



Barbara Hammer, *I Was/I Am*, 1973

Courtesy: the artist and KOW Berlin

The Screen as the Body

by Elisabeth Lebovici (Mousse 2012)

Award-winning filmmaker Barbara Hammer has been an outstanding figure on the American experimental film scene since the 1970s. Her latest works are on strong female art figures, like Claude Cahun and her partner Marcel Moore, in *Lover Other* (2006), and Maya Deren in *Maya Deren's Sink* (2011), and focus on her elective themes of gender, roles and discrimination. With Elisabeth Lebovici the artist retraces her long career and talks about her recent productions, her relationship with new technologies, and the organization of everyday practice.

Two of your latest films, *Lover Other* (2006) and *Maya Deren's Sink* (2011) are devoted to very strong artistic female figures, such as Claude Cahun and her partner Marcel Moore, as well as Maya Deren. What is your relation to the type of cinema that memorializes Elisabeth Lebovici:?

*** Nitrate Kisses (1992) was my first feature-length film whose subject is “history” and addresses questions of “who makes history” and “who is left out”. I collaged/montaged an ambitious project exploring queer history, cutting together a series of short clips and text quotes in a genre, which unbeknownst to me at the time, that is called an essay documentary. I became very interested in the essay documentary and went on to make two other films in this genre, which I call The Invisible Histories Trilogy (Nitrate

Kisses, Tender Fictions, 1995 and History Lessons, 2000. Barbara Hammer: Films like Maya Deren's Sink and Lover Other verge on the essay, but in these films I'm working with someone's story as well as the concept of invisibility of female artists in an art world dominated by men. In Maya Deren's Sink, my concern is the archive, the everyday archive. She kept diaries, but where did she keep them and how did she use them? What kind of space did she live in? What kind of floor did she walk on? How do we live everyday as cultural workers? What items, ways of living are not considered part of our archive? You could take a larger perspective and say that the film is not really about Maya Deren but about the ways archives are conceived. Again, this is a critique of the usual concept of history and historical archives.

Why the sink EL:?

By chance I was sitting in the lobby of Anthology Film Archives when I heard that Maya Deren's sink had been brought in. I immediately imagined I could look at her films using the sink as a screen. I thought about the sink as an important artifact, parallel to Duchamp's urinal. Instead of inscribing a faux signature, I would project the artist's films on her own artifact. By using this discarded sink, I could find another way of looking at an artist's life and practice. I wondered what other objects, furniture, items from her life in the 1940s and 1950s might still be left in her homes. Could I find the homes in which she filmed and go inside them? I studied her films paying close attention to background details so that I could re-project these images back onto their original locations. Maya Deren could live again in her homes of the past! BH:



Barbara Hammer, *Maya Deren's Sink*, 2010

Courtesy: the artist

Your film *Lover Other* goes back to Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore's gender performance, not only by showing the famous self-portraits, but also giving an idea of the lives of Lucy Schwob and Suzanne Malherbe – the identities behind the given names – especially the less known part of their existence on the island of Jersey, where they resisted during the German Occupation (they were eventually made prisoners and sentenced to death, before the island was liberated). You managed to interview some inhabitants of Jersey who were acquainted with their lives. How did this film come about EL:?

When I was in Paris in 1998, there was an exhibition of avant-garde women photographers at the Hotel de Sully ("Les Femmes Photographes. De La Nouvelle Vision En France, 1920-1940"), which included one of the so-called Cahun self-portraits of a woman with very short hair wearing a checkered shirt with the collar up; but most important was her gaze and I assumed it was a lesbian g BH:aze. The curator, who happened to be on the exhibition premises, sent me to the Librairie des Femmes, where I found Cahun's catalogue. My research was postponed as I was heading toward a four months residency in Cassis, in the South of France.

I was going to be an experimental filmmaker and play with experiments of film and light but after a few months there, the war in Kosovo broke out. French television is quite descriptive about war and I saw the ravages and displacements of people just a few countries away. Women and children were fleeing with only the clothes on their backs; some were left without water. I thought I can't stay and work as an artist, but, having signed a contract, I was grounded in Cassis.

