

Barbara Hammer

# WHEN A KISS IS NOT A KISS BUT NITRATE

A

As an artist, I am only too aware that my twenty-three years of work, including 50 films, 20 videotapes, and multiple performances, could be lost or repressed in the historic process. I made my first film at 30, and now at 53 my position as a lesbian artist often seems as precarious as that of those who preceded me. I made *Nitrate Kisses* because lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered people have been left out of an official history where we exist as a gloss to a heterosexual text. Often our deviance has been too threatening, our presence too queer to be even counted. Realizing that programmers, funding agencies, and publications control what is distributed and critically received, I nonetheless have risked articulating and documenting the vital community of which I am a part.

In 1990, while researching Dr. James Sibley Watson's archive at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, I became aware of the large number of 35mm nitrate out-takes from the 1933 film, *Lot in Sodom*. This extraordinary film by Watson and his gay colleague and co-director, Melville Webber, is one of the earliest queer films made in the United States. I sensed a gay positive attitude by the filmmakers due to the way men in the film were directed, lit, and costumed in nearly no clothes. Its subtext of beautiful nude male bodies made celebratory over-



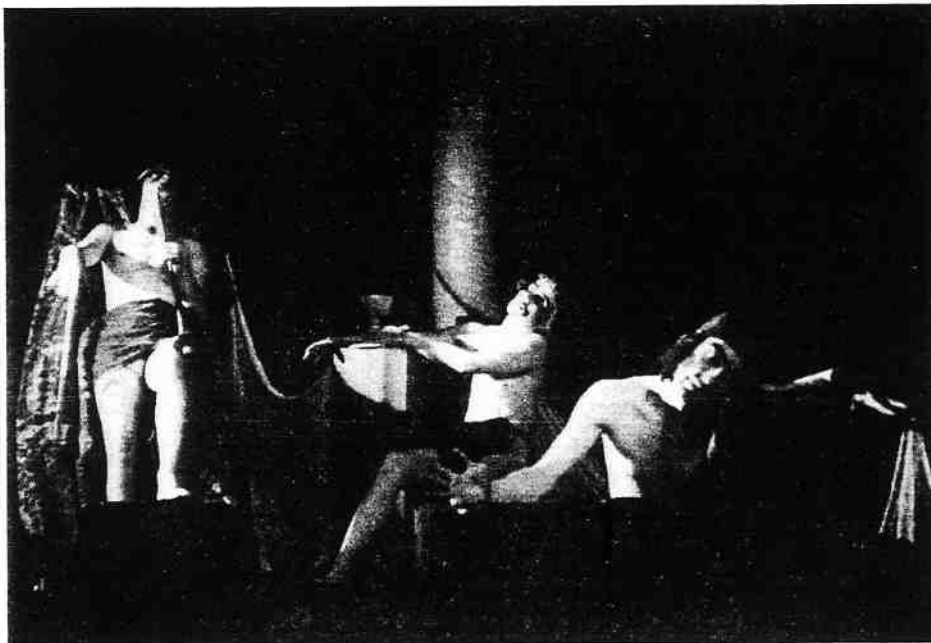
Barbara Hammer, 1993, with video monitor showing scene from *Nitrate Kisses*, 1992 (photo: Ganyphyr Novak).

for each other. While in Hamburg I was helped by Johanna Reutter, who has written on the first hand accounts of lesbians incarcerated by the Third Reich's concentration camps. Unlike earlier unsympathetic accounts by heterosexual survivors, her voice, heard on the soundtrack, recounts how straight women saw the "real" lesbians in terms of "butches" and "femmes" while demeaning them as "lesbians-for-the-moment." I intentionally used this *misinformation* in the soundtrack to reveal how lesbian history has been both distorted by the dominant culture and rendered mute and almost invisible.

