

Film is Thinking: A Conversation Across Distance

Barbara Hammer
in correspondence with John David Rhodes

John David Rhodes: I want to begin by thinking about your early work. *Dyketactics* (1974) is all about intimacy, and being really close to bodies—female bodies, lesbian bodies—and yet the film’s final form was achieved by a kind of abstraction from the original footage: the proximity was achieved by distance, metaphorically speaking. I’ve been thinking about how a lot of your work is about being too close or too far—to and from all sorts of things. I wonder what you think about that observation—or about distance as a fundamental key to your work?

Barbara Hammer: It’s interesting to think about perception and the middle ground. My original intention with *Dyketactics* was to make a ritualistic feature film and then, in the intimacy of the editing room in one sweaty night of work with machine (the Steenbeck flatbed editor) and body very close together, I cut the whole feature down to four minutes of body, body, body to achieve something different from my original intention. The middle ground was and is the distance between the observer’s eye and hand and the projection. Picture a young lesbian filmmaker trying for a big goal—a long film—and falling asleep over the ubiquitous ongoing never-ending slow movements of nude women embracing a tree, jumping through leaves, meditating on a stone, and you will understand why in cutting for the action I inadvertently cut for touch. That middle ground, that space between the splicer and the flickering light of the flatbed screen three feet away in the distance, brought me to my senses: literally, to my sense of the connection between sight and touch. This sight and touch union became the basis of my personal lesbian aesthetic.

JDR: Two questions in response: 1) The way you narrate this, I sense an impatience with a tendency in 1970s lesbian aesthetics (“nude women embracing a tree...”). In trying to articulate your “personal lesbian aesthetic” were you aware of yourself pushing against or away from lesbian artmaking practices that had achieved a certain authority or consistency (maybe especially on the west coast)? The phrase “personal lesbian aesthetic” captures some of the difficulties of coming into maturity as an artist (“personal”) who is also part of a political community (“lesbian”). 2) I love this description of you, at night, in front of the flatbed screen. Even in that scene of radical intimacy, though, there is the appearance of a gap, a critical interval, between you and the machine and maybe between sight and touch. Is there really a union (an absolute identity) or something else?

BH: It’s very complex to try to speak “truthfully” about the social artistic dynamics forty-plus years ago. One is tempered by hindsight, but since we are speaking of distance, let me give it a try.

I cannot disparage any of our joyous celebrations of a newly conceived ideology of female agency. And, some of us did feel we could express freedom with less restraints in a rural environment. There wasn’t a “lesbian art movement” but there were and still are lesbian artists or queer artists, as we would say today, working within the broader context of a new world order where women were on par with men. The rituals, the search for goddess representation in history, the separatist women-only events were part of the zeitgeist that didn’t hold interest for me beyond a few years. They were other “fixed” ways of experiencing, and I was looking for something more open, ambiguous, less structured and organized. I didn’t want to depict lesbian couples, lesbians at work, the black and white struggles of lesbian economic displacement in a hetero-normative world. This did separate me, and my push back was, I hope, a demand for a

more complex and eccentric investigation of representation. I liked and still find being a loner and going my own way productive, but my cultural antennae are seldom inactive.

Touch and sight: this union gave me a way to talk about my films. It also expressed my sensate intelligence or dominant way of knowing the world, but unions are fickle, or, to use this word “productive” again, are useful for a time. You are right, it is the gaps, holes, innuendos, mistakes, digressions, multiple identities where probing might provide something unknown, unseen, unimagined and so open up a project for the artist. A lot happens at night with the extreme concentration that little flatbed flickering rectangle of light. The mind is active and the movement of the frames of still images, the film, is like thinking. It is thinking. Film is thinking.

JDR: In asking that last question, I’m glad you understood I was expressing my affection for 1970s lesbian/feminist separatist art! To appreciate profoundly the difference a decade makes, I love to open your book¹ and flip back and forth between the picture of you as a cheerleader at UCLA with Jayne Mansfield in 1959 and the one of you with your shirt off, naked from the waist up, shooting *Dyketactics* in 1974. Those photographs and the passage between them are so radically emblematic of everything that happened and that was going to happen and is still happening.

Anyway... to return to sight and touch and thinking and acting... We can see things we can’t touch—both in the world and in cinema. Your work seems to be interested in this fact, but also in the possibility of touching things (through sight) that we can’t see, except through the films as you have made them.

