

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Barbara Hammer's recent work *Body displaced, body discovered*

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Barbara Hammer's lesbian-identified films of the seventies — strong, lyrical, angry, sensual, humorous, always personal — played a significant role in independent women's cinema by posing a particular challenge to the sexual politics of representation. In a way that the early Women's Movement documentaries had not done, Hammer's films staged a mise-en-scene of woman: woman's body, no longer defined by or even shown in the context of the patriarchal world. Hammer's exuberant romanticism found enthusiastic audiences, even when her films weren't completely "coherent."^[1][\[open notes in new window\]](#) In filming woman in nature, exalting her sensuality and spirituality and celebrating the lesbian body, Hammer's intention was to contribute a needed vocabulary of images.

Adrienne Rich has described the importance of naming for women — to name something is to recognize it, thus give it existence. Such naming finds its visual analogue in image-making. If feminist film criticism has often commented on the "absence of woman as woman" in dominant cinema,^[2] it is because image-making has to do with symbolic existence in the world. And the tools of film have belonged by and large to the patriarchy, which conceives of social existence in its own terms. Hammer has spoken of her principal mission as creating a new cinematic iconography for a heretofore invisible class, lesbians, making lesbian woman — a certain lesbian woman, anyhow — visible.

In JUMP CUT, No. 24-25, Jackie Zita summed up the aesthetic of Hammer's work of the 70s.

"We are invited to partake in the odyssey of one lesbian body expressing a universality common to life in a lesbian body. The effect is political rather than atomistic. The perceiving nature of her images force[s] the viewer to move beyond habitual ways of seeing, feeling and desiring, and to explore the possibility of another form of life, unencumbered by misrepresentation and misunderstanding. If the explicit and primitive beauty of Barbara's images at times jars us, these may be only the initial steps in learning how to reject the duplicity and deceit of a safe but invisible life. Barbara's films clearly represent a lesbian body in the making."

THE DIS-PLACED BODY

Having taken steps toward filling this iconographic gap, Hammer has turned to new stages, populated by fewer human actors. Her recent films (1980-84) after SYNC TOUCH (1980) have virtually absented human forms; instead, they focus on women's vision, a woman's vision, translating/ interpreting/ transforming the world. What world? Places. Landscapes. Bodies of water. Mountains. Interiors and exteriors. The woman's body is present in these films too, whether we see it onscreen interacting with stone forms (STONE CIRCLES) or whether it takes possession of the camera itself, seemingly swimming underwater (POND AND WATERFALL, POOLS), or walking through a radically altered spatiotemporal landscape (BENT TIME). But now this woman's body is displaced, setting up a new relation between vision, style, and subject matter. The lesbian body has moved out of the frame to the camera's viewfinder. Does that mean that the political "naming" and claiming purpose is no longer at work? Can Barbara Hammer bring a lesbian-identified audience to identify with this new cinematic universe of places, rather than of the body? Whatever the answer, clearly Hammer is striking a new balance, cinematically much more engaging, in her work.

Hammer's film AREQUIPA (12 min., 1980) will serve as a good illustration. It may be described in two complementary ways. First, Hammer's Goddess Films promotional pamphlet quotes a review that calls AREQUIPA

"... an impressionistic, rarefied and fanciful film — done with an optical printer — about how 16th century nuns living in a convent in that mountainous Peruvian city might have perceived their world and the space outside."

Another version of a description could run as follows: AREQUIPA consists of three dozen series of five shots each — mostly stills, connected by dissolves. The shots are simple compositions of windows, stones, columns, doors, doorways, steps, walls, and flowers in the sun and shadows of a 16th century convent in Arequipa, Peru. "Musical" structure results from rigorous deployment of cinematic rhythms. A first kind of rhythm arises from the actual duration and grouping of shots. The shots are of equal length, about a second each, and thus establish an andante 5/4 tempo. Each measured five-shot group follows the same succession of shot types:

first, a black and white shot (of, say, a window in an old stone wall); second, its negative reversal; third, a color version, varying somewhat in position and framing; fourth, a slightly shaky superimposition of the color and black and white negative shots;

and fifth is a blur, as if the film were running through the projector gate with no shutter.

