

Time is an Emotional Muscle

in conversation

Barbara Hammer

WITH JARRETT EARNEST

Experimental filmmaker Barbara Hammer has made lyrical, confessional, and often deeply erotic films about her life as a lesbian artist since the early 1970s. She had a retrospective (*The Fearless Frame*) at the Tate Modern in the beginning of 2012, and another (*Risky Visions*) at the Jeu de Paume in Paris this summer. She recently sat down with Jarrett Earnest in her studio to discuss her work, history, intimacy, and abstraction.

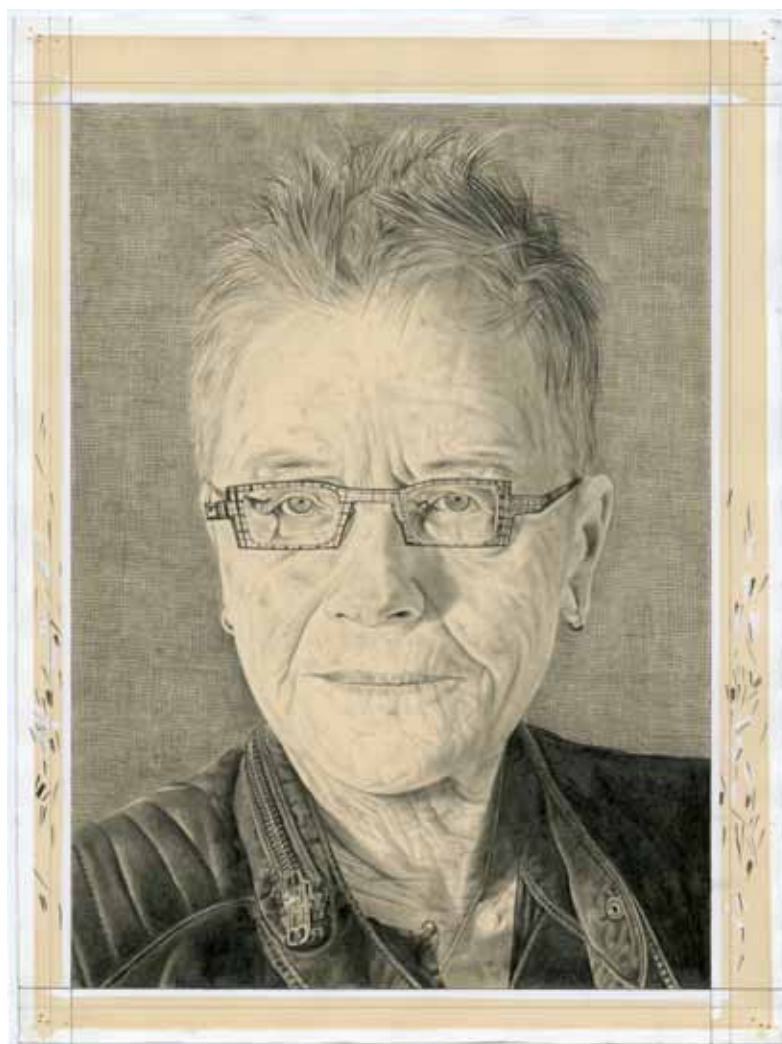
JARRETT EARNEST (RAIL): One thing that is striking in your films is how you assume the role of a researcher. The reason art matters to me is because it can show that there are different ways of doing stuff, that there are other ways—deep ways—to know history, which is its own kind of research.

BARBARA HAMMER: I'm so happy that you said that because research is a big area of my life, one I love and find myself very involved in. As you spoke, I thought, oh this doesn't really relate to my early work but then I remembered the film *Menses* (1974). I began it in 1973 by reading about the history of menstruation. I remember reading Pliny who said, "If a menstruating woman touches a pregnant horse, the horse's milk will go sour." I was trying to break deep stereotypes. What I love about that kind of research is it's a chance to go back to school—studio work is isolating unless I take up research, then I'm having a dialogue with historians and artists of the past.

I'm studying the archive of Elizabeth Bishop at Vassar now. I've been there three times to photograph and copy the documents and letters. I am going to go into Bishop's homes—I have a residency at the Cape Cod Modern House Trust, near where Bishop went to camp as a girl and established early girl friendships that she kept all her life. I don't want to make another film like *Maya Deren's Sink* (2011)—though I'm very proud of this most recent film—and I've never been interested in situating artists of the past within a complete historical context—as if you could! I have to find a way that I can get in and stir things up for myself. Right away what I started doing in the Bishop archive was photographing these two empty envelopes. What was in them? I was looking at their crumpledness, how they were opened. These are the more interesting things to me because I get to be a sleuth. I get to question the archive and then it really does live in the present.



