

# INTERVIEW

## Barbara HAMMER

► In early 1990, we met experimental filmmaker Barbara Hammer at a screening of several of her recent films in New Orleans. Intrigued by her work yet unsure how to interpret it, we wanted to know more about the theories informing her work and the questions she was, and still is, investigating.

► The non-linear, non-narrative progression of Hammer's work and her exploration with film techniques require mental and physical participation when viewing her films. One of her main concerns is to transform the commonly passive position of viewer into an active position—a viewer who not only questions Hammer's intent as an artist but also questions his or her own ways of looking and responding. Hammer's visual language and juxtaposition of images refuse easy assimilation by drawing connections between sometimes difficult, sometimes mundane subjects and by forcing the viewer to face his or her own prejudices, feelings, and fears.

► We discovered that Barbara Hammer's visual imagery parallels our own investigations into writing and feminist literary theory and illustrates the ties between the visual and literary arts. This interview discusses Barbara's background, addresses some of our questions, and hopes to interest others in the work of this important experimental filmmaker.

► Barbara Hammer resides in New York and San Francisco and is currently teaching at the San Francisco Art Institute and the California College of Arts and Crafts.

**Julia Hodges/Jamie Ramoneda/Kathy Sizeler:**  
In your development as a feminist, experimental filmmaker, and throughout your career, who has influenced you and in what ways?

**Barbara Hammer:** I have been influenced throughout my "career," if one can call the neglected backwaters of experimental film-making a career, by various filmmakers, philosophies, and people. I believe I am and have been told that I am a very impressionable person, so I expect those films and filmmakers who have inspired or challenged me to have a great influence on my work and its development.

The first film I saw somewhere between three and five years of age was Walt Disney's *Bambi*. I asked my mother "Who's turning the pages?" and I was terrified during the fire scene. Very early I learned the literary bias and the violent nature of Hollywood cinema. Perhaps I was "saved" from Hollywood, the city I was born in, by the depression and my parents' small income.

When I was twenty-one, while I was in the

first years of an aborted marriage, I saw *Pather Panchali* by Sanjit Ray and was introduced into a world of filmmaking beyond Hollywood. After that marvelous black and white film that transported me to another culture and other ways of seeing and thinking I preferred the small art houses that ran the subtitled films because there were more ideas and challenging world views. I was already tired of the plot-point trap that Hollywood screenwriting dictates.

Six years later I was an English teacher for "emotionally disturbed" adolescents in a juvenile hall, in the process of burning out on a three year floor-to-ceiling house building experience in the Sonoma County woods, a nine year marriage, and teaching. I wanted to create. I studied painting with William Morehouse. He brought a leather-clad woman model with her motorcycle into the class, and I was so inspired I stretched the largest canvas yet, and in an attempt to show the movement I felt her figure implied, gave her extra arms, hands, legs, and feet. Later I painted with materials that would change under varying lights and constructed color wheels or black light paintings that moved while viewed.

A major change occurred when Bill brought in an old Kodak 16mm projector able to work at varying speeds and some clear 16mm film leader for me to paint on. That was the day I became a filmmaker. I painted on the film using a glaze paint made for aquariums that crystallized when it dried, and constructed a

mirror box of four sides in which to project. My first developed film was re-photography, as I set up a camera to film the projected kaleidoscope in the mirrors. (Little could I imagine that twenty-five years later I would be making a four-screen film with an optical printer.) Someone gave me a Super 8mm Bolex, and I was off and running, literally, through the closest town, Bodega, filming my shadow, cobwebs through bifocal lenses the optometrist gave me, and attaching the psychedelic footage of the handpainted crystals. *Schizy* (1968) was my first film. Two things happened with that film that helped me to continue in filmmaking: it won an Honorable Mention at the Sonoma County 8mm Film Festival, and the experience of watching it projected with an audience was incredible. The film was larger than any canvas I'd painted and the audience was captured by the darkness and direction of light to watch my work in a way no one had looked at my paintings. That was it. I was a filmmaker.

