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A chromatic presence: Barbara Hammer and “What You Are Not Supposed to Look At”

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Since the 1970s, Barbara Hammer has been known for her photographs and experimental films chronicling and exploring lesbian experience. Since her 2006 diagnosis of ovarian cancer, she has ventured into an unflinching depiction of her own illness, aging, and dying. In “What You Are Not Supposed to Look At,” a 2014 collage series collaboration with Ingrid Christie, Hammer and Christie illuminate new modes of thinking about life, illness, and what we are describing the prismatic gaze: a mode of looking that subverts objectification and objectivity by positing sensuality, relationality, and spectularity.

Keywords: Barbara Hammer; prismatic gaze; illness; objectification

We long for an-other. One who sees into our depths and eases our loneliness. But, what if the other is not beside us but is an amorphous other from within?

The couple form is usually depicted as a relation between two separate entities. However, this premise often presumes a concept of selfhood that is explicitly contained. When thinking more broadly about the self as plurality, being-together and coupling become more tangled. Barbara Hammer’s oeuvre and her 2014 series “What You Are Not Supposed to Look At” explores these multi-faceted relations to and of the self through hybrid and collaborative processes. Her artistic practice extricates and illuminates relational manifestations of the self that act as a form of coupling.

Since the 1970s, Barbara Hammer has been known for her experimental photographs and films that chronicle and explore lesbian experience. Following her 2006 diagnosis of ovarian cancer, she ventured into an unflinching depiction of her own illness, aging, and dying. Her way of synthesizing her life and art challenged perceptions of female identity by embodying the nuanced entanglements of lesbianism, sickness and senescence. In a recent interview, Hammer described her film projects as attempting to produce a form of empathy by developing a “way of becoming the other person, where it could be seconds, it could be an hour – but to really see the world through someone else’s eyes” (Kitto 2018). This layered approach of merging with an-other and inhabiting their point view

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bleeds into Hammer's use of portraiture to compound self-reflection, thereby discovering an-otherness within. This dynamic compounding of others outside and inside of the self constructs multi-lateral relations of difference.

In "What You Are Not Supposed to Look At," a collage series made from photographs taken by Ingrid Christie (under direction from Hammer), images appear simultaneously tender, mysterious, and fleshy: silver Mylar strips ground and frame shadowy shapes that weave in and around nude photographs (Figure 1). The nebulous shadows were created using found X-rays. Hammer's flesh lay pink and prone in an abandoned veterinary hospital in Edinburgh, Scotland. While the title implies the avoidance of taboos, Hammer's use of her body highlights profusions of difference within the self. Rather than a forlorn surrender to cancer, these layered depictions of her naked yet defiant body insist on a complex self-hood. Her portrayals challenge representational norms and the aesthetics of scientific rationalism. Through the superimposition of sight and site, the concept of evidence gains textural and psychological expression. In this way "What You Are Not Supposed to Look At" illuminates the pluralities from within – a chromatic self. It does this by producing a prismatic gaze that forms strata of perspectival experiences. Within the series, different historical and sensational registers manifest through intersections between sight within the self, abandoned sites, and material evidence – each having different points of attachment to the question of representation. Since their discovery in 1895, X-rays have been used to probe previously hidden parts of the body, promising a mechanical objectivity, which Peter Galison argues "had everything to do with a machine ideal: the machine as a neutral and transparent operator that would serve both as an instrument of registration without intervention and as an ideal for the moral discipline of the scientists themselves" (1998, 332). This means that the machine, in this case, the X-ray, would theoretically possess more value than a patient's personal experience, speaking to what Linda Williams terms, "the frenzy of the visible," which is the drive toward transparency and visibility as the root of knowledge. Following Foucault, Williams (1989) links this scopophilic form of visibility/knowledge production to pornography's revelation of bodies in pleasure. These linkages in visual technologies, discourses of objectivity, and pornography combine to produce forms of visual evidence – the photograph, the X-ray, film – that is often used contra to that of bodily presence. As the image becomes more powerful than experience, objectification is attached to a form of truth. Although focused on visual apparatuses, it is clear that these lines of logic extend through the broader discourses of medicine, producing diagnoses that fracture bodies into examples of diseases, rather than whole, complex selves.

