

# “Lesbians Are Not Women”: Feminine and Lesbian Sensibilities in Harmony Hammond’s Late-1970s Sculpture

Margo Hobbs Thompson

**SUMMARY.** Harmony Hammond’s wrapped fabric sculptures are placed in context of the theories of gender and sexuality that circulated among lesbian and straight feminists at the time they were made, the late 1970s. Hammond has cited in particular Monique Wittig’s novels, such as *The Lesbian Body*, and her essays including “The Straight Mind,” where Wittig concludes that the lesbian is not a woman. The critique to which Wittig’s lesbian separatism has been subjected by Judith Butler in her consideration of the appeal and limitations of essentialism also applies to Hammond’s art. Hammond’s use of vaginal imagery was instrumental to visualizing a lesbian sensibility, but the proposition of such a sensibility established a new problematic: a new essential category. The article concludes that because Hammond’s work was produced in the context of a complex set of discourses, lesbian, feminist, and aesthetic, it resisted reduction to a singular meaning. Her sculptures avoided the pitfall of substituting one essence for another, lesbian for feminine sensibility, but activated both. The sculptures effectively queered vaginal imagery: When Hammond used vaginal imagery to represent lesbian sensibility, she subverted the equation of sex and gender and the essentialist notion of feminine sensibility.

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### I.

A painter, sculptor, feminist, and lesbian, Harmony Hammond selects her medium and process carefully to explore aesthetic and political issues in a visual language. In the late 1970s, like many feminist artists, Hammond employed abstracted vaginal forms to articulate her sense of herself as a woman and she extended the iconography to represent her lesbian identity as well. Vaginal imagery was a leitmotif of 1970s feminist art because it accomplished something meaningful and specific for its producer and audience. It was a visual symbol of feminine difference from the hegemonic masculine, and a sign of solidarity among women that supported common cause among straight and lesbian feminists. Inevitably, vaginal imagery participated in feminist analyses of the way women's bodies are represented in art and popular culture, and it signified subjective experiences of desire. It posed a dilemma for lesbian feminists, however: Because straight women and lesbians share the same female body, how could, or should, vaginal imagery represent a distinctly lesbian erotic trajectory instead of or in addition to its dominant content, the essential feminine?

Hammond had been involved in feminism since the beginning of the decade, and attributed her self-identification as a lesbian to that engagement: "I was an artist before I was a lesbian. I came out through my art and the feminist movement" (Hammond, 1980). She had treated feminist themes of domestic arts and crafts in her "Floorpieces" and "Presences" series of 1972–1973, and had actively encouraged lesbians to become more visible in the art world by curating the first "Lesbian Art Show" in 1978 at a SoHo gallery in New York. She was dismayed by the reluctance she perceived among lesbian artists to out themselves. Photographer Tee A. Corinne and filmmaker Barbara Hammer had made lesbian-themed work that was sexually explicit, but they carefully monitored their audiences. Corinne's best-known work, for example, a poster of a solarized photo of two women embracing that had been used for the cover of a lesbian-feminist journal, *Sinister Wisdom*, in 1977, was distributed through women's bookstores.

Hammond used a different strategy to reveal herself as a lesbian to a lesbian audience when she "came out through [her] art." Her abstract sculptures, fabric-wrapped constructions she began to produce in 1977,

often featured the centrally organized circular form typical of vaginal imagery, seen elsewhere in Hannah Wilke's *S.O.S. Starification Object Series* (1974) and Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* (1979). This iconography was privileged in feminist art because it pointed to women's essential sameness and implicitly argued for the suppression of differences of race, class, or sexuality among women. As a feminist political signifier, vaginal imagery was a marker of heterosexual difference, but Hammond set out to incorporate additional content. She claimed that the process by which she constructed her sculpture and its final form made it both lesbian and feminist. The context framing the work was crucial to this reading: it took a lesbian to see the lesbian subjectivity at work in Hammond's sculpture. That it addressed lesbians at all is what makes Hammond's work so important in the canon of 1970s feminist art: it acknowledged gender differences among feminists.

By using vaginal imagery to explore and elaborate what was "lesbian" about her art, Hammond undermined its conventional feminist associations to make it specifically address a lesbian audience. Yet Hammond's sculpture depends on the viewer's awareness of the artist's sexuality and her source material to read as lesbian art. This article will place Hammond's wrapped fabric sculpture in context of the theories of gender and sexuality that circulated among lesbian and straight feminists at the time of its production, particularly Monique Wittig's novels and essays, with which Hammond was familiar. The critique to which Wittig's lesbian separatism has been subjected by Judith Butler in her consideration of the appeal and limitations of essentialism also applies to Hammond's art. Hammond's use of vaginal imagery was instrumental to visualizing a lesbian sensibility, but the proposition of such a sensibility established a new problematic to be dismantled. She risked constructing a rigid lesbian identity to substitute for the straight feminine essence that vaginal imagery most commonly denoted.

