

Thank you, Barbara, for taking the time to speak with us about your work. One of the central themes I find throughout your career is the notion of the archive, from films such as *Nitrate Kisses* (1992) to writings such as “Shaking the Archive.” This takes the form of both literal archives—the media histories that you explore and recycle to uncover hidden pasts—and human identity as a figurative archive, a collection of memories and recorded thoughts. Does the idea of the archive serve an important role for you?

Yes, you’ve found an underlying thread although there are others. Very important to me is the haptic sense of film meaning the connection between visual perception and touch. Equally important are personal intimacies, empathy, performance and critical theory. From the beginning of my film making in the late 70s I found a dearth of images, information, theory, even names of women filmmakers, and, in particular, lesbian film makers. My goal very early on was to document a lesbian life on screen for the forthcoming centuries. In the nineties I turned to other lives, biographies, hidden histories of those queers who had come before me putting their queer stories on the screen to make a cultural platform everyone could use for a foundation of queer cinema.

A lot of critics and theorists see your filmography in three distinct phases—the extremely personal experimental films of the ‘70s; the more abstract, non-representational films of the ‘80s; and a return to an exploration of identity and cultural history since the 1990s—but I would assume this simple timeframe is much more fluid and interconnected for you. How would you say these various artistic inclinations, or “styles” (to use a problematic word), have informed each other?

An artist does not approach her work thinking about phases or styles; she is drawn into an exploration much like a scientist trying to bring something new to the fore, or reconstruct something old so it can be viewed and used again under a different light. One doesn’t think “Oh, this film on Maya Deren will be part of my later work of uncovering hidden histories.” It happens out of curiosity, solving a problem and compulsion. Here’s an example of how I make a film. A curator mentions he knows someone who lived in the L.A. stucco home of Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid. My Westbeth artist studio apartment reminds him of the sculptural architecture of the West Hollywood cottage. Immediately I follow through, get the phone number, contact the former owner and he leads me to the current owner who happens to be in the film business herself. She invites me to film in her home where *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1945) was shot. I’m almost on the plane the next day with a friend who looks like Deren. The plot unfolds as I seek entry into the New York City apartment of the filmmakers. I have the motivating idea that an artists home shapes the form and content of the work. After finishing *Maya Deren’s Sink* (2011), I am off to find and film the homes of the American poet Elizabeth Bishop.

Everything informs everything else so I’m not surprised if my celebration of light, atmosphere, geography, landscape and flora run through all of those ‘styles’ or ‘inclinations’. But what about the ‘use of text’ from the letter “X” painted across my face in my 1975 film of the same name, to the hysteric yellow journalism from the mid-80s AIDS epidemic in the forefront of *Snow Job: The Media Hysteria of AIDS* (1986), to my spelled out challenge to the viewer at the end of the post-modern autobiography, *Tender Fictions* (1995). These are examples of themes that run through the work, subtler perhaps,

yet definitive. There are many more. With so much work it is often easier to categorize into periods, but that takes away from the singularity of each film, each project.

When you've stated or written in the past that your more abstract middle-period films were inspired by a desire to be seen as "fine art," which your previous films had not been considered, I sense a frustration on your part that the art world or critical community so readily categorizes works that might in fact transcend arbitrary boundaries. Would you say this is true? And if so, has such a readiness to sort and compartmentalize changed over the years?

If my lesbian-centered films of the 1970s were shown, studied, and received critical acclaim along with those of my contemporaries Stan Brakhage, Ken Jacobs, Larry Gotheim, Ernie Gehr and others I would not have felt so unseen, misunderstood, and ignored. You seem in these questions to be stuck in a fascination with categories. I know I've spoken about changes in my work decade to decade, but now I have to say I'm a bit bored and tired with this approach. I'm not saying I'm Picasso but has anyone ever teased out and categorized to the nth degree the Blue Period, the Cubist works, the political paintings, the sculpture, the ceramics. I think in 2016 it's a time of wholism, to see inter relationships, how things hold together and pull apart but in a huge circle of artistic consciousness not a series of styles.

You've written that your avoidance of narrative cinema—a Hollywood style with a clear-cut story and characters—cost you some followers early in your career. Even in later documentaries in which you tell the life stories of subjects such as Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore (*Lover/Other: The Story of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore*, 2006) or the trio of artists in *The Female Closet* (1998), you avoid simple narrative tropes in favor of an inquisitive essay-film style. Does this aversion to mainstream storytelling reflect your views on identity and cultural representation? Or perhaps even your early life in Hollywood?

I just find most narrative story telling in feature dramatic films boring. Sure, fine for entertainment and sometimes there are interesting intercutting plots or subtle character developments, but for the most part stories don't thrill me, light does, especially projected light from the sun or my 16mm projector. Every artist has different affinities and I trust we each follow our unique interests. When we collide and find interest in another's work it is often because there are similarities with our own. That's when critics who also observe those close ties start naming a group of artists (abstract expressionists, conceptualists).