I continued to make 8 and Super 8mm films but it wasn't until 1972 when I was enrolled in film history class and saw *Meshes of the Afternoon* by Maya Deren that I knew there was room for a woman's vision on the screen. I believe I recognized gender construction and projection in that film, although I didn't have the language more than "woman's imagery" at that time. My first 16mm film, *I Was I Am*, pays direct homage to Deren. Not only am I the protagonist, I go through a transformation from a princess to a dyke, and after discarding my tiara take a key from my mouth to start the engine on my motorcycle; but also, many of the films of the '70s, especially *The Psychosynthesis Trilogy* (*I Was I Am*, 1973; *X*, 1974; and *Psychosynthesis*, 1975), are replete with charged imagery that represents for me emotional meanings.

Deren as a theorist was also important. *Film Culture*, No. 39, Winter 1965 included many of her writings. Especially important to me was her description of "vertical cinema" as opposed to a horizontal, linear, often narrative cinema. The sense of image relation building on image relation in a deep, impacted manner of possibilities and ambiguities made cinema a wealthy field for me. The "brick-building" theory of cinema of accumulation in a narrow and straight line never appealed to me, as life seemed so much more complex, my emotions so multiple, and mystery more important than "scientific understanding."

So it was no wonder when *New French Feminisms*, edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, published "This Sex Which Is Not One" by Luce Irigaray in 1981 that I was captivated by her creative and wondrous writing of the multiplicity of woman's sexuality. Woman with her two genital lips is already two according to Irigaray, two who stimulate and embrace continually and who are not divisible into ones. This idea, so poetically expressed, reinforced my desire to express myself in multiple images either through superimpositions, bi-packing of two or more images in the optical printer, or passing the film through the printer various times. Never was I trying to "veil" a meaning, but rather to enlarge upon a feeling/tone I was creating.

Teresa de Lauretis in *Alice Doesn't* (1982) and *Technologies of Gender* (1987) opens the doors of semiotic and structural criticism to feminist theory based on experience. For the first time the referent, i.e., the subject, can return to a post-post-

modern discourse as de Lauretis makes a wedge for the self-representation of difference outside, I believe, the bipolarity of gender dictated by a heterosexist ideology. In other words, the lesbian stands both within and outside of gender representation, and we can turn to her works of self-representation for the "third gender." Feminists have recognized the difference in a black woman's experience from a white woman's and that most discourse until recently has been written from a white woman's perspective. Similarly the lesbian experience has been wrongly subsumed in a heterosexist discourse. De Lauretis suggests the off-screen space as cracks in a heterosexist hegemony from which the voice(s) of difference can begin to speak.

Although I didn't have the theory or the words to form it, I worked throughout the seventies to make films of my lesbian experience. These stand outside the heterosexual discourse on gender and its representation. I was propelled in numerous films to "represent one lesbian identity/experience" by making images that were unique to my re-naming myself as lesbian. I believed that in making films that re-presented at least one lesbian's experience (my own as I knew no other), I could contribute to abolishing lesbian invisibility.

Maya Deren, Luce Irigaray, and Teresa de Lauretis have in their writings and in Deren's case filmmaking as well, confirmed my intuitive creative processes and have helped give me words to name my endeavors. I find that reading and re-reading them sustains and propels me in a community of discourse.

**Hodges/Ramoneda/Sizeler:** How have you affected other women filmmakers? How have you helped to pave the way for women and feminists in experimental film?

**Hammer:** I don't know exactly how I have affected other women filmmakers, although I have seen bright, excited, and inspired faces in an audience after a presentation. I have thanks and gratitude for the images and the discussion that followed them. Sometimes I get letters from women who tell me how important my work has been for them. Sometimes I get silence.

