

Barbara Hammer by Corina

Copp

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Conversations between Artists, Writers, Musicians, Performers, Directors—since 1981

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#143



Performance documentation of Camerawoman, 1980, NY Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen.

Recent restorations of Barbara Hammer’s pioneering feminist film and video work have screened in venues all over New York City these past months: one aspect of a citywide devotion to the artist that has been, in itself, a sight to see. A selection of her portrait photography—monochrome figurations of women, lovers, friends, herself, sensuous and nonchalant alike—was exhibited this winter at Company Gallery and published as a book, *Truant: Photographs, 1970–1979* (Capricious, 2017). And then there’s *Evidentiary Bodies*, a title conferred on several projects: a 2017 retrospective staged by the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art (with an accompanying monograph) comprising Hammer’s seldom-seen installation work, performance documents, drawings, paintings, collages, and ephemera; a 2016 performance that focused on a physical language of mortality; a brand new, three-screen film that builds on that performance, which will premiere at the 2018 Berlin Film Festival; and also a pamphlet she generously let me help put together, published by Inpatient Press. Beyond framing an intimate record of Hammer’s life and will, each iteration of *Evidentiary Bodies* forms and informs the other, emphasizing—dreamily—the idea that we’re all in this groundbreaking field of vision together.

On the occasion of our talk, Hammer unshelves a book for me—a well-worn, Spanish-language translation of Elizabeth Bishop poems, gifted from a friend. Her deep-red T-shirt is emblazoned with SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL REVOLUTION. It's morning in Westbeth, New York, and sunlight is cascading into the apartment from a modest wall of windows right smack in view of a calm Hudson River. The poster for Hammer's film Maya Deren's Sink hangs in the kitchen. Rushing over, I've forgotten the doughnuts, and go on for a minute about how I will bring her one next time. This trivial failure reminds me of Bishop's poem "A Miracle for Breakfast": "A window across the river caught the sun / As if the miracle were working / on the wrong balcony." In thinking about how to introduce this person—who has startled me into a new phase of my life (for why not let someone whose artistry wants to activate activate, even if our transformations be subtle)—I am compelled to mention these little, livening things.

—Corina Copp
Corina Copp

How did this museum show come about? You recently said, "I'm not in the closet, but a lot of my artwork is." How did your artwork gradually make its way out of the closet, so to speak? The title of the show, Evidentiary Bodies, could connect to an evidentiary hearing, like in the court system when—

Barbara Hammer

—everything is brought forth.

CC

Did you title it this way partly because you think of your work as evidence of a life lived?

BH

I did. I've had lots of retrospectives but none that represented all of my output. They've always just shown moving-image work. So this broader survey enticed me right away—especially as an excuse to open up those boxes, and to get some eyes other than my own on the work. I was allowed to choose the curators, who became my close friends. And during this time the museum had a change of direction toward greater diversity, toward lesbians of color, queer people with disabilities, and so on. It was the right team for a survey several years in the making.

CC

How was the work selected? Was any of it from the journal archives? I know they were recently sent to the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Yale.

BH

*A lot of what was on display is from Yale. There were also drawings similar to those in the journals that mostly came from my studio. When I started out, I didn't make things thinking of galleries at all. I self-identified as a filmmaker but worked in all these other disciplines. I'd lay boards out in the backyard and spray-paint them blue, then arrange them on the grass in a certain way, with some wires going across, to be photographed. It was perhaps conceptual sculpture, similar to Cady Noland's work. But my discipline was filmmaking, and that became the main course because it could include painting—I paint on a lot of film and reshoot it—plus performance and installation too. Later, I brought in research. For example, it was a great delight finding out about Elizabeth Bishop for my most recent feature essay film, *Welcome to This House* (2015). I read every book about her and dipped into her archive to investigate aspects of her life—like the homes she lived in and how they influenced her poetry. I visited Great Village, Nova Scotia; Key West, Florida; Ouro Preto and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; and Cambridge and Boston, Massachusetts.*

CC

You're a big Elizabeth Bishop fan?

