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### **[An Interview with Barbara Hammer, Feminist Filmmaker](#)**

BY [ISADORA MILANEZ](#)

OCTOBER 26, 2015

Barbara Hammer is a prolific filmmaker whose work has spanned decades, and ranges from experimental short films to long-form documentaries. At different times, she has explored the lesbian body and sexuality, landscapes, and documentaries that give voice to forgotten histories. On October 28th, the Whitney Humanities Center will screen Dyketactics and a series of other films by Hammer as a part of the “Six Groundbreaking Lesbian Filmmakers” series. I am thrilled about this screening, for I have been a fan of Hammer’s films, artistic ethic, and unabashed radicalism since reading Hammer! Making Movies Out of Sex and Life, her autobiography. In a series of email correspondences, Hammer answered all of my burning questions about politics, art, feminism and filmmaking.

#### **Why do you think politics needs art? Why does feminism need art?**

*Art is so invigorating; it brings the risk-taking personality of the artist to the ‘board.’ Artists are not afraid to challenge the status quo— and, don’t you think that in this time of multiple wars, refugee crises, hunger and poverty we need some creative thinking?*

*Any movement by an oppressed minority or majority group pushing to be part of the conversation needs the ‘ass-kicking’ character of a major artist unafraid to be vulnerable, controversial, challenging and contrary if necessary. Feminism is as much in need of artists to stir up the system (i.e. the philosophy), as the one percent movement. To be a static movement, staid and defined, wouldn’t be anything I’d like to be a part of.*

#### **As an artist who puts out radical content, how do you feel about the lesbian mainstream?**

*First, what is the lesbian mainstream? I don't see any lesbian mainstream.*

*Are you talking about a lesbian Congress? A lesbian in the White House? Are you saying that the next Supreme Court judge will be an out lesbian? If so, I've missed something.*

*I see a consumer culture consuming gender and sexual identities right and left. It takes whatever it can get its teeth into and sucks out the heart and soul of content leaving only the superficial dross and gloss of fashion and sales.*

### **Do we, as feminists or as artists, fail when our message is normalized?**

*Here we go! Normalized, what an atrocious, scary word. Wouldn't it be wonderful if 50 % of the world's power was shared with women? We are so far from that 'normalization,' let alone thinking of sharing power with all gender orientations, races and religions. Sexual politics is our politics. It is a politics of the people, and we are the people!*

*Or is it important to make accessible art? I like art that I don't understand. If I go into a gallery, sit in a movie theater, watch a play, listen to avant-garde music, and I don't entirely 'get it,' I feel challenged and excited. The lack of complete accessibility makes me want to explore further, study, ask questions, read more and just sit with my feelings and perplexities. How bland it would be if I only saw art that I had seen before? Oh yes, how comfortable it might make me feel, but how oh-so-boring. Give me that shaggy, wild and overgrown road, and I'll find a way to cut my way through while using the refuse I removed to reach some clarity.*

### **How do you mediate the social world through artistic vision?**

*I don't mediate the world and I'm not interested in mediating the world.*

### **Can you talk about your filmmaking process?**

*The process is different for every film but I can generalize the process of making my long-form films: inspiration, research, collection, shaping through editing, polishing and finishing, releasing, meeting the audience.*

### **How do you feel like you fit into the continuum of feminism? Of film? Are those things separable for you?**

*After I made my 'lesbian' films of the 1970s I couldn't get a teaching job even though I had 2 master degrees and a lot of energy and enthusiasm for teaching. I started teaching women in my studio/home using my own 16mm equipment. The fee was nominal, the interest large, and it was easy to see how the group coalesces around a theme to develop into a collaborative film.*

*I don't know if there is a continuum of feminist filmmakers. I would rather see bright lights sparkling in the sky in random patterns— the stars of Germaine Dulac, Maya Deren, Claire Denis, Chantal Ackermann, Gunvor Nelson. Every star we see, every film that brings us a new way of seeing the world, lights a fire that inspires us to do our best to make our own mark— whether that be in film, writing, painting, administration, or research, it contributes to this amazing world we are so lucky to inhabit.*

Barbara Hammer advocates for a critique of normalization and a drive to challenge the status quo. She asks that we look at art we do not understand so that we can ask questions about the things that fall beyond the realm of our experience. This is the crux of subversive art: it asks the viewer to see with someone else's eyes and confront that which is uncomfortable.

I should confess that I am an artist myself, and I spend a lot of my time thinking about the radical nature

of art. I worry about the “mainstream,” because a co-opted image loses its power of subversion in the same way that the ticking of a clock disappears into background noise if you listen to it long enough. Hammer’s framing differentiates “mainstream” art from “commercialized” art. This allows us to understand how an image can be widely adopted even if its message is not absorbed. We can make a million copies of the Guerilla Girls’ Dear Art Collector on posters, mugs and shirts without eradicating discrimination against women in the art world. Commercialization strips art of its history and context to make it palatable.

In my art, I navigate the competing urges to make radical lesbian feminism for everyone and maintain that in speaking for everyone, its radicalism will be lost. This is not an absorption with being more radical than thou— it is a deep concern with the voices that one loses when the circle of recognition is redrawn. Hammer’s metric for subversiveness holds that is it bad if the radical message is commercialized but good if it is normalized. As her prolific career demonstrates, radicalism needs constant rebirth to keep its bite. As much as I like to believe that art is timeless, art that is timely can do even more. This stems from a belief that art is foremost a political statement and a summary of the human condition on the side. Old art can be timely— we can redefine who has access to it and who can claim heritage from its lineage. The important part is that it be situated, and that it have a historical or mythological role in creating the reality we hope to convey.

I believe in the “shaggy, wild overgrown road,” so perhaps I need another way to think of this dichotomy between universalization and subversion. To clear the overgrowth is to commercialize the work. To turn it into the Snow White amusement ride, where the brambles of the forest will never get so close as to touch you, is to remove the true discomfort of challenging art. To normalize, on the other hand, is to see more people travel by the overgrown road, thorny as the experience may be. I hope, as Hammer puts it, to “reach some clarity.” It is not quite enlightenment or truth, but some clarity will do.

*Isadora Milanez is a sophomore in Yale College. She is a staff writer for Broad Recognition.*

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**Broad Recognition** @yalebroads 27 Oct

Barbara Hammer is coming to Yale on Wednesday! We interviewed her about art, politics, and when the two intersect

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