## II.

Two principles informed Hammond's production of her fabric constructions. She believed that there was a quality of lesbianness that consisted of more than sexual desire for women, but influenced her entire sense of herself in the world. And she thought that this quality expressed itself materially in her art-making practice, not just the final form but the process by which she shaped her sculpture. Even when they are small in dimension,



FIGURE 1. Harmony Hammond, *Conch*, 1977. Fabric, wood, acrylic. 13 × 12 inches. Collection Rosemary McNamara, New York City.

the scale of her sculptures lends them a presence; they work on the viewer viscerally, like human bodies. Key to reading Hammond's wrapped work is its "haptic visuality," the relay it establishes between eye and hand.<sup>1</sup> The viewer encounters a piece visually and the surface texture and evidence of the means by which it was produced encourages continued attention to the sculpture's outermost details. The result is a synesthesia effect, the optical information producing a tactile sensation. Furthermore, this tactility is the justification Hammond uses to assert the sensuality, even eroticism of her sculptures, on account of the way it recapitulates two bodies touching, the viewer and the now-anthropomorphized artwork.

Hammond's intimately scaled sculpture *Conch* (1977; Figure 1) was made of scavenged rags wrapped around a wooden armature to build up

a pair of horizontally oriented, substantially upholstered and solid oval forms. The rosy tint of acrylic paint covering the fabric and the rounded, open shape is characteristic of vaginal imagery. By doubling the form, Hammond figuratively placed two vaginas side-by-side to represent allusively a lesbian pair. But although its surface is richly textured and elicits a tactile response in the viewer, *Conch* seems ambivalent in its abstract sensuality, lesbian or otherwise. Female sexuality was one aspect of what vaginal imagery represented, and Hammond adapted that formal language because lesbian identity was at least partly about sexuality. She insisted on a distinction, though: “Any art that is really about women’s sexuality as experienced by a woman is woman-centered. Yet often ‘women’s sexuality in art’ and art by lesbians are confused. They are not the same thing.” Although any art that was supposed to represent women’s sexuality contained the germ of a “lesbian feeling,” to Hammond’s mind art by lesbians was neither only nor always about sexuality (Hammond, 1984, p. 78). She thus tried to negotiate between acknowledging women’s desire for women in her work, and resisting making her work explicitly and reductively erotic.

Hammond isolated the oval element from *Conch* in two larger sculptures from 1979, *Adelphi* and *Durango* (Figures 2 and 3), both elaborately wrapped and covered with a skin of latex rubber rather than paint so that the colored fabric was visible and the production process was integral to the exterior surface. She revisited *Conch*’s doubled oval in the much larger *Radiant Affection* (1983–1984), whose brilliant gold and red fabric contributed to the imposing scale. She intended these elements, and the doubled ovals in *Swaddles* (1979), to occupy space assertively as solid, substantial bodies, for her an idealized lesbian presence.<sup>ii</sup> She experimented with other forms to represent her sense of being a lesbian, such as ladders in *Hug* (1978, Figure 4), *Hunkertime* (1979–1980), and *Duo* (1980); arches in *Sneak* (1977–1979); and multiple enclosing arms in *Kudzu* (1979, Figure 5), *Grasping Affection* (1981–1982), and *Kong* (1981). Several of these titles evoke the physicality that is so important to the artist’s notion of lesbian identity, such as *Hug* and *Grasping Affection*. *Kudzu* and *Kong* allude to forces of nature, the aggressive Southern weed and the giant ape who was Fay Wray’s literal handler, metaphors for the power of desire. Hammond clearly named her artworks so as to influence the viewer’s experience of them.

*Hug*’s pair of ladders, one large and iridescent pink-gold, the other small and a green so dark it is almost black, suggest of an affectionate bond in their arrangement, the smaller leaning on the larger one propped against the wall. The identical forms represent duplicate anatomies, two women



FIGURE 2. Harmony Hammond, *Adelphi*, 1979. Cloth, wood, gesso, latex, foam rubber, Rhoplex. 29 × 70 inches. Piece destroyed at artist's request.

together, although the ladder shape's association with the female body is hardly inevitable. The difference in size evokes dependency to convey a parental bond more easily than a sexual attraction. *Duo*, made a few years later, more directly and humorously alludes to a lesbian couple. One of the ladders plays a femme role in pink, strewn with faux pearls and decorative ruffles along its vertical edges, whereas the companion element is more butch, painted black with midnight-blue glitter. *Kudzu*'s seven-foot height and clasping arms make it at once menacing and seductive, a model of forbidden desire. Finally, *Sneak* comprises arch shapes that proliferate across the installation site. In 1978, *Sneak* was installed at the alternative museum P.S. 1 in New York, literally "coming out" of a janitor's closet and suggesting out-of-control multiplication as it took over all available space.<sup>iii</sup> The installation was essential for this reference to be invoked, though, and in other settings *Sneak* also resembles a herd of giant caterpillars.

