Feminist Filmmaking from the Ground Up: Three Films from the 1980s

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Abstract: This chapter examines films by North American filmmakers Barbara Hammer (*Audience*, 1983) Yvonne Rainer (*The Who Envied Women*, 1985), and Peggy Ahwesh and Keith Sanborn (*The Deadman*, 1989). Each film is discussed in relationship to the social and institutional milieu in which it was made, its exhibition and critical reception, and the feminist ideas and debates it entered into.

Keywords: feminism, film theory, film exhibition, critical reception, experimental film periodicals, Peggy Ahwesh, Barbara Hammer, Yvonne Rainer

There have always been multiple ways of being a feminist and, for feminist filmmakers, multiple ways in which their feminism has entered into their filmmaking. There is some value in attempting to map the diverse territory of feminist filmmaking by identifying recurrent subject matter: films about women and women's experiences; films examining the cultural systems in which ideas about gender and sexuality are produced; films that value cultural and aesthetic pursuits, which have historically been perceived to be feminine and, as a consequence, have been devalued; films that examine the wider social and economic implications of ordinary, everyday activities. The feminist slogan, 'the personal is political,' is a still handy distillation of feminism's preoccupation with the worldliness of the everyday. The problem with any kind of mapping of feminist filmmaking in terms of subject matter, on the other hand, is less that it is never going to be representative than the fact that, like other experimental films, the films made by feminist filmmakers are almost never only about*,* never only doing*,* one thing.

There is value, too, in identifying some of the modes of experimental filmmaking that feminist filmmakers often take up. Filmmakers' interest in examining women's experiences at a particular time, and in relationship to particular places, has lent itself, for instance, to auto/biographical, portrait, ethnographic and essay modes of filmmaking. Within these modes we also find films that combine the modalities of documentary and fiction. Feminist interest in scrutinizing and redeploying the cultural values, formal conventions, and sensory appeal of popular culture, also gets explored through found footage filmmaking and collage animation. Across all of these overlapping modes of experimental filmmaking, collage strategies are often at work. Missing from this description of feminist filmmaking, however, are all the social and often quite local sites of thinking about practice that have propelled filmmakers' interest in, say, expanded cinema (or what, in the 1970s, was often thought of simply as performance), or in taking up ideas about composition being explored in other areas of avant-garde art, or in working in particular formats, or with particular actor-performers or composer-musicians.

In a volume on experimental cinema it can be assumed that when we're talking about feminist filmmaking we're talking about films that come out of a history of experimental filmmaking that, on the one hand, encompasses diverse practices and approaches and, on the other, developed sites of exhibition and criticism for thinking through, and arguing over, those differences. This account of feminist filmmaking looks at three films made in the 1980s by four North American artists: *Audience* (Barbara Hammer, 1983), *The Man Who Envied Women* (Yvonne Rainer, 1985), and *The Deadman* (Peggy Ahwesh and Keith Sanborn, 1989). Hammer, Rainer and Ahwesh each took different routes to becoming an experimental filmmaker. Each has also thought about her filmmaking—and this is something that obviously changes over time—in relationship to other types of cinema and other types of art. Their experiences and priorities over decades of personal and social change are also different. This chapter begins, then, by looking briefly at the early years of these filmmakers' careers; retracing something of the social and institutional milieu in which they worked, and highlighting some of the ways their films were framed for audiences through exhibition, criticism, and review. These snapshots serve two functions. First, they introduce these artists' work ahead of more focused discussion of specific films. Second, they situate the history of feminist filmmaking within the social and institutional history of experimental cinema more broadly.

Formalism and Feminism: Yvonne Rainer

When she made her first feature film, *Lives of Performers*, in 1972, Rainer was a well-known choreographer and dancer. A decade earlier she had co-founded the Judson Dance Theater (NY). Much later, she recalled how important meeting Babette Mangolte was in making the transition from dance to film. "Through Babette," she wrote in her autobiography, "I would learn the nuts and bolts of film production and editing" (Rainer 2006, 381). Mangolte was the cinematographer for *Lives of Performers* and Rainer's *Film about a woman who…* (1974). While making *Lives of Performers* with Mangolte, Rainer also produced two new dance works, both entitled *Performers*.

The first screening of *Lives of Performers* was part of *New Forms in Film* (1972), an exhibition of American experimental films at the Solomon Guggenheim Museum (NY) programmed by film critic and scholar, Annette Michelson. In Michelson's essay on *Lives of Performers* in the catalogue for a repeat exhibition in Montreux, Switzerland (1974), she highlighted the film's foregrounding of materials (not, in this case, the materials of medium or technology but the materials—props, characters and cliché—of narrative); the formal use of repetition as a constituent of representation (rehearsal, performance, self-analysis); and, with respect to the use of intertitles in the film, the divestment of "mimetic expressiveness" from "personal utterance" (Michelson 1974, 95-96). Joyce Wieland was the only other woman artist represented in the exhibition.[1] In a special issue of *Artforum* (1971), published the year before, Regina Cornwall had identified Wieland's films, *Sailboat* (1967), *1933* (1967), *Dripping Water* (1969) and *Hand Tinting* (1967-68), as films distinguished from others she had made by their "more formal nature" (Cornwall 1971, 36).[2] In the early-1970, the description of an experimental film as formal in nature, or formalist, was a short hand way of distinguishing its procedural methods and/or reflexive exploitation and revelation of the techniques and conventions of cinematic illusionism, from the intuitive methods and emotionally expressive aims of other experimental films. If this was too tidy a distinction between what were rather broadly described approaches to filmmaking, the framing of *Lives of Performers* in these terms situated it within a new modernist trajectory for experimental film and confirmed its artistic importance.[3]

In an interview with Rainer published in *The Feminist Art Journal* a few years later, Lucy Lippard described Rainer as a "hesitant feminist" (Lippard 1976, 267). Much more recently, Rainer herself has remarked that while her early films don't take up topical feminist issues and concerns in the way later films such as *The Man Who Envied Women* and *Privilege* (1990) do, her decision to take up feature filmmaking was, in part, emboldened by her feminist education in the early-1970s (Rainer 2006, 385-386). Like Wieland, she has recalled the heady experience of reading books such as *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970) and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for*

