

Trish Bendix. An Interview With Barbara Hammer.

After Ellen. March 8, 2010

Before there was **Donna Deitch** (*Desert Hearts*) and **Cheryl Dunye** (*Watermelon Woman*) there was **Barbara Hammer**. In 1974, while attending school in UCLA, the young Barbara met a group of women and realized she was both a lesbian and a feminist, something that would influence not only Barbara herself, but generations of women — whether they realize it or not.

1974 is when Barbara put the first lesbian sex scene on film. It was a short, called *Dyketatics*, and shot close-up in all black and white. It was real sex between two women (Hammer and a friend) and it was controversial, of course. But it helped Barbara realize that capturing lesbian life on screen was part of her ideal life, and she wouldn't stop using her camera and her sexuality to infiltrate the worlds of art and film. Now, she's giving herself to the world of publishing with her new book, *Hammer! Making Movies out of Sex and Life*.

And there is definitely a lot of both. *Hammer* will inspire you to keep anything you've ever written or created, and any photo you've ever taken — especially the ones that make you laugh or inspire you.

At age 70, Barbara went through all of her old writings and journals and photographs and created a funny and intriguing memoir about the life of an artist finding herself and her craft throughout four decades. If you're familiar with her film *Nitrate Kisses* from 1992 (featuring two older lesbians having sex) or her historical account of lesbian photographer **Alice Austen** (*The Female Closet*), you will greatly appreciate the background on her ideas and how they came to fruition. And if you're interested in her sexual escapades in Mexico and several cities in the US, there's that for you, too.

About to embark on a book tour across the U.S. in which she'll also be sharing some of her film work, Hammer took some time to chat with AfterEllen.com from her studio in New York City.

AfterEllen.com: One of my favorite things about your book is the list of things you wanted to accomplish in your life. Was that something you always remembered or was it something you came across in your archives and can now go over it and check things off?

Barbara Hammer: I was so surprised to find it in my archives. I had written it when I was young; I'd say the early '80s. It did coincide with my move to New York, which was my big plan from the Bay Area in San Francisco, but I thought, "My God, what a cool foundation!"

Luckily, my mom believed in me! [laughs] I think that rubbed off. I never had a self-esteem problem. I never thought I could be **Virginia Woolf**, so that's why I didn't go into writing. I felt like there were no avant-garde — well, there were no lesbian filmmakers. That was a direction that I could go into. I felt such a connection with images.

When I looked at my archives, there was so much writing I did in the 60s, 70s, and before my mom died, she said, "You should be a poet." And I said, "Why?" And she said, "All it takes is a pencil and a piece of paper." I don't think she knew what avant-garde film was. People weren't doing it when she worked in Hollywood for a little bit. You read the story where I was introduced to [actress] **Lillian Gish**. She had plans for me. Maybe she knows, maybe she doesn't know.

AE: That was such a great story. I think every mom probably thinks if they just met the right person they could be something, that they will be discovered. What do you think she thought would happen? That she would you were just so adorable and you were made for pictures or something?

BH: That's exactly it. And I used to talk to strangers all the time. I guess she figured, "She's not afraid, might as well put her out there."

AE: You were just made to make your own stuff instead of being in other people's, I guess.

BH: Yeah.

AE: So, one of the things I thought was interesting was that *Dyketactics* came out in 1974.

BH: That's year it came out so we shot it in '73.

AE: I was noticing that Chantal Akerman is touted as having the first lesbian sex scene and that also came out in '74, so what was it about that mid-70s period that inspired people to finally put lesbian sex out there in film?

BH: You're talking about *Je tu il elle*?

AE: Yeah.

BH: I never realized that was '74 too. That's very interesting, because we've gone such different routes, but there was very explicit sex in both of those films. It must have been the fact that the women's movement hit in '69, at least we first heard about the word feminism in '68, I would say. As soon as I heard feminism was, I declared myself a feminist, and by '70 when I heard what a lesbian was, I declared myself a lesbian. Three years later, I guess you take a breather and think, "What was it that made me choose this new culture?" because it is a culture more than sexuality, I think.

I think it was in the air, because for the first time there was language, and the words pronounced, and women looking at women for the first time. We had to make films about this profound sexuality that certainly changed my life. I don't know Chantal's history, but I had been living as heterosexual so this was really different. It was just, touching another body similar to my own increased my sense of touch. It gave my cinema a tactility, which became one of my purposes when I discovered it. You don't always say, "OK, let's make a tactile film." [laughs] You make it because your life has become more tactile.

