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Film In Conversation

BARBARA HAMMER with Alexandra Juhasz

DEC 17-JAN 18



Women I Love

Over tea and croissants at her Westbeth Studio, filmmaker and artist Barbara Hammer met feminist film scholar and filmmaker Dr. Alexandra Juhasz for a lively back and forth about Hammer's New York city-wide retrospective. Hammer's vast, fifty-plus year oeuvre of film, performance, and never-before-seen art and ephemera is currently on view at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art ("Barbara Hammer: Evidentiary Bodies," through January 28, 2018), and was recently on view at

Company Gallery (“Truant: Photographs, 1970 – 1979,” October 22 through November 26). Performances, readings, and film programs are being staged at participating venues (including Queer|Art|Film at the IFC on December 4, and a screening of *Sisters!* [1974] at the Metrograph on December 17). Barbara and Alex had engaged in another lively interview twenty years earlier as part of Dr. Juhasz’s 1998 documentary and book *Women of Vision: 18 Histories in Feminist Film and Video* (viewable for free at snagfilms.com). Their decades-long intergenerational conversation focuses on the changing, growing powers of female, queer, and feminist artists.

Alexandra Juhasz (Rail): Barbara, so much has happened and so much time has passed since we talked twenty years ago. But in another sense, here we are, the same two gals [*Both laugh.*] doing what we do, right?

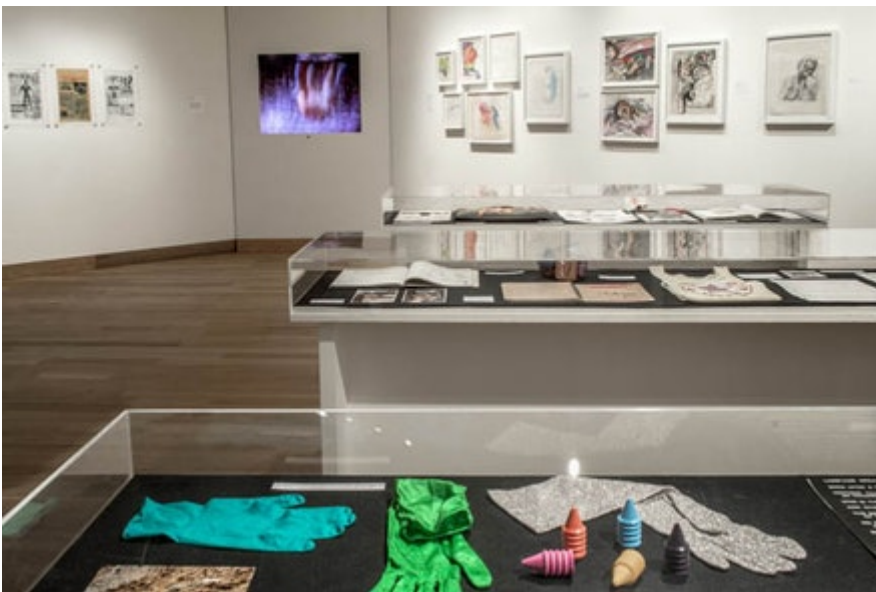
Hammer: Doing what we do. Finally getting recognized. When I re-watched my video interview with you, I was surprised that everything I said about my aesthetics back then is still my aesthetic: making moving images on the screen and bringing the perception of the audience to the screen through their own body and skin.

Rail: In *Sync Touch* (1981), you film an interaction with a film scholar ...

Hammer: Roswitha Mueller. She was the editor of [the journal] *Discourse*, and I wrote the script that she was performing.

Rail: She says, “The heart of film is the linking of touch and sight.” So, *you* say that in 1981, and you’ve continued to do that since.

Hammer: *What You Are Not Supposed to Look At* (2014) is a recent series of five collages built around images of my nude body taken at a veterinarian hospital in Edinburgh when I was there for a performance at the Fringe Festival. When I got home and looked at them, they were just too medicalized so I began to collage them with x-rays that I found on the street. I had been living with cancer for twelve years, and a lot of my work has been about mortality. It’s a subject I feel we’re afraid to talk about, much as we used to be afraid to talk about the female body and menstruation and lesbian lovemaking. I wanted the viewer to recognize that they too, at some point, are going to be involved with or have a decaying body. And so the mylar around the collages reflects the viewer and brings them into the frame. Sometimes when I talk about death and dying, people call it morbid. But they only call it morbid because it’s an invisible subject, an elephant in the room. Unless the person with illness brings it up, or you’re a close friend, it’s not talked about, and so often not depicted in artwork. So I consider that to be a continuation of touch because you have the density of a collage, you have the pinkness of the skin—just because I happen to be white—behind the x-rays. And when I look at them I feel my body come alive. There’s a continuity with that and stroking the screen with a 16mm camera while two women make love in *Dyketactics* (1974).



Evidentiary Bodies (installation view). Photo by Riya Lerner.

Rail: This reminds me of the video installation *8 in 8* (1994, two channel installation) from 1999 where the continuity is materialized between touching and then seeing. The viewer touches a breast model looking for lumps and by doing so activates eight video interviews with women who are breast cancer survivors.

