



Figure 1. Barbara Hammer, *Dyketactics* (US, 1974).
16mm film. DVD still

Performing Essentialism: Reassessing Barbara Hammer's Films of the 1970s

Greg Youmans

Jen Smith's 2006 video *Magick and the Gay Counter Culture* (US) presents an obscure ritual action enacted on a windy hilltop. The five-minute video begins with two figures seated together on the ground, both of them clad in white loincloths, fur caps, and antlers. One of the figures (Smith herself) slowly pierces the back of the other (C. Ryder Cooley) with feathers. When the piercing is finished, the first figure takes the hands of the initiate, stands her up, and slowly turns her around in a circle. As with the action, the video's camera work unfolds in the round. Five other figures—of various genders, all dressed in loincloths—approach the central pair from various points offscreen. They help the first figure lift the initiate into the air, as choral music momentarily swells on a sound track that otherwise presents only the sound of wind and of feet moving through the brush. After the initiate has been set back down, the five figures mill around a bit and then gradually disperse. Finally, the two main figures join hands and walk off together down the hillside until they disappear from view. The

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Figure 2. Jen Smith, *Magick and the Gay Counter Culture* (US, 2006). Digital video. DVD still

pastoral and ritual qualities of the video harken back to the late 1960s and 1970s—a heyday of rural hippie communes and pagan rites. At the same time, the feather piercing seems to locate the video firmly on the far side of the 1980s lesbian sex wars and the 1990s queer turn. The video’s tone is just as difficult to pin down: it is at once reverent and campy.

K8 Hardy engages similar contradictions in her 2007 music video for the song “Sisters in the Struggle” by the Montreal-based group Lesbians on Ecstasy.¹ The group, not incidentally, is known for taking songs from the acoustic lesbian past and turning them into techno dance jams. For most of the video’s five minutes, the band members, dressed in playful costumes that might best be described as rural disco chic, perform their song in a clearing in the woods. Hardy shot the video on VHS, a point emphasized by a flashing “PLAY” in the upper left hand corner of the opening shot. In addition to 1980s home video, the piece signifies new media through the inclusion of a laptop in the *mise-en-scène* as well as in shots that present what are clearly digital effects and artifacts. Despite these elements, the video remains for the most part

grounded in a back-to-the-land, lesbian-feminist iconography of the 1970s. For instance, there is an extended montage of vaginally suggestive tree knots as the song's chorus is heard for the first time: "We've been waiting all our lives for our sisters to be our lovers." The lyrics become especially poignant when one recognizes that the videomaker and the members of the band were likely born too late to participate in the heady era of communal sisterhood that they reference. Having waited all their lives for herstory to repeat itself, they have taken matters into their own hands, performing their own version of 1970s feminism. In a series of shots toward the end of the video, the musicians hold out cardboard cutouts of the female symbol (single and paired), the labrys, and the letter T. The band makes a point of being both lesbian-feminist and trans-inclusive.

Smith's and Hardy's videos are part of a recent wave of queer media art that mines the energy and iconography of 1970s lesbian feminism.² This new queer work engages more specifically with the subset of 1970s feminist practice that is often referred to as *cultural feminism*. In its most general sense, the term simply refers to any "cultural" (as opposed to explicitly "political") feminist phenomenon, from urban women-run coffeeshops to rural women's music festivals, and from high-waisted jeans to serial monogamy. Less diffusely, the term refers to a particular ideology and political project: the belief that women are fundamentally different from men, as well as the project of building an autonomous women's culture where nonpatriarchal values and ways of life can develop and flourish. Even more specifically, *cultural feminism* stands in for two currents that were especially strong in the 1970s on the west coast: biologically essentialist understandings of gender and projects of lesbian separatism. Historically, these currents have met with a good deal of criticism within queer spaces. One of the main targets of Judith Butler's 1990 *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, which helped to define the field of queer theory, was the falsely homogenous and static category of "woman" as it had developed out of 1970s feminism. Trans scholars have taken cultural feminism to task for its role in making the 1970s a particularly "difficult decade" for trans people, perhaps most famously in

the anti-trans writing of Janice Raymond and the purges of trans women Beth Elliott and Sandy Stone from lesbian-feminist spaces.³ For these reasons, it is rather surprising that trans-positive queer artists are now returning to and reinvesting in cultural feminism.

I believe that essentialism ranks high among the qualities of cultural feminism to which the new queer media work is attracted: the audacity of fabricating a pre- or ahistoric foundation for one's contemporary thoughts and actions; the righteousness of claiming truths at the level of the body; the thrill of accessing magical realms hitherto cloaked by rationality and the oppressive world of appearances; and the presumptuousness of going off to live entirely as one chooses, beyond the range and influence of heteropatriarchal media, culture, and ideology. At the same time, the new queer work seems to be clearly aware of the problems with both gender essentialism and lesbian separatism. The artists and performers temper their investment in essentialism with camp and irony, and also with a sense of melancholy—as if, unable to fully desire this past, they are also unable to properly mourn its loss.

Although I have begun this article exploring new work in the historical light of 1970s cultural feminism, my main project is actually to do the opposite. In what follows, I will use the new wave of queer media art as an invitation and a provocation to rethink hitherto dominant understandings of what 1970s cultural feminism was all about. If queer artists and performers are now drawn to 1970s lesbian feminism, perhaps it was a richer and more complex period than the frames of historical understanding developed in the 1980s and 1990s have allowed us to recognize. The new queer media work invites us to look at cultural feminism playfully and generously, seeking out and unearthing obscured sites of sexiness, humor, and nonnormative gender expression.

I will take up this invitation in particular with regard to the 1970s short experimental films of pioneering lesbian filmmaker Barbara Hammer. Her early films have been especially strong points of reference for contemporary queer media artists: in addition to developing an aesthetic and a practice for embodied lesbian-feminist media-making, they are documentary records of what lesbianism looked and felt like at the time. In many of

Hammer's early films, women forge durable bonds with each other through the shared risk of unorthodox behavior. They enact strange ritual actions together, including the action of making the films, with the goal of transforming themselves at the level of self, body, and essence.

Although all but one of the recent works I discuss in this article, Liz Rosenfeld's *Untitled (Dyketactics Revisited)*, were shot on video, much of the work appears to be seeking a return to the visual fullness (and, often, aural silence) of Hammer's 16mm film image. The recent media pieces present lush, textural images of bodies in natural settings and—with the exception of Hardy's music video, which has a more energetic sound track and a faster pace—take the time to show these bodies engaging in ritual performances that unfold slowly and quietly. The hyper sync-sound qualities of video are left unexploited. In general, the recent works evoke the scenic expansiveness and hushed reverence of Hammer's films, qualities that were apparently more conducive to the essentializing performances of the 1970s. The often melancholic quality of the new work, the sense of arriving too late, likewise seems intimately bound up with historical questions of medium and format. In the last section of this article, I will peel back the layers of digital and analog video in order to theorize the essentializing properties of 16mm celluloid and its particular contribution to the 1970s cultural-feminist project.

