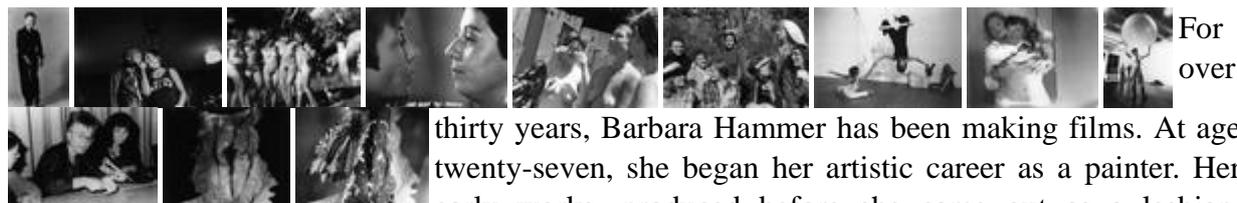




An Interview with Barbara Hammer

Figures



For
over

thirty years, Barbara Hammer has been making films. At age twenty-seven, she began her artistic career as a painter. Her early works, produced before she came out as a lesbian, introduced her to the physical aspects of film-making. The work produced in the early to mid-seventies uses her sensory experience as a lesbian for its formal basis. *Dyketactics* (1974), *Women I Love* (1976), *Multiple Orgasm* (1977), and *Double Strength* (1978) all contain sexually explicit imagery. Hammer's works are some of the only pieces from this period which concentrate on framing the nude female body in its entirety and focus on the multi-valent physicality of the body. The athleticism of Terry Sendgraff's naked body in *Double Strength* is an analogy for the female body in Hammer's films; it's full of grace, seduction, and strength. The juxtaposition between sexual, nude bodies and trapeze riding contradicts representations which usually divorce sexual activity from other modes of physical expression. These works portray sexual activity with an exuberance that has yet to be matched with any contemporary work I've seen.

On March 21, 1997 I interviewed Barbara Hammer in her room at the Commodore Hotel in San Francisco. She had flown in from New York to present her work for the first annual Mad Cat Women's Film Festival.

Kate Haug: I want to start out by saying that I'm concentrating on your early films from the seventies such as *Dyketactics* (1974), *Women I Love* (1976), and *Double Strength* (1978), because I've had the most contact with these works. I will be asking general questions about your experience as an artist and your formal concerns. I'll also be asking more specific questions about particular works.

Barbara Hammer: Tell me again what your project is. The way I understand it is that you are interested in the ways women filmmakers use bodies in films. Are you looking at lesbian bodies? **[End Page 65]**

KH: I'm looking specifically at sexually explicit work made by women at the time of the Women's Movement. I'm thinking about what artistic strategies were used at that particular moment. Obviously at that time people really started to look at representation as intrinsically political--especially in terms of the Women's Movement. So I'm thinking: "How did artists deal with that?" Especially in your work.

BH: So you're writing a historical paper about a period you don't know about. This period will

give you material to think about how you're working today. What is the impetus to recover this history?

KH: I'm really interested in the idea of women as artists and creating images themselves. I've been reading a lot of recent theoretical work that really champions the idea of reappropriation which I think is a viable strategy. But I also think there is some way people actually try to discount women who are completely authoring material rather than deconstructing or fictionalizing existing sexist material. I am interested in an artistic process that does not directly employ stereotypical images of women. Using found footage is an effective strategy, but I think it's a different strategy. I'm looking at that difference and what that difference means in terms of a political practice as well. We live in a materially based world. What does it mean to author an object that you have had total control over? What does it mean to put it into circulation? I think that's a radical act.

I'm really interested in this, especially during the popular ascension of the Women's Movement. That must have been the first time women ever produced films with such autonomy and within a national political framework. I believe that *Dyketactics* was the first film containing lesbian sexuality made by a lesbian.

BH: I didn't know that when I was making it. I didn't think, "Oh, I'm making the first lesbian love-making film." I came out with a woman. It was an incredible experience. I had decided to be a filmmaker. Why shouldn't I make a film of this experience. I had been loving men for nine years and I had never had an experience like loving women: this was revolutionary. I knew my life was **[End Page 66]** changing right before my eyes. Why wouldn't I make an experience about women touching other women? When I showed it at the San Francisco State University Film Finals, people ran up to me exclaiming how much they liked it, how thrilling it was. It was the second film I ever made.

KH: It was?

BH: Yes, in 16mm. I had made Super 8 films before that, even lesbian films in Super 8. I was pretty nervous showing *Dyketactics*, because I hadn't even seen any dyke movies before--let alone love-making movies. My professors were quite taken with it and thought it was really strong.... My heterosexual professors; I didn't trust them, but I let them praise me. The film came out of naiveté and enthusiasm and a feeling of freedom. After all, this was the Women's Movement. After all, I had just come out. I could do anything I wanted. We felt we could do it all, even men's jobs. Women were studying carpentry. **[End Page 67]**

I was the only woman in my film production class. There were twelve of us. I had to shoot a guy's film; we crewed for each other. His script was about a group of hard hats--guys who worked construction, sitting shirtless by a garbage dump talking about women's bodies as they walked back and forth. I had this moment: "Should I open the Arri and expose the film to light and damage it by mistake? I could do that." I was so against this film, and I was the cinematographer. So there I was with a moral dilemma. The first shoot--damn!