There is an ambiguous quality to all these works—are they or are they not feminist or lesbian? Medium and production process were more important to Hammond than the vaginal image as she pondered how and where her identity as a lesbian surfaced in her sculpture; she found the taxonomy

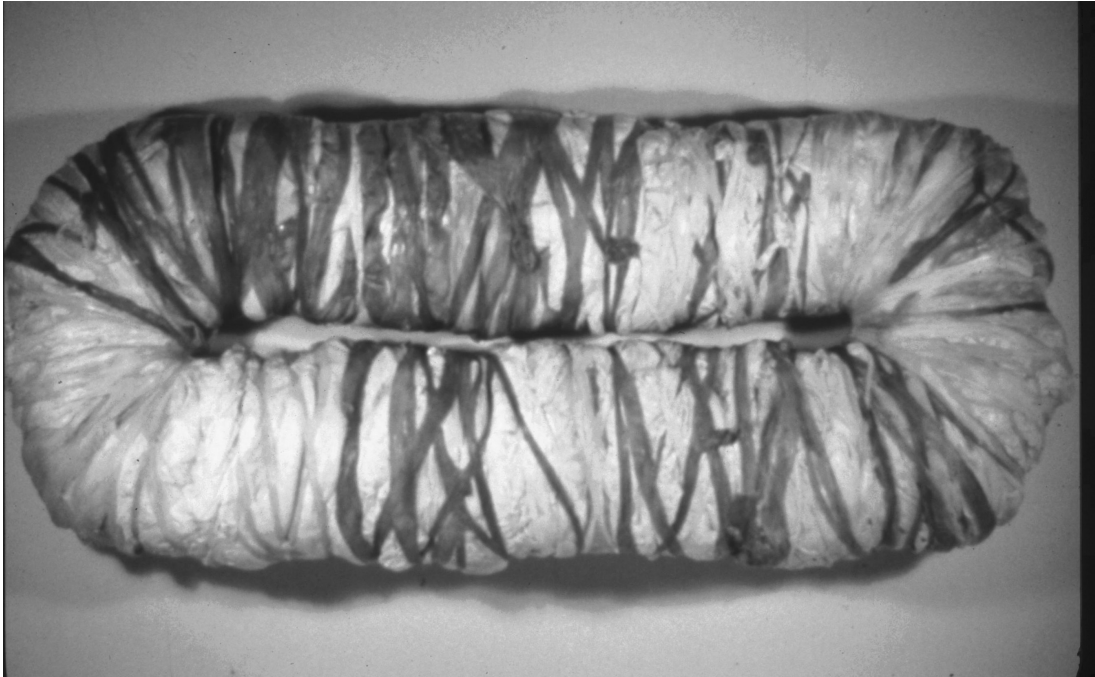


FIGURE 3. Harmony Hammond, *Durango*, 1979. Cloth, gesso, wood, latex, foam rubber, Rhoplex. 29 × 70 inches. Collection the Art Institute of Chicago.

of “shells, flowers, [and] fruits” associated with some vaginal imagery to be too limiting (Lippard, 1981). Instead, Hammond favored materials that retained the traces of direct manipulation to convey an erotic charge. The wrapped fabric strips, their folds and pleats, recorded Hammond’s repetitive hand movements and highlighted the medium’s tactility. Hammond eventually isolated this “sense of touch” as crucial to the identification of her sculpture with her experience as a lesbian (Hammond, 1984: 77–84). Tactility, while arguably sensual, is not an exclusively lesbian sensory register, of course, and Jackie Winsor and Eva Hesse were two of Hammond’s contemporaries who wrapped cord to bind forms that were neither erotic nor lesbian. Hammond’s assertion of lesbian content based on a connection between touch and lesbian experience must find support elsewhere. It depended on a contemporary feminist art critical discourse about feminine qualities in art.

The shorthand for the content Hammond claimed was “lesbian sensibility,” used widely in lesbian feminist publications. It was a term that seemed self-evident to lesbian feminists in the 1970s: it was that essence lesbians shared that makes them lesbians. Attempts to unpack the tautology



FIGURE 4. Harmony Hammond, *Hug*, 1978. Fabric, wood, acrylic. 64 × 29 × 14 inches. Collection Rosemary McNamara, New York City.