I found a compromise: I would research the people fleeing from the Nazis during Second World War in this small Mediterranean coast town. This paradisiac landscape of shimmering reflections for artists such as Matisse and Bonnard was also a place where war resisters and refugees lived or passed through. There was Lisa Fittko (1909-2005), who is in the film, and who led philosopher Walter Benjamin on his ill-fated trek over the Pyrénées. She had fled Germany, but as with many German emigres, was rounded up and isolated in a concentration camp in France. Fittko experienced the chaos of the Gurs camp and was released when the Vichy accord was signed and reunited with her husband in Cassis. Cassis and its surroundings thus became one of the subjects in my film *Resisting Paradise*.

I asked myself: What does an artist do during a time of war? As for Henri Matisse and Pierre Bonnard, they painted. If only Matisse had left his studio he might have heard that a hundred children were deported from Nice, and perhaps he would have become a changed person, like his wife, daughter and son. They were resisters, while he continued to produce landscapes, portraits and still lifes.

With *Devotion: A Film About Ogawa Productions* (2000), *Resisting Paradise* (2003) is the longest film I've made.¹ I then turned to Cahun and Moore as a coda, a smaller, more intimate film on the same subject matter, about two people, Cahun and Moore, who were both artists, resisters and lesbian. In NYC, I met a student who had written a

thesis on their resistance activities on Jersey Isle during the Nazi occupation. She told me that the archive staff was homophobic and suggested I not mention my sexual preference while researching. In the Cahun/Moore archive I found a love letter cut with jagged-edge scissors so only one sentence remained. I wondered if lesbian sexuality within the archive was being destroyed. I hired an assistant and in five days we scanned as much as we could, thinking it would be important for the future. I found an unpublished script, a dialogue between “Peter” and “Mary” – which I believe are disguised names, dating from when they were in prison because it was written on torn brown paper, like a frontispiece from a book. This “script” related a very intimate argument that I directed the two actors performing as Cahun and Moore, Kathleen Chalfant and Marty Pottinger, to perform.



Barbara Hammer, *Nitrate Kisses*, 1992
Courtesy: the artist

Your relation with American experimental cinema, with the structural practices of the 1970s and 1980s has always been stressed along with your outspoken sexual subject matter. It is often said that you have been the first out lesbian associated with the avant-garde film scene. EL:

Well you know... I think that's true. We'll never know, though as there are always new histories to dig into. But it is true that when I came out, I was just starting film school and it seemed I was living an experimental life, so my films should be experimental as

well. Plus, I saw Brakhage's *Prelude: Dog Star Man* (1961-4) and was very impressed, as hundreds of us were, by the abstractions in the film, the personal "heroic story" and the fact that he always carried his camera with him. When I left the cinema after *The Art of Vision* I saw the world differently: I viewed the world cinematographically. There was his very abstract cinema and his masculinist approach: Stan Brakhage went up the mountain and cut the tree, while Jane Brakhage would go up the mountain and plant the tree. I was more interested in Jane's approach to life than Stan's. It was only five years later that I was actually able to meet her and make a film about her: *Jane Brakhage* (1975). Jane Brakhage was so important and overlooked, Stan Brakhage transformed her into an earth goddess eternally giving birth and yet she studied and wrote about the language of dogs, collected ginger and planted it, archived every evidence of their work. This seems maybe mythological or too much of heroine worship today, parallel to the cult around her husband... but those were the days. BH:

Did you study cinema? Your biography mentions a degree in psychology and then two Masters in English literature and film... EL:

The 8mm and Super 8, *Schizy* (1968), *Marie and Me* (1970), and others were made before I enrolled in film school, when I was already 30 years old. I earned my Bachelor degree in psychology (1961) and my first Master degree in English literature (1963). Before, I came out I had another life, that was also alternative but heterosexual. Deciding to be an artist took me three years and then I didn't know what medium! Finally when I found what film offered, the philosophical side, which wasn't proposed in painting classes, I chose film and earned a second Masters degree in 1975. BH:

Dyketa is renowned to be the first experimental lesbian film... EL:

It is actually the third. There are two others I made before *Dyketa* (1974): *A Gay Day* (1973), shot in 16mm, is a critique of lesbian marriage and *I Was/I Am* (1973), my second 16mm film, where I turn from a princess with a white gown wearing a tiara to a revolutionary with a motorcycle jacket holding a gun and riding my BMW motorcycle. To return to *Dyketa* (1974), it began as a feature film. I took a group of women to the country and shot one hour of synchronous sound film. Back in the editing room looking at the roughs, I found them very boring, just full of rituals in the countryside. I cut it in one night from sixty to two minutes and then the performative sexuality in the film was added as a second layer of touch. The film's thesis is the connection between perception and touch is a lesbian aesthetic. My life changed through touching another woman whose body was similar to my own. My sense of touch became my connection to the screen. I wanted the screen to be felt by the audience in their own bodies. That differs very much from the purely perceptual work of Brakhage. BH:

So you dragged the film camera into the bed EL:?

