

## Transcript

### Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 59 Berenice Abbott

(Dead Ladies Show Music — ‘Little Lily Swing’ by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: It’s the Dead Ladies Show Podcast! I’m Susan Stone.

The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women — both overlooked and iconic — who achieved amazing things against all odds while they were alive. And we do it through women’s history storytelling on stage - here in Berlin and beyond, in places like New York and Scotland and Belgium... And then, we bring you a fine selection of those stories here on the podcast.

Happy New Year, everybody, and welcome to our first podcast episode of 2023. And welcome to you, Katy, joining me on the comfy couch.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Hello Susan, I’m very comfy!

SUSAN STONE: I’m glad! I will argue that the couch on the other side is comfier...

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Spoilt for choice!

SUSAN STONE: ...But here it’s cozier! Yeah. I’m going to keep our intro brief today, because we have a longer talk today, on a Dead Lady who turned out to have a connection with more than a few of our previous subjects. She had her own perspective on history — both macro and micro you could say!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Ah, you certainly could! Berenice Abbott was a wildly skilled photographer, and her story is so interesting that our lovely co-founder Florian Duijsens indulged in a few extra details.

SUSAN STONE: Just a few! [BOTH LAUGH]

KATY DERBYSHIRE: There are of course a number of glorious images to look at over on our website [deadladiesshow.com/podcast](https://deadladiesshow.com/podcast) or just click the link for the episode notes in your podcast app. Here’s more from Florian, speaking from the stage of our beloved venue, ACUD.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: This past summer I was meeting a friend who works at the New York Public Library [SHOWS SLIDE] He recommended the library’s first permanent exhibition of its treasures. Apparently they have lots of changing exhibitions, but this is the first time they had a permanent exhibit. It’s in this beautiful space, it’s not very big, and it has about 250 items. And as I walked around I saw their [SHOWS SLIDE] Gutenberg Bible and Shakespeare’s First Folio, and manuscripts and notes by Charlotte Bronte, [SHOWS SLIDE] Rosa Parks, Virginia Woolf [QUIET WHOOP FROM AUDIENCE] Yeah, excellent women all! Portraits of Mary Wollstonecraft and James Joyce, as well as local history like this [SHOWS SLIDE] poster for the 1970 Christopher Street Liberation Day on the first anniversary of Stonewall [MORE QUIET]

WHOOOPS AND SOUNDS OF APPRECIATION]. But then I spotted this very intriguing image. [SHOWS SLIDE - QUIET LAUGHTER AND CURIOUS NOISES FROM AUDIENCE]. Anyone know what this is? For the listeners at home I'll describe it as a sort of round, pillowy... brie? [LAUGHTER] With like little drops on it? Does that help? [SOUNDS FROM AUDIENCE AS THEY TRY TO GUESS WHAT IT IS]

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Fungus?

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Yes, it is a mold...

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Penicillin?

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: It is penicillin, yay! [AUDIENCE APPLAUSE] And I was surprised to learn from the little sign, that this had been taken in 1946, this photograph, which was the year of course that penicillin was first marketed by Pfizer.. [QUIET BOO FROM AUDIENCE MEMBER] Well, you know it did some good, penicillin...And this picture was taken by Berenice Abbott, the same photographer who took that picture of James Joyce. Of course I'd heard about Abbott, as she popped up in the biography of [SHOWS SLIDE] [Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven](#) who I spoke about on this stage [LAUGHTER OF RECOGNITION FROM THE AUDIENCE] Yes, good! Incidentally, [SHOWS SLIDE] here's the Baroness' portrait of Berenice Abbott, which the Baroness—who was very infuriated that Berenice wouldn't take *her* picture for free—she broke into her studio and stole it. The next time Berenice Abbot would see it was when it was hanging at MoMA.

