**“I Is a Lesbian Couple”: Politics and Relationships in the Films of Barbara Hammer**

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In February 2012, I had the honor of participating in the Tate Modern’s month-long retrospective of the work of experimental filmmaker Barbara Hammer. Stuart Comer, the Tate’s Film Curator, had invited artist and writer Emily Roysdon to serve as the guest curator for one of the evening programs. Roysdon paired *Superdyke Meets Madame X*, a 1976 video that Hammer made in collaboration with video artist Max Almy, with a selection of videos from *Falling in Love…with Chris and Greg*, the ongoing project that I make with my boyfriend and collaborator Chris Vargas.

I was thrilled to participate, though, oddly enough, the pairing caught me entirely by surprise. I have been writing and thinking about Hammer’s work for a long time. Her early films were central to my doctoral research on gay and lesbian activist and experimental filmmaking of the 1970s, and at the end of this year, the feminist media and cultural-studies journal *Camera Obscura* will publish an article of mine that reconsiders those early films in light of recent work by queer artists and filmmakers who are revisiting, with a difference, a 1970s lesbian-feminist aesthetic. Nevertheless, despite thinking so much about queer artistic connections across history, I had never made the association that Emily did between Hammer’s early films and my own current practice.

The connection escaped me in part because Chris and I do not riff on 1970s lesbian feminism in our project—at least, not yet. In our series, there are no “central-core” images of fruit, vegetables, and flowers, no Goddess rituals, and no back-to-the-land womanist communes. Except for a camping trip in our second episode, we seldom even go outside. So I did not put our project in the same category as Liz Rosenfeld’s *Untitled (Dyketactics Revisited)* (2005) or A.L. Burns and A.K. Steiner’s *Community Action Center* (2010), two works that pay explicit homage to 1970s lesbian-feminist imagery and aesthetics. I also didn’t make the connection because *Superdyke Meets Madame X* is such an aberration among Hammer’s 1970s films. For one, it is not a film: it is one of the rare videos mixed in with the artist’s prolific work in 16mm celluloid during the decade. The “primitive,” low-resolution, black-and-white visuals of *Superdyke Meets Madame X* are a far cry from the lush, textural, and colorful imagery of signature films like *Dyketactics* (1974), *Menses* (1974), and *Women I Love* (1976). The video also lacks the hushed, ritual reverence of many of the 1970s films. It has instead a chatty, vérité quality.

Roysdon’s pairing brought to light a number of parallels between the two projects. Although *Falling In Love…* is scripted and *Superdyke Meets Madame X* is not, both are narcissistic and confessional. Both exhibit a DIY aesthetic and ethos, eschewing high production values. Both center on the intimate dramas, the miscommunications, and, perhaps most strikingly, the “failures” of queer relationships. And both explore the political and artistic potential of queer couples: what happens when lovers collaborate, and is the sum of that collaboration greater than its two parts?

*Superdyke Meets Madame X* chronicles Hammer and Almy’s brief love affair, as the two “media freaks” flirted with each other across a Sony Portapak. The artists made a pact: Almy would teach Hammer how to make videos, and in exchange Hammer would teach Almy how to shoot 16mm film. (Almy appears as the woman with the daffodils in Hammer’s film *Women I Love*, made the same year.) Early in the half-hour video, Hammer expresses how thrilled she is to discover that video technology allows for so more spontaneity and freedom than film does. She likens the experience to the rush she used to feel as a painter. The two women make love in front of the camera, and then Hammer stages a short solo performance in which she playfully casts film textbooks from her naked body, as if she is liberating herself from the constraints of the more laborious medium. At the end of the performance, though, she suddenly becomes listless. Then, after having seen it played back on a monitor, she is sharply disillusioned. She deems the recording flat, lifeless, and unreal. The love affair with Almy, who is clearly committed to video technology and practice, loses steam at the same time. Hammer eventually made video a core part of her practice, of course, but it is fascinating to see how bumpy the initial courtship was.