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The film's rhythm also results from the interaction of this editing pattern with formal properties within the shots: the regular repetition of rectangular forms, such as windows, stone steps, doors, shadows created, and so on.

The film's point is not really whether or not viewers gain the perceptions of a cloistered Peruvian nun, for nothing in the film itself designates nuns. AREQUIPA's cadenced rhythms offer us a litany of sun, darkness, openings and closings, and old wood and stone, which are transformed by film. These cinematic rhythms have a meditative quality that approximates, if you will, the kind of perception suggested in the first description of the film.

Such a sense of evoking/transforming places pervades much of Barbara Hammer's best recent work. She has constructed films from very specific kinds of landscapes: a Peruvian town of stone and wood, dolmens and cromlechs of the English countryside, a waterfall by the California coast, swimming pools at San Simeon, a loft in New York City, urban bridges, and rocky Southwest terrain. In each case the place, the landscape, informs the film's style. Each film stages a meeting of objective place and the filmmaker's technological subjectivity. Each film seems to have emerged from the posing of two questions. First: "How may I transform this place through my vision?" Then: "In the process, how may this film in some way transform vision itself?"

"UNDERWATER SEEING"

The "body" of POND AND WATERFALL (15 min., 1982) is a swimmer. The underwater camera moves below the surface of a shallow pond, filming dazzling painterly compositions of color, light, and movement. Underwater flora and the optical effects of water and surface become quasi-abstractions. This tendency toward abstraction is reinforced by the saccadic rhythm created by some frames being multiple-printed; the effect is that we often "see" only two to 16 frames per second instead of 24. Some of these visuals seem inherently flowing as the underwater camera glides beneath reeds and brilliant red aquatic plants, which themselves sway in their watery medium. There is contrast between the natural movement of camera body through the water and the "unnatural" saccadic patterns of the optical printing, and such contrasting exemplifies the technological aspect of Hammer's subjective style. The more lengthy "stills" (those lasting one- half second to one second) holding a composition before our eyes and make us see it: both into it and onto it as a colorful surface.

From the pond the camera "swims" to a waterfall. In filming the assault of water down onto the camera eye, Hammer manipulates the shutter speed; then, multiple-printing techniques produce stop-action effects. She provides a study of water and movement — the motion of the water, the artificial motion of camera/ processing, and the narrative motion from underwater in a pond through a waterfall and ultimately to the ocean's shore. No body is seen in-frame. The body is behind the camera, is the camera, which sees, moves through, and re-creates the pond and waterfall.

POOLS (6 min., 1981, made with Barbara Klutinis) has as its subject two swimming pools designed in a grand neoclassic style by architect Julia Morgan at the Hearst San Simeon estate. This film, too, moves from one body of water to another,

beginning underwater in the inside pool and ending above water alongside the outdoor pool. The detail tile work, architectural execution of these constructions, play of light through windows and through water, carvings, goddess-statues and Grecian columns are lovingly documented as well as transformed by the camera swimming and roving in and out of the water. As in POND AND WATERFALL, Hammer likes to place her camera at the water's surface so that we see half in and half out of the water. This camerawork yields formal compositions whose beauty rivals the stop-frames under the waterfall. In addition, Hammer claims a political dimension to this formal concern. Vision means appropriating a way of seeing; filmmaking exercises the right to create and express new seeing. Thus, with POOLS, she wishes

"to see the interior structure of an early woman architect from the inside out but necessitating a 'takeover' of the Hearst Castle pools ... to film from two atmospheres at the same time (above and below water) as a woman living in this man's world sees a split-level."

POOLS uses hand painting animation as another "transforming" technique. Inspired by the forms in the outdoor pool's design and its inlaid tile patterns, Hammer and Klutinis start to superimpose their own blocs and patterns of color on black and white shots of the pool. There's something playfully engineer-like about the handpainting. It's as if the blueprints for the pool were amplifying themselves (and why not as redprints, greenprints, etc.) in childlike homage to Morgan's architectural achievement.

