

Holly Willis

Uncommon History

An Interview with Barbara Hammer



“Who is the angel of history?” asks Barbara Hammer in her latest film, *Nitrate Kisses* (1992). The reference to Walter Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History* marks Hammer’s growing interest in academic theory, and indeed, *Nitrate Kisses* illustrates many of the characteristics that constitute a poststructuralist notion of history, such as nonlinearity and a refusal to speak for everyone.

Hammer, who began making short films in the early 1970s, is known for work that is both stridently lesbian and boldly experimental. Some of her films are short portraits of lesbian life, documenting a growing lesbian community in San Francisco in the 1970s.

Others are humorous stories which play with mythological images of women and critique the patriarchal world. *Superdyke* (1975), for example, is a spoof of the Superman character and the macho ideology that subtends the hero; other early films, like *Menses* (1974) and *Women I Love* (1976), celebrate and reclaim aspects of femininity denigrated by a male-identified culture.

In most of her work, Hammer experiments with formal qualities, often animating segments of her films or using superimpositions and optical printing techniques. Hammer has consistently created lesbian erotica, and states that her film *Dyketactics* (1974) is the

first erotic lesbian film made by a lesbian. She has also worked toward constructing a kind of cinema that appeals to the viewer's sense of touch. Whether it is a massage sequence in *Superdyke* or the incredible fluidity and cool wetness of *Pools* (1981, made with Barbara Klutinis), Hammer succeeds in powerfully affecting one's somatic state.

Nitrate Kisses, which is her fiftieth film and, at 67 minutes, her longest, takes all of these qualities to a new level and also adds a strong intellectual edge. Shot, recorded, and edited by Hammer, the film is a harsh critique of the marginalization of gays and lesbians from "common history," and while it attempts to redress the gap and offer a history, or series of histories, it does so in a manner cognizant of the impossibility of history. This "history," then, is an amalgamation of voices and stories culled from eclectic sources, none of which is privileged over another. The film attempts to show the processes of history-making (i.e., the collection and identification of fragments) rather than recovering individual histories.

Continuing Hammer's characteristic attention to patterns of light and shadow, *Nitrate Kisses* opens with shots of white lace; the shots are brief and are followed by a series of old photographs of Willa Cather, from the Nebraska State Historical Society. On the sound track, writer Sandy Boucher speaks: "If you begin your work and your career and your path hiding essential things, even later on it's almost impossible for them to be seen clearly." This is said in reference specifically to the life of Willa Cather, who lived with a woman for many years, and it initiates a theme which will continue throughout the rest of the film. Music from Stash Records' out-of-release *AC/DC Blues: Gay Jazz Reissues, Volume 1*, contributes to the reclaiming of lost gay culture while also adding to the sexual and celebratory energy of the film.

The images gradually segue into shots of two elderly lesbians together. The taboo of the naked older female is smashed as the women help each other undress, don safe-sex latex, and go down on each other. The images of the women are filtered through a network of shadows cast through the leaves of plants. They are filmed with an intimate camera which moves deftly around the couple, and the shots are cut quickly, with excitement and energy. The resulting scene is startling and beautiful, and it forces one to consider the relative uniformity of women filmed in erotic situations. This opening sequence is continuously intercut with shots of old dykes dancing together. The sound track consists of fragments of stories of lesbian life—going to bars, ways of dressing, being harassed.

The film continues in a similar manner with three other segments in which three couples have sex in the context of other issues. The second couple consists of two men, one black and one white, who interact behind the superimposed text of the Hayes Code. The prohibition against sexual activity and miscegenation is simultaneously mocked and reenacted as the code literally blocks, or censors, the images behind it. Hammer continues to use text throughout the film, usually in the form of intertitles. The texts are paragraphs from writings that both inspired Hammer and supplemented the personal histories by offering a broader theoretical construct against which they may be understood.

This scene is intercut with outtakes from James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber's 1930 film, *Lot in Sodom*. The exquisite black-and-white compositions, the dramatic excess, and the stylized innuendo of this first gay film in America make an excellent complement to the "present-day" footage. In this case, too, as in the first sequence, the role of history is emphatically brought to the fore. The viewer becomes the historian/archeologist and determines the relative chronology of the footage as well as the implications of the juxtapositions. For example, a shot from *Lot in Sodom* of two men wrestling cuts to one of the contemporary male couple. Hammer implies the transcendence of gay male play.