Rather than destroy his film, I decided that I would put him in my script. My film was called *I Was/I Am*(1973). I transform myself from a goddess wearing a white gown with a tiara into a motorcycle driving dyke with a Maya Deren symbol; I take a key off my tongue to start my motorcycle. I'm up here in San Francisco on a hill. And I have him walk under this rock saying, as he did in his script, "She's got a million dollar ass." Then I jump off the rock in my tiara and white gown and bag him in a garbage bag. Cut to--he's rolling down a hill in a garbage bag. This in-house joke is a mark of a student film. However, I got my revenge.

KH: You took it to a higher moral ground.

BH: Today we are so conscious of theory. It's so interesting. We're so concerned about the images. I am, too. We all are. It's very hard to work. I mean you can't recreate the past. You can't work with that kind of naive spontaneity --revolutionary spirit--celebration of the body that we once had. I hadn't heard of "essentialism" in the early seventies. I don't know if it had even been used. All of my early work was made out of that appreciation of the body that came to me through loving another woman--even though I had also been very physical and had driven a motorcycle as a heterosexual woman. I had been around the world on a motor scooter and built a house in the woods and had done unusual things for the gender caste that I was born into. But there wasn't a sense of body specific celebration until I came out.

I developed my own sexual theory for the body-centered work in a film called *Sync-Touch* (1980-1981). The theory is that we touch before we see and so we know the world first through touch rather than sight. I didn't read about this in [End Page 68] terms of physiological studies and the implications this basic fact has on visual understanding until 1979 or 1980 when I was working on *Sync-Touch*. I read a book by Aldous Huxley. It was the only book on touching that I could find.

In *Dyketactics*, I was very conscious that the sense of touch was what had changed my life. There are 110 images in the film. It's four minutes long. Every image has a sense of touch about it. Either specifically a hand touching the breast, combing the hair, a foot moving through water or walking on leaves. And later I found out that we actually touch before we see. This fact has been forgotten by theorists. It's pre-Lacanian. It's pre-mirror stage. It's a sense that I think we can use to know the world. A child will know a mother's breast before their eyes can actually focus. I felt that I went back to that early kinesthetic sense of being by touching another body similar to my own, another woman's body. Not a hairy body. The skin was similar. The shape was similar and it re-enforced my sense of touch. The nerve endings from skin [End Page 69] make up 98 percent of the area in our brain that is devoted to the sense of touch.

Touch became a major conscious aesthetic of mine. Ideas were developing through the movement, through feminist film theorists, but they weren't there in the early seventies. I was going on intuition and experience. I took a class on feminist phenomenology with Gretchen Milner who was teaching at San Francisco State. This was a class that affected me greatly. To know the world through experience, the phenomenological experience, seemed to be the way I had been operating. Now, I would say, I work out of more intellectual constructions and ideas. Definitely I do.

KH: In your article "The Politics of Abstraction" (*Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, Martha Gever et al. eds., 1993), you talk about the idea of a heterosexual narrative and an absence of a lesbian narrative. When I was reading this part of the article, I imagined a radical interpretation of what you were saying--that a lesbian gender is constructed differently than a straight gender; Hollywood cinema does not contain a lesbian body because there is no lesbian subject in Hollywood cinema. How do you feel about that interpretation of your work? Also I'm curious about your statement: "the screen space on and off was blank." Were you saying that Hollywood could not contain the lesbian subject? I'm wondering if you could talk a little more about lesbian subjectivity as different than heterosexual subjectivity.

BH: Chris Straayer's book *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies* (Columbia University Press, 1996) has come out so I think we're more aware of lesbian genders and multiple readings rather than a gender. I also think of Monique Wittig's talk "I Am Not a Woman" where she says that a

lesbian does not fit into the feminine gender because those descriptions and characteristics do not apply to her. She opened the door for that kind of thinking. **[End Page 70]**

When I was writing the "The Politics of Abstraction," I was reacting to dramatic scripts--narrative scripts--Hollywood scripts--that prescribed a climax and a denouement. For instance, that is not the way I, as a lesbian, experience the world. Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* (1975) shows a woman's life in naturalistic terms. This is another way of confronting Hollywood cinema with difference. The woman kills the John, but we don't really know her sexual preference. Her killing him is part of a cinematic time where his killing is equal to the boiling of potatoes. Ackerman is confronting and dismissing point by point plot construction based on action, violence, or character development.

The form that Hollywood had developed left no room for others, for differences and/or experimentation with differences. In that way, I thought there was a blank cinema.

Even today with the lesbian cinema that we have--the lesbian heterosexuals. Ha, that's very good. Lesbian heterosexuals. That's the problem. No one is being daring enough to break the codes. *The Incredible True Adventures of Two Girls in Love* (Maria Maggenti, 1995) is just a nice sweet seamless story that develops along heterosexual tracks and only the characters names and biological sex are changed. Then you have lesbians who begin to break the codes, but they don't break them enough. Like Cheryl Dunye's work *Watermelon Woman* (1996). It's playful and it's low-tech--like *Go Fish* (1994). I think the two are fairly similar... They play more with the structure of the film so you have more of an opening up of possibilities and then you have the phenomenological experiences like a nail cutting scene which is lesbian specific. No heterosexual woman is going to worry about the shortness of her nails before she goes on a date that she hopes will end up in bed. So those kinds of experiences that relate specifically to lesbians of course make for a different kind of narrativity.

If you read my essay, "The Politics of Abstraction," (in *Queer Looks*, eds. Gever, Greyson, and Parmar, Routledge, 1993) you will get a better understanding of the context from which I was emerging. I had seen Maya Deren's films. Then I found Shirley Clarke and Marie Menken.