Hammer: Three out of eight women get breast cancer. And in '94 I assumed I would be getting it. I had no idea I'd actually get ovarian cancer. I wanted to make a piece where women—and men—had to touch a breast to turn on the television set. In the meantime they would also get practice for a self-exam.

Rail: So much of your work has been about making visible the places in culture where there are taboos or fears. Which taboos and fears have stayed consistent in your work, and where have you seen traction *because* of your work and that of movements for social change that you connect to with your work?

Hammer: We can start with *Menses* (1974) and my own hysteria and panic around menstruating, because nobody had taught me what it was, and suddenly I was bleeding in the toilet. And menopause—that is still a subject that is not dealt with—and I did write a script called *Nothing Can Be Worse Than Two Dykes In Menopause* (1985). [Laughter.]

Rail: Please note that the interviewer is nodding, nodding, nodding.

Hammer: Please note she might also be having a hot flash.

Rail: [Laughing.] She'll raise her hand when she is to make sure you know.

Hammer: When I made *Superdyke* (1975) and *Women I Love* (1976), images of radical lesbians were unseen. Now there are a lot of punk lesbians making work that is raunchy and wild and sexual, and trans work is on the cutting edge of what is permissible to see. And yet we still haven't seen a white male talk about wet dreams.

Rail: Your work has been part of a larger queer cultural conversation that has allowed for traction around sexuality and sexual identity, but it seems from our conversation so far that perhaps less traction has occurred around health. Do you want to reflect upon some of your work about women's bodies, illness, and biology?

Hammer: *A Horse Is Not a Metaphor* (2008) traces my experiences of going through chemotherapy, which is quite a drastic experience of the body because you're poisoning it. I really wanted to enable people to feel from inside me experiencing cancer and chemotherapy and to communicate who I am emotionally through that, like Maya Deren did. *Mesher of the Afternoon* (1945) was the first time I saw a women's cinema, a woman putting her body on the screen. But not just her body—it was from the inside out, and she used imagination, imaginative play, symbols. That was always a keystone film—it was the only film by a woman that I saw in my film history class.

Rail: That's a change from twenty years ago when we last spoke—that a young woman entering the world is not denied women's expression of women's experience. There's work to see, and she can find it. Today your work enters a much larger field of production that you in fact initiated and inspired and were a catalyst for.

Hammer: There's something that sticks in my mind, an Instagram post by a talented artist Emily Roysdon, who writes, "Why are all these old women getting their retrospectives now?" Judith Bernstein, Carolee Schneemann, and myself, Carmen Herrera at the Whitney. Why now? And she supposes that it's because we are post-menopausal and a non-threat to the powers-that-be, which are patriarchal. No longer as we were, as young, energetic, sexy...

Rail: You're still energetic and sexy, Barbara. You're *not* a threat?!

Hammer: Why does everything come through for women late in life? I'm seventy-nine. It's not going to further my career. What if I had been recognized for some of the drawings, writings, paintings, collages, earlier? How might that have broadened my work?

Rail: In *Women of Vision*, Carolee is pretty bitter. She mentions that by that time in her life all of her peers—the men of her generation, of her movement—had already had retrospectives, and she still hadn't. Retrospectives allow for more attention, more support, and thus more work. And when I interviewed you then, you said, "I need to grow into owning what I'm owed: respect, a place in history, a chance to tell my history, support to publish my autobiography, and to go into those journals."

Hammer: Oh my...

Rail: Yes, look at that.

Hammer: That has all been accomplished! Every bit of it in twenty years. That is amazing. I feel very gratified. So, I don't mean to say that I'm not happy to have a retrospective that shows more than my moving image work. But I don't know ...

Rail: We must hope that your acclaim today produces a new condition where a woman artist in the future will get this kind of deserved support when she actually earns it.

Hammer: In her thirties, in her forties, in her fifties.

Rail: There's another approach to Emily's thought puzzle. I think in some ways older women are the biggest threat.

Hammer: Yes, we can say anything we want to say...

Rail: And we're at the height of our power. Don't you feel like you're at the height of your power?

Hammer: Yes, and I don't have to play nicey-nice; I don't have to go by social rules. I can wear anything I want, say anything I want, charm or be disagreeable according to my mood.

Rail: I'm menopausal, and I feel like that's a growing into power, not a diminishment of power. How do you feel in your phase of life?

Hammer: Well, I feel very respected. And I feel many women—and men too—tell me how inspirational I am.

Rail: We feed off of inspiring older people.

Hammer: They're looking for role models and here's a living one. She's not in a book. You don't have to go to an index. She's walking around. You might even see her at an opening. Send me your URL!

Rail: You said something similar twenty years ago: how hungry you were to engage in intergenerational dialogue and how it fed you. You were and are a hungry artist.

Hammer: I like to know what's happening and what's new. I think it's young folks that are uncovering a new vocabulary, a new language.

Rail: But if we imagine a pairing of your power with youth's imagination, that's truly spectacular. You do that in several of your films.