I can't say my time in Hollywood had anything to do with my cultural development except for the nurturance of my mother's warm milk. I lived there only for the first 3 months of my life.

You had a long academic career studying psychology and English, but your films don't seem at all academic to me, to use a problematic word. They seem very spontaneous and immediate, with little attempt to go along with some kind of avant-garde zeitgeist. I also sense this in your description of a more liberated feeling in the '70s, before queer theory infiltrated academia and pressured some LGBT artists or thinkers to "look over their shoulder" and deliberate over their own thought process. How would you describe your attitude towards academia and its influence on the filmmaking or critical-theory process?

Perhaps I was saved from an academic approach to filmmaking because I wasn't hired by the academy. I was seen as a radical lesbian-feminist that no one wanted in their department; or as an artist who cared more for her own work than teaching (perhaps because I spoke so passionately, and, if I may say so, eloquently about my own work during interviews). The schools that did hire me were alternative pedagogical institutions (The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington; the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston; and The European Graduate School in Saas-fee, Switzerland). I find that there are waves in the art world when critical theory rules and then spontaneous expressionism overrides theory. It's a swing or teeter-totter and both sides are equally interesting to the curious. Sometimes, maybe like now at this time, they hold hands and the swing is still, the plank does not move and all voices are listened to. That's the best time when we are not offensive or defensive and can hear the other, the difference.

Your films have a great tactility to them; in a film like *Dyketactics* (1974), you feel like you can reach out and touch the grass or feel the sunlight on your skin. Why did you want to prioritize the sense of touch (which few filmmakers care to concentrate on) so vividly?

Thank you for appreciating my sensibility. I experience the world 'sensationally', that is, through my sense of touch. Jung divided intelligence into 4 parts: intuitive, rational, emotional and sensual. He said we all have these forms of smartness but that each of us has a different prioritizing system. I experience the world first as sensation and that has to do with touch. In my research I found that infants touch before they can see. So my first experience of life was through touching. In my films I connect the sense of touch with sight. The infant touches the breast before she can see it. I think each artist is trying to show who she is to another: what I see with my eyes I feel with my body.

In addition to a vivid tactility, you place great emphasis on both text and the voice in your filmmaking, as onscreen text and voiceover narration serve a stylistic and ideological purpose (in *Nitrate Kisses* and *No No Nooky TV* especially). Why do you enjoy utilizing written text as a compositional element? And how does one's voice contribute to formulating identity for an individual or a culture?

I think it is funny to think of a computer speaking so how could I not let the T.V. chat me up? The challenge in the 70s and 80s was that some people were voyeurs of lesbian films. I could replace text with image and no one would get off on the word 'clit'. I had a lot of fun with text and pixels!

My voice, my vision, my films are just one of a multitude, but it takes many to make a village. The more variety and difference in village inhabitants, the stronger the culture.

Since 2000, some of your films have become almost reticently political, recognizing that they take place in a world of real-life conflict (*Resisting Paradise*, for example). But do you think this geopolitical interest, this feeling of connectedness between humans sharing the planet, has appeared less explicitly in earlier works? I'm thinking of, say, the throb of energy that propels *Bent Time* (1983) or the formal play with what constitutes the human "being" in *Sanctus* (1990).

I learned through feminist ideology that everything is political. The early celebration of lesbians taking over the city in *Superdyke* is as political a tract as an investigation into the resisters during Vichy, France. To walk across the U.S. taking frame by frame shots in high energy locations (Stanford Linear Accelerator, Chaco Canyon, the Ohio Valley Mound Culture, etc.) suggests the strength and commitment of a woman filmmaker. I'm sorry to say but we still live in a world where women are not seen as capable as men. Of course, now you see the politics. As for *Sanctus*, every image was gained by destruction, the radiation of the human body caused by x-rays. The fragility of the body, the fragility of film as film, and the fragility of the planet are all referenced. There is politics wherever you look.

You said an interesting thing about the impetus for *Maya Deren's Sink* (2011): one of your neighbors was Deren's husband Teiji Ito, who claimed to have a few personal items of Deren's although he never showed them to you. You said "I was never able to see these or put my hands on them. So I think that the sink became a substitute for this desire." This notion of desire channeled into an artifact—whether that artifact is a mundane possession or a filmed image—seems to run throughout your work. What role does desire have in your films' themes and/or visual styles?

I'm sorry if I confused things. My neighbor was Teiji Ito's third wife.

Desire has everything to do with what I make and how I live. Desire is for me something that does not yet exist or that I/we do not or cannot have. It is a striving to make present what is missing or lost. A film that has not been made stokes my desire to make it.