FIGURE 5. Harmony Hammond, *Kudzu*, 1980. Mixed media. 84.5 × 84.5 × 36.5 inches. Collection Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT.

by defining that essence were frustrated by vagueness, the result of trying to account for the diversity of individual lesbian experiences and perspectives, and by reluctance to allow lesbian experiences to be reduced to sexual preference and activities. Art historians Arlene Raven and Ruth Iskin, for example, cataloged the various manifestations of lesbian sensibility at the Los Angeles Woman's Building, such as scenes of lesbian domestic life, portrait photographs, videos of female "outlaws," and a shrine to a lesbian Great Goddess. In sum, Raven and Iskin wrote, "these artworks . . . explore the entire world from a lesbian/feminist point of view, and they create a new and wholly positive imagery, vision, and imagination inspired by a lesbian perspective" (1977: 20–21). Exactly what that "lesbian perspective" comprised remained just out of reach, even for these two perceptive, self-identified lesbians. The content of the works Raven and Iskin encountered at the Woman's Building was evidently either blatant or coded so as to be legible to a lesbian audience. Nevertheless, it resisted the critics' attempts to theorize a "sensibility" from some common motif or theme. Also notably absent from the "entire world" accessible to the "lesbian/feminist point of view" were images of lesbians having sex.<sup>iv</sup>

Hammond suggested that lesbian artists' inability to control the audience for their work was partly to blame for the dearth of explicitly sexual or erotic imagery produced for a lesbian audience (Hammond, 1994: 122). A lesbian might choose not to reveal her erotic desires in the art she showed publicly to avoid homophobic, misogynistic interpretations of her work and potentially severe career repercussions. Producing erotic images of women was also politically suspect: the feminist anti-pornography movement that gathered force in 1976 had heightened awareness of the power dynamics involved in the circulation and consumption of sexually explicit images of women. Hammond and other lesbian artists worried that images of women produced for lesbians' visual pleasure would be misused by male consumers as instruments of sexual objectification and oppression. As noted already, artists like Barbara Hammer and Tee A. Corinne who were determined to produce erotic art for lesbians, regulated their viewership, Hammer by choosing the venues in which her films were screened and Corinne by occasionally limiting her exhibitions to women only. But apart from such exceptions, the cost of policing against misuse was draining explicit sexuality from "lesbian" images and reconceptualizing the erotic apart from sexual desire, as Audre Lorde had done in her 1978 essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." Hammond pursued a divergent feminist model that acknowledged differences between women and did not disavow sexuality. She asked what made her sculpture "lesbian," not

only “feminine” or “feminist,” and how erotic desire played into that identification.

The empowered sexuality represented by vaginal imagery was conventionally presumed heterosexual by the end of the 1970s. Vaginal imagery had been invented (although some feminist artists claimed it naturally occurred in art by women) to signify difference from men. This posed an acute problem for an artist like Hammond who wanted to represent lesbian identity or differing sexual desires among women. The basis of that difference, sexuality, had to be included where gender difference alone had come to be symbolized by a vaginal form. Following Lorde by severing the erotic from desire so as to emphasize common bonds among women would not achieve Hammond’s ends. She found her solution in a fantasy novel, *The Lesbian Body*, by the French lesbian feminist Monique Wittig (Hammond, 1994: 122–123). Wittig’s fiction offered compelling narratives describing lesbian sexuality and her essays advanced a radical theory of gender that separated lesbians from the class of women. Inspired by Wittig, Hammond’s sculpture attempted to undermine—to lesbianize—the straight feminist associations of vaginal imagery by recuperating sexual desire in the interplay between process and form (Hammond, 1994: 122–123). Like Wittig, she took a heteronormative language, the visual lexicon of feminist art, and reworked it until it spoke to her experience as well.

### III.

Wittig used grammar counterideologically, marshalling her pronouns to liberate her characters from the normative, heterosexual linguistic matrix. In *The Lesbian Body*, she wrote about lesbians, not women. It is an episodic prose poem that vividly describes the dismemberment of lesbian bodies; it renders the lesbian body in pieces. The narrative takes place on an island inhabited by lesbians. It lyrically relates a series of violent vignettes in which a pair of lovers tear each other physically apart. The poetic flow is arbitrarily cut and interrupted by pages on which body parts are listed in capital letters: “THE PLEXUSES THE GLANDS THE GANGLIA THE LOBES THE MUCOSAE THE TISSUES THE CALLOSITIES THE BONES THE CARTILAGE THE OSTEOID . . .” (Wittig, 1986: 40). The written litany of organs and fluids, olfactory and tactile sensations, brought the lesbian body to mind without insisting on its wholeness or singularity.

