

BARBARA  
HAMMER'S  
HARD WORK

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The journal entries that filmmaker Barbara Hammer made on tour in the spring of 1982 lay the groundwork for her film *Audience* (1982–83) and offer insight into the social dimension of feminist film history. Writing either in the evening or morning following a screening, Hammer considers the reactions of European and North American audiences to many of her early films. That these screenings often take place in women-only settings only adds to the significance of this record in the context of Hammer's wider commitment to imagining and archiving lesbian life. In Freiburg, reactions to her film *Multiple Orgasm* (1976 – shown to women at a local school – are 'mixed and heated', while a 'women' onlooker in Vienna won't stop clapping. In Munich, the audience is high energy, but someone wonders if the many thresholds depicted in *Arequipa* (1981) are in fact just windows and doorways, instead of corollaries to the film medium as Hammer had intended. The audience at an Oslo women's centre is polite, whereas those who show up to a screening at Gothenburg Women's House argue that the films are too fast. By noting these responses, and in turn responding to them herself, Hammer reckons with multiple interpretations and the geographic, cultural and political differences that shape them. Troubling both the primacy of the artist as guarantor of meaning and the idea that the work itself might possess any singular message, Hammer locates the audience no longer as the 'object' of the 'theater house' but as its subject.<sup>2</sup>

As an audience member watching Hammer bound down cinema aisles and through expanded spaces of film projection at her screenings, I felt her to have boundless energy as she attended to the ongoing life of her work. Looking through her journal entries, I am surprised to find something other than pleasure in the text. After the first screening of the 1982 tour, Hammer writes:

*This is it. The end. I will not travel with my films again without making much more money. I will not sit in the same room with them again the rest of this trip. I can't stand it. There is so much more to make than to watch the repetition night after night of my mistakes, my courage, my play. What's done, is done.*<sup>3</sup>

She explains that the dynamic question-and-answer sessions she initiated with her audiences came out of a need to renew her interest in her own films. Yet even during these interactions she continues to experience frustration. Writing in her journal after a screening at the Funnel Experimental Film Theater in Toronto, she describes an audience 'full, enthusiastic, and warm' but is disappointed that 'the questions are not probing'. 'Am I getting bored with touring?', she asks.<sup>4</sup>

The desire to complete 'the circle of expression from self to others' that underpinned Hammer's approach to presenting her work led her to make *Audience*, a film in which she interviews spectators at international retrospective screenings of her work.<sup>5</sup> Made on a second trip in the same year that she wrote the journal entries quoted above, *Audience* is split into four consecutive sections that correspond to locations in North America and Britain. Outside the Roxie Theater, located in San Francisco's Mission District, two women snog on the sidewalk as Hammer brandishes a large microphone in the direction of those queuing for a screening during Gay Pride Week. At the London Film-makers' Co-op on Gloucester Avenue, footage filmed by Penny Ashbrook shows Hammer interviewing a group that includes prominent feminist

experimental filmmakers working in Britain at the time. I send screen grabs to my friend, the film archivist and programmer Charlotte Procter, who begins to identify a list of attendees including programmer Carolyn Sandys and filmmakers Tina Keane, Ruth Novaczek, Nina Danino, Martine Thoquenne and Anne Rees-Mogg. They form an ad-hoc amphitheatre, with some sitting cross-legged on the floor encircled by others on chairs. A few of them are smoking. At the Funnel in Toronto, the smiling face of Michaelle McLean appears from behind the curtains of a miniature cinema diorama to welcome the filmmaker, her camera, and the extended audience of *Audience* to the artist-run space. At McGill University in Montreal, Hammer mingles with a lively crowd as she is introduced to the screening organiser Amy Ludick and two friends with whom she discusses Québécois identity. Influenced by techniques of *cinéma vérité*, *Audience* attests to the sometimes neglected queer and feminist dimensions of the spaces in which experimental film is produced. The film also shows, though by no means totally, the problem of whiteness within historic constructions of transatlantic lesbian feminist community.

