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Eat like a Republican and you won't get AIDS - a conversation with Barbara Hammer

Andrzej Pitrus: In 2009 I had the honor to speak to Jonas Mekas. Many people consider him the father of American avant-garde. Do you agree?

Barbara Hammer: I don't agree. Should I tell you why?

Yes, sure.

I think Jonas Mekas did a lot to contribute to avant-garde film in the United States and internationally, but in terms of American avant-garde, I think we have to look to Maya Deren, and even before – to James Sibley Watson, his *Fall of the House of Usher* in 1928. His *Lot in Sodom* was shown,—I was shocked to read this—in Times Square in 1933 without any censorship at all.

Before Mekas there were many American experimental filmmakers, but he was a person promoted their works. Of course I asked Jonas: “Do you feel more Lithuanian or American?” He answered “No, I'm not American, I'm from New York. When I go outside the city, I'm a foreigner again.”

I also asked him for his definition of experimental film and he said: “There's no such thing! Scientists make experiments, I don't really believe that there's something like experimental film”. It was a difficult conversation in a way. I wonder if you agree with him?

I definitely think there's something like experimental film. In *Sanctus* (1990), which is composed of moving x-rays of a human body that Dr. James Sibley Watson showed in the 50s, my experiment was to try to put a halo around the body, the skeletons, and to use secondary colors, like orange, lavender, turquoise, not red, blue and yellow. I wanted a subtle celebration of the bones and organs with these muted colors. If you look inside the interior of the body, which is mostly water, and see organs floating around, it seems very quiet and meditative. I wanted to celebrate the body, not the way we usually see it.

That was an experiment, I had to do many trials, and fail, and try again, to get everything the way I wanted it... So I think there is experimental film, yes.

I was quite 'disappointed' with his answer, because what I do for living is teach experimental film. Should I quit my job?

Mekas replaced this idea with a notion of 'cinema of the authors'. He said, "I'm an author, I'm a person, who, in a way, uses a camera like a pen".

He is speaking for his own kind of cinema. He doesn't see his work as experimental. After all, I don't know what the word is in English... "a writer of images".

How do you see yourself in the tradition of the American avant-garde? In your early career you made a film on Stan Brakhage. Unfortunately I haven't seen it. Then, you made another film about his wife, so I wonder if Brakhage is important for you and in which way?

Thank you for that question. I was very drawn to international film. When I was just 30 years old, I saw Bergman's movie with subtitles and I thought, "Oh, here's intellectual cinema". Then, I went to Cinematheque in San Francisco and I saw Stan Brakhage's *Dog Star Man* (1961-1964), in which he walks up a mountain to cut down a tree. It's more than 60 minutes long, I think, and it changed my world view. When I left the cinema theatre, I saw the street around me, the lights, the trees growing, the pavement differently. That was fascinating to me. I also was taking a class where we saw everything Brakhage made up until then. An early film dedicated to Brakhage is *The Song of a Clinking Cup* (1972). It's not ever been transferred from 8mm, so there's no way you could probably see it. I've never shown it.

Yes, it is very hard to find.

Jane Brakhage was my thesis film, and it only exists in 16mm. We are writing some grants to get money for digitizers so it can be made available. Another film that hasn't been released is an interview I did with her parents asking about her relationship with Stan, as well as herself of course, and this exists as a video transferred to DVD, but it hasn't been edited, so I want to go back and work on it. I think I will call it *Jane Brakhage*, too or *Jane Brankhage Two*.

Speaking about Brakhage... Maya Deren, who's certainly important for you, once said that his film about his baby being born was too much. I wonder if you agree with it?

This is amazing, because *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959) is exactly why I made *Jane Brakhage*, but I never knew Maya Deren had any commentary about it. Where did she say that?

I am not sure, but I have found these words of Brakhage himself: 'It was Maya Deren's contention that the film was a blasphemy... because it permitted men to see what they're not supposed to see'.