It is difficult for me to say how I have helped to pave the way for women and feminists in experimental film. History provided the conjunction of theory with my artistic production. I did find an experimental film-going audience devoid of feminist theory and practice and, similarly, a feminist audience that knew little about the inquiry of experimental cinema. I have tried in personal presentations to address these issues by talking about the importance and contributions of feminism to an audience of avant-garde film lovers and about the viability and expansion of possibilities that experimental cinema provides a feminist audience.

Today the discourse is more defined. After a recent Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival a young gay filmmaker said he didn't understand why my early '70s films were critiqued for not including much representation of women of different ethnic backgrounds. We would be forcing ourselves to fulfill a formula of political correctness, he thought, to be all-inclusive. Wrong, I said, it is up to us to expand our personal experience beyond a limited one-dimensional whiteness.



Barbara Hammer, from *Dyketactics*, 1974.

**Hodges/Ramoneda/Sizeler:** Your recent films are characterized by non-linear, non-narrative multiple images which you manipulate in various ways. How would you respond to someone who says, "All I see is pretty pictures"?

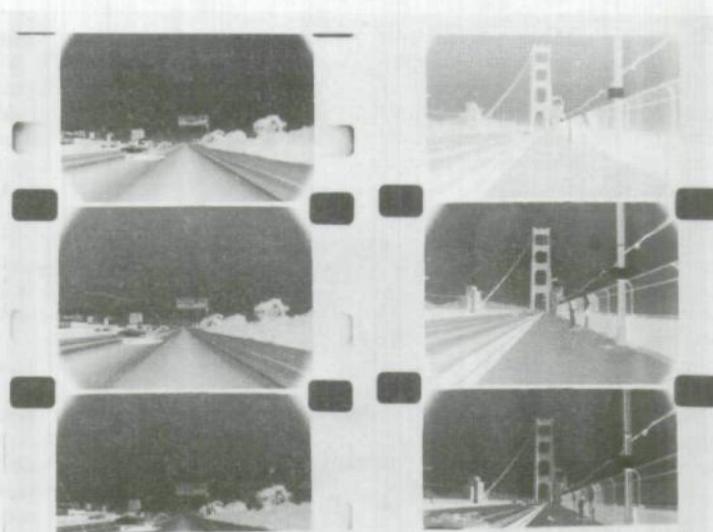
**Hammer:** If someone responded to me after seeing my films that all they saw were "pretty pictures," I'd have to respond that they didn't see my films. Of course, every film has a different intention and result, but primarily I am concerned with stimulating multiple perceptual inputs simultaneously to engage the viewer in active participation to determine meaning. Meaning may be emotional, intellectual, or a perceptual knowledge based on visuals, rhythm, frame, or shot duration and composition, sound/image relationship. I am asking a lot of the viewer: to be awake to simultaneous input in many sensory and intellectual areas. And, to put them all together in a synthesis of understanding. The guidelines are within the interpretation of the text, i.e., the film, and the viewer's reading.

**Hodges/Ramoneda/Sizeler:** Who is your audience, and has it changed in response to your work? Do you feel responsible for providing your audience with the tools necessary to understand your (visual) language?

**Hammer:** My audience has changed somewhat with the change of direction I've taken in my films. Although this isn't always the case, generally my audience has become more aficionados of the avant-garde filmic genre than the lesbians and/or feminists that populated the theaters in the seventies. An amazing and growing exception to this is the mixed audience in New York City attending the Experimental Lesbian and Gay Film Festival that is in its fifth remarkable year of a week long series of mostly sold-out programs of gay and lesbian experimental cinema. The audience there is demanding, appreciative, and knows quality of intention and finish in first films by emerging filmmakers, as well as those of us who have been engaged in production for many years. This festival has given an impetus to lesbian and gay experimental filmmakers to keep working (some filmmakers make films each year expressly for the festival) because they know they have an opportunity for exhibition.