Chris and I don’t break up in our video project, neither with each other nor with the medium, though we do emphasize disfunctionality. We relish playing a hopelessly incompatible “odd couple,” struggling with intractable political and subcultural differences: “Chris” is a queer radical and “Greg” is a gay liberal, and they don’t see eye to eye on everything from open relationships to gay adoption to gay marriage. My character is cisgendered while Chris’s is trans, and additional conflicts arise in the negotiations of this relationship configuration, in particular from my character’s failure to show proper respect and understanding of Chris’s character’s trans embodiment and identity. Most of the content of the project has some basis in real life, though, as with the characters, events and details are always distorted into extreme caricature. It is also our intention that our real-life personalities and relationship always bleed through the “amateurish” performances, so that even as one watches a doomed trans/cis couple onscreen, one knows that its healthy, functional equivalent is having a lot of fun writing the scripts, making the videos, and playing the roles together. We’ve been a couple for going on five years now.

When Stuart Comer realized that, in addition to making failed queer relationship videos with my boyfriend, I also study and write about Hammer’s films, he asked me to conduct a short interview with the filmmaker in advance of the Tate retrospective. I had the following exchange with Hammer over email in late December 2011 and early January 2012. Building on Roysdon’s curatorial lead, the interview explores the connections between Hammer’s film practice and her romantic relationships.

**Greg Youmans:** A lot of your early works are bound up with particular love affairs. *Double Strength* (1978) and *Superdyke Meets Madame X* (1976) are probably the most explicit in this regard because each of them traces the arc of a relationship from start to finish. But a number of other films also document your relationships with various women. What is the connection for you between film projects and relationships?

**Barbara Hammer:** I say “art is energy.” I found an incredible amount of energy in emerging love affairs. I was addicted to this stimulus and I used the energy I found for making art. Often, the theme or subject matter of the film was directly drawn from the details of the relationship. For example in *Superdyke Meets Madame X*, Max Almy and I vowed to never meet without a camera and by the end of three months we had enough material for our film. Since the relationship and the film were contiguous, once one ended, so did the other.

**GY:** I remember you told me once that a similar contiguity existed for *No No Nooky T.V.* (1987), a film I would not have thought to include in this camp. I think you said something along the lines of, “Needless to say, the relationship came to an end as I was finishing the final edit of the film”—as if to suggest that this was how things usually went.

**BH:** In *No No Nooky T.V.* I was documenting an affair on my Amiga computer as I taught myself the paint program. With every new addition, phone call, kiss, I learned a new paint technique and applied it. Finally, when the affair ended, I began the relationship with the computer itself (“Amiga Loves Barbara, Barbara Loves Amiga”). The final triad or threeway was the grand finale of the film. I filmed off the computer screen in 16mm, then projected that film back onto the sides and back of the computer—they were thicker then! I felt like I had married the two technologies, digital and film, and I could be content with that image act as an ending.

**GY:** So how has the connection between films and relationships changed for you since those early works?

**BH:** In 1988 I grew tired of my addiction, felt it had become an old pattern, wanted something new. A long and enduring relationship would be that new thing that I consciously wanted. Then I met Florrie Burke, the woman with whom I have shared my love, my thoughts, my health, energy and illness for the last twenty-three years. The solidity and commitment of this long relationship also figures into the films, their subject matter and form. I undertook the long format film, the essay documentary, which requires sustained research and time commitment. I have learned patience and discipline in this relationship and have applied it to my work. Art is energy still, but it is a slow-burning, nutrient-rich resource, not the quickly eaten candy bar with its sugar highs and lows.

**GY:** I love hearing about this connection between your long-term relationship with Florrie and your ambitious, long-format film projects. At the same time, it’s a maturation narrative that risks casting the short experimental films and brief love affairs of the 1970s and 1980s as immature and unsustainable in comparison to the more “adult” concerns and commitments that followed. I know though that I’m not alone among younger queer people (and I’m using “younger” pretty broadly here) to be inspired by your films from the 1970s for the ways their creative energies and formal inventions are clearly linked up with the sexual and affective experimentation of that era. One can sense this too in the films by younger artists (many of them included in the Tate retrospective) that pay homage to your early films. I’d hate to think of those inspiring qualities as unsustainable!

