

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

Barbara Hammer

Interviewed by

Anna Promey-Fallot

November 30, 2008
New York, New York

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Narrator

Barbara Hammer was born in Hollywood in 1939. She is a largely self-taught filmmaker and since the early 70s had made over eighty films. Hammer's films are closely tied to her activism. She is an out lesbian and a feminist. She is a pioneer in many ways, and has been credited with creating lesbian cinema. Her film *Dyketactics* (1974) was the first film to depict lesbian sex that was directed by a lesbian. Common themes in her work are reclaiming lesbian history, breaking silence, and "filling empty screens." Hammer is still making films, now in more of a documentary style that differs from her earlier experimental work. She is also working on writing her memoir.

Interviewer

Anna Promey-Fallot is a graduate of Smith College with a degree in The Study of Women and Gender and Art History.

Abstract

In this oral history Hammer describes where she got her passion for film and where some of her inspiration has come from. She tells the story of her coming out in the 1970s, and describes the environment of the time—specifically in terms of how it influenced her film. She discusses the themes of lesbian invisibility, recapturing lesbian history, and the politics of naming. She connects her film to her activism and talk a little about what she hopes to see happen in the future.

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Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Two 60-minute tapes.

Transcript

Transcribed by Anna Promey-Fallot.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Hammer, Barbara, interviewed by Anna Promey-Fallot. Video recording, November 30, 2008. Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Barbara Hammer interviewed by Anna Promey-Fallot, video recording, November 30, 2008, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

Transcript

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Transcript of interview conducted November 30, with:

Barbara Hammer
New York, New York

by: ANNA PROMEY-FALLOT

HAMMER: Come in here for a minute and we'll just say our names, and...

PROMEY-FALLOT: Okay...

HAMMER: This is Barbara Hammer at Westbeth on November...

PROMEY-FALLOT: November 30th

(TWO VOICES): 2008

HAMMER: And this is...

PROMEY-FALLOT: And my name's Anna Promey-Fallot.

HAMMER: And you're from...

PROMEY-FALLOT: I'm from Smith College.

HAMMER: And recording this for your archive class.

PROMEY-FALLOT: Right.

HAMMER: Okay, so here we go, there's a copy of this in Smith College.

PROMEY-FALLOT: So, my first question is: where did you get your training and your passion for film?

HAMMER: Well, two different answers...where did I get my training and my passion for film? I got—I'll start with the first—the second one. I got my passion for film maybe indirectly from my mother, who wanted me to be an actor. And, when I was born, Shirley Temple was making more money than any other woman in the United States and my mother was from immigrant parents who were born in Ukraine and, they had very little money, and—so she grew up poor. And, she married into middle class, and she and my father moved to California with the idea of making money, because California was the state that was expanding. And she thought I was so cute and precocious that I'd be a good actor. So, she took me for drama lessons, and we really didn't have enough money for me to do the professional school that the agent wanted me to do. So, I really just did neighborhood classes and my acting career went nowhere. But then years later when I decided I wanted to be an artist, I decided on film, consciously, because it put together all the arts: painting, music, architecture, sculpture, costume, design, and movement. And, that's why I chose film. But think unconsciously there was, you know, sort of the background my mom wanted me to be in—an actress. So that's where my passion came from. My training, well...was a lot self taught, all my Super 8 film work was done before I took a class...I actually was going to Sonoma State to take the class on Super 8 film and I saw an old building with cobwebs on it and red ivy leaves covering it, and I was so enchanted by it that I went inside and made a film, rather than going to class (laughter) so that's how I got my start in film, and then later—a few years

later when I was just starting to get a masters degree and choosing between literature—well actually I got a degree in literature, so, well, between painting—for my second masters I got a degree in painting, and filmmaking, and that's when I decided to do filmmaking. And then I went to San Francisco State University where I got an M.A. in film.

PROMEY-FALLOT: So how does your early interest in painting come across in your film?

HAMMER: Well, I think its there, everywhere—sometimes, in *Resisting Paradise* I literally drip paint down a piece of glass that's between the camera and the landscape in France, the camera is here (gestures) the glass is here (gestures), we're looking through and we don't see me, but I'm going—leaving the camera running and putting paint on the top of the glass and then it flows through, so its like I'm painting the landscape. And when I did optical printing in the 80's, I chose every frame as if it were a painting. The composition was important to me, the colors...and it was really a study of still frames more than of movement.