I'm sorry to say this hasn't always been the case. My lesbian films were often rejected by avant-garde showcases across the country and in museums everywhere during the period I was actively and expressly engaged in making lesbian representation. It wasn't until I "depopulated" my cinema, i.e., took the women out, that I began to get the invitations I had so long sought after. Believe me there were callouses on my knuckles from knocking at locked doors, for I am not one to accept a "no" and go away quietly.

There has been a social control or censorship as well that has worked against the exhibition of my lesbian films. Once in the Tri Cities area of the South, the church fathers closed their doors and withdrew their permission for the screening of *Dyketactics* and *Multiple Orgasm*. A few years ago I was met at the Buffalo, New York airport by a worried curator who informed me that the "vice squad" was waiting at the local gallery to pre-screen the films to make sure they weren't pornographic. I had the choice to



Barbara Hammer, from *Bent Time*, 1984.

refuse to screen them and disappoint a community audience of 200 or sit there chagrined and mortified while these two women looked for any "child nudity" or "abuse of men" as they defined pornography. I chose the latter, and it was very difficult. I showed them the most graphic of the films, although I was mortified through every minute of the projection. That evening they came to the screening at the club and commented that *Superdyke* contained child pornography, as there were two nude prepubescent girls in the film. I pointed out that those girls were holding the hand of their also nude mother and that

was consent. Furthermore, they were all walking through a field of grass. The film was celebratory of a new found independence and freedom from social restriction, yet here I was caught in the clutches of a police mentality upholding a foreign and secretly coded morality. No person should have to undergo the humiliation of censorship. I would never do it again.

I do feel responsible for providing my audience with the tools necessary to understand my visual language, but not by taking them by the hand and leading them one by one through the images or formal construction of the film. Rather, I like to present what some of my concerns were in making the film that suggest a language. That allows the audience to work however they want to participate in the code or references I use without limiting their experience to mine.

As there are feminisms not feminism, so there are multiple ways of knowing just about everything. I think the future of the planet and all that entails means an increased ability to function and comprehend on multiple layers and ways of knowing at the same time. This challenges the old mode of "do one thing at a time." Just as light can be understood by both a wave and a particle theory, so too can the juxtaposition of imagery, rhythms, color and black/white have multiple meanings. Openness of readings is what I'm looking for in my audience, not closures.

**Hodges/Ramoneda/Sizeler:** In creating a language or sign-system for women and/or lesbians, are you avoiding naming and defining, or are you renaming?

**Hammer:** Until recently lesbians were unnamed in film, on radio, in the popular press. At most we were named historically by patriarchal medicalizations. I was thirty years old when I first heard the word "lesbian." That word wasn't heard or written until the second wave of feminism in the 1970s. With the word came a change of lifestyles for many of us who immediately or slowly recognized emotional, sexual, and physical attractions to women. Some women I'm sure are more precocious than me, but it took the name, the "L" word, for me to rename myself and act on hitherto unnamed desire. Amazing.

Until there is a naming and a construction there can't be a deconstruction. So I think that during the '70s we were naming ourselves; it was a community affair. Now in the '90s we can deconstruct the social identity we gave ourselves. With that ability to reexamine we can then re-construct with greater

consciousness and permission what self-representation we desire.

**Hodges/Ramoneda/Sizeler:** What role does sexuality and desire play in creating this discourse?

**Hammer:** Our experience of sexuality and desire changes, and with those changes comes a change in discourse. For example, with the newly found expression of our charged sexuality unleashed, so to speak, from the unconscious past, many of us ran headlong and passionately from one woman to the next. What we named "uninhibited activity" and "sexual freedom" could later be renamed as "love addiction" or "dyke drama." We are a new and changing community, and the discourse matures as we mature. The depth of love expressed through longevity and commitment of lesbians in daily relations that continually self-define without guarantees is the challenging position where I find myself at 51, or put another way, a 21 year old lesbian practitioner.