Barbara Hammer, 16 mm film frame from *Sanctus* (1990), rephotographed from a 35 mm frame by Dr. James Sibley Watson.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

I am also working with my own archive so I'm very conscious right now of preservation, archiving, and interpretation. In reading all my continual struggles in relationships, which I have noted in journal after journal, I have to think, whew, that will be embarrassing one day. Did Gauguin write about that? I don't think so. Maybe that will be the archive of the future: the women who revealed.

RAIL: Something that relates to your role as a researcher is your continued investigation and working through people's "houses." In *Resisting Paradise* (2003) you filmed around Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore's home in the Isle of Jersey, the places Maya Deren lived in for *Maya Deren's Sink*, and it sounds like Elizabeth Bishop's childhood locations are getting a similar treatment. What type of knowing does the experience of these places offer you?

HAMMER: I've always felt that where I live really influences what I make, and since I'm not living in the woods like a wild-child (although I've tried) I am in a home. Either I was a married woman, carving out a space for myself to paint in the basement of a house we built in the woods, or I was this roaming dyke during the 1970s (which was my adolescent coming out period even though I was 30) moving from house to house, moving from lover to lover—there was no settlement, so the films are short as well as intimate. I would work differently if I had a warehouse; I'd be an installation artist! I have a lot of ideas for projection projects but in order to get them off paper and really get into the piece I need to have a space. I talk to Carolee Schneemann, who lives upstate, and she says, "Well, Barbara, you could build yourself a warehouse." Maybe I could now, but to me energy is art and you don't have as much energy at 73 as you do at 33. I'm not sure I have the energy to make those huge installations now, but I think that is one way the work could have gone given a different environment.

Maya Deren is my mentor, mother, progenitor, as the mother of American Avant-garde film. Her work was often made within her own space, by transforming the furniture, moving it, covering it, having a dancer in front of the fireplace. But she also used her friends' homes, for example, she shot the huge dinner scene in *At Land* (1944) in Buffy Johnson's loft. When you work with a small budget you work with what's around you, and you have more creative freedom in your own home. When I made *Dyketactics* (1974) my lover and I made love on the floor of her house. When I made *Nitrate Kisses* (1992) I invited two women I met in leather costumes at Judith's Room, a feminist bookstore that unfortunately no longer exists. They drove up on motorcycles with

their leather costumes and chain dresses coming in past the guards at Westbeth. I just loved that. So you can break taboos in your own home without being arrested [laughs].

RAIL: There is a moment in *Women I Love* (1976) when you reconstruct an artichoke in reverse that reminds me of Cocteau re-piecing hibiscuses in reverse in *Testament of the Poet*.

HAMMER: That's great; I'd never make that connection. In *Women I Love*, each one of those fruits or vegetables literally represented a woman I loved.

RAIL: No! I was so swept up in the beauty of the images I didn't make that connection.

HAMMER: Yes! The onion references a woman who made me cry a lot, the broccoli represents a woman with multiple arms (or so it seemed), but the artichoke was the winner because she could go forwards or backwards; there was always more to unpeel [laughs]! The artichoke was homage to a great artist who is now unfortunately deceased, Gloria Churchman. She was a shy artist, she drew and painted, and we made *Moon Goddess* (1976) together, which was the first time I started projecting onto inflated balloons. I just wanted to mention her name because she never got recognition, even from her relatives, who threw out one of the two prints of our film. Fortunately, it was restored by Colorlab for my MoMA retrospective.

That is a wonderful, lush thing about having a retrospective: if you've made over 80 works and you haven't looked at them for a long while, you get to see them as a curator quite differently. You re-cognize, become re-cognizant of some major works that you thought were okay or fit in your development but didn't stand out as the minor masterpieces that they are.

RAIL: Was Gloria the woman in *Women I Love* who stands behind you touching your breasts when you have the camera on your shoulder, filming into a mirror?

HAMMER: Yes. Talk about intimacy! Yes, she had this big broad face that was so sensitive. I re-photographed that sequence of her playing with my breasts and slowed it down because I shot it at two frames a second, probably to capture more light in the bathroom. When I saw what I had, examining those individual frames, I knew I had to give each frame five to ten extra extensions so that we could appreciate the joy, the pleasure and the play. We should really talk about play.

RAIL: Okay, let's talk about *play*, my favorite subject. I thought the first film that played at Jeu de Paume, *Two Bad Daughters* (1988), very clearly got at the way you think about play as a subversive strategy.

HAMMER: I made *Two Bad Daughters* in 1988 with Paula Levine; we undertook this visual and sonic play together to undercut the theoretical tone of the 1980s that "the author was dead." By making ourselves a double author and using artifacts from "the father's house" as playthings, we hoped to subvert theory reinstating ourselves as artists within a historical context.