PROMEY_FALLOT: Getting back to your family a little bit, um, were any of them—or your close relatives—activists or artists?

HAMMER: Nobody in my family was an activist. My parents were republican, my grandmother—I don't even know if she had citizenship. I think when she got a home she bought it in my mom's name. So, she never knew English well, I really don't know—I'll have to ask my sister if she remembers if

my grandmother were a citizen—but, so nobody was an activist, but my grandmother was an artist, and, she used to paint, at the kitchen table, and she often stayed with us because she would lose jobs—she was a temperamental woman—and she couldn't keep a job very long so she was always moving back into our house. And then I saw her do ceramics, painting, and...you know, it wasn't a happy move because my father and she didn't get along, and I didn't get along with her all the time, she was very—wanted to put a lot of rules on me, that I resisted. Um...but I saw somebody contented, working away all day on a painting, and putting them in a few local art shows, and I think that was—and my mom used to take me to museums, and, she would always want me to go look at ancient and I always wanted to look at contemporary. She was always saying: “Well, why don't you look at the older work?” and now I love it, but at that point I just wanted to see modern art. But no activists—except, my mother was instrumental in getting sidewalks put on our block in Inglewood, California, where we just had lawns going straight into the street, so she made it safer for children, she was the head of the PTA, and then something that always influenced me was she gave money to street musicians. So, when I hear somebody in the subway, and I give them a coin, I'm thinking of my mom, who taught me that. So that's the form of activism that she took, and I don't—can't think of my dad—doing anything in that realm.

PROMEY-FALLOT: Um, this goes back to childhood again a little bit: what were your impressions of Hollywood in the 1950s, and how did that influence you?

HAMMER: Well, you know, I wasn't really in Hollywood, I grew up—was born in Hollywood Hospital but I was only there for three months, so as an infant I was taken to Inglewood, California. Which is, was a working class, really, suburb that I grew up in until we—I got to be about 13 and then we moved to a middle class suburb and had a house really built for us by a contractor in a new development. So, I was not influenced by Hollywood, we got a television late in life—late in my life, a number of years, maybe five years after they came out, so if they came out in 1950, we got one in '55. Other people around the neighborhood already had televisions. Radio influenced me, we used to sit around and listen to radio as a family, and I think radio is terrific for the imagination in a way that television doesn't let you—or film. You're free to create the scenes in your mind, with the sound effects and the voices that you hear, and sometimes descriptions of landscapes or interiors—so I liked—I still like radio.

PROMEY_FALLOT: Um, uh describe what coming out was like for you in the more silent time—the more silent atmosphere of the time, and how did this effect your work.

HAMMER: I came out in 1970, it wasn't silent at all.

(Two Voices)

PROMEY-FALLOT: Oh, I thought it was the 50s.

HAMMER: Back in the 50s, when it was a no-no, but 1970 was the birth of the second wave of feminism, so with that consciousness... we all heard Betty Freidan—and I heard Betty Freidan when I was heterosexual, we were reading Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, a woman in—I had divorced already, and then, had—was teaching at a junior college—and a woman in our support group, well, a feminist consciousness raising group, came out to the rest of the group and said she was gay, well, lesbian, and I'd never heard the word. I was thirty years old. And I said, "What does that mean?" And she said, "Well, that means loving and supporting women, and in particular one woman." And I thought it was a great idea. And I thought, oh, and it kind of excited me, and I met her lover, and her lover physically turned me on—we went to theater group—a theater play—*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*—and I was sitting next to her, and her knee touched mine...and I felt turned on, by that, and I decided right then and there to act on it. That, it was not—see, it was really unfeminist of me, because...she was already in a relationship, and so I broke up the relationship, so...I didn't have a very kind of kind consciousness, and was pretty self-centered, I think. But I had, it was just thrilling, and wonderful to come out—changed my life, and I made films about it right away, and my mother died before—of cancer—before my first film was finished, and

