

# Barbara Hammer Evidentiary Bodies

Edited by  
Staci Bu Shea and Carmel Curtis



LESLIE -  
LOHMAN  
MUSEUM  
OF GAY AND LESBIAN ART

HIRMER

## Contents

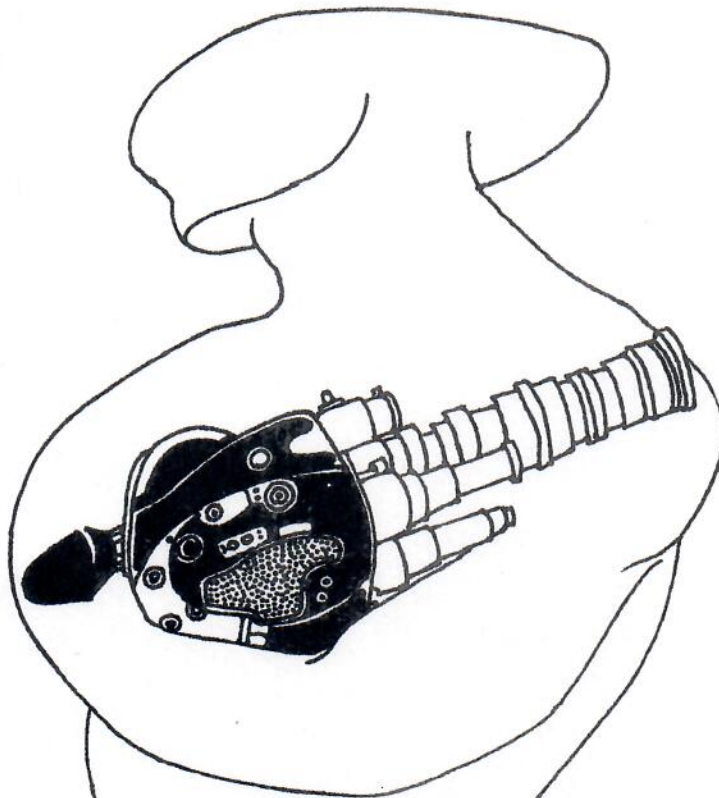
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FILMS

by

BARBARA HAMMER



DANCE afterwards  
Beer & wine sold  
Sound by Sheri Knobs

Dyketactics — 4 min.  
Psychosynthesis — 8 min.  
Moon Goddess — 15 min.  
Women I Love — 25 min.  
The Great Goddess — 25 min.  
Barbara Hammer will be present to talk about her films and lead discussion.

Cate

at the

RIVER QUEEN  
17140 River Road  
Greenwood Park

JULY 16  
8:00 P.M.

\$1.50 -  
2.00  
Sliding  
Scale

childcare provided

Fig. 1 Films by Barbara Hammer at the River Queen, 1970s

The Artist as Archivist, the Archive as Art  
Ann Cvetkovich

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I've always wondered what Barbara Hammer's own archive would contain since her films are already so archival, especially her trilogy of history films— *Nitrate Kisses* (1992), *Tender Fictions* (1995), and *History Lessons* (2000)—in which she incorporates footage from other movies, personal photographs, and historical documents. Central to these projects, as well as those focused on artists such as Alice Austen and Hannah Hoch (*The Female Closet*, 1998), Claude Cahun (*Lover Other: The Story of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore*, 2006), and Elizabeth Bishop (*Welcome to This House*, 2015), is a desire to create a fuller sense of lesbian lives by insisting that intimate relationships are crucial to the public record and should not be cordoned off from the work. Hammer has been mining the archive for a long time and in ways that draw on her experimental sensibility: using the power of editing to create innovative historical montage and her love of the tactile to showcase the materiality of film.

So, what's in the archive of an artist whose art practice is archival? The curators of *Barbara Hammer: Evidentiary Bodies*, Carmel Curtis and Staci Bu Shea, gave me a chance to look at a selection of material scanned from Hammer's files. Even a brief selection from Hammer's archive reveals that she is a good saver! There are, of course, notes and sketches towards the finished work that are often valued in an artist's archive as documentation of the working process. There is evidence of her early career as a painter and as someone who consistently works across multiple disciplines including poetry, essays, and other genres of writing; pencil drawings, watercolors, and other visual forms; and even the sheet music for a song written for *Superdyke* (1975). As I have argued elsewhere, this access to life behind the scenes is especially important for understanding lesbian artists whose lives may differ from the norm and whose ways of working may be connected to their politics or their social networks.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to keeping the evidence of her own life as an artist, Hammer understands the principle of the lesbian feminist archive that values intimacy, relationships, and other aspects of daily life, not just the work. Moreover, she knows that her personal archive is also a collective and historical one—her papers offer evidence of the social networks that connect artists, filmmakers, lesbians, and queers and foster art scenes in New York, San Francisco, and other places. For example, a sheaf of hand-drawn flyers announcing screenings for film such as *Dyketatics* (1974) and *Moon Goddess* (1976) are a valuable archive of lesbian feminist cultures of the 1970s. A list of lesbian artists from a SFMOMA show in 1979 is not only a reminder of the impulse to collect names but now almost forty years later stands as a record of who was claimed as a lesbian at that time. Fig. 1

The archive also conveys a strong sense of Hammer's daily practice as an artist because it includes work that is not necessarily designed for public circulation but registers the activity along the way. This commitment to process is common for many artists but carries additional resonance in Hammer's case given the centrality of "processing" to lesbian feminist cultures. The "1970 sketchbook" included in the exhibition at Leslie-Lohman Museum is a good example, especially because it combines a range of methods including pencil sketches, watercolors, spray paintings, figurative and abstract images, some black and white, some color. There is both writing and drawing, including some serial images that read like a mini-graphic narrative, anticipating what is now an important queer genre; "the artist struggles in her imagination" / "surrenders herself" / "to a black hole" are some of the cap-



the artist struggles with her imagination



Fig. 2 "The Artist Struggles With Her Imagination," Barbara Hammer, "1970 sketchbook"