Feminist Revolution (1970).[4] In discussion with Rainer, Lippard put it to her that feminism involves "a real consciousness of what it is to be a woman for you and for other women. What there is in common" (Lippard 1976, 268) The complex treatment of autobiography in *Lives of Performers*, which draws on details from Rainer's own life, but also introduces fiction, and distributes its autobiographical subject across multiple characters, has potential for just such an understanding. In conversation with Lippard, Rainer described the film's characters as stereotypes—"Valda the Femme Fatale, or Shirley the Older Woman, Fernando the Latin Lover…"—highlighting just one of a number of ways that the film directs viewers to consider the narrow, if also alluring, repertoire of ways of being a woman offered by classical, narrative cinema (Lippard 1976, 274). In the same year that Rainer was interviewed by Lippard, the editors of *Camera Obscura* interviewed her for the first issue of their journal.[5] These discussions with feminist art and film critics were clearly important for Rainer's own thinking about her filmmaking, providing necessary grist for the articulation of her own practice as both formalist and feminist.

After the Guggenheim, places for other early screenings of *Lives of Performers* were the experimental film organizations, the Millennium Film Workshop and the Collective For Living Cinema, and the *Women Filmmakers Festival* (February 15—March 16, 1973), which was presented by the New American Filmmakers series at the Whitney Museum of American Art. *Women Filmmakers* was the third exhibition of women's films, and the second women's film festival, to take place in New York over less than a year. In the summer of 1972, just a couple of months before the *New Forms in Film* exhibition at the Guggenheim, the *First International Festival of Women's Films* (June 13—21, 1972) brought together a diverse range of films made by women. Films by experimental filmmakers were represented in most of the thematically organized short film programs, which mixed documentary and experimental films, and a few filmmakers had films in multiple programs (Maya Deren, Gunvor Nelson and Lotte [Charlotte] Reiniger) (Kaplan 1972, 37-45). Other artists who had short film or video works in the festival included Abigail and Jon Child, Sally Cruikshank, Joan Jonas, Menken, Lillian Schwartz, Penelope Spheeris, and Chick

Strand. However, the selection committee also rejected films by experimental filmmakers Milena Jelinek and Carolee Schneeman.[6] Along with showing a number of films that had screened at the previous festival, the *Women Filmmakers Festival* presented three programs of films by Shirley Clarke, who had chosen not to show her films at the earlier festival, and a program of five films by Schneeman, which included the previously rejected *Fuses* (1967).[7] *Plumb Line* (1968-71) was the first film in this program, and this may well have been the occasion Schneemann was referring to when, many years later, she recalled a festival screening in New York where women began screaming and hooting as soon as "the handsome, traditional face of the man in *Plumb Line"* appeared (Schneeman 2009). She had certainly experienced hostile reactions to her films from feminist audience members before. In 1974 B. Ruby Rich recalled the occasion of her own first encounter with *Fuses* at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1972. "That night," she wrote:

> the sex cops were out in force and were outraged by what was, after all, a 'hippie' movie, celebrating sex as Dionysian elixir, a luxurious connection back to nature and the pantheism of sensuality. I still remember the attack on poor Carolee for giving head to her by-then ex-boyfriend up there on the screen. The practice was ruled subservient and antifeminist" (Rich 1998, 22).

At the end of the decade, Strand also faced hostile reactions from audience members over a sequence in *Soft Fiction* (1979) in which a woman reads a letter from another woman describing a scenario in which she ends up giving blow jobs to a group of cowboys at a rodeo.

Art/ Film Spaces and Feminism: Barbara Hammer

After more than a decade of filmmaking, and with a pioneering body of experimental, lesbian-feminist work behind her, Hammer moved from Berkeley to New York in 1983. At this point in her career, she was still as interested, as she had been when she made *Dyketactics* (1974), in exploring

film's capacities for rendering embodied experience and for engaging viewers in sensuously immediate ways—but from new directions and through new techniques of representation. New York didn't just offer a more densely concentrated network of spaces for showing and seeing experimental film. Through museum programs such as the Cineprobe series at the Museum of Modern Art, the New American Filmmakers series, and the Whitney Biennial, it specifically offered an experimental film network more fully integrated into the wider art world that the museum represented. Within just a few years of moving to New York, Hammer was invited to show her films in the Cineprobe series at MoMA (1985), and *Optic Nerve* (1985), was selected for the Whitney Biennial 1987.[8]

In the mid-1970s, Hammer was making films that treated women's and lesbian women's experiences in ways far removed from the conventions of ordinary, narrative documentary and fiction films. This was a period in her life in which her development as a filmmaker, coming out as a lesbian, and involvement in the development of women's art and educational programs in Northern California, were completely intertwined. We see this in an annotated curriculum-vitae that she wrote for Arlene Raven, co-founder with artists Judy Chicago and Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, of the Feminist Studio Workshop at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles. In the context of this professional calling-card, Hammer locates a series of personal and professional events and achievements, not just in a particular year, but in relationship to particular feminist organisations. So, for instance, we learn that she "came out as a lesbian in the Santa Rosa Women's Liberation Guerrilla Theatre Group" (1970); that she "[m]et Faith Wilding and Suzanne Lacy and was invited by the women art students at the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI) to teach feminist art" (1975); and "[m]et women nationally in media at [the] Feminist Film and Video conference at Grandview"—an independent gallery housed in the Woman's Building (also 1975) (Barbara Hammer).