I was afraid to come out to her. And—you know we all use excuses, mine was that she was dying of cancer—why should I give her one more burden. My father called me at my mom’s house—she was bedridden at that point—and he asked me if I were gay, and I said yes, so I had no problem telling my dad, although, he put me down, he said—I said, “Does that surprise you?” And he said, “Nothing you do could surprise me, Barbara.” (Laughter) So, big coming out. I guess I wish I could have reconciled with my mom. I don’t know if we could have in that time, she had little energy left, but, I think she knew anyway. She had traveled to Europe where I was teaching and had lived with my lov—my first lover and I in Switzerland, or Germany I should say, for a few months, or maybe a month and—and then we drove for Christmas over the Swiss Alps to a ski resort and my first lover kept putting her hand on my leg when I was driving and my mom was in the backseat and I was so pissed at her, because I had told her not to touch me, because I hadn’t come out, you know, so, I mean, I’m sure my mom knew, my mother hated this woman, as well. So, she called her names, and I—she called her mealy-mouthed (laughter), mealy-mouthed liar, so what I think of meal is that kind of grain that worms eat, so you’re your mouth is all (sounds and laughter). And I said, if she says one more thing against her, she’ll never see me again...so she didn’t, but, Marie, was her name, never came to visit after that. We were just together two years, which was a long time, back in the 70s, to be together. So, I came out with the movement—everybody was coming out, I mean everybody was—engaged in sex—not

everybody but a lot of the feminists were engaged in sexual exploration. It was a very exciting time—wonderful time.

PROMEY-FALLOT: That actually anticipated my next question, which was about when you first heard the word “lesbian,” when you were thirty. Um, was naming and identity a significant part of your work—the politics of naming?

HAMMER: It was, naming was very important to me, naming myself as a lesbian—but always a lesbian feminist, because I considered myself a feminist as well—and when—I was a feminist before I was a lesbian. When I first heard the word “feminist,” on KPF—KPFK, the LA—The San Francisco, Berkley station—it was a broadcast on the beauty show in Atlantic City—The Miss America Contest, and it was a critique of it—it was the first time I’d ever heard a critique of lookism, and women basing their life on their looks—and, then I was probably around between, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, and I immediately told my husband when he got home, “I’m a feminist.” He was so angry, he didn’t know how to deal with it, and his boyfriend, who was also my boyfriend—not my boyfr---my friend who was a male, who lived nearby us, **Ralph Boonslaught** said to me, “Oh that’s great, Barbara, you’re a feminist.” You know, but Clayton, my husband, didn’t see it. So, when I came out, and I heard the word lesbian, I thought it was really important to make films about it, because I hadn’t seen any, hadn’t read the word, I researched it later I found out that it was only used in the New York Times in 1920 for the first time. And I

realized, this was like a hidden word—and I think words make people, they construct *us*, *we*—I didn't have the idea on my own, or I didn't feel attraction before I ever heard the word, and thought that this was a possibility. I'm not saying everybody's like me, but that's the way I related to it. So, I think that had a lot to do with my early 70s films that were constantly lesbian naming—full of lesbian representation and identity and I—I look at my writing from that period as well, I'm working all the time on a lesbian aesthetic and connecting my ideas about touch and sexuality with film.

PROMEY_FALLLOT: Okay, you've been called the “Doyenne of Dyke Video” and the “Queen of Queer Cinema,” what did it mean to you when you realized you were a pioneer in the field and were effectively creating the genre of lesbian filmmaking?

HAMMER: What a question that is. (Laughter). Well, I knew very early that *Dyketactics* was probably the first lesbian lovemaking film to be made by a lesbian. So, I knew that way back in—so that's 1974, when I made it. **Connie Beeson** had made a film about lesbian lovemaking, and, it, um, the only thing that's in—and I had seen it—so the only thing separated us was that she identified bisexual. There were a lot of—there's a human sexuality institute in San Francisco, where I was, and a lot of my friends, like Tee Corrine, and Jill—I don't remember her last name, maybe it was **Beasome**, they were studying and getting PhDs in Human Sexuality, and

they were studying the climax cycle, and—for both men and women, and they would watch classes, or be with people who watched films, all day, on sexuality, most of it was heterosexual. But the point of this was for them to get beyond the puritan arousal at seeing films—seeing sexuality in film, and to see it as normal activity, and that was the whole point—or one of the points—of the Human Sexuality Institute...but Tee Corinne taught me about the sexual response cycle, and we would use mirrors and watch our clitorises grow and get blood engorged, and the lips of the vagina swell, and change shape, and you know, before that, I mean I had been sexually active since I got married, which was when I was twenty-one, so this must have been around—for ten years, I hadn't thought about my own sexual response cycle. I'm probably far away from what the question was, but—

PROMEY-FALLOT: It's okay, it actually goes back to a question I had for later, but, um—

HAMMER: Well, what was your original question, right now?

