

From Hyrstorians to Bolex Dudes:

The Many Descendants of Barbara Hammer

Last autumn, [NYFF55 kicked off](#) a citywide retrospective of works by the prolific experimental filmmaker Barbara Hammer. Well-attended screenings followed at the Museum of the Moving Image, the Whitney Museum, and Anthology Film Archives—for good reason: a handful of Hammer’s films, thanks to a National Film Preservation Grant and archivist Carmel Curtis, are newly restored. 50 years and over 100 films later, there’s never been a better time to know Barbara Hammer—as much as one can, anyway. As she inquired during the Q&A following NYFF’s *Barbara Hammer Program*, “Do we ever know anyone? I don’t think we do. I think we die alone and we are born alone and I do my damndest to show who I am by making films.”

Instead of focusing on Hammer’s own movies, many of which are rubbing up against audiences for the first time in decades, IFC Center, in partnership with Queer | Art | Film, enriched the retrospective by [screening seven early feminist experimental films](#) that motivated Hammer (once an aspiring painter) to grab life by the Bolex. The mildly devoted Hammer viewer can reiterate the origin story. *Dyketactics*’ twirling intimacy and idealism echo Carolee Schneeman’s *Fuses* (1965); *History Lessons*’ feminist snicker, Martha Rossler’s *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975); and *Place Mattes*’ erotic fixation on the hands, Yvonne Ranier’s *Hand Movie* (1966). Who influenced Barbara Hammer’s work? It is IFC Center’s thorough answer to this question which compels me to ask another one: Who is influenced *by* Barbara Hammer’s work?

In *The Argonauts*, the poet Maggie Nelson’s memoir on her relationship with the video artist and director Harry Dodge (*By Hook or by Crook*), she observes, “A lot of lesbian sex writing from the 70s was about being turned on, and even politically transformed, by an encounter with sameness. This encounter was, is, can be important, as it has to do with seeing reflected that which has been reviled, with exchanging alienation or internalized revulsion for desire and care.” Or, as Hammer cheekily reflects in her own memoir, *HAMMER!: Making Movies Out of Sex and Life*, “The 70s were a glorious time of feminist ideals and lesbian bed-hopping.”

Barbara Hammer's films began emerging from the ashes of postwar American life in 1968; long-established virtues of womanhood were being discarded and new separatist vision began to emerge. Hammer, fresh from San Francisco State University, was there to develop it. Of all her films, her second cozies up the closest to this lesbian feminist daydream. In *Dyketactics* (1974), women, having taken 'back to the land,' roam barefooted through water and leaves. Their active, idyllic lives are emphasized by the 16 millimeter film's diligent crossfades of flowers, candles, and fruit into nude women—all indeed embodying *sameness*, their homemade coiffures and fair skin a tad too homologous. As for the "bed-hopping": two women (Hammer and Cris Saxon) grow closer and closer to one another on a mattress, and impossibly closer still; it's an effect that Hammer, with the help of Poe Asher, achieved by winding her camera and letting it unfurl on the bed between their bare bodies, lens emulating their hands' caresses. *Dyketactics*, a four-minute romp totaling 110 shots, is widely recognized as the first erotic sapphic film to be made by a woman who identified as such, predating Chantal Akerman's first feature, *Je tu il elle*, by a year.

It is *Dyketactics'* elusive utopia, one that women of all stripes perennially chase during periods of social unrest, that makes the short Hammer's most recognizable work. As far as erotic timelessness goes, *Dyketactics* is moderately successful. The most radical of feminists now indulge and toy with the objects Hammer's short strips away—the stiletto, the girdle, the lipstick—and at no disservice to their politics. *Dyketactics*, affectionately called a "lesbian commercial" by Hammer, owes some of its longevity to the ongoing conversation about bodies and spaces, and whether some are more feminist, or more queer, than others.

The Argonauts has played a role in this discussion. "But," Maggie Nelson clarifies after her initial observation about lesbian art's obsession with similarity. "Whatever sameness I've noted in my own relationships with women is not the sameness of women, and certainly not the sameness of parts. Rather, it is the shared, crushing understanding of what it means to live in a patriarchy." Sure, misogyny is a foregone conclusion for 2018's queer experimental filmmakers. But if their work has anything critical to say about its roots in lesbian experimental film, it's more

complicated than the mere disconnect that Nelson suggests. The next generation seems well-aware that to dismiss the homoerotic creative epiphany is to not only dismiss its groundbreaking filmic forms, but the joy of *being*, and the censorious public and institutional responses to that joy.