The next sequence suggests that some acts today are possible only through the battles won and lost in the past. The couple in this case are two women dressed in leather and chains. The scene is intercut with footage from the Neuengamme concentration camp. Hammer's point is perhaps strongest here as Johanna Reutter, a Hamburg-based student of cinema and history, explains that the histories of lesbian concentration-camp victims have all been told by heterosexuals. These authors barely conceal their disgust for the lesbian prisoners, and the resulting stories can only be read as partial. While Hammer does not claim to fill in the blanks or provide the real story, she does succeed in showing that the narrative thread that might link lesbians able to act out fantasies of power and submission to women who died in concentration camps has never been written.

The final sequence features two women generously tattooed and pierced. As part of the heated debate and political posturing in the "lesbian community," these two couples illustrate the very near impossibility of the term—the community is not nearly as homogeneous or harmonious as the term might imply.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault describes "common history" as the project of a power

structure that claims to speak for everyone in order to unify a disciplined and subjected society. With *Nitrate Kisses*, Barbara Hammer shows that lesbians have almost always been spoken for, when they are spoken of at all. Her film is an uncommon history, then, one that is neither complete nor willing to speak for everyone.

I spoke with Barbara Hammer following the premiere of *Nitrate Kisses* at the Sundance Film Festival in January, 1993.

Jack Waters
and Peter Cramer—
and the Hays Code

II. SEX

THE SANCTITY OF MARRIAGE

THE MARRIAGE CONTRACT SHALL BE UPHELD.

LOW-CLASS OR SEX RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE ACCEPTED COMMON THING.

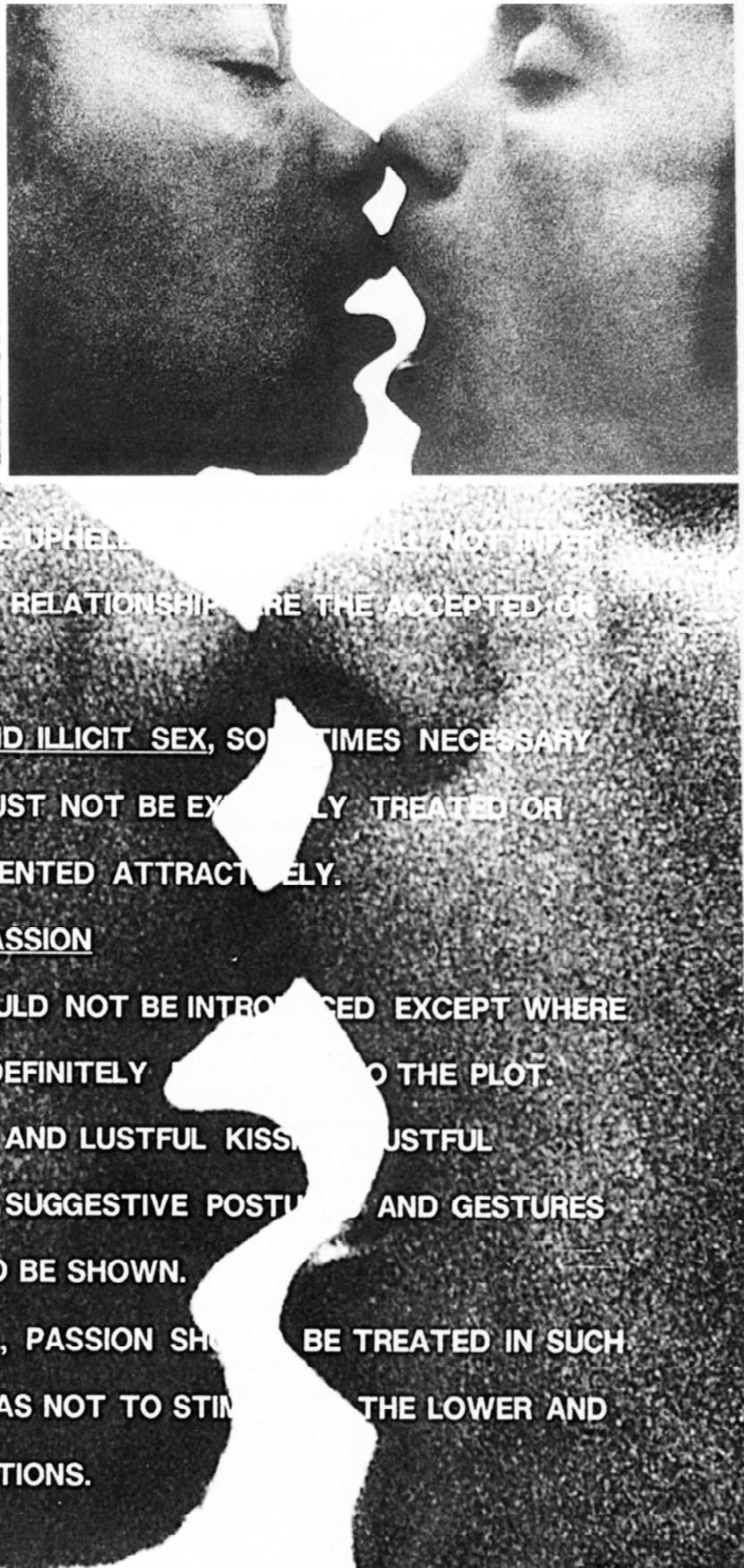
1. ADULTERY AND ILLICIT SEX, SOMETIMES NECESSARY PLOT MATERIAL, MUST NOT BE EXCESSIVELY TREATED OR JUSTIFIED, OR PRESENTED ATTRACTIVELY.