Barbara Hammer's "Cultural-Feminist" Films of the 1970s

Hammer made her 1974 film *Dyketactics* (US), a groundbreaking work in the history of lesbian filmmaking, while she was earning her master's degree in filmmaking at San Francisco State University. To make the film, she gathered together a group of women and took them to the countryside for the weekend. Shedding their clothes and inhibitions, the women engaged in a series of simple actions—dancing, touching each other, embracing trees, washing and combing each other's hair, and so on—which Hammer and Chris Saxton filmed. During a second shoot, Saxton filmed Hammer and Poe Asher making love as soft afternoon light spilled

in through the window of a Bay Area home. Although Hammer appears on-screen in both sequences, it is Asher who forms the narrative bridge between the two locations: in an early shot we see her sniffing a vibrator as she drives down a highway in a convertible, as if she is recalling previous sexual pleasure and anticipating the renewal of it at her destination. Hammer ultimately cut more than an hour's worth of footage down to four minutes and an astonishingly compressed 110 shots. Despite the rapidity of the editing, watching *Dyketactics* is gentle and sensual; this is a result of the film's natural setting, the slowness of the women's on-screen actions, the lapping repetition of the sound track music, and the prevalence of superimpositions. By editing the film down, Hammer isolates moments of touching within each shot. In an essay written in 1977, she describes the process as "textural editing" and says that the film represents "erotic time." She also describes *Dyketactics* as a "lesbian commercial," and, from her own account of early screenings, the film did effectively sell lesbianism to at least a few women in the audience.⁴

Hammer's films evince many of the characteristics of cultural feminism. *Dyketactics* demonstrates the centrality of the female body to her practice, not only on-screen but also in her quest to develop an embodied way of both making and viewing films. With *Dyketactics*, Hammer also sought a way of representing lesbian love-making that did not deploy the visual and narrative codes of mainstream, heterosexual pornography. In this regard, the film contributed to the 1970s feminist project of developing a women's erotica. In other 1970s films by Hammer, we encounter still more hallmarks of cultural feminism, for instance, ritual actions that are explicitly linked to matriarchal cults of the Goddess (e.g., *Moon Goddess* [US, 1976, made with Gloria Churchman] and *The Great Goddess* [US, 1977]) and visual metaphors that associate women's bodies with biomorphic shapes found in nature (e.g., *Multiple Orgasm* [US, 1976] and *Women I Love* [US, 1976]).⁵

It is no surprise then that Hammer's 1970s films "can be seen as embodying the cultural feminist position," as Andrea Weiss puts it in her 1992 history of lesbians in cinema. Richard Dyer characterizes the films in the same way in his survey of gay and les-

bian filmmaking published two years earlier.⁶ Dyer and Weiss both deploy the label descriptively, though by no means uncritically, as a succinct way to situate Hammer's films historically and to clarify their aesthetic and ideological stakes. A decade earlier, in a review of the films *Women I Love* and *Double Strength* (US, 1978), Weiss was far more critical of Hammer. She characterized Hammer's effort to develop "an intuitive, feminine, and emotional approach to film" as naïve, and she argued that, despite Hammer's efforts to escape and undo patriarchal codes of representation, the filmmaker had ultimately fallen into the trap of "adopting the masculine romanticized view of women."⁷ Weiss was not alone among feminist commentators in the 1980s in criticizing Hammer's films, and cultural feminism more broadly, in this way. Judith Mayne has spoken of the "essentialism detectors" that were working overtime within the field of feminist film studies throughout the decade, eagerly sniffing out and dismissing any films and criticism that seemed to promote the "'dangers' of essentialism—an affirmation of the difference between men and women as given, and an attendant belief in the positive value of female identity which, repressed by patriarchy, will be given its true voice by feminism."⁸

In a 1998 interview, Hammer discusses how critiques of essentialism affected her career and artistic practice:

I think what happened there for me was that critics were leading the feminist movement after I made the films. And I wasn't aware that by placing women in nature, nude, and celebrating the expanse of nature, I was saying that women were purely biological. That wasn't my intent. . . . It made me more conscious to have that criticism. I welcomed it, except that it wasn't a criticism in dialogue. It was a criticism after the fact. It seemed so harsh and so judgmental that I couldn't keep doing the same kind of work.⁹

Hammer responded to the criticism by taking women out of her films for a number of years. This is not to say that films like *Pools* (US, 1981) and *Pond and Waterfall* (US, 1982) are disembodied. There remains a clear sense of an embodied filmmaker holding and moving the camera. As Claudia Gorbman puts it, "[The films]

focus on women's vision, a woman's vision, translating/interpreting/transforming the world."¹⁰ Yet women's bodies are no longer visible on-screen. Hammer attributes her move from California to New York in the 1980s to her desire "to be in more of an urban setting where [she] wouldn't have the allure of open space and the expansive lesbian/feminist philosophies that were born here on the West Coast."¹¹

To understand how critiques of essentialism could wield so much power in the 1980s, it is necessary to understand what cultural feminism was accused of displacing and also what it was accused of having spawned: in the first instance an earlier "radical feminism" and in the second an ascendant "antipornography feminism." Alice Echols, who did much to define and establish the term *cultural feminism* with this particular critical valence in the 1980s, credits its first use to the reconstituted Redstockings group of 1975.¹² In the anthology *Feminist Revolution*, the women of Redstockings used the label to characterize and criticize what they perceived to be negative developments within the women's liberation movement, among them, a turning away from and forgetting of the movement's early radical leaders and its original commitment to coalitional and multi-issue Left activism; an apolitical and therapeutic reframing of the project of consciousness raising; and the rise to ideological dominance of reformist and revisionist understandings of feminism such as those offered by *Ms. magazine*.¹³ Echols uses the term *cultural feminism* similarly, as a tidy label for developments within the women's movement that, by her argument, displaced *radical feminism*, a term she reserves for the pioneering late 1960s groups that articulated a feminist political program and analysis in connection with the New Left. Essentialism is at the heart of the cultural-feminist formation that Echols describes and criticizes:

Most fundamentally, radical feminism was a political movement dedicated to eliminating the sex-class system, whereas cultural feminism was a countercultural movement aimed at reversing the cultural valuation of the male and the devaluation of the female. In the terminology of today, radical feminists were typically social constructionists who wanted to render the sex-class system irrelevant,

while cultural feminists were generally essentialists who sought to celebrate femaleness.¹⁴

Echols argues that cultural feminism began to displace radical feminism in 1973 and that it had firmly eclipsed the latter by 1975, though she recognizes that the seeds of cultural feminism were already present in the radical feminism of the late 1960s.

Echols acknowledges that a number of other factors contributed to the dissolution of radical feminism as well: the economic crisis of the 1970s, the overall shift toward social conservatism in US culture, state infiltration and repression of radical groups, the concessions of reform governments, and the concurrent dissipation of other movements (8–9, 247–62). Nevertheless, she presents a chain of cause and effect—and blame—that is largely restricted to feminist spaces and women’s communities. Echols musters egregious citations from the writing of Robin Morgan and Jane Alpert, in which important Left causes are categorically dismissed as instances of male supremacy, as examples of how cultural feminists called into question and undermined the coalitional activism advocated by radical feminists. No doubt the rhetorical and ideological qualities of these writings connect forward to writings by Morgan, Andrea Dworkin, and Catharine MacKinnon that were produced a few years later in the context of the antipornography movement. It is less clear, though, how the more “cultural” elements of cultural feminism—women’s music festivals, rural communes, and the countless experiments in lesbian visibility, self-creation, and world making birthed in the 1970s—were responsible for the obsolescence of radical feminism and the ascendance of anti-pornography feminism. The contributors to the 1975 *Redstockings* anthology explicitly blamed the 1970s mandate of “political lesbianism” (which insisted that true feminists should form erotic bonds with their sisters rather than with “the enemy”) for derailing feminism from its original radical agenda and vision. Echols, however, writes a decade later at the height of the lesbian sex wars, in clear allegiance with the prosexuality side of that conflict, and she is critical of the “homophobia” that marred the *Redstockings*’ analysis.¹⁵ Nevertheless, there is a blind spot in her own argument

around 1970s lesbianism that ends up obscuring the prosexuality camp's historical debt to the erotic, sex-positive work that Hammer and others were engaged in only a few years earlier.