Hammer challenges this techno-medical hierarchy by recontextualizing its relation to the body. She aesthetically queers science and rationality by approaching viscosity through many registers. It is important to consider *how* she deploys these visual technologies. The X-rays do not appear in their standard format – allowing radiologists to describe the relative locations of viscera – but are cut into bulbous tumor-like shapes, that hover around the images of Hammer's body. This provocative resistance positions viscera out of place, remnants of an untethered internal gaze. Additionally, they are not Hammer's X-rays, but found objects, which further emphasizes their non-utility. If there is no external connection, does an internal map matter? The X-ray's materiality alludes to an internalized medical gaze – perhaps reminding viewers of their own opaque interiority and also the ways that they exceed it. The images propose sight and site as both seen and unseen possibilities.

This superimposition opens toward the more indeterminate aspects of selfhood and an emerging recognition of otherness from within. Through these diffusions, the prismatic gaze refracts singular perceptions into chromatic identifications within the self. Furthermore, the Mylar's mirrored surface implicates viewers by superimposing their reflections onto the images, thereby entangling them within the dynamics of exposure and vulnerability. These overlaps of exteriority, interiority, opacity, and vulnerability prompt the viewers to relate to both their own and an-other's relationship to mortality, thus compounding Hammer's prismatic gaze.

The hospital site also provides an opportunity for viewers to identify what other forms of self and relationality lie in excess of this drive towards transparency within objectification. Throughout the series, Hammer positions herself on top of disused medical equipment. She sits naked and curled on a stainless steel table; she lies on a counter, prone with eyes closed; and is in proximity to other spaces that reference the rational and sterile design of a



Figure 1. Barbara Hammer, *What You Are Not Supposed to Look At #5*, 2014, chromogenic prints, Mylar, X-ray, collage, 23" x 26". From the series "What You Are Not Supposed to Look At," 2014. Courtesy of Barbara Hammer estate and Florrie Burke collection.

previously functional hospital. The Mylar mimics the metallic coldness of clinical instruments. Yet, the combination of these elements does not produce more transparency nor further ensnare Hammer into the world of diagnosis and disease. The site alludes to an abandonment of hygiene, efficiency, and utility. Hammer creates an alternate epistemology by arranging these elements into fragmentary components, thereby resisting any smooth totality within the work.

The project questions the dominance of evidence-making via scientific method by highlighting Hammer's body as a location where objectivity, objectification, and the singular self are severed. This disruption occurs through the aesthetic strategies of autonomous subject/object authoring, scientific de-centering, and material superimpositions. These strategies are explicitly contrary to the reification of an identitarian singularity, conveying, instead, a porous spectrum of relations. A conversation with John David Rhodes reveals this tension in Hammer's work between individual particularities (implying an overall plurality) and the overarching term of identity. In describing the aesthetics of her earlier work she says, "This sight and touch union became the basis of my personal lesbian aesthetic" (2012, 1). Rhodes responds, "The phrase 'personal lesbian aesthetic' captures some of the difficulties of coming into maturity as an artist ('personal') who is also part of a political community ('lesbian')[...] Even in that scene of radical intimacy, though, there is the appearance of a gap, a critical interval, between you and the machine and maybe between sight and touch" (2012, 1). The cleavage that Rhodes identifies is two-fold. It occurs between Hammer and the sign of lesbian, which connects, extends, and evolves with other identities that Hammer simultaneously manifests and discards through her current work – illness, aging, etc. – and between "sight and touch."

"What You Are Not Supposed to Look At" further augments that gap by deconstructing visuality's cultural attachment to objectivity and by refocusing its relation to the haptic. This shift towards the haptic is important because it signals the epistemological rupture between objectification and objectivity. In thinking with the haptic (which touches rather than compartmentalizes), the strips of Mylar become an insulation for Hammer's exposure. The haptic also transforms the X-ray shapes into another form of opaque flesh covering Hammer, conveying a sense of protection and companionship. Prioritizing touch, then, not only moves beyond a particular scientific discourse of objectification, but also shows a different means of approaching an objectified body. In drawing on the haptic as an important form of knowing and relating to the chromatic self, we see another aspect of the prismatic gaze's multivalence.