In the former East Berlin, I visited the reconstruction of a famous bar on Mulackstrasse in the basement of a home/museum of Charlotte Bécafelden, a wonderful old transvestite. There I found photographs of the lesbians, prostitutes, and Jews who, as outcasts of the Reich, had banded together. Later, Ahima Berlage, a young German lesbian, led me along the bullet torn street to the empty space where the original bar once stood. In the film I choose to edit this footage with that of two lesbians who wear and use leather and chains in their lovemaking. These kind of images are often censored from within the lesbian community itself, as well as the wider public, and therefore might be lost to history. The women who prefer leather, who pierce and tattoo, or older lesbians in their sixties and seventies, these are the people and sexualities who inform our lives today and must be included in the history we preserve for tomorrow. Consequently, I wanted to tie the free expression of contemporary sexuality in the film to the hiding, denial, and repression which determined our past. The construction of sexuality and its expression is fluid and changing; it is always in process. By accounting for our past and not censoring our present we open the door to a future of sexual histories that we have not yet dreamed.

The film continues to elaborate the issue of censorship by retrieving an unthought past inter-cut with the present. I was both shocked by and interested in the 1930 Hayes Motion Picture Code with its miscegenation clause forbidding love between races on the screen. Two friends and filmmakers, Jack Walsh and Peter Cramer, consented to act for me. The Hayes Code scrolls over a voluptuous shot of two touching black and white asses. The viewer is forced to choose: you are stopped from seeing while reading the censorship laws, or you see past the text to the images.

The lovemaking is also intercut with scenes of men together from the *Lot in Sodom* footage which began my cinematic journey. Here again I demand an active audience who must engage in the retrieval process themselves: which footage is from the thirties and which is contemporary? In editing I too was forced to sort out fragments from the past and present and extricate a meaning from their conjunction. I want the audience to join me as archaeologists



Frame from *Lot in Sodom*, 1933, in Barbara Hammer's *Nitrate Kisses*, 1992.

and historians who speak a story often untold and edit images too often unseen.

*I want to thank Allen Berube, Bill Walker, and Eric Garber of the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California; Joan Nestle, co-founder of the New York Lesbian Herstory Archive, for making their archives available to me; and the lesbian writers and biographers Frances Doughty and Sandy Boucher. I also recommend these readings: Jennifer Terry's "Theorizing Deviant Histories," in difference; Jeffery Weeks' Against Nature: Essays on History, Sexuality and Identity; Michel Foucault's The History of Sexuality; Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History;" Stash Record's AC/DC Blues, Gay Jazz Reissues.*

*Barbara Hammer is an independent film and video artist currently living in San Francisco. Nitrate Kisses is available from either Strand Releasing (415-441-5220) or the artist (415-641-7595).*

## INTRODUCING BARBARA HAMMER

The producer of over 50 experimental films and videos, and the recipient of numerous awards and prizes, Barbara Hammer has pioneered the art of lesbian filmmaking. In a discussion of her films published in *Jump Cut* in 1981, Jacquelyn Zita said:

In one sense, the theme of revealing and re-seeing lesbian experience is a subject matter ideally fit for cinematic media, but difficulty arises in the effort to reveal difference and alterity where the dullness of habitual ways of seeing arrests our ritual and erotic imagination. The work of... Barbara Hammer provides an excellent case study of a woman artist struggling to redefine the medium in a form and content commensurate with the requirements of a new lesbian film aesthetic. Central to her work is the development of a new iconography for the lesbian body; an iconography designed to carry the spectator into forbidden and revelatory terrain. ("The Films of Barbara Hammer," *Jump Cut* 24/25, pp. 26-30).

Although produced some eleven years after Zita's comments, *Nitrate Kisses*, Hammer's first feature-length film, is also "about" new ways of seeing the lesbian and gay experience. It documents the repressions of history and cinema, the importance of the erotic, and the tenacity of those who are different.

