

NYFAI-

Interview: Barbara Hammer interviewed by Flavia Rando

Date: October, 2nd, 2006

B.H. Test, test, test, this is Barbara Hammer, It is October 2nd, Yom Kippur, day of atonement and therefore I am going to atone to the New York Feminist Art Institute.

Testing.

F.R. Thank you Barbara. So I guess we could begin by just sort of sketching out your time and involvement and what your involvement was like with NYFAI.

B.H. O.. I'm primarily a filmmaker, I also work in video and I've done performance and installation. I identified myself as a west coast artist for many years because that's where I did my early work. I was involved with The Women's Building in Los Angeles for many years. I did performances there, I showed films, and I taught classes. But, I never lived in L.A. So this was usually a drive down to a 6 week film class in the summer from San Francisco where I . In the early eighties, I decided to move to New York. I wanted to further my career. And I felt like San Francisco was wonderful but it was small. And, I was at the top of my game and I would be pushed to do more critical thinking if I moved to New York, and my work would advance. So, I decided to do that. And I did move. And when I got here, I looked for a place where I could continue to teach, and a group of women who I could mingle with, and who would be supportive of me, and whose work I could appreciate.

F.R. How did you find NYFAI?

B.H. How did I find NYFAI? Well, I moved here in about '82 or '83 and I started teaching out of my own studio, which was a loft that I rented from Babette Mangoldt, the filmmaker, on Greenwich Street at Chambers The class would meet in my loft and then we'd go across the street where there was a park and we'd film whatever we had scripted. Well, that was awfully close to the New York Port Authority on Spring Street. And, I don't know if I saw a poster or I used to always read the Village Voice to see what was happening. Or maybe I saw a listing in another downtown press, maybe it was the New York Press or something like that, I'm sure I saw something listed . . .

F.R. So you didn't have a personal connection?

B.H. No, I didn't know anybody.

F.R. Many people who really spent time at NYFAI came through some sort of personal connection.

B.H. No, I didn't know anyone at NYFAI that I remember. I'm sure I went to one of their open houses and met people and asked if I could teach there because one of the things that I didn't like about teaching out of my studio was the administrative work. Posting the signs, receiving the phone calls, telling people what to bring, what the class would be like, over and over and over. You know, when you teach at a school, other people handle that. So I made the class in a way that I would charge a little bit more so that NYFAI could take their part and I would still get what I was used to getting, which was very little when we look back at the records. So I started teaching there . . . and Nancy Azara who ran the Feminist Art Institute was kind enough just last week to look up the dates for me, in the old catalogues and tell me when I taught and what classes I taught. That was very helpful in terms of jogging my memory. And, I was around more than my classes. I would go to events and maybe I was there when they honored Louise Nevelson, I think I was.

F.R. That was the very first.

B.H. Was it the first? What year was it?

F.R. '79, I think.

B.H. Oh, I don't think I was there then. No, because I hadn't moved here yet. Although, I came to New York sometimes.

F.R. Louise Bourgeois perhaps?

B.H. Maybe, what was that?

F.R. I don't know. But that happened later on.

B.H. NYFASI served a purpose for me, but it was really different from the Women's Building in Los Angeles. The women there owned the whole structure, the whole building I think. . . or maybe they rented it. It was very high power. There were women working there all the time . . . working in the printshop, there was a store where you could buy items that were made by feminist artists, or old clothes. There were events happening all week. . . huge spaces to perform in. There was Chrysalis, the magazine, was published there by Shiela deBretville and Arlene Raven. It was a model of theory and practice and the NY Feminist Art Institute was more disjointed, and more

educational. They were both support systems from women, that is totally true, and given the kind of classes that I've experienced as a young filmmaker, or a painter, when I studied painting and film in colleges we needed that support. We were not treated well, and still today one runs into sexism in the film industry regularly.

F.R. Really.