And of course I knew Berenice Abbot's portraits of 1920s lesbian luminaries such as [SHOWS SLIDE] [Djuna Barnes](#) [WHOOOP FROM AUDIENCE] and Janet Flanner, the *New Yorker* writer, but I had no idea that Berenice Abbot had taken these scientific photographs, let alone that she had several patents. But then I dove into this 800-page biography, by Julia Van Haften and I realized she'd been there all along, in basically ALL of our Dead Ladies Show research. She was on a panel with *New Yorker* writer [SHOWS SLIDE] [Emily Hahn](#), seen here with her beloved monkey. She witnessed [SHOWS SLIDE] [Josephine Baker](#)'s explosive debut in Paris, and [SHOWS SLIDE] photographed [Emma Goldman](#)'s boyfriend, seen here appreciating Josephine Baker. [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] And here she is with [Leonora Carrington](#), and like Piet Mondrian and Max Ernst and all these people. So how do all these threads connect? To do that we need to go back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. [PLAYS CLIP]

BERENICE ABBOTT IN VIDEO CLIP: I was born in 1898. So you might say that my life has spanned a century. This is my century. And I want to see it through. So I'm planning to live to be 102. Or 100, anyway.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: She didn't quite make it to 102, but she got very very close! Bernice, for that was the original spelling of her name, was born on July 17<sup>th</sup>, 1898, the fourth child of a traveling salesman and a seamstress in Springfield, Ohio. [SHOWS SLIDE] A local brewery there has a mural now honoring her. Her parents' marriage was very very unstable, and when

her father sued for divorce, her mother just left town with her and her sister and took her basically to all the midwestern capital-Cs: [SHOWS SLIDE] Cincinnati, Columbus, and Cleveland [SHOWS SLIDE].

Bernice became a premodern latchkey kid, out exploring the cities on her own. [SHOWS SLIDE] Her mother would claim she was a widow in all these new places. She would tell Bernice that her dad had kidnapped her sibling, and even marry again, despite the fact that she wasn't actually divorced. Bernice would be spoiled for marriage ever after, later saying: "Marriage is the *finish* for women who want to do their work. It's good only for men. You can't let things hold you back. And when they're married, women let everything hold them back. Most marriages are tragedies for ambitious women." Bernice was ambitious.

[SHOWS SLIDE] Here's her report card. She had a 95 for Latin, and 98 for Oratory! Midway through high school, her father ended his life, and she was never connected to her mother, who disliked her tomboy ways and wanted her to wear corsets instead of the loose tops and skirts that she wanted to wear. Yeah, I know. So she planned her first ever act of rebellion: "The day after I graduated from Lincoln High School I had the barber cut off the long, thick braid which hung down my back, and with its departure came a great sense of relief." [WHOOPS FROM THE AUDIENCE] Yeah she's looking good!

She stayed in Ohio though, [SHOWS SLIDE] enrolling at Ohio State where she writes: "A handful of students from New York at once mistook me for a 'sophisticate.' We became friends, and a new life began for me." At college she only did well in French - she tried astronomy but it wasn't for her - and when the US joined World War One she applied to the nearby School of Military Aeronautics only to be told they weren't taking any girls [BOO FROM AUDIENCE]. I mean she was better off, let's face it. [A "YEAH" FROM AUDIENCE, FLORIAN LAUGHS] Yes! Desperate to get away from her mom, she borrowed \$20 from friends and bought a ticket to New York City, one-way. She was 19.

[SHOWS SLIDE] At the time, the historically Black neighborhood of the Village was attracting bohemians who acted a lot like Berenice. But Bernice, having grown up poor, would never romanticize poverty. She moved in next to the Provincetown Players, [SHOWS SLIDE] where playwrights like Eugene O'Neill were shaking up American drama. [SHOWS SLIDE] Within months, she'd become friends with Djuna Barnes, the Baroness, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and suffragists and anarchists from Emma Goldman's circles, but unlike some of them, she had to make ends meet by working as a secretary or a waitress. [SHOWS SLIDE] She'd been hoping to study journalism, but Columbia felt "like a hell of a sausage factory" [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] so she was about to make her debut as an actress in one of these plays that were shaking up the off-off-off-Broadway, when she caught the Spanish Flu. [SYMPATHETIC SOUNDS FROM AUDIENCE] Yeah. For two months, she was in the charity ward of St. Vincent's. Of course it was also the place which took care of the wounded from the Stonewall uprising, from 9/11, not to mention countless people suffering from HIV/AIDS. It's no longer there/ [SHOWS SLIDE] When she recovered, she had to learn to walk all over again.