In her cultural history of lesbianism in the US, Lillian Faderman does not use the term *cultural feminism* in the chapter on 1970s feminism. She prefers to use less retrospectively framed terms, as the chapter title demonstrates: "Lesbian Nation: Creating a Women-Identified-Women Community in the 1970s." Faderman does, however, use *cultural feminism* in the next chapter, "Lesbian Sex Wars in the 1980s." Here she asserts, oddly enough, that lesbian communities in the 1970s were "dominated by cultural feminists." She then proceeds to map the 1980s battle as one between "cultural feminists" and "lesbian sex radicals."¹⁶ Faderman's use of the term points to the problematic way it both characterizes lesbian-feminist activity in the 1970s *writ large* and more narrowly signifies the anti-sexuality camp of the sex wars. It is in part because historians and critics have sought to get the full measure of the former through the circumscribed frame of the latter that so many reductive accounts of both 1970s lesbianism and 1970s feminism have circulated.

Over the past decade, the essentialist line of critique seems to have lost much of its power, and, not unrelatedly, the term *cultural feminism* seems to be falling into disuse, at least in a few high profile forums. The exhibition WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution, which opened on 4 March 2007 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles before traveling to Washington, DC, New York, and Vancouver over the next two years, presented 1970s feminist cultural production thematically, grouping work together under such rubrics as "Body as Medium," "Family Stories," and "Gender Performance." As a result, artists who have often been considered forerunners of feminist postmodernism, such as Mary Kelly, Yvonne Rainer, and Martha Rosler, appeared in the galleries alongside artists who have usually been considered dyed-in-the-wool essentialists, such as Judy Chicago, Mary Beth Edelson, and Hammer. Although on one level this approach invited essentialist versus constructionist comparisons of the work on view, it also defused such comparisons by making it clear that the exhibition was not structured by the terms of the old debate.¹⁷

More recently, in October 2010, the Center for Gay and Lesbian Studies (CLAGS) at the City University of New York hosted a three-day conference titled “In Amerika They Call Us Dykes: Lesbian Lives in the 1970s.” Although largely eschewing the term *cultural feminism*, the conference focused on aspects of 1970s experience that almost certainly could be labeled as such. As the conference website points out, in the 1970s lesbians created businesses, music, softball teams, films, and womyn’s land: “Inspired by the massive social changes that were taking place, lesbians made new worlds for themselves and others.”¹⁸ The conference was a reunion of sorts for women who came out in the 1970s, and also a chance for these participants and witnesses to speak to younger scholars studying 1970s lesbian feminism without having experienced it. In a printed recap of the conference, Lisa Weil paraphrases Lisa Duggan’s presentation at one of the plenary sessions, at which Duggan summarized two competing narratives about 1970s lesbians within feminist discourse:

1. They were dogmatic, dumpy sexless lesbian separatists and cultural feminists with no race or class politics, followed in the 1980s by radical, witty politically sophisticated sex radicals.
2. They were creative, utopian lesbian visionaries with radically egalitarian politics followed by narrowly pragmatic assimilationist LGBT reformers and corporate sellouts who have forgotten feminism.¹⁹

Although there were moments of discord and debate at the conference—around race and class politics, as well as around issues of trans inclusivity—it was also clear that the conference was, by design, a space in which the second position predominated.

Hammer has been consistently productive as a media artist since the 1970s, and she has been honored with many awards and exhibitions over the past three decades. At the same time, I do not believe it is a coincidence that in today’s context of a renewed appreciation of 1970s cultural feminism, she has achieved a level of art-world prestige unprecedented in her long and illustrious career. Hammer was the subject of a 2010 retrospective at the New York

Museum of Modern Art. Earlier that same year, she published a memoir with the Feminist Press, *Hammer! Making Movies out of Sex and Love*. And in 2012, the Tate Modern presented another month-long career retrospective that paired many of her films with the work of younger queer and feminist artists who have been inspired by her.

Sex, Humor, and Feminism

Artists A. K. Burns and A. L. Steiner took inspiration from Hammer when they made their queer experimental pornographic video *Community Action Center* (US, 2010). Burns and Steiner's list of influences also includes gay male pornographers and underground filmmakers, as well as a number of women artists, not all of them lesbian, whose films and performances assert sexual confidence and autonomy. "We were deeply inspired by 60's & 70's gay porn-romance-liberation films like those of Fred Halsted, James Bidgood, Jack Smith, and Joe Gage. We're also heavily influenced by feminist film and video artists such as Maya Deren, Lynda Benglis, Yoko Ono, Valie Export, Ulrike Ottinger, Carolee Schneemann, Barbara Hammer, and many others."²⁰ By including Hammer in their eclectic list, Burns and Steiner invite us to rediscover the sexual excitement that infused cultural feminism in the 1970s, and to think about it with rather than against other queer and feminist projects of sex-centric world making. The decade was a heady time of lesbian sexual encounter and exploration, both among born-this-way dykes, many of whom came out in the wake of the late-1960s liberation movements, and among the "political lesbians" who explored lesbianism as a corollary of their involvement in feminism. Hammer herself came out in 1970, shedding her earlier identity of heterosexual wife and quickly blossoming into a lesbian Casanova. (Another reason she has given for her move to New York in the 1980s is that she had become too well known among the women in California.)

The sixty-nine-minute *Community Action Center* (CAC) constructs and documents queer "community" through a series of pornographic "action" scenes that go well beyond the range of sexual

activity presented in Hammer's films. Some of the scenes playfully mine the tropes of mainstream pornography, for example, a sexy carwash and a pizza delivery (the latter is queered virtually beyond recognition). Some scenes evoke gay male pornography more specifically, for example, a street cruising scene. Other scenes are more generically neutral, presenting couples in bed, in the bathtub, and in the kitchen. Still others explore less charted terrain. For instance, the film opens in a large, art studio space, where a number of performers, presenting an array of bodies, engage in sex and gender play: tying each other up, peeing on each other, donning and castrating clay phalluses, and giving birth to one another. As in many of Hammer's films, the performative scenes of *CAC* are built around play and collaboration. Also, Burns and Steiner travel with their video whenever possible, engaging the audience in conversation and consciousness raising at postscreening discussions, as did Hammer with her films in the 1970s. Key differences are clearly the elements of gay male inspiration behind Burns and Steiner's work, the inclusion of trans and cisgendered men on-screen, and the more expansively queer audience viewing their video at the time of its release. That said, Hammer has told me that she never insisted on women-only viewings of her work during the 1970s, though her own accounts make it clear that cultural-feminist venues were the main places in which the films were seen until well into the following decade. This seems to have been a product of the times and of the Bay Area milieu in which her artistic and social networks took shape, and not the result of an ideological position in favor of separatism on her part.²¹