B.H. Yeah, it happened to me last week. I'm making a DVD of "DYKETACTIONS and other 1970s Films" for the WACK! Show at MOCA in Los Angeles. The guy who was transferring them said, "I'm having a hard time looking at this. It's turning me on." He's looking at nude women from my films from the seventies and getting aroused from it not knowing how to deal with it. And I had to sit there with it, or else walk out and start a whole new process with some other industrial film house that does this kind of work which would be full of men too. So I tried to say things like, "These are not for voyeurism. One can't voyeur these women, these women are active." . . . Just the kinds of things that I used to talk about at feminist shows in the early years of the 70's. I'm thinking after I get my master tape writing a letter to the head of the company (who was cloyingly sweet to mean, who I didn't like either). It's just very hard to be taken seriously, still, in the early twenty-first century. It's rather shocking.

F.R. And if it's difficult for us, for young women . . .

B.H. Even more difficult. I mean if men didn't recognize me in the film, I mean, here I am sixty-seven and when I shot the films that he was looking at, I was thirty years old. At one time I had a buzz cut he called the camera person, who was nude, who was me, a man. . . "Oh, look what the man's doing with the camera."

Let's get back to the NY Feminist Art Institute. I was disappointed. that it as big and as vibrant and vital as the Los Angeles Woman's Building.(is it Woman's Building?) But it served a purpose and it was something in a city that didn't have many opportunities for women artists to get together.

F.R. What do you think the strength of NYFAI was?

B.H. The strength of NYFAI I think I heard last week when a group of old NYFAI'ers got together and talked about their experiences. I saw women who in the past felt insecure about their work . . . find support through their teachers, through their mentors. I think that was the strength overall. It was where they could feel that they were artists,

and they could get validation for their art, rather than having to compete in the larger system which is male dominated. I don't know. I think it served it's purpose but I'm not sure it served art. We had our moment in time and in art history as feminist artists. But that moment quickly passed. You know, we can't repeat doing circles and goddesses.

F.R. By "we" do you mean feminist artists or NYFAI?

B.H. Feminist artists.

F.R. O.k.

B.H. Feminist art as movement had its period.

F.R. But don't you think that even saying that sort of narrowly defines how we're going to think about feminist art?

B.H. It does, maybe it's too narrow.

F.R. And that particular definition of feminist art really never quite deserved.

B.H. Theoretically it became vocabulary for the queer movement, the black movement and now the trans-gendered movement. Psycho-analysis . . . and feminism are malleable ideas that can be adapted to different forms. But in terms of visual imagery, or modes of making work, process oriented, ovular, circular, fem-centered, that became too literal and too confining.

F.R. Do you think that was part of what was happening at NYFAI, is that why you bring that up?

B.H. Probably. Merlin Stone was very important to me for a year but five years later there were still women studying the goddess . I was in Baghdad in 1963 and looking and seeing little figurines that I deciphered as goddesses.

F.R. Very fortunate.

B.H. Yeah, very fortunate. You don't want to get caught. The women's movement can become an entrapment as well as a liberating force. Movements need to grow and change and take part in the larger discourse. And, I don't think there were that many theoretical voices at the time. If it could have been like the Whitney study program, where young artists are trained to talk about their work theoretically as well as make it and their work then can benefit from the kind of ideas that were being engaged in at the time or now, the work would be stronger. It would be fluid, it would move, and there would be . . . it wouldn't be a period of art history then like the way I was talking about it. It would

continue to be a vital force. I mean abstract expressionism, how many years? 10? I don't know. That was a vital force. Then there was Post-abstract, and then we had Pop. F.R. Well, I think really, the Feminist Art movement does have that. I really do. I think this is completely aside from NYFAI. That the feminist art movement has developed and has had generations of art that have developed critically. And many visual artists, in fact . . . as you speak about your work, many visual artists can speak or write in a very complex manner about their work and about the sources . . . But I think that what you might be referring to, is that NYFAI had many students, and really had many students who were at a very beginning stage, and needed basic support to bolster the idea that they could be artists as women. That seems to be . . . How did you find your film students?

