

The grandchild of D.W. Griffith's cook, Barbara Hammer was introduced to such screen luminaries as Lillian Gish as a child. But the thought of making movies didn't occur to her until nearly twenty five years later when Hammer left her marriage, took off on a motorcycle with a Super-8 camera, and became America's progenitor of lesbian filmmaking with her film "Dyketactics!" An artist and experimental filmmaker having completed 50+ films and videos, Hammer's work is iconoclastic, sexually explicit and inextricably connected to her lesbianism and feminism. Before she left for this year's Sundance and Berlin film festivals, we talked about death, silence, history, and her first feature film "Nitrate Kisses."

Tina DiFeliciantino: How do your fears, anxiety, and aggressions inspire your work?

Barbara Hammer: In "Vital Signs," I was inspired by death, something I've been trained to fear. Gender is constructed, why not look and see how death is constructed? I read about the medieval reception of those who had died. They were buried right next to the homes. Their presence was a part of life. After the cities became walled, cemeteries were put on the outside. We've put death far out of our minds. We've tried to forget those who have died. But now, certainly there is a new community saying, "We want to remember." We want to know our history. So we are very interested in keeping the dead near by, and embracing them.

TD: We're talking about death and history in the same sentence. In America, we allow our history to die. There's only a certain privileged few who get to write history. "Nitrate Kisses" explains the silences around that history. Who is controlling the silences? That's just as important as the history itself. Maya Angelou talked about that in her speech at the inauguration. The press was appalled that she could get up there and talk about the horrors of our history.

"That's a pessimistic thing, how could you bring up such an unpleasant thing?" They totally missed the point. We have to learn from our history so we don't repeat it. That's obvious.

BH: Yes! I also think it's time for idealism again. We have been living in cynicism, depression and a sort of status quo for a number of years. I don't think we can have a diversified culture by just accepting it. We need our personal energies behind that. Every place that I've been teaching, I bring together *everyone* in the classroom. I see apathy and I say to them, "This is our time, let's try it again." We need to learn how to grab hold of the life force again. That use of the erotic that Audre Lorde wrote about so beautifully. She was our great living representative. Somebody who has changed all of our lives. She told me if I ever encountered a racist comment, to not let it go by. I extend that to anti-Semitism, to homophobia, a comment on size or looks, all the different ways that we as people feel the need to disparage each other.

TD: In my own work, role models have been very important. My parents were immigrants. My grandmother didn't get out of third grade. She was a peasant in Italy. Her history is on the verge of being lost. They don't talk about their history in Italy because it was so painful and so devastating. At one point, I interviewed her. The stuff that came out was so rich and so wonderful, and I definitely want to incorporate that in my work, but I'm having a hard time getting people to give a damn about it. Who cares about an old Italian immigrant?

BH: That's where thinking about an audience can dampen the creative spirit. I often don't think about an audience. I make the work for myself. It's always been my feeling that if I make a film that's very true to my feelings, then I'll be able to make something unique. Some will relate to it, maybe some will have trouble with the more experimental form.

TD: I'm very drawn to the themes in your film. I'm not an experimental filmmaker, yet, we share the same sort of concerns.

BH: It dovetails. The crossing of genres now, I think, is the most exciting. There are sequences where you can do a docudrama or you can put in a dream sequence, where you challenge visual notions. A lot of times we think, "Oh, this documentary is going to tell me what to think, or it's going to tell me what the filmmakers think." The more interesting

documentaries are those that combine other forms so that the viewer works on several layers in order to read it formally. Form determines content as well.

TD: That requires a more disciplined viewer and most American viewers are not disciplined.

BH: I don't think we want to feed them back the language they already know. Film is a new language and we're still developing it. In "Nitrate Kisses", I try to make the viewer the historian. They have to decide which piece of film came from the 1930's. What piece of film was shot last year? Where was it shot? A lot of people have asked me, "What are those burnt out buildings doing there?" I want them to figure it out. That's what we have to do, if we are working at recovering history. We're piecing these things together with our point of view. Now, it's our turn.

TD: For a long time you were the first, if not the only, lesbian avant-garde filmmaker. That must feel rewarding now, to see a proliferation of experimental work by lesbians.

BH: My work has been challenged and critiqued by younger lesbian filmmakers, and I expect that it will continue to be. That's the way change is made and if it ever gets totally critiqued in a negative sense, it will get regrouped later. It is something to build upon. Somebody's got to start making those first efforts out there. I was lucky when I made "Dyketactics!" I didn't realize that it was the first lesbian film made by a lesbian. I would have been so afraid and intimidated. Instead, I just burst out and let my energy carry me through my work. In some ways being alone was great. There was a blank screen and I was filling it. That was a thrill. At the end of "Dyketactics!", I showed a vagina on the screen and this man screamed, "AAAAAAHHHH!" All the women said, "Haven't you seen that before?"