In the 1970s, screenings of Hammer's films and performances were reviewed most extensively in Bay Area newspapers, including women's newspapers such as *Plexus,* and in women's, and gay

and lesbian newspapers and magazines in other cities in which her films were shown. In the early-1980s, her films were approached more critically in essays by Jacquelyn Zita and Andrea Weiss in *Jump Cut,* and Martha Gever in *New Women's Times*. Each of these writers raised questions about the implications of what they understood to be Hammer's search for a lesbian iconography and aesthetic: identifying as sites of critical interrogation, the extent to which in films such as *Moon Goddess* (1975), and *Superdyke* (1975) "Goddess imagery and symbols of Mother Nature become respectively [universalizing] sources of new ritual and rule" (Zita 1981); the romantic idealization of lesbian relationships in *Double Strength* (1978) (Weiss 1981); and the displacement of the goals of women's liberation by a focus on women's bonding through mystical experience in *The Lesbos Film* (1981) [Gever, 1982]. Hammer both took these criticisms on board and pointed out what this lesbian iconography didn't show (the lesbian vampire, the lesbian of straight male pornography, the tough dyke) (Patterson 1985).[9]

One area of Hammer's practice in the late-1970s and early-1980s in which we find her engaged in the kind of complication of representation that she applied to her filmmaking in the 1980s is performance. Not all of Hammer's performances have been examples of expanded cinema. In the mid-1960s, Jonas Mekas offered as examples of expanded cinema practices as diverse as the use of film projection in dance (Rainer has said of her own move into filmmaking that she inched toward it "via multimedia theatre pieces that incorporated slide projection, texts, bits of narration, and dance"), theatre (including happenings), installation, and the live manipulation of film, video, slide, and light projection by experimental filmmakers and other artists (Mekas 1972). Hammer's expanded cinema performances include *Available Space*, first presented in 1978 at the Woman's Building, and *Camerawoman* (1980). In a statement about *Available Space* written for programmers and curators, Hammer outlined two formal-conceptual concerns, which would also increasingly guide her filmmaking practice: first, the reflexive articulation of a theme both at the level of technological, material means—using the 'available space' of the gallery—and at the level of

representation (cinema as an instrument both of women's containment and liberation) and, second, the address to a specifically embodied viewer (who also becomes a subject of the performance):

> Working to involve the audience with the film presentation, working to change the form of the screen from a rectangle to a circle, working to use the available space present in a theater or art gallery through which the projected light passes, I created a 'lazy Susan' table that rotates 360 degrees in order to project the film *Available Space* in a circular format using wall space, door-ways, created paper screens to reflect the image of a woman discontent with the film frame, the frame of a suburban home, the available space between the camera and herself, the subject… (Barbara Hammer).

Interest in performance across the arts in the 1970s created opportunities for experimental filmmakers to present expanded cinema works at galleries. In 1978 Hammer presented *Available Space* at Target Gallery (Oakland, SF), San Francisco Cinematheque, Pasadena Filmforum, Northeast Artist Association (Portland, OR) and, in 1979, at A Space Gallery (Toronto).

Collaboration and Feminism: Peggy Ahwesh

Like Schneemann and Joan Jonas, two artists also still producing work in the late-2010s, Hammer and Rainer were both born in the 1930s. Ahwesh belongs to a later generation of feminist artists, born in the late-1940s and 1950s; among them Abigail Child, Su Friedrich and Leslie Thornton. When she began making Super-8 films while a student at Antioch College (OH), where she studied with Janis Crystal Lipzin and Tony Conrad, Ahwesh was much younger than either Rainer or Hammer had been when they began making films. Discussing her time at Antioch in an interview with Scott MacDonald, she recalled a particularly memorable visiting filmmaker event in which Wieland, Schneeman and Beverly Conrad were all present. In her words: "It was a major event for me to meet these women and hear them talk about their work" (MacDonald 2006, 116).

After college, she moved to Pittsburgh where, she told MacDonald: "I got very involved with the punk scene there in the late seventies and made a lot of great friends overnight. We documented the punk bands, and were all making Super-8 sound films, and there were all these crazy characters to put in your movies" (MacDonald 2006, 116). Two of the women Ahwesh met over this period, Natalka Voslakov and Margie Strosser, both also filmmakers, became friends and frequent collaborators. The three women met working on George Romero's *Creepshow* (1982). *Martina's Playhouse* (1989) was the last of Ahwesh's films to be made on Super-8, but the ethos of collaboration, modesty of technological means, and formal-conceptual complexity—executed so deftly as to risk going unnoticed—which we find in her Super-8 films are also qualities of films such as *The Deadman* and *The Star Eaters* (2003).

After moving to New York in 1982, Ahwesh continued to work with old and new friends. Filmmaker, Jennifer Montgomery, who plays the central character in *The Deadman* also performs in *Martina's Playhouse*. So does performance artist and actor, Dianne Torr (who plays the barkeeper in *The Deadman*). In an article offering a breakdown of a scene in the film, entitled "The Deadman's Drunk Scene Written," Ahwesh pointed out that the closeness of relationships between cast members was a condition of making the film. "Everyone involved in the bar scene," she wrote, "were friends. Most were school mates. Several were students of mine. We all felt very close and already had a history of intimacies which allowed us to work together on this project" (Ahwesh 1989-90, 30). In films by Ahwesh in which actors—overwhelmingly women—craft stories on the fly, or tell stories about their lives for the camera, or are put, as Montgomery is in *The Deadman*, in the position of making moment-to-moment decisions in response to the not-entirely-predictable actions of other actors, we get the charge of performances that confound distinctions between fiction and the real.

In the 1980s, the most important theoretical considerations of Ahwesh's films were to be found in journals published by experimental film organizations. In the same issue of *Motion Picture* in which Ahwesh's breakdown of the drunk scene in *The Deadman* appeared, Tom Gunning and Ivone

Margulies both contributed essays, which addressed Ahwesh's films (although, in Gunning's case, only briefly). In films by Ahwesh, Nina Fonoroff, Richard Herwitz, Mark Lapore, Lewis Klahr and Phil Solomon, Gunning identified a 'minor cinema,' very different to the so-called structural or formalist filmmaking of the previous two decades, and different again to the kind of filmmaking that film critic Paul Arthur had recently dubbed New Narrative (Gunning 1989-90). In these filmmakers' embrace of Super-8, creation of narrative worlds and/or scenarios that can't be adequately described either as narrative fictions or as documentaries, and engagement with popular cinema, Gunning identified a rejection of the material and aesthetic, always also political, choices of an older avant-garde.