These forms of knowing through relation and touch, instead of sight, frames the prismatic gaze as that which deconstructs the singularity of vision into a chroma of variance. This methodology of emphasizing the ambiguity of difference is also used in contemporary quantum physics. Neutrinos, which are subatomic particles that oscillate between three states, are believed to be essential in explaining the existence of matter. However, because of their size, they remained a hypothesis until highly sensitive particle colliders found traces of their encounters – the rare moments when they brush against another particle (Hallin 1999). In another instance, sound (not sight) confirmed Einstein's theory of gravitational waves when scientists identified the collision of two black holes through a brief blip in the musical note middle C (Koren 2017). The invisibility of these quantum movements shows us the limitations of linear space, time, and objectivity. Their opaque

movements convey an ontology of blurry-ness and in-betweenness, to evoke Fred Moten and his analysis of the radical potential of blackness' multiple temporalities and nonsingularity (2017). Hammer's series mirrors this economy of blur and sensation. By undercutting the primacy of visual epistemologies, she asserts the quantum possibility of matter to exist as multi-dimensional forms. This is sensing instead of "what we're not supposed to look at." This evidence is based on relational excess instead of standardized objectivity.

Utilizing the prismatic gaze (rather than an objective/objectifying one) refracts identity into a spectrum of dynamic entanglements and relational difference. Hammer's project activates the prismatic gaze by using discourses of objectivity and illness as possible points of shattering economies of sexuality, objectification, and value. Her work not only relegates clinical technologies to the periphery, but also appropriates the notion of detachment by rendering her body as spectacular. Hammer IS spectacle, challenging ideas of representation. This form of haptic spectacle refracts a singularity of presence by highlighting the numerous layers of relations from within. In an assessment of Hammer's filmic oeuvre, Rizvana Bradley argues that this move toward self-representation is emblematic of a form of queer feminist theorizing, as a demand for more nuance:

Since the 1970s onwards, Hammer has placed her own body in her work. She has insisted upon this form of self-presentation as being less about representational narcissism and more so about the requirement and demand for a more complicated and nuanced critical, queer feminist presence within film (2018, 57–58).

Bradley further argues that her earlier work, featuring multiple versions of Hammer, "gestures outward and emphasizes the morphological proximity of the self to multiple personae. In doing so, she stresses the creative practices of survival and endurance that occupying and laying claim to a gendered body in the world require" (2018, 58). Hammer's work implies that this self-spectacle becomes *spectacular* in its chromatic variations and demonstrates the limits of conceding to "what we're not supposed to look at" – an aging, dying woman.

Beyond the rarity of seeing the spectacle of age and mortality, Hammer also shifts the framework for relating to these chromatic selves by foregrounding abject openness. Hammer knows that her frailty is not what we are supposed to see; it is excluded from the social body. However, by placing herself within the frame, she challenges this marginality while conveying the contours of her vulnerability. In this instance, abjection centers peripheral spectacularity and asserts power from below. This form of relation is especially important for thinking with the prismatic gaze and chromatic selfhood because it illuminates what can happen when vulnerability *is* the frame through which we register representation. Here, vulnerability does not mean weakness. While Hammer's posture in the photographs is prone and curled, this horizontal posture exudes its own form of dominion over the landscape – it does not stand up to power, but spreads rhizomatically from within. Hammer's nakedness further underscores the importance of precarity. This is not the nudity of pornography or a search for knowledge. It is a nakedness that requires a radical self-acceptance. Viewers are aware (via X-ray shapes and knowledge of Hammer's diagnosis) of her frail organs – damaged by cancer and chemotherapy. What does it mean to posit that this vulnerability is central to spectacularity?

Positioning this complex and tender self in the center of the frame is an insistence that the marginalized be able to author their own place within the schemas of value. This also shifts the meaning of representation. In her earlier work, Hammer gained fame for her “improvisational breaking of sexual codes,” by foregrounding her own desiring body (Bradley 2018, 57). Her current images also break sexual codes, but refer less to Hammer’s own desire and more toward the re-valuation of her aging lesbian body. This form of peripheral spectacularity as representational frame acts as both a resistance to invisibility and a mode of self-valuation. In this way, Hammer can be described as shameless; shameless in asserting both her worth and vulnerability, further refracting relationality.

This shamelessness differs from social vulgarity. The work of Bob Flanagan, the self-declared super masochist who battled cystic fibrosis and who Lynda Hart describes as shamelessly shameless, in reference to Flanagan’s excitement at making the public feel twice shamed for witnessing his pain and seeing his own lack of shame. Hart writes, “It is credible that Flanagan would have begun to perform his masochistic sexuality in public in order to introduce an element (the spectators) that might have recharged his shame” (1998, 140). Hammer’s shamelessness does not seek to manipulate the viewer, but instead, leads toward de-objectification and transformation.