As in her two previous novels, *The Opoponax* and *Les Guérillères*, Wittig experimented with pronouns to interfere with their gendering of the

subject. In *The Lesbian Body*, the first person, the speaking subject, was perturbed. The French “I,” “me,” and “my” were sliced by a virgule (for example, “j/e”). Thus the subject was shown split, Lacan’s moment of gendering graphically represented, by which Wittig denoted the heterosexualizing force of language. This violent insistence on space between the letters, within the pronoun figured Wittig’s claim for a space where she could formulate a new language in which she, the lesbian subject, would be reformed (Wittig, 1986: 10–11; Wittig, 1992: 82–89). A first-person narrator was expected to expose himself or herself in a text sooner rather than later, Wittig noted, and it made the reader uncomfortable when the normative revelation was deferred (Wittig, 1992: 79). It mattered which gender was revealed as speaking, because whereas the masculine subject was endowed with a universal, authoritative voice, the feminine subject was in contrast particular, gendered, sexualized, and diminished. This disempowering of the feminine subject occurred through language, Wittig observed, and so she resisted it grammatically and orthographically by inventing a lesbian “I” (“j/e”), a speaking subject whose splitting redoubled her authority so that it was the lesbian voice, not the masculine, that spoke universally, beyond gender<sup>v</sup> (Wittig, 1992: 87).

“You look at m/e, you do not stop looking at m/e” (Wittig, 1986: 41): Sight was only one of the modes of sensory exploration the lesbian lovers used to connect. Touch was at least as important:

*I have access to your glottis and your larynx red with blood voice stifled. I reach your trachea, I embed m/yself as far as your left lung, there m/y so delicate one I place m/y two hands on the pale pink bland mass touched it unfolds somewhat, it moves fanwise, m/y knees flex, I gather into m/y mouth your entire reserves of air. (Wittig, 1986: 68)*

As was smell:

The smell that escapes from m/e is noisome. You do not stop your nostrils. You do not exclaim with fright when at a given moment m/y putrescent and half-liquid body touches the length of your bare back. (Wittig, 1986: 20)

Wittig’s emphasis on non-visual sensory registers offered to Hammond a means to reconstruct a lesbian body out of sight but still perceptible. The author’s stress on tactility was reiterated in Hammond’s wrapped sculptures, which the artist said conveyed “a felt imagery rather than seen” (Wooster, 1979, p. 124). The surfaces of Hammond’s sculptures vary from

the thick satiny finish of *Hug*, to the scumbled matte paint of *Conch*, to the glossy translucent latex rubber coating of *Adelphi*. The appeal to the viewer's sense of touch was reinforced by the texture of the fabric strips. Raised stripes and rough pile in *Conch* evoke bed linens and towelings, whereas in *Adelphi*, twisted and braided strips and the contrasting colors of adjacent bands and layers direct the viewer's attention to the way the pieces of cloth touched each other.

Wittig sketched sexual encounters between the narrator and the beloved that were as brutal as they were passionate:

You lash m/e with your tail in your comings and goings, m/y face is struck on either side, m/y hands no longer able to raise themselves to protect m/y cheeks, all m/y scattered torn fragments are gathered by you and frenziedly devoured, *I* see you silently relish some flakes of m/y flesh in your teeth, *I've* done with watching you m/y eater of ordure m/y most nefarious one m/y so disquieting one. (Wittig, 1986: 64–65)

Wittig rejected Sapphic tropes constructed for straight male enjoyment, in which lesbians perform for an outsider's gaze. Wittig's protagonists intently and exclusively focused on each other. She also avoided the narrative conventions of the romance novel that were supposed to appeal to a straight female readership. Her lesbian lovers' couplings deliberately alienated the heterosexual reader by refusing to map lesbian desire onto heterosexual patterns. At the same time, Wittig powerfully expressed the profound erotic desire her protagonists experienced and enacted.

Hammond did not alienate her audience to the same extent, in that her sculpture was still legible according to mainstream art criticism. Outside the context of lesbian-feminist discourse, her sculptures could be simply described without regard for political or gendered content: for example, a review in *The New York Times* called *Conch* "macabre . . . [it] evokes thoughts of a mummy's putrefying bandage" (Shirey, 1980, p. 11). This was a grotesque comparison to be sure, and one could infer disgust at the abject female or maternal ("mummy") body, but to do so strays from the critic's merely descriptive intention. Even the feminist content of vaginal imagery could be soft-pedaled, as Ann-Sargent Wooster did in her *Art in America* review of Hammond's 1979 exhibition at Lerner-Heller Gallery in New York. Abstracting the anatomical referent by isolating and enlarging the oval shape produced "powerful emotional symbols, spiritual images," she wrote, but it did not suggest to her that Hammond was "trying to

establish an alternative iconography for women.” Wooster’s conclusion (Wooster, 1979, p. 124) flies in the face of Hammond’s intentions as well as denies her work’s participation in the movement in feminist art and criticism to establish a feminist iconography. Her assessment should not be judged to be mistaken, however. Wooster’s review makes clear that Hammond’s sculpture depends on its context for interpretation, and the feminist and lesbian sensibilities Hammond claimed for it were evident to viewers who were predisposed to search them out.