At the centre of most of the films Ahwesh made in the 1980s are women: creative, glamorous, risk-taking women. A key film for Margulies, as for Montgomery, writing about Ahwesh's films the year before, was *From Romance to Ritual* (1985).[10] The main actors in the film are Strosser and Renate Walker (another friend and collaborator). As in *Soft Fiction*, a woman in this film (Walker) tells a risky story: in this case a story about an abusive past-boyfriend. Margulies points out that the anecdotal mode, which storytelling takes in this film, is already a performative one: in her words, both "the record or description of reality and its reinvention or subversion" (Margulies 1989-90, 33). It is Montgomery, however, who cuts to the theoretical stakes of this film for feminism quickest. "The current trend in feminism toward acceptance of ethnic and sexual difference," she wrote in 1987, "is a move away from the kitsch of white, middle class, privileged feminism. Yet, with the rush away from the internally oppressive morality of feminist kitsch, there has been a rush toward a glorification, and idealization, of sexual marginality" (Montgomery 1988, 41). The sequence in *From Romance to Ritual* in which Walker tells her story—clearly revelling, as Montgomery points out, in telling it to a friend, but also to a camera and an audience—doesn't leave any room for idealization. It also doesn't invite viewers to imagine themselves into the scene. The space Ahwesh's films give to women's performances is a strategy for sharing control over the scene. The result is a dynamic that constitutes viewers not as introspective spectators, but as

audience-members, and demands from them not identification, but engagement. Or, as Montgomery herself put it: "Ahwesh's films elude a simple theoretical stance in favour of the power and tension of the moment of engagement with others on film" (Montgomery 1988, 41).

The feminist art and experimental film periodicals in which many of the interviews and essays examined in this introduction to Rainer's, Hammer's and Ahwesh's filmmaking were published, are of particular interest here. In the 1970s, scholarly film journals such as *Screen* and *Camera Obscura* were important sources of new writing on feminism and film, particularly in the context of academic film studies. Informed by psychoanalysis and poststructuralist philosophy, the critiques of classical cinema, and calls for a feminist counter-cinema—soon collectively referred to as *feminist film theory*—energized feminist film scholarship and, in different ways and to different degrees, informed the work of individual filmmakers. At the same time, the use of the term, *feminist film theory*, to describe a fairly narrowly circumscribed set of approaches to the analysis of classical cinema, and much less clearly defined parameters for critically engaging with experimental cinema, had the effect of reducing the existing scope of feminist film theory.

Because what still goes unexamined, even in quite recent appraisals of the history of feminist film theory, is the assumption that, in the 1970s and 1980s, feminist film scholars produced feminist film theory.[11] Redressing the blind spot in this historical representation involves recognizing that all kinds of writing and talk by artists and critics, some of it (such as program notes) unpublished, but much of it published in small, often short-run film and art periodicals, engages in theorizing. It is not a matter of privileging one source of theoretical ideas over others, but of widening the field. It is also not a matter of ignoring or flattening out the differences between these different kinds and sites of film theory. All kinds of professional and discursive protocols distinguish them. A lot of the writing in experimental film periodicals, for instance, takes the form of review and review-essays. The presentation of ideas in these short critical works, often written by filmmakers, can sometimes be impressionistic or gestural, or not quite-worked-through (as it can be in scholarly writing). But it is in critical writing by artists that we find, for instance, theoretical consideration of models for

describing narrative in experimental film, or, with respect to films in which people act and tell stories, reflection on modes of addressing viewers that not only don't require identification, but actively work against it. This is feminist film theory from the ground up; arising from wrestling with the complex, multivalent nature of experimental film forms.

***Audience* (Barbara Hammer, 1983)**

In an interview with Hammer that appeared in the feminist newspaper, *Womanews,* in 1985, Wendy Patterson asked her: "Do you consider yourself a *lesbian* filmmaker? Do you find this identity liberating or limiting?" Hammer replied: "It depends on the audience" (Patterson 1985). Patterson goes on to explain that one of the motivations for her question was Chantal Akerman's withdrawal of *je tu il elle* (1974) from the New York Gay Film Festival the year before, an action that Akerman herself represented as a refusal to be "ghettoized".[12] It was hardly the first time that such an objection had been raised. Reporting on the organization of The Second International Festival of Women's Films in 1976, Kristina Nordstrom and Leah Laiman commented that: "amid all the enthusiastic support we have received, we have come across an undercurrent of genuine concern that sees inherent dangers in a festival of women's films. 'Aren't you creating a ghetto of women's films?' we have been asked" (Nordstrom and Laiman 1976, 10). Patterson put it to Hammer that the lesbian filmmaker runs the risk of not being taken seriously by mainstream audiences. But for Hammer, a lesbian filmmaker, making experimental films, there wasn't ever any question of making films for mainstream audiences. The films she made about lesbian women in the mid-1970s were very much made for feminist and lesbian audiences (and were shown at both women-only screenings and screenings for women and men). They explore lesbian women's relationships and sexuality, present a diverse range of lesbian styles-of-the-flesh and, in often humorous and playful ways, envision lesbian community and the conditions of possibility for public life.[13] Hammer's first major, invited, show—two nights of film screenings and performances—was at The Woman's Building in 1978. At the time of the interview with Patterson, she had moved to

New York, a move, as we have seen, that coincided with her desire to refresh her practice, both by tackling a more expansive range of subject matter, and by approaching representation in new ways. She also hoped that the new work would circulate more widely. Not in 1985 or any time after, however, did she imagine not showing her films at women's or LGBTQ festivals and events.

Providing much more than an idea, the social networks, which feminist film festivals and conferences helped to create, produced the circumstance for making *Audience*. For this film, Hammer interviewed audiences in San Francisco, London, Toronto and Montreal before and after screenings of her films. The film is, in an important sense, a document of feminist sociality. On her own account, it was the women—filmmakers and programmers—she met at the First International Feminist Film and Video Conference Amsterdam (1981), who made organizing a European tour for the following year possible: nineteen programs of films and performances in seven countries over a month. During the tour, she kept notes on the discussion that took place at each screening, noting comments by individual audience members, and reflecting on her own responses to them. This experience was the catalyst for her decision to make a film in which the audiences who came to see her films would be the main subjects (Hammer 2010, 112-118).

