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ARTICLES

Remembering Barbara Hammer, Who Envisioned Spaces for Women to Be Themselves

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Susan Silas March 19, 2019



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

Barbara Hammer died this past Saturday at the age of 79. Masha Gessen interviewed her for *The New Yorker* on February 24, less than a month ago. Hammer was dying, and Gessen made no attempt to skirt the obvious; in fact the interview was titled [*Barbara Hammer's Exit*](#)

[*Interview*](#). Hammer was an activist to the end, and the two talked not only

about her art but also about the fight for doctor-assisted death, for death with dignity. Reading this interview between this extraordinary artist and this no less extraordinary writer, all I could think was that I wished I were there, sitting in the room with them, watching them interact with one another.

In January of 2018, I reviewed Hammer's exhibition [*Truant Photographs, 1970-1979*](#) at Company in New York. The images in the show were culled from thousands of black and white negatives in Hammer's archive and a number depicted the same type of all female idyll that is represented in her breakout film *Dyketactics* from 1974. I was struck then by Hammer's comfort in her own skin — by the fact that she had a kind of personal freedom that is uncommon

and difficult to achieve in patriarchal society. In *The New Yorker* interview, Gessen refers to someone who responded to Hammer's work by commenting: "She makes being a lesbian look like such fun." It seems to me that what this person recognized was the freedom Hammer had achieved by extricating herself from the proscribed behaviors demanded of women by the male gaze. She opened up a space for women to be themselves — fully realized on their own terms. And that impulse is evident both in her life choices and in the formal decisions she made in her films. She was conscious of the intertwined relationship of form and content and understood the need for a new form to represent the space she wanted to carve out for women.



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

While it was Hammer's intention to create a liberatory space of action for lesbian women, and to acknowledge and represent their experiences, she had much to teach straight women as well. In another interview, given for the *Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art* series, she directly addressed the desire to create lesbian histories. "Heterosexuality was the norm for recorded history."

Her film *Nitrate Kisses* from 1992 and *History Lessons* from 2000 both take on the creation of that lesbian history. But it wasn't being a lesbian per se, that Hammer made look like fun, it was the liberation from the male gaze; getting to be who you are without all of those cumbersome rules to follow. For straight women, who are entangled in the male gaze even in the privacy of their own homes, this is a much more difficult proposition. And her freedom inevitably looks enviable. Hammer didn't seem to care what other people thought — and not in a dismissive way. She cared about people very much. Women are taught from the moment they are born that they had better care about what men think of them. And this constraint is suffocating. Personal power comes with letting that go, and no one watching Hammer can fail to recognize this.

While Hammer was visible throughout her career, serious institutional recognition came late. Retrospectives of her work at the Museum of Modern Art, the Tate, and the Jeu de Paume all took place after she turned 60. And it wasn't until her recent retrospective *Evidentiary Bodies* (also the title of a beautiful film about her ailing and aging body) at the Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, that her films were shown together with her photographs and installation works. By then she was 68.

In an obituary posted in [ArtNews](#) the authors refer to an unpublished interview in their archives in which Hammer said: “I would think a lot — well, sometimes — of what my career would look like if the snowball had happened in my mid-thirties or early 40s, as it does for most artists.” Curiously, she did not say most *male* artists. And yet the fact is that women are overlooked as a rule, and early recognition for them has historically been the exception. We know that critical and financial support helps artists to flourish and gives them the time to make serious work. How could someone so driven and dedicated not wonder what the outcome could have been with the kind of support so automatically lavished upon men? And not only was she a woman artist, she was a lesbian — not exactly someone male power and money have traditionally wished to support. And yet, she was totally undaunted, and from what I observed, completely optimistic.

Four months ago, Hammer gave a talk/performance at the Whitney titled, [The Art of Dying or \(Palliative Art Making in the Age of Anxiety\)](#). It seems that women artists often have to be either half or completely dead to be embraced by the art world. Hammer surely understood this and brought her dying directly into the museum. Her partner of over 30 years and many of her close friends were in that audience. She spoke about dying but also addressed the aspirations of younger artists and friends in the audience saying, “Be open, open to your intuition, and pleasure yourself in the joy of making. There is no way to make plans, control, everything is contingent. There is no solidity to count on except what you claim.”

And then, at the end of her talk, she stepped into the audience and began to point directly at individual people saying: “ I love you, and you and you and you....”

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