

Natalie Bookchin

PORTRAITS OF THE MULTITUDE

This exhibition brings together seven audiovisual works produced between 2008 and 2017 that explore the paradoxes related to the daily use of communication technologies. Using resources characteristic of the aesthetics of databases, social networks and the collaborative economy, the artist makes it her practice to assemble hundreds of online videos recorded in first person. The result is a composition of self-portraits that reveal the effects of communicative capitalism in North American society.

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[LA VIRREINA]
CENTRE
DE LA IMATGE

Ajuntament de
Barcelona



BRIEF GLOSSARY
Regarding the work of Natalie Bookchin

The exhibition *Portraits of the Multitude* is the first solo exhibition dedicated to Natalie Bookchin in Spain. It brings together a selection of seven audiovisual works produced between 2008 and 2017: the series *Testament* (2008/2017) with the chapters *Count, My Meds, I Am Not* and *Laid Off*; the video installation *Mass Ornament* (2009), and the videos *Now he's out in public and everyone can see* (2012–2017) and *Long Story Short* (2016).

Her work belongs to the so-called documentary practices in art, which in the last two decades have politically explored forms of seeing, understanding and handling images attending to the multiple connections and complexities articulated by the public sphere. In this sense, Bookchin analyzes the production conditions of digital technologies in late capitalism, highlighting the social and economic effects generated by our blind trust in social networks. Taking as raw material the forms of representation of the vlogosphere, she constructs new visualities that expose the mechanisms and paradoxes that mediate the “connected multitude” on one hand to address an idea of the commons that promotes different forms of social connection on the other.

The following pages contain a brief compilation of terms divided into four sections which contextualize Natalie Bookchin’s work. Following the logic she applies in editing and assembling videos found online, the result is a sampling of fragments written by the artist herself that correspond to a selection of interviews, conversations and essays published to date.

Documentary practices in art

Image document

I see my project in part as an attempt to develop and invent new documentary forms. One obvious difference between my work and some of my precursors is that instead of hitting the streets to collect my footage, I go online and cull from a continuous stream of video instant replays with analysis or commentary about everyday life, documenting life mediated through other people’s descriptions. While in some ways I have a greater reach—more mobility and easier access to the inside of people’s homes across the country and the world—in other ways my distance is greater. This of course is a condition of our times. [...]

What gets me excited is when art “disrupts”—it’s not only Silicon Valley that does that—and offers a way out of habitual ways of seeing, understanding, and feeling. I try to invent new visual and sonic forms to open up new spaces of reflection. This invention of new forms is really hard and takes many tries and failures. It is why my work takes so damn long to make. Often it can take a number of years of trying, of making mistakes and going in wrong directions, before I finally figure something out.

Multiplicity

There is a long tradition of filmmakers and artists who reject or push at the boundaries of mainstream cinematic forms, as well as a number of influential works exploring multiplicity in their depiction of groups of people living within particular geopolitical or social conditions.

In his cinéma vérité documentary *Comizi d’amore (Love Meetings)* from 1965, Pier Paolo Pasolini travelled across Italy and interviewed groups of people on their views about sex. Speakers, organized by groupings such as gender, age, location, education, and class, crowd into the frame responding to Pasolini’s questions. The film reveals a cross section of the population struggling over and negotiating meanings and definitions of words and ideas that shape and discipline bodies, while exposing the contradictory but largely conservative attitudes about sexuality that permeated Italy in the mid 1960s. Chantal Akerman’s *D’Est. Au bord de la fiction* from 1995 consisted of 25 monitors with looping distant tracking shots of private and public spaces and people filmed in the Eastern Bloc just as it was collapsing. The installation forsakes the authoritarian voice of documentary, instead offering multiple simultaneous documents of everyday life during a time of major political and social transformation.

Lastly, in 2004 Turkish artist Kutluğ Ataman produced a video installation entitled *Küba* consisting of 40 monitors, each displaying a portrait of a different resident of a mostly Kurdish shantytown on the outskirts of Istanbul. Together, Ataman writes, “they construct a shared singular identity, namely being a Küban”. Each of these works produces a composite portrait of a society, shifting focus away from individual characters and singular narrative arcs, and instead offering a multiplicity of views.

Long Story Short carries this into the current context of social media. Instead of presenting the viewer with one larger-than-life hero, the film is comprised of video footage drawn from an accumulated archive in which many subjects relate their stories

and views on living in poverty. Rather than allowing algorithms or popularity to determine who is seen and heard, all those who volunteered to participate in the film are included, and no single perspective or voice is privileged over others.