The two most extended sequences of *CAC* explicitly reference cultural-feminist iconography. One of the sequences culminates with a woman who, expressing what seems to be her anger and jealousy over a straying lover, overturns a picnic table laden with fruit, vegetables, and other food items that she then attacks with an ax. The scene seems like an assault on the "central core" prop table of Hammer's 1976 *Women I Love* shoot.²² The earlier film presents a series of portraits of Hammer's ex-lovers (and in one case a friend) interspersed with stop-motion animated sequences in which single fruits and vegetables morph from whole to "core,"

for example, a head of lettuce opening out leaf by leaf or an orange unpeeling itself. It is not clear why the performer in *CAC* attacks this cultural-feminist harvest. Perhaps she is last month's lover, fed up with the symbols that the "liberated" serial monogamist has used to justify her actions. Or perhaps, as a woman of color, she assaults the objects as hallmarks of a notoriously insular white feminism, expressing her rage at this strand of feminism's inability, or refusal, to represent her, or its presumptuous claim that it could. Andrea Fontenot points out that this particular scene "can be read as a response to the partiality of the community that the film creates—one peopled primarily, though not exclusively, by white, able-bodied, dyke couples." And, to be clear, although the new queer media work discussed in this article critically reimagines 1970s cultural feminism as a formation that can include and empower trans and genderqueer people, it does far less to address critiques of the formation as a white women's province.²³

CAC's other main sequence features the performer Pony, who is arguably the film's star. (The final shot of *CAC* is of Pony standing nude in a field, lifting a labrys to the sky.) When Pony is first shown, she is exploring a pastoral woodland setting. Eventually she comes upon a stream and lies back on the grass. She seems then to ruminate on the scenes of bondage, domination, and feather piercing that the video proceeds to show us, scenes that unfold in urban settings that look like the interiors of Brooklyn lofts. As the film returns to Pony back in the forest, she unwraps a honeycomb from its leaf casing, drips it all over herself, and proceeds to masturbate to orgasm. A bit later, as she squats before the stream, a chicken egg comically bounces out of the water and enters her vagina, an action presented in reverse motion that then plays again in forward motion.

One could read these scenes with Pony as a queering or parody of Hammer's films of the 1970s and of the cultural-feminist project more broadly. Surely *CAC* is turning essentialism on its head by inserting a performer whom many will read as genderqueer into a pastoral setting and then having her "give birth" to an egg. Yet this reading fails to account for how Hammer's 1970s films already seem to be engaged in queer parody. Her 1974 film *Menses*



Figure 3. Barbara Hammer, *Menses* (US, 1974). 16mm film. DVD still



Figure 4. A. K. Burns and A. L. Steiner, *Community Action Center* (US, 2010). Digital video. Video still

presents a group of women who come together to enact menstruation rituals on a lush green hillside. In the first shot, the women stand together, naked and facing the camera. This is followed by slow, close-up pans, multiplied in superimposition, of the women's crotches, a few of which are gripping chicken eggs. One woman spreads her legs and drops an egg to the ground. Then the egg appears in close-up as bright red blood splashes across it. Later in the four-minute film there are specific ritual actions, for instance, a ceremonial drinking of Codeine and the wrapping of a woman in toilet paper until she resembles a large tampon. All of these actions are performed "straight," which is to say that the women (almost) never smile or break out in laughter. However, intercut with these hillside scenes are shots of the women smiling and laughing as they carry box upon box of tampons and other menstrual products out of a drugstore. Together they push a shopping cart that is overflowing with the products around the store's parking lot. The film's sound track is comprised of frantic and distorted electronic music. At times a voice breaks through the auditory chaos to intone, "Muh-muh-moon . . . menses . . ." Toward the end of the film, the same voice narrates a first experience with menstruation just as slowly and emphatically: "I was men-strua-ting! I thought that I was dy-ing!"

Menses is undeniably among Hammer's most essentialist works: in its exploration of menstruation as a definitively female act, in its conflation of women and nature, and in its invocation,

however playful, of a spiritual or transcendental realm of female experience and interconnectedness. At the same time, the film is so literal and repetitive in its essentialism that it almost seems divided from itself. Hammer herself saw the film as Brechtian. She clarified its use of humor and alienation effects in a 1977 article:

Menses is a ritual too, a home-made one, but it is also a satire on the Walt Disney film which became for many of us the junior high school puberty rite of our culture, the time when we were shuttled off as prepubescent adolescent girls to the closed-off walks of a hushed and secret closet auditorium. In the films shown then it was lace and daisies and muted whispers that surrounded the flow. What a farce. . . . I'd make my own film combating from the other side. It was no fun. It was discomfort. It was womanly and so was talking about it and screaming and playing and boasting. It was no secret. It could be filmed in consumer heartland, Payless Drugstore; it could be exhibitionist and free and wild—nude women dripping blood in Tilden Park high over the intellectual playground of the state, Cal Berkeley. It could be collective, each woman planning her own interpretation of rage, chagrin, humor, pathos, bathos—whatever menses meant to her within the overall satiric and painted nature of film. And I could shape and form and find the unifier, the pubic triangle and the egg, red. And each of the women was a part of me and it was not necessary that my particular body and face be screen present. They acted out for me, for them, the personal expression of one bodily female function. The color Brecht, the humor Barbara.²⁴

This description suggests the complexity of essentialism within 1970s cultural-feminist practice. Hammer's female-centric film about menstruation is purposely anti-"lace and daisies." The film assumes and gives space to a fractured, unruly, and collective expression of femininity. It is not for everyone, but nor is it reductively unitary. The film is also highly satirical and far from earnest.

In the course of a nuanced, historical analysis of artwork from 1970s lesbian community arts journals, Margo Hobbs Thompson examines a photograph of a naked Amazon draped in vines and staring down the camera, as well as a playfully punning drawing that equates the vulva with a fig waiting to be eaten. At the end of the article, she writes, "Despite their contributions to feminist

discourse on sex and gender, the subcultural artworks examined here are earnest and free from irony and thus difficult for a contemporary viewer to take seriously, especially one who embraces queer identity in all its contingency.”²⁵ The assumption that a contemporary queer viewer can only, at best, laugh at such work and never with it is quite pervasive. Not long ago I had the bizarre experience of watching twenty students watch *Menses* without laughing. I discovered afterward that they had assumed that the film could not possibly have been meant to be funny. I slowly spoke the events of *Menses* back to them, without inflection (basically using the same intonation that Hammer uses for the film’s voice-over), until the students at last recognized and appreciated the film’s intentional absurdity. In the late 1980s, Hammer included *Menses* on a VHS compilation of her films, titled “Lesbian Humor.” She made the compilation in part to combat the stereotype that lesbians, and feminists, lack a sense of humor. I hope that today’s resurgence of interest in 1970s cultural feminism will shatter that stereotype for good.