In *Window Water Baby Moving* he shows childbirth in a very explicit way. And it was made in the late 50s when it wasn't that common not only to share images of childbirth on film, but also for a father to participate in it.

We can thank him for that film and for another, when he went to the morgue to capture *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (1971). I really objected to that birth film, especially after I met Jane Brakhage, because he shows her as an earth goddess: you see her in a bathtub with her pregnant belly and she's celebrated as if she was on a pedestal, as if she was extraordinary in terms of mythology. So I decided I wanted to meet her. We invited Stan and Jane to the San Francisco State University, where I was a graduate student. She was **so** not a goddess; she was a very practical person. She collected seeds from trees in San Francisco when we were walking to the school, and she was going to plant them and see if they would grow. I made my thesis film on her and I went to Colorado, high up in the mountains in Rollinsville, and I found the most amazing woman. She wrote an alphabet of dog language. She could play on her recorder songs to the birds and they would answer her. She put out the laundry and then opened her hand without any food in it and birds landed on it. She took a walk through the snow—I was there in January—and her donkey and goats, besides her dogs, followed us on the walk. She was an extraordinary woman, who was abused in a way by Stan Brakhage. He talked all day, she had to sit there and listen to him.

And also she had to be in his films!

And she didn't get credit! Who shot him when he was cutting down the tree? It was Jane Brakhage, she told me.

There was a problem with his second wife, who didn't want to be filmed. So he started making non-camera films, painting and scratching, and once he said that this was because his second wife didn't really want to be shown, especially giving birth or having sex with him...

Well, I think he was being clever, because he did make *Mothlight* (1964) a year before which is a cameraless film though not hand painted or scratched; it's a wonderful film. He takes moths and takes their wings and puts them on celluloid—16mm film—and then has it re-photographed in a lab, so you are seeing moths 'flying', bringing reality into projection in a way nobody had done before.

We've just watched *Dyketactics* (1974). It was made when the approach to explicit sex on the screen changed. On one hand, there's your experimental film, and on the other there's *Deep Throat* (1972), a mainstream porn flick and a feature film at the same time. Correct me if I'm wrong, but the sex in

***Dyketactics* is said to be staged, so there's no pleasure involved. How it is to stage a sex scene?**

I think it's wonderful to perform... In my opinion, when you're shooting sex, it's always staged, it's always a performance. In terms of shooting sex without performance I guess you could put a camera on the wall and let it run for a week, and maybe you would forget it. But I think there's pleasure in performance and there can be pleasure in a stage set, but you're very aware of the camera being there, and besides, with the Bolex you only get 19 feet, so it's going to stop. You can giggle and then wind it again. Anyway, I'm in the film and I'm directing it, so I know it was staged, I know it was pleasurable. I had the idea that the best shot in the film is the most intimate. The Bolex can run by itself, so you wind it and you put it between the two bodies and you just take your hand away. It shoots the scene of the two women pulling their hands up along the body. You have three-dimensionality, depth, sensuality, hand touching. If I may interject, my cinema is about connecting touch and sight. It was perfect to make the screen a sexual haptic experience, so I hope the audience feel in their bodies what they see with their eyes. My research shows that we all touch as infants before we see. For two months your eyes don't focus. That's why I have 110 images in these four minutes, and every image has a sense of touch in it.

***Dyketactics* was certainly a breakthrough and probably the first arthouse film in which an explicit lesbian sex scene is shown. But obviously, before that there were many pornographic films with both heterosexual and homosexual scenes. This was a very important and interesting moment, because in the 70s porn films went mainstream, and at the same time, there were also people who wanted to use pornography in a different way. Do you believe it is possible to use pornography in a decent, proper way and make some kind of value out of it?**

When you say "a proper way", do you mean for pleasure, for sexual arousal?

Actually no... Mainstream pornography is an exploitation of mostly female bodies and female sexuality made for men's pleasure. But there were feminists who wanted to redefine pornography. I'm asking this question, because your film is certainly not pornography in a proper sense, but it is as explicit as some well-known, soft-core pornography films. The borderline is really obscure.