The conditions of the network

Vlogs

The vlog (video diary) is associated with micro rather than large-scale media production. To use this format—and to shoot using laptops and webcams—is to reject (or sometimes, to mimic or parody) the conventional idea of the professional image that’s supposed to convey authority and expertise.

Poor image

My interest in the ‘bad’ image began with a series of videos I made between 2005 and 2007 that documented anonymous landscapes I found by looking through online security webcams. In relation to that work, I wrote about the poetics of the images I collected—low resolution and highly pixelated—unmanned by a human operator and indifferent to blinding bursts of light or hours of darkness, and how they bore the marks of their travels across low bandwidths of electronic networks.

Hypervisibility

Thanks to networks, we live in a time of hypervisibility, barraged with continuous flows of images. It can be difficult to notice what it is we are not seeing. What gets the most attention are the images that either get the most likes or that host platforms consider most valuable. Others drop out of sight, and we may never know it. We don’t have access to the algorithms [...] used to determine what rises to the top of our feeds. And, while some of us worry about how to remain invisible in an age of overvisibility, others don’t have that privilege. As I learned from *Long Story Short*’s narrators, many worry about their invisibility, about not being seen. In a way I wanted to do a bait and switch, to put into familiar forms images and stories that don’t usually rise to the top of our feeds.

The effects of the network

Extimacy (intimacy exposed)

In 2008, the year the Global Recession began, I started working with videos people record of themselves performing, dancing,

and talking to cameras connected to the Internet. This was before mobile video had really taken off, and people were spending a lot of time in front of their desktops and laptops. The works convey the sometimes disarming trust people still felt on the Internet. These were more innocent times, a few years before the Arab Spring, and before online shaming became as bad as it is today. Many were gushing about the positive world changing effects of Internet connectivity. I wanted to offer a more complicated picture—to show how these strangely public-private videos reflect both the absence of and longing for public space and social connection.

Imitation and Replicability

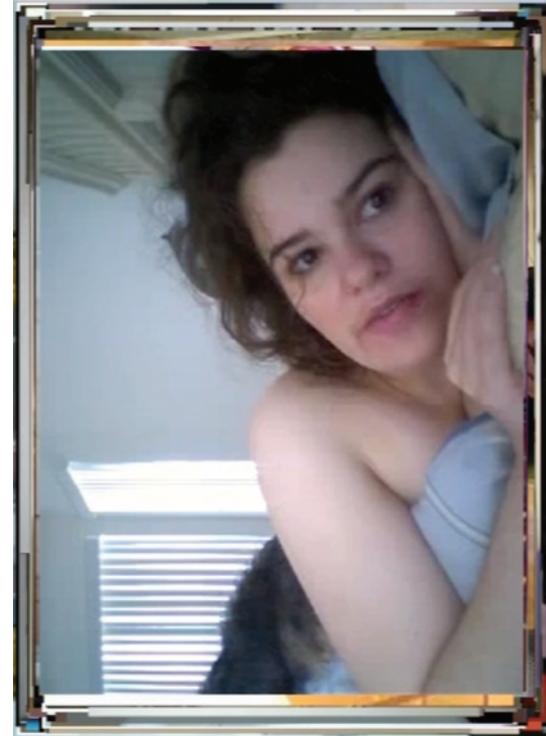
In *Testament*, I started with an idea that I wanted to represent waves of language and ideas as they flow across the Internet, like the shared movements flowing across the net in *Mass Ornament*. Once I choose a topic I want to explore, I look for patterns in the way people talk about it: the words they choose, their tone, their attitudes, the narrative arcs they follow. Sometimes I just look at single words or phrases. Other times I want extrapolations. While I am sometimes surprised, moved, or disturbed by what people have to say, just as often I'm not. They mimic the media—sometimes word-for-word—they vent, they advocate, they confess. They talk to the camera as if it were a friend, an adversary, or a mirror.