Performativity vs. and Essentialism

In the first eleven minutes of Hammer’s *Superdyke* (US, 1975), a group of women invades the city of San Francisco. Clad in matching jeans and “Superdyke” T-shirts, they joyfully reclaim public spaces for lesbian use: a street in the Mission District, Muni (San Francisco’s public transit system), the plaza in front of City Hall, the Coast Highway, Dolores Park, the Erotic Art Museum, and the Macy’s at Union Square. Then, for about six minutes, the women share more private, contemplative moments as they massage each other in a house and then perform a series of ceremonial actions in an isolated spot in the countryside. At one point they walk single file, nude and with hands extended to each other’s shoulders, in front of a tepee constructed in a clearing. A brief, winding-down montage revisits scenes of the women’s triumphant occupation of the various urban locales of the film. Lastly, a shot after the closing credits presents the women piled together in the back of a station wagon, brandishing their homemade Amazon

shields and cheering and waving to the camera as they drive off, presumably on their way to another city to conquer. The film is brightly and naturally lit. Even the shots taken on city streets during a light rain shower have a sweet, homemade quality to them as the women smile through a rain-smudged lens. From start to finish, the film is unified by a buoyant piano accompaniment that was designed to resemble a silent film score.²⁶

Why are these women “Superdykes”? It is true that they conjure extraordinary identities and accomplish amazing feats:



Figure 5. Barbara Hammer, *Superdyke* (US, 1975). 16mm film. DVD still

in Dolores Park they become Amazon warriors wielding bows and arrows; along the Coast Highway, dykes on bikes magically sense when a sister is in trouble and rush to her aid. They are also Superdykes because they have the gall to wear shirts that identify them as such in ordinary, everyday spaces,

the spaces of passing and constricted behavior for queer subjects. And yet, the women’s actions do not seem to be directed out toward the straight people whom they encounter in public space. Judging by the film, the onlookers of 1975 San Francisco were more amused than shocked by what they saw. Perhaps a better question, then, is, for whom are they affirming their Superdykeness? One possibility is that they intended their actions for women at the cultural-feminist spaces where the film would have its first screenings. The women in these audiences presumably had an affinity with either lesbianism or feminism, or both, though they may not have been willing or comfortable enough to perform those affiliations as exuberantly as the women on-screen. Or, a second possibility, perhaps, is that the women’s on-screen actions, from the film’s first frame to its last,

were not really intended for any audience, present or future, but instead for the performers themselves.

The intimacy and amateurism of the performances seem to support this interpretation. *Superdyke* has the feeling of a home movie or, better, a vacation film: it seems to have been made by and for the people on-screen, as a way to heighten the thrill of their journey, as an excuse to act differently than they do back at home, and as a means for them, on return, to look back and remember who they were when they cut loose. It does not feel like the film was made for a future audience of strangers. For the person who watches *Superdyke* today, across the gap of historical distance, the experience is a bit like observing a strange species of lesbian life through a fishbowl. The women of the film look again and again at the camera, but they do not seem to look through it to anyone on the other side. When they are not laughing, the women often have blank, deadpan expressions on their faces. By one logic, a facial expression can be deadpan only in context and only from the perspective of an outside observer who deems the seriousness of the expression incongruous with the perceived absurdity of the performer's actions or the situation around her. But from the perspective of the performer, a deadpan expression can be the calm center from which the project of world making begins: an insistence on taking absurdity seriously within and against a society that has rendered queer modes of existence absurd and impossible in the first place. It is no accident, then, that deadpan expressions also pervade the new queer media work discussed throughout this article. Like their sisters of yore, today's crop of videomakers and performers are bent on creating, fostering, and incorporating outlandish queer ways of life, in the hope that they might take root and become the way things are.²⁷

The strategy of using performance-for-camera to construct new queer worlds is by no means limited to the media projects discussed in this article. Thomas Waugh suggests that virtually all films made by lesbians and gay men during the 1970s were built around "performance-based techniques," among them "expressive elements that were more theatrical than the standard documentary

idiom of the day allowed: dramatization, improvisatory role playing and reconstruction, statements and monologues based on preparation and rehearsal; nonverbal performances of music, dance, gesture, and corporal movement, including those of an erotic and diaristic nature.”²⁸ Waugh takes up Bill Nichols’s category of “performative documentary” as a way to frame and understand this 1970s queer film practice.²⁹ It is eye opening to think about the media works created in the inventive and exhilarating first decade after gay liberation as *performative documentaries*. The way the term suggests that play-acting (performance) leads to reality (documentary) brings attention to the “realizing” aspects of gay and lesbian film performances: the way that the archive of queer subjects acting up on film in the 1970s has so much to tell us about who queer people in fact were at the time, but also the way that, through performance for film, queer people sought and at times succeeded in realizing new selves.

Within the field of queer theory, the term *performativity* usually circulates as the antithesis of essentialism. If the former signals queer anti-identity, then the latter is what the early-1990s queer turn was turning against: a shameful past of naively totalizing, ideologically rigid, and damagingly exclusionary gay and lesbian identity politics. Waugh’s queer recuperation of 1970s gay and lesbian filmmaking as performative documentary was both an effort to grant many films historical and political legitimacy as documentaries (against their not-infrequent dismissal as solipsistic works of the avant-garde), and an effort to demonstrate that they are more performative, which is to say less essentialist, than previously thought.

There is an opportunity now to undo the polarizing distinction between performativity and essentialism. Queer theory since the early 1990s, including Judith Butler’s work, has gradually shifted away from deconstructive notions of performativity toward constructive engagements with embodiment, as well as from emphasis on the contestation of (hetero)norms toward the project of developing habitable new norms of our own—in other words, a move from “trouble” to self-definition.³⁰ Dovetailing with this development, the line of queer theory deriving from the early-

1990s work of Eve Sedgwick has long insisted on the constructive and “reparative” potential of queer performativity and performances of self.³¹

Approaching the performances at the heart of Hammer’s 1970s films as ritual performances is one way to pursue this constructive, as opposed to deconstructive, path in queer theorizing. Rituals are practices that bring the performative and the essentialist together. A return to the paradigmatic work of J. L. Austin shows that the performative speech act—even if, by one understanding, it can only ever launch an endlessly reiterative chain of *différance*—is a representational act that seeks to change the self and the world.³² In scholarly work that is concerned with what queer people are doing or trying to do when they perform or make art, it is therefore important to remember that the performative act strives to make real what is not yet real, to conjure forth and to confirm a new reality. In other words, the performative seeks to essentialize, to assert new truths at the level of the self and make them stick.

The end of *Superdyke* presents a series of what appear to be ritual actions: a woman passes a hollow animal bone across her torso and sends shadows dancing gently across her skin; later, three hands slowly pour dust over Hammer’s nude body as she cradles her camera. Presumably, these actions are meant to transform the women in body and soul, by reconnecting them to a matriarchal past and to their inherent but suppressed female essence. To skeptical outsiders, observing from beyond the charmed circle, the actions likely seem ludicrous and destined to fail. And yet, regardless of whether she achieves a direct connection with the Goddess, a person can still be transformed through ritual actions, in no small part because to commit to ritual actions is to suspend precisely such skepticism about the possibility of change. Feminist scholars have provided insights into cultural-feminist rituals that move us beyond static binarisms of success and failure, possibility and impossibility, and naïveté and sophistication. These scholars ask us to think about what cultural-feminist rituals do accomplish, instead of dismissing them for what they cannot achieve.³³ For instance, in a 1978 essay, Kay Turner argues that the 1970s was a time of awakening, a “crisis passage” for women coming into a feminist

consciousness, and that the formalized rituals of cultural feminism helped to alleviate this larger stress of liminality “by rendering it in dramatic, metaphorical terms and providing a support group to encourage and enable the necessary catharsis to take place.”³⁴ Through shared, formalized performances, women found a way to take seriously new ideas and ways of life that mainstream society deemed preposterous. The rituals helped them cross over. As Turner puts it, “Certainly ritual is an ideal microcosmic experience, but it may be an enduringly important means of invoking a new order of things in the macrocosm” (22–23).