B.H. Very eager, very appreciative, very eager to use equipment, to learn about equipment, to take direction, to bring in their ideas and they were forthright and they were very group oriented. I didn't have a feel of competition with them. They were naïve in terms of equipment and in terms of ideas. The work produced wasn't . . . I mean, it was how to make a film so we had to work on something and finish it in 6 weeks. So it's whatever dream or idea took shape and the group got behind it. But it wasn't to make art. That wasn't the point of the class. The class was to make a film. They met for 6 weeks, or even a semester but without context. They're not going to other classes where they're studying the history of film, what women have brought to film. The most you could do is make a communal project.

F.R. Did you ever think of documenting that in any way?

B.H. No, it just occurred to me. I wasn't really interested in NYFAI very much once I was disappointed. I think it was wonderful for a lot of people, but I wasn't in the place where I needed that support. And it didn't offer me a mentor.

F.R. Even though there were artists who were your peers that were teaching.

B.H. I never got together with them. Like Harmony Hammond, somebody whose work I respect and did respect . . . I sublet her loft, but we never became friends, we never socialized. Betsy Damon and I did, I don't know if she taught there . . . performance artist.

F.R. I don't believe she did.

B.H. Susan Kleckner and I are friends, I don't know if she taught there. But, the people who had advanced in the art world, like Harmony Hammond, didn't seem to have time for me. They seemed closed off. You know, already established. I was a new person, from the west coast too, that's bad.

F.R. O.k. I didn't realize that was bad. In other words, the NYFAI didn't cure it's participants of every little art-world response that they had been inculcated with.

B.H. No, and who knows. I don't really know the life of the artist we're speaking of at this time. A lot of people already feel fixed socially when you enter into their life in your forties. They already have their friendship circle, you don't really easily move into that.

F.R. I think that's true. Now, NYFAI was a feminist art institute. How did the issue of sexuality and lesbian and queer work there?

B.H. Well, I always identified as a lesbian feminist., I always put 'lesbian' first. I thought that if it's a feminist art institute, it is also, a good part of it about lesbian feminism, or at least 10 % or 20 %. But, you didn't see hide or hair of it. There were no classes that mentioned . . . the word queer wasn't born yet. But you heard no classes about lesbian art making, lesbian dreams, lesbian sexuality in art . . . all those things that are crucial . . . lesbian identity, lesbian representation . . . all the kinds of work that was happening in L.A. that culminated in the big lesbian art show there. I don't know what year that was.

F.R. '82.

B.H. '82, so I'm teaching here in '83. Why isn't there a lesbian art class? I thought there was homophobia. There must be a percentage of us who are gay. I wasn't encouraged to come out. The lesbian part of me didn't feel celebrated in any form. I ask myself, well, why didn't I bring it up? Perhaps I could have said, I wanted to teach a class in lesbian sexuality and that's what our class will be whether it's film or not. But, I didn't. I don't remember ever doing that so,

F.R. Do you know why?

B.H. I don't think the atmosphere excited it. I also thought there was some class bias but these were words we didn't use back then . . Charlotte Bunch knew about class, but the rest of us middle class white girls didn't. We weren't aware of class the way we are today. Even if the board was diversified towards the end of the NYFAI experience, all of

us were racist and classist, and it's institutionalized in us. But, I did see class at that time, because I didn't understand the money that could run the school, I didn't understand where it came from. It wasn't spoken of or published out there to tell us, and that was part of feminism, is showing the whole process and where things come from. That felt closed and I didn't like that.

F.R. I myself was totally focused on lesbian activism and lesbian art, so I didn't have much to do with NYFAI.

B.H. Oh, that's warranted. Oh, because I was wondering why you weren't involved, you told me you weren't. I didn't know if you weren't interested in art at that time or what.

F.R. But it's interesting because I gave a talk on Thursday at NYU about the early years of lesbian activism and right away students asked me about what role did class play, how did race function, who were we exactly? So, sharp, it was really good.

B.H. Yeah, what class were you in?