DOMESTIC SPACE: *NEW YORK LOFT, DOLL HOUSE*

Having moved from California to New York in 1982, Hammer rented filmmaker Babette Mangolte's New York loft. Rents in the Big Apple being what they are, she reasoned that she ought to get as much use out of her loft as possible, and hence the film of that title. Both *NEW YORK LOFT* (1983) and *DOLL HOUSE* (1984) convey a strong sense of this resourcefulness, this "making something" out of interiors, specifically domestic spaces. And domestic they are, in an avant-garde sort of way. The filmmaker gives plentiful evidence of arranging things, moving them, adjusting, placing, and re-placing them. Here, *mettre en scène* means *mettre en ordre, faire le ménage*.

The first visual theme which Hammer subjects to formal domestic play in *LOFT* is sticks or line shapes: poles leaning up against a wall, pieces of wood lined up, and poles rolling down an inclined plane. (It reminds me of the columns, matches, and city streets in René Clair's 1923 *ENTR'ACTE*.) A second section follows, whose formal principle derives from fabric, mostly colorful rectangles of it — sheets, pillows, etc. as figures whose ground is a king-sized bed. Animation piles the fabric up in the frame in a constantly evolving composition of color and form. No bodies are to be found on this bed — as long as we discount the distinctly sexual allure of some sheets, which at one point, via animation, open out in the shape of a vulva. Third, we see round things. Circular magnets, machine parts, film cans and the like eventually become visually paralleled with the camera lens itself. The lens is seen as Barbara films into a round mirror. How different are the visions of this woman-with-a-movie-camera from Vertov of sixty years ago! Each extols the camera-eye, but Hammer replaces Vertov's sociopolitical kino-truths with adventures in domestic space.

The film returns to shots of the human filmmaker-housekeeper arranging the original poles against the wall in front of a movie camera. Superimposition and pixilation techniques denature her appearance and movement. She arranges these things but the film arranges her, too. We see a plastic windup toy, a walking camera with a big, goony central eye (to which Hammer has set herself up as a comparison in a previous shot). The toy walks, "shooting," across the worktable littered with filmmaking and editing paraphernalia. It gets stuck, bumping up against the edge of the round mirror, as on the soundtrack the ungainly mechanical "music" loops like a record skipping in the groove. The movie, by extension, seems stuck in its own process, its own self-reflexiveness.

DOLL HOUSE (4 min., 1984) works with similar themes. Rapid montage shows a plethora of objects all arranged in, or with reference to, the central prop of a dollhouse. We see whimsical references to domesticity (kitchen implements), clothing (shoes), the housing situation (want ads), feminist film (Annette Kuhn's book *Women's Pictures*), relationships, and claustrophobia. But if NEW YORK LOFT ends up lodged against a mirror, this film breaks out in the opposite direction. The final shots show the dollhouse outside, up in the branches of a tree — by the effort of cinema, the dollhouse has become a treehouse. This thematic movement mirrors the movement of Barbara Hammer's films in the last few years: from preoccupation with inside/ the body, to a claiming of outside/ the landscape. As she puts it,

"The move from locating the film image in the body to the landscape is a move for me from intense interior-looking and identity-naming to a broad geography, exterior claiming ... My aesthetics in terms of a sense of light and color, delight in the abstract ... making another part of me expressed, an ambitious energy female, roving, and uncontainable, not content to stay in the closet, at home, or, for that matter, at nation."

Like POND AND WATERFALL and POOLS, DOLL HOUSE traces a movement from inside to outside. The claustrophobia of domestic space gives way to the "ambitious energy" and freedom of exterior space. Hammer's recent filmmaking consistently recapitulates this theme of stretching boundaries outward — from preoccupation with the (lesbian) body to what's around it, from domestic space to the world outside, and, as we shall see, beyond even the spatiotemporally familiar world to something, well, spiritual.