Through play you can find so many new ways to achieve, to make, to change without a whole lot of baggage. Play is considered light and unthreatening, and this makes it a strategy to work around or burrow underneath sticky conundrums.

RAIL: One of the reasons I like those films from the 1970s especially is the way they are doing something with intimacy that is twofold: *thematizing* intimacy by depicting touching or kissing but also *reenacting* an experience of intimacy on a formal level—the pace of the editing and using abstraction and texture. What brought you to these aesthetic decisions?

HAMMER: My life changed when, as a heterosexual woman, I made love with a woman. My sense of touch increased incredibly. I don't think I was aware of it as a sense as important as "taste" or "sight" or "sound" during my heterosexual life. The way I propose that this sense developed for me was through making love or touching a woman whose body was similar to my own. The largest area of our brain is connected to touch, and the largest part of that area is our nerve centers for our thumbs and our clitoris, in the case of a woman. No wonder my sense of touch increased! I think abstraction is very physical as well; it's not mental. When I look at a spray painting without any kind of line in it I have a real sense of those particles. It's a connection between sight and touch that maybe I always had, but didn't really connect to it until I came out. When I look at the world, like I'm looking at this parquet floor, from my view I feel in my body as if I were to touch it. Some people have called this kinesthesia, or the haptic sense. The emulsion of film is a skin itself, and some people develop their own emulsions, believe it or not and scratch and pull the skin off the film and re-photograph it. I've burnt it,

punched it, and worked extensively with an optical printer to get that sense of permeability and peeling.

I think maybe it comes from a deprivation of touch. I'm a white middle class girl, and even though I wasn't raised with any religion, which I consider a blessing, my family didn't physically touch that much. My mother was the daughter of immigrants from Ukraine and my grandfather was rather strict about ideas and religion—he tried to stomp on my guitar. My grandmother was possibly only 13 when she left the Ukraine, she came alone through Ellis Island. I don't think she had much nourishment herself and so had little to give my mom. When I did find that through perception I could have a sense of touch, it was fulfilling.

RAIL: As we know, the optic mechanism that allows us to bridge the gap between frames is the "after image" that lingers long enough on the retina to create a sense of fluid continuity. In your writing you signal that there might be a kind of bodily after image, or muscle memory that carries the physical-emotional continuity of the film and also from life/memory to film experience and then back to life. Can you talk to me about your writing on film-time and structure as it relates to the body?

HAMMER: That is such a beautifully phrased question! I think of the simultaneity of time: when we are experiencing this moment we are also experiencing everything else that we've ever done in our lives. Time is not linear, and it's not circular either; it's sort of like an energy field. I think Gertrude Stein writes like that—with the use of verbs. That's why it's not "Women I have loved" but "Women I Love" because it continues—it isn't a cut off historic sense of the past. If that is my way of experiencing history and time then that allows me to conjoin two different historical periods in a cut or collage. For instance, I found the archive of Dr. James Sibley Watson, maybe the first gay American filmmaker, who made *Fall of the House of Usher* in 1928, and in the outtakes of his film *Lot in Sodom* (1933) there are men wearing loin cloths that he's directed to wrestle. In my own film, *Nitrate Kisses*, I direct the performers and filmmakers Jack Waters and Peter Cramer to play, and they choose to wrestle. I bring this similar Watson footage of wrestling from the 1930s and 1990s together and by doing so link gay history. I'm saying this is part of gay culture that continues, remnants of the past that continue into the present. That is one way of thinking about time. Time is an emotional muscle. If I can connect with my audience through images or editing structures that create emotions then they are *there* as physical bodies experiencing the film. They are released when the film turns meditative, and I hope then that they experience the world differently when they leave the cinema. The first time I saw Brakhage's *Dog Star Man* (1961-64) at the San Francisco Cinematheque I remember I looked at trees as I was walking down the street and I saw the world differently. I had a sense that my perception had changed through watching this film.

RAIL: I've been thinking of Stein's long poem *Lifting Belly*, the way the language is opaque in such a way to create a textured surface, it is a use of "abstraction" to articulate queer desire in a historical moment when that was not permissible. How has your use of abstract, textured images connected with that lineage, while also being very explicit in its depictions of sex?

HAMMER: The textural quality of the abstract film image creates a sense of touch not unlike the language of *Lifting Belly* where Gertrude Stein keeps words in the continual present through abstraction. If there is no literal representation by the word of a thing or a time (past tense, future tense), by the image (layered, color fields, soft outlines), the physical



"The Darned Club," by Alice Austen, approx. 1898, as used in Barbara Hammer's *The Female Closet*.