2. SCENES OF PASSION

a) THESE SHOULD NOT BE INTRODUCED EXCEPT WHERE THEY ARE DEFINITELY NECESSARY TO THE PLOT.

b) EXCESSIVE AND LUSTFUL KISSES, LUSTFUL EMBRACES, SUGGESTIVE POSTURES AND GESTURES ARE NOT TO BE SHOWN.

c) IN GENERAL, PASSION SHOULD BE TREATED IN SUCH A MANNER AS NOT TO STIMULATE THE LOWER AND BASER EMOTIONS.



HOLLY WILLIS: *What was the genesis of Nitrate Kisses?*

BARBARA HAMMER: The genesis of *Nitrate Kisses* was twofold. Once, I had already been to the Eastman House archive and had made a film called *Sanctus*, which is moving X-rays of the human body, using footage I found there: Dr. James Sibley Watson's medical outtakes from the 1950s. At the same time I had also discovered that they had 17 cans of outtakes from his *Lot in Sodom*.. They were in great condition, and I knew I should think about this for the future. I did. I wrote a grant for *Nitrate Kisses*. I used *Sanctus* as my sample, proof that I had been to the archive, proof that I had access—and I got the grant. In the meantime, ITVS [Independent Television Service] was formed. As a lesbian, I've always felt that we've been invisible and I decided that it was time for marginal people to be on broadcast television. I wrote an ITVS grant that would look at the invisible histories of gays and lesbians in the U.S. It was the largest grant that I'd written—for \$60,000. I had done some extensive research, written a larger budget than I'd ever done, and I was very committed to the project. These were the two starting points.

What happened next?

After I finished the grant, I took off on a European tour. But I felt compelled to start shooting this new film right away; I couldn't just wait until I got money. I borrowed cameras, Super-8 cameras, and I found black-and-white Super-8 in three different cities, which was a very hard thing to do.

When I travel, I don't like being a tourist. I like to work. After each of my shows was over, I would stay for a few days and the people who hosted me helped me. For example, they drove me to the concentration camps. Johanna Reutter had written a paper on heterosexual accounts of lesbians in concentration camps which certainly influenced me, and I used her voice on the sound track. And Ahima Berlage, the director of a women's performance space in Berlin, took me into former East Berlin, where we tried to find the bar that the Gypsies, Jews, lesbians, and gays used to frequent during the Third Reich. I found it reconstructed in the basement of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf's museum home in the far outskirts of the city. It is Ahima's voice on the sound track that tells the sad story of denial by lesbian camp survivors today.

In Paris, I shot in the cemetery where all the famous Left Bank writers are buried—Djuna Barnes, Nathalie Barney, Janet Flanner, Gertrude and Alice—but I cut most of that out because they are so well known and the

film is really about recovering the history of those who are not known. It's about ordinary lesbians—what was their cultural life like? There's a huge hole there . . . we don't have their stories.

To go back to your first question . . . I started making this film because I realized that I'm 53, I've made many films, and I'm an out lesbian, but my history could be lost. I've dedicated my life, I hope, to advancing film and lesbian studies and if I could be lost, what about everyone else? Who determines history is so male and so patriarchal. It's easy to pass; no one needs to know our sexual preference. Some day in the future, when we have perfect freedom, it may not be so important, but right now we have to be out politically to determine that our history can be preserved.