BH

Well, my first master's was in literature, and poetry was my love. I even wrote poetry for a while when I was young. But back to the show: the curators had free rein.

CC

*Whether it's including loose ephemera in the new monograph—like a collectible trading card and a sticker by Vanessa Haroutunian that reads *Barbara Hammer Says Yes!*—or seeking-out audience members one by one after a screening, or building into your films direct conversations with strangers, lovers, and new friends, your affection for participation, or—I'd like a better word for it—encounter, or optimistic relation, is evident. But you can't*

always be there engaging with people. The gallery work has a delayed sociality, whereas the films feel more immediate. Is it important for you to talk with the people who see these works in a way somehow similar to previous audience engagements at your films? I imagine you're getting feedback from women about their experiences.

BH

And men too. I just got an email from the artist Brent Green, who saw Truant, my recent show of photography from the 1970s. He wrote: 'I knew you were a badass, but you were a badass way back then.' (laughter)

But you're onto something here. I've sat in the museum a few afternoons, watching people look at my work, overhearing some of their comments. It didn't give me the thrill of interaction that live performance, live film projection, and live audience snoring, grunting, or laughing in their seats does. They're perceiving the past; and I'm glad there's a past to observe in the art and artifacts, but it's an intellectual pleasure knowing that. What grips my being is the dialogue, the confrontation, the smiles of direct engagement. That's special—the emotional pleasure of person-to-person(s) gaze, touch, and talk. Did I say exchange? Do I have to say relational?

There was something different happening during the opening of Truant. It was like looking at vulnerability without design, camouflage, and pretense, even without that sacred art cow: irony. Innocence, joy, authenticity, agency, playfulness, and community encounter speak to me even now from those past records. The spontaneous—or so it seemed—feminist, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender revolution in the Bay Area following immediately after and often in conjunction with the vibrant, hopeful turmoil of the hippies and Black Panther movement was the zeitgeist. You couldn't ignore it as a sentient being. You were a lucky sentient being to be alive and aware of this strength-in-vulnerability expressed by so many courageous beings damned sure doing their best to make a change in a rigid social structure.

When I look at those photographs, I still feel our energy and desire, and that leaves me in the open, wondering state of tenderness. Vulnerability is not a weakness in a computer system, a personal flaw in another, or an exposure to be covered over or protected. Our vulnerability to one another and to ourselves is our strength.



The Great Goddess performance, Berkeley, 1977 (2), 2017, silver gelatin print, 12 × 8 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Company, New York. © Barbara Hammer

CC

A particular photograph, The Great Goddess performance, struck me as poetic realism, like a Marcel Carné film.

BH

(laughter) It does look like Marcel Carné. How interesting; I love that. For the performance, Mary Curtis Ratcliff had built a room-size inflatable, which I performed inside, birthing myself as the plastic went from flat to full. My thinking was that a highly developed, eight-month-old fetus dreams before it's born.

CC

Where was the audience?

BH

They were outside, sitting around in the Skylight Studio in Berkeley that belonged to Terry Sendgraff. She was a great teacher and had developed a movement technique called Motivity, which is based on feeling gravity and allowing your body to release itself to the force. It's the opposite of ballet, which resists gravity. When we later used trapeze in our performances together as "Double Strength," we let gravity move us through space.

(BH rises and begins a sequence of movements.)

CC

You still have the body memory of it.

BH

I do. Body memory is so important in all my work. I'm glad you recognize that!

*So, after I birthed myself, the audience came inside the inflatable amniotic sac, so to speak, and the twenty-five-minute black-and-white film *The Great Goddess* (1977) was projected inside it. We were all in the womb together! That's so wonderful to remember—wouldn't that be fun to reprise?*

CC

Um, yes! Did people use the word brave at that time?

BH

I don't think so.

CC

We've regressed.