Hammer: You could go back to *Moon Goddess* (1976) with Gloria Churchman who was eleven years my senior and how we followed our spirit and ideas and creativity when we were in Death Valley to make that film. And of course Joey Carducci who I met at a lab here in New York. Joey was Gina Carducci at the time and running a huge machine there. I was so impressed by this lesbian in a lab coat running machines. I suggested we make a film together. There were thirty years or more in between us. And then after we made *Generations* together in 2009, to have Joey transition was also a wonderful new experience for me. So, like trans peoples' emphasis on pronouns today, maybe we old folks need to think up our own pronouns: around age or class or all the different kinds of relationships we might have including for twenty-nine years, mine with the woman behind the woman, Florrie Burke.

Rail: Florrie shows up in your work (*Still Point*, which considers "how a middle-class lesbian couple can be a part of public space," from 1989 was screened with four of the older films at the New York Film Festival as part of the retrospective) and also in many places in the exhibit.

Hammer: Yes, in the vitrines.

Rail: What was it like for you to show your film work in an art context, where your collage, your performance, your photography, and the vitrines could put them into a different context than can take place in a theater?

Hammer: This is actually an intergenerational answer, too. *I didn't think it through. I chose the curators who made these choices: two young women, Staci Bu Shea and Carmel Curtis.*

Rail: Their work—making transfers, choosing screenings, curating the retrospective, and the show of photographs curated by Andrew Durbin—create a deep context in which your large body of work over fifty years can be understood. That is another gift older artists who are properly supported can give to younger artists: proving that work doesn't happen in a vacuum.

Hammer: It's community-based.

Rail: That's one of your unique gifts as a human being and an artist: the energy that you have, regardless of your age. Your art is about enlivening yourself, always knowing that you will also be engaging with an audience, a community, a back and forth of energy.

Hammer: I remember when I was working on *Psychosynthesis*, a 1975 film that's just been restored by the Academy of Motion Pictures, and I'm turning the rewind through 16 mm film saying, "Art is energy art is energy art is energy." Of course I feel it even more now that I have less energy, dealing with illness which takes some of my energy and with age since I need to rest in between things. But it's still there, my energy. Here we are, as I knew we would be in this conversation where the spark is lit. And we're going back and forth.

Rail: I wonder what has changed across this back and forth over time. For instance, in the interview that I did with you years ago now, you said to me, "There's often danger involved in my films. I like to

take risks because I feel that it's part of lesbian filmmaking. Being a lesbian was risk-taking, at least when I came out." Is it still risk-taking for you to be a lesbian and a lesbian filmmaker?

Hammer: Um, no, it's not.

Rail: Isn't that exciting?

Hammer: Yeah, it is, to see the change in my lifetime. I'm so happy.

Rail: Congratulations! To us all!

Hammer: The biggest risk I'm taking right now is with health.

Rail: That's the same courage you had to be an out lesbian representing your experiences before it was allowed or seen, and also the courage you had as a woman artist. But you also have your needs. Twenty years ago I asked you what you wish for, and you said, "I hope that before I die, I can start a Barbara Hammer Fund for lesbian filmmakers who use experimental form in their work and do not replicate the status quo." [*Hammer laughs.*] You laugh because...

Hammer: Because I did it! I can't believe I said that twenty years ago!

Rail: Then, "I would love to have a larger budget. I would love to share the load. I have to do everything myself."

Hammer: The Wexner Center [for the Arts at Ohio State University] is sending me an editor next week to help me finish my first three-screen film.

Rail: Hoorah! "I wish for health. As you age and see more and more friends with AIDS, breast cancer, chronic fatigue syndrome, arthritis, I wish for health because that will give me the energy to continue."

Hammer: I have been blessed with twelve years of living with cancer.

Rail: Twenty years ago I asked you what is your place in feminist film history, and you were around fifty-five, and you said, "I hope that work will be seen as a progression of sophistication and development as it traces one lesbian's life in the second half of the twentieth century. This is a space now filled, where before there was a lack, a void. Now I have sisters and brothers around me in queer cinema. I want to keep working with my eyes open, learning from others, going to see new work, trying to do the best I can to develop further my visual language." What have you done since then to further your visual language?

Hammer: My retrospective brings in all the different branches of my work, from performance to photography to installations to journal keeping to writing, and of course to 16mm film, super 8 film, digital film and video. That's the language: a diverse one that can move in any direction according to the idea or emotional motivation. I think many youth currently in art school are brought up with that language. They don't define themselves as filmmakers as we were taught to do. So maybe we've arrived at the place where a young artist in art school begins from a place where everything is available.

Rail: Because of your work and courage young artists can now come into their voices with a permission to cross in lots of places. The complexity of their gendered sexual raced class healthed position is part of what they get to play with, and you really did give us a vocabulary and permission to do that, as well as to move across media.

Hammer: Thank you, Alex, for your appreciation and for seeing me after twenty years.

CONTRIBUTOR

Alexandra Juhasz

ALEXANDRA JUHASZ is the Chair of the Film Department at Brooklyn College. She makes, teaches, and writes about activist media, including *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001) and the documentary *Women of Vision: 18 Histories in Feminist Film and Video* (1998, 83 mins)

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By Jesse Cumming

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