

# BARBARA HAMMER (1939–2019)

© Barbara Hammer

by: Ingrid Ryberg, May 15, 2019

‘A lesbian film artist births herself. There are no examples of lesbian filmmakers who identify themselves publicly as lesbians in the past. The absence of visual mothers for the moving-image maker presents a particular vacuum and accounts for some of the aesthetics of a lesbian filmmaker today’ (Hammer 1981).

As she wrote this in 1981, Barbara Hammer was looking back at a decade of groundbreaking filmmaking capturing lesbian life and sex in the Californian hippie art world. For Hammer, exploring her lesbian identity and sexuality after leaving her marriage and coming out at the age of 30 was intertwined with exploring the film medium and her identity as an artist. Intimate short 16mm films such as *Dyketactics* (1974), *Women I Love* (1976) and *Double Strength* (1978) testify to the spirituality and euphoria of Hammer’s new lifestyle, relationships and community. Her experimental and utopian filmmaking, in search of aesthetics of its own, pivotally changed the moving image landscape of the time. By 1981, Hammer had altered the very premise she describes in the quote above. Ever since, and still after she has now sadly left this life, she remains a visual mother, role model and inspiration for lesbian, queer and experimental artists.

The notion of the lesbian film artist who by birthing herself begins to fill a void is a powerful image. It reflects the visceral and ritual aspects of Hammer’s aesthetics—how new worlds materialise through women’s bodily self-exploration in *Menses* (1974) and *Multiple Orgasm* (1976)—as well as the sincere ambition, determination and self-reflexivity of her artistic project. Insisting that these life-altering, liberating experiences of hers should be given space in the art world as well as be inscribed in history, Hammer’s work encompasses not just a political but also a historical understanding of the personal. Challenging the historiographical neglect of lesbians was the driving force behind films such as *Nitrate Kisses* (1992), her first feature-length documentary, and *History Lessons* (2000), both reclaiming lost histories using archival footage, as well as her last film, *Welcome To This House* (2015), about the poet Elizabeth Bishop.

Yet, Hammer's work was not always unreservedly embraced by the lesbian and feminist communities. The reactions to her naked and explicit imagery were sometimes harsh, even resulting in cancelled screenings. Someone once wrote 'fascist' on the poster of *Dyketactics* outside a woman's bar, Hammer told me when I had the chance to interview her in Stockholm in 2010. She said she saw herself as a lesbian maverick, that she had always had to justify and explain her films. Her journal from a tour in Europe in the early 1980s accounts for some of the awkward and embarrassing responses her films received. The criticism that hit Hammer the hardest, though, was the dismissal of her 1970s work as 'essentialist', as naively romanticising ideas about biological womanhood. She found this unjust and simplistic and continued to address these accusations throughout her career.

Like others in my generation of queer film scholars and filmmakers, I was drawn to Hammer's films precisely because of their idealistic and empowering fleshy imagination. In the 2000s, Hammer received crucial recognition by numerous media artists inspired by her work, including Liz Rosenfeld and duo A. K. Burns and A. L. Steiner. This new appreciation was articulated by a generation who—as Greg Youmans (2012) importantly reflects over—was informed by queer activist standpoints of trans inclusion and sex positivism, that have been held as opposite to the context of 1970s cultural feminism in which Hammer's early films were made.

One significant aspect of Hammer's legacy is that her films have contributed to complicating common feminist stories of sequential generational progression, from notions of 1970s dogmatic anti-sex separatism to open-minded and enlightened sex radicalism in the following decades. Hammer's frank, lustful and performative 1970s films undermine this narrative. In my work, encountering her films, and herself again when she participated in a workshop on queer filmmaking that I co-organized in Gothenburg in 2015, crucially helped opening up new perspectives also on Swedish lesbian and gay filmmaking in the 1970s, beyond notions of essentialism.

This disruption of linear temporality is highly apt, given that experimenting with discontinuity ran as a main theme in Hammer's work, from the early films, over meta filmic experiments in 1980s films such as *Optic Nerve* (1985), to *A Horse Is Not A Metaphor* (2008), tracing Hammer's experience of chemotherapy after being diagnosed with ovarian cancer. 'Radical content deserves radical form', was an often-repeated motto of hers. Deeply influenced by Maya Deren, Hammer sought to capture life experiences through a lyrical, intuitive film language that she described as

phenomenological rather than formalist. Hammer's theoretical reflections about her work form another invaluable part of her legacy. Many of her essays and presentations are collected in her memoirs, *Hammer! Making Movies out of Sex and Life*, published by the Feminist Press in 2010.

The publication of her memoirs coincided with large retrospectives at the Museum of Modern Art, Tate Modern and several other prestigious locations. During her last years in life, Hammer's work finally received the broad recognition, celebration and place in history that it deserves and aspired to. The recent preservation of her films and the grant she established in 2017, the Barbara Hammer Lesbian Experimental Filmmaking Grant, help to ensure that generations to come will have the luck of finding inspiration and empowerment in her rich and brave work and life.

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## REFERENCES

Hammer, Barbara, (2001 [1981]), 'Lesbian Filmmaking: Self-Birthing', in *Hammer! Making Movies out of Sex and Life*, New York City: The Feminist Press, pp. 99-104.

Youmans, Greg (2012), 'Performing Essentialism: Reassessing Barbara Hammer's Films of the 1970s', *Camera Obscura*, Vol. 27, No. 3, pp. 100-135.