This is a fun question. We could probably talk about it for hours. I have no objection to people being stimulated in whatever way they want: visually, texturally, with their imagination or with the real thing, but I think I was very concerned that my work would not be possible to voyeur. So when you come to some other films, like *Nitrate Kisses* (1992), when you have four different couples making love throughout the feature documentary, I make sure that I interrupt the film. There's the rupture, not only to show the loss of gay history, which was my intention, but also to say that this film was not made for sexual pleasure and stimulation, although it's ok with me if you are stimulated.

The whole film is about censorship of queer history, but when I looked at my own community I had to ask: what are we censoring? We're censoring the sexual practices of old women—we never see them on the screen—or black and white couples, or young women who shave their heads and tattoo their bodies. We're censoring sadomasochistic sex practices—this was at the time of the sex wars in the feminist community. I wanted to say: “hey, we're not holier than you, we have our own censorship”.

I really enjoyed your *Menses* (1974), because it's so affirmative. In many films or feminist performances the problem of menstruation was shown as a kind of a curse. I don't really know much about it, I wish I could...

I encourage students and filmmakers to make work that is gender specific. For example, many times when I'm teaching I have young Caucasian men in my class... I haven't seen a film of a wet dream yet! There are different expressions that our gendered bodies have, so I'm happy to tell you about menstruation.

The girls who are buying massive amounts of tampax and stuff.. It is funny and affirmative. This is a kind of radical happening, but like nothing else on the subject.

I made that film because I had seen Walt Disney films. When we were children, the girls were separated from the boys to see films about menstruation. It was all about flowers, it wasn't at all about the experience of dripping blood between your legs. There are some serious points in *Menses*. For instance, I researched menstruation in history. I had a slumber party and I shared my research with the young women who are in the film, and one of my sources was from the Roman author Pliny, who said that if a woman is menstruating and she touches a pregnant horse, its milk will go sour. Historically, women have been banned in different cultures during menstruation: you have to go to a house outside the village. That the impetus plus my own personal history with my mother telling me about menstruation—which she didn't—that made me make that film.

Another film made in the 70s, *Superdyke* (1975), is also funny. It shows girls attacking institutions and taking over. But I wonder if experimental or avant-garde cinema is the best 'weapon' for an activist? Once a German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder said that he had realized the audience he wanted to address really enjoyed melodramas and Hollywood film rather than his revolutionary works. So, in a way, his avant-garde and experimental cinema made very little sense. People he wanted to reach preferred mainstream culture. You make experimental films, and you are probably seen as an activist...

I'm functioning as a visual artist. I can make what I want if I'm self-funding my films. I think I made my films out of my own pocket for 15 years at least. So I have to be giving myself pleasure, I have to be doing what I want for the reasons that I have, and they

don't necessarily have anything to do with activism. My audience is the same as Fassbinder's: they want a narrative, they want a lesbian happy ending. In the 70s or the 80s, the queer audience wasn't used to experimental film any more than the straight audience. I can't say that my films were always well attended. Sometimes they were, when my name became known or if there were a celebration and we could dance afterwards. The times were different then. The thing is, Fassbinder isn't alive today, and I am. So I'm wondering about his change of direction. You see what I mean? If we don't do what really pleases us, maybe we get depressed and choose an ending.

What killed him was drugs and alcohol...

But we can ask – why the drugs and alcohol?

In *Women I Love* (1976) you used slightly different imagery. In the early films you were explicit, and I think at that time it could be quite shocking to some people. Then, in *Women I Love* you opt for Georgia O'Keefe-style imagery, more metaphorical and poetical: fruits and vegetables evoking sexual organs.