I've written a narrative script, a feature script, and I've given it to some producers **[End Page 71]** to read. They're telling me that I should have these lesbian characters dealing with their lesbian situation by following some other story in life; their lesbianism should be the subtext. But I put it center text. Now are those producers concerned with commercial sales? Yes. So if I go in that direction and rewrite with that in mind, I will have lost a possibility of trying to define a lesbian narrativity. I don't have many words of wisdom on this. I need to think about it some more, because I haven't been a narrative filmmaker.

KH: That's one question I also wanted to ask. In the article, you also say that radical content deserves radical form. I wanted you to talk about that, specifically in terms of the formal construction of the films. Where do you see the radical form coming in?

BH: Well. It's harder to speak about early works than with later works like *Optic Nerve* (1985). That film is very easy for me to talk about in terms of the formal construction. Why do I make the screen flat--without 3D? Because of my content; my grandmother only has one working eye. The experiences of **[End Page 72]** pushing her through the door of the nursing home were very traumatic so I show them over and over and over again each time more degraded. My emotions aren't as strong and sharp as the first time. The content is determining the form of what I'm doing, sometimes not as consciously as in my later films.

If you're working with your feelings, people can say your feelings are constructed and criticize you by saying that your feelings are not unique. Your sensibilities are not unique. But then, neither is your mind. I could build a theory beforehand and then make a film to fit the theory. Or I could develop a theory to fit the film after I've made it.

KH: When I look at your films, especially something like *Women I Love*, I read a narrative. I see it as being formally different from other films that deal with women's bodies. The difference is that the films are pro-sex, but they're not pro-patriarchal. They are so exuberant. Would you describe that?

BH: I can. I had taken my camera with me without the intent of making a film. Over a number of years... to just shoot without an idea of ever using this footage.... I had many lovers and different lovers, and I just enjoyed filming them. Then I was caught on a rainy winter living in a barn in Sonoma county with Peter Adair's ¹ family and a lot of filmmakers. I set up an editing bench in the barn and began to make a necklace of my friends and lovers and I thought--that's the way I think of *Women I Love*, as a necklace. I thought each of these women are like mini-portraits having a specific personality and a quality about her. I had footage that I had shot of vegetables and fruit in Mendocino county so I thought about the feelings each one evoked. I think of it as very corny now, but the fruit and vegetable motifs were part of the form then.

The way each of those films was shot reflects the relationship. They're really about relationships. Max Almy ² is the first woman in the film who is sweeping the daffodils. That was very much a film where I constructed a narrative and had her act and she did the same with me on video. We were teaching each other film and video at that time. So it was a more formal and not a very intimate relationship--the film reflects that. **[End Page 73]**

Then you have Ruth Mahaney who is the woman on the motorcycle camping trip, and I use slides that dissolve into each other. That is a very tender relationship even though it's not moving images. You can see in her eyes a vulnerability, so I have the onion peeling, because of the way it can make you choke up and tear. That was there in our relationship. And then there was a woman I wasn't lovers with--a friend.

I always ask the audience to look for the differences in relationships in the film--differences in form and content. They're suppose to be looking and thinking about the formal concerns: who in here was a lover and who was a friend? I think it's apparent.

The friend is Cynthia MacAdams. ³ She's the woman behind the glass door and she's holding out the tampon. She licks herself. I directed her to be an erotic housewife lusting for this dyke. I had my hair cut really close in a buzz cut and you see my reflection. In a way it's like playing out the fantasies with your lover or friend, but in a way that reflects what the relationship is. Then I had her play the goddess.

All this goddess stuff is distant; it doesn't grip me. I mean everybody was beginning to read that material for the first time in the late seventies so we were influenced by it. It wasn't a way to go deeper into oneself. It was an abstract metaphor that didn't relate to my personal experiences. It was interesting historically, but I didn't find the goddess movement very meaningful except for a couple years.

KH: When people are learning and have exposure to new information, they take it for what it's worth and it gives them momentum. When you are looking at political developments like feminism, ideas come up at different moments in that particular cultural history. People who participated look back and realize it wasn't useful to their whole life, but in that one moment it

felt good, stimulated some thinking, and gave new experiences.

BH: I think a key question that you're asking is: "Why is there this uninhibited, celebration--playfulness of the whole woman body in the frame without a lot of fragmentation?" Psychologically I could think, maybe it's bursting out **[End Page 74]** from a repressed culture. Growing up in the fifties I was told to keep my legs together. I've had lovers who were Catholic who didn't like me touching myself. I like touching my body, not only sexually. I like skin. I like touching skin. It was definitely the enthusiasm of the moment and an appreciation of the human body. Really that's what it is--a celebration and appreciation of the human body. And the fun of risk taking. Being a little bit on the edge. The fact that I shot *Menses* (1974) on a hilltop overlooking the University of California at Berkeley was important because I wanted to comment on the restrictions placed on education within the system. We performed our playful rite directly above the university. Nude women stood in a triangle which symbolized the pubis. They held hard boiled eggs between their thighs and at the signal opened their legs so the eggs fell. Today it both amazes and delights me that I was so brash and outrageous in my thirties.

KH: When I was reading that article "The Politics of Abstraction," it sounded like you were making a defense against criticism of your work which described it as essentialist.

BH: Yes, that really hurt.

KH: I had a couple of different takes that I wanted to ask you about. Do you think it was called essentialist by default, because there was so little work made by lesbians at that moment? The work wasn't really able to exist in dialogue with that many other pieces. So in one way it's just standing by itself.

The other question is this idea of the lesbian body; what is the relationship for you between the sign of the lesbian body--which we could say exists in representation--and the actual physical body?