Audience begins with Hammer, standing outside a theatre, collecting tickets from a ticket booth. She tells us in the film's only use of voice-over that it is June 26, 1982 and that she is at the Roxie. The ticket-seller tells Hammer that this year the theatre started hosting tributes to lesbian and gay filmmakers at the festival and that this year, those filmmakers are "you and Kenneth Anger" (the festival is the 6th Annual San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival). Microphone in hand, Hammer interviews people outside the theatre waiting to get in. Some of them are women who already know her films, others tell her they have come hoping to see: "lesbian art and a positive image, something beautiful, hopefully," "a point of view that is rarely seen," "something different". Some of the women (and men) Hammer interviews are addressed by name, and in other cases, conversation reveals prior acquaintance.[14] While she is seen interacting with the people she interviews, the framing of the scene privileges her interview subjects. The

cinematographer repeatedly zooms in to frame interviewees in close-up. The documentary values of the film are expressed most strongly, both through the cinematography, and through the care taken in editing to give people the full run of their thoughts before cutting away. A particularly important moment in the film is one in which a black woman talks about the process she goes through to find a point of commonality or connection to representations that exclude her. She tells Hammer: "well, I feel like I can feel empowered when I see anything that as closely relates to me as possible and, as a black woman, I see very little of that in terms of my own personal image, but sometimes, in terms of lifestyle, I see things that, you know, [I] more relate to or I do not relate to; and when I can relate to it on some level, in my lifestyle at least, or my politics or something, then I feel empowered, and I feel like I relate to the people around me…".

As strong as the film's documentary values are, *Audience* also has the stripped back narration and formal variety of an experimental film. Through Hammer's interaction with audience members, cities get announced. We even hear a little bit from the women involved in organizing the screenings in each city, and learn what film and cultural organizations they are active in—the London Filmmakers' Cooperative, the Funnel [Experimental Film Theatre Toronto], the McGill University feminist organization on campus—but only a couple of the women introduce themselves by name (and only one of them by her full name). Other things go unannounced or unexplained. Through the back-and-forth of question and response, it is possible, for instance, for someone familiar with Hammer's films to work out some of the films the audiences saw, but only some of them. Nor can we always be sure of the question or comment an audience member is responding to. Audiences in London and Toronto clearly watched footage of the audience in San Francisco in a film, which one woman refers to as the "audience film," but did it already take the form of the finished film?[15]

In contrast to the first part of the film, the filming of the second and third parts has been carefully set up. For the after-show discussion at the Funnel in Toronto, participants stand in a circle. One woman speaks after another and the consistent direction of camera movement creates

the impression that it is moving methodically from one to the other despite obvious edits. A little later the talk flows more freely, and the cinematographer whips the camera around the circle to find and frame each speaker in close-up. The crafted informality of this sequence underscores the women's easy rapport and confidence in talking about the films and the issues they raise, including the issue of whether or not women-only film screenings are desirable. Sparking murmurs of agreement, one woman asks: "what about trying to educate men so we don't have to have women's screenings?" "Trying to heighten awareness," another woman offers, "if you're just going to limit it to women, that's crazy." The aspirations and values of feminist sociality that the film articulates both through the range of views that it gives voice to, and through formal differences between each of its four parts, are those of inclusivity and respect for the differences of individual and social experience. A film about film audiences, it is undiscriminating with respect to how people engage with films or what they want from them. In *Audience*, the achievement of feminist sociality is presented, then, as the creation of environments supportive of individual expression of difference and dissent. The fact that in the late-1970s and early-1980s there were deep and irresolvable differences between feminists on issues such as (trans)gender, lesbian S&M, and pornography, only underscores the importance of the film's documenting of spaces of tolerable disagreement. Just one year after beginning shooting of the film outside the Roxie Theatre, *Audience* had its premier screening at the 7th San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. With this film, Hammer had initiated a move towards making films in which lesbian women, including herself, wouldn't entirely disappear as subjects, but in which they would be displaced by others.

The Man Who Envied Women **(Yvonne Rainer, 1985)**

High profile early screenings of *The Man Who Envied Women* included Cineprobe, and two retrospectives of Rainer's feature films at the Whitney Museum of American Art; the second, part of the Whitney Biennial 1987. J. Hoberman reviewed the film in the context of the first retrospective, and Arthur in the context of the second. Both of these critics, long-time writers on

experimental film and habitués of experimental film screenings at places such as the Collective For Living Cinema, where Rainer was then a member of the board (she became the organisation's president a couple of years later), made connections between the film and films by other feminist filmmakers. The scope of such contextualization was, however, exceedingly narrow. The tendency of these critics to treat Rainer's filmmaking as a special case had, as we have already seen, been at work in Michelson's programming of and writing on *Lives of Performers* in the early-1970s, and it continued to be a feature of feminist film scholars' engagement with *The Man Who Envied Women* in the 1980s. In his review of *The Man Who Envied Women,* Hoberman wrote: "It is truism that she's the avant-garde's most important woman filmmaker since Maya Deren (herself a former dancer); more likely she's the most influential American avant-garde filmmaker of the past dozen years, with an impact as evident in Los Angeles or Berlin as in New York" (Hoberman 1986, 84). He offered as examples of films that have features in common with *The Man Who Envied Women*, the already familiar example of Raynal's *Deux Fois*, and Akerman's *je tu il elle*. For his part, Arthur was much less admiring. In his own review, which had the wider remit of commenting on the Biennial as a whole, he griped that the film cost too much (feature films require grants); that it appeared to have been made for an audience of "downtown middle-class left art academics" (Hoberman had made a similar observation but a lot less crankily); and that, like so many other films in the Biennial, it manifested a "simultaneous denial of the personal (as subject) and the profound inability to replace it with any coherent concrete problematic" (Arthur 1987, 6).

But the distinctions Arthur drew between features and non-features, between narrative and non-narrative (or "nonfiction narrative"), and between films that take the personal as their subject matter and films about ideas, don't quite hold up when examined from the perspective of feminist filmmaking. Common to many features and non-features made by feminist filmmakers in the 1980s, after all, are films that take both personal experience, and ideas for understanding the ways in which personal experience is shaped by larger cultural systems—language, family and kinship structures, traditions of representation and storytelling—as their subject matter. This describes *The Man Who*

Envied Women but, to choose among other feminist films of this period, it also describes films as different as *Empty Suitcases* (Bette Gordon, 1980), *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (Leslie Thornton, 1985), *From Romance To Ritual* (Peggy Ahwesh, 1985), and *The Ties That Bind* (Su Friedrich, 1985). To take the example of just one of these films, *The Man Who Envied Women* and *From Romance to Ritual* share the use of humour to complicate narration; a collage structure that offers multiple points of connection and/or interpretation between audio-visual elements, some of them very precisely communicated, and others more open or ambiguous; and an antipathy to offering the suffering and triumphs of characters—whether those characters are fictional, or are people telling stories about things that actually happened to them—as a site of identification for viewers.