In 1991, the grant Hammer was certain she would receive from the Independent Television Service to make her first feature-length documentary, *Nitrate Kisses*, never came through. She managed to secure support through the National Endowment for the Arts during [the infamous “NEA Four” snafu](#), though it came with a stern moral caveat. “A year or more later when I was working on a new film, *Tender Fictions*, I received a phone call from an anonymous person who said he represented the NEA,” Hammer recalls in her memoir. “I was told I must never release another print of *Nitrate Kisses* with the NEA mentioned as grant supporter in the credits. Luckily, I had known for a year they were reviewing my film and I asked the laboratory to make me plenty of prints.” *Nitrate Kisses* would premiere at Sundance in 1993.

Sex is an essential, sometimes all-consuming part of Barbara Hammer’s early films, from *Dyketactics* to the naturalistic *Multiple Orgasm* (1976) to the acrobatic *Double Strength* (1978). It’s hard to wrap one’s head around the fact that these images, unprecedented at the time, were created by a woman who was once groomed to become the next Shirley Temple, all-American and chaste, devoted to one man and one man only: Darryl F. Zanuck. Hammer clearly erred in a direction antithetical to the studio system, imagining worlds that are still being re-imagined by the avant-garde’s progeny. [Liz Rosenfeld](#)’s *Untitled (Dyketactics Revisited)* (2005), shot in 16 millimeter like its Hammer predecessor, assimilates the bodies and environments that have been left on an era’s cutting room floor. *Untitled* isn’t so much a reinterpretation of *Dyketactics* as it is a natural progression, meant to—as Liz tells me—“reference and celebrate Barbara’s work.” Its frolicking bodies are varied, some clothed, some wearing that which is in-between nudity and cloth: the chest binder. *Untitled*’s playground isn’t a woodland, but a cold industrial city, Chicago, understood by Rosenfeld to be just as much of a queer colony as Hammer’s. When asked about

Untitled in an interview with *Polari Magazine*, Hammer celebrated the throwback to her old work, declaring, “Long live *Dyketactics* and may there be more iterations!”

The 1980s were Barbara Hammer’s most prolific era to-date. During the decade, she frequently premiered three, four, and sometimes up to five films per year. Curiously, it’s this same timeframe that produced the most Hammer scions: young yet accomplished filmmakers—sometimes lesbian, sometimes queer, but always feminist-identified. Now in their 20s and 30s, they are eager to grapple with or thoroughly contest the idea of a creative disconnect between generations. “The most important lesson I take from Hammer is her self-awareness that she is inventing a lesbian voice, lesbian view, lesbian cinema,” [Daviel Shy](#), who debuted her first feature, *The Ladies Almanack*, in Outfest’s Platinum section in 2017, tells me. “Formally, I may be far more ‘tame.’ But I operate from a commitment to lesbian cinema, history and culture as a real and living calling.”

[Joey Carducci](#), now an instructor at Pratt Institute, first met Hammer while working as a contact printer operator in Hell’s Kitchen. When Hammer, impressed by Carducci’s lab skills, realized he was an idling 16 millimeter filmmaker, she insisted they collaborate; their project would become known as *Generations*. Bolexes in tow, the two roamed through Coney Island’s Astroland on the 46 year-old amusement park’s final day of operations in 2008. Carducci films Hammer as Hammer films Carducci. A bittersweetness hovers over *Generations*’ fourteen minutes and thirty-six seconds, as though something new is being born from that which one has yet to properly mourn. Hammer the wiser and Carducci the younger brim with newfound creative energy as Astroland illuminates Brooklyn’s dusk one final time.

This phoenix motif is part and parcel of the Carducci-Hammer collaboration. In 2015, Hammer led [A Place Called Hope](#), a public workshop where she generously offered digitized copies of her film outtakes to participants so they create a work that was both vintage and contemporary, individual and collaborative. Carducci selected scraps from *Tender Fictions* (1995), Hammer’s follow-up documentary to *Nitrate Kisses*. *Tender* is the closest Hammer has come to

crafting a traditional memoir film—which is to say that it’s anything but. “I was born at a time when Shirley Temple was making more money than any other female in the United States. I was taught early to perform and perform I did,” Hammer begins in voiceover, lulling the viewer into a false sense of genre security before shirking into an alter-ego. “In Tangiers, I robbed an American Express with my Swiss Army Knife,” she continues, thwarting the viewer’s quest for an earnest documentary while never altering her inflection.