F.R. They have a student services for aging teens and they invited me to speak to them. So, it was a wide range of graduate students.

B.H. I know there was someone there who was discontent, her name was Priscilla Green, and she worked as a secretary to Nancy or NYFAI, I believe. And, she would be a great source if you can find her because she was vocal about her discontent with the institute. And, she was closer because she was working for them. She was paid. She lived in the same building and on the same floor as me when I sublet a loft from Harmony Hammond. The building was a flow through and I think it had another loft and I think it was in the front on 22nd street. Do you know that wonderful space? It was a great year to be there. I did a lot of wonderful work there. We weren't aware of class were we? Were you aware?

F.R. Well, early eighties? I was somewhat aware. I come from a working class background . . . immigrant parents. But, I didn't know what it meant, I just knew that it nearly affected me. I also knew that . . . you know, as radical lesbians, I think we've gotten sort of a rep as a somewhat wide exclusive group, we weren't and we sort of hashed it out quite a lot. And, it's in a very not knowledgeable way, but we tried. I don't think we did a great job, but we tried. I think only now am I coming to terms with class and race and what it really means. And, how it's really impacted my life. And I think the

irony that I've learned from doing these interviews is that money was a huge problem. But I guess that was kept separately from the classroom atmosphere. I really don't know. It sounds like it was kept very, very separate.

B.H. Well, one time, I am reminded of a performance that I did at NYFAI. And, I don't remember what the class was or why we were gathered but there were women seated in a circle. And, I have it documented in my film "Tender Fictions" which is a post-modern auto-biography/ I'm running around in back of them taking off a white jacket underneath of which is a shirt I made for a film in 1975 called "Super Dyke" and I'm wearing a little red headband around my head in Indian fashion and I'm proclaiming . . . I don't know if I'm reading from a script in my hand, I think I am . . . as I'm running around this group. And I know it's about coming out. I know it's about trying to infuse lesbian spirit into the New York Feminist Art Institute. That is very clear in my mind, except that I don't know the exact words. So, for me having to do that, I must have felt that it was restrictive and closed and not open to this expression. Because I always try to find those areas and pry.

F.R. See, and I tend just to sort of back away in a certain way . . . which I was beginning to recognize that about myself.

B.H. Yeah, I was going to make that talk about class and not middle class, although my father, even though he is college educated, worked at a gas station for most of of my youth because of the depression Well, one can talk about class historically but I always wanted to break away from ine. I didn't like middle-class. It was too nice. And things were hidden and not talked about. And I always thought that working class was where you used your mouth on the street and where you fought for the best pickle.

F.R. Well, don't you think that's a bit of a mythology there?

B.H. Yes. (laughter). And the working class shall free themselves. But I had no hesitation to try to disrupt niceness and politeness. And the New York Feminist Art Institute was polite, and it was nice, and it was tidy and it was skirted, no butches.

F.R. Do you think there was a sense that it was always sort of at risk, and that's why this happened? That somehow this made it safer?

B.H. Yeah, I do. I do. I thought that New York was much less progressive in politics than the west coast . . . maybe not in terms of art, but in terms of social movements, and

ways to be. There are a lot more rules here. You just took your time to meet somebody, and you had to have coffee before you had lunch. There is more formality on the east coast than there is on the west coast, still. And it was a more formidable city to make an institution in, and to make it viable, make it exist. I thought that was protective, that was the reason, because I saw the leaders . . . they were lesbians. As far as I knew they were sleeping with women if we define 'lesbian' that way, Tee Corrine's genital definition of lesbian. I was aware of that, and maybe I didn't shout louder or try to do those classes because of that. Nobody was doing that. It was much later in life until you could teach queer studies on campus and it's everywhere now. (*addendum: Memory does not always serve me well for I recently found a flyer for a class on Lesbian Film that Andrea Weiss and I taught at the NYFAI.)