PROMEY-FALLOT: That, what did it mean when you realized that you were a pioneer, that you were—

HAMMER: Oh, the pioneer question. Well, the one thing about that was, other early lesbian feminists told me, “Barbara, you have to choose between being a lesbian filmmaker and an avant garde filmmaker,” and, you know, you

need to brand yourself—they weren't using that word, but that was the idea, if you want to get known, you know, you need to figure out who you are, you can't be both. And that bothered me, you know, I'd always thought of myself as both. And, you know, even today when I'm working on my memoir, you know, what are we going to call it—we're going to call it *Hammer*, and then the editor came up with the subtitle, which will be: "The Coming Out of an American Filmmaker." So it gives a queer identity without saying "lesbian," and it brings American filmmaker, which I am, and if we didn't have sexual oppression, I would just be an American filmmaker from the beginning, I wouldn't have had to—people saying you have to choose between being a lesbian feminist and being an avant garde filmmaker. So, I was aware at the beginning of being a pioneer, and I was aware in my film history class when the only film we saw by a woman was Maya Deren. And I knew there was a feminine and feminist—a womanist sensibility on the screen, and I researched her later in life and found out she was bisexual, so I was picking up more than that, but I knew there was a blank screen in terms of lesbian cinema. And you know, when you're beginning out work as an artist, you are trying to make work that hasn't been seen before, so it was a perfect niche that I thought I could fill.

PROMEY-FALLOT: Um, this goes back to what you just mentioned, that *Dyketactics* was the first film to show lesbian sex that was made by a lesbian. Why do you think there was such reluctance to accept women's sexuality as portrayed

by women directors as opposed to men, and did this affect your work at all?

HAMMER: Well sexuality in American culture, you know, because we're established by puritans and the Church—churches have reigned supreme, and still do, they've determined that sexuality is something that should be private and only seen in the bedroom—sometimes even with the lights off, nobody sees it at all. I wasn't raised with a religion, so I was free of religion, and I—I hated middle class rules—rules about sitting with your legs together, crossing your legs—of course I'm doing that now, but out of comfort (laughter), the way a girl should act, what we had to wear...you can't read at the table, chew with your mouth closed—I mean there are *so* many rules that the hiding the sexuality was just one of them, and I wanted to break those rules, I saw no—being considerate to people, yes, wonderful to have as a rule, no war allowed, yes, no physical violence, yes, but sexuality and rules around the way you eat and sit and behave? It really constricted us as human beings and was really deterministic of who we could become, who we were constructed to be. So, sexuality was just a part of showing—and I think in *Tender Fictions*, my postmodern autobiography, I bring up some of those other rules, and I always saw sexuality as as normal as eating and sleeping and so therefore why shouldn't it be shown? And I wanted to celebrate it because here I was already thirty years old the first time making love with a woman, and I hadn't seen it. But I'd felt it, and experienced it, and so there was something to put on the screen that hadn't

been seen. So it was part of that whole filling the screen with all the no-no's, all the taboos, breaking all the old customs that I was trying to do.

PROMEY-FALLOT: Um, many of your films deal with breaking silences around lesbian and gay issues. Were you influenced at all by some of the groups in the 70s with similar goals such as Queer Nation, and the Lesbian Avengers?

(Two Voices)

PROMEY-FALLOT: The 70s and the 90s

HAMMER: Yeah, you know I was never really part of a group. Um, even Act Up, it was always—I used to call myself a maverick, until John McCain used the word (laughter). And now I never will again (laughter).

PROMEY-FALLOT: Now you can't (laughter).

HAMMER: But, outsider...I identified with those movements, but I didn't participate in them. The Lesbian Avengers, I used one of their actions in *The Female Closet*, when they went to Staten Island and protested at the Alice Austen house, claiming that Alice was a lesbian, which she was, and dressing up in costume, and performing in front of the board members, and the big exhibit that was going on outside in the yard, that day. So I celebrate their work, but I never was part of the group, and the most I can do is collaborate with one other person, sometimes a straight woman, Paula

Levine in *Two Bad Daughters*, and then other times a lesbian, Gloria Churchman, in *Moon Goddess*. **Max Ulme** in *Superdyke Meets Mad Max*, but never more than another person, another woman.