Your summoning of the “active spectator” in your film performances and your actual movement out of the screen in a performance like *Changing the Shape of Film* seem to reverse the logic of the early film *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (1902) in which the hillbilly spectator, who doesn’t understand that the image isn’t real, attempts to intervene in the projected film image. (It’s also interesting here that Uncle Josh is attempting to censor a sex act in this moment.) Your work actually sort of takes up Uncle Josh’s position, as if to say, hey, this image *is* real, and you (the spectator) will become more real(ised) if you actually *do* react back on it in response. I like that. Am I right here? And do you still believe in the possibility of producing an active spectator? Have the conditions for producing this spectator shifted radically since the 1970s, or do you think we fundamentally still live in the same world?

BH: Fun to watch Uncle Josh dance with the strutting dance hall girl before he ducks from the train, and tears the screen down to... what? Interrupt the romantic delights? Challenge the male lead so he can supersede him? There is a lot to think about here in comparing my ideas of activating the audience. Although Porter was making fun of Uncle Josh, I celebrate his tearing down the screen, the surface of the illusion of cinema. In *Changing the Shape of Film* I cut through the back of a paper screen, tearing the image (which is a film itself of a woman tearing up a screen) and puncturing the dream until it is in shreds, no longer reflective, and I jump through into the audience (or in the case of the Jeu de Paume performance, Rosa Barba and I jump after disassembling the screen).² This event happens as the end of the film *Available Space* (1979) is projected throughout the theater—on the walls, the ceiling, the floor, the projection booth itself—which already has people out of their seats and moving around the space to “see” the image. The image itself is of a woman trying to burst out of the frame in a variety of ways. I think the Jeu de Paume performance was most realized in that Rosa and I covered the auditorium seats with rolls of white paper so the audience couldn’t sit down. The seats themselves then became one of the projection screens. So yes, you are correct in your analysis of my intention that the spectator is more fully realized through active involvement with cinema.

So much has changed since 1979 and so much has remained the same. But the spectator has been rooted to the sitting position in a theater as if poured cement has anchored her/him, and the spectre of terror, adventure and romantic comedy continues to seduce a torpid state of being, with movement encouraged only between the hand into the popcorn and then to the mouth. The cinema is full of chewing, chomping bipeds seduced by the homogeneous drugs of advertising and the promise of escape. I conclude, therefore, that representations and complex juxtapositions are not enough to effect political change or to lead to acceptance and celebrations of difference. And so another strategy was born: I engage with the audiences and bring new physicality to the projections that I hope would move them into another space. In retrospect, I believe the goal of this work is to achieve an interactive populism in which the audience participates in creative social processes in what Nicolas Bourriaud has since called “relational aesthetics.”

JDR: If this engagement of the audience is what you’re after, what is your sense of this audience? Who are they? You investigate this question in *Audience* (1982), to brilliant effect. In this film (which is one my favourites of yours), the film actually is an event—as much as or more than it records an event. It constitutes an event. But it also archives a particular audience, which was mostly composed of lesbians/feminists (or lesbian feminists). The film is both, therefore an event and a document of a period and of people inhabiting particular times and places. Many of the women in the film speak, very movingly, about the fact that they feel your films are somehow made for them—because they are filling a gap in representation. So, I’m curious about your sense of the audience now—who are they? But also what *specific* kind(s) of populist agency do you and they produce or have access to together? I think your work is more challenging (and more interesting) than the sorts of work Bourriaud valorizes. I understand your what you mean by your work’s populism, in a sense—mostly in terms of its engagement of the material body—but your work is not entertainment, which is what a lot of art that has been championed under the banner of relational aesthetics can seem like at times.

BH: You make a very good point about the entertainment of the work championed as exemplary of relational aesthetics. I remember being in the Guggenheim just after the closing bell and seeing the end of the how-many-hour-kiss of two entwined hetero folk as they fell away from performance and into selfhoods, as the museum shut down and they, the performers, became daily citizens. (Was this a Tino Sehgal event?)³ I don’t know if it was relational—more theatrical?—but I felt so fine to see the moment of transition.

Audience (1981) grew from a European tour I set up for myself. I was traveling from one country to the next every other night by train and having such different cultural exchanges with the audience in Toulouse, Vienna, Oslo, Copenhagen—you can imagine! To me it was a moving picture show, and I couldn’t help but delight in both the vociferous pleasures of the Southern French women and the appreciative but reserved audience in the far north. Cultural difference was here in our backyard, or at every train stop, so rather than searching for missing histories in archives, I decided to record this phenomenon of audience differentiation by filming the people who inhabited the theater seats.