F.R. Yeah, I realized as I was giving this talk that so much of the early radical lesbian movement and radical gay movement had so much to do with the appropriation of space in New York. We appropriated buildings, we got keys to empty buildings, we rented buildings for a dollar. I mean we were all over downtown . . . 6 locations, including one where the only thing really left of the building intact were the floors, but not quite intact. There were big holes down to the next floor. There were no walls, and without that I don't know if we could have done some of the things that we did because we desperately needed a gathering space, a communal space.

B.H. I remember showing my films at the Fire House in Chelsea and Gretta Schiller, of "Gretta and Andrea," helped set me up and got me a projector to use and even went and got her own when a bulb burnt out. And that's where the Town Lesbian Feminists met, 22nd street wasn't it?

F.R. That's right. 22nd street, the firehouse, I think we rented it for a dollar from the city.

B.H. It's a great space.

F.R. With de-acession by us, now somebody lives in it.

B.H. Of course. I miss those days, that time. I miss that radical period and the lesbian café life. I mean that's still going but everything . . . doesn't have the rawness and the danger to it.

F.R. Well, I think that young people do find a place for that. And that the danger lies in other arenas, although I would be hard pressed to exactly say. They used to do zines, now they do things online. But I don't know that that's quite the same as face-to-face.

B.H. No, I'm going to get my notes on the classes that I taught.

F.R. So the classes that you actually did teach were?

B.H. Oh, well one class that Andrea Weiss and I taught in September of '85 was a one night lecture screening. It was intensive. Maybe it was during the day, I don't know if it was just the night. And it was a film-screening and dialogue on lesbian sensibility, aesthetics and representation in film. Eat my words. We showed the films of Jan Oxenberg, Susan Browstein, Sally Potter, Barbara Hammer . . . and Andrea Weiss, of course, went on to write the book on lesbian film, *Vampires & Violets* (Penguin, 1993).. We asked our class to bring their own films, super8 and 16mm for screening and discussion.

F.R. They were all films that had a lesbian theme?

B.H. They were all films that they wanted to show in the class. It was either one day or one evening. The hours . . . one day, May 18th, a full day. So that sounds really good.

F.R. It does.

B.H. So, that was September '85. . . so that was later because I started teaching there in the Spring of '83. So it was two years later when I probably felt more comfortable and maybe we were going for broke . . . because that is what we wanted to work on.

F.R. But something kept you there for the two years in-between.

B.H. The administration . . . I mean I don't want to lie, it's the truth. It's easier to teach if somebody organizes the space for you, takes in the money, interviews the students, says that the class is full, tells them what the class is, it's all printed, they can pick up the brochure. They don't even need to talk to somebody. That was so much easier than phone calls and putting up posters all over town and Xeroxing them. I have some of those posters by the way. So when I get my archive organized the flyers will be accessible., In the Spring of '83, I taught a 16mm filmmaking class from 6:30 to 9:30 on Friday nights: "We will script, shoot, A/B roll, and complete a film for only 25 dollars. 7 in the class. We would shoot in black and white and I would teach them scripting, shooting and editing. Really this is much more advanced. When you teach now, you

might have a whole class on scripting. Then you might learn how to shoot and edit within one semester. Next semester you learned how to A/B roll, mix the sound and come to a finished film. I can't believe we did it all.

F.R. Although obviously it's possible.

B.H. Yes it is.

F.R. Did the students come to you with knowledge already?

B.H. No. Most of them didn't, no. Some of them shot super8. . . .Some of them had shot 16 and they were looking for the some kind of support and community and energy. I wrote down, or Nancy read to me, that some of the classes met at NYFAI in Tribeca. So that was when it was on Franklin Street, and some meetings met at my loft. Which was Greenwich Street in Tribeca where I was subletting Babette Mangoldt's loft at the time. That was one class and then the second class I taught was another similar class, 13 sessions, Beginning Filmmaking, 6:30 to 9:30, February 20th to May 25th, 1984. So both times in the Spring. 16mm black and white film based on personal stories. Equipment will be provided, instruction would be in my studio.

F.R. And you had called . . . did students come with personal stories?