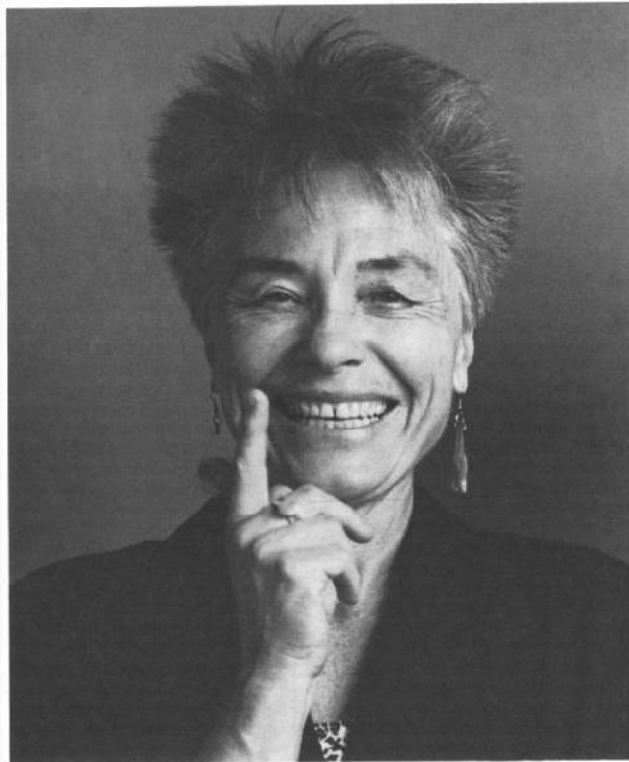
TD: The two older women making love in "Nitrate Kisses," was something I'd never seen. Women in their sixties or seventies, nude, making love: that was a first.

BH: That's why everybody likes it, it gives them hope.

TD: I just read this article by David Ehrenstein in which he says, "Whether heterosexual viewers as well will be moved by 'Nitrate Kisses' is uncertain because the film requires from them a personal examination of the silences that so many people have worked so mightily to construct." I thought that was really at the heart of the matter. That is a major challenge.

BH: Yes, and I have not succeeded with

Tina DiFeliciantino is a filmmaker currently in production with Jane C. Wagner on "Madonna Mia," and, "Silent Voices of the Silver Screen."



the heterosexual viewers. A producer who I would like to produce my next film said that he felt left out. I felt crushed, because I'm so vulnerable. My lover overheard and as soon as he left she said, "Left out? We are left out of 97% of cinema in this country." We can read in, we can interject lesbian or gay into the sexuality of the character. That's what we've had to do. He doesn't have to do that. He has so much of it out there. I went to see a film that he had produced with heterosexual sex and I gave the same line back to him — I felt left out — and I think then he understood.

TD: I had a conversation with my partner Jane and one of our interns about male viewers. When they feel uncomfortable it's more disturbing for them than it is for women.

BH: They haven't seen cinema shot by women produced by women, edited by women, who have a totally different constructed experience of the world than they do because cinema has been in their domain. The apparatus, the scripting, the money, the way the film was shot makes a seamless escape narrative for the male viewer. Any woman who has identified with the man, in a heterosexual world, also becomes part of that audience. The advertising has been for them. It's only recently that there has been enough of a response for the independent cinema. That's why we have Sundance. That's why we have people who will make no-budget films and still get them distributed theatrically.

TD: Is it hard for you to say, "Quiet on the set?"

BH: As a woman, I've been trained to be liked. Trained to do the sort of social things so that people will like me. I realize that we have different ways of working with people. We become communal and involve everyone in the process of filmmaking, which isn't the usual purpose of a director. We can get terrific results from that. But as I move into the project I can see that I am going to want to have control and I am going to look like a dictator. But I really have a vision, and the only way I can do it is to have control and respect from everyone I meet at this time.

TD: You're almost making an excuse for being a director.

BH: You're right.

TD: I was reading about Ida Lupino. The back of her director's chair read, "The Mother Of Us All." She would be like, "O.K. baby. O.K. honey," using her maternal charms as a way of getting what she wanted. In reading about women filmmakers from the past, you find how

women were very involved as writers, editors, producers, and directors. Then they were pushed out.

Let's switch gears and move onto the imagery in your films. What about your repetitive use of hands?