Algorithms

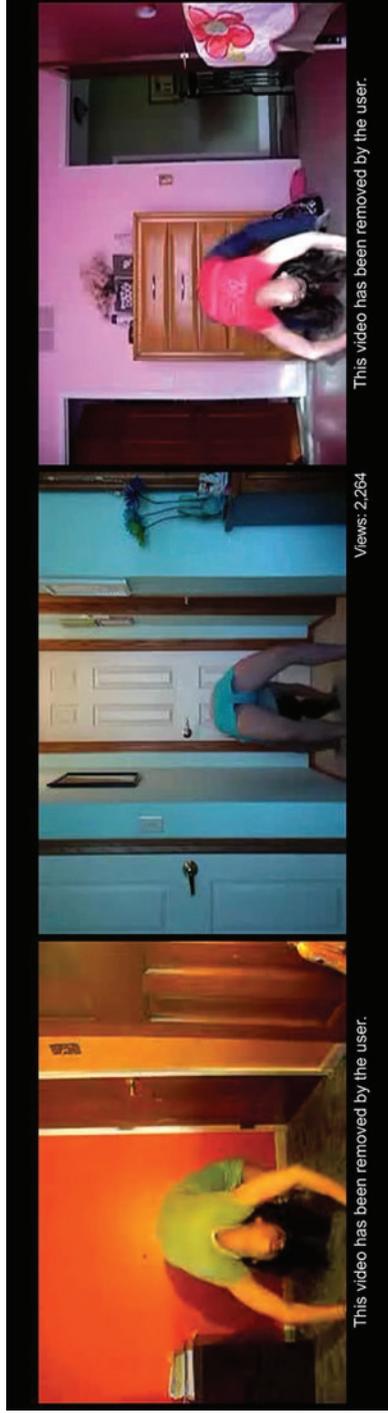
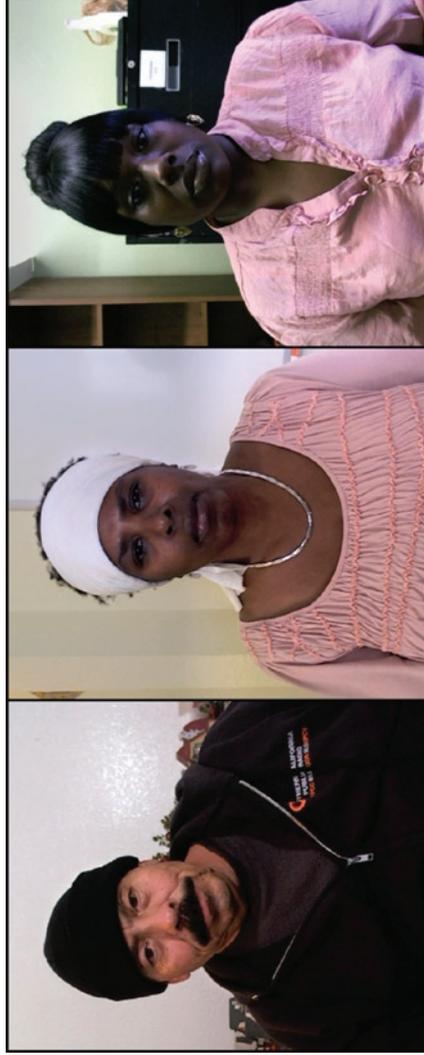
The work I've done over the past decade lies somewhere between a collaboration with and intervention into Google's algorithms. I dig into online databases to collect the videos that I use in my work, and by varying search terms and going deep into search results, I aim to circumvent the search's algorithmic biases. I rescue videos lost in the cacophony, buried by secret algorithms that favour more "sharable" data, or, in one project, produce my own videos on topics I can't find through online search.

Algorithm-based recommendations offer people films, books, or knowledge based on past choices, providing what the algorithm thinks we want. My montages also suggest relationships between different sets of data, but unlike algorithms, which are invisible and individualized, I make my biases visible through editing and montage, and the semantic relationships I create reveal larger social truths that go beyond the individual.

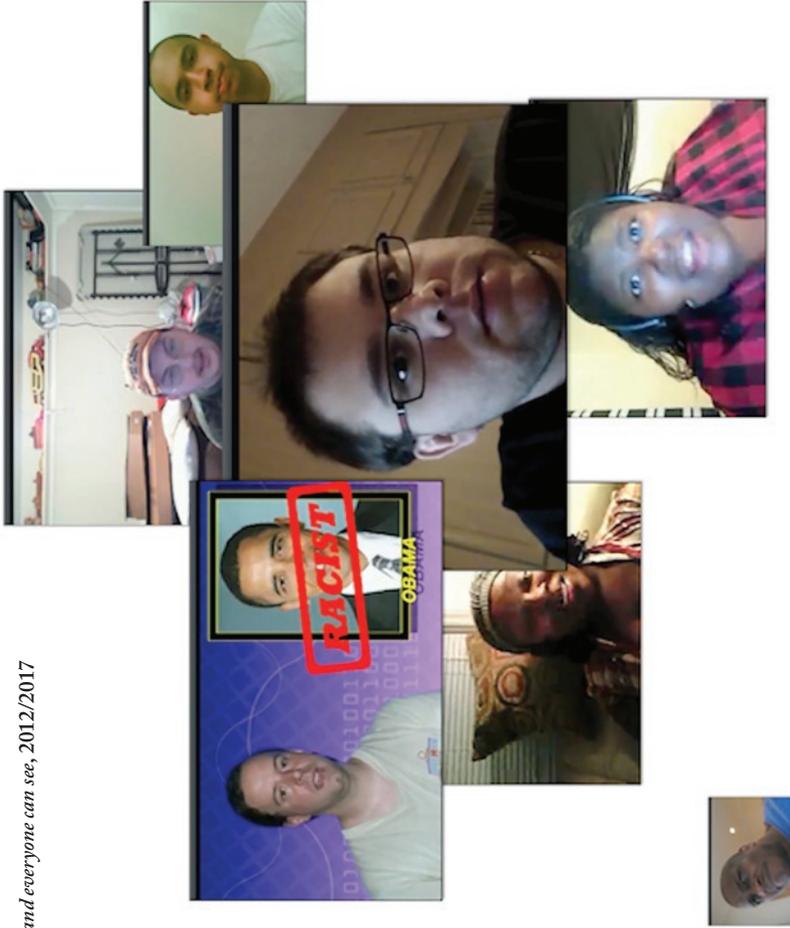
YouTube's algorithms can't easily detect subtext or irony, falsehoods, or disinformation. Any politics, preferences, ethics—or



