance or yoga, which are to allow us to be one with our bodies, are in fact a way of giving ourselves over to (the wisdom of) our bodies. Therefore the experience of the wild during

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[1] The idleness of the saunterer is a crucial aspect of Thoreau's criticism of labor: "the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to men; his labor would be depreciated in the market. He has no time to be anything but a machine. How can he remember well his ignorance — which his growth requires — who has so often to use his knowledge? We should feed and clothe him gratuitously sometimes, and recruit him with our cordials, before we judge of him" ("Economy" 5)

[2] Agamben argues for the politics of "pure means" not focused on the ends to be achieved: "politics is the sphere neither of an end in itself nor of means subordinated to an end; rather, it is the sphere of a pure mediality without end intended as the field of human action and of human thought" (*Means without End* 116-7).

the walk in Thoreau is necessarily embodied and "returns" one to one's senses ("Walking" 602). By suspending the habits of the mind we may try to evade the hegemony of cultural, intellectual training. Yet this supremacy of the bodily and sensorial, or the oneness of the body and mind (or "spirit") is difficult to achieve and Thoreau "is alarmed," he says, "when it happens that I have walked a mile into the woods bodily, without getting there in spirit. In my afternoon walk I would fain forget all my morning occupations, and my obligations to society. But it sometimes happens that I cannot easily shake off the village. The thought of some work will run in my head, and I am not where my body is, I am out of my senses ("Walking" 602). We spend most of our lives "out of our senses." The walk, the excursion into the wild is to return us to our senses. We need to be "out of our minds."[3] To return to one's senses, to be embodied, and to suspend the control of the mind is, according to Thoreau, the prerequisite for critical thinking. As Tomasz Sikora argues in his excellent essay on Thoreau, it is also the precondition of ethics. (Sikora 34-41).

I will use this theoretical bracket—of Thoreau's articulation of "wildness" in 1862 and the contemporary uses of the term and related queer critical positions—to discuss three intervening manifestations of the concept of the wild: in *Dyketactics*, the 1974 film by the experimental lesbian filmmaker Barbara Hammer; in a 2005 replay of Hammer's wild utopia in Liz Rosenfeld's *Dyketactics Revisited*; and in Wu Tsang's 2012 *Wildness.* I want to suggest a certain common theoretical framework or tradition of thought operating at these different historical junctures, even as they seem to be in conflict with each other and are usually read oppositionally: the 1970s feminism as an overthrow of the dominant white male cannon of which Thoreau is a major representative; queer positions as a rejection of essentialist tendencies in the early gay and lesbian movement and in lesbian separatism. I am curious about Rosenfeld's gesture in 2005 of taking up Hammer's 1970s film: Rosenfeld's is a utopia realized through a backward glance to a period largely disparaged in queer theory (for its essentialism,

[3] This brings us back to the idea, discussed by Halberstam, originating in Fanon and adopted by Moten and Harney, that being in the wild entails "giving ourselves to a certain kind of craziness," inhabiting "the crazy, nonsensical, ranting language of the other, the other who has been rendered a nonentity." See: Halberstam, "The Wild Beyond" 7.

separatism, naïvete). I want look at the uses Rosenfeld has for that early lesbian classic *apart* from the cult status *Dyketactics* enjoys among lesbian and queer audiences, as well as at the ways in which *Dyketactics Revisited* departs from the "original." Wu Tsang's *Wildness,* which serves both Muñoz and Halberstam as a model text for the discussion of the wild streak in queer performance and queer theory, and which operates most explicitly at the juncture of the aesthetic and the political, provides yet another version of queering the wild.

Dyketactics is a 4 minute black and white film in which a gang of naked women roams the wild. Their bodies are filmed unabashedly, with all their imperfections, unposed. Despite their nakedness, the bodies are strangely asexual, even though the object of their wild romp seems to be pleasure—they are hopping around, dancing, playing with the camera, washing each other's hair, drawing circles on each other's bodies. Hammer clearly works hard to prevent those bodies from becoming objects of voyeuristic gratification. When reminiscing about the time she made *Dyketactics*, Hammer observes: "I wanted an intimate cinema, not a cinema of distance that invited voyeurs" (Hammer 27). It is the women themselves that are represented as seeking and capable of experiencing pleasure.