How did the film actually come together?

During the editing. I had the outtakes of the men from *Lot in Sodom*, and I had all this lesbian footage that I'd shot—and the footage is . . . what? Bunkers, burnt-out buildings, St. Louis demolition sites, streets in Berlin that are empty . . . vacancy . . . holes and gaps. . . . It's only the oral history that gives a personal meaning to the film, and the voices become a collected history. Some people don't understand why I didn't use sync sound. I didn't because I didn't want the film to become one person's story, but rather a collective history woven from all the voices together.

Do you think this collective voice is problematic in any way?

Yes. It can collapse difference into homogeneity and I believe I was prone to do this in the men's section, as their history is so different from ours. As a lesbian, I am more an outsider in the gay male community. Their culture and history is quite different from my own and it has innuendos and distinctions that are difficult to discern from an outsider position. Now I believe it is better to make the film that you know about, in your own community. I could take what the men told me in the interviews but I didn't have a grasp of it emotionally and physically the way I did with the women. When I edited the sections with the women, there was an interior "felt" integrity—I knew what was going on. I felt an emotional connection between picture and sound. However, even if I was constructing a disjunction, the men's footage is more beautiful.

Why is that?

Men, traditionally, have had more money and Dr. James Sibley Watson is not the exception. The Eastman House archive has 35mm nitrate multiple takes of the

same shot in near perfect condition. I was amazed at the number of takes Dr. Watson could afford. Women, and especially lesbians, have had less money and less access to money and, therefore, to film-making. It was both a historic and aesthetic statement to shoot the women's sections in Super-8 while the men's sections originated in 35 or 16mm.

Until recently, we have had very few lesbian films. There was *Maedchen in Uniform* in 1931; we had *Dyketactics* in 1974. Is there anything before that? Or: Dorothy Arzner, will you please come out? That's the problem—there's a blank screen. But that makes it an exciting time to work, actually.

Contemporary theories of subjectivity valorize discontinuity; similarly, there is a critique of continuity in a kind of historiography that effaces gaps and links and puts causes and effects into a teleology. Both of these notions of discontinuity seem to run through Nitrate Kisses. . . .

Yes, I wanted the audience to become the historians and the archeologists. There are the strands and the threads and the fragments—or discontinuities, as you say—and the viewer must do the work and become an active participant in the cinema rather than escaping into the narrative structure of the film. So the narratives are always breaking and fragmenting even if there are stories on the tape. You become aware that this is non-illusionistic cinema and that's more of what I've been interested in. Even in *Orlando*, Sally Potter does this by having Tilda Swinton turn and speak to the audience. Break the illusion. . . . But who's to say what's true?

There are so many multiplicities of truth. We make a continuity ourselves, just as in life when we walk down the street and we piece separate things together. What we make out of Park City or Sundance, for example—our experience has been so fragmented here and yet when we go home, we'll remember it and feel it as a whole. But I am also interested in trying to make experiential cinema.

What do you mean by that?

When I had my experience coming out in 1970, I touched a woman's body for the first time when we made love. All the corpuscles on my skin were highly charged by touching a body similar to my own. I think that my sight is connected to my sense of touch. It was Aldous Huxley who pointed out that children know the world through touching before they can ever see.

I began to connect touch and sight in my work in 1974. In *Dyketactics*, there are 110 shots and every shot in that four-minute film has a quality of touch in it. Western knowledge is limited by privileging sight. We are touching even when we are sleeping!

I try to make all my films experiential. If it's underwater, I take the viewer on a swim. Through the pond, down the river, into the ocean. That's in *Pond and Waterfall*.

Do you think that this experiential level is a major element of Nitrate Kisses?

Yes, it's there in terms of texture and camera movement, especially as the camera caresses the loving couples, but I think *Nitrate Kisses* is much more

Still from James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber's *Lot in Sodom* used in *Nitrate Kisses*



intellectual. I never felt like I worked as much with showing my research or my thinking until I got to *Nitrate Kisses*. People have laughed at me when I've said that, but I feel it's my most accomplished film and it shows all my processes. I decided not to leave the research out of the film this time. Usually I research and then go into production. The research is the preparation and the production is the result, but with *Nitrate Kisses*, I kept the quotes from the books that really influenced me and I made sure that I got them on Kodalith [a high-contrast film used mainly for titles] and shot them, because I knew if they were there to edit with, I would use them. I thought it would be another level that the

films. But essayistic or not, I was a little worried about the didacticism. I felt that when you've been oppressed and you want to say something, you have to say it strong and loud, especially when you are working alone. I don't want to be subtle.