This is where she moved, to “Clothes-Line Alley” off Christopher Street. And once recovered she would “toot around the Village” dancing with her buddy Man Ray, [SHOWS SLIDE] who took these nude pictures of her. That picture on the left that you can’t see the face of, I also showed here as a picture of the Baroness. The biographers, you know they don’t agree, it might be anyone. Let’s face it, it might not be anyone, it might be any white lady of a certain age. She started training as a sculptor. [SHOWS SLIDE] This picture is the only visual evidence we have of her sculpting. It’s sort of a lady lampshade. [LAUGHTER] Nevertheless, she was encouraged by Marcel Duchamp and the Baroness, who enchanted her with stories of Europe. [PLAYS CLIP]

BERENICE ABBOTT IN VIDEO CLIP: America was no place for the artist. And it was no place for me. Nothing would have happened to me here. A poor girl from the middle west, to Spain, nothing open to you except marriage. I worked hard, found a lot of odd jobs and everything, and I got the fare. I had about \$6 left over. I went March 21st 1921. One way.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: She was 23, and everything she owned fit into a small trunk. Unable to afford actual French art school, she made do with pay-as-you-go life-drawing classes, relying on her leftist trust-fund friends to supply the champagne, and the oysters, and all the parties that 1920s Paris is so legendary for. [SHOWS SLIDE] Eventually she’d find a garrett studio near the Gare Montparnasse, sleeping on the balcony so in the mornings she could descend into her drawing room [SHOWS SLIDE] She signed a letter “your bad little Berenice,” and suddenly her name had an extra E: “Berenice “(close friends got to call her Berri). She was still struggling with her attraction to women, writing: “I am rather tired – rather embarrassed – at being ‘curio.’ I want to appear – to feel human because god knows I am human, ordinary enough.” It didn’t help that her bohemian style didn’t seem to translate: “It was all right for the men to be very eccentric and different, but it was not all right for a girl.” Now she met all the movers/shakers—Satie, Léger, Gide—but it was time for the young artist’s *new* rite of passage: moving to Berlin. [LAUGHTER AND WHOOPS FROM AUDIENCE ] Another friend loaned her money for the train ticket. [SHOWS SLIDE]

Once there, Berenice planned to teach American dances like ragtime and the very very hot new foxtrot. At first, it was magical, you know this, you’ve done this! [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER]: “Germany exceeds all my expectations. [...] Energy – force – abounds in the air. The newer architecture: excellent. Streets big and clean – shops handsome – original and all material advantages without any of the stamp of grossness or commerciality that spoils everything in USA. [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] Theater – photography – music – years ahead. ... The place is clearly more healthy than Paris – dry – cold – fresh. One does not see a fifth or a hundredth of the number of Americans here.” [MORE LAUGHTER AND APPLAUSE]

Still, it would be a willowy American who would lead her back to Paris: [SHOWS SLIDE] That’s Thelma Wood, an ex of Edna St. Vincent Millay’s — Edna St. Vincent Millay who was named after what? The hospital that I was just talking about! Anyway, so she was an ex of Edna and a future ex of Djuna Barnes, Thelma was. For a while, Wood funded Berenice’s travels back and

forth to Berlin, but Berenice had trouble keeping apartments or getting apartments in Berlin. Her sculpting was very loud also! [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] I'll quote here very briefly: "To find rooms yet – more than all for *Ausländer* is seemingly impossible." [LAUGHTER] More substantial funding from an American patron fell through, however, and when she missed a train somewhere in Belgium, she was forced to leave behind her heavy sculpture material and start over in Paris. [SHOWS SLIDE]

There, she ran into her old buddy Man Ray, who told her: "My last assistant knew too much. [SHOWS SLIDE] He got in my way." "What about me? I don't know a thing," she said. "Why not?" She was there when he took this picture of Proust on his deathbed. [SHOWS SLIDE] But it was in the darkroom where she really first heard her calling. [SHOWS SLIDE] "Half the fun of photography is fooling around, mixing solutions, playing with papers, exercising tangible authority over the silent partners of photography—film, paper, chemicals." She earned about \$1.50 a day. About Paris, she'd later say: "We were completely liberated. [...] We had the illusion that we could go ahead and do our work, and that nothing would ever come and stop us."