The bodies are the protagonists of the film. *Dyketactics* is not about individuals, but about a multiplicity of bodies. Sometimes we see them only in fragments; sometimes the face, which visually assigns the body to a person is not even visible; sometimes, superimposed on each other they blend into one another. Bodies interacting, mingling, touching. What we witness is bodies in the wild, which have shed their protective (and socially determining) armor (clothing), which occupy space they do not own and which are not owned. The film resolutely eschews dialogue and voice-over, so there is no language to assign value to the scene, to assign bodies to persons.

We are thus dealing with an instance of pure corporeal expression (if mediated by a camera), which frees the bodies from the signification of speech, allows the bodies to speak in ways which are in fact untranslatable into language. As Judith Butler points out, "the body can appear and signify in ways that contest the way it speaks, or even contest speaking as its paradigmatic instance. Indeed, could we still understand action, gesture, stillness, touch, and moving together, if they were all reducible to the vocalization of thought through speech?"

("Bodies in Alliance"). Bodies can signify in ways not reducible to language. In *Dyketactics*, the bodies acting together establish a (political) scene the significance of which lays beyond any single consciousness, beyond the perspective of any one of the women we see on the screen. "[W]hen we think and act together," says Butler, it becomes particularly clear that "I must appear to others in ways for which I cannot give an account, and in this way my body establishes a perspective that I cannot inhabit ("Bodies in Alliance"). Butler's comments on this quality of collective embodiment comes from a context in which she discusses political action of "bodies in alliance," and Hammer's decision not to include language in her film makes sense also in terms of the politics her film espouses, a politics emerging out of an interaction of bodies. As Butler says, following Arendt, "No one body establishes the space of appearance, but this action, this performative exercise happens only 'between' bodies, in a space that constitutes the gap between my own body and another's" ("Bodies in Alliance").

The interaction between bodies is the central dynamic of Hammer's film. When she edited the hour-worth of film material she had down to the 4 minutes, she made sure "[e]very frame of the film has an image of touching" (Hammer, 65). Situating herself in opposition to the Platonic legacy which undermines the tactile and sensuous in favor of the visual and cerebral, Hammer agues for the primacy of touch which "precedes sight in ontological human development" (65). The haptic constitutes the grounds for Hammer's aesthetic, her epistemology and even her politics. What is more, she argues that seeing is a form of touching (131), thus countering the claim about the disembodied character of the film medium.[4]

In this focus on the haptic aspect of human cognition and aesthetic experience, Hammer has a queer predecessor in Walt Whitman who is also preoccupied with touching and being touched and for whom an erotic encounter provides the model for the encounter between the artist and his audience.[5] Touch in Whitman has many dimensions and has a power to undo, as

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[4] Notably, Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that touch and sight are interrelated and, in fact, seeing is a form of touching: "the look…palpates…the visible things." Palpation by the eye is a variant of tactile palpation: "vision is the palpation with the look" ("The Intertwining-the Chiasm" 3 and 4).

[5] Hammer, especially in her early work, is a Whitmanian in a larger sense: like Whitman's, her work of the 1970s needs to be read as a founding moment (with all the characteristic attributes of such a moment, including the

well as to create. “Is this then a touch? quivering me to a new identity…” (“Song of Myself” 55): Whitman’s question anticipates Merleau-Ponty’s assertion that touch is what makes us. In Judith Butler’s paraphrase, touch is “the condition by virtue of which a corporeal existence is assumed” (“Merleau-Ponty” 182).

It is the touch of a body which is like our own that Hammer recognizes as foundational, as what constitutes the (lesbian) body and self. She recalls: “When I made love with a woman for the first time my entire worldview shifted. I was touching a body much like my own which heightened all my senses” (26). Whitman also hints at this: “My flesh and blood playing out lightning to strike what is hardly different from myself” (“Song of Myself 55): this touch of a body “hardly different” than our own allows us to experience being a subject and object at the same time. As Butler points out, “[t]o speak of a founding touch is a romantic conceit,” which in itself is a telling remark: Hammer’s subject, “formed from tactility” (“Merleau-Ponty” 181), does seem to have its roots in the romantic tradition (of Whitman, as well as Thoreau). Like the speaker of *Leaves of Grass* who confesses, “I pass so poorly with paper and types . . . . I must pass with the contact of bodies and souls” (“Song of Occupations 89), Hammer places her Bolex camera between two love-making bodies and lets it roll. This fantasy of immediacy is, however, carefully constructed: the sexual act is performed; indeed Hammer insists that this, and her other appearances in sexual acts in her own films are staged and not documented. Obviously, the brutal editing of the film material down to four minutes also suggests highly structured artifice and not live recording.