Tender Fictions was the perfect foundation for Carducci, who by then identified as a transman, to come out to his cherished mentor. In *A Letter to Barbara Hammer* (2016), Carducci uses her outtakes to ask permission to use them in a broader project about his transition, tentatively titled *Coming Outtakes*. “As queers, if our identities are expansive and self-defined, am I still a ‘Bolex dyke,’ as we had nicknamed ourselves after making our film? Am I still the lesbian experimental filmmaker you didn’t want the world to lose? Or am I a Bolex dude, another white man in the film industry?” he painfully inquires as clips from *Tender Fictions* roll. Fearless, Carducci’s respect for Hammer and love for experimental cinema eclipse the weight of his coming out. “I was born at a time when Barbara Hammer was making more 16 millimeter experimental films than any other lesbian in the United States,” he says, riffing on *Tender Fictions*’ opening line.

If queer cinema traditions possess a shared characteristic, it is a preoccupation, as Rosenfeld and Carducci illustrate, with our community’s own expansive chronologies and non-biological ancestries. Queer experimental film allows one to go the distance: to compensate for archival limitations, address forbidden intimacies in the frankest of terms, and approach historical repression with a liberating sense of humor.

Hammer’s third decade is defined by her trilogy of 16 millimeter historical documentaries: *Nitrate Kisses* (1992), *Tender Fictions* (1998), and *History Lessons* (2000). Borrowing its name from the highly flammable film base, *Nitrate Kisses*, disputed by funders and faith leaders, ponders the same erasure of queer life to which it was narrowly subjected. Shot in black and white, *Nitrate* seeks atonement for the loss of lesbian biography and the existence of Hays Code by wedding the censor

to the censored. Couples are shown having sex (some of which, in 2018, still represent the underground of the underground): two elderly women, two women of color, a sadomasochistic duo, and an interracial gay couple. Hammer's early trademark eroticism persists, but with a newfound sophistication: as the gay couple make love, the Hays Code scrolls across the picture. Like its namesake, *Nitrate Kisses* refuses to be extinguished, even when soaking wet.

A similar playfulness can be located in the series' third film. A collage built from newsreels, nudie mags, educational films, and other offbeat delights, *History Lessons* smudges yesteryear to reveal the queer vitality within. In a move that feels like damage control, Hammer uses the deception perpetuated by the Hays Code and the Lavender Scare against these institutions themselves, in turn crafting a more even-handed historical truth that's also relentlessly tickling. In a newsreel clip, Eleanor Roosevelt—long rumored to be “family”—presides over a women's rights roundtable. A participant rises, speaking in half-original audio, half-manipulated audio. “*Dykes* are people and the Constitution is the supreme law of the land. Therefore, these rights have been guaranteed to us. We have the right to *be gay* and *make love* with whom we want.”

The same year that Barbara Hammer and Joey Carducci premiered *Generations*, Liz Rosenfeld released the first in her own 16 millimeter trilogy of semi-historical experimental short films. *Frida and Anita* centers on a chance encounter between the artist Frida Kahlo and Weimar performer Anita Berber in Berlin in 1924. Rosenfeld followed *Frida & Anita* with speculative biographies about Dadaist Hannah Höch (*HÖCH*), Leni Riefenstahl, and Eva Braun (*Die Neue Frau*) in 2014.

This time, Rosenfeld, who is based in Berlin and had crafted Hammer-inspired work before, didn't realize the parallels between her *Surface Tension Trilogy* and Hammer's earlier series. Nor did she realize that they shared a subject in Höch (whose history Barbara explores in her 1998 film *The Female Closet*). “It's a funny coincidence,” Rosenfeld says.

At the same time, this mutual interest in forgotten figures and their stories seems natural, even imperative. “I think that as queer people we do gravitate towards understanding our own histories, especially because they are so untold, lived through the body, rather than written down, and also based on stories passed down, interpretations of films, books, images that have been left behind, and of course, *gossip*,” mused Rosenfeld. Daviel Shy, who spent three years researching *fin de siècle* literary communities before adapting Djuna Barnes’ 1928 chapbook that satirizes Natalie Clifford Barney’s Parisian women’s writers colony, echoes her sentimentality. “Our history was not codified and canonized, thank goodness, so our history is whatever transpired experientially between women.” It is fitting that Hammer also once desired to adapt Barnes’ modernist fiction (the author’s literary executors rebuffed her efforts to secure the rights to the novel *Nightwood*).