"BROAD GEOGRAPHY": AREQUIPA, OUR TRIP, STONE CIRCLES

OUR TRIP (4 min., 1980, with Corky Wick) paints a comic travelogue of a camping and hiking trip to the Andes. It draws on conventions of the slide show: though it contains much "movement" through hand painting and editing, its photographed images are all stills. It presents a collage of snapshots depicting a collage of experiences. It presents snapshots of the travelers, hand-painted, juxtaposed against rapid montages of foods eaten, travel arrangements made and ruined, etc. We also see breathtaking landscape shots. Via hand-painting and animation, these mountains and valleys become transformed into parts of the female body. For example, animation draws a line that outlines the shape of two mountains in a photograph. When the line scribbles furiously in the valley between, we suddenly see the landscape as two thighs with public hair in the interstices.

Like other Hammer films (notably *STONE CIRCLES*), *OUR TRIP* plays with levels and functions of language. Photos are shown being crammed into a typewriter, as if to approximate a letter home. Showing the Inca Trail leads to a brief detour to a dictionary page whose words start with "inca-": "incalculable," "incandescent ..." Elsewhere, the word "seething" aptly captions the intrepid travelers waiting, frustrated, for airplanes. The next shot zeroes in for a close up, framed tightly on just a red mouth and the word fragment "see." The film is densely packed with figures of framing, editing, hand-coloring, and other devices to create tricks and double entendres at lightning speed.

In *STONE CIRCLES* (10 min., 1983), Hammer really leaves "nation" as well as "era" and creates a film poem on the prehistoric stone cultures of Britain. She films dolmens and Druid rock formations, including Stonehenge. An introductory section shows excerpts from books and diagrams, which in their way document these stones and explain the stones' origins. Hammer takes the diagrams and playfully animates these scientific "scale models" by filming colorful arrangements of small stones, clods of dirt, sticks, and grasses. Somehow this childlike treatment exposes and critiques the notion that diagrams can "explain" the lifesized phenomena they represent. Hammer may be playing God, "creating" mounds and formations with small stones and dirt, but don't scientific models do this, too? She brings an animism to the subsequent images of the structures themselves. And this animism seems just as valid an approach to the stone formations as the historical/ scientific speculations regarding their significance.

Alfred Hitchcock would sometimes set up extraordinary little projects for himself while making a movie. For example, in *SPELLBOUND*, he managed to have the classiest female movie star in Hollywood (Ingrid Bergman) say the ugliest word in the English language ("liverwurst") in a huge soft-focus close up. In *STONE CIRCLES*, it's as if Hammer resolved to make the heaviest inanimate objects imaginable not only come alive but dance around and be sexy. And it's not a gratuitous exercise, either. The animism with which *STONE CIRCLES* shows the ancient stones not only receives a concrete existence through film techniques that make the stones move and jiggle; but the anima Hammer gives the stones or discovers in them is a feminine one, arguably a lesbian one.

For instance, we see a hand cupped over a "scale model" of a circular mound. Hammer cuts to show this large earth mound (Silbury Hill, part of the Avebury complex) and then a black-and-white photo of it. As off-screen hands bend the photo, the mound pulsates — rather, its image does. Subsequently a shaking camera makes the mound appear as a breast vibrating atop the earth's great body.

Elsewhere, Hammer uses pixilation to show a woman walking up to a dolmen and inside its "pillars" and "roof"; both it and the woman seem equally alive in their interaction. A time-lapse shot of a massive, tire-shaped, hollowed-out stone standing in a field creates movement via the changes in light and shadow through the central hole, according to the sun's position. Spectators make various mental associations here, mostly anatomical: it is likened to an eye opening and closing, a mouth, a vagina. For filming one shot of this stone, the filmmaker lay on her back with camera resting on her chest as she breathed. The shot is framed on both sides by her legs, through which the rock-with-hole is suggestively visible.

Most impressively, Hammer uses the camera eye to create shots that make the enormous stones dance. Changes of camera angle, fast motion, and single-framing combine such that at one point it seems like the dolmen is spinning around and its capstone is falling off from centrifugal force. Again, filmmaker and camera movement and a "feminine" kind of technological subjectivity are documenting and transforming these ancient monuments in nature — reading and re-writing them.