Apart from being the cornerstone of her (lesbian) aesthetic, the sense of touch and connection seem to directly translate into or be part of Hammer’s perception of community. Speaking of the moment of the discovery of lesbian sexuality which *Dyketactics* grows out of,

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narrative of the lack of predecessors in their field); they are both very aware of their audience and make address central to their relational aesthetics; for both a type of expansive generosity is balanced by claim for narcissism; they are both very conscious performers, and performatively constituting themselves as (public) personae; they are both intensely political with a politics sketched out in broad strokes; they are both transgressive in terms of the mores of their times; they both engage the subject of (homo)sexuality at a time and in ways which are seen as shocking by their contemporaries—thus consistently pursuing the centrality of the body; they are both originators of a queer aesthetic.

she remembers: “In addition to the sensual pleasures, my social network was completely changed; I was swept up with the energies and dreams of a feminist revolution. . . . . We were making a new culture with hairstyles, dress (and undress), and ways of walking and talking in the world. Everything was part of this new self-definition. . . . It was empowering, community forming....” (26). Not surprisingly, having its sources in the community of women, in feminist empowerment, Hammer’s first “lesbian” film features a group of women, without a central character, and is determined by a group dynamic. What seems a particularly noteworthy aspect of *Dyketactics* is that, being without individualized characters it still gives primacy to touch, this most intimate of all sensations, mapping that intimacy onto the representation of a community.

Thus Hammer’s intimate project extends into the political field. And it is not merely a *record* of a revolution, but a projection of the revolutionary onto the future audiences of the film whom she wants to engage in an equally intimate manner, so that they “feel in their bodies what they see on the screen” (Hammer 65). We are to be touched by what we see, the film reaching us via our bodies, rather than, or as well as, via our minds. Given the highly heteronormatively coded medium of film, this move perhaps affords a better chance for the viewer to experience the utopian moment by partaking of the sensual exchange orchestrated by the conglomeration of bodies on the screen.

The scene of *Dyketactics* is prelapsarian (we are given a hint toward that end with the image of apples); it is a utopian space. The group of naked women in a meadow is reminiscent of Natalie Barney’s visions of “Modern Lesbos,” the lesbian utopia set in modernist Paris. Indeed the fragmentation and superimposition of images torn out of their (narrative) contexts is a visual echo of the fragmentation of the Sapphic oeuvre[6] (needless to say, the reconstruction of the fragments by the viewers is an erotically charged act). Only Barney staged her Sapphic

[6] Susan Gubar has argued for fragmentation as central to lesbian aesthetic, where the task of the reader is that of putting together a scattered text and where this work of love constitutes the lesbian tradition: “Precisely because so many of her original Greek texts were destroyed, the modern woman poet could write ‘for’ or ‘as’ Sappho and thereby invent a classical inheritance of her own. [H]er ancient precursor is paradoxically in need of a contemporary collaborator” (“Sapphistries,” 47).

revival in a garden in Paris, while Hammer takes her women into in the woods: the American utopia is a wild zone.

In Barbara Hammer's *Dyketactics*, the women "shake off the village" and, very much like the Thoreauvian "saunterer," engage their senses in a defiant embrace of their otherness. In another film from the same year, "Menses," where Hammer also films naked women in a natural environment, the mise-en-scene even more directly echoes the opposition between "the woods" and "the village," as Hammer chose the hills over Berkeley for the film's location. She recollects: "We felt separate from the dominant culture and the male-controlled institution of the university, as we filmed high in the hills overlooking the University of California at Berkeley" (100). In the wild, the women engage in the impractical, playful, and non-productive lesbian sex.