The crisis of representation inaugurated by exhibits of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs in 1989-90 and the funding (or de-funding) of lesbian and gay artists and performers by the National Endowment for the Arts taught us that censorship is less about pornography—so-called "indecent

and obscene representations"—than about politics. For when lesbians and gay men create our own erotic imagery, it is considered by many to be automatically and inherently pornographic. While Barbara Hammer herself was a recipient of an NEA film production grant, films made by lesbians and gay men that openly embrace gay/lesbian subject matter are still sufficiently rare as to constitute courageous acts. Films that introduce the complexities of gay desire into representation challenge prevailing meanings by making visible that which continues to be repressed within dominant cultural traditions and they, in turn, urge respect for sexual difference.

Hammer's prodigious body of work over the past 20 years provides students of gay culture with a vocabulary for lesbian erotica. However, the task of creating a new aesthetics, or a new iconography, means that the lesbian body—neither hypostasized as the site of heterosexual fantasy, nor accorded ontological status as existing outside of or before signification—is, rather, placed in history.

*Nitrate Kisses* makes visible the erasures, the omissions of history, to show how identities can be negotiated in the gaps, on the margins, and between the lines of the dominant culture and its modes of knowledge. This multi-layered version of history, which celebrates the body with a montage of footage from early "queer" film, photographs, and home movies, as well as with scenes of lesbian and gay lovemaking (some forms of which are presently being censored by our own communities), enacts, I contend, Joan Nestle's claim that "for gay people, history is a place where the body carries its own story." (*A Restricted Country*, Ithaca: Firebrand, 1987)

We already know that the AIDS crisis is a fertile arena for political homophobia; however, renewed offensives against gays and lesbians—exemplified by legislative initiatives in Colorado and elsewhere and by the moral panic unleashed by the debate over gays in the military—continue to disenfranchise us. Discrimination against gays and lesbians is maintained by fiat—our minority status mandated by law. Consequently, for lesbians and gays, sexuality and politics are indivisible. It is our sexuality that has been most suppressed, most taken from us, thus it is our sexuality which is part of the historical documentation of gay and lesbian lives. The creation of sexual imagery is a political act. By refusing the mantle of "illegitimacy," Hammer's images cannot be separated from her life, her biography, as a lesbian. She brings to her films her own history as a

sexual deviant and the histories of the women and men who preceded her. Her films depict lesbians and gay people struggling to live in sexually self-determined ways in a culture hostile to them—to us—as queers. To quote Nestle once again: "Sexuality is not a limiting force but a whole world in itself that feeds the fires of all our other accomplishments."

*Nitrate Kisses* affirms the erotic as an element of history. It demonstrates how sexuality is at the center of our history, as it is at the center of our oppression as gay people. As the publicity for the film states, *Nitrate Kisses* "encourages the viewer, gay or straight, to save scraps, letters, books, records, and snapshots in order to preserve our ordinary lives as 'history.'"

*Cheryl Kader teaches women's studies at Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin.*

whelmed the Biblical myth of the punishment allotted the men of Sodom. Though this story is well known, scholars now believe it actually told a fable of rape and violence rather than sodomy. I wanted to retell it as a contemporary tale of gay pride.

In the remaking I wanted to assert another history, which would challenge the official testaments rather than simply recover an earlier interpretation. Like all historians of the marginalized, I was forced to search for my story in the shards of stasis and change, marks and traces, holes and blurs where the remnants of my own sexual history congeals into a community of silenced but real people. It



Frances Lorraine and Sally Binford in Barbara Hammer's *Nitrate Kisses*, 1992.

was my intuitive hunch that this history could not be imagined without a contemporary context. Only this reference point in the present would allow me to understand the past.

I think of this film, my first feature (ninety-three minute black and white documentary), as a postmodern constructivist collage. The first section I shot and edited involved new and archival footage of Germany. I shot the blocked doorways from Neuengamme concentration camp, the underground barracks of Hitler in Potsdamer Platz, as well as the long promenade in the former East Berlin, Unter den Linden, where lesbians in the thirties left love notes