The background of *Resisting Paradise* (2003)—the fact that you were staying and working in Cassis in southern France when the war in Kosovo broke out, and were motivated to make a film questioning the role of artists during times of violent conflict—speaks more broadly to the balance of private and public lives for artists, a theme that I see consistently through your work. Although all of your work is personal and candid, your earlier films certainly seem more inwardly focused than your more recent documentaries on communities and biographical subjects. Has your attitude about artists' balance of their personal and public lives transformed over the years?

I just make what I want to make. That is the reason I am a totally independent artist. If I have an idea and it requires funds then I must articulate the idea, develop the theme, and search out the monies. We follow whatever comes next; it's not like I plan on a film about violent conflict, but when I find myself in a situation where I am vicariously experiencing the nearby Kosovo war and refugees, the war becomes part of my psyche. How can you watch the Syrian refugees today and the blockades to their survival without wanting to help?

What is personal and what is political is always the same. You should see my completely personal and intimate film on going through chemotherapy for ovarian cancer: *A Horse Is Not A Metaphor* (2009).

While your films shot on celluloid have a tactile quality that foregrounds the material nature of the film strip, your more recent work with digital equipment has expressed a willingness to embrace new technologies as a unique aesthetic. Of course the act of archiving and rediscovering film becomes more complicated, too, as technologies become digital. What do you think has been gained and/or lost in the transition from analogue to digital forms?

A lot has been lost. Image quality, color density, tactility of presentation, and the sense of perfection in that no digital reproduction of the original analogue can muster good grades.

I was reading an interview recently in which you talked about a film you were making in Key West, for which you interviewed an 82-year-old man who rode a bicycle decorated with two aquariums and whose land was worth a fortune, which he intended to bequeath to his grandkids. You said: "it's more interesting to meet and film other people than to be in the videos myself... It's fascinating to talk to people." Do you sometimes approach a new film without knowing what your main conceit is, instead seeing where the interviews and research lead you? And do you think your interest in the biographies of real people has intensified recently?

You are a perceptive reader and have gone to lengths to research and read. I respect your energies. I don't remember where I spoke about that wonderful man of Bahamian ancestry who never made it into my film because I was so focused on the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop and the homes she lived in. I couldn't include much of her cultural environment in Key West though truly she would have been very keen on talking to this gentleman.

It's a choice for me: to let a film run free or give it shape from the beginning. An ambitious project such as this one Bishop took me around the world (Canada, three locations in Brazil, Boston and Cambridge, Florida and New York City) and would totally escape into something else if I let it run away. I rein in to make clear. I also respected my funders, the Guggenheim Foundation, who gave me monies for this explicit film, *Welcome To This House* (2015). I hope you get a chance to see it. But you are on to something as there is nearly always another film lying right behind the one you make and sometimes it bothers me that I've made the right one or not.

One bit of onscreen text in *Nitrate Kisses* really caught my eye: “Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.” How do artists or audiences ensure that they are viewing images from the past in an engaged manner, recognizing it as part of the fabric that has led to their own current moment? And secondly, your interest in archives points to an emphasis on the passage of time, and trying to conquer time through art and storytelling—would you agree that these are important themes for you?

That quote is from Jennifer Terry and I hastily and apologetically add that I forgot to credit her for it. I was so shamed to find my error. We have to consider everything as part of everything and even a glance can be historic if it is preserved. The active, the act of seeing, perceiving, making known—the brilliance of the Terry quote—is a way of preserving. Note-taking rules! Even lowly scraps are part of the fabric and might at any minute be elevated to prominence.

I have a yellowed scrap of newsprint from my paper archive. I have no idea of what year, what decade it escaped from onto my studio floor. I’ve picked it up and read the underlined sentence that seems as true to me today as when I first read it. The article is talking about Mr. Reitz’s passion for cinema (probably Edgar Reitz, a German filmmaker and director of *Heimat*) and quotes him “The view through the small projection room window onto the screen was for me identical to the view of the world.”

I remember the successful performance projection of *Available Space*, a film I made in 1979 and perform with up to today. I take film off the rectangular screen and project it from a rotary projector table with wheels around the architectural space of the theater. The film is edited into 9 sections with black leader in between giving me time to move the projector (and, thus, the audience must move to if they want to see!). All the scenes are about pushing the frame, a woman seeking beyond the square, with added visual and aural references to off-screen space. One image is a gorgeous moonrise over Pyramid Lake in Nevada: bright moon and blue landscape. I projected this scene on the window of the theater’s projection booth! Cinema folded in on itself and at the same time transported us outside the confines of the theater into open geographical space. Voila! Bien Sur! Buenos! There you have it.

Thanks for the interview.

Barbara Hammer, New York City, January 2016