Where alternative iconographies for women were countenanced, in exhibition catalogs and feminist art journals, Hammond’s wrapped sculptures clearly fit the descriptions. Lucy Lippard listed traits she observed recurring in art by women in a catalog essay from 1973: “overall texture, often sensuously tactile and repetitive or detailed to the point of obsession; the preponderance of circular forms, central focus, inner space . . . layers, strata, or veils” (Lippard, 1976: 49). Ruth Iskin echoed Lippard four years later when she described an additive process and repetitive, slow, rhythmic gestures in some work by women; according to Iskin, however, these attributes were typical of art with a lesbian sensibility (Raven and Iskin, 1977: 24). For Hammond, wrapping layers of textured material marked time and opened a level of abstraction where sexuality could be suggested:

[A]bstraction offers the possibility of erotic art that bypasses the problematics of figuration. Instead of focusing on the figure with its fixed contour and impermeable surface of skin, abstraction opens up time and space, allowing us (other women/lesbians) to feel/respond sexually “in the body” (versus “to the figure”) to what we see. And since the lesbian gaze is not focused on the “image of orgasm” but rather on how it feels, it can avoid the male gaze and be extended indefinitely. (Hammond, 1994: 122)

Lippard and Iskin’s language supported a latent erotic charge: “sensuously tactile” and rhythmic repetition were suggestive observations, but the critics did not pursue them. Hammond was not so reticent about how she expected her ideal lesbian viewer to react to her sculpture. By manipulating her medium to direct the viewer’s attention away from the central voids and to the surfaces of *Durango*, *Adelphi*, and *Conch* and what they contain, Hammond avoided exploitative gazes while she produced pleasure and encouraged recognition of different sexualities in identical, female bodies.

For the viewer who had not been exposed to the debates among feminists over the existence of female imagery in art by women, Hammond’s

sculpture registered as a form of process art: its means of production were visible in its final form. For the feminist viewer who disagreed that women's art had unique characteristics based on her awareness of her body, Hammond's vaginal forms would seem tendentious. Others would find the equation of femaleness with having a vagina a reductive reiteration of patriarchal ideology. Isolating the vagina fragmented the female body, it was true, and so Hammond and Wittig both worked to redirect the viewer's or reader's attention to include the rest of the body, its surface and interior. When Wittig dismembered the lesbian body in her prose, she contested the notion of genitally organized sexuality that maintained that a woman's erotic pleasure was centered on her reproductive capabilities, signified by the vagina. In *The Lesbian Body*, desire proliferated across and through the body, destroying the sexed, female body in which pleasure was confined to the genitals. Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, reads *The Lesbian Body* as an anti-essentialist text that offered a way to represent the female body while simultaneously challenging categories of sex and gender. Wittig's lesbian body was an incoherent female body, and Butler wrote that the book registered Wittig's disagreement with "those who would defend the notion of a 'specifically feminine' pleasure, writing, or identity; she all but mocks those who hold up the 'circle' as their emblem" (Butler, 1990: 126). By this account, Wittig would be appalled at vaginal imagery for its reification of heterosexual difference and its reiteration of the body as at once sexed and feminine. Had Hammond misconstrued *The Lesbian Body*?

A wrapped circular shape like *Durango* traced a vaginal form, to be sure, but more significantly for Hammond the medium and process of its production "[conveyed] the interior female body—the muscle, tissue, membrane, fluid body" (Hammond, 1994: 123). Hammond patiently built up the form, wrapping scraps of fabric by hand, gauging their tension and smoothing them flat. The attention she devoted to the sculpture's insides corresponded to Wittig's protagonists' impassioned explorations of muscles, internal organs, and fluids. *Durango* and *Adelphi* were "specifically . . . places where my lover and I met, and touched," she wrote in a 1980 artist's statement (Hammond, 1980). Hammond covered *Durango*'s surface with latex rubber and Rhoplex to form a skin-like membrane on top of the wrapping, enhancing the bodily metaphor. Like Wittig, she "created a raw, passionate and sometimes violent sexuality, a body (re)membered and whole, taking up a space beyond its physical space. Beautiful and powerful" (Hammond, 1994: 123). Wittig's novel offered Hammond a way to think about representing sexuality without relying on vision alone by engaging other senses, especially touch. *The Lesbian Body* enabled Hammond to devise a strategy

that refined her aesthetic concerns to incorporate allusions to lesbianism through her art-making process rather than by representing vaginal forms. It supported her conclusion that “a sense of touch” was the location for the “lesbian feeling” that she believed was present in all art by women that treated women’s sexuality (Hammond, 1984: 80–82). The sculpture reified two sensibilities, lesbian and feminine, neither of which replaced the other.

