

Another Gaze

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“Deconstruct, Reconstruct, Challenge, Celebrate”: In Conversation With Barbara Hammer

Another Gaze: Do you remember a moment when you decided to start making films?

Barbara Hammer: I was studying painting at the time and it felt so static to me. My teacher came to me and said, “I think you’re more interested in movement than you are in putting paint on canvas”. And

he brought into class a 16mm projector and clear leader 16mm film and told me that I could paint on it, do whatever I wanted. And so I started painting on the film itself and projecting the film onto the canvas. I loved it, but I wanted even more. So I started painting with black light: a fluorescent light that brings out fluorescent paint on canvas. I would paint on canvas with fluorescent light and would turn off the lights in the room, turn them on, turn on the black light, turn it off again, and from this I got all kinds of movement and colours on my painting.

AG: And do you remember your first encounter with a camera?

BH: Somebody gave me a Super 8, or probably an 8mm camera – I don't know – and I started filming my shadows in the countryside and began making early psychodramas about myself as a woman in a man's world. My first film was called *Schizy* and was about learning how to see double. What was the reality I saw? And what was expected of me? And how did other people see me. So, schizophrenic. This was a fabulous film. In my pockets I had bifocal lenses that I'd picked up from the optometrist and so I shot through them, giving me two different ways of seeing the world. It won an honourable mention in a festival, and that was all I needed. It felt like more of me was in the film than in anything I'd painted. So I became a filmmaker. I'm really a visual artist, because I've continued to paint, to do installations and performance throughout my artistic career.



Schizy (1968)

AG: In what way was the practice of filmmaking an escape for you? I read that you left your marriage, not to become a filmmaker, but that it was instrumental?

BH: Yes. I married a very exciting man, a working class man with whom I went around the world on a motor scooter. We saw Afghanistan and Iraq on my Lambretta and everything was wonderful but when we came back suddenly I was a wife serving coffee. Meanwhile, the men were having interesting conversations. Women didn't know how to bond at that time. I was fed up with it. I left my marriage and decided to go to film school. In film school, at the same time, I was coming out as a lesbian. So my early work was about lesbian representation. It was really about the way I was feeling and I hoped that it would relate to a general lesbian audience in particular. So *Dyketactics* (1974) was the first, as far as we know, lesbian lovemaking film and I made it because touching a woman's body similar to my own increased my sense of touch in a way that I hadn't

experienced as a heterosexual. So I began to put touch on the screen, connecting eyes, sight, perception and physical touch.

AG: Can you talk more about this relationship to touch? Was it grounded in any sort of theory?

BH: Well, I started trying to study the sense of touch and found that really it wasn't scientifically studied. I only found one book by Ashley Montagu on touching and as I read it, it confirmed my experience. In the brain, the largest area connected to the senses is the area of touch. We know space through movement, through moving. The amount of nerve endings in our opposable thumbs is almost equal to the clitoris. These are our areas of knowing the world, and they are connected directly to sight. Why? Because, as infants we do not focus until two months, but we touch immediately. We have to find our mother's breast. So our sense of touch is more highly developed upon birth than any of the other senses that we have. I think this is extraordinarily important and is still neglected. I hope that when people see my cinema they feel their bodies and they find the connection.

AG: *Dyketactics* was one of the first films to depict lesbian sex – what was it like showing it for the first time, in the context of the '70s?

BH: I was so nervous when *Dyketactics*, which has two minutes of lesbian lovemaking in it, was shown during film finals. I'm there, a late bloomer, thirty years old, the professors are all there and they're all men. I'm the only woman in the film production class and my film goes on the screen. I'm standing at the back of the auditorium. Then at the end of the screening, it seemed like all the professors started running up the aisles towards me. I thought: Uh oh, here it comes. But they all came to congratulate me: they loved the film. After that, I made a whole series of films, thirteen films in two and a half years. None of

them for classes. They were all for my own personal expression. *Menses, Psychosynthesis, X, Superdyke*. Anything I could think of I could make because the equipment was there, film wasn't that expensive at the time and I was living in a basement without a kitchen, without even a toilet, to save money.

AG: Did the discovery of your sexuality fuel your relationship to feminist movements or did you already have some involvement?

BH: I became a feminist when I was married, and I heard a radio production, and it was a critique of the Miss America contest and as soon as I heard it I became a feminist. Then I remember my husband came home with a male friend of ours and they got out of the pickup truck, we were living in the woods, and I said "I'm a feminist". I had two reactions by two men. My male friend and neighbour said, "Great, Barbara" and my husband was so upset he scowled. He didn't know what this meant to him I guess, I don't know. He didn't take it well. That was the first awakening for me, and this was before I was a lesbian. The feminist – I would call it the lesbian movement – in San Francisco was very strong. When I came out there were women flirting with me everywhere. It was a wonderful time for bed hopping, there's no getting around it. I was prolific in work and in sex. Actually, the sexuality and the relationships fuelled my energy for my films because many of the representations of women were of lovers or friends, or lovers who became friends and I began to study lesbian relationships and what it was because it was so different from my experience with men. In *Double Strength* (1978), where Terry Sendgraff and I perform on trapezes, I explore the four stages of lesbian relationship. The falling in love which means losing yourself, where you're totally focused on the other person, projecting on her what you think she

should be. That lasts for three months, so I had a lot of three-month relationships because it's very addictive. Then there is the 'coming to know' stage – seeing the person for who she is. Number three is accepting that this is a real person, another personality, another perception of the world that is not your own. Are you going to accept that? Or not? Four is continuation or break-up. So that's all couched within the film *Double Strength*.