STONE CIRCLES draws parallels between earth and body, between these stones and the body. Not only do the stones breathe and dance; we also see stone's-eye point-of-view shots. As Barbara snuggles down, lying on her side, on top of a stone slab, the next shot of countryside is skewed at a 90-degree angle. The film offers a free exchange of "spirit," life, and vision between these ancient monuments and the filmmaker.

The film has a musical soundtrack of Celtic music dominated by harp and flute. It also includes human voices and percussive sounds made by stones. For some reason, the music is disappointing, as if it were an accompaniment for a conventional travelogue. It over-romanticizes a film that is already very rich; it has a reductive effect, not an evocative one.

"STRETCHING THE CLAIM": *BENT TIME*

BENT TIME (22 min., 1984) opens with an image of light curving: the camera speeds through a dark bending tunnel while filming the fluorescent lights above. Then we see another image of light and curves, one that will close the film as well. It's a shot of an ancient clock, which the filmmaker identifies as "the oldest calendar of time, in the Northern Hemisphere, the nine-circle petroglyph, discovered by Anna Sofer in 1979 and known as the sun dagger.

The petroglyph consists of a set of concentric rings carved into rock, the whole of which is located inside three large stone slabs. Through their interstices, a splinter of sunlight moves across the rings according to the sun's position outside. In this film, Hammer has filmed the clock in time-lapse cinematography so we can see how it works.^[5] This image acts as an emblem of the entire film in encapsulating its subject matter. For one thing, BENT TIME offers a meditation on time. History, prehistory, and the present are evoked by camera-travel to the Ohio Mound Cultures, the Chaco Canyon pueblos, highways, the streets and skyscrapers of New York, and the Stanford linear accelerator. Film technology also provides a "vision" as it synthesizes another kind of time. It does so by also provides a "vision" as it synthesizes another kind of time. It does so by compressing realistic time — for example,

- in the time-lapse shot of the sun clock;
- by using fast-motion shots (single-framing) of travel down city streets and highways;
- and by showing fast-motion "subjective walking."

Thus Hammer walks, filming one frame with her camera on each step, across the Golden Gate Bridge. The camera also speeds down the endless corridor of a linear accelerator as its aperture changes, almost as if to approximate an atom's-eye view of

the moment when mass will become light energy. (In fact, SERENE VELOCITY, Ernie Gehr's 1970s structural film showing a corridor, in which the only changes are those of camera distance and light, would also aptly name whole sections of BENT TIME.)

In Barbara Hammer's work, of course, film technology transforms space as well as time. Most of BENT TIME consists of camera movement forward: through openings in ancient pueblo ruins, across the bay to New York City, down innumerable roads, paths, streets, and train tracks, across cemeteries, bridges, and open Southwest terrain. If forward camera movement provides the film's predominant stylistic "theme," its second theme is panning (Hammer calls it circling). The camera pans around the Guggenheim Museum's interior, whose architectural spiral formally echoes the sun clock's.

Other times, we see the camera pan across a train car or around a Pueblo ruin. Using an extreme-wide-angle lens, Hammer makes these spaces into inflatable compositions, "bent." She transforms mass as it is, making the film in its own way a high-energy experiment. In the course of the film a third stylistic "theme," a shaking-camera effect, progressively becomes insistent. Thus with the wide-angle lens and the shaking-camera effect, a span of the Brooklyn Bridge becomes an enormous, bubbling, vacillating web of expanding and contracting curves. And in a development that logically follows from STONE CIRCLES, Hammer makes a rock mass in the desert move and shake as if it were a large lumpy pancake about to be flipped.[6] Back in New York, tall buildings including the World Trade Center shimmy; the Statue of Liberty does a jitterbug.