PROMEY-FALLOT: Can you talk a little bit more about your interest in art that changes things, that creates new ways of seeing things as opposed to just reproducing the world?

HAMMER: I wanted to build an experiential art so that people could go inside the screen in the sense that they would feel with their body what they were seeing with their eyes. So I tried to make a cinema that was kinesthetic, is a word that's been used, haptic, is another word—a cinema of touch, and as I mentioned at Yale, and I think you were there at that lecture, that we learn the world through our eyes but our eyes are connected to the sensibility in our brain of touch, and so the perceptive of hairs that know where we—that are on our arms and cover our body—know where we are in the world through walking—now that's amazing, right there. And, so you could put a camera on your body and move where your hairs tell you to move (laughter), and I tried to make people feel that they were swimming in a pool, if it was a film like *Pond and Waterfall*, or *Pools*, or *Pearl Diver*, where I'm using underwater cinematography, to feel the water go by them. To feel the density, the viscosity, not just air space, to enter the water—and as the camera sees through that, its moving, hopefully, and the person will also feel the water going by. And that had a

political, actually, reason behind it, and it was to activate the audience. If I could get the audience to leave the theater changed, that they might think more carefully on their vote, they might go into the streets with Queer Nation to—or Act Up—to protest the lack of medical concern around AIDS or whatever they might do, they would be active, because I found that we lived in a passive citizenry, and, I thought cinema could be used to motivate an audience, and the first thing to do was to motivate them while they were watching the film so they became aware of their own bodies, and with their bodies they become aware of themselves as a presence in the world. It's a bit, you know, of a stretch, because they're not dramatically political films in the sense that they're talking about the exploitation of immigrants in the United States and listing all the difficulties that an immigrant might face and how our nation is based on immigrant work—they're not that kind of a documentary, so it's a kind of philosophical, behind the scenes approach that I wanted from my viewers—for them to become active and involved. And that's all in the early work, and it becomes more intellectual in the 90s.

PROMEY-FALLOT: Okay, um, reclaiming a lost lesbian history is also a theme in your work, um, how, in your opinion can we go about uncovering these histories that have been so deliberately hidden?

HAMMER: Well, even today, my lover, **Flora Burke**, was researching on Google—googling—I think for the first time an aunt of hers who was lesbian, who was—should have had the Nobel Prize for research that she did on detecting kidney damage through a micro, kind of a hole, and she was a physicist, and she was a physician, and she was a—I guess a physician's engineer, so to speak, and these two women lived together in Pennsylvania, she and her lover, in obscurity—I mean not obscurity in terms of her work, because the internet is filled with her scientific papers, but in terms of their personal life, because she didn't come out in the 70s—**Florie** was younger than me, so these women were-- probably, it was the 40s and 50s when they were living their lives, and, so that would be a history right there to bring back. There are so—I feel like we don't have a lesbian culture unless we have a lesbian history. Unless we, you know, are able to name and find and celebrate the diverse lesbians that have lived in our culture and others, either as lesbians or under some other kind of name, or way of being—because we can't really take western culture and look at Africa for instance, or another continent, any other continent, in the same way—but we look for those close female-female bondings. Then we see that we have a world history, and it gives us a whole greater strength of identity. Otherwise, it's as if we invented ourselves out of vapor, you know, in 1970, and it's not true at all, so that history should be celebrated and those foremothers should be claimed and named.

PROMEY-FALLOT: You've been quoted as saying that feminist audiences have not always been particularly receptive to experimental cinema and fans of experimental cinema have not always recognized the contributions of feminism. Can you say more about this, and do you see it as changing at all?

HAMMER: Yes, I—I found it difficult to show my work to—and avant garde audience did not particularly want to see lesbian work. A lesbian audience wanted to see reality cinema, they didn't want to see manipulation of the film frame, or of a new kind of style that they hadn't seen before, all they wanted was give us a lesbian story told in the old traditional, to me, heterosexual way. So, I could never be a complete success, I think, in either community. I don't know if there's any change today. I think the lesbian audiences still prefer a heterosexual script, with lesbian characters. And I think an avant garde cinema audience prefers not to be disturbed with a lesbian aesthetic (laughter). I don't think there's a change.