During the 1970s, both feminists and gay activists saw the “truth” of themselves as something radically, historically new and in the fragile process of invention, and also, at the same time, as something buried deep within themselves, long suppressed and obscured by heteropatriarchy, that needed to be excavated and set free. These contradictory understandings of self came together in the liberationist and cultural-feminist performances of queerer and more feminist selves than one yet was: freer selves, more public selves, more sisterly selves, more erotic selves, and more militant selves. In some cases, the transformations flashed up and then flickered out. In other cases, they endured.

Video Personae and Celluloid Selves

In 1976, Hammer experimented with video, got drunk on the medium’s narcissistic properties, and woke up with a hangover. The resultant video, *Superdyke Meets Madame X* (US), was a collaboration with video artist Max Almy that began as a skill share: Almy showed Hammer how to use a Sony Portapak and in return Hammer taught her 16mm film production. (In 1976 Hammer also made her film *Women I Love*, in which Almy appears as the woman with the daffodils.) *Superdyke Meets Madame X* chronicles the brief relationship between Hammer and Almy as well as the equally short-lived love affair between Hammer and video technology. Intriguingly, the piece thematizes failure and disillusionment more than do any of Hammer’s other films of the same period.³⁵ Ultimately, its many apparent failures help us to understand just



Figure 6. Barbara Hammer and Max Almy, *Superdyke Meets Madame X* (US, 1976). Analog video. DVD still

how central filmic process and celluloid support were to Hammer's cultural-feminist practice during the decade.

Superdyke Meets Madame X begins with Almy on-screen responding to questions that Hammer asks from behind the camera. Almy says that if the two of them end up getting involved, then she thinks “the whole thing should be documented,” thereby establishing from the outset the exhibitionistic, confessional, and relationship oriented qualities of video that are now so familiar to us from reality television. Hammer, interviewed next, says that she feels “really good” about “just the little bit of shooting” that they had done that morning: “It shows that we are human beings and that we’re not just looking at each other as objects—and sometimes when you film without sound and without this dialogue, you miss that.” She expresses hope that shooting in video will allow her the spontaneity that she used to feel as a painter but that she finds lacking with film, which she describes as “really tedious and controlled and disciplined.” The two artists proceed to shoot a sequence of themselves making love, first by setting up a static camera on a tripod and then by inviting another woman in to record with a moving camera. The footage is reminiscent of the second half of *Dyketactics*, though the low-resolution, black-and-white video image

clearly sets the two works apart. In voice-over, Almy expresses disappointment in the footage, or perhaps it is disappointment in the love affair: “it looked really good but we weren’t feeling.”

A bit later on in the nineteen-minute video, Hammer organizes another shoot, one that presumably represents her act of “throwing away film,” which is the phrase she utters just before the cut. The sequence begins with Hammer lying naked on a bed, her body covered in film books. As the camera slowly pans from her feet to her head, we see that she has been reading avidly until, driven by passion, she has begun to stroke herself. She sits up, pushing the books from her body. But then, just as she seems to be nearing the climax of her performance, she breaks character and wearily draws her hands down across her face. Suddenly the video jumps to a later moment: Hammer is lying back on the bed with Almy at her side trying to comfort her. In the gap between the shots, Hammer had apparently looked at the material played back on a monitor:

HAMMER: So you’re right, I did freak out. Because it looked so static, you know. It didn’t look like—It just was like me showing off, being clever, and—It weren’t shit.

ALMY: You didn’t like it?

HAMMER: No. I thought with what we were doing, it was much more important to be real.

Next, back in her clothes, Hammer expresses a desire to break free of the narcissistic video frame: “I would like to go door to door and talk to housewives. I would like to have some kind of communication with somebody rather than us media freaks feeding on each other.” Almy, however, says that she is not interested in socially based art and that she prefers to work with video in the studio to create works of personal expression. Hammer’s two love affairs seem to have run aground at the same time.

One wonders if the women of *Superdyke* would have been so disappointed if they had seen their performances immediately played back. Was it some formal quality of the video image—a lack

of color and richness, or perhaps an overabundance of sound—that drained Hammer’s performance of magic in *Superdyke Meets Madame X*? Or was it something more fundamental about video’s relationship with time, a way that the instantaneity of the technology spurred different performances-for-camera to begin with? After all, Hammer seems to have become dissatisfied with her performance as it was happening. The video technology invited her to “be real” in a way film could not, and yet her performance began to feel artificial to her as she was doing it, before she even saw it in playback.

Video artist and historian Catherine Elwes notes of early video, “As far as the working practices of moving image artists were concerned, the most revolutionary aspect of the technology was the instant access it provided to the image—something that film could not do.”³⁶ Video often served as a mirror for artists, a relationship best exemplified in works such as Lynda Benglis’s *Now* (US, 1973), which stages the artist-performer between a camera and a monitor looped in a studio. And yet video’s medium-specific quality of instantaneity works against a stable sense of identity in the work of Benglis and other video artists, as self and self-reflection loop around and layer onto each other to the point of implosion. Not unrelatedly, in the 1970s, critics and theorists often insisted that video was more intrinsically postmodern than film, in the sense of being both immaterial, as a signal-based medium, and deconstructive, as a critical reflection on the technological and ideological system of broadcast television.³⁷ Perhaps it is for these reasons that early works of feminist video art, even when they are formally quite simple (i.e., one long take of a performer engaging a static camera in direct address), seem less essentialist than Hammer’s films, more playful and contingent, and more about the exploration of personae than about the construction of identity. The body on the video monitor moves and speaks, but it has trouble grounding itself in time and space. As such, even though early feminist work in video was performative, it is not clear how and if it was used, or even could be used, for performing essentialism.³⁸

By contrast, 16mm film technology seems to have been conducive to ritual and transformation. There is a protracted distance

between the act of film performance and the act of film projection, and as a result both acts are charged with significance. Between them unfolds a slow process of becoming that incorporates numerous steps of material and alchemical transformation, including the developing bath, the editing table, and the optical printer. Likely for these reasons, film infused 1970s ritual performances with eventfulness in a way that video could not. The medium augmented the nature and power of feminist ritual, moving it from the transportative to the transformative, from the liminoid (the temporary, no-strings-attached role playing of postmodern life) to the liminal (a more fundamental and unidirectional change in self).³⁹ Perhaps it is for these reasons too that the women in *Superdyke*, even when they look directly at the camera, seem so far away. They are not looking into a monitor that instantaneously feeds them back their image. Instead, they are looking into the inscrutable depths of the film camera, from which will arise confirmation of their augmented selves days, perhaps weeks, even months later.

In 2005, Liz Rosenfeld brought together a 16mm film camera and a ragtag group of queers in the hopes of performing a similar enchantment. She incorporated the footage into her hybrid film/video piece *Untitled (Dyketactics Revisited)* (US). The homage to Hammer's 1974 film is felt most strongly in Rosenfeld's gentle, lapping sound track and her similar presentation of nude bodies in disorienting yet enveloping superimposition. But Rosenfeld has displaced Hammer's natural and domestic settings with the stark exterior spaces of what appears to be a warehouse district on the margins of a city. During the piece's six minutes, the on-screen figures slowly move away from buildings into more natural settings, where they encounter flowers and expanses of shrubs. It is as if they are moving toward (or perhaps back to) the pastoral landscapes of Hammer's 1970s films. Yet these pockets of nature, like the on-screen figures, remain surrounded by concrete and chain-link fences.

