

Remembering Barbara Hammer: Artists Discuss Her Legacy, Generosity, and Work

April 18, 2019



Barbara Hammer, who forever changed avant-garde filmmaking by exploring lesbian identity and sexuality through experimental cinematic techniques, passed away in March 2019 due to cancer. Her artistic practice provided an unflinching look at issues like aging, illness, death, as well as sexuality. Hammer became an early member of the Creative Capital community when she received a Creative Capital Award in 2000 to develop her film *Resisting Paradise*. As a one of the first awardees, Hammer played a crucial role in developing how Creative Capital helps artists with the professional side of their careers.

Hammer touched many other artists' lives and practices through her positive energy, her unwavering attitude to make challenging work, and her commitment to acting as a mentor to others—she was constantly engaging with new and young artists in all fields.

Barbara embodied everything Creative Capital aspires to be," said Suzy Delvalle, "radically generous, collaborative, open, nurturing, committed to a unique vision, and consistently an inspiration to be around and a joy to work with. Her spirit will live on not just in her work and legacy, but hopefully in the work that Creative Capital does with new generations of artists."

In the last few years Barbara became an outspoken advocate for dying with dignity, even performing several spoken meditations on *The Art of Dying*. She used her own life and work as a creative force till the very end, demonstrating that the art of death and the art of life are connected.

We talked to several artists who interacted with Hammer through Creative Capital and elsewhere in the art world—all of them recalled how much joy she exuded, even to her last days.

Cauleen Smith

Barbara was a great advocate for artists. She believed that they should be looking after their own interests. That was what she taught me as my mentor. She encouraged me to set up my work around the kind of life I wanted to live.

She was a generous, funny, and smart person. It was just such a huge honor someone who had so much experience and wisdom and lived a full and creative product life giving me advice when I needed it. She supported me in so many different ways.

She did everything she could to help me, and she really did help me progress in my career.”

I hit the lottery when I was told by Creative Capital that Barbara Hammer was going to be my assigned mentor. I couldn't believe my luck. I had respected her for so long through her work, but I had never met her. We just hit it off right away. She was very focused, friendly, and warm.

I really treasured the time that I got to spend with her. She was really dogged and committed about making sure we checked in and talked. She did everything she could to help me, and she really did help me progress in my career.

She taught me to respect her own time, and to be very clear with people about how much time you have and what your time means for you. She was very clear about the different ways women versus men are treated in this field. With that aside, she encouraged me to be focused on what I wanted to get out of the work I was trying to make.

Laura Parnes

I think the word “mentor” is an accurate word. She was very open with younger artists, and really generous. She was always looking at other people's work and really investigating it intellectually, which I think is unusual. There are a lot of artists that are only concerned with their own work—Barbara was really open. She was an incredibly positive force and she was also a really supportive friend.

The work she did at the end was possibly one of the biggest contributions that she made. There are relationships you can make between like, Hannah Wilke, or other artists that have made work about the process of dying, but the performance lectures Barbara did at the Whitney and ICP about death and illness, are truly unique. Who else would have the energy to do that while being so sick? Only Barbara! Her energy was so remarkable.

She really challenged us to tackle really difficult content—life and death issues—even if it meant making our films more difficult or harder to show.”

To make the work she was making earlier in her career, it was already difficult to be a woman filmmaker. Then, to embrace expressing queerness, being a lesbian, and making that your content—she was totally uncompromising. She stayed true to her vision. In the end she was lauded, but there were many years where she was overlooked, yet she was never bitter, and that was very encouraging. With her uncompromising work, and fierce attitude, I and many other artists saw her as a role model.

She really challenged us to tackle really difficult content—life and death issues—even if it meant making our films more difficult or harder to show. She was such an enthusiastic presence. She

really did embrace life, but she also taught us how to die. An invaluable lesson.

Elisabeth Subrin

I first met Barbara through her work, initially as an art student, then as a professor who taught her films in film and video art classes. My first immersive experience with Barbara was when we were both among the first rounds of Creative Capital Awardees, maybe 17 or 18 years ago. She was always so supportive of me. And when she started making experimental biographically-based documentaries, we had even more to talk about it as my work deals with that as well. So we also had a connection through our shared interests in hidden histories of marginalized women.

On a more personal level, I found Barbara an incredibly kind, supportive, and open fellow artist in the trenches of queer, feminist, experimental filmmaking. We were allies in a marginalized part of the art/film world. That's part of what's so beautiful about the grant that Barbara and Florrie put together. There are very few grants that support women filmmakers exclusively, and there are very few grants that support experimental filmmakers. And I don't think there exists in the US a grant that supports experimental women filmmakers who specifically identify as lesbian. It's not just financial support, but recognition and affirmation.

Barbara nurtured to the very end of her life a passion for living, a deep curiosity about ideas, a constant interest in her fellow filmmakers work, and a commitment to living a life of creativity and intense inquiry.”

In the last year of Barbara's life, I got to know her more closely because we brought her to Temple University in May, 2018 to honor her with a lifetime achievement award in the Film and Media Arts Program where I teach. When we told her that we had voted to give her the award, we were unsure if she would even be able to come because of health issues. A few weeks before it, she called and said she wanted to come. It was a really profound day for all of us.

