

BARBARA HAMMER

INTERVIEWED BY
HANS ULRICH OBRIST



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How did you come to art in the first place? I saw an interview online where you said that at age 30 you were a housewife and you had a sudden epiphany. Can you tell me more about that?

BARBARA HAMMER Yes, my epiphany. I think there were multiple epiphanies like there are multiple orgasms. I had been married for 9 years and I felt there was something inside me that wasn't expressed. So I began to make Super-8 films, to do installations. We had built our own house in the woods: I'm of the generation that was part of the Black Panther movement, the feminist movement, the lesbian movement, and the hippie movement.

HUO So, you designed your own house?

BH Yeah, we did. We drew our own plans. The guy I married was working class. I said I'll marry you if we go around the world, I was just straight out of getting a BA in Psychology at UCLA. So we got a Lambretta, we picked it up in Milan and drove around the world in one year. Then we came back, bought the land and did the plans, got them approved and built the house ourselves. I had a big studio downstairs that I painted in at the time, then I decided I would apprentice myself to William Morehouse, who started the Graduate Art Institute program at the San Francisco Art Institute. I had seen a poster of his, it was very sexual, and I thought I wanted to study with him. So he helped me identify myself as an artist. After one semester I took a room of my own, I stretched white paper around the whole room and started painting. He was a second generation abstract expressionist, he thought that I should find my way to make a mark, so I made my marks. He also told me how hard it was to be an artist, but I still continued and I divorced my husband. At the time I used to read the biographies of male artists.

HUO Vincent Van Gogh?

BH Van Gogh and Gauguin. That gave me the incentive to leave my life, and take a risk and move out into the world. At the same time, I came out as a lesbian after I left my husband. I took off for Europe with my girlfriend and I lived in Germany for a year, in Ludwigsburg, where I was an English teacher for the American Army. We lived there and bought BMW motorcycles, flew them back on an Army plane and drove across the United States.

Then I enrolled in San Francisco State University, with the 10,000 dollars my mother left me when she died. I decided to go into film, as I was interested in the courses in philosophy, theories of filmmaking, as well as script-writing. After one semester, I decided that was really my way, especially after I had seen Maya Deren's *Mesches of the Afternoon*.

HUO Maya Deren was an inspiration?

BH During the film history classes, we three feminist students sat together and watched films and there was never a film by a woman. We were always saying 'what about Pudovkin's wife?; who is Eisenstein's mother?; who are the women in these men's lives?'. Then finally, one short film came on the screen: it was different than anything I had seen. That was Maya Deren's *Mesches of the Afternoon*, 1945. What I saw was cinema made from emotions, from the inside out, rather than intellectual or narrative cinema. I felt a connection with that emotional approach to imagery. I decided there was a blank screen in terms of women and lesbian cinema. So, I decided to fill that space.

HUO Do you still show these films?

BH I still show them. I also have Super-8 films that I did while I was married. I showed them in the retrospective at the Leslie-Lohman Museum. They are being digitized right now, there's probably a hundred films now.

HUO Wow! Can you describe a little of the films you made in parallel with school? You made thirteen films in a very short time. How did that happen?

BH I think art is energy, it's my definition of art. I had a lot of energy breaking out of a traditional role, finding a new sense of freedom. I needed to express a lot of things that had never been shown: lesbian sexuality, menstruation, comedies of super-dykes taking over San Francisco, 'psychosynthesis.'

HUO Can you tell me more about 'psychosynthesis'?

BH It means putting together your different psyches into one. The synthesis of your psyches. I learned that through therapy sessions: my thera-





pist asked me to lie down on the floor, turn on the tape recorder, close my eyes and open the door. Out of the door came a baby, a witch, an athlete, an artist.

HUO We are many!

BH We are many. I did three very personal films *X, Psychosynthesis, and I Was/I Am*: this is my second 16mm film where I change from a tiara-wearing princess into a motorcycle dyke and I take a key out of my mouth, referencing Maya Deren; on the motorcycle seat there's a sliced pumpkin with a gun inside. These are all quick actions. I learnt how to edit by studying the theories of Eisenstein.

HUO So, Eisenstein was another hero, besides Maya Deren. What did you learn from him?