The structural rigor we saw in AREQUIPA also permeates BENT TIME, although the latter film is more sustained and complex. One section of BENT TIME achieves a striking rhythm and intensity by alternating two kinds of moving shots. The first kind consists of a forward tracking down a country path, shot in fast motion. Shots of the path alternate with leftward pans (or "circles") of places we've already seen in the film: train car, bridge, cemetery, city street, the corridor of the atom-smasher. Other editing patterns similarly create formal unity by repetition and variation. As I have already noted, patterns of camerawork also function as sources of formal resonances and consistency. Finally, the film achieves formal unity through the images' subject matter. As Barbara Hammer put it, she filmed "high-energy places," the old and new, the scientific and the spiritual.

Thus, in the course of the film, Hammer opens out the elements implicit in BENT TIME's inaugural shot of the sun clock. She mobilizes and manipulates time, light, energy, forward linear movement, round shape and movement, and the technology of cinematic vision. In doing so, she creates a rhythmic, meditative cinepoem. Composer Pauline Oliveros' monotonously haunting, vaguely middle-eastern composition, "Rattlesnake Mountain," accompanies the film from beginning to end, and the music contributes greatly to the film's meditative quality.

I cannot persist in pinpointing the presence of the "body" in BENT TIME; to do so would be stubbornly casuistic. The body has not only left Hammer's visual field; it is also less and less of a tangible presence behind her camera. The camera now seems a disembodied eye, a weightless intelligence. A qualitative change has occurred in Hammer's films since STONE CIRCLES, POND AND WATERFALL, and the rest. While

she continues to use places as raw material, Hammer has moved beyond her previous mode of treating these places. BENT TIME strikes me as a manifesto, a new synthesis, filmmaking on another track. The spectator now moves through space but is herself unfettered by the contingencies of real mass or real time. In identifying with the film we feel more powerful than before. Hammer has let us experience an egocentric subjectivity, which seems responsible for this sense of power. Hammer herself traces these mutual developments in her films and her personal identity. She says they arose from a progressive "claiming," as she moved from claiming the lesbian body to the "felt necessity of claiming a place." I'd argue that she's moved beyond — even perhaps toward creating a new mythology.

"I first left my husband to live as a lesbian feminist (to me, an independent woman) and I lived in Petaluma, CA, where I painted and wrote poetry. To feel my sense of being 'above,' 'in control,' 'powerful' in the world (as opposed to the studio artist in her garret), I climbed the four hills — north, south, east, west — and studied the town from that vantage point. That way I didn't feel trapped by location, isolated, suffocated ... That was freedom."

"I think in BENT TIME I am stretching that early town claim to a nation claim ... The "high energy" places in the United States I'd locate as mine, and by mine I mean for all of us — all and like-minded people who could appreciate the native energies inherent in ancient and modern spiritual, geographical and technological environments. By walking, moving, recording the passage through these monuments, I felt I was able to identify with them, make them part of myself, extend my sense of self to a grand space."

Hammer emphasizes power, ego-centeredness, but not power over. She may have temporarily or definitively left the in-frame lesbian body behind in her development as an artist, but she is inviting her viewers to share the camera-eye with her. She is making myth itself, drawing on the visual vocabulary she began to create a decade ago. If Barbara Hammer's recent films are weighted toward abstraction, she surely has imbued them as much as ever with her characteristic sensuality, technological romanticism, and visual power.

Notes

1. For a feminist critique of Hammer's romanticism, cf. Andrea Weiss' article, "Lesbian Cinema and Romantic Love," JUMP CUT, No. 24-25 (1980), p. 30.

2. Cf. Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," and Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary, eds., *Women and the Cinema* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977); Judith Mayne, "Visibility and Feminist Film Criticism," *Film Reader*, No. 5 (1980); Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures* (London: RKP, 1982).

3. Jackie Zita, "Counter-Currencies of a Lesbian Iconography: Films of Barbara Hammer," JUMP CUT, Nos. 24-25 (1980), P. 27.

4. This and all other statements Barbara Hammer makes in this article are quoted from correspondence with the author.

5. On solstices and equinoxes: Hammer filmed this segment on June 21, 1983. 6. The butte in Chaco Canyon on top of which the "sun dagger" is located.