

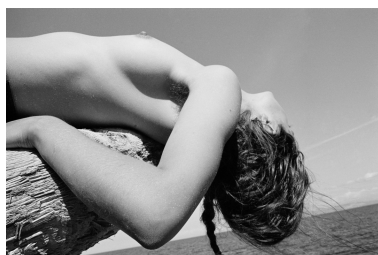
HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Barbara Hammer Refuses the Male Gaze in 1970s Photographs

Hammer came out in 1970 and her work during that period feels tied to her declaration of independence from social norms.

Susan Silas January 17, 2018

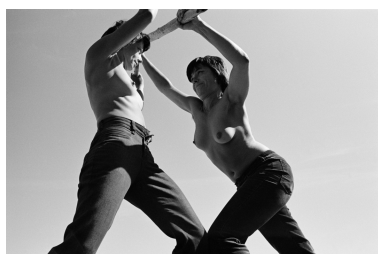


Barbara Hammer, "Bowsprit, Hornby Island, British Columbia" (1972) (photo courtesy the artist and COMPANY, New York)

Barbara Hammer is on a roll. She has a retrospective exhibition titled *Evidentiary Bodies* at the [Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art](#) through January 28, she had multiple film screenings in the fall at Electronic Arts Intermix, the Japan Society, and the Museum of the Moving Image, and her films were the subject of a program called *Lesbian Hands* at the [Anthology Film Archives](#) in December.

Hammer is known primarily as an experimental filmmaker. At her screening at Electronic Arts Intermix, she revealed she had an archive of approximately 1,000 negatives, many of which had never been printed. Her book, *Truant: Photographs, 1970–1979*, is culled from that archive, and for an exhibition of the same name, [Company Gallery](#) recently displayed 28 modestly scaled black-and-white photographs from the collection.

The peopled images are exclusively of women. These images, dated as they are from the '70s, may remind us of the tail end of hippiedom — a comfort with nudity combined with rebellious self-representation — but in fact they offer us something more important. Hammer came out in 1970 and her work feels tied to her declaration of independence from dictatorial social norms, as well as her need to be an active agent in her own work of self-definition. If true personal freedom stems from genuinely not caring about what other people think, then there is real freedom from patriarchy in not caring about what men think.



"Wrestling, Hornby Island, British Columbia" (1972) (photo courtesy the artist and COMPANY, New York)

We know that we are constructed by our own will and personalities, but at the same time we are not immune to what is reflected back to us about ourselves by other individuals and the culture at large. Hammer is an optimist. After her screening at Electronic Arts Intermix, she stated in response to a question from the audience, "We're constructing ourselves." She has enormous faith in self-creation. This may have been a necessary component of coming out in the '70s to begin with. If we look back at advertising from the post-war generation on, it is clear how much of the message was about managing female sexuality

rather than about simple consumerism, although these two agendas were ultimately tied together in trying to convince women that what they lacked (the phallus, according to Lacan) could be compensated simply by buying the right consumer objects. Later, of course, this strategy was transformed into a complete objectification of female sexuality (as defined by men) to sell every imaginable thing to both women and men.

By contrast, Hammer gives us women who are comfortable in their own skins; who have their own agency and who, like Hammer herself, have refused to be managed. What we feel most keenly in these images is the removal of the scopophilic male gaze. In Laura Mulvey's brilliant essay "[Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema](#)," published in 1975, Mulvey states: "In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. ...The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation."



Barbara Hammer, "Sappho Production Meeting, Los Angeles" (1978) (photo courtesy the artist and COMPANY, New York)

In Hammer's images titled "Sappho Production Meeting" and "Shooting Sappho, Los Angeles," both from 1979, we see an all-female film crew meeting and working, all completely naked. This, it seems to me, is the ultimate refusal of the male gaze as described by Mulvey; one in which women are the producers and actors in their own self-representation and in which nothing about their appearance is dictated by the contemporaneous male-defined expectations of how they should look and what they should be allowed to do. This same sense of refusal may explain Hammer's attraction to experimental film, where the rules that have been laid down about

filmmaking, almost entirely by men, are forsaken.



Barbara Hammer, "On the Road, Baja California" (1975) (photo courtesy the artist and COMPANY, New York)

In one photograph, "On the Road, Baja California" (1975), we see Hammer perched on a motorcycle about to embark on a road trip alone. When I was younger I had a deep envy of the writer Ryszard Kapuściński, not only because he wrote so beautifully, but because he could go anywhere in the world alone and write from there. In a recent essay by Rebecca Solnit, published in the *Guardian*, titled [If I Were a Man](#), she addressed this same deep frustration with the limits of the possible: "If I were a man ... I didn't want to be someone else so much as I wanted, from time to time, to be treated as someone else, or left alone as I would be if I was

something else. In particular, I've wanted to be able to walk around alone, in cities, on mountains, unmolested. You can't wander lonely as a cloud when you're always checking to see whether you're being followed, or bracing yourself in case the person passing grabs you." When someone, again in the audience at Electronic Intermix, remarked that Hammer was so brave, she responded: "I don't feel brave, I feel foolhardy." She did admit feeling a bit scared to take this trip alone — but she went.

There is also in these images the desire to capture friendship and intimacy among women. Hammer states that she was accused many times by other feminists of being an essentialist. This seems to me to be a wrong-headed confusion in which her

foregrounding of the importance of female agency and the freedoms available in a homosocial female space are interpreted as essentialism, rather than as celebratory acts.



Barbara Hammer, "Corky Wick and me" (1979) (photo courtesy the artist and COMPANY, New York)

One of Hammer's films that screened at Electronic Arts Intermix, *Would You Like to Meet Your Neighbor? A New York Subway Tape* (1985), was shot at a time when a subway ride could be a frightening experience, when the doors between cars slammed open and shut at every curve and everyone sat warily attentive but trying not to make eye contact with anyone else at all costs. But Hammer steps on to the train dressed as a subway map, and gently cajoles passengers into acknowledging each other and her. She sweetly asks of all of us: "Why aren't people meeting one another and talking to one another?" A question more relevant now

than ever.

We tend to think of optimism as a form of naivté. Given the times, how can anyone maintain that optimism has any value at all? Hammer is enormously accomplished and at the same time humble. She is quite sophisticated, and thoughtful and aware. What to make of her continued optimism then? I see her optimism not as naive but rather as visionary. She believes that we can live differently if we so choose, that self-creation is indeed possible and that it can lead us to a different future. We can see a glimmer of that in the way she activated that subway car.

Barbara Hammer's [Truant: Photographs, 1970-1979](#) is now out from Capricious.

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