Yes! *Dyketa* was shot with a Bolex. I put it between our bodies in the bed and let it run on its own: as we stroke each other, the camera is set within the body cave. The metaphor could be of the interior of the body with two women stroking it. BH:

All over the western world, there were feminist and lesbian circles in the 1970s arguing about changing the practice of the gaze and the reception of cinema, and some theoretical claims for a "feminine" take on film, hoping for a haptic vision on the body,

on sexuality. Did you partake in those discussions EL:?

I felt from the beginning of my work in film that there was a specific aesthetics of touch connected to perception. I invite the audience into my films through the connection of sight and touch. The film isn't shot from a distant doorway or from the 3D Renaissance perspective. It is a camera that goes to bed with me and another: a cinema of intimacy. These two tactics – intimacy and filmmaker as performer – allowed the films to resist a voyeuristic patriarchal dimension often seen BH: in pornography. I have nothing against our conditioned visual pleasure and scopophilia, but I was looking for a new form of expression echoing my experience.

I invented my own aesthetics but later, in the 1980s we were discussing Cixous and Irigaray, fascinated by the trope of the "two Lips" as "one" and the deconstructive strategy against the Western discourse of unity, embodied by the phallus. I loved that! I was very much reading l'écriture féminine and still recommend those writings to students and interns today. But I was more of a phenomenologist, making a personal cinema, from my experiences. I think I'm more wide ranging in influences and readings, more multifaceted than an adherent of any one group.



Barbara Hammer, *Double Strength*, 1978
Courtesy: the artist and KOW Berlin

Is this position reflected in the wide-angled interest you are receiving now from institutions, such as MoMA or the Tate? How does one go from LGBT or queer

alternative festivals to the Museum of Modern Art EL:?

To bring my community audience into the institution is not easy because of the tremendous prices that museums are charging for entrance: twenty dollars! I try to find ways to open the doors. BH:

I feel rewarded: one, after all, does want to be included in art history. I have said before that my work is to put a lesbian artist in the frame of the XX and XXI century and I think I do and did work with a sense of history behind and in front of me. I just have to owe it to my mother who thought I was a Shirley Temple of my own time (!) and who believed in me. Unfortunately she died before I finished my first film. She taught me self-confidence and self-esteem, even though it has been a struggle to be a lesbian and obtain a full-time teaching job, with my radical cinema history. Getting a full-time professorship was my greater struggle with institutions, much more than with museums.

What kind of routine do you have in the studio EL:?

(Laughing). Around the year 2000, I was trained by Creative Capital to become a strategic planner and impart those learned skills to other artists as part of a professional development team. For example something I teach and practice: I come in and make a list of five business things to be achieved during the week. Then I try not to do email until the afternoon. I sit with a project at hand, which could be, for example, bringing in some images into a computer program, beginning to look at them, finding my relationship, emotionally and intellectually to them, searching on the web for who else is working in this area. At the end of the week, I look at my list to make sure that I have achieved the five goals. BH:

Something else I am working on is an installation: at the Tate2, I will be showing a film on inflated balloons. I would like the balloon to become the body so to speak, and the audience to have a closer relationship to the image than a theater screen.

Your relation to technology is constantly evolving. EL:

Yes. I love reading about technology and looking at work by other people, which is so sophisticated now. I haven't studied programming language for computers so the most I can hope to do with that specific form of intelligence is to find a person to work with. Of course this goes back to the first artists working with the industry to manufacture their work. Even Michelangelo asked someone else to quarry the marble in a particular fashion so he could use it later. Why am I interested in new technology? It's exciting to learn about intellectual discoveries. I don't want to be left behind without at least a basic understanding. I want to know what are our options. BH:

1.

To be shown at the cinema "Le Nouveau Latina" in Paris, February 23, 2012.

2.

"Changing The Shape of Film", Feb. 5, 19:00, Tate Modern, Free.

(01/19
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Barbara Hammer, *Menses*, 1974
Courtesy: the artist and KOW Berlin

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