Like Hoberman and Arthur, Bérénice Reynaud was deeply knowledgeable about experimental film, but even in feminist film scholars' close analyses of *The Man Who Envied Women*, we find the same tendency to treat the film in isolation from other feminist films. The result is that, in this writing, the film's narrative strategies appear much more straightforward than they arguably are. Few commentaries on the film have failed to mention the fact that the female protagonist of the film, a woman named Trisha, who has just left her husband (Jack Deller), is heard but not seen. The voice we hear is that of dancer-choreographer Trisha Brown. Coming after a decade of feminist film theory, the reasoning behind this gesture was clear to critics right off the bat: the only way to put the cinematic depiction of a woman beyond the objectifying gaze of spectators is to take her out of the picture. As Hoberman put it, Rainer:

> "not only reverses the premise of Buñuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire,* in which a pair of actresses impersonated the eponymous object, she also literalizes the axiom of advanced feminist film theory that, in mainstream narrative cinema, woman is the object of the implicitly male gaze. If this is so, the existence of an unseen female subject overthrows the patriarchal tyranny merely by locating its organizing principle beyond the scope of the controlling gaze" (Hoberman 1986, 84).

The fact that a recurring sequence in the film has the set-up of a therapy session—Deller (played by two actors) talks about his relationships with women while a film is projected on a screen behind him—could hardly fail to be seen by feminist film scholars as an invitation to treat the relationship between Deller's commentary and the projected image as illustrative. One therapy sequence, however, required special mention. Instead of a scene featuring a woman in a Hollywood melodrama, film noir, or horror film, the film behind Deller shows Brown performing her dance, *Watermotor*, in Babette Mangolte's film of the same name (1978). In her reading of the film, Reynaud noted that the image of Brown is "incongruous" in this context, but argued that because the set up encourages viewers to see these images as projections of Deller's fantasies, any other significance the image of Brown might have for viewers is largely absorbed by this narrative function. When Trisha's "real body does become visible," she wrote, "it is lost among a gallery of portraits" of the heroines of "*films noirs* being played in Jack Deller's fantasy theatre, fictions projected behind his back that demonstrate how, in our cultural past, 'real men' knew how to handle women" (Reynaud 1989, 28). Although wary of underplaying the potential for irony, and mindful of the need to allow for the over-determined nature of the relationship between Deller's commentary and the image of Brown in *Watermotor*, Judith Mayne's reading of this sequence also picked out those aspects of Brown's body and performance, which accord with Deller's descriptions of women (Mayne 1990, 78).

But another way to see this sequence is to see *Watermotor* as a choice, in fact, to redirect viewers' attention and experience. Describing her approach to narrative in an interview with Mitchell Rosenbaum a few years later Rainer put it this way: "Where narrative seems to break down in my films is simply where it has been subsumed by other concerns, such as the resonances created by repetition, stillness, allusion, prolonged duration, fragmented speech and framing, 'self-conscious' camera movement, etc. Rather than being integrated *into* the story, these things at times *replace* the story" (Rosenbaum 1976, 89). Rainer certainly knew what she had in Mangolte and

Brown's collaboration. *Watermotor* captures the movement of Brown's body as she dances as only cinema can. Mangolte shot Brown's dance three times; each time in an unbroken take. The finished film presents viewers with two of those takes: the first shot at regular speed (24fps) and the second in slow motion (48fps). Over and above its documentary function, *Watermotor* is very clearly a film that was made to delight and, notably, the excerpt of it that we get in *The Man Who Envied Women* has been taken from the second half of the film. Rainer gives viewers just a little under a minute-and-a-half to enjoy the movement of Brown's body in slow motion but it's enough to produce a new relationship to the image. Coming back to *The Man Who Envied Women*, thirty years after Reynaud and Mayne were writing, it is how this film complicates its own strategies for organizing meaning that stands out. Here, after all, is a film that takes its fictional protagonist out of the picture to make the point that narrative cinema inevitably submits representation of women to an objectifying male gaze—and gives viewers a film of a woman dancing to enjoy.

***The Deadman* (Peggy Ahwesh and Keith Sanborn, 1989)**

Over the decade, feminist film scholars' accounts of visual pleasure would turn out to be at once too narrowly defined—being unable to account for multiple visual and narrative pleasures—and, on their own terms, too narrowly applied: describing only male pleasure in looking at women. In fact, feminist scholars and artists were already calling for reconsideration of the idea that taking pleasure in images of women (and men) and, especially, in sexually explicit imagery, is either alien to women, or evidence that women's sexuality has been entirely colonized by patriarchal culture. In the mid-1980s, the most contested and polarizing battleground for feminists on these issues was pornography. The group of feminist artists and scholars who founded the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce (FACT), first in New York City (1984), and then in other U.S. cities, did so with the immediate purpose of opposing the anti-pornography ordinances then being proposed by anti-pornography campaigners, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon. The crux of Dworkin's and McKinnon's arguments for civil laws that would allow individuals to sue producers, distributors

and exhibitors of pornography, was that pornography constitutes sexual discrimination against women (Duggan et. al. 1988, 72-85). In early critiques of these proposals, feminist scholars argued that women's experiences of pornography are not universally negative, that the blanket rejection of sexual explicitness limits women's self-expression, contributes to the misogynist perception that women's bodies are obscene and, in Lisa Duggan, Nan D. Hunter and Carole S. Vance's words, has the potential to "eliminate the images associated with homosexuality" (Duggan et. al. 1988, 83). Over the decade, censorship of the work of feminist, lesbian and gay artists took many forms (Jacobsen 1991). Most controversially, in 1990, Congress directed the federally funded National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to consider "general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public," when making funding decisions. One result was that the Chairman of the NEA overturned a recommendation, by a commissioned panel of experts, to fund the work of three lesbian and gay artists: Holly Hughes, John Fleck and Tim Miller. Feminist artist, Karen Finley, was the fourth performance artist to have her funding withdrawn at this time (Schlossman 2002).