BH I learned editing techniques of disjunction, how every edit creates an emotional shock in the viewer's psyche and it makes them feel alive. That's what I wanted, an active audience. I also learned about perspective and scale. At that time narrative cinema, for the most part, was so linear and boring to me, and I thought that his early writing as well as his films really confronted that.

HUO So, your idea of active cinema came out of Eisenstein?

BH I think the editing aspect of it. The other aspect of active cinema for me is to get the audience out of their seats. So, I take a portable projector or even a 16mm and I roll it around the room and then I have a rotary projector table, so I could use the architecture of the space for the screens.

HUO So, when did you use the notion of active cinema for the first time?

BH In 1979.

HUO With which piece?

BH It's called *Available Space*. It's a 16mm film shot in eight sections of images with 10 seconds of black in between which gives me time to roll the projector to a new space. It's about a woman feeling confined by architecture and the rectangular film frame and screen. The images show a woman, it's me, pushing the frame of the film, trying to expand it. Then at the very end there is an image of me, re-photographed, projected onto a white paper screen.

HUO And then you go through the paper?

BH And then I go through it. I did it at the Turbine Hall, at the Tate, within the retrospective Stuart Comer curated. In the Turbine Hall there's a lot of space, I could even run with the projector, the audience had to move.

HUO Any part of architecture can basically become part of the work: the ceiling, the vaults, the corners, the waves...

BH Yes. The first time I did it was at 80 Langton, New Langton Arts in San Francisco. I wielded the projector to the door and projected outside onto a garage door across the street. One time I projected on snow, out of a window. I thought traditional narrative cinema was an escapist cinema. I wanted the audience to be politically motivated and my idea was that if you get up and move you have more blood running through your system. More energy.

HUO You mentioned Eisenstein's writing and I know you are also writing a lot. Can you tell me about your texts?

BH A lot of them went to the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Collection at Yale.

HUO Your handwritten work?

BH My handwritten work. Three boxes of journals that I kept up until the '90s. I write mostly now

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about living with illness and health issues. I wrote a lot in the late '60s and early '70s, never correcting, never re-reading, writing about my life, my coming out, my struggles as a filmmaker, and the first 30 pages of that is called *My Life as Henry Miller*. They were published within the book *Hammer! Making Movies out of Sex and Life*. I think there's also a novel in there. There's also something Frieze published at the last Frieze fair in London which was early lesbian aesthetic, where I'm influenced by the cultural movement going on in the Bay Area, talking about the mother as a muse, circle forms for women to use... I was trying to break out of that rectangular frame, so the circle was another way to show films: I started projecting onto inflated weather balloons.

HUO Wow.

BH It's beautiful. I did that at the Tate and I most recently did it at the Exploratorium last February. I put two performances together and two films, *Available Space* and sometimes we also project a film called *Bent Time*, in which I walked across the United States taking a frame of film for every step, in high-energy locations, and then through editing, making them into a circle. I had read that time bends at the edge of the universe, so I used a 9mm lens, that actually bent the image. There's a score by Pauline Oliveros.

HUO So your writing is mostly unpublished, right? Only one book was published, *Hammer! Making Movies out of Sex and Life* (2009), The Feminist Press, City University of New York.

BH Yes.

HUO Was that a kind of manifesto?

BH It is, it moves through decades so you could see a changing aesthetic and a changing philosophy. The first 30 pages are fictive writing but based on my life. Then we go into different essays I've written over the years for film or feminist publications, *Millennium Film Journal*, *Sinister Wisdom or Heresies*. There are also new chapters like a piece on censorship, and about my interest in mortality issues.

HUO Doris Lessing defined autobiography as an interim report. She once told me a great thing about unrealized projects, which I was very fascinated by.

She told me that unrealized projects are not only the projects which we couldn't carry out due to lack of money or censorship, but also the projects we didn't dare to do. There's a certain degree of self-censorship in all of us. What are your unrealized projects, projects that were too big, too expensive, too ambitious, something you didn't dare to do?

BH Well, putting my naked nude cancer-stricken hairless body on the screen during a very bad year of chemotherapy and looking at that now in my edit, I think that is the scariest thing I could ever have done and performed. But there are also unrealized projects. One of them was unrealized because I didn't have money. I think it was a good project, a script called *Nothing Could Be Worse than Two Dykes in Menopause*: it's about a younger woman wanting to be an older woman and to join an older woman's group. I got to do 17 minutes of the piece, but I didn't really have the money to go forward.