BH: When I had my experience coming out in 1970, I touched a woman's body for the very first time when we made love. All the corpuscles on my skin that have nerve endings that go to the part of the brain that is about touching were highly charged by touching a body similar to my own. I feel that my sight is connected to my sense of touch. When I look at the world I can feel it in my body. I don't need to go over there and touch that pillow to know the difference of textures around me. My textual sense is in my eyes. I think it was Aldous Huxley, who pointed out that children know the world through touching before they can ever see. They can't even focus, yet they are touching. They put things into their mouth which is full of sensory touch organs. Of course, the clitoris has more nerve endings than any other organ in the human body. More than the penis. The thumb is next.

TD: The thumb?

BH: It's a whole new respect for the thumb. *(laughter)* So, I began in my work to connect touch and sight. In "Dyketactics!" I had 110 shots and every shot in that four minute film has a quality of touch about it. Either a literal one, a

woman touching a woman or a more metaphoric one, brushing of hair. As I said before, we know the world in ways other than sight. For instance, I'm driving down the road, and I look out at a plowed field. I can feel that texture in my body through my sight. It came back to me, through my lesbian experience of touching a body similar to my own. I think this reaches out to Foucault, talking about how Western knowledge has been limited by sight. That's why there are so many hands, and clitorises, and feet and skin in my movies because that is our organ of touch. Skin takes up 97% of our body. We are touching even when we are sleeping. Air is touching us. All the films I make, I try to make experiential. If it's underwater I take the viewer in the swim. Through the pond, down the river, into the ocean. That's in "Pond and Waterfall."

TD: You're very prolific.

BH: People say that with envy, sometimes with hate and sometimes with resentment.

TD: Are those other filmmakers?

BH: Yeah. I always look toward Stan Brakhage and his success. He's done twice as much work as I have. I don't think people say he's prolific with negative tones. Sometimes I feel if I



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Above, Sally Blinford and Frances Lorraine in Barbara Hammer's, "Nitrate Kisses," 1992. Top, still from "Lot in Sodom," by James Watson and Melville Webber as used in Hammer's "Nitrate Kisses."

made as many films as Stan Brakhage I couldn't be ignored. Times have changed and it's okay to be all of myself now. All dyke and all artist. But, in the ideal world, why should I be known by my sexual practices? Besides that, they could be fluid and changing as we see in "Nitrate Kisses." It's pretty boring to think that you're going to be cast as lesbian, or heterosexual, or bisexual for all your life. Why not just be known as a filmmaker? Why does it have to be "woman filmmaker." Somebody said to me once, "You'll never be Stan Brakhage. You wouldn't die for your work." I said, "How do you know? How do you know whether I've suffered as much as the male artist has suffered in the romantic myth?"

TD: One thing I wanted to bring up was the Hays Motion Picture Code over that wonderful dick rubbing that man's white butt in "Nitrate Kisses."

BH: That is my favorite shot. Isn't that funny that two lesbians can enjoy that shot so much?

TD: I love the irreverence and how beautiful it was. Was that equally as enjoyable for you to connect those two images?

BH: I was so nervous about that shoot. I'd never seen men make love. I directed them to use a condom. Then I got into it. People said it was so refreshing to see gay male sex that was not phallogentric. It was

so friendly. It was an all body over way of loving.

TD: Is your NEA grant status for "Nitrate Kisses" something you want to talk about?

BH: Not right now. But when I found the Hays production code. I didn't know anything about the fact that not only were you not allowed to show queer sex until 1968, you couldn't show mixed races. So, it was perfect to overlay two men — one white, the other African-American — over the text of the code and to setup a challenge for the viewer. They had to decide which they were going to watch. They could be restricted by reading the fence of words, it imposes a sense of censorship on the image.

TD: It says, "Fuck you" to censorship codes.

BH: It also says, "I love penises." Old stereotypes of lesbians not liking penises is out. We are polymorphous perverse. We like everything.

TD: As long as it feels good.

BH: Exactly.

TD: In another scene, you intersected animals with sex and lovemaking. I'd never seen that represented in film before. I have a rabbit and when you start doing something, she wants to get right in the middle of it. If it's with my lover or by myself, she is always literally on top of me. Animals just get mesmerized. What inspired you to capture that on film?

BH: The same thing you're talking about. The male couple had all these dogs and as soon as they got close to fucking, the dogs would start barking. The dogs didn't bark earlier during the wrestling, the massage, the caressing. The dogs were quiet. But when it came closer and there was an erection, the dogs were all barking.

TD: My rabbit grunts. I loved that shot, that point of view of the dog. Through the dog's eyes. It's very unexpected, very funny.

BH: We are animals and a lot of times we deny it. In "Dyketactics!", I have salamanders crawling on women's breasts. There is a connection.

TINA INFELICITANTINO