You could say that the film *Women I Love* was in 1976, just two years after *Dyketactics*, and then in '93 I'm showing explicit sexuality again. In *History Lessons* in 2000 I'm showing pornography of lesbians made by men. I don't think there's some adverse reaction that I was having toward sexual expression. I was interested in animation, and also these were six or seven of my lovers that I had no intention of making a film about. When I started, I was just shooting our relationship without intention to put it in a film for others. Then it seemed to me on one rainy day, when there was nothing to do but make a film, that each woman could represent a different fruit or vegetable. I only had that material that I had shot to work with, and that became *Women I Love*.

You mentioned lesbian pornography made by men. I wonder why it is so popular among men to watch lesbian pornography.

Well, I have to ask *you* that! But let me talk about *History Lesson*, if I may. I made three feature documentaries about ideas rather than a person or persons. These are essay films. They're all about queer history. After *Nitrate Kisses* (1992), I made a post-postmodern autobiography called *Tender Fictions* (1995), and that was followed by *History Lessons* (2000). If you look for lesbian cinema when I started making film there wasn't any and I felt that we needed to have a foundation to build our culture. My plan was that I would take what was already there: medical films made about lesbians, educational films—'oh, don't let your daughter get too close to her schoolmate'—and pornography made by men. Going back to the 1920s, I found pornographic film and made a comedy out of those. My idea is that these manmade negative or fantastical ideas of what lesbian sex was like could be our history—and that became very queer as I took something that already existed, turned it around, made it malleable and flexible, and reclaimed it. That's making queer cinema space, and I didn't have that language for it when I made it, but I knew I wanted to make a foundation of what was there and I

could do it through being humorous.

Heterosexual men would never go and watch homosexual pornography with males, but on the other hand many of them would enjoy lesbian scenes in pornography. Why?

Because if they watched male homosexual sexuality, that might implicate them, but a woman—soft, gentle and a lesbian? Maybe they could convince her to have sex with them. It isn't threatening, it doesn't threaten their masculine construction. You and I were brought up by our parents, school and educational system. You and I could have exactly the same feelings if we were brought up in a non-sexist environment. I think it's possible and I think young people today are experiencing that. It's not about me changing the world, it's about the world changing.

Today your visit is really important. You probably know that in 2015 Poles elected a new government. Quite a disaster, I think. Our new minister of higher education once said that we had 'to do something' with all those gender studies, because they are not a real academic subject. I am quite concerned since I am an academic and I do deal with gender studies a lot.

Just a few days ago, there was a huge conflict over abortion. You probably know that the Polish law is quite restrictive at the moment, but there was a fight in the Polish Parliament over the right to abortion. The party called Prawo i Sprawiedliwość that has a majority there wanted to ban it completely. Even if the child is an effect of a rape or is dead, not able to live, or has severe medical issues, you cannot abort. You said once that we still have to fight for feminist issues; if we win, then feminism is not necessary. How do you see Poland in this context?

On one hand it is shocking what the government is prescribing in the legislature, and on the other hand it is amazing to the world to see the activism of the public, 24,000 on the streets, men and women. Men can be feminists too. I know more demonstrations were planned, because my Polish friends are directly involved in that. The power of the people on the streets can immediately change the minds of mostly men in the legislature to reconsider. And it did! I think it's very successful. Feminism is certainly still necessary and not only in Poland, but in every country on this small planet. We haven't arrived. Certainly you know that.

I think it's successful, but on the other hand I also have some doubts about it. Maybe they really didn't want to change the law in the first place, but just played it to make people come to the streets and protest. Abortion has always been a 'replacement topic' in Poland. Now they can say, "Well, we are listening to you! You will have what you want".

I don't think they're that smart.

They're not too smart in one way, and very smart in another. Well, I'm not sure if they are listening, but if they are, they are going shut Mocak down pretty soon.

That really surprises and shocks me and it's the first time I've heard that so I don't know what to say, except to listen to you and be open. Maybe that's possible, but I have the feeling that if the legislature hasn't changed and they really haven't fixed the law—yet it is too soon to see—that it could become a global imperative, that people from all over Europe, Australia, the southeast Asia, the US, South America would be come to Poland to protest. I had this vision. I think it will happen if things aren't changed.