BH: There seem to be two really different questions. Let's discuss the essentialist concern first. I think that you're right. There wasn't anything to weigh it against or to look and deposit it with. I think what happened there for me was that critics were leading the feminist movement after I made the films. And I wasn't aware that by placing women in nature, nude, and celebrating the expanse of nature, I was saying that women were purely biological. **[End Page 75]** That wasn't my intent. I think that part of my reason to move to New York was to be in more of an urban setting where I wouldn't have the allure of open space and the expansive lesbian/feminist philosophies that were born here on the West Coast. My early films were really geographically driven.

It made me more conscious to have that criticism. I welcomed it, except that it wasn't a criticism in dialogue. It was a criticism after the fact. It seemed so harsh and so judgmental that I couldn't keep doing the same kind of work. Also, that particular manner of filming wasn't viable to me any more as my life changed. I had to find a new way. I took women out of my films for a number of years. If you look at the work in the eighties, there aren't any women in them.

There are other reasons. New York just wasn't ready to embrace these body centered films of the seventies, and I did want some recognition as an artist so I had to make another kind of work. It would be interesting to see them critiqued again. Did they deserve that kind of criticism given the type of community spirit that was going on? Large numbers of women were living in Mendocino and Albion and leaving for the woods--out of the urban setting to try and

find this lesbian life that was truer to what they felt they were, rather than being inhibited by the cultural constrictions of the city.

The lesbian body. I don't know if you saw *No No Nooky T.V.* (1987). That's a film I did using the Amiga computer. It's fun. It's a really clear construction of the lesbian body and sexuality. I say the lesbian body is holes and gaps and innuendoes and fringes and areas that are not defined. To me, we can't be defined or won't be defined--as much as we try. Or once we get a definition, the lesbian will move on to redefine herself. But it's a visionary idea, because the audience, my audience, doesn't always follow me. And has never... because of the avant-garde nature of the films or the formal concern of the films. This society is driven by Hollywood entertainment and has been trained to look at film in a particular way. So until film can be taught in all its genres at the elementary school level and people are educated to appreciate experimental work, there won't be a lesbian audience that is terribly concerned about these formal issues, these issues that you and I are interested in. **[End Page 76]**

Finding that the lesbian audience was just as conservative as a heterosexual one was a big blow to me, because I just thought that all lesbians were going to be curious, breaking rules, breaking norms, out on the fringe. I thought that's what a lesbian was. I personally had moved out from a marriage. I left the marriage before I knew I was a lesbian, but still it was the next step to freedom. I was just shocked that all lesbians were not artists and they all were not interested in change and expansion. Like all population groups, some of us prefer the status quo.

We are just a nano second in terms of depth, in time on the planet. To hold ourselves back is difficult. We only have this one life to do this work in. It's really good to talk to you, because it re-engenders my enthusiasm for a lesbian cinema, a new lesbian cinema. It makes me want to go back to my script and work on it in a new way.

The sign of the lesbian body. What do you mean by that? The advertisements that we see today? **[End Page 77]**

KH: No, I was speaking more in terms of the argument made against your work as being essentialist. In a way, I think that argument stems from a notion of equivalency between the representations you made of women's bodies in nature and the existing cultural associations surrounding those images. There was no move to theoretically address those images in a new way. I think that the films go beyond the bodies. There's a much more philosophical aspect of the bodies brought up by the act of representation. The way that they exist in filmic space is not accounted for in an essentialist critique.

BH: I think you're right and the gendered construction of filmic space is very important. I did want to take up a lot of space and have women claim that space for themselves. I would have to go back and look at the films. I felt the restrictions that all women felt. We were reading Betty Friedan, the early work of Christian Metz--just reading what a sign and a signifier was. Christian Metz's work was only coming out in Xerox form when I was in school. It wasn't a published book so we weren't even thinking of representation when we were making films. I was introduced to *Screen* magazine late in my film studies.

I was interested more in ideas that I got from Noël Burch in terms of film space and off-screen space; what could be said that wasn't said. Every time those kinds of openings happened, I got very excited by them. Marginalities. I hope that shows in the work.

Double Strength is not a sutured film. I see it as being the stages or fragments of a lesbian relationship. By the late seventies, I'd had enough relationships; I started to think I was an

expert in it.

So again, I put the subject on the screen. I wanted to show the subject, the lesbian woman, by not trying to make a traditional, dramatic, linear work but one that evoked ecstasy, space, and freedom by collecting images in moments of despair and passion. Not writing the script before hand.

I was a lesbian archeologist, an archeologist of lesbian relationships. I questioned how the ten other relationships that I had had related to one another. [End Page 78] Finding the images from the image bank--in a way montaging from your own work rather than found work--finding your own work and using that work to represent the relationship; knowing I was successful, because I was emotionally taken with the images. When I started *Double Strength*, I had regular periods but I started bleeding throughout that film. I think it was caused by the pain and the suffering and the catharsis that I was undergoing when I was working on that. I did the film at the end of the relationship.... of course.

KH: I have a question relating to that. *Double Strength* is evocative of the lesbian difference that you talk about, because it is a relationship that could have the traditional structure of a Hollywood love story, but it doesn't.

BH: In *Tender Fictions*, my most recent film, I use the idea of "I Is A Lesbian Couple." In *Double Strength*, I see that mirroring and that doubling with Terry Sendgraff and me on the trapeze. People don't know who is who, even though you would if you saw us standing by one another... which you never do interestingly enough. Probably because I had the camera and then gave it to her. [End Page 79] We never brought in an outsider to shoot. We had intimacy in the cinema. You still might be confused about whose body is whose. Who is the performer and who is the voyeur so to speak. Those two positions are interchangeable in a way that is so balanced that the trapeze is almost a metaphor for that balance.