Hammer's *Dyketactics* can be located squarely in the Thoreauvian tradition of the wild, but can also be read as a critique of Thoreau's individualism. What distinguishes Hammer's wild zone from those of Thoreau and Whitman (apart from the gender of the sojourners in the wild) is its collective character. Whitman's and Thoreau's are individualist projects, personal models for how to live: freely and responsibly, as men and citizen. Hammer engages a plurality of bodies, filming what we may call, with Judith Butler, "bodies in alliance." "[M]y body does not act alone, when it acts politically. Indeed, the action emerged from the 'between,'" observes Butler ("Bodies in Alliance"). Following Arendt, she argues that collectivity is a precondition of politics: "to act and speak politically we must 'appear' to one another in some way, that is to say, that to appear is always to appear for another, which means that for the body to exist politically, it has to assume a social dimension – it is comported outside itself and toward others in ways that cannot and do not ratify individualism" ("Bodies in Alliance"). Indeed, the emergence of the political body in Hammer's—and, as I will show, Rosenfeld's and Wu Tsang's—work is conditioned by plurality.

Recently *Dyketactics* became an inspiration for a queer filmmaker of the next generation, Liz Rosenfeld (born in 1979, five years after *Dyketactics* was made). In 2005, thirty one years after *Dyketactics,* Rosenfeld produced a tribute or sequel to Hammer's film, titled *Dyketactics Revisited*. Rosenfeld's film is a replay, or replica of Hammer's "original," with some important

alternations.[7] The film, like Hammer's original, shows a diverse group of bodies idly sitting and moving around and interacting with each other. The soundtrack replays the same tune, only this time it is whistled, like a remembered melody. The visual field is, again, structured by superimposition of images. Even the camera distance and movement echoes that of Hammer's.

Here is how Rosenfeld herself describes the film:

> Inspired by the Barbara Hammer film made in 1974. Bodies move freely through an ambiguous urban utopia. Shot on 16mm film and digital video; allow yourself to be led through the space where bodies exist independent of social codes. Dreamy landscapes, androgynous figures, skin, and concrete, masquerade through a fantasia of fluid forms referencing history while looking into the future. (*Dyketactics Revisited*)

Free movement of bodies in a utopian space which liberates them from social norms: this is clearly Hammer's legacy. At the same time, however, already this short description marks crucial differences between Hammer's "original" and Rosenfeld's "copy." To begin with, the space is urban, featuring "concrete" next to "skin." Urban ecology becomes the natural landscape: a utopian wild zone has to be sought—or, rather, made—within the city and not as an escape from it, Rosenfeld seems to argue. Secondly, the bodies which inhabit this space—as anonymous as they were in Hammer—are not necessarily identifiable as women's bodies. Some have bound chests, some have their backs turned to the camera, so that we are repeatedly prevented from imposing gender on those bodies, from saying "women," as we unhesitatingly would when watching Hammer's film. One of the reconfigurations of the utopian wild zone in Rosenfeld's film, then, rests on problematizing or queering gender presentation. The two

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[7] For another interesting "replay" of an earlier film, see Elisabeth Subrin's *Shulie* (1997), a remaking, scene by scene, of a 1967 documentary on the future icon of radical feminism, Shulamith Firestone. Subrin has her own actors replay the scenes of the earlier film exactly as they were originally filmed. Like Rosenfeld's, Subrin's film is made 30 years after its "original," a type of a queer tribute to an earlier "revolutionary," gesturing obliquely at the period of second wave feminism in the US, and engaging with the questions of politics, time, history, and cinematic "reality."

changes introduced by Rosenfeld—the shift from the natural landscape to cityscape and the shift from femininity to queer or non-binary gender presentation—are perhaps related as ways of questioning what is "natural." This is why the figures in Rosenfeld's film are said to "masquerade" rather than reveal.

While Hammer's film seems to be suspended in a type of eternal present, Rosenfeld's claims to be referencing history and future and is obviously very aware of its own temporality. One of the tools she is using is digital video, thus consciously adding a flatness, a marker of the digital age, to the sensuality and textured beauty of a 16mm film. Rosenfeld is making a point about the (im)possibility of repeating, at the same time as she wistfully gestures back toward the 70s lesbian utopia. To refer back to Halberstam's speculation on the power of wildness, *Dyketactics Revisited* is one of those works that "function as citations of the past on behalf of a possible future" (Halberstam, "Charming for the Revolution," 9). Elisabeth Freeman's speculation on queer temporality in *Time Binds* similarly attends to such nostalgic backward glances, instances when the past and present meet, arguing that we should attend to such "nonsequential forms of time" as they can "fold subjects into structures of belonging and duration that may be invisible to the historicist eye" (xi). Those structures of belonging are created by "shared timings" and the affect that inheres in diverse temporalities. Freeman sees these moments as grounds for an alternative (queer) politics: "I stake my claim for a counterpolitics of encounter in which bodies, de-composed by the workings of experimental film and literature, meet one another by chance, forging—in the sense of both making and counterfeiting—history differently" (xi). Unlike those lgbtq theorists who look toward the future and strive to be always "ahead" (of the existing theorizations), she suggests there is something to be said for "trailing behind"(xi). In a statement that also testifies to the fact that lgbtq theory itself now has a *history*, and that it no longer has to flex its muscles to legitimize identities it was created in the service of, Freeman confesses: "I find myself emotionally compelled by the not-quite-queer-enough longing for form that turns us backward to prior moments, forward to embarrassing utopias, sideways to forms of being and belonging that seem, on the face of it, completely banal" (xiii).