**BH:** I see what you mean. I do want to honor first and foremost my relationship with Florrie, but without wanting to take away AT ALL from the vitality, enthusiasm, and tremendous outpouring of energy of the 1970s that resulted in a large number of films. It was a great time full of optimism and change. Nothing could be better than these films being recognized again today for the energy and possibilities that they reflect. I don’t think of those qualities as not sustainable. I wouldn’t have worked so hard on the films if I thought that.

As for maturity, I grew as fast as I could but I did think that coming out at thirty meant a reliving of an adolescence, a dyke adolescence this time. If I had been caught by reflection, by musings, by too much research, I might not have made those thirteen films in the two and a half years I was in film school, where I was afforded free equipment, plenty of colleagues and friends, and a small $10,000 inheritance from my mother that allowed me to buy, develop, and make film prints. Mom came through again, but in a way she would never have imagined!

**GY:** So what for you is the value of that 1970s archive?

**BH:** Well, when I was in the middle of that period, when I was making films and working on them and living them day in and night out, I wasn’t thinking so much about the archive. Although, on one level I did think that I would make a lesbian film archive for the 20th and 21st centuries. I thought this because I could not find role models in films from the past and I saw a clear lack, an emptiness. I believed then and I do now that to grow queer culture we need a foundation, we need a starting place.

I guess the thing that bothers me though about this focus on the films of the 1970s and early 1980s is the disregard for the large body of work that falls outside this concern: the rigorous optically printed films of the 1980s and early 1990s, the intellectual montage of the essay documentaries of the early to mid-1990s, and the late layered film-poems of mortality in the 2000s. My life, my work, has been so multi-focused that there is a disregard for that complexity in a homogenous approach.**GY:** Point well taken. You’ve accomplished so much since the 1970s, including just in the last few years as you’ve successfully battled cancer, published your memoir, and been honored with a number of major career retrospectives. This is clearly a milestone moment for you. Is it also another turning point in your practice as a filmmaker and an artist? Are we about to witness another major shift in your work?

**BH:** Well, I don't know if it’s a major shift but I recently finished an ambitious five-screen interactive digital installation having to do with oil spills and how we are implicated in ecological disasters. I haven't had the time yet to introduce *Sea Change* or search for venues, but you can get a good idea of the project from my web site: www.barbarahammer.com/installations.

As for the rest of it, I am thrilled and satisfied with the exhibitions and publications, awards and honors during the last few years. It feels like coming home! This culmination of an artistic practice is what we all deserve.

Chris and I traveled to London for the “*Superdyke Meets Madame X* Meets *Falling In Love…with Chris and Greg*” event. After the screening, we joined Emily and Barbara onstage for a discussion. We talked about issues of medium specificity, the confusions of audience address that attend the presentation of intimate queer work, and the intricacies of performing oneself onscreen. Emily was particularly amused by a moment in *Superdyke Meets Madame X* when, after expressing her disappointment in the results of her and Max Almy’s effort to capture their romance on video, Barbara proposes that they bring a second Portapak into the mix the next day. It seems like a case of doubling the poison to cure the disease.

Barbara is a bit embarrassed by her performance in *Superdyke Meets Madame X*. This caught me by surprise because she is hardly a shy person. Moreover, nothing she does in the video is more extreme than what she does in a number of films from the same era, none of which seem to embarrass her today in the same way. In *Dyketactics*, which was made two years before *Superdyke Meets Madame X*, she makes love onscreen with Poe Asher, and in *Multiple Orgasm* (1976) she superimposes close-ups of herself masturbating with images of biomorphic cave and rock formations. But apparently these film performances were aestheticized and controlled, as well as, from a production standpoint, staged and “simulated,” in a way that the performance for video was not. Somehow the Portapak, and the footage it produced, made Barbara feel more exposed and vulnerable, both at the time of the shoot and now more than three decades later. I argue in my article in *Camera Obscura* that Barbara’s 16mm films of the 1970s were sites of lesbian magic, projects in which the ritualized performances of cultural feminism gained added strangeness and power as they passed through the artisanal and alchemical processes of filmmaking. By contrast, early analog video seems to have produced something quite different: no aesthetic(ized) transcendence but instead the voluble, closed circuit of “lesbian processing”—an endless conversation that lays bare, but leaves unsublimated, all of one’s needs, desires, and flaws. Perhaps Emily saw this same quality in *Falling in Love*.

