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Author(s): Barbara Hammer

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THE ARTIST AS TEACHER: PROBLEMS AND EXPERIMENTS

Barbara Hammer

New York, New York

The teacher of art must, of necessity, reach students on a personal as well as an intelligent level. The process of teaching in the arts thus demands personal sharing and commitment, and in this it is related to the process of creative work. This paper examines the process of creative teaching from the viewpoint of a feminist aesthetic. Artistic growth is seen as related to personal growth, and the learning processes of teacher and students are seen as related. Finally, the commonalities and conflicts of art making and art teaching are examined, and potential solutions for the conflicts are suggested.

My earlier essay "Creative Teaching: Home Movies" (1983) deals with how and why I teach filmmaking in an independent studio setting rather than in a university. In the period following the publication of this essay I was ironically—and wonderfully—invited to be a visiting artist at SUNY Binghamton for the spring of 1983. My feminist aesthetic was now a positive attribute: I was cross-hired by the Women's Studies and Film departments with funds specifically providing for a feminist artist on campus. Although I had little time to create my own work, this was an exciting, fulfilling period for me.

The teacher of art reaches into the personal as well as the intellectual places in the student, unlike with other disciplines where the focus is primarily on ideas and less on personal involvement with students. This emotional connection of shared inspiration, personal interaction, and recognition between teacher and student, coupled with the political sense of bringing a nonsexist, nonracist, nonelitist mode of teaching into the art class, is a demanding and full-time occupation. In the course of my semester as a visiting artist I learned much about how to teach, and I learned as much about the relationship of teaching to personal creative work.

One of the ways I keep my "artist-self" alive while teaching is to teach in new ways, to use my imagination in shaping or developing a class. And for the first time since I had received my degrees in film and teaching, I was using them in the manner for which they prepared me. More important, here was a room full of equipment, a technical assistant, other artists as colleagues, the weekly unfailing support of the Women's Studies chair and secretary, and a classroom of eager students.

Not all of the students were necessarily receptive to feminism or to avant-garde film, but the ones who did not start with those predispositions were a welcome challenge to my aesthetics and ideology. They provided an opportunity for me to clarify my ideas and simplify as well as change and expand them. It was especially exciting to present formal film to those in the audience who were habituated to Hollywood and television drama.

At Binghamton, I proposed and taught a new course, "Experimental Films Made By Women." I did a tremendous amount of research for this course as no text was available. I enjoyed the sleuthing that took me to periodicals at Lincoln Center and to an unpublished Maya Deren notebook at the Film Anthology. My own learning process was involved in the class preparation. For example, when I found "Transcription of Tapes Acquired from the Maya Deren Collection" (Boston University Library) containing many of her lectures, not only was I able to present this material to my class—in an excited fashion born of my sense of discovery—but I was also able to impart the great importance of "unwritten history." The experience reminded me again of the selectivity of film history, of the numbers of unknown film artists left to obscurity because they haven't been "collected" in the works of film historians. This research stimulated my own continuing efforts toward the recognition and preservation of both my own films and the films of other women filmmakers who might otherwise be lost to film history.¹

The second class which I taught that semester was an art-making class, "Collaborative Filmmaking." As I looked back on this and on my earlier experiences of studio teaching, in preparation for writing this account, I had the following dream:

I am at a Goddess Temple in the Middle East, possibly Catal Huyuk in southern Turkey, and I want to make a film using the site for location and the strong tale of the goddess for the narrative. My students are there and they begin to assign roles to each other. One will do lighting, one sound, one will cast. But who will direct, they ask, as none of them has taken a class in directing. I will direct, I say. I've had a lot of classes in directing and besides, I've already directed a lot of films. They all agree.

It's interesting to me to see that I justify my need to direct, my desire to be the leader with my educational background. It's as if I don't want to undercut the students in their own stage of development. As director and creator I need complete control of my artistic expression. But my chosen role as an art teacher is nondirective. I try to be a nonauthoritarian teacher of art who supports the unique development of students on a feminist basis of equal and shared learning.

I believe in a nondirectional approach to teaching art, wherein the teacher looks for and "sees the artist" in the student. She notices, encourages, and appreciates the unique and particular bent of each personal expression rather than imposing her ideas, projects, directions, and interests on her students. Equal support for each student is my goal, even when the student's interest is contrary to my own. Yet when a student has a natural and predisposed affinity for my own aesthetic, the problem of "giving myself away" arises. By this, I mean giving my own creative ideas to students.