#### IV.

Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, questioned the value of identity politics, such as a feminism founded on a common female anatomy, which limited the imagination and foreclosed radical change. Hammond, while seeking to evoke lesbian sensibility, managed to represent dual identities—lesbian and feminine—while following existing codes of feminist art. There were tensions and disagreements between lesbians and straight women in feminist political activism. These motivated Lorde to theorize the erotic as a unifying force, not a divisive one, and Adrienne Rich (1979) to propose that the “lesbian in us” is the font of women’s creativity. Hammond’s sculpture in fact resisted collapsing the categories of lesbian and woman. Because Hammond was concerned with articulating lesbian experience and desire, simply to deploy vaginal forms would not be adequate, even if that imagery had not already been claimed by straight feminists. Representing lesbian difference, her sculpture articulated the refusal to perform femininity that Wittig attributed to lesbians in her 1978 political tract, “The Straight Mind.” That is, it established a polarity between lesbians and women as much as between women and men. Hammond wrote in retrospect that Wittig’s essays were “controversial” for their separatist tone, which struck a vivid contrast with Lorde’s assimilationism, but they broke ground for elaborating the discourse surrounding the body, sex, gender, and sexuality through the 1980s (Hammond, 1994: 105–106). Hammond’s artworks, like Wittig’s polemics, were radical political gestures that undermined heterosexual hegemony.

Butler discussed “The Straight Mind” and related essays as part of her “*feminist genealogy* of the category of women,” and as with *The Lesbian Body* she found strengths and weaknesses in the essays that also bear on Hammond’s sculpture (Butler, 1990, p. 5). For Wittig, Butler wrote, sex was always marked as feminine and reciprocally “women become suffused with sex,” while masculinity was universalized (Butler, 1990: 113). Wittig’s lesbian was already unsexed by virtue of her location



outside the Straight Mind—the ideological system of compulsory heterosexuality—not-woman but also not-man; although she inhabited the masculine position of the authoritative speaking subject, she did so as a lesbian (Butler, 1990: 115). Compelling as Wittig's theory was, Butler found it flawed in its assumption that the lesbian can exist somehow beyond gender, with the result that gender itself becomes impossible as constructed according to normative heterosexuality. Butler suggested instead that while heterosexuality was normative, even compulsory and violently enforced, it was also an ideal that is “intrinsically impossible to embody”: “I would offer this insight into heterosexuality as both a compulsory system and an intrinsic comedy, a constant parody of itself” (Butler, 1990: 122). Lesbians and gay men subverted compulsory heterosexuality by “appropriating and re-deploying categories of sex,” as for example when a lesbian femme describing her attraction to butch partners clarified for Butler that “she likes her boys to be girls”: in butch identity, masculine tropes were seized, reworked, and liberated from association with the male body (Butler, 1990: 123). Likewise, Hammond took the form by which feminist artists had represented feminine difference and loosened the heterosexual assumptions attached to it.

Did Hammond make the same conceptual misstep Butler attributed to Wittig, setting up straight and lesbian as mutually exclusive categories? Did she simply substitute one essence for another, lesbian for feminine? Hammond certainly risked doing just that: she showed some of the sculpture discussed here in a group exhibition where the artists' sexuality was a decisive criterion for inclusion, “The Great American Lesbian Art Show.” Her artist statement in the show's catalog insisted on her works' lesbian content: “*Adelphi* and *Durango* are lesbian places. They refer to sensuous times and spaces between women. Making visible what has been hidden.” (Hammond, 1980). But where her work was mentioned in the few reviews of GALAS, there was no discussion of lesbian sensibility much less sexuality as significant to the works' meaning (Menzies, 1980; Muchnic, 1980). The usually eloquent feminist critic Lippard was left at a loss when analyzing Hammond's large wrapped sculptures. Throughout her essay on them, Lippard relied on Hammond's interpretations and statements of intent, which coincided closely with Lippard's own chief interests, class conflict and feminism. Lippard knew she was missing something, but could not put her finger on it: she confessed that while she sensed the political valence of the works, her critical vocabulary was inadequate to the task of explaining its nature. Still, she did not extend her analysis to consider sexuality as the basis for the works' politics (Lippard, 1981).