I think that I would have fun going back to my journals at the time I was working on these films to see what I had written--what kinds of issues. I might find more theory, beginnings, foundations for developing more thought. But if I think of anything that contributed to the making of the film--it was self trust that I had a vision. I had a voice. I had a calling to make this work and that was pretty amazing given the way most of us are brought up. Many people I know don't have that confidence. That's a huge, huge, important thing for us as women. No matter what our sexual preference is.

Now I want to be responsible for intellectual theory and meaning behind things I put out in the world. But at that point in time and place, there was no time for that. I had too much energy. There was always a new film to make.

In 1978--there was *Double Strength*. In that same year, I made a film called *Available Space* (1978) that talks about the suffocation of a lesbian relationship where the doubling is too intense and there is the loss of identity.

To me, the screen was as confining as a relationship, because it's a square, a rectangle. Somebody just made that up--the construction of screen size. In '76 during this 'goddess phase,' I made the *Moon Goddess* (1976) with Gloria Churchman which we projected on an eight foot weather balloon; people looked at it from under and all around the balloon.

With *Available Space*, I show the woman, and it's me, within the frame and trying to break out of the frame in eight different ways. I built an Active Annie--renamed from Lazy Susan--which is used on a table top so the projector can be in the space and I could move it around. I project

in different architectural locations according to how the images project. The audience must move to see the film. In one image you have me sitting nude in the frame in an old deserted house--it's all torn apart--and I'm pushing against the frame. That **[End Page 80]** looks really good up in a little corner where you can have the sense of being trapped. You get this feeling of entrapment and performance in limited form.

The impetus for *Available Space* came from a dream I had, before I left Terry Sendgraff. In the dream, I lifted up the window shade behind the kitchen sink and there was a pyramid, and I was to go to it. So I got out the map and there was a lake called Pyramid Lake in Nevada. I drove there and camped out and made this film in that environment. Talk about trusting yourself and knowing that you needed to do it! I bought this long cable release that was about twenty feet and I had this tripod and I'm nude, again, walking in this desert proscribing what kind of space I have and I can be in. It's this limited square again except now it's out in space, in 3D. So there are eight different ways in which this is imaged. It's really a film performance.

In *Optic Nerve*, I make the film go from a positive to a negative framing--a white frame, a black frame, a color frame. It's a flicker. All that makes the frame grow. It's to say that we don't need to be confined. When you look at that film, your retina is so stimulated that you have reflexes in your mind of little colors shooting off. *Optic Nerve* is also about my grandmother, as an angel --as a metaphor--for her spirit leaving the space as well.

I think these films have to do with being a lesbian; the heterosexual role is too narrow, the experimental film role is too narrow, the formula of a projector and screen is too rigid and square and defined without frizzing at the end, without this raw quality that you can enter into in a new way, more freshly. The form of those films comes from trying to break a gender and sexual proscriptive coding. The same in film as in life. Although, after being a lesbian for so many years, I'm not breaking any codes by being a lesbian now except by being an active older lesbian and that's important!

KH: You are describing the frame and the restrictions of the frame which most filmmakers encounter or work with on some level. How did you first start making films? How did you get involved in it? I read somewhere that you didn't make your first film until your thirties. Typically in a woman's life that's not a time that she picks up a new medium. **[End Page 81]**

BH: I decided that I wanted to be an artist after being a teacher of emotionally disturbed children, a recreation leader, a bank teller, and an English teacher. I wanted to be an artist. That conflict still exists today: will I take a full time teaching position or will I work as an artist? This is the same conflict I've had all my life. I decided to be an artist when I was twenty-seven. I read biographies of famous artists. They were all men, but I identified with Rilke and poets in particular. This is in *Tender Fictions*.

If not a poet, I thought I'd be a painter. I saw the work of William Morehouse, ⁴ and I found out where he was teaching. I went to that school and apprenticed myself to him--so to speak. Well, in the first painting class he had a woman model drive into the class on her motorcycle. I mean I couldn't believe it. The first time we had a model. I thought that meant nudes. I was all excited. I had stretched a big canvas--as big as my reach. And I put it up right next to her. I was working; I painted three arms on her and three legs. I hadn't seen Duchamp. Maybe I had, but I really wasn't grounded in art history. Bill noticed my painting and he brought it to my attention that I was trying to put movement in still paintings. He brought an old projector to class with some 16mm clear leader and suggested that I paint on it; then I could project it. Before I did that, I worked with black light and fluorescent paints; I would turn the light on and off making the colors move around on the canvas. Then I painted on the film and projected it.

Somebody gave me a camera, and I don't know who that somebody is. I thought that I should take a class on Super 8 filmmaking. Instead of taking the class, I saw something that interested me. It was an old building with cobwebs around it and red ivy leaves. I parked my Lambretta outside the shack and instead of going to class, I went inside. In my pocket, I had bi-focal lenses from an optometrist. I placed them in front of the camera lens and started filming through them one at a time and then I'd pull them away. I went outside. I was living in a little rural town. There was a porch with several chairs. I would put the camera with the bifocal lens in front of the chairs and make them swirl around. I started running up and down the porch. I was following my intuition again. I was filming my shadow running. The man who lived in the house came out and sat down and started smoking a roll-your-own cigarette. **[End Page 82]** So I climbed up behind him and filmed him. I asked him if he had a mirror. He went into the house and brought me back a little shaving mirror. I got in the same position as he and put the mirror in between my feet, smoked as he had and zoomed into myself.