When this happens it is hard to "hold back" and allow the student to make his or her way, but it is necessary for discovery. In other words, it is too simple for the teacher to present an understanding, a *fait accompli*, to the student who is on a similar path to the one the teacher has followed. The student hasn't as yet taken all the steps necessary to lead to the conclusion. And it may be presumption on the part of the teacher to think that a student's start in a similar direction means progress toward a similar artistic end. To share personal creative solutions means to influence the direction of a class, or of a student. I am not certain that this influence is the best situation for either student or teacher.

On the first meeting day of "Collaborative Filmmaking" I was met by 17 students. Compared to the small groups I teach in my studio it was a bit overwhelming. I decided to divide the group in half—all men and all women—thus creating two manageable groups suited to the production of a collaborative work. One young man challenged this decision. I explained that I wanted everyone to have an equal chance to use the equipment; that women are culturally trained to fear equipment, and men just the opposite. I wanted to avoid the men taking the cameras, watching the women float into actress roles. Everyone then agreed to the structure. As the teacher, I spent half the class period with each group. The gender division of classmates was a creative experiment in teaching for me. It held the possibility of providing interesting and challenging processes as well as creative results. I set no outside limits for the group, other than that the film itself be personal.

The men's group, as a whole, found it difficult and embarrassing to share personal experiences, dreams, or even thoughts. When I wasn't there they moved—slowly—from a stage of initial giggling to an intellectual escape: a film about making a film. They shot themselves discussing what kind of film to make. This product took about four weeks to arrive at. It's interesting to note that the men all wore paper cut-out masks without expression in their group sequence where they discussed what film to make. Only very late in the discussion did some of them remove their masks to show their faces.

However, the individual sequences within the group structure were exceptionally strong and creative. Several of the men went to great lengths to achieve some of the creative animation, superimposition, and drawings directly on film that made their entire film pulse with an intense but random energy. One young man superimposed himself three times in his dorm room going through "college antics" of drinking, counting money, preparing tests. Another shot from his word processor and mounted the camera in the VW van to show himself driving; another scratched a lyric series of lines crossing one another then rephotographed the film frame by frame into a rhythm he liked. Although the sequences were strong alone there were no connecting threads, partly due to the unresolved and unfocused nature of the group sequence. The final work suffered from a lack of cohesion. This lack of cohesion reflected the group's working process.

The men's group had difficulty establishing leadership and direction and, once those were achieved, achieving equal cooperation. In contrast, I found the women's collaborative group to be happy functioning together. They were individually supportive, cooperative, and able to share work.

Each woman shot her own film sequence, totally different in style and content from the others. The sequences were later intercut with sequences from a group dinner party. This was held by the group, lit, and shot, entirely on their own; I wasn't there. Each individual worked toward a unity of expression. The film they produced is, I think, lyrical and beautiful. The camera would pan or zoom to a woman at the dinner party and then cut to the individual student's scene. One woman shot a punk fantasy herself with wild hair and makeup shot in a bathroom setting of make-believe violence. Another made a passage showing her daughter awakening to movement and vision in many repeated sequences of mythical overtones. Each student embodied her own expression in her sequence, but it was incorporated in the whole without disruption. Each woman sat at the dinner party with her own "thoughts" within a unity of expression.

The one significant problem I saw in the women's group experience was "over-cooperativeness." For example, the group would hold themselves back to wait for a tardy member. Sometimes this would be a detriment to the entire group effort and the final product. Although I raised my eyebrows at this procedure, I felt the teacher's role was to guide the different groups in whatever internal process they developed naturally.

Again, in the Binghamton class, my personal direction was reflected. I had planned to use a tripod on wheels in a forthcoming film. Both the women's group and the men's group tried the camera mounted in this fashion. The men's group had the camera continually circling during a

conversation they were filming. The women's group kept a continual circle going, interrupting the camera movement to change the person in the scene so that in what looked like one take, eight different women awoke and moved from their night's sleep.

This circular mode, interestingly, reflects that of the process of the consciousness-raising group developed by feminists in the late sixties and early seventies. I see this as a model for education and artistic production. As the class physically sits in a circle, the focus of the group can be equally shared as ideas and criticisms are passed around. Each member of the class can be seen as an individual; each member is supported in presenting material to the group. It is impossible to judge each student's gains from this process. Generally, I can say that some of both the men and the women told me personally it was the best class they had ever taken. What they meant by best I'm not certain; I hope they meant that it was rewarding and that it helped them grow. Did aesthetic growth produce personal growth? Were students who were not predisposed to my feminist aesthetic developing their own aesthetic? Did they become more politically aware? And if change did occur, whether artistic or personal, was it achieved through the group process or through exposure to my teaching?