[SHOWS SLIDE] In one gay bar, she fell - and who could not - for the dreamy Tylia Perlmutter (who would later become the first French translator of Anne Frank's translator) and in a raid in another one she was arrested alongside sculptor and future spy Gwen la Gallienne [SHOWS SLIDE]. Berenice was a big drinker, would always be, perhaps an even bigger smoker, but maybe, she realized, she was also a *photographer*. [SHOWS SLIDE] She took her first tentative snaps in Amsterdam, and her first portrait subject was her new friend and fellow astrology-enthusiast Peggy Guggenheim. [LAUGHTER] Man Ray agreed that she could take these pictures in her lunch hour if she wanted to, just as long as she charged the same fee he would. She made it a rule very early never to do work for free. [APPROVING SOUNDS FROM AUDIENCE] Yes, this is also maybe why the Baroness was so upset.

She'd later describe the art of portraiture as follows: "Most people indulge in a certain amount of self-deception. They imagine they want to see themselves as they really are; yet their subconscious censor shears away double chins, warts, big ears, and such, so that their mental image is totally different from what the outsider sees, and especially from what the relentless lens registers. Here what the photographer must do is to put the sitter's best face forward, without sacrificing all identity." Her career quickly took off - this is a famous picture she took of Jean Cocteau [SHOWS SLIDE]. This is Harlem Renaissance writer Claude McKay [SHOWS SLIDE], and this is Sylvia Beach [SHOWS SLIDE], the famous bookseller from Shakespeare and Company, looking very sort of glossy and moody. Eventually Ray got very jealous of her clientele, so she had to strike out on her own.

Berenice was 28, and soon had her first big solo show, after which her work started popping up in exhibitions in Brussels and all over Germany. The Baroness, who had newly returned from New York to Paris, thought Berenice was "inflated by inorganic prosperity – too newly gained – automatically with wobbly flop-popyeyed vanity – idiotic flapperpout." [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] Still upset! And this despite the fact that Berenice was still living from loan to loan, perhaps

because she would only do one sitting a day, then taking five or six exposures on that day. But being poor was simply not part of her story. [SHOWS SLIDE] As her single published poem from this era has it: “Don’t discuss life, people, problems. Don’t voice poverty.” That’s the entirety of the poem. I should note here, that though Berenice’s photographs were considered artful, the idea that photography was an artform on the level of sculpture or painting was still very novel. [SHOWS SLIDE] This is why, when Berenice got obsessed with Eugène Atget, [SHOWS SLIDE] a local photographer who’d been documenting Parisian street scenes as reference material for architects and artists since 1890, [SHOWS SLIDE] she was one of the few people who recognized his work as revelatory. [PLAYS CLIP]

BERENICE ABBOTT IN VIDEO CLIP: His compositions are just about perfect. He knew absolutely where to put his camera. And this is art. The art is partly right there. The art is in selecting what is worthwhile to take the trouble about. Second place, you put your camera in the right place, and that has to be very selective. You can put it on a thousand faces, the same subject.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: So she would scrape together all her francs to buy a single print off him, and she even asked and got to take his portrait. But when she brought over the resulting portrait, he was already dead. [SYMPATHETIC SOUNDS FROM AUDIENCE] Scrambling to save his 1500 negatives and 8000 prints with her girlfriend’s money [SHOWS SLIDE], she effectively became his executor, tirelessly promoting his work, often to the detriment of her own. Only 40 years later did MoMa finally buy her collection.

[SHOWS SLIDE] She really hated being constantly compared to him, but when she returned to New York with the idea of setting up an extra, like satellite photography studio there [SHOWS SLIDE], she was so enraptured by the changing city (you have to imagine, in her absence like, skyscrapers had like *arrived*), that the city would prove her next subject. [SHOWS SLIDE] “People said, ‘You’re crazy to go back, just insane.’ But I felt an extremely strong pull. The American scene just fascinated me. I was like a stranger. I could have been from Mars almost.” [SHOWS SLIDE]

Now the start of the Great Depression wasn’t a great time to be charging like \$150 dollars for a portrait, [SHOWS SLIDE] This was at a time when a haircut cost a quarter and department stores were rolling out photo booths, where for a dollar you could take your own picture. [SHOWS SLIDE] These pictures are from something called a “photo weigh” which would weigh you at the same as take your picture, then print your weight with your picture. I mean... [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] So to get money she grudgingly started taking pictures of tycoons (“stinky little men”) for *Fortune* magazine. That’s her quote “stinky little men.” It could be mine, but she’s better. [SHOWS SLIDE] She’d also document work for the great artist Noguchi, and his portrait of her is now at the National Portrait Gallery in DC. [SHOWS SLIDE] She sold a share in her Atget collection and with the proceeds she bought a very very large camera. [CLIP PLAYS]