Then I cut to hand-painted kaleidoscope-like frames. I had built a kaleidoscope out of mirrors and projected some of this hand painted film into the mirror box so the image split apart into six sections and refilmed that on Super 8. I called the film *Schizy* (1968). That film is being shown this month in Toronto for the first time since 1968 when it was made and won an Honorable Mention in a Super 8 film festival. There were fifty people in a small room watching *Schizy* on a large screen. None of them left. I thought: "This is better than painting. It lasts longer, and the canvas is bigger." I noticed people just walked by my paintings, but with film they had to stay and experience a time-based art. And I was able to express something--something from inside that was coming out.

It seems like I've always been conscious of what it's like being a woman in a man's world. That was the bi-focal vision. Seeing two different ways. Also I was very conscious--I hadn't come out then--that's a pre-lesbian film--but I was very conscious of being different within this world and having to be a chameleon. I know how to play a gender role and I know how to be myself, represented by the bifocal lens of splitvision. That's the story of how I became a filmmaker.

KH: One thing that I noticed while you were talking is that you have a real desire to integrate your own physicality into your filmmaking practice. You are running along with the camera. There is a real sense of you, the filmmaker, being embedded in the film. By formally emphasizing your physical relationship to the world in your films, you collapse the implied distances between the filmmaker, the screen, and the audience.

I wanted to talk about the inclusion of yourself with the camera in *Women I Love* for instance. When I saw that, it reminded me how different your image was than similar images of men with cameras in Hollywood films. An extreme **[End Page 83]** example of what I'm talking about would be *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1959) or Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1951) where there are men with cameras. What does it mean when you have the camera? When you have it, there is a more holistic sense about the film dynamic. It's a different mode of filmmaking.

BH: It's breaking down the subject/object relationship. It's non-exploitative. It's celebrating aging, because a lot of the women have aged bodies or non-traditionally beautiful bodies. It's a willingness to be as vulnerable as I ask the person I am filming to be. In *Sync-Touch*, I have an image of me caressing the camera in bed. I take the camera to the most intimate places and then pass it to a partner to film.

The physicality does collapse--it collapses the pre-planning which is what sets up that distance. That's why it's so difficult for me to work with a script, because it's all pre-planned. I really

probably wouldn't know what I would do until I'm physically in the space with the actors. Then we would find a way.

I know that I was very conscious of getting the audience to experience cinema physically not just visually, but not in an I-Max total all over body experience--that almost is too much. I wanted to set up nerve reactions and blood movement--coursing through their veins that physical movement requires. When you move, more blood will go to that area of the body. So with *Available Space* I was asking the audience to move, get out of their seats and move. In *Pond and Waterfall* (1982), I take the camera underwater and swim with it. The audience has a sense of being in that place, in that pond and exploring the dimensions. The same with moving the camera on the trapeze. I make experimental cinema, because I want to get away from the narrative. I want the audience to experience a physicality in space. **[End Page 84]**

KH: I sense that distinction being made when I watch the work.

BH: You're sort of inside me. If I can show you from inside out, it's a way of communicating. I can communicate who I am to you. You get to be inside my body. Lucky you. (laughter) During my undergraduate years when I studied psychology at U.C.L.A. I was obsessed with trying to devise a manner in which we could each get under one another's skins. I thought if we could invent a way to "feel the way another feels" we could understand one another better. This then could lead to more tolerance and avoidance of war.

KH: A question about documentary. In the work coming out of the seventies, in that liberatory moment, it seems like you're really using the community around you. You're using the people you know. In a highly personal way, you are documenting that particular moment. Were you thinking about that? Was that an issue for you?

BH: Very consciously. I was aware, again, of that blank screen in terms of lesbian cinema. I thought: "My work will be to at least document one woman's life during the last third of the twentieth century.... Hopefully into the next." It's very much about my growth and development. In all my work, you can see it as my growth and development or change throughout the twenty-five, twenty-seven years of working up until now. So yes, it was extremely conscious. The lesbian-feminist community was very important--it was my background and foreground. It was and is my historical context. I could not document my life without documenting the community.

It was a wonderful opportunity. I am so lucky to have been born when I was and go through that early seventies period. Then I had people tell me--promoters, agents--that I had to decide if I was going to be an avant-garde filmmaker or a lesbian filmmaker. What was my image going to be? This was the kind of image consciousness of an agent who was representing Chris Williamson ⁵ and some of the early women's music people. This agent was going to put me on the road. I had to make some of these decisions.

I saw that I could not choose one over the other. We are the holistic, interested, **[End Page 85]** cross-disciplinary creatures that we are; it would be very boring to have to become a model for just one particular form or idea. I do think of what I am going to be known for after I die. It's going to be as a pioneer lesbian filmmaker. It's probably not going to be a pioneer, avant-garde woman filmmaker. It won't be pioneer, because there are women that precede me in that area. Maybe that agent was right. I hope not.

KH: It's funny, though, to talk about these categories, because that is where essentialism lies. If you are already claiming these multiple spaces for yourself, there is no way you can be named

an essentialist.

BH: That's right. I just need to keep claiming more and more spaces.

KH: Can you talk about the historical moment, the context around the films when they came out. Where did you show them? Who attended? What was the initial critical response to them? Were women upset by the fact that they were sexually explicit? Were they excited?

BH: I was showing my Super-8 work for one of the first times in an Oakland coffee house that was attended by lesbians. Most of the films that I had made at that time were heterosexual. I had just come out. A lot of the women left the theater and only two stayed. They happened to have children, one of whom was male. They didn't have the separatist idea that you couldn't show men on screen or that you had to leave the rest of your life behind you forever. This kind of early doctrinaire, rigid feminism confronted me right away with the reaction to those early films.