The ‘tension’ in Rosenfeld’s *Surface Tension Trilogy* refers to the relationship between the past and present. It engages in its own variations of Hammer-esque smudging and collage. Apart from period clothing, there is little effort to obscure spatial or physical anachronisms. The three films borrow from the few archival materials available as much as they do a present-day understanding of queer connection and community. “For me, history is at the crux of all my work,” Rosenfeld tells me. “I am thinking about past or future histories, and especially in relationship to how history is carried through the body, which is where my work really lies at the intersection of both film and performance.”

Frida & Anita is shot in the style of a 1920s silent movie, with a legitimate letter the author sent to her father while in Berlin occupying the intertitles. The anachronism bleeds through her entire series, beginning with our introduction to the strip-teasing Anita Berber (Richard Hancock), who is presented as an illustrious transwoman. The line between *Cabaret* and *Ru Paul’s Drag Race* becomes increasingly slim; so does the meek line that designates who can and cannot be a woman, let alone a woman who desires other women. As it very well should.

A staggering undertaking for a first-time feature filmmaker, Shy's *The Ladies Almanack*, filmed with Super 8 and spanning 86 minutes, also uses the anachronism to link the past to the present. A cast of over 25—impressively wrangled over the course of a 33-day shoot spanning Brooklyn, Chicago, and Paris—is necessary to depict the revolving door of writers, artists, friends, and lovers who moved through the American heiress Natalie Clifford Barney's salon at 20 Rue Jacob, Paris for 60-plus years. While Deborah Bright, Josephine Granqvist, and Nessa Norich boast the mannerisms, language, and vintage filter of Radclyffe Hall, Djuna Barnes, and Romaine Brooks, the salon's constituency simultaneously resembles a group of patrons at Henrietta Hudson's on any given Friday night. This is deliberate. "Any period piece says more about the time it was made than the time it portrays," says Shy. "My film does not try to fight that fact. The process was always about finding corollaries between them and us, then and now. The anachronisms are to bring them closer, not to give history the middle finger. There is a philosophical and emotional faithfulness to the book that I was trying to adhere to, and to do that honestly we would have to enter the picture." Like its source text and the almanack form it appropriates, the film occurs over a calendar year, broken up into monthly chapters.

In *The Ladies Almanack*, Natalie Barney (Brie Roland) engages in a tryst with Oscar Wilde's drug-addled niece Dolly (Slaveya Minkova), revealing a series of moon phases tattooed down Roland's spine. The ink pairs rather nicely with the *Almanack's* subtitle: *showing their Signs and their tides; their Moons and their Changes; the Seasons as it is with them; their Eclipses and Equinoxes; as well as a full Record of diurnal and nocturnal Distempers*. Colette (Natacha Stolz), like Rosenfeld's Hannah Höch, has a facial piercing. While historically white, Shy's casting also aides Barney's salon in getting with the times: Mimi Franchetti (Fannie Sosa) is portrayed by a person of color; so are Thelma (Audio Jack), Lily de Gramont (Merci Michel), and a number of other late 19th century creatives who, while renowned and often celebrated for their work and sexual deviancy at the time, rarely grace today's textbooks. *Almanack* also cleverly recruits established members of today's sapphic literati and intelligentsia to portray the women who paved the way for their work: Eileen Myles takes on Monique Wittig; Terry Castle, Gertrude Stein. The adaptable French philosopher Hélène Cixous, age 80, plays herself (no complaints here). "Recently, I decided to call myself a

'historian,'" Shy tells me. "For us, or any person whose past has been abridged, erased, or doctored, one has to modify the popular story of what happened in order to burrow closer to the truth." Rosenfeld and Shy's imaginative approach to articulating the past has clear roots in Hammer's own work. "*History Lessons* is one of my favorites. I think playing with history is important, and to engage deeply with any material one cannot be overly reverent," she acknowledges.