BERENICE ABBOTT IN VIDEO CLIP: Most of the pictures I shot with what we call a view camera which is what this camera is. I was working with an eight by ten camera, century universal, it had the most swings, the most movements, takes your time to set it up, takes your time to focus... You change the shape of a subject by tilting the back, but you change the focus by tilting the front.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: It took a while before she felt comfortable lugging around this 40-pound monster to document the city's changes. [SHOWS SLIDE] But as the depression worsened, and Hooverilles like this one in Central Park that she took this picture of were going up, it was very hard to enthuse anyone to pay Berenice to take pictures of New York. [SHOWS SLIDE].

Still, she designed this beautiful mural for MoMA, they had this show of murals. And she designed this mural, it's a collage of these steel girders that she photographed of one of the big bridges, I forget which one, and then in between the girders she very artfully spliced in photos of the city. So there's the Statue of Liberty and some skyscrapers. It's very cool. Yet nothing from her solo show sold, the reviews were good but no one was buying. Even though at this point she was creating absolute masterpieces like the one on the left there, which is called *Exchange Place*, which is one of the narrowest streets in New York City, and because the skyscrapers are so close together the sun really barely reaches the ground. And it's this very tall cropped image that you really have to see in person but it's very impressive. That is of course Wall Street [BOO FROM AUDIENCE] I know. But she was paid for this one! [A "YAY" FROM AUDIENCE] And at this time she also made perhaps her most famous picture, which is the one on the left called *Night View*. The picture on the right, maybe is of her taking the picture? Probably not. But yeah, she had a terrible fear of heights, I'll just say. So she took this picture from the top of the newly finished Empire State Building.

BERENICE ABBOTT IN VIDEO CLIP: *Night View*. Well there was a 15 minute exposure. But I had planned it pretty well because night views are very difficult. This building can be done only a few minutes of the day and the year. You have to take the shortest day of the year. Since most people leave their offices at five. You have to go there, be set up and ready, before them. After you take it the lights begin to go out. And before long, you don't have that magnificent view.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: To earn money, she started teaching at my alma mater, the New School for Social Research, where she would teach one night a week for the next 24 years. Her colleagues were the likes of Aaron Copland and Martha Graham. Richard Avedon took one of those classes, I want to say Eudora Welty applied, I'm not sure she got in, we don't really know. But Diane Arbus did. Unlike Arbus, most of her female students' careers were thwarted, as "they always have to go home and make supper for somebody." [BOOS]

By now she'd long been forced to abandon her studio off Central Park and returned to the Village, splitting two stylish but stark open-plan apartments on opposite sides of the hallway with her new girlfriend, [SHOWS SLIDE] the art critic Elizabeth McCausland. The picture on the left is Gertrude Stein. Berenice got to call her Butchy. [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] They turned one apartment into a studio/darkroom, but the two addresses ensured their privacy as a gay couple

– and for the next 30 years, they made do without a tub or a shower in either apartment. It's the Village! They'd met after Elizabeth wrote a positive review of one of Berenice's shows. [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] She loved "that the Chrysler Building, [...] Rockefeller Center, the Stock Exchange, and any other of a hundred similar displays of ostentatious and vulgar wealth should exist side by side with those Central Park shanties which she has also photographed." More of an outspoken leftist than Berenice, who'd nevertheless remain a communist for the rest of her life (if not publicly), Elizabeth would make explicit a lot of the politics implicit in Berenice's images for their next project, funded by Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration. [SHOWS SLIDE]

Documenting the city from tip to tail and titled *Changing New York*, the project took four years and resulted in a carefully curated set of 100 images with text by Elizabeth: [SHOWS SLIDE] "The anarchistic unplanning of our cities is certainly a major part of the story to be told about them for future ages. [...] Though New York opposes the filthy, ugly streets of the East Side to broad avenues of high rents, yet even these tell a story not completely lovely. How pathetic are the wisps of trees which the wealthy can boast. What happens to human beings who must perforce live among such surroundings? The portrait of the city should have these too." Used to working alone, Berenice would get frustrated about having to work with a team of researchers, not to mention men. [PLAYS CLIP]

BERENICE ABBOTT IN VIDEO CLIP: Well, I was on the Federal Art Project at that time in the 30s. And each week, I would take some pictures in to show the supervisors. And there were some of the Bowery and the man in case, I can't remember his name, he said, nice girls don't go down on the Bowery. And I said, "Well, I'm not a nice girl. I'm a photographer, I go anywhere."