Women are hungry. We were all hungry in the seventies, and, even by the eighties our appetites for images we could relate to had not been satisfied. I am thanked over and over for making the work I’ve made, but mostly I hear—and this is in the last few years particularly—that I inspire. Perhaps it has to do with age, perhaps with perseverance, but most of all I think it is the publication of my book that has reached and stayed with my audience (may I say that?). The appreciation has not ended, although glory boots often return to the mud from which they came.

But I'm ready, my boots are thick and sturdy, and I still keep having ideas and the need to make them into a film, an installation, writing.

My audience then could be the populist feminist or the feminist populace. As ideologies come late (at least for me they did), women, men, queer, straight, trans, grasp onto this still centered, focused demand that all genders be considered equal in pay, in promotion, in life values. My work celebrating a nascent second wave feminism but without stricture, rules, or rigidity wants to bring the pleasure principle back into politics. Everyone likes to play and through play we can make changes, little by little. Oh, I feel like I'm preaching. Hmmmmmm.

JDR: Was there something about our insatiability for representation—we can rarely have enough of it, and are rarely satisfied with it when we get it—that made you turn in the 1980s towards a mode that was rather more abstract? I'm thinking here of a film like *Bent Time* (1983), which I think is one of your masterpieces. I know that you've discussed in other contexts this development as stemming in part from some of the criticisms your work received from second wave feminists who found it too “essentialist.” Without asking you to cover that ground again (and I should mention that Greg Youmans’ article on your work as “performatively essentialist” is really terrific and provocative⁴), I want to ask if you felt like the politics or political strategies of your work shifted in that period and with that work. Abstraction can be too easily attacked as “formalism” (whatever that is), but it also offers us a way of thinking geopolitically.

BH: We want it all, we want it all, all the time. Images, opportunities, experiences, adventures—life! I say that “walking across and through high energy locations in the United States”, i.e. *Bent Time* (1983) was as expansive as I could be. This metaphoric foot by foot, frame by frame, *walk* echoed not only my desire to fully contextualize energy through landscape, but also to reflect my physical movement of home from the San Francisco Bay Area to New York City. Yes, *Bent Time* is a pivotal project in the overview of all my films and videos.

I was determined to be seen as an artist, to take human representation out of the frame, to “take on” my critics by moving to the center of the art world at the time. *Pond and Waterfall* (1982)—tracing the path of a vernal clean water pond out a stream, over a waterfall, and into the ocean—and *Pools* (1981) made with Barbara Klutinis (studying the pools at Hearst Castle designed by the architect Julia Morgan by swimming and filming in them) preceded *Bent Time*, so I was already drawn into a geopolitical landscape with the underwater work. The woman was out of the frame but very physically behind the camera below and above water. Performing cinema, Greg Youmans might say.

I don’t understand *Bent Time* as abstract except in my concerns to reflect the principal of physics of time bending at the edge of the universe, the inspiration for this vagabond, rather heroic quest. Abstraction does not equal formalism. There is an abstract tendency in some of my films at this time (*Arequipa* [1981], *Pond and Waterfall*), but, for me, abstraction is an openness, a lack of foreclosure, a way of inviting the viewer to experience color, shape, light, movement without a didactic program.

JDR: I agree entirely with how you are speaking about abstraction here. The problem of openness and the “lack of foreclosure” is what links the films you mention (or a film like *Still Point* [1989], another of my favourites), with a film like *Audience*, which is from the same period, but is so entirely different—so representational, if you will. These similarities cut against homogenizing “period style.” I like the fact that so many of your films look so different from one another (even when made in roughly the same period of time). Style (how you work with form and shape material) is pre-eminently important for you and is *not* a means to an end, but because

you are also always trying to touch the political through style, one gets the sense that any particular style is expendable to you. You seem to invent styles as is necessary, and yet your work rarely feels like the enactment of an idea, like something prescribed—even by yourself. This tension goes back to the unpredictable way in which you made *Dyketactics*. Your work really seems like it's trying to trace a shifting seam, a porous border, between abstraction and political commitment. Or maybe rather than tracing this border, you're revealing the border itself as a fiction.