BH

Uh yeah, and this was the West Coast too. Terry and I, in a lot of our 'Double Strength' performances, would try to figure out what to wear. We decided that part of this work was building up our muscles. Our arms, from the trapeze, were well defined, and our back muscles were quite pronounced. In one piece, we climbed a rope that dangled down from the ceiling, and I just wore my motorcycle helmet and nothing else but a short vest. We decided skin was a covering, so skin was our costume. We wanted our muscles to show. That was, in part, why we were doing this work: to take up a new kind of space as women.

CC

While adjusting the perception of what nudity is.

BH

*Exactly. You know, you stop looking at nudity once you see nudity, right? And there was so much activity going on. People can't be voyeurs of the film *Double Strength* (1978) because the women are active. Many voyeurs only really enjoy a passive woman, where the power is in the viewer, not in the object of their gaze—she who is chopping wood, climbing a tree, and swinging from a trapeze.*

CC

*Last night, I was rereading Joseph Chaiken's *The Presence of the Actor*, and I thought of you. One of the questions he always asked himself was: What makes you want what you want? And so a conversation in your film *Superdyke Meets Madame X* (1976) really struck me. You're talking with your partner at the time, Max Almy, about your intentions as a filmmaker, as a documentarian of your life and sex life. The concern in this scene is whether you can seduce without the camera. In this moment, you have actual seduction, formal direction, the political action of putting lesbian bodies on screen, and your own enjoyment of presence and of recording your life, all functioning in tandem. There's so much going on, and I can see it on your face as you two are talking. What made you want to have your camera always ready?*

BH

Superdyke Meets Madame X was an experimental video. I thought it would be fun and interesting since I hadn't seen anybody do anything like it. And I don't think I'd had a relationship with somebody who was also a moving-image maker before Max. It was the first time two lesbian media-makers got together to make a film about their affair, and there was some, you know, sexual desire, and the idea came.

So yes, we never met without the camera. The funny thing is that the film ends abruptly, and you never have the breakup, which is mentioned at the very beginning. To me, it shows a bit of unfulfilled planning, and also questionable editing. The ending, rather than showing the breakup, goes back to an earlier scene when I'm just wearing Frye boots and headphones, saying, "Oh I want to have a million climaxes, and film them all, boom boom boom." So it doesn't resolve for sure. But that would be hard, to really show a breakup!

CC

It's sort of the beauty of it—that it ends where it does. Was there a distinct difference in the solo versus collaborative work, and did you prefer one to the other?

BH

*If I look back through my filmography in the 1970s, I did go in and out of making something purely by myself or something community-based or with another maker. The other maker always has ideas so enriching to a project. It's thrilling. But you often don't get to go deeper into your own drive and reveal more about what your intentions are because you want to incorporate this other. Strictly personal work is satisfying in a different way because you get to do that. I always need to return to personal work—like *Psychosynthesis* (1975), where the subpersonalities of my body come out the door.*

CC

The baby, the witch ...

BH

The artist, the athlete. All that was internal work, finding who these characters were inside of me. I can't imagine that being collaborative, though someone

else was shooting while I was directing all those shots. Did I give credit? No. That was after Dyketactics (1974), and I didn't give credit when I should have there either. Alix Dobkin had a record out called Lavender Jane Loves Women. I took two of her songs and just put them in my film.

CC

She didn't know?

BH

She didn't, and I thought that was fine, since everybody would recognize them. Then later, after I'd got one print made, I was in touch with her. She said, "It's okay with me if you can promise that men won't see the film." I went, gulp, "I can't promise you that!" So I made a new soundtrack, which is the Moog synthesizer soundtrack that exists today. Years later, I ran into Alix again and noticed she had young children, boys, walking around with her—her grandchildren! She's no longer a separatist! I asked her again about the songs, and she said, "Oh sure." So I redid the film again, marrying both soundtracks, and printed the same film twice. It's titled Dyketactics X 2 (1974–2001). I was influenced by Shirley Clarke's Bridges-Go-Round, by how she put jazz and classical tracks to her superimpositions. It's just beautiful. You see visuals in an entirely new way with different soundtracks.