Chris and I were able to remain in London through to the end of the retrospective a few days after our event. The final program was entitled “For Florrie.” It was a series of films selected by Barbara in honor of her partner of twenty-three years, Florrie Burke. I had met Barbara before, but it wasn’t until London that I had the pleasure of meeting Florrie. She is just as warm, smart, generous, and gregarious as Barbara is. And, most impressively, she even outdoes Barbara sartorially. Florrie sported edgier, punker outfits throughout the days I saw them together in London. Barbara has always dressed to impress—I have a picture over my desk of her in the silver-lamé jumpsuit she wore when touring her films in the late 1970s—so it’s no small feat to be able to stand out style-wise at her side. **[Silver or gold? I can’t remember, and I only have black-and-white pics of the outfit.]**

The “For Florrie” program provided another opportunity to think about Barbara’s relationship-based practice, and in particular about how that practice has developed since the 1970s. The screening began with *Dyketactics* and *Women I Love*, two of Barbara’s now-classic cultural-feminist films—perhaps selected as representatives of the “quickly-eaten-candy-bar” rush of her early days. *Still Point* (1989) and *Tender Fictions* (1995) followed, two films that she made after entering into her relationship with Florrie, who appears in both. I was quite moved by these two films, as well as by the event as a whole. I had never seen *Still Point* before, and though I had seen *Tender Fictions*, I saw it anew in the context of the event.

 The first spoken line of dialogue in *Still Point*, presented over a black screen before the opening credits, foretells the film’s theme and formal design: “and there is a transition / of how much we have.” It is a strange, fragmented formulation. Two different women speak the line yet they sound very alike. (I believe Barbara speaks the first half of the line and Florrie the second.) Throughout the film, the women speak calmly and quietly to each other. The intimate merging of their voices signifies, in retrospect, the basis of an enduring relationship, yet the words they share tell of the newness and uncertainty of what they are embarking on. “I mean, can two women live together? / I can do my work life / Uh, I really don’t like it! / Or domestic boredom? / It could be enough / A privilege to have this / And if I were home all of the time / Shared some of the wealth…” Again, it is hard to be sure which woman speaks which line, or, for that matter, what their original, unfragmented conversation was all about. But it seems that Barbara, in particular, is uneasy about entering into a long-term relationship, as well as with the newfound privilege of sharing an apartment in Manhattan with a partner who is a professional.

Around the soft-spoken couple at the center circulates all of the noisiness of late-twentieth-century urban life, presented in a modernist collage of voices and sounds clipped from mass media sources: weather reports, sports broadcasts, and the authoritative male commentary tracks of television documentaries. In its visual design, *Still Point* presents a series of sharply contrasting images of privilege and poverty. The screen is regularly broken up into two, three, and, most often, four sections, with imagery both juxtaposed and layered. Across its nine and a half minutes, the film wrestles with the contradiction of two white women finding domestic happiness together alongside scenes of racialized poverty and homelessness unfolding on the New York City streets just outside their window. At one point, the right side of the screen presents footage of Florrie hiking leisurely in the countryside, presumably during a vacation, while the left side shows a parallel composition of a black homeless man moving along a city street, searching through garbage cans for food to eat. At another point in the film, Barbara says, presumably during a conversation with Florrie, “but look at the trying circumstances of those who don’t have the same space.”