Later I made 16mm films like *Multiple Orgasm* (1978) and *Sync-Touch* which have representations of the vagina and the vulva, and there were often controversies about whether they should be shown in women-only spaces or mixed spaces. I would usually let the community decide rather than deciding myself; whatever was comfortable for them was important to me. In Vienna, once, we had two different screenings: one for women only and the other one mixed. During the mixed screening, a man yelled out when the vagina came out on screen, "Ahhh." I mean he screamed as if he had never seen a vagina before. **[End Page 86]** The women told him, "Shut up! If you don't like it, leave."

In 1979, there was a women's film conference being held at Peterborough University north of Toronto in Ontario. I was going to show *Multiple Orgasm*. I was showing a lot of my early work and talking about women's erotica. The censor came, a representative of Mary Brown, and she said, shaking from anxiety, "If you put that film onto the projector, I will have to confiscate it." I didn't want to lose my film, but also I didn't want to back down. I went in front of the audience and for the length of the film which is six minutes I gave them a description of every orgasm that was in the film! I also exposed the censorship that had just occurred.

In the early days, there were many kinds of reactions. People know what to expect when they come to my cinema now. There was a lot of discomfort with experimental work with a lesbian or feminist audience. They really liked... What is that one... *Jaine's Janie* (Geri Ashur and Peter Barton, 1972)... A real linear, down to earth documentary about a normal woman talking. They didn't like this extraordinary stuff. It was too fast. It was too hard. A lot of women left the cinema. I've been used to it--all my life--walkouts. On the other hand, when I would go to an avant-garde screening for a mixed audience, men would think they didn't want to come, because it was a lesbian cinema. What does it have for them? Or they might have thought feminism was too strident. They didn't want to see that. I could be rejected by both audiences for different reasons: for content by the avant-garde audience and for form by the lesbian, feminist audience. **[End Page 87]**

There are always people who celebrate my work. You know I wouldn't be here today without them. I couldn't continue. I remember having the first show outside of California in St. Louis, Missouri at the University where Jacqueline Zita, the philosopher taught.

What was I wearing?; I wore a silver lamé jump suit or I would almost be in nothing. I would be flexing. It was just like a performance of energy and enthusiasm. I projected on an inflatable eight foot weather balloon and had the audience walk around it during the film. I stayed at

Zita's house. I remember... she was the first person to look at my work and study it seriously. She was watching it while I was sleeping--I probably only had one print and had to take it with me. I remember waking in the morning and hearing my soundtrack going already in the house downstairs. That was so thrilling. I remember having a dream of Maya Deren and walking in her footsteps. I heard her walking down the steps and then I walked down to find Jackie projecting my work.

The community has always been a major support for me--the San Francisco community especially. Much of my work was made here.

KH: I wanted to ask about this question of women's erotica. How do you look at your own works and describe them? Is it lesbian pornography? Is it erotica? Do you use these definitions? When you were making the work, you were obviously aware of the possible risks of showing....

BH: No. I wasn't... Not when I was doing *Dyketactics* or *Double Strength*. No. There were no issues of erotica/pornography. Nobody called them porn. Or if they did, it wasn't in the mainstream or in the feminist debates that came later.

KH: So when you actually made them, those debates weren't....

BH: They weren't formed or shaped. I called them erotica. I never called them porn, because when I was in school, I looked at the Mitchell Brothers (a famous San Francisco corporation of pornography, both live and in film/video sales). Most of San Francisco's film industry was based in pornography. Monaco [End Page 88] Film Laboratory celebrated me and the Mitchell Brothers at a dinner once, because we were both making sexually explicit work. I wrote a paper at San Francisco State defining and comparing erotic and pornographic art and then I was invited to debate with the Mitchell Brothers. I went on stage and publicly confronted the Mitchell Brothers with their pornography.

It felt like I was coming from a very different place. For one thing ... there are so many things. Primarily, sexuality is like eating, sleeping. It's a necessary part of life. It's biologically driven. It's a deterministic activity that we carry on. It has many constructions around it. It was the normalcy that I was talking about. I wanted to situate love-making just like eating breakfast or having this interview. It's just an everyday activity--if you're lucky. All the restrictions around sexuality come from other institutions. I never had those inhibitions. I didn't grow up with a religion so I don't have a religion structuring me. I guess I broke out of the traditional codes of the fifties. I still feel fine about my body and I don't feel there's a reason to hide it. [End Page 89]

We started having conferences where we discussed these issues. There was a conference at UCLA and I was on a panel with Tom Waugh who teaches at Concordia University in Montreal and writes a lot about gay male pornography --the history of gay male pornography within the gay movement. ⁶ I was supposed to be the expert on women's sexual expression. Throughout that whole discussion, I told Tom and the audience, "You cannot call my work pornographic. It doesn't come from a pornographic tradition. You can call yours pornographic. It comes out of a pornographic tradition. You had playing cards, etc. Women were taught not to look at each other's bodies. We didn't have photos or early videos that we passed back and forth or a filmic tradition around this. My films are a celebration of my eroticism: what I consider to be erotic and it doesn't stand for all lesbians' erotica. You've got to use the word 'erotica' when you talk about it." And they did, during the rest of the discussion. As soon as we left the room and we were walking to another panel, Tom started using "porn" again. I kind of gave up. I could not

teach or educate. It was not going to be a major concern of mine to make these distinctions to people who couldn't learn.