In a comment which seems very applicable to some of the Hammer criticism,[8] Freeman finds the looking-forward of the dominant models of queer theory to be a form of "paranoid criticism" (as defined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick): "it's about having the problem solved ahead of time, about feeling more evolved than one's context" (xiii). The essence of reparative criticism, conversely, is to "gather and combine eclectically, dragging a bunch of cultural debris around us and stacking it in idiosyncratic piles…" (Freeman xiii). And thus, in her book Freeman writes about "a series of failed revolutions in the 1960s and 1970s" including "second wave feminism's lost possibilities," (xiv) and discusses works by the succeeding generation of artists who missed those great upheavals but now turn back to the "revolts" of their predecessors. Freeman observes: "In the projects I take up here, particularly the visual texts, the 1970's appear as a 'revolting' decade . . . . they glimmer forth as an embarrassment, as something that remains to be thought, as the text's indigestible material, and/or as a point of departure for resistance but not for grand revolution" (xiv).

Liz Rosenfeld's return to Barbara Hammer's 1970s classic—an object of both cult and heavy criticism—fits Freeman's model perfectly. Rosenfeld's work is an encounter with, rather than an attempt to master, it is a form of "reparative" reading. Indeed "revisiting" may be an apt alternative term for the queer aesthetic and politics advocated by Freeman. Revisiting is a form of repetition with a difference, both an embrace and a necessary departure. And the difference in the film's affective charge from that of Hammer's is very telling: a recent group of viewers[9] observed that *Dyketactics Revisited* is "sadder," that it lacks the vitality, the joy of

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[8] *Dyketactics* has enjoyed cult status among lesbian audiences, but Hammer's early work has not always fared well among film critics. From early charges that her films are not feminist *enough* (for example by adopting patriarchal notions of romantic love) to the later complaints that it is *too* feminist (read: essentialist, lesbian separatist), much of critical work on Hammer leans toward the judgmental. Perhaps that is the condition of all art which is risky, provocative, and affectively engaging; nevertheless, for many years the engagement of Hammer's critics often compelled them to instruct rather than to observe. This tendency may have been also partly the result of the resolutely non-authoritative stance of Hammer as a film director.

[9] Both films were screened at the *Queer Feminist Film* series at the American Studies Center, University of Warsaw, in November 2014.

Hammer's original. Such is, perhaps, the melancholy nature of all repetition, but the disparity is also the marker of time: while Hammer's wild zone is a site of a revolution, Rosenfeld's is a site of resistance. For even if the revolutions of the 60s and 70s are unfinished they cannot be completed in the original form, even if part of the appeal of Hammer's early work is the hope they can.

The return to the utopian mode of the 1970s, earlier accused of the lack of concrete political program could be related to the tendency in contemporary thought to divorce means from ends. In his text about wild theory Halberstam makes an interesting reference to Lauren Berlant:

> Berlant, remarkably, turns to anarchy, arguing that anarchists enact "repair" by recommitting to politics without believing either in "good life fantasies" or in the "transformative effectiveness of one's actions." Instead, the anarchist "does politics, she says, "to be in the political with others." In other words, when we engage in political action of any kind, we do not simply seek evidence of impact in order to feel that it was worthwhile; we engage in fantasies of living otherwise with groups of other people because the embrace of a common cause leads to alternative modes of satisfaction and even happiness, whether or not the political outcome is successful. ("Charming for the Revolution" 7)

Halberstam calls it "the embrace of the impractical" (Halberstam, "Charming for the Revolution" 3). Works of such experimental queer filmmakers as Rosenfeld (or Elisabeth Subrin, also discussed by Freeman), can also be read as a refusal to accept where the lgbt revolutions have taken us. With the wide-ranging process of normalization and mainstreaming of women's and queer issues into what Freeman calls "state-sponsored narratives of belonging and becoming" (xiv), these artists, instead of celebrating the new freedoms, rights, and visibility, resist appropriation and commodification. When they confront the past, they seem to argue that "[p]ure nostalgia for another revolutionary moment . . . . will not do. But nor will its opposite, a purely futural orientation that depends on forgetting the past. Instead, the queerness of these

artists consists in mining the present for signs of undetonated energy from past revolutions" (Freeman xvi).