Then you look at the screen and people are telling you they feel in their bodies what they're looking at. And you realize, "Oh, yes, my life has changed." My skin, corpuscles, and all the cellular knowledge of touch increased. I was touching a body like my own, reinforcing my own body shape, so of course I had to bring that onto the screen.

Hers is a different cinema. It's more distant. She's in her film, which is fantastic. I mean, I got in my film, but her scene is not close up. It's certainly not hiding anything, and it's not voyeur, you're not in the doorway looking at it, like in Donna Deitch's film *Desert Hearts*, where the woman is looking in on the sex scene, but she's standing in the door, so you identify with her and you're put in the place of a voyeur. I wanted you in the place of the participant.

AE: You've never shied away from being a lesbian filmmaker, you've never tried to separate the lesbian part of it.

BH: Well now, that's a difference between me and Chantal.

AE: Why do you think that is?

BH: At first, I was told by feminists who were promoting writers and performers at the time, I should choose. Which did I want to be? Either an avant-garde artist or a lesbian filmmaker, I couldn't be both. I just never could make that choice, because I love both. I just followed my instincts and made films about what I needed to make films about.

That was one thing that I didn't appreciate, that she did step back and say, "I want to be seen as a filmmaker, not a lesbian filmmaker." Well, I can understand that too, because it was a gamble for people in terms of their programming. Oh, we can't have her until the Queer Week. [laughs] You can get pigeonholed. I found myself in that predicament in the conservative '80s after the burst of social change in the '70s, so I just took women out of my films and made film art. That way, it couldn't be ignored. It placed me, I guess, in the art world, which is what I was striving to be seen as. Then, that could last a few years. You know, the lesbian never goes away. [laughs]

Then identity politics came to the fore in the late '80s, early '90s. Theory was leading art, and it was very organic. I was feeling a need to return to sexual expression, but with larger, flung out ideas. *Nitrate Kisses*, I was releasing that when I was at the Chicago Art Institute. It's a film about history, or actually, what's left out of history. Let's put back queer sexuality and queer history, but also, let's not mythologize gay and lesbian and bisexual and transgender people and think that we're better than anyone else. What do we censor?

That was very interesting when I came to that in the film. I remember using Barbara Scharres's office, the head of the film center there at the Art Institute, and I didn't have my own fax at the time, and I was using her fax, and I was getting so many requests from Europe and the States for *Nitrate Kisses*. It was a pretty dynamic year for me starting in January of '93 when it started at Sundance.

You just have to follow your own inclinations, and hopefully, the world is with you. [laughs] Maybe it will be after you're dead. [laughs] It might catch up one day.

AE: When you look back at *Nitrate Kisses*, modern day, do you think much has changed in the way queers represent themselves in film, or in life, or in culture in general? How has it stood up over time?

BH: I was just at a memorial last night for **Sarah Jacobson**. There's the Sarah Jacobson Grant for DIY feminist — I don't think it's necessarily queer — filmmakers. I saw the award winners for the last few years, and they were all so confident in themselves and what they put on the screen. It was rough, and punk, and it was do-it-yourself. It was cut-out animation. It was stills from television. I think there's a confidence in young women filmmakers, young feminist filmmakers, young queer women filmmakers.

Maybe people were stuck with those questions, are you going to be a film artist or a queer filmmaker? Those questions, I don't think, aren't so burdensome today. People can float back and forth between their subject matter. They can do a film on trafficking of human beings, and the next turn-around they're having a queer identity problem. I don't think people are stuck with labels like we were.

AE: Do you think there's a need then for lesbian and gay specific film festivals, or do you feel that's ghettoizing at all?**BH:** I do. For instance, St. Petersburg, Russia, the last queer film festival they had — they've had two. The first one was hut down by the police. The seconds one, when they tried to shut it down, they had an alternative, and they had all these secret places where you could go and sit on the floor and watch these queer DVDs that they'd programmed. They were able to avoid censorship and government control and societal control. Today, they're starting to get together for their third festival in October. I don't know what will come of that. They've asked me to go, and I hope I can.

The world is not San Francisco and New York City. Most of the world is still — and then when you read about Africa! Just the issues in Uganda and Kenya about killing gays, and definitely devaluing them in society, and the two that tried to get married in Kenya last week and their lives were threatened.