B.H. No, they didn't come with them , they came blank. And I developed this thing that I did as a workshop, I'm tired of doing it now, but I used to do it called "developing personal imagery." I have students lie down on a life-size piece of paper and each person gets an outline drawn of them. Before they move from that paper, I lead them on a guided meditation into their body and we do some physical exercises first which is isolating the body parts so that they become aware of all the parts of their body. And then I lead them into their body . . . it could be maybe through the head where they imagine a blank screen in their mind and then what is in that blank screen. It comes from the work of Pauline Oliveros, the avant-garde composer, on deep listening. Then I ask them to smell the image that they see, to move around it, to note it's color or is it in black and white, does it make a sound? And then I ask them to remember that image and all those components. I lead them through the whole body. Finally, I bring them back into the room, have them turn over, and draw these images or write or collage the images if they feel like they don't want to draw them. So they fill in their bodies. And then we cut out the bodies and we place them around the room and each woman will talk about

her personal story, her personal body, and from that, I will make a script of where they come together . . . maybe everyone has a water image . . . or they will be some similarities in all 7 scripts, and that will be the script that we shoot.

F.R. I see, so, you were really a strong guiding force here.

B.H. Yeah. I have done that internationally for all forms of art, poetry, music, painting. It's a lovely exercise. I always want to be on the floor instead of leading it.

F.R. Have you?

B.H. Have I? Sometimes. But I led it in Switzerland with the graduate students in a film class, the European Graduate School, where I teach "The Queer Essay Documentary" every summer. They loved it. It sounds so sort of hokey . . . a few people couldn't experience any images at all and of course they freaked out. I always say at the beginning if you don't have any it is O.K.

F.R. I think just the opportunity to actually claim their bodies, which really is what this is about, is really a huge thing. . . for all people. We're getting more and more disembodied as a culture.

B.H. I know. I'm not happy about it. So, that is how we scripted in the class.

F.R. So one work came from you and 6 or 7 or 8 students.

B.H. The work, the ideas for the film, came from them. The ordering of it came from me.

F.R. So that was the process, the product was . . .

B.H. One class film, always in black and white because that was the cheapest to do. And then Spring of '84, I taught creative animation.

F.R. My god.

B.H. Pixelation, in two days. Thank to Nancy and to brochures. This was on Saturday, April 21st, and the next Saturday, April 28th. I was actually using this technique in my own work, at the time. Pixilation is a form of shooting live objects and moving them. You just shoot them one frame at a time and then you move the glass and then another and pretty soon the glass is going in a circle on it's own, which is what you see. So, it's a way to do animation without drawing it. And I was doing that in Mangoldt's loft. I made a film there called "New York Loft." So I'd see how my own work was feeding into the class and vice versa I'm sure. I told the students to bring in still objects that were

important to them . . . letters, paint, and anything that was a favorite of theirs. We would learn how to shoot that way, and then later how to edit it and the class then went up to 80 dollars. 25 was not enough early on. This was easy and fun to do because everybody could help in the movement of the object. If you're doing it yourself, it's tedious. The last class I taught was . . . the lecture/screening class, discussion group in September '85 with Andrea Weiss, that was the lesbian sensibility class. And that was the last class that I taught there. When did NYFAI end?

F.R. '89?

B.H. Yeah, so there were quite a few years I wasn't involved at all. That's my short life at NYFAI.

F.R. Did you continue to teach elsewhere?

B.H. I got my first teaching job at an institution then. I went to Chicago in September of '85. I used to come back to New York on weekends. I had a job teaching at Columbia College, Chicago. My first teaching job in an institution and after that I never taught in my loft again. I always taught in institutions.

F.R. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

B.H. No, but I'm really glad that care and attention are being taken to preserve the history in this splice and slice of life because it's all important, and it all has cumulative effect . . . somebody else is doing the history of Heresies and some of the other feminist art movements that were happening at the time. It is all a piece of that period and tremendously important.

F.R. Thank you.

B.H. You're welcome.