

ANNIE DELL'ARIA

## Barbara Hammer: *In This Body*

Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio: June 1–August 11, 2019

This past March saw the loss of two pioneering artists and filmmakers who made the body and women's sexuality central to their work: Barbara Hammer and Carolee Schneemann. While Schneemann's practice is often cited as multidisciplinary, Hammer is primarily celebrated within the contexts of queer and experimental cinema. *Barbara Hammer: In This Body*, an exhibition curated by Jennifer Lange at the Wexner Center for the Arts at The Ohio State University in Columbus, looked to the artist's interdisciplinary works, particularly those that focus on the body's vulnerability and fragility as read through the textures of media [Image 1].

Known primarily for her work to make visible the lives and bodies of lesbians through film and video, Hammer was also deeply attuned to women's similarly invisible experiences with disease. Like Hammer's ecstatic study of intimacy through the pleasures of touch in hallmark films like *Dyketactics* (1974), the film, video, photography, collage, sculpture, and installation on display at the Wexner explored themes of sickness and corporeal fragility through real or simulated tactile surfaces. This body of work incorporates images that employ what Laura U. Marks called "haptic visuality"<sup>1</sup> as well as works that make the literal surfaces of media apparent through process or installation. For example, *Blue Paint Film Scroll* (2005), a vertical scroll that gathers in a pile on the floor, features a digital transfer print of an experiment Hammer conducted on 16mm film with crystals, hydrochloric acid, and paint. This work brings together film, photography, and sculpture and calls attention to the material fragility of the film itself, finding on that surface both decay and beauty.

Like her experimentation with the fragility of film, Hammer's exploration of the body's susceptibility to disease preceded her own 2006 diagnosis of ovarian cancer, the disease that would eventually claim her life. Three works from the 1990s included in the exhibition, for example, deal with women's experiences with breast cancer. *Cancer Bones* (1994) features a horizontal display of calf bones printed with newspaper headlines about the disease, and *Chance of Breast Cancer 1* (1993) superimposes a *New York Times* article noting that one in six women will get breast cancer with photographs of women, in effect humanizing the statistics. *8 in 8* (1994), the only monitor-based video work in the show, featured eight interviews with women about their diagnosis and life with breast cancer, each activated by the viewer

1. Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

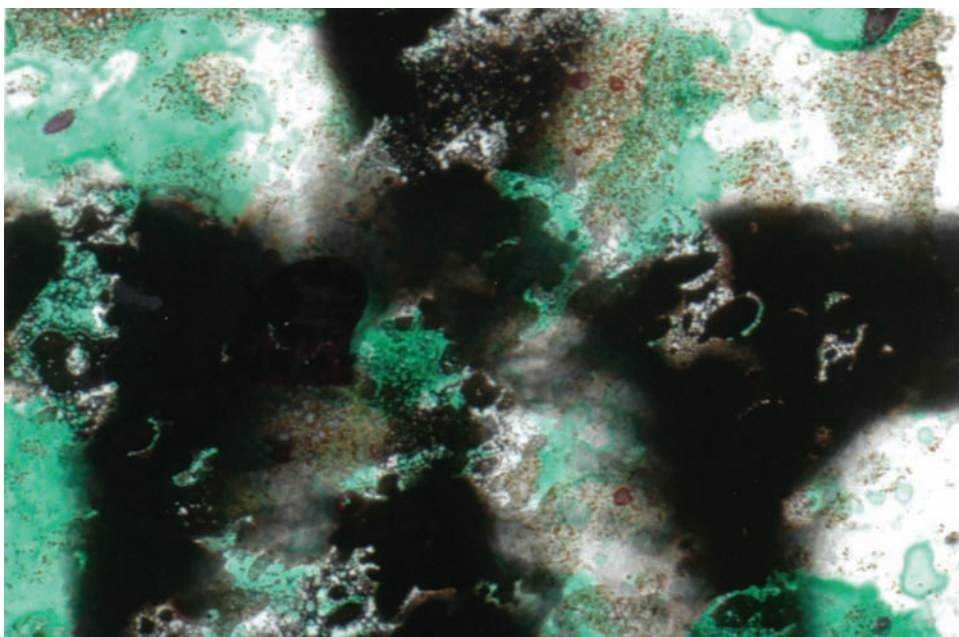


IMAGE 1. *Chest X-ray 5* (2016) by Barbara Hammer; courtesy The Barbara Hammer Estate, COMPANY, New York, and KOW, Berlin; © The Barbara Hammer Estate.

finding cancer nodules on simulated silicone breasts. This tactile interaction was simultaneously strange, empathetic, and instructive, merging pathos with activism [Image 2].