AE: That reminds me of how, in your book, you tell how you used to journal the audience responded to your work, whether they liked it, whether they didn't, if they had any questions. Is that something you've continued? After you see how people react, do you take that into account when you're making new work?

BH: You know, I don't take it into account in terms of making work. I feel like I can't make something strong if I'm thinking about an audience. I'm sorry, but I've heard other people say that too. If I want to make something that's never been seen before, I can't think about an audience. The audience has to grow to reach me.

Just like when I go to see work I don't understand, then I like to read about it again, and then I get it, or I see it a couple of times. I don't want to make something I've seen before. I don't want to see the same patterns. You never know where your audience is, so you're trying to make something *you've* never seen, then you hope your audience hasn't either. And you say, "I guess I'll have this small following that wants to be challenged." That's fine with me, because I could never work the other way.

I mean, I do have somebody come in and look at my works-in-progress and make some small suggestions. It helps because you do get close, but by this time it's almost developed, so they're smaller points. It's helpful things you're blind to because you've been living with the material for so long. Are you a filmmaker?

AE: No, I'm a writer.

BH: Similar process.

AE: Yes, and I understand what you mean about criticism. I appreciate constructive criticism, but especially writing for the internet, you get so much direct feedback that sometimes you take it too much into account when you go to write the next thing and you end up censoring yourself.

BH: Yeah. The strongest blogs are those that have the fiercest personalities, who aren't afraid to be out there.

AE: I've also found that lesbians are a hard crowd to please. I don't know if that's the same for you in filmmaking.

BH: Yes, they are. [laughs] It's crazy because, for the most part, way back when, they all wanted their nice sweet film: Show a nice happy couple without a murder at the end, making babies, and voting democratically, and making a better world. I don't like to see those heterosexually either, let alone homosexually. To me, those are like the feel-good films that somebody is going to make money on, but they're not a challenge and they're not about my life. I just can't do that.

We're diverse, the lesbian audience. We're diverse people. We're not homogenous. I'm talking about a particular group at a particular time, but I imagine that continues. Otherwise, why did we have *The L Word* for so many years? But that's now gone another way too, or gone away, I should say. I only watched one episode and I haven't been able to talk about it. Oh, man. Those were long-haired, lipstick, long fingernail girls, not lesbians. [laughs] If you say they were, then OK but — any group is probably a tough group, but maybe a repressed group is a harder group to please.

You can look at the problems Obama is having right now. You can say that Democrats coming out of eight years of Republican rule have been repressed, and now you have so many desires and demands on one person who's stuck in the system and can't make changes. But hey! It looks like Don't Kiss Don't Tell is on the way out, and that will just precede other types of advances that we will have.

There's nothing definitive on this. You just have to be flexible like a willow tree. Flow with the breeze but have that strong inner core, that trunk that's holding you up.

AE: Why do you think that so many lesbian films and filmmakers get a bad rap as being cheesy or poor quality or not good writing? It seems like so many lesbian films get lumped into a group of not being quality.

BH: That's a good point, and you can say, "Why is that? Is that true?" Then you go to queer film festivals and you see a lot more gay films that are good, that are well-written, and good acting, good directing. The reason for that is because money for men has been way over the top compared to women. It's been that way, it continues that way. The festivals, not many of them are 50/50 percent, even in their programming. Girls are having a harder time, still. Things haven't changed in terms of directors in Hollywood.

So many lesbians want to be filmmakers, maybe they think, "We don't have enough lesbian films so I can just jump in and do something." A lot of them can. You grow from your mistakes. Seeing Sarah Jacobson's *Mary Jane's Not A Virgin Anymore* last night, this feminist, heterosexual, DIY, punk film that just had so much courage in it that you forgave that the lighting wasn't good, that the acting was so-so, or that she didn't use close-ups and all the things we expect. But then you go back to **Lizzie Borden's** *Born in Flames* in 1983, and it's incredibly courageous and wild and out there, and both lesbian, queer, and straight, black and white and Asian, and the world is revolutionized in a film that is revolutionary in its own content. That is exciting cinema. That doesn't mean she continued in that vein, because she didn't. She did *Working Girls*, didn't she? And then we haven't heard from her.

That would be interesting, to go back to some of those films that were hits in the '70s and early '80s and find what's become of the filmmakers that didn't continue, who just did one or

two films, like *She Must Be Seeing Things*, and why. Then you'd have the answer to your question.

Follow **Barbara Hammer** on Twitter @barbarahammer and check out her tour dates or buy her book on barbarahammer.com.