Though related to tactility, this shamelessness can also be directly ascribed to Hammer’s illness. In an interview with David Napier, she describes the egolessness that her experience with cancer produced:

When I think about illness as a form of spirituality, immediately, I am back in bed with ovarian cancer stage three and unable even once to leave that bed. [...] It required a kind of new me. It required a shrinking of the ego. It required withdrawing from the world and from exchanges, so that I would have enough togetherness to go through this transformative experience (2018, 85).

This transformation is emphatically political. Later in the interview Hammer says,

I think it’s also the body politic that we have to look to. If we are aware of illness among us, we will be more likely to take charge of our own bodies. [...] When I walk with my friends who have breast cancer and are brave enough to show it, I see the stares that they get from the public – an unaware public – that doesn’t know how to look at difference or recognize that we are all part of one body, really (2018, 86).

This shamelessness further severs objectivity from objectification while asserting self-objectification as a means of refracting and exposing one’s internal intricacies and entanglements. This self-defined refraction and transformation, which is central to the prismatic gaze, means that the vertigo the viewer experiences when looking at the images is not that of fear or alienation, but of awe in encountering a nuanced body exuding a strata of selves. This conversion of the objective/objectifying gaze not only relates to the body politic, but also to the concept of death. Hammer’s re-valuation of her ailing body converts dying into a form of testament and release where death could be another amorphous existence of a yet unknown self.

Hammer’s more recent work, “Evidentiary Bodies” – an installation that premiered as envisioned and planned by Hammer at the Wexner Center in Columbus, Ohio in 2019 after

a 2016 performance at Microscope Gallery in Brooklyn – expands Hammer’s play with chromatic layerings. The work prompts viewers to spatially negotiate between objective visual technologies and Hammer’s embodied evidence. Walking through a confined hallway, demarcated by three layers of found X-rays and projections of Hammer’s CT scans, they enter a small area with low benches. Projected on the wall are images Hammer’s CT scan and Hammer with the scan projected over her head, among others. She is thin and obviously ill. At one point her nose bleeds. But, it is in her act of grappling with these technologies and presenting her body and life as excess in relation to them that we see her subversion of objectivity. Life, again, is multi-dimensional and boundless. In a description of the installation, Hammer describes herself as “perform[ing] living with cancer” (Kitto 2018). Hammer, as in “What You’re Not Supposed to Look At,” depicts an exuberance amidst the immediate presence of dying. Again, we experience vulnerability, tactility, and the sensational in relation to evidence. Most strikingly, Hammer exudes an intricate life instead of conceding to a death sentence. Within her excesses, we encounter nakedness, touch, and spectacularity as testimonies of existence. This poignancy resonates especially in the last scene of the 10-minute film, which features Hammer, nude, walking through a monumental strip of film, which has been “painted with acid, with acrylic colors, with crystals of salt” (Kitto 2018). Her movements are slow, her emotions heavy and complex, as she traverses the texturally abstract landscape. The viewer gazes at Hammer’s spectacular vulnerability. These refracted associations layer and reframe the gaze, making the film’s materiality a technology reliant on Hammer’s touch. Despite moments of exhaustion, the surface she contends with is her own construction, an accumulated evidence of her self-determined presence. Her body wrestles with the nuanced topography of her abstracted selves feeling their rich variances within and through her skin. Her prismatic eye shamelessly and spectacularly refracts the chromatic brilliance of her singular life. Technologically uncontainable, her body surrounds and touches all who witness.

In many ways, the project encapsulates the vivid crossings between Hammer’s art-making, lifestyle, and the changing relations within the self. These variances that Hammer pursues move beyond technologies of capture in film and diagnosis – though we can read her work as a form of critique – while flourishing in the alchemy between interiority and exteriority. We see the strata of movements and residues of touch within the salt reactions, each conveying different versions of selfhood in the arenas of evidence and its excesses. Her work considers these rich chromatic forms of internal and external couplings that emerge from the prismatic gaze. It is not accidental that “Evidentiary Bodies” acts as its own form of evidence against “evidence” and testament since it was also the title of her 2017 career-retrospective at the Leslie Lohman Gallery.

Notes on contributors

Maureen Catbagan is a Filipino-American, multi-media artist based in Brooklyn whose work engages social collectivity and examines relations between identity and experience. Collaborative projects include Flux Factory, ZAPT zine, Abang-guard, HOWDOYOUSAYYAMINAFRICAN? Collective, and experimental music groups Bloodflames and PXALM.

Amber Jamilla Musser is Associate Professor of American Studies at George Washington University. She writes about race, aesthetics and sexuality. She is the author of *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism* (NYU, 2014) and *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (NYU, 2018).

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