*Still Point* takes its title from “Burnt Norton,” the first poem of T.S. Eliot’s *The Four Quartets*: “At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh not fleshless; / Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is…” The film is Barbara’s first, sustained filmic exploration of the politics of long-term coupling, as well as of the injustices of a world in which financial security, home, and happiness are neither understood nor distributed as universal human rights. In the film, Barbara reckons with her ambivalence toward the couple form, as a feminist who came of age politically in the 1970s, as an artist with a particularly individualistic practice, and as a queer person who values a range of alternative relationship configurations. But, at the same time, she acknowledges and explores the potential of a long-term relationship to provide her with the sustenance and strength to grow as an artist and an activist.

Barbara gives Florrie a good deal of credit for the expansion of her practice and worldview in the late 1980s and since then. Florrie is an activist working to bring an end to human trafficking and modern-day slavery. She co-founded Freedom Network USA in 2001, and she regularly serves as a consultant on issues of trafficking to both governmental and non-governmental organizations. Not long after meeting Florrie in 198\_, Barbara began making feature-length experimental documentaries. The content of these films often ranges beyond the bounds of her own experience—historically, geographically, and experientially—in ways that were not evident in her earlier work. For example, *Out In South Africa* (1994) explores the experience of lesbians and gay men living in the townships in the immediate wake of Apartheid, and *Devotion: A Film About Ogawa Productions* (2000) investigates the history and interpersonal dynamics of the pioneering Japanese leftist documentary film collective. It is clear that Barbara found in her relationship with Florrie not a retreat from the noise and injustices of the world, but instead a place of centeredness and compassion from which to engage actively and effectively with them. As Eliot writes, “Except for the point, the still point, / There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.” **[Did I get the description of Florrie’s work in this paragraph right? Also, what year did you meet her, Barbara? And what work was she doing when you met her? The human trafficking work began in the late 1990s, no?]**

Like *Still Point*, *Tender Fictions* expresses ambivalence about long-term coupling, while also building a clearer case for the personal and political value of making a sustained commitment to one lover. Barbara made *Tender Fictions* six years after *Still Point* and well into her relationship with Florrie. It is her third long-form experimental documentary and the second in a trilogy of films that excavate and reimagine lost and marginalized queer histories. (The other two films of the “Invisible Histories” trilogy are *Nitrate Kisses* (1992) and *History Lessons* (2000).) Of all of Barbara’s films, *Tender Fictions* is the most explicitly autobiographical: in the course of one hour, it chronicles her life from childhood (when her mother tried to make a Hollywood star out of her in the mold of Shirley Temple) to the present (when she becomes domestic partners with Florrie in San Francisco in the early 1990s). Among other source materials, the film presents archival family photographs and home movies from Barbara’s childhood, as well as excerpts from her first experimental works in Super 8, made in the late 1960s and early 1970s when she was shedding her identity as a heterosexual wife and blossoming into both an avant-garde filmmaker and a lesbian Casanova. *Tender Fictions* also includes audio recollections, recorded at the time of the film’s making, by friends and lovers who reflect on aspects of Barbara’s life and personality. About three-quarters into the film, we hear a friend recall Barbara saying in the 1980s that she was tired of always moving from one lover to the next and that she was ready for a more serious commitment. And, at just that moment, along came Florrie—almost, the friend suggests, as if fated.