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Yeah! [AUDIENCE APPLAUSE] So, at this point almost a *century* after she took these pictures, it's all the more important to have Berenice's record of what New York was like at this time of transition. Like does anyone know what this is? [SHOWS SLIDE] Yes, it's the old Penn Station, it was demolished shortly after she took this picture, replaced with something really dreadful!

When it came to publishing *Changing New York* in 1939, however, Elizabeth's extensive captions were replaced wholesale before going to print, which has affected how Berenice's work has been seen over the years, and the originals have only been published recently. [SHOWS SLIDE] Here's what originally accompanied this image of a gunsmith's gun-shaped sign in print: "*Gunsmith and Police Department* [...] Frank Lava's gun shop was founded in 1850 by Eli Parker. It closed up during the Civil War, but was re-opened in 1870 by ancestors of the present owner. The Lava shop used to do repair work for the police, until the department retained its own armorers. It still does work, however, for the sheriff's staff."

And here's Elizabeth's caption (admittedly slightly overwritten): "Content is inseparable from form here. Of other photographs in this series, it has been said that composition is dynamic, form powerful, organization of parallel and diagonal lines rhythmic and moving, as if subject matter and style could be divided. In this picture, subject matter *is* form. Later ages may look at

*Gunsmith and Police Department* with the same detachment that we show in viewing African sculpture, unaware of ceremonial signification. But to the *New Yorker* of 1937 the photograph says one thing: Here is a gun, pointing at a police department. It is an unavoidable comment.”

[SHOWS SLIDE] As I noted earlier, though Berenice thought of herself as political, she was never very vocal about it, and when a critic later asked if she could write about Berenice’s sexuality, she responded: “I’m not a lesbian, I’m a photographer.” This doesn’t mean that Berenice wasn’t out to her friends and her colleagues, and in her partying days she was arrested aplenty at lesbian bars, charged with disorderly conduct, resisting arrest, and assaulting a police officer.

In the 1940s and 50s, it became even harder to do political work, especially for gay people, so Berenice wrote photography handbooks. [SHOWS SLIDE] These are inspirational as well as technical: “Seeing the unseen is not only a matter of equipment and high-speed flash; it is a matter of the imagination, of seeing what the human eye has been too lazy or too blind to see before.” Here’s a clip from a PBS documentary called *The Quantum World*. [PLAYS CLIP]

VOICEOVER IN VIDEO CLIP: When an object can't be seen, how can the mind grasp it? The eye which sees helps the mind to imagine, but sometimes the mind must teach the eye to see. In the making of images, science needs art.

BERENICE ABBOTT IN VIDEO CLIP: You can take pictures of babies or all day long, and they'll usually be pretty good, because babies are sort of cute, but why can't you take pictures of wave motion and all kinds of other things in physics? Simply a different subject, and to me much more interesting.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: So science became her third major subject. She started reading up on physics and taking chemistry classes at NYU. And this era also marked her debut as an inventor, [SHOWS SLIDE] inventing a simple way to create distorted images in the developing room or the dark room — basically the first Snapchat filter! [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] A unipod, which was basically a tripod with one leg [INCREDULOUS AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] It was pneumatic, it could be extended which was pretty cool. It sounded like a joke, I know, but it was pretty cool! And the Kit-Jak, which was a jacket with pockets to hold anything a photographer might need. It looks suspiciously like the jackets photographers wear. [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] Most impressive however was her SuperSight camera, which could take hyper-detailed closeups using a reverse camera obscura technique. So the well-lit subject would be placed *inside* the camera, which then projected its image through a lens onto a big sheet of film on the wall of the darkroom outside the camera. [SHOWS SLIDE] So you avoid a lot of the grain you would otherwise get from blowing up images. The only other person she told how it worked was her friend (and former lover) poet Muriel Rukeyser.