Many works in the show engendered empathy by implicating the viewer, be it through touch like the cancer nodules in *8 in 8*, reflection, or movement. The collage series *What You Are Not Supposed to Look At* (2014) features stretched Mylar in addition to X-rays, newspaper clippings, and portraits of Hammer shot by Ingrid Christie in a defunct veterinary hospital in Scotland. These images are vulnerable, intimate, and human; they co-exist with the clinical anonymity of x-rays and the shifting images of viewers in the Mylar along the collages' layered surfaces. This implication is taken a step further with *Transmission Screens* (2016), a hanging series of forty-eight X-rays of the artist's body that acted simultaneously as entryway and screen for the exhibition's culmination: the three-channel immersive work *Evidentiary Bodies* (2018) [Image 3].

Situated in a black box theater in the rear of the exhibition, *Evidentiary Bodies* is perhaps one of Hammer's most immersive works, one that advances her career-long desire to use film as a radical tool for intimacy and empathy. Completed during the artist's residency at the Wexner as she was dying from ovarian cancer, the work engulfed the viewer. Densely layered images consumed three of the room's walls as the hanging X-rays flickered behind the viewer. A score made in collaboration with cellist Norman Scott Johnson filled the space with alternately mournful and animated cello phrases and the deep sounds of human breath. "The screen is expanded through exhalation and collapsed through inhalation,"<sup>2</sup> as Hammer

2. "Electronic Arts Intermix: Evidentiary Bodies, Barbara Hammer," [www.eai.org/titles/evidentiary-bodies](http://www.eai.org/titles/evidentiary-bodies).



IMAGE 2. *What You Are Not Supposed to Look At 1* (2014) by Barbara Hammer; courtesy The Barbara Hammer Estate, COMPANY, New York, and KOW, Berlin; © The Barbara Hammer Estate.



IMAGE 3. Detail from *Evidentiary Bodies* (2018) by Barbara Hammer; courtesy The Barbara Hammer Estate, COMPANY, New York, and KOW, Berlin; © The Barbara Hammer Estate

said of the work, making of expanded cinema a kind of enveloping body that brings the viewer as close as possible to crawling into the skin of another, the skin of a dying artist.

As in much of her work, Hammer steps in front of the camera, offering the viewer intimate close-ups as well as long shots where ghostly images of the artist's naked body walk and crawl along a slowly moving, chemically manipulated strip of 16mm film. Her body acts as a screen—images of hands are projected onto her, attempting to feel her skin. Chemically treated chest X-rays appropriated from the X-ray films made by James Sibley Watson, Jr., during the 1950s also recur during the work. These films were also used in Hammer's *Sanctus* (1990) and in a series of photographs featured in *In this Body*. These images' beauty is haunted by the dangerous levels of radiation inflicted on the living bodies they see through. The Watson X-rays combine with other types of evidentiary forms, such as more modern medical imaging, archival "China Girl" images formerly used to calibrate color film, and the recurring texture of chemically degraded film found in the hanging digital prints in the gallery.

Hammer's use of degraded 16mm film and grainy found images that coldly flatten, diagnose, and even destroy women's bodies layers with her own haunting performances in front of the camera, shot in high definition. At times she assumes classical humanist poses, using the body not to signal physical evidence but to indicate the depths of the soul. Hammer holds her head in her hands pensively, recalling tropes of philosophers and spiritual anguish; as Hammer's torso spans to consume the screen, her body recalls Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* (c. 1490) or the figure of Christ on the cross as much as the superimposed diagnostic chest X-rays. Two ghostly figures, one naked and one clothed, wander across the surface of the screen like figures in a Roman relief searching for each other, echoing the doubling of trapeze artist Terry Sendgraff's youthful and powerful body in Hammer's earlier film *Double Strength* (1978). When coupled with the knowledge that the film was completed as Hammer lived with a terminal diagnosis and fought for the right to die on her



IMAGE 4. Still from *Evidentiary Bodies* (2018) by Barbara Hammer; courtesy The Barbara Hammer Estate, COMPANY, New York, and KOW, Berlin; © The Barbara Hammer Estate .

own terms,<sup>3</sup> the immersive experience of *Evidentiary Bodies* is mournful and at times emotionally overwhelming [Image 4].

As a crumpled, marked-up manifesto from the artist's studio on display in the show attests, Hammer abhorred the adoption of military rhetoric in the “fight” against cancer. She wanted to promote empathy for those living with the disease and to support research, but refused to see living with cancer as a war. She did not want people to see her as a survivor, warrior, or fighter engaged in battle—she wanted only to be treated as a human living with cancer. The works in *In This Body*, as well as the exhibition's related film programming, not only “make the invisible visible,” as Hammer is often-quoted saying of her efforts to bring lesbian sensuality to the screen, but also make the invisible *felt*. We feel the fragility of the body on the skin of the film, on the textures of her objects, and even within ourselves. ■

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3. Masha Gessen, “Barbara Hammer's Exit Interview,” *New Yorker*, February 24, 2019, [www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/barbara-hammers-exit-interview](http://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/barbara-hammers-exit-interview).