Fig. 3 "One should do what one wants"/"be yourself," Barbara Hammer, "1970 sketchbook"

tions that accompany a series of drawings of a cartoon-like character who is part animal, part human, grappling with other creatures and objects. Fig. 2

The use of the sketchbook for a range of media also underscores its materiality and tactility. In the middle of it is a series of colorful blocks and shapes in spray paint, as Hammer experiments with yet another medium and shows her penchant for abstraction and experimental practice that are also present in her film work. "Seurat wasn't crazy," the first spray painting says! At this early stage of her career when she still identified as a painter, Hammer seems to be working through her relation to a male art world, from which the medium of film allowed her the freedom to escape.

What I like most are the pencil drawings that show the artfulness of small-scale work that doesn't have to be any bigger or more polished to be of interest. The sketchbook opens with a scrawl of a doodle in pencil, with lines of varying thickness and darkness in what might be a figure of some kind (or not) accompanied by the words: "Why have a miserable life when it can be pleasant?" The humor continues across the pages as Hammer articulates what might be both an artist's manifesto and a feminist one: "One should do what one wants," is struck through in favor of "be yourself" to accompany a single line of vertical squiggles that cover the page from left to right. Like the free write, the drawing functions as a record of the continuous motion of the artist's hand on the page. Fig. 3

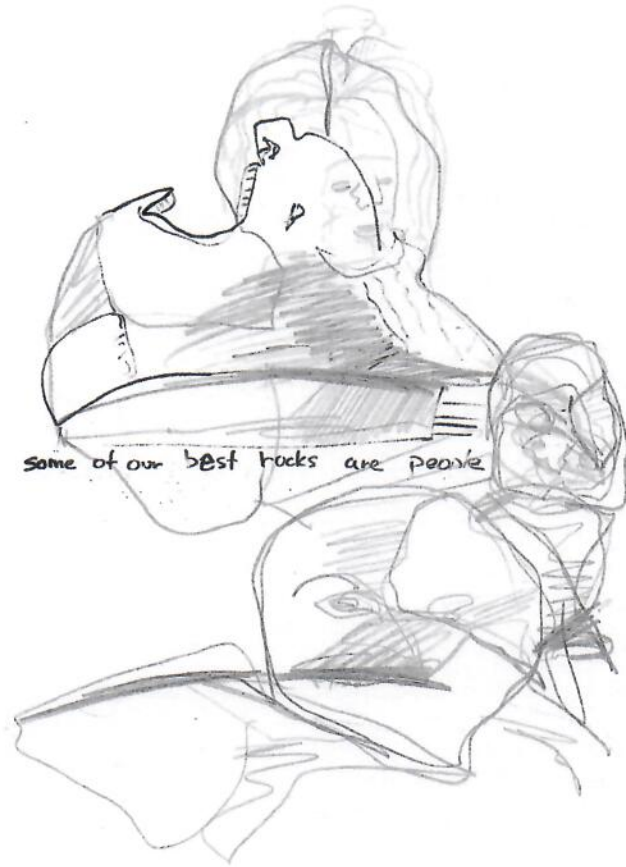


Fig. 4 Some of our best rocks are people," Barbara Hammer, "1970 sketchbook"

In further reference to the art world, "no one paints today" accompanies a scrawl that leads into the words "open your forms." "At least I could draw a circle" accompanies a single line circle with a slight gap in its circumference: "but closure was difficult" is written at the bottom of the page. The conversation continues on the pages that follow—the lines: "can I take an hour to draw a chalk circle? / no, there isn't time" are followed by a circle formed by a single line whose ends are crossed and the comment: "but I took five minutes and oversealed the edge." Below that a figurative drawing of a skeleton covered with scribbles is captioned: "de Kooning's women, shit! / male nudes!" The lesbian feminist artist at work in the 1970s engages with the male giants of painting and opts for the pleasure and simplicity of the pencil line for circles and scribbles. The exchange between writing and drawing in proto graphic narrative registers a commitment to process as both material motion on the page and emotional working-through. Hammer's making of visual images, whether figures or just lines and color fields, keeps thinking afloat, making it possible to continue asking questions and also to gently poke fun at both the art world and herself.

In the final image of this sketchbook, the line: "some of our best rocks are people," accompanies pencil drawings of what could be either heads or rocks, figures or abstractions, anticipating 21<sup>st</sup>-century interest in the liveliness of objects. Hammer's spirit of play as she roams across different styles and media in this early sketchbook is also evident across her

now varied career, including her film practice. In a conversation with her some years ago, I was struck by the powerful self-confidence of her claim that when she gets an idea she goes for it rather than holding back or questioning herself. As a result, there may be a more seamless connection between the archive and the artwork in her case because she moves readily from practice or process to product. While we already have a sense of her archive, both personal and collective, from her available work, the 1970s sketchbook and the exhibition suggest that there will be many delightful surprises ahead as Hammer's archive comes into public view, especially because she has already forged a path for showing how the archive can be a source of art. Fig. 4

<sup>1</sup>  
See Ann Cvetkovich, "The Craft of Conversation: Oral History and Lesbian Feminist Art Practice," in Linda Sandino and Matthew Partington (eds.), *Oral History in the Visual Arts*, Bloomsbury, London 2013, pp. 12-34