

Barbara Hammer Interview
Conducted by benjamin Cox
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BC: When looking at your website, it seems like a lot of how you define yourself as a filmmaker comes from your identity as a gay artist. However, your work covers a much broader range of topics than that. Why do you choose to focus your image on your gay identity?

BH: Well, I didn't know the website would give someone that impression. All I can think of is a hand there, "lesbian humor", "lesbian sexuality", "optical nerve", "perceptual landscape", and then the feature films some of which are gay and some which aren't. So I never thought I was focusing. Someone told me, a manager for a touring group told me I'd have to decide between gay identity or artist. And I thought, "why? Why do I have to decide? I'm both." So I never tried to shape an identity. I just tried to be who I was. And there are a lot of lesbian films because there weren't a lot made. In fact, when I started there were none. So there seemed like there was a real place for me in film history. It was a niche. But now there are so many; you don't have to be a lesbian to make a lesbian film. So I don't feel that kind of calling. Now I feel more around the issues of age. There are very few films showing vibrant aged persons. That concerns me now that I've moved into another generational grouping. Also now leaving lesbian filmmaking and gay film to look at issues of history that are not my history, for instance "Resisting Paradise" is fascinating because I get to look at something I didn't know about. It's not something I grew up with. I didn't come out until I was 30 years old. I've now been a lesbian for over thirty years, I mean what is there to study. Even theory queer theory and lesbian representation sort of slightly shifts year to year according to what new work comes out. So that's not as interesting to me as other subjects right now.

BC: It seems like a lot of the quotes and the reviews describe you as a lesbian filmmaker, as by choosing to put those on your website you paint a picture of yourself through what other people call you.

BH: I think that may have to do with that I see that as an area where I see a claim to fame and it is important to me to be recognized and be looked at and studied after I die. And influence other people in coming generations and you need to have a moniker or a logo because there is so much in the world and that seems like something unique. I mean I don't believe in solitary invention of something, I think there is simultaneous invention. You arise through a context. If I had been born ten years later I wouldn't have made the first lesbian lovemaking film. In fact there had been a lesbian lovemaking film made by a bisexual woman before I made "Dyketactics." But you're right, it doesn't really address my work. But how would you advertise yourself?

BC: Well it also has to do with the purpose of the website and who you're trying to reach. I think one of the most interesting things about your work is the versatility of format. But you can't really advertise yourself based on that. I'm actually kind of curious since you've covered so many different subjects in your films from your gay identity to your grandmother's aging to historical accounts how that's affected your choice in format and filmmaking method from straight filming and cutting to cut-out animation?

BH: Its fun to think about that cut-out. I like to keep learning. I like to keep exploring. I don't like to repeat myself. If I do I feel like I'm stuck. That's why I don't work commercially or industrially. Because you're just repeating yourself. I don't want to shoot *Six Feet Under*. I don't want to direct that—it's all prescribed and cut-out, in another way. Whereas I'm teaching myself compositing in final cut pro, which I taught myself years ago on the optical printer, but now I have to read the book and go online and find some tips and try it and then it's a little awkward in the beginning until I become familiar with it.

BC: Do you have any desire since you've worked with so many different forms of the technology to go back and re-work or re-edit any of your old films or revisit an old topic

BH: There's an $\frac{3}{4}$ " old film called "Stress, scars and pleasure wrinkles" that I never really edited it. I really didn't know how to edit video then and now that I can edit digitally. I do have that impulse for some old films. But I always have something new, even though there are things that I've shot years ago that I haven't finished. But now they just don't seem to me very significant pieces. Or one is significant and anthropological and ethnic about diving women in korea—underwater for food—and I always wanted to find some other characters in another culture to put together for a longer piece. Another is where I had residency at a dune shack in Provincetown and I used windup toys in the desert and it doesn't have any idea of history, just Barbara plays in the sandpile. So I always just put it aside. Its not the kind of thing I could get money for. I cant get a grant for it. But usually I don't think about going back and editing something, except for that one I've mentioned. But the other thing is that when you're older as old as I am and you have other 80 films you have an archive, not only of the films and the outtakes, but all the reviews and articles and I have journals and journals and posters and costumes. I have so much material that if I don't do something with it no one else will. Theres things you have to attend to. It will be fun once I start, but it means I have to stop filming and put aside a year or two to catalogue this all. I don't think I am going to go back and reedit something...but it would be a fun piece to do and maybe bring in new material. And with final cut pro now, I could work quickly with it.

BC: In the pieces that have remained unfinished, what was it that initially inspired you but not the energy to finish the work?

BH: Well, the dune shack—I just wanted to live in the dune shack. Theres no running water and electricity and it's a 20 minute walk to the ranger station. You're alone unless

you are collaborating and you have to have a project. So I wrote a project so I could go. Once I got there I felt responsible to do something. When you're there for 30 days with just your camera and journal you want to make something. So that's the inspiration. Its adventure. Inspiration is inspiration. When I did the Korean women piece it was adventure. I didn't know there was a group of women my age who were diving for fish and snails and sea cucumbers. They are a matrifocal culture caught between Korea and Japan. I like to snorkel and I do underwater cinematography so when I got invited to a Korean womens film festival in Seoul I went down there with a crew and dove with the women and interviewed an anthropologist and had all kinds of struggles there because of the dynamics of a stranger coming in to film. So the adventure was more in the filming than the editing. When I do an essay documentary like "resisting paradise" which is art about and resistance in a period of chaos and war and how people make those kinds of choices and nitrate kisses are why people are left out of history. Who makes history what is history? Those are interesting themes that I can find in the editing. And shape and develop I can reshoot if I need to and do more research—read walter Benjamin. With the Korean film it seems like a Margaret Meade kind of film. I've already satisfied my inquiry. So I don't know how to make it something bigger than what I set out to do. There are people who want to see it and I promised I would finish it someday, so I will. But that's why.