She also worked for *Science Illustrated*, creating these gorgeous soap bubbles [SHOWS SLIDE], and it's clear she was perfectly suited to popularizing science for the Physical Science Study Committee in the late 1950s. [PLAYS CLIP]

VOICEOVER IN VIDEO CLIP: When the launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik shocked the United States into reforming science education, Abbott was hired to photograph scientific phenomena in an effort to make physics more understandable to students.

BERENICE ABBOTT IN VIDEO CLIP: It was very clear to me that science needed a friendly interpreter. Why not photograph science? There is an essential unity between photography, science's child, and science, the parent, we had a quiet conspiracy to do good pictures. I did early experiments on my own. I wanted to do a book on electricity and everybody said "Oh, you can't do a book on electricity, blah blah blah." The amount of setup it took, you wouldn't believe it to get some simple little thing. The simpler it is, the more complicated it is. Each picture was an adventure and created all kinds of unexpected problems that were absolutely amazing. It was a wonderful way to learn, by doing it, you know.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Based at MIT, Berenice would visualize a science curriculum updated for the Space Age. [SHOWS SLIDE] MIT was also a bit closer to Maine, where Berenice had been spending a lot of time renovating an old inn, but eventually she was let go. Those previous clips about science were from this PBS documentary where she was all like "ooh science," but her actual experience at this semi-governmental organization was not so great. [PLAYS CLIP]

BERENICE ABBOTT: I was working with Jim, the young physicist who was a male chauvinist. And he would really make things pretty tough for me. And it discouraged me, I almost wept one day. When my job ended I was suicidal almost I was just heartbroken. My assistant got the job. A young man, whom I had trained. I think the last thing the world really wants are independent women. I don't think they like independent women much. Just why I don't know. And I don't care. [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER AND APPLAUSE]

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: She and Elizabeth were also in bad shape physically, with Berenice ultimately losing a chunk of her right lung (leading her to finally stop smoking at least, if not drinking). Elizabeth, suffering from diabetes, depression, and alcoholism, wasn't so lucky, dying alone in their New York City apartment in 1965. [SHOWS SLIDE] They'd been together for 30 years, but of course the *New York Times* didn't mention this in the obituary. Not that they would have preferred that they mention it, but I'm just saying to give you a picture of the times.

By the end of the 1960s, however, Berenice's situation would change. Not only did she finally manage to sell off her Atget collection, she was recognized with retrospectives at the Smithsonian and MoMa. Photography was also coming into its own as an art commodity, so she soon had more money than she knew what to do with. She got a boat [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] called *The Adventuress* and a cat called Butchy [SHOWS SLIDE], and invested in lakeside property, but sadly also in gold coins on the advice of her new pal... Jackie Onassis! Yes! So she bought all these Krugerrands, converted all her savings into them and put them in a safe.

Then she lost them all when she left town for some reason and then left the combination on a piece of paper outside the safe. Anyway, it was ultimately fine, but it was also *awful*.

[SHOWS SLIDE] She also published a tribute to her adopted state of Maine called *A Portrait of Maine* and got honorary degrees, like from the New School and Ohio State. She was also the first American to get into the French Order of Arts and Letters; her godson, one of Josephine Baker's kids, accompanied her to the ceremony.

She loved her log cabin life in Maine: "I haven't seen so much fun since the roaring '20s only this is more roaring and primitive. ... there has been some mighty friggin dancing going on. I'm not sure what friggin means but the word around here is legion. ... The Charleston did not compare with this goof – Anyway, it is vital and if I weren't so darned old, I'd get up more. ... But only in Maine could this be." [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER AND CLAPPING]

She worked and printed photographs into her 80s; she didn't *mind* aging [CLIP PLAYS].

BERENICE ABBOTT IN VIDEO CLIP: I had no idea I was getting older. I never worry about getting older. I don't see why people make so much of a thing about aging. It's so natural to age. Everyone is aging all the time. Everybody's aging constantly. Why worry? It's slow. You're not aware of it.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Exactly. [SHOWS SLIDE] Here she is on her 93rd birthday, looking like a photographer who has done her thing, right?