There is no doubt that Barbara Hammer's work is loaded with such undetonated energy, some of which was mined by Liz Rosenfeld. I have been witness to the unceasing power of her early films to passionately engage but also shock and threaten a contemporary audience. I have heard *Dyketactics* being described as "revolting" in both senses of the term: as enacting a revolt against the status quo, a liberating romp into the wild, and as indecent and sickeningly inappropriate, indeed, beyond al norms. And even if the context for these responses was a Polish classroom—a context with no history of the sexual revolution and only the beginnings of an lgbtq movement—still the very vehemence of those responses suggests the film continues to carry explosive radical potential, potential which, paradoxically, got somewhat overshadowed by the advent of queer theory. Perhaps "wild theory"—as defined by Halberstam, Muñoz and Nyong'o, as well as practiced by Freeman can give us new access to Hammer's subversive power.

While Rosenfeld makes less of a claim to an "absolute freedom and wildness" than Hammer does, the freedom they achieve is certainly not merely "civil." In fact they violate civility-as-propriety and advocate for civil engagement as an embodied and collective practice outside the established forms and structures for political activism. Such is also the project undertaken aby Wu Tsang and a group of trans and queer activist and artists which resulted in the experimental documentary film *Wildness* (2012). *Wildness* is an autobiography of a bar. Narrated in a female Latina voice-over—the voice of the bar itself—the films tells the story of this local Los Angeles gay Latino/a hangout which served its community for four decades. With time, and against protest from the more traditional gay patrons, the "boot-wearing Tejanos," the "Silver Platter" opened her doors to the trans community, "the Chicas." The story focuses, however, on the most recent developments when the "Silver Platter" has been invaded by a group of new patrons—mostly young, educated, not all of them Latino/a—who took over the Tuesday evenings to stage an entirely new kind of party, "wildness."

The bar has traditionally clearly been a haven for a particular, narrowly-defined community. It has always kept a low profile and avoided much advertising for the safety of its

customers, not only because of their nonheteronormative sexuality and gender-bending, but also because of their political status, as many of them are illegal immigrants. Many of them are aliens in more ways than one. And then, Wildness begins. Organized by Wu Tsang and a group of queer folk, the Wildness parties bring in a new crowd. As the Chicas put it, they are "gringos of various shades." These "punks and artists" (Muñoz, "The Queer Commons") completely revolutionize Tuesday evenings and introduce a new quality to the bar. Being extremely successful, they bring huge crowds, popularity and press. This is not necessarily what the original patrons of the Silver Platter desire, their safe haven now become "the best of gay LA." At some point, Wu Tsang and his crowd realize that their success may actually endanger the original patrons of the bar, that worries about the Chicas may in fact no longer feel welcome. To give back to the community which took her/him in, she/he opens a free legal clinic next-door to help with papers, name changes, anything that may be of use to the transgender immigrant community s/he has now become a part of.

"Wildness" parties are the source of potential conflict (or appropriation), there are serious differences to be reckoned with, but also, as the bar-narrator puts is, there is a thrilling experimentation with something new: "my children were stitching together many pieces that didn't fit," she says, and even if "fractured," "inside me the pieces came together." The power of Wildness comes not from uniformity, but from difference. The ability recognize, accept, and make use of difference is a difficulty many contemporary political movements struggle with. All too often, it scatters energies and divides potential allies into a multitude of inefficient factions. In a recent talk at a symposium devoted to Audre Lorde, Angela Davis pointed out that this inability to tolerate difference and use it as potentially productive, generative, creative is very much the heritage of "western ideological frameworks of normality," as "western cultures have a difficult time with difference," preferring assimilation and homogenization. Davis goes back to Audre Lorde who has repeatedly pointed out that effective political organizing is possible across differences, in fact may be empowered by them. Davis quotes Lorde: "we sometimes find it difficult to deal constructively with the genuine differences between us and to recognize that unity does not require that we be identical to each other" (Lorde, "I Am Your Sister" 25, qtd. in Davis). In another key text, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House,"

Davis reminds us, Lorde argues: "Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 111, qtd. in Davis).