Long Story Short, 2016



Fragment of the video installation *Mass Ornament*, 2009



lack thereof—embedded in the algorithms are company secrets. My intervention aims to highlight our algorithmic condition, how we come to see and know what we do through automated algorithmic mediation, as well as to underscore the value of embodied, situated, creative human intelligence and perspectives.

Collaborative economy

Long Story Short uses the tools and the aesthetics of the Internet's sharing economy to draw a link between the neoliberal condition and poverty, and to amplify the voices of those most displaced by this condition. I define neoliberalism not only as a set of political and government policies and tendencies that include a shrunken welfare state, unregulated markets, increased privatization, and increased temporary work and job precarity, but also as a condition that presupposes a particular form of subjectivity. Under this regime, human beings are redefined as human capital, and all aspects of existence are seen and understood in economic terms.

Editing

Portraits

I try to reveal what is at stake in America today as the ground continues to fall out from under the lower and the middle classes—as secure jobs and the safety net disappear, innocent people get attacked, arrested, or shot because of their colour, online algorithms reproduce bias and corrode the news, and people have fewer opportunities to interact with others outside their own tribes. I pay special attention to the basic humanity that can be felt in the presence of someone revealing or displaying their vulnerable self on camera in all their imperfection. It is something that Roland Barthes described as 'punctum', the parts of the picture that 'prick' you, touch you, and produce a visceral response. I think this can be felt in the moments people let their guard down and you can feel something of their longing and their desire to be seen, heard, and paid attention to.

In *Long Story Short* the camera is a little bit below or at eye level. The gaze is direct. I have always been inspired by August Sander's portraits of German society, which reveal a quiet dignity and equal exchange between photographer and photographed. For filming, I used a webcam attached to a laptop, and people saw themselves on screen as they spoke. I did not want to follow subjects around, to reproduce overused images of urban decay,

or to catch people off guard, but rather to set up the conditions for people to present themselves as they wanted to be seen. The casual set-up, sitting face-to-face with the camera, produces the intimacy of a one-to-one exchange.

Succession and simultaneity

I would describe the montages I create as taking two forms: simultaneous or sequential spatial montages. In the case of simultaneity, the same gestures may appear or the same words may be uttered in unison in separate videos across the screen. Spatializing the montage creates the illusion of simultaneity, and reveals commonalities among separate individuals. Sequential spatialized montages are instances where an action or narrative unfolds over time. Here again, multiple videos appear on screen at the same time. To give a simple example, on a three-frame screen, someone begins a sentence on the left side of the screen, someone else continues the thought in the centre, and another person completes the sentence on the right, while the two preceding videos remain in place. Viewers get the sense that the subjects are listening to each other, or that there is a conversation happening, while at the same time being able to see that they're watching a constructed conversation that did not really take place. This kind of fiction takes place all the time in conventional editing. The most obvious example is where the B-roll of an interviewer's nodding head is added to an interview to create the impression of them having nodded in agreement. The difference is that in my work the editing is visible. You simultaneously feel its effects and see it as an artifice.

