Multiple Orgasms, 1976. 16mm film transferred to digital video, color, silent

Ways of the Flesh: Barbara Hammer's Vertical Worlds

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"The erotic is a measure between our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves."[1] Audre Lorde, *The Uses of the Erotic*

Bodies licking, climbing, writhing, and dancing in the grass. Hands caressing splayed limbs, women moving together in the throes of sexual excitement. Visually mesmerizing, the scenes from Barbara Hammer's short experimental film, *Dyketactics* (1974), convey the raw materiality of bodies, whose onscreen presence collectively offers a new sexual vocabulary that aims at the liberation of queer social life. The sensuous progression of Hammer's camera, as it attempts to render the arrhythmic pulse of uncontainable, unquantifiable desire, does not just survey a scene, but thinks and feels as it expresses the entanglements and yearnings, as well as the forms of relation and touch that illuminate a teeming landscape of lesbian love and sexual expression.

Hammer draws upon structural film's formalist tendency to examine the materiality of the medium while she radically expands avant-garde grammars of perception and touch. For Hammer as for the viewer, it is the texture, grain, and feel of queer nakedness that draws us into and beyond the film's frame. She opens film to the body itself. In *Dyketactics*, we sense the balmy heat of that nakedness, which Hammer visually regards as an embroidered surface that augments and extends queer modes of viewing pleasure. *Nitrate Kisses* (1992) exemplifies Hammer's sensuous exploration of the body as it traces the literary and filmic archives of gay and lesbian culture, and offers four aging couples embracing and caressing the gentle folds of one another's bodies. The haptic dimensions of memory and history are felt in relation to the artist's film practice in this work especially. The illumination of an irreducibly sensuous, haptic zone of experience through the particular motif of the *caress* is key for Hammer as it is for film theorist Laura Marks, who employs the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas' assertion about the "visual caress of the eye" as a means of exploring what she refers to as "visual erotics" that ". . . allow[s] the thing seen to maintain its unknowability, delighting in playing at the boundary of that knowability."[2]

Hammer is interested in the exuberance and playful passion of corporeal experimentation and insists upon the improvisational breaking of sexual codes. Such improvisation and experimentation have become part of the artist's larger repertoire of works that attempt to give shape not just to desire, but to the *want* and *hunger* that attend queer pleasure onscreen. The unapologetic attention Hammer pays to the subjective exploration of pleasure and to the difficult construction of the self in relation to the fractured psychic spheres one occupies, has continued since her early work in the 1970s where we see Hammer risking and testing the limits of her own subjectivity.

From 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. In works like *I Was / I Am* (1973), one of a trilogy of 16mm films she made in the 1970s that includes *Psychosynthesis* (1975) and *"X"* (1973), we see the artist embody and present a number of different female types. Shifting from a princess into a revolutionary dyke holding a gun and riding a motorcycle, and tracing her proximity to an infant, an athlete, and a witch, Hammer offers a triptych of fractured subjectivity that explores the many psychic layers of a culturally fragmented, queer self. Rather than prefigure an aesthetic narcissism—apropos Rosalind Krauss, who has theorized narcissism as affectively endemic to the video medium that continuously offers images of "self-regard" and "self-obsession"[3]—Hammer's early work gestures outward and emphasizes the morphological proximity of the self to multiple personas. 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. These early film works have to do with questions of coerced socialization, the public exhibition of private desire, and the embodiment of vulnerability as a political act.

Hammer's unapologetically queer feminist aesthetic insists upon a haptic (re)-envisioning of the body onscreen. Texture and tactility in her films emerge as what the artist would call a "dyketactic," a minor / minoritarian *tactical* aesthetic intervention that understands sensuality and sensation as they operate in and at the edges of vision. Displacing the occularcentric mastery of film, with *Dyketactics,* Hammer's camera interrogates the function of the screen as purely a medium for projection, imaging, and representation. The screen is opened and radically extended in and through sensuous bodily entanglements with film's medium. It is this improvised choreography of bodies that, whether enjoined and entwined in fantasy or flight, or under duress, consistently gesture toward their own processes of ageing, illness, and death as expressions of corporeal potentiality.