We presented a screening of her work, and then she spoke to a packed theater of faculty, students and staff, and I moderated a Q&A with her. It was the first time that she talked about death publicly. That became the seed that created her lecture, *The Art of Dying*, that she performed at other venues over the past year. The event was staggering because not only did the work inspire us so much, but she talked in depth about her life, her work, her illness, her death, and even took the mic into the audience and asked students about their life experiences. It brought the audience to tears; students were unbelievably moved. One student came up to her afterwards and said, "I don't believe in God, but I feel like I just went to church." Barbara was so open, and unbelievably energetic and passionate about making art, despite her health challenges.

What is still so powerful to me is that Barbara nurtured to the very end of her life a passion for living, a deep curiosity about ideas, a constant interest in her fellow filmmakers' work, and a commitment to living a life of creativity and intense inquiry. Even death was of great interest to her. She exuded that passion with intensity, generosity and playfulness. I was prepared for her death, but nevertheless it is devastating to think about her not being in the world anymore. We're lucky because we have her films, her art, her writing, and we have Florrie.

Chris Doyle

One of the reasons the first Creative Capital Artist Retreat is so important to me is because that was where I met Barbara. The Retreat was at Skowhegan, and it's always an intense bonding experience, but as the first one, it felt really important.

My experience with Barbara changed as I got to know her. We were pulled into the same universe when we were asked to help develop Creative Capital's professional development curriculum, and we started seeing each other a lot. I remember her from the very beginning being so radically open, transparent, and incredibly generous. She was the ultimate open-source human. She wanted to share any information she had with other artists. There was no compartmentalizing.

Whatever she could do to make life easier for other artists, she was always doing.”

I remember her seeing my Creative Capital Project, *Leap*, and I didn't get much of a reaction from her. I just felt like I had disappointed her in some way. Later, I was able to understand what that was about: she was someone who had so much vitality, and it always felt like she would be disappointed if other people's work didn't have that crazy vitality that she had. I would later go on to show her other work, and she would be so effusive, and would say, "Yes, this is what I'm looking for from you!" In the end, I always felt like I never wanted to make work that disappointed Barbara. I thought that was the bar for whether my work had a great life force or not.

She got a Guggenheim in 2013, and I did the next year. It's a very mysterious process once they inform you. You have to tell them how much money you want. So, there's a lot of opacity around the whole process. She was the person who I went to and asked what I should do. She was totally transparent and open with me. She told me exactly what I should do and what I should ask for.

It's the type of stuff that artists can be tight about, but she was never that person. Whatever she could do to make life easier for other artists, she was always doing.

That combination of radical openness and rigorous expectations in terms of things being thrilling for her was my total experience of her. I felt really lucky to have had so many wonderful experiences and encounters with her over the years. It didn't surprise me in the least when the *New Yorker* published that article about her fighting for her right to die with dignity, in the way that she wanted to because that was an extension of every part of who she was. I will miss her terribly, but at the same time, thinking of her always brings on a surge of joy.

Akosua Adoma Owusu

In 2015 to mark Chantal Ackerman's passing, *Indiewire* released a list of six avant-garde female filmmakers who redefined cinema. They happened to put my name on this list next to Barbara Hammer. She's such a cinematic pioneer. Her film, *Nitrate Kisses*, was this radical film that introduced me to queer love. I was shooting a film on Super-8 called *Reluctantly Queer* centered on my friend Kwame's narrative of being a self-identified gay man and what it's like to be black and gay in America. Using Barbara Hammer's *Nitrate Kisses* as a source for inspiration, my film ended up being in line with these radical representations of queer bodies.

She's such a cinematic pioneer. Her film, *Nitrate Kisses*, was this radical film that introduced me to queer love.”

She traveled to Africa before she came out as gay. Her travels on the continent of Africa partly inspired her to become a filmmaker. Like her, I'm also navigating these multiple worlds, making film in Ghana and the States. That's where I felt this strong connection to her as a pioneering filmmaker of the avant-garde and queer cinema.

Following her journey, navigating these multiple worlds, and showing how identities weren't fixed was one of the things that inspired me to continue my work exploring triple consciousness. Her work on feminism and being a lesbian filmmaker of the avant-garde inspired me to tell stories that are personal to me, and through experimental techniques, I hope to connect to people in ways Barbara's did.

I never met Barbara in person, but we followed each other on Instagram after we were associated together in that *Indiewire* article, and since then, our work is often screened together. It was truly an honor to be associated with her in that way.

Deborah Stratman

I knew of Barbara's work, and had met her, but I didn't know her well. We respected each other's work across a distance. So, it was a shock when she contacted me with this proposal to collaborate on some of her unused film footage that she shot during a motorcycle trip to Guatemala in 1975. At that point she was sick enough that she knew she was unable to complete these works that she received commission funds from the Walker Art Center to do.

Barbara was radical to the end.”

A lot of things stood out about Barbara. In terms of this project in particular, I loved the generosity and risk and trust behind her decision to re-grant the money to myself and a few other artists. She asked us to do the work she'd initially wanted to do herself—the work of return, re-contextualization, reinvention. That move was rooted in the collective spirit that so much of her work embraces. It was a radical decision. Barbara was radical to the end. How great to be open to that kind of exchange, letting your idea and work be handled, and potentially totally messed up. She was energized to think how the film might become something completely outside her original vision.

She had an edit already, but she wasn't wedded to that. I didn't want to take on the project if it was just me executing her decisions. I was more into a collaboration where she was the cinematographer and I was the editor, and we could go back and forth to finalize it. I worked really quickly though, because I wanted her to be able to see it before she passed, and luckily she did.

Abrons Arts Center hosts an open [celebration of the life of Barbara Hammer Sunday, April 21.](#)

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