Assembly

I began working on the video *Now he's out in public and everyone can see* in November 2009, one year into the Obama administration, a time when white America's racial resentments, always lurking just beneath the surface, began bursting forth. This was especially noticeable on the Internet, where conspiracies about Obama's identity began to circulate. I began collecting vlogs narrating scandals about black men and looking for patterns. In the final narrative I assembled, I omitted the names of the men discussed, and blended the scandals together, to highlight the repetitive ways blackness and whiteness are contested by different groups of people. Each man's blackness, and the threat of violence against him, or his supposed danger to others, seems to gather force once he is in public, that is, in spaces historically

constituted as white. Blackness itself, its presence in public, becomes the scandal.

Listening

Long Story Short is built around the interplay between speech and silence. There are many instances where someone lingers on the screen as a silent witness. The moments of silence slow the tempo and act as counterpoints to the orchestral moments of dynamically layered speech. The silences also give us time to reflect on what has just been said, allowing it to gather weight and importance. They give space and time to the words that remain unspoken, and for viewers, to pay attention to this lack of attention.

Archive

To make *Long Story Short*, I worked with a similar form to my previous works, using first-person amateur vlogs. This time, though, instead of working with found material I decided to shoot my own footage, because as far as I could tell an archive where people addressed their own experiences of precarity and economic inequality didn't exist or didn't rise to the top of the databases of social media platforms.

Greek chorus

The source material I use is transformed pretty radically through my editing. I attempt to foreground instances where performances of identity and individual expression appear as social and collective enterprises, sometimes performed as a series of apparent scripts that people internalize, interpret, or enact for the camera.

[...] The work borrows from a Greek model of tragic theatre where the chorus speaks collectively, set apart from and reflecting on the action of the drama. I like Schlegel's description of the Greek chorus as an ideal spectator who watches over and comments on the action.

One of the roles of the chorus in Greek theatre was to act as a bridge between the audience and the actors, mediating the action between the two and interacting with both. In the choruses I create and the commentary I assemble, I variously present different positions, and speak through the assembled voices. In other words, at varying points in the different works the chorus's commentary becomes my own.

Bibliography

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Eden Osucha: "Presence + Polarization: Natalie Bookchin's Portraits of America". Interviews, vol. 2, no. 3. The Chart, online art journal, spring 2017.

Geert Lovink and Rachel Somers Miles (eds.): "Out in Public: Natalie Bookchin in Conversation with Blake Stimson" in *Video Vortex Reader II: moving images beyond YouTube*. Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam, 2011.

Holly Arden: "Natalie Bookchin in Conversation: Long Story Short". Network Cultures Institute. Online edition, 2016.

Natalie Bookchin: "Long Story Short" in Pepita Hesselberth and Maria Poulaki (eds.): Bloomsbury Press, 2016.

Natalie Bookchin: unpublished text fragment, 2017.

"Narrating the Silence of Poverty. Natalie Bookchin in Conversation with Geert Lovink" in *Portraits of America. Two Films by Natalie Bookchin*. DVD box, Icarus Films, New York, 2017.

Paula Kupfer: Online Natalie Bookchin interview, as part of the exhibition *Public, Private, Secret*. International Center of Photography Museum, New York, 2016.

Public programme

Conversation with Natalie Bookchin and Geert Lovink

Friday 2 March at 5.30 pm

Space 4. Simultaneous interpreting

Natalie Bookchin is an American artist and filmmaker who, through virtuosic editing and innovative sound and visual montage, interrogates the American crisis and its increasing inequality and polarization, as well as the seismic impact of the digital tools and platforms that determine the shape and texture of contemporary life.

Geert Lovink is a Dutch media theorist and critic. He is the founding director of the Institute of Network Cultures. Lovink is the author of *Dark Fiber* (2002), *My First Recession* (2003), *Zero Comments* (2007) and *Social Media Abyss: Critical Internet Cultures and the Force of Negation* (2016).

Opening

Friday 2 March at 7 pm

Virreina Lab

Film Forum

Friday 9 March at 7 pm

Virreina Lab. Free admission. Limited number of seats available

Screening of Natalie Bookchin's film *Long Story Short* (2016, 45 min, English with Catalan subtitles), followed by a debate with the artist, introduced and chaired by Héctor Acuña, Catarina Botelho, Franco Castignani, Judith Hoekstra, Björn Kühn and Francisco Navarrete, researchers on the Independent Studies Programme (PEI) at the MACBA.

In 2012, Natalie Bookchin started filming a hundred or so personal accounts told to her by people taken in by third-sector organisations in northern and southern California. Looking into a webcam, these people described the way poverty affected their personal, family and community lives, as well as the potential measures that should be implemented. Using elaborate editing, the artist draws attention to a hypothetical new social model that counters the neo-liberal discourse of poverty and the poor.

Curator: Montse Romani

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**Opening hours: Tuesday to Sunday
and public holidays, noon to 8 pm
Free entry**

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