*Tender Fictions* draws heavily on feminist theory from the 1980s and 1990s, and in particular on theorists’ challenges to totalizing and falsely stable conceptions of self, identity, and autobiography. Among the writers whose work is cited in the film’s voiceover track are Marilyn Frye, Mab Segrest, Barbara Smith, and Trinh Minh-ha. The enigmatic phrase “I is a lesbian couple” surfaces more than once*,* sometimes spoken and sometimes printed in all capital letters on the screen. In an interview published in 1997, Barbara credited inspiration for the phrase to the theoretical work of scholars Leigh Gilmore and Biddy Martin on the subject of lesbian autobiography. Gilmore’s critical study of Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas,* a book in which one lover speaks in the autobiographical “I” of the other, seems to have been particularly inspiring. That said, in the first part of *Tender Fictions* Barbara seems less concerned with how the “I” plays and grows through coupling than with how it can get lost and suppressed. The beginning of the film is all about individuality, and more particularly about Barbara’s struggle to forge, and find precedents for, her identity as a woman artist, a lesbian artist, and, most specifically, a lesbian filmmaker. As the film progresses, this emphasis on individual identity is gradually lapped by other, more relational content. One thread of the film explores how the two members of a couple grow to mimic each other over time, for instance, through shared gestures and vocal intonations. Toward the very end of the film, in the portion devoted explicitly to her relationship with Florrie, we hear a friend muse that most lesbians aren’t butch or femme but instead something in the middle, pointing out as evidence that Barbara and Florrie are quite similar in their gender expressions. Stein doodled “Gertrice/Altrude” in the margin of one of her manuscripts, suggesting that even in the famed butch-femme relationship of yore, a happy blurring of identities sometimes occurred.

*Tender Fictions* then, particularly in its second half, makes the phrase “I is a Lesbian Couple” suggest the merging of lovers into one “I,” the way that two individuals become one as the halves of a couple slowly turn into each other. In other words, the phrase suggests *identity within difference*. Yet, at the same time, the film makes the phrase suggest *difference within identity*. For instance, at one point a citation from the work of Sue-Ellen Case is presented that explores the double vision and consciousness of the feminist subject, who is at once both interior to and exterior to heterosexual ideology. Elsewhere, the film incorporates work by poststructuralist gender theorists, Martin for instance, who explore the idea of the split self, when “I” has lost the illusion of autonomy and coherence and come to recognize itself as no longer one but multiple. As a filmmaker forged in the cultural-feminist milieu of the 1970s and now journeying in the postmodern terrain of the 1980s and 1990s, Barbara seems to want to have her cake and eat it too: “I is a Lesbian Couple” connotes both the violence of identity deconstruction and the blissful merging of two kindred spirits.

In its closing sequence, *Tender Fictions* presents another provocative phrase, printed on the screen in all capital letters: “BECOME A COUPLE / A DOUBLE SELF / AVOID ASSIMILATION.” Following as it does upon the multivalence of the earlier phrase, the meaning of this new injunction is likewise hard to determine.Should one “become a couple” in the sense of fracturing the illusion of a unified self, i.e., become a “double self” in order to avoid the pitfalls of egotism inculcated in bourgeois, capitalist society? Or, should one become a couple more literally, in the sense of finding and partnering with a soulmate like Florrie? But isn’t the latter different from the former? Isn’t the moment of coupling up and settling down precisely the moment when queer people need to be extra-vigilant about assimilation?

Contemporary queer discourse, at least what I’ve been reading, often presents the problem in this way. Queer culture has historically been a place where sex and relationships are not played straight, from the rejection of marriage by lesbian-feminists in the 1970s to the reclamation of promiscuity by AIDS activists in the late 1980s and 1990s. And over the last decade, as both mainstream gay activists and antigay activists on the religious Right have put same-sex marriage center stage, there is, for many queer people, a heightened anxiety that other relational forms will be relegated to the wings, or get cut from the playbill altogether. For this reason, contemporary queer writing, artmaking, and activism are often invested in countering the mainstream LGBT movement’s love affair with gay marriage as well as in calling attention to the many forms of queer relating (and non-relating) that are not afforded state protections and benefits. At the time of this writing in summer 2012, the New Museum in New York is hosting an exhibition and series of events around Carlos Motta’s “We Who Feel Differently” project, which “seeks to invigorate discussion around a queer ‘We’ that looks beyond tolerance or assimilation toward a concept of equality that provides for greater personal freedom.”Itis important that queer artists who are critical of the gay marriage agenda do this kind of work. We live in an age when mass-media coverage situates gay people within a couple/marriage framework to an extent that has never before been the case. This will have (and already has had) a profound impact on the way younger queer people envision the possibilities for how to live their lives, and this will in turn transform (already has transformed) queer culture. That said, there has also never been a time when a subset of queer people did not choose to pair up and form durable couples—sometimes monogamously, sometimes not—including many of our most brilliant and radical queer artists and activists.