CC

I saw your film Audience (1981) this year at the New York Film Festival. It takes the viewer along as you talk to moviegoers at premieres of your work in San Francisco, London, Toronto, and Montreal. Ultimately, we learn as much about the cultural and political climate in each city as we do about how women feel and think, and the film makes clear, again, your affection for audience and encounter. You ask one of the women in Montreal: "What is lesbian language?" Do you feel it's a revolutionary language at this point? I ask because right now I think your vision is crucial, and I say that not just to float your boat. Certain modes of seeing—and male dominance based on eons of indifference and abuse of power—are shifting (or so is the hope) as men topple. You must sense a solidarity among women-identifying persons right now in the art world. Is this part of an ethics of loving women?

BH

Well, we're not afraid of loving each other anymore. And we have so many ways of loving. It doesn't have to be sexual. We can love each other intellectually, or from afar, wishing it were sexual; we can love each other as a suppressed body of second-class citizens, or in recognition, sympathy, and empathy with the victims of horrid oppressions, like domestic violence. There's a new language forming, and it's a language of power. It's forming because we can talk to each other quickly, and because, in solidarity, other people are coming out in terms of sexual harassment. Now with Artforum—one of our most widespread, approved-of, established art magazines—it's revealed that the publisher was harassing women. What does that do to the magazine itself? How many other people involved are complicit? This phenomenon should become a notation on Wikipedia. What's it called?
#notsurprised

CC

After Jenny Holzer.

BH

Yeah, there could be a whole entry on feminist hashtags and the power they have.



Barbara Hammer with Ingrid Christie, What You Are Not Supposed To Look At, 2014–17, photograph, Mylar, and X-ray, 33 × 25 inches. Courtesy of the artist. © Barbara Hammer

CC

Technology is integral to your art and thinking.

BH

And for all of us, I think.

CC

But you keep current on knowing how to use it as it advances.

BH

*Or knowing who to ask for help. I'm working on a three-screen film piece now called *Evidentiary Bodies*—same title as the retrospective. The Wexner Center has given me a residency to complete unfinished work, and they flew in an editor to help me fine-cut this complex piece. I hadn't worked on it for a while and refreshed myself the week before he arrived by revisiting my image and sound collection for the project. In the past, I would work every day on something. It becomes part of my thought process. I wake up knowing what the next edit will be. I don't have the poet's white-paper stare or the novelist's writer's block. When I know what my last move will be, I pack up the studio and go home. I go to bed that way. Then I come in the next morning and make that edit. It flows all day.*

CC

You always have a task then.

BH

Sometimes you can think art-making is problem-solving or task-solving. I've always thought that art is energy.

CC

I love that. Tell me more about the new work?

BH

I'm living with ovarian cancer and have been for twelve years. During a time when the chemo was particularly difficult—last year—I didn't have hair. I would perform in front of a black screen. Instead of editing footage, I'd have a new idea about how to show what it feels like to have cancer and go through these destructive treatments. A lot of them involved having projections on my

body, while one of my assistants took photos. Of course, I couldn't see what was happening. I'd just hope for the best.

CC

What were you projecting?

BH

In one, I'm sitting beneath a ladder with an assistant projecting a CAT scan down on my head. Then there are images of my chest, X-rays that I treated with acid, so they're full of dots and holes and bubbles. These dissolve into each other, so you have moving colors and acid bubbling, and pretty soon it gets abstract. By chance, the black screen fell on me once. I wrapped it around my head, and suddenly I looked like the great photographer Hannah Wilke. She made a picture of herself with breast cancer, a towel around her beautiful face.

Another day I spontaneously started doing a dance that included yoga moves, like downward-facing dog. That turned out to be really powerful. If you work from body memory and intuition, what you're moved to do can be quite surprising.