Excessive corporeality develops into the persistent thematic that characterizes Hammer's queer redirection of film's aesthetic. Specifically, the artist's experimental editing techniques alter the practice of the gaze as well as the regimes of spectatorial attention that subsequently inform and organize affective experience in relation to experimental film. The artist edits primarily in post-production, in the case of *Dyketactics*, trimming what was to be a one-hour feature down to a four-minute visual collage. Even more significantly, Hammer's manipulation of time through editorial methods of layering her original footage, mobilize the frames of her films to move not horizontally, but vertically. The result is an experience of film not as diachronic (as occurring linearly and across time), but as synchronous. Hammer's intervention here is to reorient and recalibrate the temporality of film *to* queer feminist experience.

Layering images so that they convey a cascading of emotions and sensuous phenomena, Hammer's vertical approach to time is fully on display in *Optic Nerve* (1985). The 8mm footage of the artist's 97-year-old grandmother's physical decline (her blinding in one eye), is a hazy portrait that extends a meditation on the processual effects of aging, which in Hammer's repertoire can be understood as a means of *becoming*. This emphasis on illness, not as a state of being but of being in flux and actively becoming, resists the metaphorical reduction of the ailing body and instead conceives of that body metonymically, to employ Peggy Phelan's distinction.[4] Hammer honors the physical ambivalence the aging body performs onscreen and thereby avoids the "punitive" tendency to "give a disease a meaning—that meaning being invariably a moralistic one."[5] *Optic Nerve* demonstrates Hammer's proficiency with fusing the materiality of the medium with the physiology of her chosen subject. The artist's grandmother is an integral part of the strange material progression of the film strip as her image continuously loops over the celluloid. The line between materiality and image is radically blurred as the body *in* and *of* the work fuse and strain against both time and technology.

This temporal verticality is carried through in Hammer's 2008 film, *A Horse Is Not A Metaphor*, for example, enables her to fully explore the intensely private experience of her body with respect to her own cancer diagnosis. Shot inside a hospital, the cruel, clinical subjection of the aging body, exposed, and turned into an object for medical examination and scrutiny is amplified by the shaky precariousness of a handheld camera that surveys her aging brown spots and sagging skin. The medical subjection of the gendered body is central to Hammer's later work like *A Horse Is Not A Metaphor*, where she consistently explores the double-edged power of the subjected and seemingly powerless body. Her film, *Sanctus* (1990) draws from the moving x-ray pictures of female bodies from the 1950s. She manipulates James Sibley Watson's archive of medical imagery by re-photographing and then painting, burning, and distorting the images of internal organs, rendering the skeletal renderings of the x-rays into the collaged material for an erotic re-discovery of the body.

That aesthetic rediscovery of aging, ill, and physically deteriorating bodies constitutes the beauty and sensuality of the artist's work. Forty-three years ago, Hammer envisioned a queer feminist utopia onscreen with *Dyketactics*. Her artistic repertoire has understood sensuous bodily practices as central to the practice and project for political utopia. The trajectory of her work has continued to offer itself as an intervention into the imagination of utopia, as Hammer has visualized something like a body politic organized around the haptic revelation of gendered bodies on film. For Hammer, the body is both a site and target for the forms of violent expropriation, exploitation, and the devaluation of queer social life, *and* a resource for the social reproduction of those forms of sensual life, for those practices and expressions that resist and disrupt the gendered, biopolitical ordering of the world.

1
Audre Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic," in: *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Crossing Press, Trumansburg, New York 1984, p. 54
2
Laura Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2002, p. 19
3
Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," i n *October*, vol. 1 (1976), pp. 50–64
4
Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Routledge, New York 1993
5 Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, New York 1978, p. 58