**Hodges/Ramoneda/Sizeler:** How can you say that your discourse in film is a women's language?

**Hammer:** I can say that my discourse in film is a woman's language because of my experience of being a woman. The trick is that the constructed language is often a man's language, but the way in which it is used can be very womanly. Similarly, as a lesbian woman and as a lesbian woman experimental filmmaker, my experiences are different and the images, juxtapositions, abstractions, rhythms, and textures will state that difference.

**Hodges/Ramoneda/Sizeler:** Do you feel that labeling yourself as 1) experimental 2) lesbian film artist limits your work or audience in any way?

**Hammer:** Yes, probably my label of myself as experimental and as lesbian film artist limits my audience more than my work, as I seem to go ahead and make what I want to make without any other than my own personal limitations. Both experimental film and lesbian film are endangered categories, and as long as that is the case it is necessary to name them. Without a name and without activity of self-definition they will go away, dissolve into the mainstream, exist in hiding. It is a political act to name and be named and to name again and that will be so until we truly



Barbara Hammer, from *Sanctus*, 1990.

exist in an egalitarian world with an inquiring population.

**Hodges/Ramoneda/Sizeler:** Can this marginal discourse reach the mainstream and have any effect on the dominant patriarchal discourse? Should it? What effect, if any, are you trying to have on the mainstream discourse? If your films became part of the mainstream, would they lose their impact?

**Hammer:** Most marginal discourses reach the mainstream in this novelty-hungry capitalist society, and parts and pieces reappear in the popular press or commercial movies in a newly renovated and camouflaged avant-garde image. Agents and

image mongers, garbage collectors rummaging the downtown scene, the newly acquired films at the archive, the new hybrid genres that appear are grabbed in a flash only to reemerge in a Calvin Klein busstop ad or a 2 billion dollar budgeted film script. I am not trying to have an effect on the mainstream discourse, but by reason of my making work and putting it out I and other film and video artists will possibly in some manner have our work appropriated. At that time we will inscribe new margins for our free expression until we are reincorporated and on and on and so the process goes. The avant-garde can never really be appropriated, for the style and gestures do not the person make. The grit, the anguish, the *jouissance* or bliss, the human passions, and intellectual struggles behind the imagery remain a secret to the surface collector who spatters paint after Jackson Pollock on a T-shirt.

**Hodges/Ramoneda/Sizeler:** In a previous interview, you expressed a desire to increase the audience's awareness of their own bodies by creating a tactile sensation from visual stimuli. Could you talk about how this makes an audience more active? Is this attempt to encourage perception beyond the visual, in a mostly visual art, an effort to subvert the mainstream?

**Hammer:** The effort to kinesthetically "touch" my audience through visual stimuli so that they "feel" the images in their bodies grew from a personal recognition to a political strategy. I noticed a developed sensitive link between some things I looked at in the natural world. For example, driving along a plowed field I, while looking, would also feel the texture of the earth in rows within my body as a generalized feeling sensation. I look at a polished hardwood floor and literally "feel" the hardness and smoothness interiorly. I began to poll my audiences to see if other people had a similar response. Only a few would raise their hands or nod in agreement. I thought most didn't know what I was talking about so I began decidedly to construct

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and to create these "feeling" images. I think that if people are more aware of physical sensations in general they are more active in the physical world of politics, for example. On the smallest scale to vote is a physical activity, on a larger scale to organize and demonstrate is a huge bodily effort, and to commit to change can be a totally consuming physical experience. I must directly confront stasis if I am to challenge the passivity of the entertained audience in a mainstream linear film where plot-points appear and change the script as regularly as a clock.

The audience swims in *Pond and Waterfall*. The still body of the audience was to be enveloped in a pond of water moving slowly about, then faster down a stream and eventually over a waterfall and out into the ocean. Swimming the camera I would swim the audience so they would not only appreciate the pristine and unique nature of an eco-system but also recognize their personal and physiological containment as a blood coursing, oxygen using self-sufficient and co-dependent system. The film is silent so they can hear their own heartbeat and fluids coursing much as one hears the pressure system of the pond's weight underwater. My idea is that an activated and physically stimulated audience is more likely to engage in the world outside the theater in an active manner than a passive observer who moves from theater to world as in a dream. I want us to change the way the systems are, politics operates, people oppress. I do not want to replicate a model of conformity and passivity.