Barbara Hammer, production stills from *Sync Touch*, (1980).



Barbara Hammer, 16 mm film frame from *Endangered* (1988). Shows the artist working on an optical printer with abstract images.

reading of the word, the image is more stimulating to the mind, which is, of course, part of the body. The entire body then is involved in the “reading” and with the total body involvement touch is brought into play. One could even go so far as to say that since “touch” has been so little studied that it carries as one of our senses an abstract quality. It is also exciting in an intellectual way. Desire is created intellectually, it is something that you don’t have/can’t have. One doesn’t have the “out” as Gertrude Stein is talking about her lover’s multiple orgasms in plain English, but there is the rising belly: “Question and butter. / I find the butter very good. / Lifting belly is so kind. / Lifting belly fattily. / Doesn’t that astonish you.” That kind of thinly veiled abstraction makes us want to know more, generates desire, brings us into the field of desire “two women together in bed.” Or on the kitchen floor—oh my, Gertrude Stein on the kitchen floor, I have work to do [laughs]!

RAIL: You made *Sanctus* with hand-painted archival footage of X-rayed moving skeletons in 1990. I can’t help but see this as connected to AIDS and the climate of the culture wars. As someone who was making important work about the body from the 1970s on, what are the shifts you’ve seen?

HAMMER: To historically recount: in 1985 Jan Zita Grover, the writer and critic, introduced me to the politics of AIDS and representation. She couldn’t believe I was doing abstract landscapes and underwater work in a period of AIDS. Her critique changed my work and I made *SnowJob: the Media Hysteria of AIDS* (1986). By the time I got to the 1990s and found the archive of Dr. Watson and his research associates, who X-rayed the body in motion, I was very aware of the fragile human body. Not only the unresolved issue of AIDS but also the environmental issues that threaten the body, and aging itself, of course. Today I’ve gone through cancer treatments and chemotherapy, which brings forth another invisibility of the body as it struggles to survive in my film *A Horse is Not A Metaphor* (2009). What still has not been seen much is the aging woman’s body, which I am very aware of because I *am* the aging woman’s body. Yes, we have two old women making love in *Nitrate Kisses*, but that isn’t the “aged body”—they’re still glorified in their chiaroscuro lighting, filmed in beautiful black-and-white. We’ve never really accepted the wrinkle as the sign of lived experience. Signifiers of age haven’t truly been recognized or appreciated in our society. We’ve had so many turn arounds in cultural awareness—wouldn’t it be amazing for the next to be a world where the elder is really honored and respected.

RAIL: *Multiple Orgasm* (1976) shows close ups of your vagina as you masturbate to orgasm eight times, then close-ups of your face during climax, all flowing in and out of landscape images. You showed these films separately, to solely female/lesbian audiences and then to “mixed” audiences, where men could also attend. Could you talk about your decision to screen separately?

HAMMER: For the screenings around Europe I would usually ask the group: Do you want a woman’s only screening or do you want a mixed screening? In Vienna, the women wanted to have two screenings, one woman only and the other mixed, and I showed the same films. During the mixed audience show when *Multiple Orgasm* played this man started screaming when he saw a vagina full screen—he was shocked. A woman yelled at him, “If you don’t like it, leave.”

At some point the film isn’t about your own body—it’s a representation. *Multiple Orgasm* is not plural, because in a way one orgasm is all orgasms—it is silent because I wanted the audience to hear themselves breathe, but everybody always holds their breath, so it doesn’t work. The whole point of that film was to see what you can’t see, which is all my work from the 1970s: “lets look at it!” How can you watch your own orgasm, particularly your face during climax? My god, it looks like a baby, it was thrilling! All phobias are washed away. In the 1970s people in my social group were going to the Institute for Human Sexuality and watching film after film of people making love—to see sexuality finally as just part of life rather than as filled with romanticism. We were experiencing ourselves using mirrors and studying the sexual response cycle, it was almost medical. When I shot *Multiple Orgasm* it looked so scientific. I was camping with Gloria Churchman in Capital Reef National Park in Utah and the rockscape was beautiful like a woman’s body. If I were to make it today I would show it straight up without the landscape overlays.

RAIL: I have a huge amount of affection for your work from the 1970s. There’s a sensibility in those works that says, “I’m trying to deconstruct the systems that have structured and naturalized my conception of what life is like and really just start over”—a profound place for an artist to approach the world from. You’ve managed to marry that search with delightful sense of generosity as a thinker and a maker, so I really wanted to say thank you for that.

HAMMER: Moving from film, to installation, to photography, to book, to this interview is the same circle and I am so glad we are in this moment together. Thank you for your interest and questions and may we continue to play! ☺

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