Untitled (Dyketactics Revisited) builds on a utopian queer potentiality that Rosenfeld recognizes as having already existed in Hammer's film, while at the same time expressing significant doubts about that utopianism. On her website, Rosenfeld offers

a description and presentation of the work: “Bodies move freely through an ambiguous urban ‘utopia’ . . . or do they? [. . .] Allow yourself to be led through the space where bodies exist independent of social codes. Dreamy landscapes, androgynous figures, skin, and concrete, masquerade through a fantasia of fluid forms referencing history while looking into the future.”⁴⁰ Like the other contemporary queer media artists discussed in this article, Rosenfeld is keen to update the aesthetic form and political project of 1970s cultural feminism for a new queer present. Her film showcases a broader range of gender presentations than its namesake, for instance, by including chest binders and strap-on dildos that are absent from the *mise-en-scène* of the earlier film. *Untitled (Dyketactics Revisited)* seeks to conjure a “space where bodies exist independent of social codes,” not only patriarchal and heteronormative codes but also cisnormative ones.

I imagine that Rosenfeld shot in 16mm film not only because it is how Hammer made *Dyketactics* but also because the medium and format have become associated with an exuberant and perhaps naive time when feminists did not always qualify their utopianism. Yet the melancholic tone and medium hybridity of Rosenfeld’s piece suggest the impossibility of getting back to a time (real or imagined) when it was still possible to transform the self, or to build a durable community, through performance for celluloid. The figures in Rosenfeld’s film/video alight on a pastoral landscape and flirt with a new vision of community, not unlike the figures in Jen Smith’s video who gather on a hilltop to create a magical, though fleeting, gay counterculture. But both pieces end on notes of wistful longing and the suggestion that their utopian visions are but a dream. All of the contemporary queer media-makers and performers I have discussed in this article have no fear of “cruising utopia,” to use José Muñoz’s formulation, but they seem wary of settling down with it.⁴¹ Perhaps they worry that to do so would expose them to accusations of being theoretically naive, rigidly programmatic, and historically backward, the now-classic critiques by which 1970s essentialism has been dismissed since the 1980s. But if fragile queer worlds are to have any hope of enduring, we may need to find ways to take our absurdity more seriously.

Notes

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1. The video can be viewed on K8 Hardy's YouTube page, www.youtube.com/user/k8hardy (accessed 11 November 2011).
2. In addition to the videos of Smith and Hardy, in this article I will discuss Liz Rosenfeld's *Untitled (Dyketactics Revisited)* (2005) and A. L. Burns and A. K. Steiner's *Community Action Center* (2010). This is by no means an exhaustive list of recent queer media works that reference cultural feminism. For example, the February 2012 Barbara Hammer retrospective at the Tate Modern brought together a number of other works of the past decade that are either explicitly or implicitly in conversation with Hammer's 1970s films, including Scott Berry's *Fagtactics* (Canada, 2002) and Kirstin Rossi's *SuperQueer* (US, 2006). See www.tate.org.uk/modern/eventseducation/film/barbarahammerseries.htm (accessed 20 February 2012). The recent wave of queer returns to 1970s cultural feminism is also by no means limited to media art. For example, Allyson Mitchell's various interdisciplinary projects around the notion of "Deep Lez" intersect with and likely helped to motivate some of the artworks discussed in this essay. See, for instance, her talk at the 2008 symposium "Art Institutions and the Feminist Dialectic" in Toronto, archived at feministdialectic.ca/en/ (accessed 9 March 2012).
3. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999); Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley, CA: Seal, 2008), in which Stryker discusses the 1970s as one of "the difficult decades" for transgender people (91–120); and Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (Boston: Beacon, 1979).
4. Barbara Hammer, "Use of Time in Women's Cinema," in "Lesbian Art and Artists," special issue, *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*, no. 3 (1977): 86–89. This essay and many of Hammer's other writings have been anthologized, and in some cases slightly revised, for her recent memoir/collection, *Hammer! Making Movies out of Sex and Life* (New York: Feminist

Press at CUNY, 2010). In the book, she provides an account of the making of *Dyketactics* (26–27). During my interview with her, Hammer told me about straight women who became lesbians after seeing the film (San Francisco, 28 June 2008).

5. For discussions of the construction and embrace of an essentialist “female sensibility” within 1970s feminist artmaking, see Lucy Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women’s Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976), 80–89; Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 10–83; and Amelia Jones, ed., *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s “Dinner Party” in Feminist Art History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
6. Andrea Weiss, *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 141–42; and Richard Dyer, “Lesbian/Woman: Lesbian Cultural Feminist Film,” in *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film* (London: Routledge, 1990), 174–210. Although Dyer discusses a few other works by feminist filmmakers in the 1970s, he devotes the bulk of the chapter to Hammer’s films.
7. Andrea Weiss, “Women I Love, Double Strength: Lesbian Cinema and Romantic Love,” *Jump Cut*, nos. 24–25 (1981): 30.
8. Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women’s Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 90.
9. Barbara Hammer, “An Interview with Barbara Hammer,” by Kate Haug, *Wide Angle* 20, no. 1 (1998): 75–76.
10. Claudia Gorbman, “Barbara Hammer’s Recent Work: Body Displaced, Body Discovered,” *Jump Cut*, no. 32 (1987): 12–14.
11. Hammer, interview by Haug, 76.
12. Alice Echols, “The Taming of the Id: Feminist Sexual Politics, 1968–83,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 50–72.
13. Redstockings, ed., *Feminist Revolution* (New Paltz, NY: Redstockings, 1975). Kathie Sarachild is listed as the main editor of the anthology. She and a few other members of the original Redstockings, which existed as a group from 1969 to 1970, collaborated with other feminists to reconstitute the group in

1975. In a piece in the anthology, titled “The Retreat to Cultural Feminism” (65–68), the writer referred to only as “Brooke” traces the term *cultural feminism* back further, to a self-identified socialist feminist who used it in a 1972 movement periodical to discredit radical feminists who were trying to transform “cultural” issues such as sex and housework into political issues. However, Brooke claims that since this early use of the term, “women who actually do have a non-political view of feminism” have adopted the label as a way to describe themselves (65).
14. Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 6.
 15. Echols, “Taming of the Id,” 67n3.
 16. Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 215–70.
 17. At least three other recent art-historical reflections on 1970s feminism eschew the terms of the essentialist versus constructionist (or cultural-feminist versus postmodern-feminist) debate by placing both camps together in one celebratory account: Joan Braderman’s 2009 documentary *The Heretics* (Italy/Spain/US), Lynn Hershman Leeson’s 2010 documentary *Women Art Revolution* (US), and the exhibition *Doin’ It in Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman’s Building*, on view at Otis College of Art and Design from 1 October 2011 to 26 February 2012. For other examples of positive reevaluations of 1970s feminism that have occurred in the art world over the last five years, see Michelle Meagher, “Telling Stories about Feminist Art,” *Feminist Theory* 12, no. 3 (2011): 299–300.
 18. In *Amerika They Call Us Dykes*, www.70slesbians.org/ (accessed 11 November 2011).
 19. Paraphrased in Lisa Weil, introduction to “Are Lesbians Going Extinct? Part 2,” special issue, *TRIVIA: Voices of Feminism*, no. 11 (2010), triviavoices.net/. The issue features transcripts, in some cases revised and expanded, of a number of presentations given at the conference. Similar material is anthologized in *Sinister Wisdom*, no. 82 (2011). For an account of the conference, see Emily Douglas, “Recovering ’70s Lesbian-Feminism, on Its Own