In a prescription that has guided this article, art critic Cassandra L. Langer proposed that Hammond's work must be situated in a lesbian-feminist discourse to be properly understood (Langer, 1983:122–123). By taking this approach, Langer and Arlene Raven in separate essays demonstrated that Hammond conveyed both lesbian and feminine essences at once, erotics and identity politics, when the viewer was cued to be receptive by context or knowledge of the artist's intention. Raven wrote of *Duo*:

A ruffle is stitched along each side of one. She is the female form, any one of us in that time of our lives when we are suddenly to be "feminine." After all she has pink skin of/over gesso (the traditional paint skin), cloth, acrylic, wood, rhoplex, glitter, beads . . . the baby in pink ruffled blanket and cap, or adolescent blushing with pink and painted pink with first lipstick. . . . The erotic quality and potential of this form are already characterized by the discomfort of the dichotomy it contains—the juxtaposition of a woman's real, naked body with imposed ideas of standardized "femininity." (Raven, 1988: 36)

Raven confirmed that Hammond's sculptures embodied a feminist consciousness and invited the viewer to recognize their erotic power. She referenced Wittig later in the essay, comparing the "raw sensuousness" in *Les Guérillères* with Hammond's *Kudzu*, whose imposing presence was enhanced by the limb-like appendages that threatened to embrace or entrap the viewer. *Kudzu* and the other works of this period were like "monsters . . . symbols and metaphors for the wildly sexual Lesbian" (Raven, 1988: 39). They were political to the extent that they challenged masculine culture, "modern technology," and the "civilized world" with their powerful, unbridled "erotic nature" (Raven, 1988: 40). The erotic that Raven discovered in Hammond's sculpture incorporated both the identity politics of Lorde's female solidarity and the violent, sexual aspects of Wittig's lesbian protagonists.

Hammond's late-1970s sculptures avoided the pitfall of substituting one essence for another, lesbian for feminine sensibility. Because her work was produced in the context of a complex set of allegiances and influences, lesbian, feminist, and aesthetic, it resisted reduction to a singular meaning while it depended on discourse for its content. Hammond's wrapped sculptures effectively queered vaginal imagery: she appropriated its empty oval shape while using a medium and process that drew attention away from the abstracted anatomical form to the tactile surface, so that it was in her words more "felt" than "seen." When Hammond used vaginal imagery to

represent lesbian sensibility she subverted the equation of sex and gender and the essentialist notion of feminine sensibility. As Wittig lesbianized her first-person narrator in *The Lesbian Body*, Hammond lesbianized vaginal imagery and rendered it capable of representing her experience of herself.

## NOTES

- i. On tactility in art and its feminist uses, see Laura U. Marks, "Video Haptics and Erotics," *Screen*, 39(4) (1998), 331–347.
- ii. Personal communication from Hammond, undated letter, summer 2005.
- iii. Conversation with Hammond, March 20, 2005, Galisteo, NM.
- iv. For a discussion of the scarcity of explicitly sexual images of lesbians in the 1970s, see Jan Zita Grover, "Dykes in Context: Some Problems in Minority Representation." In Richard Bolton, ed. *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990: 163–202.
- v. In the English translation, "j/e" is rendered *I*, with italics standing for the impossible virgule.

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- . 1977–1979. *Sneak*. Cloth, wood, gesso, acrylic. 13 units, each approx. 39 × 36 inches. Collection Harmony Hammond.
- . 1978. *Hug*. Cloth, wood, acrylic. 64 × 29 × 14 inches. Collection Rosemary McNamara, New York City. (Figure 4)
- . 1979. *Adelphi*. Cloth, wood, gesso, latex, foam rubber, rhoplex. 29 × 70 inches. Piece destroyed at artist's request. (Figure 2)
- . 1979. *Durango*. Cloth, gesso, wood, latex, foam rubber, rhoplex. 29 × 70 inches. Collection the Art Institute of Chicago. (Figure 3)
- . 1979. *Kudzu*. Cloth, metal, acrylic. 84.5 × 84.5 × 36.5 inches. Collection Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT. (Figure 5)
- . 1979. *Swaddles*. Cloth, wood, gesso, rhoplex, latex rubber. 80 × 90 inches. Denver Art Museum.
- . 1979–1980. *Hunkertime*. Cloth, wood, acrylic, metal, rhoplex, latex rubber. 9 units varying heights, 60–83 inches. Approx. 18 feet wide. Collection Harmony Hammond.
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