CC

And you were being recorded?

BH

Yes. Angel Favorite, my assistant, isn't someone I've been at all intimate with or anything. So I was surprised that I could, in a way, perform this for the recorder. But I was doing it for myself, trying to express how I felt. For that, we projected a video of me walking and dancing onto a long, horizontal, hand-painted print of a 16 mm film, so I disappear in and out of spattered blue acid-ridden paint, but you also see me crawling through film. This became a scroll.

CC

They're astonishing. How long is each scroll? Twelve feet?

BH

Well, some are twenty. In the past, I'd printed on discrete rectangles. I didn't know that photo paper from the laboratory was purchased in rolls of varying

lengths. When I saw this large professional printer and its roll of paper, I said, "Let's set up a file of a 16 mm film strip that will print all night." When we came back in the morning, there was this long print folded onto itself, as if it had been released. What a thrill! And there are sprocket holes above and below because that's kind of my life in film—that's what it represents for me. I've both enjoyed it and it's taken chunks out of who I am.

CC

You feel that way?

BH

There are a lot of other things I could have done in life, like ridden more horses.

CC

Motorcycles.

BH

Go to more countries. I've spent a lot of time making art.

CC

Do you want to give yourself that free time now or continue with these art projects?

BH

I don't like to leave something unfinished. That's a problem right now, because I know I have limited time. There's one I want to finish because I've never done three screens. I always like to do something new technologically, and it's in an anamorphic format. Then there are other things unfinished. I hope I don't need to finish them, so I can just go play some more.

CC

That might be part of your process too. You might say: Well, maybe now I'm the kind of artist who's okay with letting things be unfinished.

BH

That would certainly be a new kind of artist for me.

CC

I just want you to have a good time. I think about this issue with poetry all the time—it's ruined my life. (laughter) It's not even that I've lost out on anything, quite the opposite—but thinking in and of poetry can give you just a harrowing sense of things all the time.

BH

Oh! Beautifully said.



Still from Would You Like to Meet Your Neighbor? A New York City Subway Tape, 1985. Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York. © Barbara Hammer

CC

*I just saw *Would You Like to Meet Your Neighbor? A New York City Subway Tape* (1985), where you ask subway passengers if they ever talk to each other about what they're reading. And you've mentioned Kathy Acker as a narrative strategist you admire. How does reading play into your work, and what other writers have influenced you?*

BH

I have a hard time finding books I want to read. They have to be as good as Virginia Woolf.

CC

That's difficult.

BH

*Or at least approaching that. I just finished Chris Kraus's book on Kathy Acker and was most interested in the way she worked. She was so disciplined, but the writing seems so spontaneous, pulling quotes from here and everywhere. What I like about it, and about essayistic writing, is that the reader has to become active to put it together. It's the same with Andrew Durbin's *MacArthur Park*. The reader starts thinking all these things could fall into a certain theme, but they're not sure, and then you come to a chapter giving dates, names, quotes, and eccentric descriptions found through research. But it might be reading filmmakers and their films that influences me most.*

CC

I'm curious about that too.

BH

Nitrate Kisses is called an essay film. But in 1992 when I made it, I didn't know what an essay film was. Now there are books written on it. It wasn't until I started to teach "The Essay Documentary" at the European Graduate School that I understood. It's not about a certain person or location. It's about all of those things but with a main theme: What is history? Who makes history, and who's left out? I went to a conference at the University of Chicago on the essay film, and they all considered Godard to be the first film essayist.

CC

What about Agnès Varda?

BH

Yes! She's kind of an easy read, and I think that's why she's so popular. She's fun, personable, and doesn't hide her age or gender. I met her in 1978, when we were both in the Festival de Filmes de Femmes de Paris. It's in Creteil now. I followed her around like a little puppy dog and asked, "Can I be your

assistant?" She said, "Well, why?" "I want to learn how to make films." And she said, "Just go make them." So I did. And it was great advice.