BC: Is your filmmaking emotionally charged in the difference between production and post production. In that your energy behind piqued in interest in something and then you lose that kind of focus on something?

BH: Yes. See but now when I'm working on a biographical piece. I think to myself, there is no big philosophical thing. The first thing I did was go out and find some experts, because no one knew what they were looking at. I have a couple art historians talking. I put them Its so boring to hear this academic talk when the visuals of what these artists made are so beautiful or what I've done with them is so beautiful and exciting. So that's when I went back into my archival research and finding this script. And I changed it into a narrative film script and adding a challenge for myself. So now we've shot with one professional actor and one performance artist and it looks good and the sound is beautiful. Now I have the real challenge of editing the piece. I don't know what to call it. special effects but it has lots of compositing and wonderful gender bending black and white photography from the 1920s. The experts are being weaned away but they are there. I had the actors read their narration, "I was born in Nante in 1840." So I don't have to use an expert to tell the story. So I can go back and tell the story and now I am excited about going to work and seeing how I can reshape it. I'm also working with Pamela Zee, an avant garde composer. We realized though that a grant we're applying for isn't so much for a score for a feature film, but rather for a surround sound installation. So now its not only an experimental documentary, but its also a gallery installation. I also just applied for a digital photography grant. When I was editing it I found the image in the middle of the dissolves, which is like a super[imposition]. First I shot in green screen. In the middle of

the dissolve I've frozen it and I'll make large digital prints of these images. So there will be a still basis for it. Its something I've always wanted to do but usually I've let those kinds of things go.

BC: You just mentioned that you looked at your grant which is only for surround sound installations. Is there any difference in your mind between being pushed by grants versus commercial filmmaking where you are being pushed by audience and market?

[at this point Barbara Hammer gets up to play with her dog for three minutes]

BH: Yeah you're right. You do get driven by things. In this case it's an opportunity. I've always wanted to go a gallery piece. But we haven't gotten the grant yet. If we do, though, I'll get a DVD made; I'll get to work with an engineer. I've been drawing diagrams on how the film should be projected. If you can have surround sound, why cant you have surround image. I think it's different. You are driven a bit. Your filmmaking ideas will change from a grant but it's different than working a 9-5 job. I mean come on.

BC: When you are making your movie, do you choose format based on who your audience will be?

BH: I think the best filmmaking is made without an audience in mind except for yourself. I think if you work for yourself your work will become more and more sophisticated and more advanced because you know what your language is and what the vocabulary is. You want to invent a new vocabulary and find a new form. You haven't seen it before so you cant make it for an audience who hasn't seen it before. Then the audience comes along and they recognize it as something new and vital. In "Resisting Paradise," the optical printing part and the experimental part was done for myself but the part where I interviewed resisters and used war footage, that's different. I feel responsible to the people I interviewed to not experiment with their stories, at least not in this film. I also sought a wider audience because I thought it was important for all of us to ask ourselves where we were in a time of war. So that one I tried to make accessible using a language that people know talking heads documentary and archival footage but at the same time I intercut it with painting on film, 8mm film, negatives that I found in a flea market. You know, a lot of material that you don't usually see in documentary film. So I thought I could expand the documentary form, I thought and think, at the same time bring the audience with me because they had gone to school and they watch television and know documentary in the old fashioned away. That film follows the form of resistance as enunciated by matisse's grandson when he says that one doesn't decide to be a resister overnight. It slowly builds and your civil liberties get taken away and you slowly find yourself committing to action and doing more and more until finally, my God, you finally are a resister. So the film starts very slowly and you hear about so atrocities more and more that I hope that people would find that choice at the end to resist the kind of government we have today, for instance.

BC: So much of the "avant garde" and independent film production relies on the film festival circuit for distribution and curation. What kind of role does that play in your mind in terms of being an active filmmaker?

BH: It plays a big role. You can't help but think of Sundance when you're working. If your film goes to Sundance a lot of people get the catalogue and the film goes to other festivals automatically. I love it. I do it because I love it. I love festivals. I love travel especially to places I haven't been. I have two invitations to go this spring one to Europe and one to South America where I've never been. And I'm thrilled. I always try to bring in some kind of vacation for myself, some kind of adventure especially when I go to Argentina. How many times will I get to go to Argentina again. I'll go to Patagonia probably. It's a lot of fun. I don't know where that curator saw my film and is going to show a lot of my films at the Mar Del Plata film festival in Buenos Aires. One thing leads to another and you meet a lot of people and you may find some other gig. It's also something that happens for me now because I deserve it and because I've worked for years to deserve it. It's not something that can happen so much for first time filmmakers unless they do something that becomes a hit.