It's sort of a joke, but some people claim that pornography is the only genre that physically moves people, so I think it's great that you have made what some could construe as a "pornographic" film, but the "movement" is very different.

I'd like to say that my film is not pornographic. To me, the violence in some films is pornographic. Sexu-



Frances Lorraine
and Sally Binford
in *Nitrate Kisses*

film could work on. Some people feel like it breaks, but again, that's what I want to do—break the continuity that is part of commercial cinema.

At first I found the titles didactic and didn't like them, but then I decided I admired your audacity.

Well, there's a genre called the essay film, or the essayistic, which is a tradition that I was unaware of, although I admire Trinh T. Minh-ha and Yvonne Rainer's work. Their films are full of ideas, yet they're visual and they reach you on many levels and can be viewed many, many times. In fact, I would say *Reassemblage* and *Privilege* are two of my favorite

ability is like eating and sleeping and hiking, being active and taking care of ourselves in the world. It's necessary to be touched. I know how I change, the relaxation that goes into me, with sexual experience. Why do we hide it? The camera in *Nitrate Kisses* is not posed voyeuristically. It's a very intimate scene, and you feel like the cinematographer is part of this directed sexual lovemaking. I say "directed" because it looks *cinéma vérité* but it isn't. I know there is a discontinuity between the intimacy of the lovemaking and the abstraction of the subtitles, or the emptiness of the visuals of burnt-out homes. I knew when I viewed my footage that I had to include sexuality. It was going to make the

film. It was going to keep people with it, it was going to keep me with it, and it was going to show what we could also leave invisible.

What do you mean?

Within the lesbian communities there is a certain amount of policing and censorship and that's why I put such disparate forms of lovemaking in the film and especially why I included the S/M. A lot of women don't want to recognize S/M as a viable form of sexuality. The same is true of body decoration such as tattooing and piercing, which is very popular right now. The question is, what would we not look at? How might we censor our own history? I included forms and styles of lovemaking I felt might be excluded by our own communities today. It's not an ideal community, but then again, there aren't any, are there?

I found it interesting that after a recent screening you were called on as the representative for this disparate group called lesbians. . . .

Well, for many people outside "the community," there is a notion that there exists this united, homogeneous group. It's simply not true. It's better to speak of communities. When there have been so few lesbian film-makers, I am often expected to be a spokesperson for some mythical group. Expectations and desires of an underserved culture are projected. Perhaps I best serve the communities through teaching, where I can encourage diverse expression by young dykes.

I found your use of Foucault interesting because he is someone who has written on both history and transgression. While you reference the historiographical material, I wondered if you were familiar with A Preface to Transgression?

No, I'm not, although I am currently reading two books on transgression—*The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, and *Transgressions of Reading: Narrative Engagement as Exile and Return*, by Robert D. Newman. I tried to start a reading group to discuss these things—it's so hard once you're out of school!

So didactic or not, your referencing of this material outside an academic institution is interesting in and of itself.

I find the preproduction study and research as exciting and rewarding as the production aspect of media. I studied the Western constructions of death for *Vital Signs*, for example. Death is a state I've been trained to fear. I found that the medieval reception of

those who died was more familiar than what we have today. People were buried right next to their homes. Their presence was a part of life. After the cities became walled, cemeteries were put on the outside. We've put death far out of our minds. We've tried to forget those who have died. But now, certainly there is a new community that says, "We want to remember." We want to know our history. We are interested again in keeping the dead near by, and embracing them.

How do you respond to the charge that avant-garde work is elitist?

There is recent avant-garde film that tries to be accessible, and there are disruptive strategies that work. Look at film-makers like Peggy Ahwesh and Su Friedrich. Leslie Thornton kicks the tripod that her camera is on to make a disruption. Disruptions challenge assumptions. There's nothing elitist about being a bad girl. Also, video and film artists work with images from popular culture or incorporate the news and print media into their work, so I think it's more a problem of distribution that keeps us separated or makes the work "elitist." And what if we didn't have an avant-garde? Would we just clone films year after year?

- Holly Willis is the West Coast editor of *Filmmaker: The Magazine of Independent Film*; she is writing her dissertation on experimental film and video at USC.

Nitrate Kisses is available through Strand Releasing in Los Angeles; some of Barbara Hammer's other films are available from Women Make Movies, in New York City.