CC

Were you influenced by Chantal Akerman? I'm thinking of *Dyketactics* and *Je, tu, il, elle*.

BH

I hadn't seen *Je, tu, il, elle* when I made *Dyketactics*. My film history class, with about a hundred students, was shown all male films until Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). And that film confirmed my drive to be a maker. Deren puts interior female subjectivity on the screen. I couldn't find any lesbian filmmakers at that time, though I found out later that Deren was bisexual.

CC

So you were looking and not finding.

BH

Exactly. My professors were male. Every single one. And in my film production class, learning 16 mm? All men, and me. We would switch roles, and I was once the cameraperson for another student's project. This guy's film depicted men—hard-hat laborers without shirts on—sitting on a loading dock, commenting on the bodies of women as they walked by. And I had to shoot it, which was my first moral dilemma around film. Do I open the Bolex and expose the film by "mistake"? Or do I go another route? I decided that everybody has a right to their own expression. Then I put him in my film *I Was/I Am* (1973) and had him repeat his lines, since he had been acting in his own film. So he's wearing his hard hat, no shirt on, and I bag him in a garbage bag—one of those huge, black contractor bags—after he makes his comment. Then I tie it up and roll him down a hill. (laughter)

CC

I heard you were once in a sorority.

BH

It's true. They tried to conform me. Do you remember *Conformity Script* (1979), that long scroll about how people were trying to make me nice? It's

writing film frame to film frame, about how I was being pushed into some kind of pattern that wasn't me.

CC

Women still must be nice.

BH

Yeah, that's still pertinent, especially for lesbians. I didn't get hired for certain teaching jobs because they would write radical lesbian feminist by my name. I know this because a friend of mine was on one of the hiring committees. Also, I care a lot for my work, which might be another reason not to hire me. But what artist doesn't?

*Coming out in 1970, I always felt that people were scared of lesbians. So I had to be the nice lesbian. It wasn't until late in life that I could be grouchy and angry, like other women were. They were bigger than me—think of Harmony Hammond and the painting *Angry Harmony* by Louise Fishman. But they weren't addressing so much direct sexual lesbian practice in their work either. And I like to be liked. I like to engage an audience and bring them along. When I read about relational aesthetics a number of years ago, I thought: Ah, that's what I was doing with *Superdyke*, or in taking a group of lesbians to the country to make *Dyketactics*. It's all relational, all bringing people together. Now my practice is often relational with the audience, getting them to engage, maybe even inspiring them or changing their lives. Sometimes I go into the audience with a microphone and ask, "What are you thinking?"*

CC

You sometimes take on the role of an inspirational speaker.

BH

I'd love to do a TED Talk.

CC

Can we make that happen somehow? Would you want to write a script or improvise?

BH

Improvisation is the way. One of the pieces I've done that could be incorporated is photographing with my eyes blindfolded. I feel our sense of touch is not well understood or highlighted enough. It can, in fact, be the number-one area of sensory perception that we use in all our work. So at this lecture I would blindfold myself and wear an instant camera, then go into the audience and touch someone. I would have an emotional reaction to the person I'm touching and would talk about the emotion I'm going to photograph within this person. I would click the shutter, take off my blindfold, and give them the photo. That's called Camerawoman.

CC

I feel it might reach a level of theatricality that TED Talks generally resist. They're not as creative as they could be.

BH

Fine, we'll change it to THEODORA Talks. Just get me a venue. Corina Copp is the author of The Green Ray (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2015) and a three-part play, The Whole Tragedy of the Inability to Love. Her writing has appeared in Frieze and Pelt v. 4: Feminist Temporalities, among other publications. She currently lives in New York and is translating Hall de Nuit (Night Lobby), a play by Chantal Akerman.

A retrospective of Barbara Hammer's films will be on view at the [Austrian Film Museum](#) in Vienna, April 19–22, 2018.