Another unrealized project is called *Dune Shack*: I lived in a dune shack in Cape Cod about ten years ago for a month without any electricity. I was working with miniatures at the time, miniature toys, winding them up, putting leaves on them and filming. I never could find a justification for finishing it, because I didn't have political content for it. The third unrealized project is from 1975: I drove my motorcycle to Guatemala by myself and with my wind-up Bolex where I went to a village that had a big market that indigenous people came to. I filmed that and my idea was always, and still is, to go back and try to find the same location. I would film in the same locations and the film would investigate the commercial economy that I suppose will be reflected dramatically in the images. The commercialization of Latin American economies would be my research project.

HUO So, to go back to Guatemala. That's the third unrealized project.

BH That's the third. There's a few digital projects that are unfinished, one of them is an AIDS conference for deaf people that was held in San Francisco in 1996 and I have ten tapes. It was filmed in a traditional documentary style. My idea is to find a deaf filmmaker to finish the project.

HUO Can you tell me about technology?

BH If there's a new technology I want to learn it,





I want access to it. Now when you see this piece that we've edited and I've made about mortality, you'll see how far I've pushed the program of FinalCut Pro: you'll see the complicated images, the projections on my body, digitized images of a skeleton, x-rays of the human body, a CAT scan projected on my head... I was sick, that whole year. I'm in an experimental trial now with immunotherapy and I have stable disease now!.

HUO But now you're feeling better?

BH Oh yes, I'm better. I have more fat on me, I have hair, color.

HUO In the '90s you went back to the roots with your trilogy, which is composed of the films *Nitrate Kisses*, *Tender Fictions* and *History Lessons*.

BH *Nitrate Kisses* was my move into the essay documentary from this more experimental work. I decided to be intellectually active, to stimulate people's brains. I began to use gay and lesbian material which was left out of history, by making a film about these absences: that was *Nitrate Kisses*, I shot in Super-8 while traveling in Germany, Berlin and Paris, looking for spaces like Mulackstraße in the former East Berlin and meeting the wonderful trans-woman, Charlotte von Mahlsdorf that Rosa von Praunheim made a film of the same year. It was followed by *Tender Fictions*, which became a critique of autobiography, and then by *History Lessons* which is a trip.

HUO That's a comedy.

BH Yeah. It's all made of lesbian material that was made by men, before the beginning of the feminist movement in the '70s. I took that material and re-edited it and changed some of the voices. For example, I have Eleanor Roosevelt welcome the audience to the 'first ever lesbian conference.'

HUO I am really interested in the idea of mentorship. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote *Letters to a Young Poet*, which is a masterpiece. You also wanted to help the younger generation. That's a whole other experiment which started after the trilogy.

BH Yes, I love that book. My first concrete move towards mentoring was running by chance into a young woman who was working in a technical laboratory, she showed me a contact printer that she was in charge of and she was working in 35mm,

70mm. I asked to see her films and I suggested we make a film together, so Gina Carducci and I made *Generations* (2009). We shot with our Bolexes, we went to Coney Island and worked on the idea of youth and age coming together. When we finished shooting, eight or nine months later, I saw that real mentoring was giving the younger artist the chance to fly free and find her own voice. So I said let's divide the footage, and we edited it without seeing each other. She edited it in 16mm, I edited it in digital files and then we married each other's footage without cross-editing at all.

HUO Speaking more generally now, in 2017, what would be your advice to a young artist and filmmaker today?

BH To believe in yourself. Don't listen to anybody else, follow your own intuition, intuition can be just a little spark, try it out. Don't think about fame, don't think about the gallery system in the art world, I didn't. Finally it found me later in life. Have friends in the art world, that's just happening for me now too. Don't spend money on cars and homes, you don't need that. If you're really satisfied by making your work and that really fills you up, you don't need the other things that culture tells you to need. Enjoy, don't do it unless it's pleasurable, we only have one life and it's short, so pleasure yourself. Not every aspect of your work is going to be pleasurable, but the main one, if you love to edit, love to shoot, make that the primary focus, if you love the way paint absorbs into soft paper, let that happen, let it flow.

HUO Beautiful, that's a great list.

BH Thank you.

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