PROMEY-FALLOT: How do you think that art and feminism interact at present? What, anything did it mean in this context that, as you mentioned before, the Lesbian Avengers protested the Alice Austen exhibition because of the foundation's refusal to acknowledge her lesbianism?

HAMMER: What was the first part again?

PROMEY-FALLOT: How do you think art and feminism interact at present?

HAMMER: Well, its great that we have this year and last year the WACK show, the show that's brought together 70s artists, I think 120 of them, that opened at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and that traveled to three other venues including PS1 in New York and that is now at the Vancouver Art Gallery in Canada, and, that show got reviewed in the New York Times with a full-page ad in the art section, my name was mentioned, I think for the first time—well, there has been a film review, *Nitrate Kisses*, because it released—opened commercially, and *History Lessons* opened commercially. But, so, *Superdyke* was mentioned, you know I mean that's—that's amazing right there, and look how long—how many years it's taken. So, I think that is a spur then—an encouragement to new feminist artists and in fact the Brooklyn Museum of Art had a new show of feminist artists from 1970 on, or even more contemporary than that. So, women I think are always working from their own sensibility and that right there is feminist. A man can be a feminist, and he can be working from a sensibility that isn't sexist. And giving equal rights and space to women that are in is film and...or women's sensibilities. And, you know, at some point in life, if the world exists that long, there may be—and this is really future guessing, a long, long way from now, equality of the sexes. And we make our slow strides with Hillary Clinton become Secretary of State tomorrow (laughter, yes!) And I know she follows Condoleeza Rice, but she follows with a stronger personality, and we

know, a lot more opinions—because we've heard her run for the Democratic candidate for President of the U.S. And there are a lot more women in Obama's transition team as well as his appointees so far. As well as a variety of class—not class, but race, I don't know about class, that would be really interesting to look at the class background of all the appointees and see if anybody is from anything other than upper-middle, um...the Clintons certainly started out with nothing before they amassed their fortune, so, but I think they would come from—well I guess maybe Bill Clinton comes from working class, always talks about his mom struggling for him, but I don't know about Hillary, I doubt it. But I don't know, I'd have to look a little bit closer. As long as we are raised differently—blacks, whites, Asians ...female, male, disabled, old, then we're seen differently—old, young—there's going to be difference in our art. And that difference is unique and celebratory—to celebrate, you know, not to be scared of.

PROMEY-FALLOT: When did film festivals begin to show your work that they had previously rejected on the basis of its lesbian content?

HAMMER: Hmm...

PROMEY-FALLOT: And do you see this as indicative of a larger shift in thinking?

HAMMER: I don't know if my work was ever not shown at film festivals because of its lesbian content—it probably has been, for all the time that I've been showing festivals...but I didn't even know there were festivals when I was making—in the 70s. And in 1979, **Terry Cannon** called me up, he's a man and he was the programmer—orgaist—**cinemathèque** called **Film4** in Los Angeles, downtown in L.A., and he invited me to have a show there. Well, I had been having shows, I think, before that, at the Women's Building in Los Angeles and I had been showing at coffee houses and bars in the San Francisco Bay Area, but I didn't know that there were cinemathèques, universities, that there was a whole system set up where you could show your work. So, I said, "you want to show my lesbian films in your cinemathèque?" "Yes, yes, come on down." And it was a wonderful screening, and it was the first time that I saw that there were audiences beyond the lesbian feminist community that had supported my work up to that time. And then after that there was **Michael Lumpkin** sitting on my doorstep, he was running the Frameline Festival—first Gay San Francisco Lesbian Festival that there has been in the world. He showed my work consistently, almost every festival I had a film in it for twenty years or more, and people, then, would curate from that program—and they still do. You know, I'm sure that I was censored, because the work was lesbian, I know it took me a long time to get a screening at Museum of Modern Art, and I kept piling up my films, one film, you know, every—two films, every year in cans, and they would say, "Oh, you don't have enough work yet." I finally got a show there, I think '82 was