Because of the informality of the class, many issues besides film-making were brought up. One young man opened himself through sharing personal observations, and through his struggles with me in the course of the class. His efforts to confront racism on campus received my verbal support and encouragement. As he shared this struggle with the class I came to know that he was of mixed black and white heritage and identified with black people in their struggle for equality. We formed a political bond between feminism and anti-racism and, by doing so publicly, influenced others in the class.

Such influences and changes are qualities difficult to measure. I know, though, that one student, a young mother, discovered a latent artist-self in the class. During the term her work moved from the incipient filming—which was remarkably astute and personal—to photography and poetry, supervised by me in a later special-projects course. I'm not sure if she will continue moving from one medium to another, return to film, or concentrate on multi-media. I do know that she will continue to make art and to enjoy the satisfactions of creation.

If it is difficult to measure artistic growth, it is, on the other hand, very easy to measure time. The major conflict between art making and art teaching is over the issue of time. I have always felt that it was important to be making art at the same time that I was teaching about the art-making process. My usual mode of production when I am not teaching is to concentrate on beginning new work at the same time I am finishing

old work. If I don't actually shoot new material, I at least plan it. It begins to live inside of me and form a direction of its own, while I am editing film or working on sound for a film already shot. One work begets another. During my teaching at the university, however, I began no new work. I was able only to edit two short films that I had previously shot, and to prepare soundtracks for both of them. Although I randomly shot—due to the increased access to equipment—none of the film I shot during this time has turned into a workable project. I think that it was without clear direction due to my preoccupation with teaching. Now I no longer think it is necessary to create personal work while teaching full time. In fact, I suggest the opposite. When teaching, teach; when making art, don't teach. I cannot use my art directly in the creative teaching process as I have done in the past, but must withdraw and pull in these energies to use for my own work.

A problem unique to the mother mode of teaching I practice, teaching in my own studio space, has to do with art and territoriality. Presently I am teaching a beginning filmmaking class through the New York Feminist Art Institute, and the students meet in my home/studio and use my equipment. Per hour of work I make about the same amount as when I taught at the university, but my hours of teaching are far less. Aside from the economic disadvantage of teaching at home, there is also a more ambiguous situation created when students sit in the teacher's living room and edit at her personal bench. There is some sense of space invaded that occurs as the same space used for the private act of creation becomes public. Art needs a place to gestate, a private space to begin, grow, and complete. It is an interruption physically, emotionally, and psychologically to have students in the very environment of creation. The intensity of the incubation process necessarily lessens, is dissipated. Vulnerable work in progress that may be left in the space can be seen before it is formally presented. Continuity of personal artistic energy is broken by the class meeting. And, on the most mundane level, my camera can be accidentally broken by a student, thus hindering my work progression. After several years of this experience, I have decided to undertake the extra labor of moving equipment to another space, rather than teach at home or give up teaching.

What of teaching in a university setting, which can be so challenging and stimulating for an artist? I would like to see art institutes and universities and colleges adopt a flexible pattern in their hiring procedures allowing "job sharing" in the art departments. I would propose one full semester of teaching, devoted to giving the most possible to the students, with the next semester free to do private work. This would be with the security that one will be not a "visiting artist," but a "returning artist." I know of art and film departments where the faculty become weekend

painters, or where would-be filmmakers return from vacation ready to begin their work only to be diverted by meetings, schedules, and the need to give of themselves to their students. How happy I would be to share a year's position with another artist in the fashion I have suggested, to live on a smaller income but be richer in the time I have for creative work.

In creative teaching, the whole body, mind, spirit, physicality of the teacher is used; all her resources and capabilities are in play. The teacher must give her class the same wholeness which she devotes to her private art. To return to the dream I had the morning I began this essay will return us to this central issue in my psyche: I need to function as a director and creator as well as a teacher. There can be no contest. Everyone in the dream (I almost wrote "film"), as I announced my intention to direct, stood up and clapped.

References

Hammer, B. Creative teaching: Home movies. In C. Bunch & S. Pollack (Eds.), *Learning our way: Essays on feminist education*. Trumansburg, New York: Crossing Press, 1983.

Footnotes

- 1 For example, Robert Haller of Film and Video Anthology recently told me that the works of Mary Ellen Bute, who generated the first electronic film imagery in her abstract oscilloscope films, were never shown during her lifetime in her home state of Texas.