Let's hope so. I think that the people who protested were really honest, but the government knows the statistics: over seventy percent of Polish society does not expect change in the abortion law. They support the status quo. Yet, some Polish people are more progressive and they want abortion on demand. But only some of them.

My next question is related to a film that I really like. It's called *Pools* (1981) and it's really different, since it does not seem to have a feminist subject. But underneath there's something, because actually it's a film about a female architect who designed this strange palace for 'Citizen Kane'. In this film you manipulate the film stock. What made you interested in the very substance of cinema?

I began to identify as an artist when I was 27 and when I was 30 I was taking a painting class. I thought I'd be a painter. My teacher came up to me and said, "You are more interested in movement than you are in putting the paint on the canvas". Our subject was a woman on a motorcycle. She came right into the studio and I painted her with four arms and four legs. I'd never seen Duchamp, I didn't know that much about art at the time. In any case, that's what he told me and he brought in some clear film without any image on it and a projector, and he told me I could paint on the film, so I started painting and projecting the painted film onto the canvas. Then I started painting with fluorescent paint and used a black light that I would turn on and off during projection so the images would flicker. I think he was right: I used to paint all the way around the room.

In *Pools* though it was a different technique. I made the film with Barbara Klutinis whose work as a still photographer who hand painted her photographs I appreciated. We took stills during the shoot at the swimming pools at the Hearst Castel and we filmed with stop motion our hand painting of the printed black and white photographs later in my studio. Of course, this led to some abstractions of the original photographic image.

Do you feel attached to this tradition of abstraction?

I love abstraction, but I don't feel attached to it.

I was thinking about Stan Brakhage. His handmade films were like Jackson Pollock's paintings in miniature...

Yes, I love many of those films. But societal injustices often pull me back from abstraction. For example, in *Snow Job: The Media Hysteria of AIDS* (1986), I'm talking about media and how it has distorted the truth. For instance, I found bumper stickers in the United States that say "Eat like a Republican and you won't get AIDS"... Really crazy things. "Don't let your hairdresser sneeze on you". Full of stereotypes. In 1985 I turned to a critical cinema that was led not by my body, but by my mind. There are stages in the entire body of my oeuvre and I think those changes should be considered when an idea is addressed.

***Sanctus* (1990) is based on x-ray film. You discovered it in Rochester, in George Eastman House. Before you were showing the surface of the body; here you go deeper. In a way it is a manipulated found footage film, but you use it to understand something very substantial. What was so interesting in those x-ray films to you, and why did you want to interact with stock itself?**

I am using images of the basic body structure and it was intuitively right to work with the basic physical structure of film. Theme and process made a handshake. The fact that film is chemically based I love and exploit: it can burn, you can drop acid on it, you can make the most beautiful circles just with water drops, you can throw salt on it which is a crystal formation that creates facets of light. I've taken film and put it through the sewing machine, then re-photographed it in *Endangered* (1988), where I talk about life on the Galapagos Islands being endangered and really all of us, because it is a material form. That's the reason, and because—approaching it as a painter originally—I want to put my hands on film stock and move it around, but now it's digital.

The next film I want to discuss is one of my favorites: *Nitrate Kisses* from the early 90s. There is some kind of relationship between *Sanctus* and this one. In this film you combine two subjects: cinema that passes away, and lesbian sensuality and its memory. What is the link between them? The film is about something that we lose in terms of cinema, its material aspect, and also in terms of memory of lesbian history.

Both films are about loss. In *Nitrate Kisses* (1992) I am working with the loss of lesbian and gay history whereas in *Sanctus* I am interested in the loss of the healthy body due to medical practices. I was really influenced by Roland Barthes' and Walter Benjamin's studies of history. Benjamin says that you can understand a culture by its fragments. This is what made me think that the fragments of queer history can be brought together and made into a whole. We don't need to have the entire bottle here to understand it. It could be broken and if we have one piece of glass, we can understand that this culture was based on heat, perhaps coal. We can surmise a lot about the culture from the

fragment. Also, I like the audience to become the archeologist of the cinematic fragments. They have to make the meaning rather than me spoon feeding them with my ideology.