my first **cinprobe** and after that I've had many, many, many. I know I was censored as a teacher by being an out lesbian feminist. Because I had a friend who was on the hiring committee—it was at San Francisco State, the same school that I graduated from—early, maybe it was in the 80s, and I was applying for a teaching position, and one of the senior faculty members—well, I might as well name his name—**Ron Levalcomb**, who had actually helped me get into film school, wrote my name on the board: Barbara Hammer, slash—dash, lesbian feminist. A *radical* lesbian feminist, and so I asked this person—this other faculty member who told me about this if she were ever—if any of the other candidates had republican, conservative republican, or whatever, written by their names. No, I was the only one that was singled out. And, I feel like, I really had a hard time getting a full time teaching job—and I tried and tried. I never had a Guggenheim, I've tried and tried, probably fifteen applications, at least. So I'm sure there have been festivals, but how do you know that—unless somebody from the inside tells you. Now, you know, I want the work to be seen, you know, by everyone, in a wider sense, so that the world embraces everything that we are, and a lot of my films haven't been about being a lesbian, so they also gather in a different audience, but I always make a point—my activism is that I always self identify—or just about every time—self identify as a lesbian while I'm addressing the audience if the film isn't—you know, like *Resisting Paradise* has nothing about being a lesbian in it, but I'll talk about—I'll try to find a lesbian resister when I

meet the audience and I identify as a lesbian. So, censorship works in lots of ways, and we don't know all of them.

PROMEY-FALLOT: What influenced your decision to switch from more experimental film to a more documentary tone in your more recent work?

HAMMER: I decided to make a long film because I was tired of going around have shows of seven short films making a program of forty—of an hour and forty-five minutes, hour and thirty minutes, and then talking with the audience afterwards about many subjects. So I thought, why not take one subject and go deeply into it, and make the film just this one theme. And also, at this point, before I made *Nitrate Kisses*—my first long film—the independent television service had been formed by congress to represent—ITBS—it goes by, and they're still in existence, and it give money, government money, to underrepresented people for public television. And I thought, oh, perfect. And I had been listening and helping through **NAMAC**, a national media organization, and through the Association of Independent Film and Video, where I was on the board, where ITVS was forming, so I'd been aware of this move, gestation, for five years, before the organization came into being, and then I thought, oh, I'll make a long film on hidden histories of lesbians and gays in the western world—that should get me ITVS money. That's what I thought. So I was off on a European tour in 1988, first one, I think, or '82—must have been '88, and I—once I have an idea and I've written a grant and

sent it in, I don't like to wait to see if I get money for it, I like to make it anyway, even maybe with less resources. So I started shooting the film when I was in Europe, and interviewing people, and I never did get the grant—that grant, but I got a **NISCA** grant, I got an NEA grant for it, maybe some other funds. So I was able to finish the film and get it out, and later when I talked to people from ITVS they said my budget was never big enough. I think it was 60,000, for that film, which I thought was a lot at that time—and, they're used to paying 200,000 for a documentary—or more, up to 500—for a documentary that's going to go on national public television. So they thought, you know, you can't finish a film and shoot adequately, in the kind of standard that they wanted—at least that's what somebody has told me. So...then I like the long format, and I could go more deeply into a subject, I could also collage and expand in that way, and bring in lots of materials and have a longer period to explore. So—and people like to come to see a longer film—so, it all worked together and I sometimes made documentaries that were more literal and less art forms, like *Nitrate Kisses*, *Tender Fictions* and *History Lessons*, I think, are my—some of my better works, where I am working with a form that fits the theme of the film, and trying to expand the language of cinema. But if I take something like *Out in South Africa*, about the first gays and lesbians in South Africa, or *The Female Closet*, exploring three different lesbian artists over the range of one hundred years—those are films where I don't feel I have the liberty to play with the content, I feel its more important to get the history out so it can be

understood. Then if I were to go back, I could play with it. I could play with my own history, or with a general cultural history, but it was more important just to let the township gays and lesbians and bisexuals and heterosexuals that were having gay sex talk in my film, and give an interview, than it was for me to try to develop a new language there—their language hadn't even been heard yet, so it would be really presumptuous of me, I think to—to play around with their words and their images.

PROMEY-FALLOT: Um, the tape's going to run out relatively soon, so I'm going to switch that.