Hammer described *Audience* as a diary. Documenting film publics both before and after screenings of her work, it fleshes out the notes that she made in her journal. As she probes, jokes and flirts with her audience to solicit responses, the affective dimensions of these interactions enliven film and filmmaker alike. Informed by practices of feminist consciousness raising, *Audience* finds women who already recognize themselves in Hammer's films. 'I have a terrible time distancing myself from [the films] in order to comment', says one interviewee in Toronto. At the screenings in London, Toronto and Montreal, this distance is further reduced as the groups respond to the footage shot at the Roxie that will become the first section of the film. 'The first frame of *Audience* I saw tonight, I saw my daughter there ... She's over there in San Francisco and I'm here in Toronto', one says, laughing. This call-and-response approach places *Audience* within a lineage of post-1960s self-reflexive documentary, of which Lizzie Borden's *Regrouping* (1976) is a useful counterpoint not least for Borden's groundbreaking approach to (re)mediating debates about lesbian sexuality within second-wave feminism.

Hammer cuts a dynamic figure at screenings of her films across North America and Europe. Travel is a vital part of her autobiography, one that, following her participation in the First International Feminist Film Conference held in Amsterdam in 1980, increasingly became a feature of her outlook as a filmmaker. 'No longer could I remain an American isolationist', she writes of this trip, which immersed her in the perspectives of international feminist filmmakers for the first time.<sup>6</sup> Both Hammer's notes on her experiences with international screenings and *Audience* underscore the potentiality of the film medium to enable transnational feminist encounters, even if these were limited by Hammer's ease of access to North America and Western Europe relative to other centres. *Audience* charts the geographic idiosyncrasies of lesbian feminist communities as well as how particular places become placeholders for queer imaginaries. The lively footage of dykes on a San Franciscan sidewalk provokes a mixed reaction in London, as do the explicit depictions of vulvas in *Multiple Orgasm*. 'I would like it a little more underplayed', responds one viewer who introduces herself as a filmmaker and a lesbian but whom I have not yet been able to identify. This sober reception reminds me of a story that the writer Susie Bright tells about a screening of a lesbian erotic film by photographer Honey Lee Cottrell at an all-women's squat in London around

the same time that *Audience* was made. The punchline of Bright's story lands on the audience and their outrage at the excessive use of hot water during a shower scene. Back at the Film-makers Co-op, one woman contrasts the joy and energy of the lesbian scene in San Francisco with the realities of feminist organising in Britain. Acknowledging that there are still exciting things happening in her country, she goes on to say that 'many lesbians are poor, they're depressed, the weather is not that great.' 'Chips are awful', someone else interjects amid laughter. 'Chips are awful ... right', continues the speaker, 'and it's very, very easy to get very heavily involved with hard work'.

Amid fraught debates about the representation of sex and sexuality, and a culture of suppression engendered by state-enforced censorship, Hammer embraced pleasure as a vital part of lesbian feminist politics and experimental filmmaking. Yet, as with her journal entries, *Audience* also engages in the hard work of feminist worldbuilding. By regularly accompanying her films to screenings at which she sought intimate exchanges with her audiences, Hammer does the work of closing a feedback loop and brings the experience of viewer participation closer to that of community membership. This might be invigorating but it isn't always easy. In a 2018 letter, Florrie Burke comments on her long-term partner's 'work ethic': 'I see how tough you are as you work just as hard in the bad times as you do in the good'.<sup>7</sup> For Hammer, who died in 2019, seeking audiences for experimental lesbian film over five decades also meant engaging in the collective work of inventing them. *Audience* conveys this dual effort of showing and making. In the process, the film witnesses the contingent infrastructure required to sustain feminism and its archive.

#### Endnotes

1. Hammer writes the singular this way, always in the plural.
2. Barbara Hammer, 'International Audiences: Personal Experiences of a Filmmaker', *Hammer! Making Movies Out of Sex and Life* (New York: Feminist Press, 2010), p. 118.
3. Hammer, 'International Audiences', p. 113.
4. Hammer, 'International Audiences', p. 118.
5. Barbara Hammer, 'Lesbian Filmmaking: Self-Birthing', *The Blatant Image: A Magazine of Feminist Photography*, 1 (1981), p. 47.
6. Hammer, 'International Audiences', p. 112.
7. Florrie Burke, 'Dearest Barbara', *Barbara Hammer: Evidentiary Bodies*, ed. Staci Bu Shea and Carmel Curtis (New York: Leslie-Lohman Museum, 2018), p. 95.