Today, pornography is interesting and has been studied from so many points of view as a codification and as a commodity. I think Baudrillard talks about it. He said that pornography is about the disappearance of sexuality. I thought that's a very interesting way to look at pornography. Mine is not a codified cinema. It doesn't have a lot of rules and regulations about it. It doesn't have particular shots that it has to have in it--particular scenarios. It's not made for sexual arousal in the privacy of your own home. It's fine with me if it's used that way, but that's not what it's made for. That debate was interesting for a while, but it was very quickly not interesting. Purely semantics. I just left it.

KH: In your films, you show yourself or other women masturbating. I was wondering, in terms of this discussion of erotica, what is the significance of masturbation for you?

BH: There's a sense of sexual independence in masturbation that breaks the codes of women--and men, too--being told not to touch themselves as they're growing up. Masturbation means you can be free of a relationship, if **[End Page 90]** you want to. Satisfy yourself. Or be in a relationship that may not have the kind of sexuality that you want in it; you can use your own fantasies and break boundaries even within a relationship through masturbation. Maybe some of it was egocentric. It probably was.

In a way, when I made *Multiple Orgasm*, I wanted to see what I looked like. Have you ever seen yourself having an orgasm. Nooooo. Well, my god, that's one of the most intense things in our life, and we've never seen it. That was the main thing. My cinema is made for me.... some of it.... most of it. I wanted to see what my face looked like. In contraction, it looked like a child being born. I was so surprised. Really. It's very refreshing. And the contractions that you can see in the vagina. The lips move, close up. It's great, because all I could do was feel it from the inside. It's not terribly visible like an ejaculation, but if you watch closely--and as lesbians and as women we make love closely. We have to be sensitive and we have to be sensitive to our cinema, too. Is there that much masturbation in my films?

KH: Yes, there's quite a few scenes. One example that pops to mind is a scene in *Women I Love* where you super-impose a woman masturbating with butterflies. Masturbation is an image that is rarely ever seen outside of the context of porn film.

BH: Or a sex education movie. Don't forget, historically, that was happening in San Francisco at the same time I was working. It even precedes my work. At the Institute of Sexology, you can get a degree in sexology. There was the **[End Page 91]** idea that people could get over their inhibitions around sexuality by watching films. This Institute would produce films of all kinds of couples making love. They produced *Holding* by Coni Beeson who identifies as a bisexual woman and that film has explicit lesbian love-making in it. This was made before my films. In the culture at the time, in San Francisco, all kinds of love-making was considered normal behavior and not something that we should all freak out about.

KH: When I watch your films, in terms of your camera work and the pixelation of imagery in *Women I Love*, there is a lot of playfulness. A prankster attitude. Was this a conscious strategy in your presentation of women's sexuality? There is this overall merriment in these formal elements.

BH: When you look at "auteur cinema," you're going to get the personality and characteristics of the cinematographer, the filmmaker, the director--that whole person who is making the work

reflected in the film. So I think that you are seeing me. My attitude towards life.

After all, I'm doing the shooting and I'm doing the editing. When you see *Nitrate Kisses*, you will find it full of puns. In this very serious film about recovering a marginalized history from the thirties to the present in terms of the gay and lesbian communities, there's humor.

I have to entertain myself. I'm working for no money. Why am I in this life? I'm going to have the necessary sadnesses and set-backs and tragedies that we all will have through living. To find pleasure where you can has been a guiding principle. I think my mother--when she died at sixty-three, so young, said to me--she told a neighbor--"Tell Barbie--Have fun." She saw... I'm a very hard worker, I'm really very serious, very ambitious. I work very hard. I try for everything. She saw that I could be over-determined that way. Like "lighten-up." And it was a lighter period back then. Even in the editing I have fun. *Tender Fictions* is a comedy, a subtle comedy. I had fun making it. I love it when the audience laughs. I love it when they get off on the story that I'd tried to rob an American Express office with a Swiss Army knife. There are so many things I used to do. Scatological things, too, that I haven't showed. **[End Page 92]**

I think being playful is my idea of what lesbians can be for each other and the world, rather than the "over-determined feminist" that we've been stereotyped as. I can be angry, too, at a situation, but there's always so much humor. It makes living so much easier--as well as film watching.

I like to be a prankster... I always was... In my sorority, I was called "House Mouse" and I borrowed women's typewriters; every week I would write up the gossip that people never talked about--except to each other--and posted it. They couldn't track me, because they didn't know whose typewriter it was. It became this scandal of the house. Making the personal public, the private public was always my goal.

Fifth grade... the teacher didn't like us eating Kool-Aid in class. So he would come and get the Kool-Aid and rip it up. You'd see the lime-green sprinkles go into the trash can. I hated that. So I filled my Kool-Aid bag with sand. And he ripped it up and angrily called, "Barbara Jean." Anything to challenge stuffiness.

I enjoy being the prankster and I think there has to be a prankster. In Native American life, there was always the prankster in mythology that kept things on a level so one couldn't take him or herself too seriously. There's some relief in that. That makes a possible space for me to occupy. You can't challenge anything without humor. You can burst a stereotype or a restriction or a code with a laugh. It's a really great tactic.

Notes

- [1.](#) Peter Adair, San Francisco filmmaker
- [2.](#) Max Almy, video artist.
- [3.](#) Cynthia MacAdams, photographer, whose books include *Emergence* (New York: Chelsea House, 1977) and *Rising Goddess* (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Morgan & Morgan, 1983).
- [4.](#) William Morehouse (d. 1993), painter and teacher at Sonoma State University for many years.
- [5.](#) Chris Williamson, musician and performer.

6. Thomas Waugh, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film From Their Beginnings to Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

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