In *A Horse is Not a Metaphor* (2008) you relate to your experience with cancer. The film is very personal, so I wonder if you made it to break another taboo or just for yourself?

I think about all my films going back to *Dyketactics* and even before (for example, a film called *A Gay Day* (1973)) are to make what is not seen visible. I have never seen a film or read a book about going through chemotherapy; that's why I made that film. And also because people don't know about ovarian cancer, which is the kind of cancer that I have, and I wanted to share the knowledge and experiences I've had. Ovarian cancer is often misdiagnosed. If you knew what the symptoms were, you would be able to survive it if you caught it in the first few stages. At the end of the film I mention the symptoms: bloating, frequent urination, back pain and so on. There are many doctors who have misdiagnosed ovarian cancer saying: 'oh, you have gastrointestinal issues', they don't go and take a scan where they could see that there's a tumor growing on the ovary, remove it and go through a complete hysterectomy, which is required if you're going to survive. I learned these things during my cancer, because I had frequent urination, but I was in Cambodia, hiking up the temples, thinking "oh, I'm drinking a lot of water, that's the reason". If I knew the symptoms perhaps I would have caught the cancer earlier. I never thought I'd make a film on that, I didn't mean to shoot it. My friend and fellow filmmaker Barbara Klutinis shot all the footage of me with a bald head and walking nude in the forest, my spouse shot me in the waiting room and getting the chemo dripped. Then, the last day of treatment I decided to take the camera myself because the light was so beautiful, coming through the chemistry that was hanging by the window in all those bags. That is how I got the footage. It was only maybe a year or two later that I decided to make the film. People said to me right away, 'You're gonna make a film about it, aren't you?', and I said 'no' never thinking I'd show something as awful as going through chemotherapy.

You said that Maya Deren is a key figure in American avant-garde cinema? In what way is she still important to you?

She's important for all of us! Back in 1972 I'm taking a film history class. I hadn't heard of Truffaut etc. During the semester class every film shown was made by a male director. I couldn't believe it! This class was almost over and we hadn't seen a woman director. Suddenly on the screen there was this 15-minute black-and-white film. I knew it was made by a woman, because the images were entirely different from what a male would shoot and because she was working from the inside out. She was showing her emotions through her directing the enigmatic imagery. I thought, "Aha! I'm sure I should make cinema now". If they don't show anybody for the entire year except for this one short film, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1945) by Maya Deren, there's a blank screen

in terms of women cinema, and in terms of lesbian cinema, there's absolutely nothing. Later when I studied Maya Deren I learned she was much more than a filmmaker. She showed her films at universities, she set up lectures and screenings, she wrote theory that is just as valid and relevant today as when she wrote it, and she set up a distribution system, so that people could rent the films. This was really remarkable. She made films, she lectured, she distributed. What a powerhouse of a woman! I never met her. She died before I even began to think about film. If you read her writings, they continue to inspire, and as for her work, it's incredible what she's left us.

I also think she was very powerful, because technically the film was not only directed by her, but also by Alexander Hammid, who was her husband at that time. Whenever I discuss it with my students, they always say it's Maya Deren's film, they never mention Hammid. I think it shows her power. I always use *The Meshes of the Afternoon* as an example of great avant-garde cinema, and how to make it.

But if you look at her other works—it's not as strong as her first work and I think that is due to Sasha Hammid's contribution. He was schooled in cinema in Czechoslovakia. Maya had never shot with a camera before. He was very experienced. One can only conjecture today, but I think she would talk about her ideas, what she wanted, and he would have an idea of how it could be filmed. She learned from that, but then they divorced, so she worked with a female cinematographer in her other films. They are a little bit stagey, not as fluid as *Meshes*. She lost more than her husband when she divorced.

Thank you very much for the conversation.