Jose Muñoz, who acknowledges that women of color feminism is his "portal to the commons" observes that "Wildness" at the *Silver Platter* was "both diverse and uniform, in the form of a collectivity that included working-class transgendered Latina immigrants and queer of color punks and artists" ("The Queer Commons"). The commons, argues Muñoz, is "not placid, always a turbulent; not only because of pressure from outside, but also because of the disagreement within the commons, what Jacques Rancière calls the *dissensus*. . . . What the film is about is the conflict between the younger Tuesday punk crowd and the regulars. Some of the regulars loved the infusion—from different class and race backgrounds and some resisted it. This type of turbulence endemic to the commons" ("The Queer Commons"). Muñoz refers to Althuser, Hart and Negri, Jean-Luc Nancy, and the theory of contact by Samuel Delany formulated in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* to argue that "the commons is always about unsteadiness" ("The Queer Commons"), always a dynamic of collision.[10] This element of unsteadiness and conflict is what Wu Tsang's *Wildness* adds to the tradition of the wild zone I have been tracing through its earlier queer manifestations.

Importantly, the politics espoused by the three filmmakers, hinging on the subversive potential of the wild zone, do not posit a program. Muñoz, whose master utopian is Ernst Bloch, also argues not for a deliberate, planned utopia, not for a utopian *program,* but for something "not knowable in advance" ("The Queer Commons").[11] Indeed, as Wu Tsang observes, the participants of "Wildness" did not create a movement, but found themselves in the midst of one. The success of "Wildness" was not something knowable in advance. The wild zone at the Silver Platter generated a cultural phenomenon that could not be designed as a program of a

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[10] To Muñoz's list of thinkers who have argued that the nature of matter is collision, one could add a feminist materialist perspective of the physicist Karen Barad who uses quantum physics to make this argument, an argument which she insists is "radically queer" ("On Touching" 206-223).

[11] Frederic Jameson develops a reading of this type of utopia, which he calls "the utopian impulse," in his *Archeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions,* 1-3 and passim.

cultural institution, a political statement that could not have been made at a political rally (Muñoz, "The Queer Commons").

Detractors of the fuzzy, underdefined, somewhat intuitive category of "wildness" may argue that concrete political programs are surely more effective as tools in the fight for justice and anyway, what is the big fuss, with all the lgbtq victories of the last four decades? What is revolutionary about a group of transgendered artists performing in a gay bar, in a country soon to embrace marriage equality, where before long everywhere everyone will be able to decide with what pronoun they wish to be addressed? Indeed, in June 2011 Wu Tsang has been an artist in residence at the New Museum in New York, where he curated "Full Body Quotation"(a program which samples clips from the canon of transgender cinema) and *Wildness* has been screened all over the US, with an international premiere at the Canadian International Documentary Festival "Hot Docs." I saw it in the spring of 2014 at a screening in the Guggenheim which, one would think, is legitimation enough. We are witnessing an institutionalization of queer art. The question is, however, what world does this translate into: for queers, for the Chicas from the "Silver Platter," for the transgendered youth, for the immigrants?

When I went to see *Wildness* at the Guggenheim, the little movie theater was almost empty, except for a group of very well dressed, middle aged, upper middle class tourists (the type you would not call loud, but who tend to lay claim to the spaces they enter so you end up hearing what they say whether you want to or not) who clearly stumbled onto the film by accident in the process of checking the Guggenheim off their list during their sightseeing rounds of New York. As I was scribbling my notes I could feel the discomfort rising in the small space of the screening room. Particularly the moment in the film when white patrons enter the "Silver Platter"—those that "look like they may be from the university"—was greeted with murmurs and much fidgeting. Finally the men in the audience started talking out loud. And then they started laughing. I hoped they would settle down, once it sunk in what the film is about, once they let out the heave of transsexual panic, once they started seeing the brilliance of what is happening on the screen, and, if not, once they realized that what they are watching is not just a party, that these people on the screen are actually taking great risks. But when the narrator

said that the girls, the Chicas, are continually facing violence—from the State, as illegal immigrants, or from their boyfriends—and that some of them die, when the footage was shown from protests after the death of a trans woman, the Guggenheim audience started laughing.