BH: I never start a film with a preconceived idea of form or style—if you want to call “form” “style.” Rather I research, research, research. That can mean reading numberless books on a subject, or skipping through indexes to pages that might inform the work, to surfing the internet and vimeo/youtube, to beginning to shoot and collecting the shots in image banks or bins, by writing, by keeping a separate notebook for each film/video with queries, frustrations and ideas. When I feel I have exhausted that process I begin to look at everything, listen again to sound clips, begin to “see/hear” a film. Then it all begins with the first edit or conjunction of sound/image, or often times, merely image. Once “something” is there (Yes, Gertie, “there”), it calls for a reference, a rebuke, an addition, and I respond and am off on the post-production or editing of the new project. It is a bit like a sculptor who speaks about a form within the stone. To me, within this large disarray, this newly collected library of image/sound, lies a film and a form unique. Each film subject/theme, abstract or representational, calls for a particular form, and, since my themes are changing, the forms are different one from the other. Once that form emerges, I often cut and paste, shift and stretch, chisel and polish with one image or a whole sequence until there is a “fit.” I am going to say here that it is all a fiction—you are leaning in that direction, too, I read. A form is made-up, conceived, created, even copied—but whoever says it—the film—is merely a form is making a fictive statement of course. All form is a conjecture toward meaning.

There is one exception to this process-oriented answer to your question. *A Horse Is Not A Metaphor* (2009) surprised me, as I began with one image sequence, it led to another, and finally, the film was complete. There was no restructuring, no moving around of images. They called, I responded, and, like painters I’ve heard who start from a corner of a blank canvas and fill up the canvas without a sketch, I filled up the thirty minutes that became *Horse*. I had the amazingly linked sound work of Meredith Monk to work with and I found so many congruencies in our “feeling bank” of notes—hers sound, mine image—that I was again in wonderment).

JDR: I wonder if *Horse* came into being that way because it documents a story (the real story of your cancer) that was so terrifyingly sequential.

BH: Yes, so terribly sequential. Time in the form of calendars, appointments and, most forbidding of all, chemotherapy, became the counting focus, the rhythm of the days—days I was blessed to have. It is strange that the film unfolded without this counting, but in a differently imagist manner of marking, as it was only after the film was finished that I returned to the footage and put in the sessions of chemotherapy appointments. I felt the viewer would be lost without the narrative of time to hold on to. Me, I just held on, but I was first-person experiencing, and in the end—when is that?—it all becomes a unit of circular memory anyway.

JDR: What you describe about your method interests me because it seems like you are dissolving another (fictional) border: that between intellectual labor and artistic labor. You ask us to think about making art as a process of scholarship and intellection, and scholarship as something instinctual, contingent and creative. I like that.

BH: Yes, the fictional borders, the blurs, a breaking of categories, an all embracing encompassing—as much as each one of us is capable—the complexities, disciplines, study and production and study again. What a lucky girl I am to practice these activities called labor and with your help open the word to the artistic process that so many of us practice in our ever ongoing, forever evolving projects... What distance we've covered!

Barbara Hammer is a visual artist primarily working in film and video. She has been honored with major retrospectives at The Tate Modern, London for the month of February 2012 and Jeu de Paume, Paris in June 2012. The Museum of Modern Art in New York City presented a retrospective of forty-four different films from September 13-October 13, 2011. Her work reveals and celebrates marginalized peoples whose stories have not been told. Her cinema is multi-leveled and engages an audience viscerally and intellectually with the goal of activating them to make social change. Her trilogy of documentary film essays on lesbian and gay history has received numerous awards: Nitrate Kisses (1992), Tender Fictions (1995), History Lessons (2000). Recent films, A Horse Is Not A Metaphor (2009), Generations (2010), and Maya Deren's Sink (2011), were awarded Teddy Awards for Best Short Film at the Berlin International Film Festivals. HAMMER! Making Movies Out of Sex and Life, a book of memoirs and personal film theory, was published by The Feminist Press, City University of New York. She is represented by KOW-Berlin, and her website is www.barbarahammer.com.

John David Rhodes is a co-editor of World Picture.

Notes

¹ Barbara Hammer, *HAMMER! Making Movies Out of Sex and Life* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2010). The photographs in question are found on pages 19 and 63.

² This performance was in connection with BH's retrospective at the Jeu de Paume, June 12-July 1, 2012, Paris.

³ The performance BH describes was part of Sehgal's show at the Guggenheim, which ran from January 29-March 10, 2010.

⁴ Greg Youmans, "Performing Essentialism: Reassessing Barbara Hammer's Films of the 1970s," forthcoming in *Camera Obscura*.