Censorship only made work by experimental filmmakers challenging normative ideas about what constitutes appropriate representation of bodies, sexual practices and histories more urgent. Programmers, some of them also filmmakers, responded with regular film screenings or special exhibitions that took bodies and sex as their focus. Examples of just some of this programming in 1989-91 include: Mark McEhatten's Sunday night "Exposures" series at the Collective For Living Cinema; Ahwesh's "The Body and Other Tales of Joy and Woe," at the Critical Art Ensemble Media Festival (Tallahasee, Florida, 1989); "Sex Salon Film and Video" (part of *Sex Salon*), at the Epoché Gallery (Brooklyn, NY, 1990); and "Reel Time: Love, Sex and Death" at Performance Space 122 (Brooklyn, NY, 1991).[16] In Ahwesh's program notes for "The Body and Other Tales of Joy and Woe"—a nearly three-hour program of film and video works by thirteen artists—we see the way in which the critical framing of these works stresses their focus on the cultural mediation of bodies. She wrote:

> MANY BROAD ISSUES OF THE BODY ARE ACTIVATED BY THE TAPES AND MAKE FOR A SPIRITED AND PROVOCATIVE ANALYSIS OF OUR UNDERSTANDING OF HOW THE BODY IS GOVERNED, INTERPRETED, INVENTED AND IDEALIZED IN CULTURE AND WHAT OUR INVESTMENT ACTUALLY IS IN THESE STRUCTURES.

Ahwesh and Sanborn also used programming of *The Deadman*, made in the same year, to situate the film within a varied and then little written about history of popular, genre stretching, films about sex. For the first screening at the San Francisco Cinematheque, the pair decided to show the film with two shorter films.[17] They each chose a film independently (not discovering until the screening which film the other had programmed). Sanborn chose the Betty Boop cartoon, *Bimbo's Initiation* (Max Fleischer, 1931) and Ahwesh the silent stag film, *Getting His Goat* (aka *On the Beach,* 1923). All three films—*The Deadman, Bimbo's Initiation* and *Getting His Goat*—depict sexual encounters in which male characters are tormented by homosocial and feminine others in amusing and surprising ways.

The Deadman was a rebuff to a cultural climate of censorship in which, on the issue of pornography, radical feminists and right-wing conservatives could find themselves aligned. Inspiration for making the film came from two sources: a short story by Georges Bataille (*Le Mort*), which Sanborn had recently translated, and *The Man Who Envied Women*. In discussion with MacDonald, Ahwesh recalled her thoughts on viewing Rainer's film:

> I remember seeing that and thinking, 'As a Lacanian response, that's really smart.' It's a really knowledgeable, thought-through Lacanian position about women and sexuality in this culture—the woman can't even be *in* the movie because she's *so* misunderstood and misrepresented by language and imagery." She added: Keith and I "had many discussions

about this, and we were interested in somehow reinserting woman as a sexual agent into the movies" (MacDonald 2006, 131).

Just as significant, and inextricable from the matter of representation, is *The Deadman's* address to an on-going question about the possibility of feminist reclamation and re-articulation of the cultural category of the feminine (or femininity). Lacanian theory's ambivalent gift to feminism was to leave feminists in no doubt about just how deeply a patriarchal system of sexual difference cuts into personal and psychic life. But in the mid-1980s feminists were also already asking 'and then what?' Or, as Margaret Morse put it in 1985: "can we really accept some airy notion of femininity as a nothing that is left after all the masculine projections of Woman have been stripped away?" (Morse, 1988, 49). If masculinity and femininity are, in fact, cultural constructions, then they could, feminist writers and artists argued, be inhabited differently.

FIG. 1 Postcard for *The Deadman*, courtesy of Peggy Ahwesh

A postcard produced for early screenings of *The Deadman* makes clear the centrality of the body to this film's feminist concerns (Fig. 1). On the left side is Marie/Jennifer Montgomery, hair damp and naked except for her black-rimmed spectacles. One hand is at her mouth, about to grip a dangling cigarette. The image, taken from the film, has been enlarged. Graininess and cast shadows combine to emphasize the curves of Montgomery's body. On the right side appears text taken from an early intertitle: "She looked like she had floated up on the squall of the night (they could hear the wind outside)".[18] In the middle of the postcard a hand-drawn skull connects this image of commanding, feminine, embodiment to death, and signals the closeness of the film's themes to those found in Bataille's writing.[19]

Marie is all action: she pisses and belches and gets sucked and demands to fuck but the film makes the matter of her interiority moot. Almost half of the action takes place in a bar. After a physical struggle between Marie and Pierrot ("just a little too good-looking a man"), the barkeeper (Torr), demands that Pierrot suck her. The barkeeper, another woman, and a cowboy type prop her up on a stool so that she can be sucked ("slurp, slurp"). Intertitles, sometimes announcing the action ("Marie is sucked by Pierrot), and sometimes coming in after it has started ("Marie kisses the barkeeper on the mouth"), occasionally indicate a psychological orientation to the action ("Nauseated, her head thrown back, Marie gave herself up to their obscene squirm"), but more often such description is blank ("Marie comes"). The constant movement of the camera emphasizes the physicality and movement of bodies in action. For the most part, editing coincides with the insertion of intertitles. A little later when, Marie, squatting on a table, pisses on a male character (the count) and then exposes her vulva to him, demanding "Look how pretty I am!", her genitalia mostly remains in shadow. Low on psychological disclosure, and the kind of sexual disclosure found in straight male pornography, the film's pleasures are a queer mix of libidinousness and intellectualism: of curiosity, and pleasure in looking, mixed with admiration of Montgomery's performance and appreciation of the film's deadpan humour and discretion.