On December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1991, aged 93, Berenice died. At the time of her death, she no longer owned her New York pictures, they were all owned by the New York {Public Library. Her science ones were all owned by that agency. The Atgets she'd sold. And a lot of her beautiful work went largely unseen during her lifetime, [SHOWS SLIDE] including those from her road trips with Elizabeth in the early 1930s or her gorgeous color photographs that she took along US Route 1. [SHOWS SLIDE] You can see those in a massive box set called *The Unknown Berenice Abbott*, [SHOWS SLIDE] and you can get an overview of her most famous work in *Berenice Abbott: Portraits of Modernity*. [SHOWS SLIDE] The most recent biography, the one that talks about her being gay, is the exhaustive *Berenice Abbott: A Life in Photography*, by Julia van Haften, and you can find digital copies of all of the *Changing New York* pictures in super super high definition on the New York Public Library's website for free for your desktop pleasure. And on the website of the Metropolitan Museum you can watch Martha Wheelock and Kay Weaver's *Berenice Abbott: A View of the 20th Century* documentary that you've heard little snippets of tonight.

Now as Berenice wrote in 1975: "The challenge for me has first been to see things as they are, whether a portrait, a city street, or a bouncing ball. In a word, I have tried to be objective. [SHOWS SLIDE] What I mean by objectivity is not the objectivity of a machine, but of a sensible human being with the mystery of personal selection at the heart of it." She conveyed this to all her students, even Allen Ginsberg [PLAYS CLIP].

ALLEN GINSBERG: I've been taking photographs lately and I've been to two photography gurus, who both gave me some rebuke on the subject. I went to a wedding where this lady Berenice Abbott, she was the bridesmaid at 87, and I was a wedding photographer. And it was like this great opportunity to take pictures of this great photography guru. So I was there going click, click, click and she said, "Oh, don't be a shutterbug!" Which is funny, it's an old 1930s word, 'shutterbug', for somebody who is unable to experience a situation, so in great panic takes as many pictures as possible, hoping to have an experience of a situation later by preserving it.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: We know this feeling, right? [KNOWING LAUGHTER FROM AUDIENCE] Perhaps Muriel Rukeyser (whose eye this is, as taken by the Super Sight camera), perhaps she saw best what Berenice was all about:

"I think of the magazine editor before whose office I waited until Berenice Abbott came down with the series of big 'science' pictures still under her arm [...] 'He turned them down. But he said they had very little grain,' she told me in wry despair; another picture editor who could not see. [SHOWS SLIDE] Look at that penicillin until it opens you, brilliant and round, producing its droplets. [...] these things and forces—ripples of water, shallow-edge waves; surface of bubbles, very physical; [SHOWS SLIDE] the prism declaring its effect on life like Cocteau; light bent, motion of a bouncing ball in a perspective of vanishing arches. Magnets here like faces. Actually, forces like faces. [SHOWS SLIDE] I think that the witnesses of this art, coming to it for the first time, will see that Berenice Abbott has given us the vision of a world in which all things look at us, declaring themselves with a power we recognize."

Perhaps this is what Berenice called living photography: "Living photography builds up, does not tear down. It proclaims the dignity of man. Living photography is positive in its approach; it sings a song of life—not death." [APPLAUSE]

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Florian Duijsens on Berenice Abbott, recorded live with assistance from Thomas Beckman and Johannes Braun at ACUD.

As we mentioned, we have a selection of Berenice Abbott's work and great links on our website and episode notes, as well as on our social media channels @deadladiesshow.

SUSAN STONE: Thanks for that, Katy. And thank you to Florian for the wonderful talk. It was a fun evening back in November when we recorded that — so amazing to have a full house in our regular venue ACUD again, to see so many smiling faces, and thank you to all our Berlin fans and friends for coming along.

I'd also like to give a shout out — hey! — to some of our recent Patreon supporters, who help us out over at [patreon.com/deadladiesshowpodcast](https://patreon.com/deadladiesshowpodcast) where we treat them to exclusive monthly audio segments like reviews and interviews in our Dead Lady Book Club, and we also have a few logo goodies on offer as well.

So lots of love going out to Samantha Renusch, Robin Kirkpatrick and Prue Walker. We really appreciate your support! Why not join them in becoming a Dead Lady Listener, Dead Lady Lover, or Dead Lady Librarian — there are three levels you can support us at!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Thanks also to everyone out there supporting us by listening and sharing us with others! We'll be back next month with another fabulous Dead Lady!

SUSAN STONE: We will!

The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced, and edited by me, Susan Stone.

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: And that music you hear is our jazzy theme tune, 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon. Good-bye!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Bye!

SUSAN STONE: And boop boop be doo! [BOTH LAUGH]