- Terms,” *Bilerico Project* (blog), 12 October 2010, www.bilerico.com/2010/10/recovering_70s_lesbian-feminism_on_its_own_terms.php. See also Clare Hemmings, “Telling Feminist Stories,” *Feminist Theory* 6, no. 2 (2005): 115–39. Hemmings analyzes two competing narratives, in many ways similar to Duggan’s, that shape feminist remembrance of the 1970s.
20. A. K. Burns and A. L. Steiner, “Community Action Interaction: An Interview with A. L. Steiner and A. K. Burns,” by Johnny Misheff, *Dis Magazine* (2010), dismagazine.com/discussion/9725/community-action-interaction/ (accessed 11 November 2011). On 26 March 2011, Burns and Steiner appeared with Hammer for a joint screening and conversation titled “The Hole Picture: An Intergenerational Dialogue on Erotics and Porn in Lesbian-Feminist Queer Cinema” at the Issue Project Room in Brooklyn. The event featured a screening of five of Hammer’s films from the 1970s—*Dyketactics*, *Menses*, *Multiple Orgasm*, *Women I Love*, and *Superdyke Meets Madame X*—followed by a screening of *Community Action Center*.
 21. Hammer told me this during my interview with her on 28 June 2008. Hammer’s first Super 8 films were made during her heterosexual marriage and sometimes present the nude, male body on-screen. In an interview published in the late 1990s, she recalls an early-1970s screening of these films at a lesbian coffeehouse in Oakland when many women walked out: “This kind of early doctrinaire, rigid feminism confronted me right away with the reaction to those early films” (interview by Haug, 86).
 22. In the early 1970s, Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro argued that women artists were naturally drawn to “central core imagery”: forms analogous to women’s subjective experience of themselves as “formed around a central core and hav[ing] a secret place which can be entered and . . . from which life emerges.” They promoted the conscious exploration and development of this imagery as a cornerstone of feminist art practice. Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago, “Female Imagery,” *Womanspace Journal* 1, no. 3 (1973): 11.
 23. Andrea Fontenot, “Full to the Brim: Passing Time with A. K. Burns and A. L. Steiner,” *Artillery*, September/October 2011, 64. For 1970s critiques of cultural feminism as a white women’s

- pursuit, see Audre Lorde, “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: Third World, 2002), 101–5; in the same collection, see also Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” 234–44; and Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith, “Across the Kitchen Table: A Sister-to-Sister Dialogue,” 123–40.
24. Hammer, “Use of Time,” 89.
 25. Margo Hobbs Thompson, “‘Dear Sisters’: The Visible Lesbian in Community Arts Journals,” *GLQ* 12, no. 3 (2006): 418, 421.
 26. For a detailed discussion of the film’s score, see Dyer, *Now You See It*, 198.
 27. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner define queer culture as a “world-making project,” in “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 558. A number of scholars have studied the relationship between queer world making and various types of performance. See, for instance, José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); and Benjamin Shepard, *Queer Political Performance and Protest: Play, Pleasure, and Social Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2010).
 28. Thomas Waugh, “Walking on Tippy Toes: Lesbian and Gay Liberation Documentary of the Post-Stonewall Period, 1969–1984,” in *The Fruit Machine: Twenty Years of Writings on Queer Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 250. For an engagement with and qualification of Waugh’s characterization of 1970s gay and lesbian filmmaking as inherently performative, see Greg Youmans, “D Is for Documentary,” in *Word Is Out: A Queer Film Classic* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 2011), 44–51.
 29. Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 92–106.
 30. See, for instance, the essays collected in Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004). Butler credits the shift in her work in part to the “New Gender Politics” that have arisen since the 1990s: “a combination of movements concerned with transgender, transsexuality, intersex, and their complex relations to feminist and queer theory” (4).

31. See, for instance, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You," in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Sedgwick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–40, reprinted in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–51.
32. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976); and Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 1–28.
33. See, for instance, Lucy Lippard, "Quite Contrary: Body, Nature, Ritual in Women's Art," *Chrysalis*, no. 2 (1977): 31–47; Gloria Feman Orenstein, "Recovering Her Story: Feminist Artists Reclaim the Great Goddess," in Broude and Garrard, *The Power of Feminist Art*, 174–89; Moira Roth, ed., *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America, 1970–1980* (Los Angeles: Astro Artz, 1983); and Jayne Wark, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America* (Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press, 2006). For a recent article that intervenes against the continued marginalization of Goddess art and spirituality within feminism, see Jennie Klein, "Goddess: Feminist Art and Spirituality in the 1970s," *Feminist Studies* 35, no. 3 (2009): 575–602.
34. Kay Turner, "Contemporary Feminist Rituals," in "The Great Goddess," special issue, *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*, no. 5 (1978, reissued 1982): 20–26.
35. Hammer's 1978 film *Double Strength*, which similarly traces the arc of a relationship from early passion to break up, probably comes closest to *Superdyke Meets Madame X* in form and affect; however, the film presents the embodied performances of its two women protagonists, Hammer and trapeze artist Terry Sendgraff, in a powerfully affirming, even enobling, way.
36. Catherine Elwes, *Video Art: A Guided Tour* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), 16. Rosalind Krauss based her influential argument that narcissism is the "medium of video" on this same quality of instantaneity. Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October*, no. 1 (1976): 50–64.

37. See, for instance, David Antin, "Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium," in *Video Art: An Anthology*, ed. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 174–83. Antin argues that video art is always in a critical relationship with television and by extension mainstream culture, and that this dynamic is not dependent on the artist intending or even understanding the relationship.
38. For examples of early video and its strong relationship to performance art, see the two video collections put out by Video Data Bank: *Surveying the First Decade: Video Art and Alternative Media in the US, 1968–1980* (US, 1995 [VHS], 2008 [DVD]) and *I Say I Am* (US, 1998 [DVD]). The latter is a compilation of women's performance videos from the 1970s. For recent discussions of the deconstructive and ironic play with identity in early feminist video practice, see Alisa Lebow, "Strategic Sentimentality: Nostalgia and the Work of Eleanor Antin," *Camera Obscura*, no. 66 (2007): 129–67; and Susan Richmond, "The Ins and Outs of *Female Sensibility*: A 1973 Video by Lynda Benglis," *Camera Obscura*, no. 69 (2008): 81–109.
39. I borrow these terms and distinctions from Victor Turner's "Liminality and Communitas," in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 94–130, as well as from his "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual," in *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 20–60.
40. Liz Rosenfeld, "Untitled (Dyketactics Revisited)," www.lizrosenfeld.com/?page=filmandvideo&work=9 (accessed 11 November 2011).
41. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

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Figure 7. Liz Rosenfeld, *Untitled (Dyketactics Revisited)*
(US, 2005). 16mm film and digital video. DVD still