END TAPE 1

TAPE 2

PROMEY-FALLOT: Okay, this question is a little bit more anecdotal. Un, but, along the lines of the issue of invisibility, I was particularly struck by a moment in *Nitrate Kisses* when you include in voice, in French, of a woman who says that she hopes that 20 rue Jacob will become one of the most beautiful museums. Um, and when I was in Paris—there's nothing there, there's not even a plaque or anything to mark that it was Nathalie Barney's salon. Um, do you see this sort thing—recapturing places like that—as an important part of documenting lesbian history?

HAMMER: I do—that was Marie-Jo Bonnet who has written a book that I have here on—in French, it hasn't been translated—on French lesbians and French lesbian invisible histories. And she was instrumental in telling me to go to Père Lachaise and find the graves of Gertrude [Stein] and Alice [B. Toklas], and where rue Jacob was and Nathalie Barney's salon, like you said, and I think that environment makes a person, as well. And that we can change our environment a bit, but the environment can change us. And also the language, and that's why I didn't translate that section—you have to know French to understand that (laughter). And I think it's important that we do have plaques, we finally got a plaque for **Shirley Clark** on the Chelsea Hotel about a year or two ago. And it's the first plaque for a woman artist, there is a hotel on 23rd street that artists have inhabited from when—whenever it was

built until now, and they left a lot of their artwork there and there's a whole wall outside that's full of plaques, and it was—she's the first women artist, even though there were other women artists. And, it took a woman filmmaker today, **Carol Chasen** that decided that she should have a plaque. And I think its important when you go around and you see the plaque for Gertrude Stein, and you can go on a whole tour and understand Paris just through locations that way, you know, where was Sylvia Beach's librarie, you know—and I'm sure there's plaques for Picasso all over the city. So, Nathalie Barney, not only was she the social figure, but she was also a writer—published—and she was lovers with Una Troubridge, right?

PROMEY-FALLOT: Umm hmm

HAMMER: Who was a painter and, was she a write—a writer too?

PROMEY-FALLOT: I think it was Romaine Brooks.

HAMMER: Romaine Brooks—Romaine Brooks and Una Troubridge were the couple. Or—

PROMEY-FALLOT: I think it was Romaine Brooks and Nathalie Barney.

HAMMER: Oh, okay, that it. Voilà. (laughter). I mean to have the whole house preserved and to be able to go out and see the little kiosk in the back and the statues

would have been so great, and a lot of people would be interested in that, gay or straight. So, I think it is important to keep our places, and our locations, and our homes, and our salons, and our libraries open to the public. Or, if not that, then at least with a name, you know, like Clou Cajon's home on Jersey Isle, is privately owned, you know, you'd have to talk to the owner before she'd give you permission—which she did say she would give me permission to go inside and see the home. But how wonderful if even just a room could have been preserved with the furniture and her artwork on the walls. It's so much richer to see the artist in the environment, or the remnants of the artist in the environment, than to only see them at a bookstore—a museum or a bookstore.

PROMEY-FALLOT: Um, and then, just the last question I have is if there is anything else that you wanted to discuss that hasn't been covered yet?

HAMMER: Hmm, well, I think the importance of lovers in my life has been really—hasn't been mentioned. And there've been numerous ones, and the last twenty years I've been with the same woman, **Florie Burke**, and I think the stability of this relationship and the maturity of it, because we're both very involved in our work, has also allowed me to make the long film form—not just to write the short paper, so to speak, but the novel. Um, and, right now, to work on my memoir, and get that ready for publication next year by the Feminist Press and CUNY University, or

CUNY I guess you'd say. Early on I think it was the exciting stimulation of new lover after new lover after new lover that gave me the kind of energy for new film, new film, new film—or short film, short film, short film. So, I think besides environment, relationship of a lesbian artist—and probably, any artist, homosexual, bisexual, gay, celibate, or asexual—I saw a movement of asexual people the other day—yeah, that was interesting. So any choice, but if it does involve another person, I think that's as important as the environment for developing your consciousness and your sensibility and putting that out in your work. Outside of that I really enjoyed the interview.

PROMEY-FALLOT: Okay, thank you so much I really appreciate it.

HAMMER: Yeah, it's been great and I hope that it's easy for you to transcribe (laughter). Bye
Smith College!

END TAPE

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed by Anna Promey-Fallot December, 2008

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