Based in Brooklyn, Sasha Wortzel's films focus on an undocumented regional history that isn't as aloof as Weimar Berlin or bygone as bohemian Paris. Her first feature, *We Came to Sweat: The Legend of Starlite*, which [premiered at Film Society of Lincoln Center in 2014](#), details the rich past of Brooklyn's oldest Black gay bar, recent attempts to shutter the hub, and the community members who, valuing the Starlite's past as much as its future, rise up against its closure. Wortzel, in collaboration with trans activist and writer Reina Gossett, has continued to chase late 20th century queer histories with *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*, a forthcoming short biopic that, like *The Ladies Almanack* and *Frida & Anita*, liberally and joyfully speculates about lost legends. *Marsha!* busies itself with the blind spots in widely-recognized LGBT histories—namely, the circumstances of transgender activist Marsha P. Johnson's life in the hours preceding her involvement in the 1969 Stonewall Riots.

While *We Came to Sweat* embraces established cinéma vérité traditions, Wortzel has also experimented with form to connect a current audience with a previous era. In 2011, Wortzel, having accumulated footage of an elderly lesbian in the wake of her partner's death, jerry-rigged these vignettes into a typewriter. When a key is pressed, a clip plays through a screen situated near the obsolete device's paper table. Named *42 Butter Lane*, the installation features interviews about the quotidien (wallpapering disagreements, anecdotes of familial homophobia) and shots of the survivor's palpably half-empty home.

Parallels can be drawn between Wortzel's *Butter Lane* and Hammer's *No No Nooky T.V.* (1987), a 12-minute film that was a part of NYFF's recent [Barbara Hammer Program](#). An Amiga computer emits Valentine-like drawings-in-progress and feminist declarations. Crafted at the height of the debate on film versus video, Hammer decided that she wanted both. "I shot everything with my Bolex set up in front of the computer screen and then I had to project onto the T.V. so that I could make the digital into film," she told the audience during the Barbara Hammer Program's Q&A. "Then I really felt like I had made something whole. So when it was released, it was released as film and video at the same time."

Like *Butter Lane*, *Nooky* combines seemingly incompatible forms of technology to capture the weight of a lesbian relationship that's reached its end, albeit a much shorter one. "I taught myself the Paint program while I was having this summer affair and it was so much fun—both of them. I went, 'Okay, Spraypainting!' Then, 'Okay, what's happening in my personal life—are we going out tonight are not?' I used whatever I learned and turned the page, going on to the next chapter," Hammer described. In both works, death of format and death of lover collide, albeit in inverse. Wortzel insists that the digital appreciate its elder: the analog.

When asked, "What do you wish for?" in an interview with *Filmmaker Magazine* in 2001, Barbara Hammer responded, "I hope that before I die I can start a Barbara Hammer Fund for queer filmmakers who use experimental form in their work and do not replicate the status quo." Sixteen years later, that wish came true. In December 2017, Queer | Art | Film announced the recipients of the first annual Barbara Hammer Lesbian Experimental Filmmaking Grant. [Fair Brane](#) was selected as the recipient by a jury composed of queer cinema figureheads Cheryl Dunye, Su Friedrich, and Dani Restack; [Quyên Nguyen-Le](#) and Sasha Wortzel were named runners-up.

The Lesbian Experimental Filmmaking Grant should not be viewed as the Hammer's first act of creative altruism. Rather, it commemorates the work she has been doing for young

filmmakers, unsung, for a number of years. Daviel Shy first met Hammer at her book launch in 2010. “We chatted and she signed my book with the words, ‘Daviel Shy, what a name - as good as *Hammer*. Go for it - in film *and* art, Barbara Hammer,’ she recalls. “Hammer came back into my life once more as a staunch supporter of *The Ladies Almanack*. At our fundraiser at the Leslie Lohman Museum, she did an impromptu plea for donations and read her favorite passage from *Nightwood*.” Hammer, who will turn 79 this year, has shared films with Joey Carducci, [collaborated with Sasha Wortzel at the Whitney Museum](#), and [screened her work alongside Liz Rosenfeld’s](#).

The experimental filmmaker never fails to consider her own role within the years that will follow her camera’s final shot. When asked what she was thinking after the screening of her films at New York Film Festival last year, Hammer responded, “I thought of all the films we are not looking at tonight. All the exploration of what history is, how we’ve been left out of history, this empty hole that is now being filled by courageous, queer, wonderful, diverse, expansive lesbian, gay, and trans community.” Today’s queer experimental film community is the one she has been waiting on since she became the first. “The construction of sexuality and sexual expression seem to me to be fluid and changing. This is most important and interesting, for it leaves open the doors of possibilities for future constructions of sexual histories,” she wrote eight years ago in her memoir.

Doors that, thanks to Hammer, new filmmakers are passing through in extraordinary numbers.