**Hodges/Ramoneda/Sizeler:** You once said that men and women probably have a genetic difference in perception due to the xx and xy chromosomes. Do you still think this is true?

**Hammer:** I really don't know if chromosomal difference could lead to perceptual differences. It might. It might not. In an attempt to know, it would be impossible, I think, to separate learned and constructed gender perceptions from biological tendencies. Probably a multiple reading of differences from all levels of understanding would be the model I'd subscribe to now. Class, race, sexual preference, age, physicalism, as well as chromosomes could all inscribe difference.

**Hodges/Ramoneda/Sizeler:** How would you characterize your work's transformation from bodies of humans (women) to bodies of land (geography)? What prompted this change from interior to exterior?

**Hammer:** One of the reasons that I began to make exterior films of the landscape in the '80s was to expand the language from the interior, body-focused imagery to the world. I did not want to work on language that could only speak from the enclosed space of my body. Women have been defined by their bodies and their domestic spaces for too long. I want to expand that projection. I wanted to walk the world with my camera, expressing physical concepts of "bent time," the curving of time at the edge of the

universe as noted by physicists (*Bent Time*, 1984); architectural space as both two and three dimensional as well as experimental (*Pools*, 1981); and the fragile material nature of film (*Endangered*, 1988).

In *Still Point* (1989) I return to the body but this time in conjunction with the exterior world. The screen is divided into four spaces: two domestic scenes and two scenes of homeless street people. My lover and I are seen meeting at the airport, hiking across an empty volcano in Hawaii, playing with our food while

homeless people beg for money, pick out aluminum cans from garbage pails, and sleep in the park. It is important that our discourse move to include others while not neglecting the significance of personal relationships. At the same time two lesbian women are courting and developing a life together, two or more other people are without necessary amenities for minimum life requirements. We are important; all of us are important.

**Hodges/Ramoneda/Sizeler:** Discuss your move to create an alternative discourse that is not tied to the body. Why is this important?

**Hammer:** It is important to the survival of all of us that we keep and respect our differences, protect ourselves and others from the many threats to all forms of life, and collectively clean up our act on this planet. As experimental filmmakers, as lesbians and gay men, as feminists and socialists, as people of color and people without color, we must reach beyond our borders and address the issues of survival that face us in the late twentieth century.

**Hodges/Ramoneda/Sizeler:** Where do you see your work going in the future?

**Hammer:** Where is my work going in the future? Presently I am interested in remembering forgotten footage, women and men from film history, and particular cinematic concerns that have lain dormant. While touring the archive at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, I saw a number of silver cans marked "Watson's X-Rays." That site of discovering has led to *Sanctus*, a film using x-ray footage of the moving human body skeleton and interiors shot by Dr. James Sibley Watson and collaborators in the 1950s. With the soundtrack by Niel B. Rolnick who digitized the "Sanctus" section of the mass from recordings by Beethoven, Bach, Mozart, Byrd, Mechant, the viewer enters the invisible, the place unseen yet familiar, his/her body. The "holy" body. The fragile body. The experimental body. I have returned to the interior body but through the exterior remains of the first cineradiographic motion pictures of the human skeleton and organs.

As we rush into the future it behooves us to look at our history. To stop, digest, inhale, read, and reflect. To appreciate and respect; to despair and vow never to repeat. It is a time for contemplation, pause, and evaluation. I hope this for my work, that it becomes more reflective, considered, and thoughtful.

*Julia Hodges works for Red Bass magazine; Jamie Ramoneda is a poet; and Kathy Sizeler is a visual artist. All reside in New Orleans, Louisiana.*

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