Double Strength (1978)

AG: In terms of *Dyketactics*, there were some feminist criticisms about essentialism. Did its reception change your perception of the film at the time?

BH: When *Dyketactics* and other films that I made of women in nature in California came out some critics called my films essentialist. I didn't even know what that meant at the time. When I read that it meant that I was portraying women as if they were only natural subjects, in other words, only biological, not culturally produced, I was shocked because I never thought of it that way. I came out as a lesbian; there was a whole group of women coming out as lesbians. There was a cultural construction of lesbians going on in 1970 and even earlier than that. How to dress and how to act. You know, you don't come out in

isolation. I think I was most interested in the performance of the body. The performance of women being active subjects on the screen where they could not be watched voyeuristically, because they were so active.

You know, this was a critique that was easy to make. I don't think I had the language to confront it at the time, but I do now. Still I think the films were enjoyed and they made for great feelings of emotional participation in the audiences. Often celebrations or dances were held after maybe an hour program of my short films from the '70s and I think that was a wonderful community contribution that the films made.



Generations (2011)

AG: In terms of working with other women and non-binary people, you've made the film *Generations*. I was interested in that because it's about bringing other women into filmmaking. So, can you talk a little bit about that?

BH: I've always been interested in community involvement but a lot of my work has been solitary, expressing my own aesthetic. When I was in a film lab in New York City I met a woman who has now transitioned,

whose name is Joey Davids. At the time, he identified as lesbian and we made a film called *Generations* on 16mm. We shot on Coney Island because it was falling down and in need of repair, just like my body did. Joey was fascinated with film emulsion and would develop it himself, cross processing it. It would get scratches on it just like the brown spots on the face of an ageing person. And we highlighted age in the film. I would circle my brown spots and my wrinkles, I would look at him and celebrate his multiple piercings, his Mohawk, and we separated to make the edit because I thought then, that if I'm mentoring somebody, they need to go their own way and make their film. We agreed that we would edit 40/30 minutes each, using the same sound and footage banks. We came back after six months and looked at our film footage. Joey's was very abstract, celebrating film itself. Mine was full of relationships. And so we started the film with his and we wedded the footage in the middle and put the relationship in, and that became *Generations*. We are so honoured to have won a Best Short Film at the Berlin Film Festival.

AG: You've also worked on projects in relation to women who are now dead. Can we talk about Maya Deren's influence and the work you've done on her?

BH: When I was a film student at San Francisco State University, I mentioned I was the only woman in the film production class. In one film history class we were introduced to a film that I knew nothing about. I mean, we talked about Fellini and other filmmakers, but we never saw a woman director at all until half way through this particular class when finally a very short film came on the screen made by a woman. It was called *Meshes of the Afternoon*. It was by Maya Deren. This film changed my life, in the sense that it confirmed that I

should make films because the screen had been so blank in terms of representation of women. I graduated with my masters in film in '75 – so I'm talking '74/'73, when I took this sort of introductory class and there was no representation. Not even one two-minute film made by a lesbian director who was out and depicting lesbians on the screen. So I was very convinced that I should do this work: I thought I should do it for the lesbians of the 21st century. That there should be a cultural foundation that we build on. I feel honoured that I was able to take that place and see it, and continue with my work. Maya Deren's work is also important to me because she put herself in the films. The films were about her personal expression. The way she dreams, her intellectual process, her theory, her dynamism, her vitality, her creative ambition. She continued, often without money – as my film *Maya Deren's Sink* (2011) reveals – and made a foundation for women in experimental film that still exists today. Maya Deren is our mother.



Maya Deren's Sink (2011)

AG: We're surrounded by boxes which contain part of your archive.

Did your illness spark this preparation for a time when you might not be here or have you always been archiving in such an organised way?

BH: I have this archive here, my paper archive. I've had it since the '60s. I started keeping track of my work because I believed in myself.

It had nothing to do with illness. My mother thought I was wonderful. I wanted to be president of the United States when I was a little girl. I think every artist who makes work wants to be known for who they are and that this cannot be expressed in any other way except through their work. That's the reason I've kept an archive because the archive shows the process: it shows the response of the communities, it shows the censorship that I've experienced and the celebration – it's a legacy. If there was no cultural history or foundation for queer filmmakers in the past when I was looking for it, then I want this, as well as others, to be there for those who want to research now and build upon that work, critique it, take it apart, reconstruct it, deconstruct it, challenge it, celebrate it. Hey, it's yours!

AG: What advice would you give to young aspiring, particularly women and lesbian, filmmakers?

BH: In the very last chapter of my book *HAMMER!: Making Movies Out of Sex and Life*, I write about the creative process, how things are in the beginning, the middle, towards the end, and the end. In the beginning you need intuition, personal trust, no internal critic, spontaneity and flow. In the middle – anything goes, risk, chaos. Towards the end it's essential to know everything you've gathered, to have discipline and care, allow multiple points of view. And then the ending is polishing and perfecting, trimming and tightening, keeping or rejecting the glitches in your own visual language, and then communicating, respecting others, letting go and receiving feedback. Process without content is empty, so you must begin again.