A few months after the February screening event (and also in the course of working on this article), I attended the wedding-esque ceremony of two friends, curator Christina Linden and artist Allison Smith. I went with the desire to celebrate and share in their joy together, but also with deep ambivalence about gay marriage. I was ready, of course, to put aside my *general* critique in order to celebrate this *specific* relationship—a balancing act that I know a lot of queer people perform regularly, caught up as we all are in the situational irony of our big gay present. However, I was entirely unprepared for how profoundly the ceremony moved me.

At one point, the couple read a brief passage from Martha Nussbaum’s recent article, “A Right to Marry?,” in which the philosopher points out that there are three aspects to marriage: civil-rights, expressive, and religious. The ceremony, which was not presided over by a religious authority and which took place in California where same-sex marriage is not currently legal, was dedicated to the expressive aspect of marriage: a public expression of a couple’s love which the larger community then answers back with a public acknowledgement of that love. There were readings from the Book of Ruth and Anne Carson’s translation of Sappho, as well as a statement from the couple about their desire to recognize, and for the state to recognize, all unions and forms of kinship, not just couples who practice or emulate marriage. The tale of their romance was then shared. Aware and wary of queer critiques of marriage, Christina and Allison began their courtship by exchanging delicate rings made out of blades of grass and asking each other the question, “Will you engage with me in a conversation about what it would mean to be married?” In the months that followed, they asked each other the same question again and again, always exchanging new, fragile rings. And though they have since bought and exchanged more durable rings, at the ceremony they again plucked and tied blades of grass to each other’s finger, again asking and building a shared answer to the same question. In this way, the ceremony became one of “for/ever expanding engagement,” rather than of narrative culmination or closure.

The occasion did not mark the movement of two individuals out of public space into private space: the privatized, domestic space of the couple in retreat. Instead, it was an occasion for Christina and Allison to make their relationship more public than it ever had been, and thereby, also, to bring accountability to it. This accountability was felt in their exchange of individually tailored and not always reciprocally framed vows. Some of these vows even felt like they were meant not so much for other but for those of us who were assembled in the audience: the women made explicit pledges *not* to retreat from the world into domesticity, but instead to maintain their individual lives, identities, and relationships with other people. In their sum, the vows were honest and revealing, and they showed that the two women were not interchangeable pieces made or eager to fit into a cookie-cutter mold of the universal couple. It was incredible to hear them make it so clear that the relationship they’ve forged, though quite an accomplishment, is also a work in progress. Witnessing, one understood that relationships like theirs are hard to build and sustain, but that, like the making of long-format essay documentaries, they also have their rewards, and ultimately benefit more people than just the two women at their center.

*Still Point* and *Tender Fictions* function similarly. The films were and are occasions for Barbara to make public her relationship with Florrie, both for celebration and accountability. Together, the films show that she has been grappling with the political question of gay marriage for a long time, in both her life and her practice. And it’s worth mentioning here that she married Florrie in 2008, when same-sex marriages were briefly legal in California before the passing of Proposition 8. **[Is this correct? Did you then remarry in New York later?]** I still don’t fully understand what Barbara means when she says “I is a lesbian couple,” or how coupling can help a person avoid assimilation. But, as poetry, or as experimental prose incorporated into an experimental film, those seemingly paradoxical statements have done their job of provoking me to ask myself hard questions about the politics of queer relationships. Barbara’s two-decade-plus love affair with Florrie seems, as she says, to have deepened her artistic and political commitment to the world beyond herself. And, in that, I recognize some of what I have gained from my relationship with Chris.

At the end of the “For Florrie” screening, I asked Barbara a question from the audience about that cryptic statement at the end of *Tender Fictions.* Barbara acknowledged my question and the complexity of the issue, but then she laughingly said, “I could never be assimilated.” And the audience laughed with her, because we knew that it was true.