So what kind of timeline does one construct to account for this cultural-political moment in 2014? We have a narrative which takes us from the boot-wearing tough gay Tejanos, to cross-dressing Chicas, to a queer crowd which establishes a legal clinic for the immigrants, next to the well-off, educated audience in one of the major cultural institutions of the United States—who freely engage in outbursts of transphobia. There is no convenient modality to account for this: we are neither in the backwoods of rural Nebraska where *Boys Don't Cry* locates transphobic violence to account for the murder of Brandon Teena in 1993,[12] nor are we "back" in the day when no laws protected sexual minorities.

Needless to say simple narratives of progress will not do; neither will the institution of gay marriage or institutionalization of gay art. But perhaps by embracing spaces that are not inherently political, by creating momentary utopias, by bringing bodies into alliance, by creating momentary *wild zones,* artists such as Hammer, Rosenfeld and Wu Tsang embrace a politics which cannot be codified into laws, but which nonetheless offer a powerful critique of the status quo. Writing about the politics of the street, Butler formulates what may be the political definition of the wild zone:

> Perhaps these are anarchist moments or anarchist passages, when the legitimacy of a regime is called into question, but when no new regime has yet come to take its place. This time of the interval is the time of the popular will, not a single will, not a unitary will, but one that is characterized by an alliance with the performative power to lay claim to the public in a way that is not yet codified into law, and that can never be fully codified into law. ("Bodies in Alliance")

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[12] See Judith Halberstam's critique of that geographical assumption in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives.*

Such political action, which creates a peculiar momentary wild zone is necessarily embodied. To understand the conditions of its creation one must examine the conditions in which bodies exist:

> To rethink the space of appearance in order to understand the power and effect of public demonstrations for our time, we will need to understand the bodily dimensions of action, what the body requires, and what the body can do, especially when we must think about bodies together, what holds them there, their conditions of persistence and of power. ("Bodies in Alliance")

Hammer's 1970s films lay the foundations for thinking about this: the embodied character of action which has political dimensions. She is rethinking dramatically the precise juncture where the private, nay, the intimate, becomes political; realizes her politics *through the body*; indeed through the gathering of bodies, eliminating language which could obscure, dominate, appropriate or simply misrepresent the scene of action. That scene, "the space of appearance" is created as a space between bodies.

Wildness does create a moment of anarchy, as it resides outside the law and puts into question the legitimacy of the existing regime. It does not last (whence the recurrent recognition of momentary or failed utopias): Butler calls it "the time of the interval." The moment is created by a collective, not a single individual, but the collective—as Lorde, and later Muñoz also aptly point out—is not unified, but a site of strife. The collective performatively *creates* what Butler calls, after Hanna Arendt, "the space of appearance," and is shaped by that space in turn. The bar-narrator of *Wildness* is there to bring this last point home. Most importantly, the claim the collective lays to the public is not codified and can never be fully codified into law. Instead "Such an action reconfigures what will be public, and what will be the space of politics" (Butler, "Bodies in Alliance").

Hammer, Rosenfeld, and Wu Tsang redefine what is political, embracing spaces not inherently "political" and engaging in performative acts which traditionally are considered pre-political. As Butler points out, "the classic conception of the Polis" is not of much use when we

want to address the efficacy of wild zones created by bodies in alliance. In fact, classic politics gives us no "language for those forms of agency and resistance that focus on the politics of exclusion itself or, indeed, against those regimes of power that maintain the stateless and disenfranchised in conditions of destitution. Few matters could be more politically consequential" ("Bodies in Alliance"). Arguing for the recognition as political of those domains which get excluded by the classic conception of the Polis, Butler claims that we need a conception of the political which allows us to recognize that,

> the life stripped of rights is still within the sphere of the political, and is thus not reduced to mere being, but is, more often than not, angered, indignant, rising up and resisting. To be outside established and legitimate political structures is still to be saturated in power relations, and this saturation is the point of departure for a theory of the political that includes dominant and subjugated forms, modes of inclusion and legitimation as well as modes of delegitimation and effacement. ("Bodies in Alliance")

The wild zone is where the seeds are sown for such a reconfiguration of the political.

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