With wry economy, Ahwesh laid out the critical stakes of hers and Sanborn's choice to make a film, at the end of the 1980s, in which the protagonist is a naked woman, when she noted that at a screening of *The Deadman* at Anthology Film Archives, the audience included Rainer and a journalist from *Screw* magazine.[20] The answer to the question of what the journalist made of a film in which men, at the command of an inscrutable, feminine, sexual agent, fail to find pleasure or wind up dead (never mind that the film is also in black-and-white, has intertitles, puts overexposure to expressive use, and lacks all the conventions of hard-core pornography), hardly matters. The point Ahwesh's anecdote makes is that at stake in feminist insistence on sexual representation is precisely the interest it arouses. In response to the feminist endgame pursued in *The Man Who*

Envied Women, *The Deadman* ceded control over the image for a stake in fights raging over censorship and pornography.

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Writing the history of feminist filmmaking is necessarily an on-going and collective enterprise. The organizing locus for this examination of feminist filmmaking has been to approach it from within the social and institutional world of experimental cinema: reproducing something of how these filmmakers have narrated their own careers, saying something about the contexts in which their work has been shown, and something, too, about how it has mattered to the people who have written about it. Looked at from this perspective, the history of feminist filmmaking is as much a story about social networks and relationships, including, and perhaps most importantly, friendships—in all their different forms—as it is about the achievements of individual women and men. The social worlds of feminist filmmaking in the 1980s aren't lost to us. We glimpse them in the films Rainer, Hammer, and Ahwesh (along with many others) made over the decade, and get a fuller sense of them by also retracing the circumstances of those films' making, exhibition and critical reception.

In the interview with Rainer that I looked at earlier in this essay, Lippard made a case for feminism as a practice—of art and of everyday life—which is critical but also positive. "I think," she told Rainer in 1975, "it's more a recognition of the fact that you're a woman and then seeing this as a positive factor, being conscious of its manifestations. That being a woman isn't bad, isn't something to be ashamed of, in fact is good, and that there is material for both art and life in that difference, and pride in it" (Lippard 1976, 268). In the work of a great many artists working in the area of experimental film, performance, and installation today we find, I suggest, models of just such a productive feminism.[21]

[1] Michelson also programmed the films shown in the exhibition, *Options and Alternatives: Some Directions in Recent Art* at the Yale University Art Gallery (4 April—16 May 1973). Rainer and Wieland were, again, the only women represented in the film programme.

[2] Wieland was the only woman artist represented in this special film issue of the magazine. It is also worth noting that among the films described by P. Adams Sitney as structural films in 1969, Wieland's are the only films made by a woman (Sitney 2000).

[3] Lauren Rabinovitz offers a critical examination of the early critical reception of Rainer's film (Rabinovitz 2003, 192-194).

[4] Wieland told Kay Armatage in 1971: "Books dealing with women's problems like *Sisterhood is Powerful* are the most unifying of all. They just turn your head right around overnight. You feel differently, you just aren't the same after those books" (Armatage 1972, 25).

[5] The first issue of *Camera Obscura* includes an introduction to Rainer's films, an interview with her, and notes written by Rainer on her films. It also includes essays on Jackie Raynal's *Deux Fois*. See *Camera Obscura* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1976).

[6] Jan Rosenberg makes the comment that "no major documentarists were excluded" (Rosenberg 1983, 99).

[7] Lauren Rabinovitz identified *Fuses* (1967) as the film of Schneeman's rejected by the festival (Rabinovitz 2003, 191).

[8] In his review of the Whitney Biennial 1987, Paul Arthur wrote that: "In this most prestigious, widely circulated venue for avant-garde film, being 'in' or 'out' carries very real leverage in the struggle for financial and critical attention" (Arthur 1987, 1).

[9] Page numbers of newspaper clipping missing (Barbara Hammer, The Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven).

[10] See John David Rhodes for a recent reading of this film (Rhodes 2014).

[11] See, for instance, essays by Laura Mulvey and Amelie Hastie, Lynne Joyrich, Patricia White and Sharon Willis (Mulvey et. al. 2015, 17-28 and 169-186).

[12] See Martha Gever's reflections on Akerman's decision (Gever 1990).

[13] Greg Youmans offers an important reassessment of the criticism that the films Hammer made in the 1970s were essentialist (Youmans 2012).

[14] Hammer also interviews four men in San Francisco. One of them is local filmmaker Curt McDowell.

[15] The London and Toronto audiences saw the first part of the finished film. It appears on the program for the film screening at the London Filmmakers' Cooperative as *Audience* (Barbara Hammer, US, 1982), 12 min.

[16] Films and performances in Sunday night "Exposures" screenings at the Collective For Living Cinema include (among others): Ahwesh's *Martina's Playhouse* (1989); Tom Rhoads' [Luther Price's] *Sodom* (1989); Ken Jacobs' *CXHXEXRXRXIXEXS*, Michael Wallin's *The Place Between our Bodies* (1975) and *Decodings* (1988).

[17] The date of the screening is December 7, 1989. Accessed August 9, 2017. https://archive.org/stream/sanfranciscocine89sanfrich/sanfranciscocine89sanfrich_djvu.txt This program of films was shown on a number of occasions the following year, including screenings at LA Film Forum and Millennium Film Workshop.

[18] Along with other intertitles that appear in the film, this text has been taken directly from Sanborn's translation of Bataille's short story (Bataille 1989).

[19] See Elena Gorfinkel for an examination of this film in relationship to Bataille's thinking (Gorfinkel 2014).

[20] The screening was a Collective For Living Cinema presentation. Advertised as a New York premiere, *The Deadman* was shown on February 16, 1990.

[21] In addition to the filmmakers already named in this essay, an expanded list of just those filmmakers now living and making experimental films in the United States. would include Stephanie Barber, Betzy Bromberg, Mary Helena Clark, Michelle Citron, Martha Colburn, Nazli Dincel, Janie Geiser, Kerry Laitala, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Laida Lertxundi, Dani Leventhal,

Jeanne Liotta, Marie Losier, Jodi Mack, Jesse McLean, Akosua Adoma Owusu, Charlotte Pryce, Jennifer Reeder, Jennifer Reeves, Lynn Sachs, Kelly Sears, MM Serra, Deborah Stratman, and Karen Yasinsky. Where feminist film history is at stake, the only thing worse than an incomplete list is no list at all.

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