

## Barbara Hammer

On that rare, early spring day, when the world erupts into petals and bloom I had the pleasure of speaking with legendary queer artist [Barbara Hammer](#). Pioneer of lesbian cinema, structuralism filmmaker and movement artist, Hammer's work has always pushed the boundaries of the cinematic.

We met at her studio space on the West Side highway and with the sun reflecting off the glittering mouth of the Hudson we fell into talking about her newest work, *Welcome to This House, a Film on Elizabeth Bishop* about the homes and domestic spaces of the poet Elizabeth Bishop. The film which you can see at the [MoMA from May 26<sup>th</sup> - June 1<sup>st</sup>](#) is an exploration of the homes of Bishop, which endeavors to challenge the nature of temporality, memory and the production of images.

However the work in particular that I was there to speak with her about was "Available Space" a performance that she originally constructed in 1979 and performed early this month at the Launch Party for [Global Committee](#) a new Brooklyn based art gallery.

"Available Space", is a 20 minute long performance that sees Hammer moving through a space, cradling a film projector in her arms. As she walks she projects an abstract film, comprised of bodies in motion on to all of the spaces and dimensions of the room she finds herself in, including the bodies of the audience members, the area beneath her feet, she pushes the projector at times right up close to the wall till the image is so small it is almost lost, before spinning and angling the projector across the room, filling the space with light, and casting the film from floor to ceiling. In playing with the projections the bodies represented on the 'screen' become differently alive, moving both within the film, and being stretched and contorted by Hammer's movement of the frame. This dialogue between the dancers in the film, and the dance of the film's projection is quintessential Hammer at her finest. She is always creating and devising work that challenges the boundaries of space-time and how we consume the art object. She wants you to work, to move, to explore space alongside her. The piece ends with Hammer passing off the projector to an assistant and stepping behind a white paper screen that she has positioned in the middle of the gallery. Drawing out a butchers knife she stabs repeatedly through the screen itself, till the paper has been ripped apart, and she assumes the place of the screen, her body becoming the site where the projection now rests, images of her past self dancing across her body.

The piece is haunting and yet filled with this fiery spirit that asks us to challenge convention and unseat our expectations about how film is meant to be consumed. As the sounds of the cars and the waves of the Hudson mingled we came around to talking about 'Available Space'.

**Shelton:** How has re-performing Available Space changed in 2015, compared to when you devised the piece in the late 70's?

**Barbara:** It has really changed, for instance this is the first time I have performed the work digitally. Early this year I had a lecture at Pratt where I performed this work. I used a 16 mm projector on a table with wheels. To see a 70 plus woman pushing this major projector, and projecting around the space, it gives another dimension to the work. I mean I always have to have an assistant now to catch me or the projector you know. It gives another dimension to the performance that the digital will never hold or have. But given the crowd that was at the Garis & Hahn gallery when I performed the version you saw, it would have been impossible to move with a 16 mm projector. So I have switched to digital. Plus there are very few old school projectors in the world; it's an old fashion machine. But the digital projector allows me to move around the space. Always when I perform this work the space is different. I get to choose the locations for the woman pushing the frame, the woman constantly frustrated by her captivity of the frame of the camera, which was ingeniously invented by Lumier if we go back to the early camera, but the whole rectangle nature of the screen is constructed, and so 'Available Space' the film is about a woman pushing the frame into some new kind of projection space. It could be a circle a triangle a rectangle, or multiple screens as we have today. Or it could be the single image, but bent around the corner. The other idea with this film is about getting the audience to move, because I really object to Hollywood cinema which is cut in such a way to entertain us without involving us. And so we go to sleep politically because we have been drugged by Hollywood, and I want people to become active with their body for the mind is part of the body and the blood rushing through your body as you move to see the projection also goes through your mind and hopefully you will be more alert more critical when you see cinema that is critical of Hollywood because of that flow, that movement which stops you from going to sleep. And to be critical of Hollywood is to be critical of the current political, economic, environmental and social world. I mean we need to be more critical, we can all imagine a better world but we don't seem to make it.

So I am trying in my own little way to move that dialogue forward, by activating the audience.

**S:** In addition to activating our bodies, I felt that this piece specifically activates dialogues and critiques the current status on gender, performance and the machine as represented in cinema. We often speak about the cinematic apparatus as masculine and penetrating, and the screen is this feminized location that the object/image is projected onto. So in watching you as a woman carry the device of projection around and interrupting the space with unexpected moments of projection is this fabulous re-gendering and challenging of traditional cinematic assumptions. And then when you end the piece when you penetrate the screen, so graphically, speaking and tearing the screen apart, until suddenly the images are projected onto you is such an active dismantling of the Hollywood aesthetic, that we as the audience become aware of the conventions and expectations of consumerist cinema. How does it feel as a performer to penetrate the screen, to challenge those genre and gender assumptions?

**B:** Well once I did this show at the Tate Modern in London, and they built me this giant screen to do the performance on, and I got up on this ladder to stab the paper and as you can imagine I was so emphatic while doing it, the knife slipped out of my hand and went into the audience. But luckily it skid on the floor. (Laughter) Some one from the audience had to hand me the knife later. Oh I was so scared when I heard it hit the floor.

But the thing that was empowering thing about the Body2Body performance was rapping. I have never done that before. It was spontaneous. It was probably the best part. (laughter) Normally there is audio on that film, but it did not come through. And so after I stabbed the screen I just started moving through the audience, and I kept feeling that I needed to say something. I was working with my body movement, and it gave me the rap, it gave me the words, it gave me the rhyme, it made me dance, and feel inspired to deliver that free form piece. And then it ended in the right form of space.

**S:** You have made a career out of challenging cinematic conventions, specifically temporal conventions and how we relate to time. Now you find yourself with a massive personal archive of your own work, as well as works such as 'Available Space' that you continue to perform. This archive, the re-performance of your older works, your general interest in disrupting time through cinematic expression. Why is temporal disruption and archival work so important to you?

**B:** Why did I keep everything? I mean look around here all of these boxes are filled with my writings, I was a writer before I was a film maker. When I started to make film I was taking a film history class. I was already 30 years old and I knew nothing of making film. I already had another career in English literature, and in one semester of film school, I saw only one film by a woman, it was only a few minutes long. It was 'Meshes of the Afternoon' by Maya Dern. When I saw that film I knew I had chosen my second masters degree program wisely. There was room for me, the screen was blank in terms of women's cinema, and in terms of lesbian cinema there was hardly a screen. So I right away new that I had to document my life as a lesbian in the 20<sup>th</sup> century going into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to leave some repository so people coming behind me would not be left with nothing. And then this was only reinforced when I went to study lesbian artist as I got further into my career, artists such as Alice Austin a photographer, who lived with her lover for 50 years and yet their was no documentation or descriptive labeling of her as a lesbian even though she was. Furthermore I discovered that board members and trustee of her archive had been taking out the lesbian materials and destroying it. And its not just this archive, some artists burned their own letters, Elizabeth bishop did not come out, because of the homophobia that exists culturally, the homophobia that we drank down when we drank our mothers milk, so we all were raised homophobically. So this became a further confirmation for me that saving my archive, whether I made artwork or not, at least it would exists as a record of one lesbian life, for how ever long I am granted it.

We continued to talk as the afternoon wore on.....

Its not often that one gets to meet some one who is as inspirational as Barbara hammer.