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2018

Network Effects: Natalie Bookchin, Media Works 2008-2017

Natalie Bookchin

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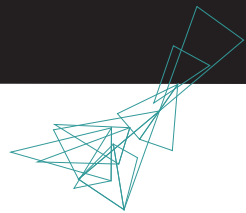
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ARTS AND TECHNOLOGY PRESENT:

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2008-2017

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Background

In the 1990s, soon after the Web was invented, Bookchin started working with the internet as a site, medium, and distribution platform. Her artwork took the form of computer games, collaborative performances, texts and manifestos, interactive installations, and hacktivist interventions. It addressed topics often sidelined by the utopianism and celebratory clamor that dominated conversations about the internet. These included technology’s increasing capacity to track, rationalize, and control bodies—bodies under surveillance, defined by genetics, or gendered through computer games.

By the mid-2000s, as the internet grew more commercial and cacophonous, Bookchin took her work offline, and made a series of short videos and installations documenting global landscapes compiled from screengrabs of found security webcams and online videos, exploring the internet’s erasure of lines between public and private spaces and its flattening of time and space.

In 2008, as social media was remaking the Internet and identity itself, Bookchin began working with found videos of people recording themselves in front of cameras connected to the web. These were more innocent times, before Twitter took off, before the Arab Spring, and before online shaming got really bad, and the videos reveal the sometimes disarming trust people still felt online. While many commentators gushed over the democratic, even revolutionary, capacity of these new forms of communication, Bookchin offers a more complicated picture - showing how these oddly public-private videos reflect isolation and a longing for public space, social interaction, and community. In the four-part series **TESTAMENT**, spanning the years 2009-2017, Bookchin collected and edited fragments of found online video diaries (vlogs), shaping them spatial montages that reveal and reimagine overlapping and interconnected subjectivities. Addressing subjects ranging from mass unemployment to homophobia on the web, **TESTAMENT** reflects on the peculiar blend of intimacy and anonymity, of the simultaneous connectivity and isolation of contemporary social relations.

In the widely acclaimed 2009 work **MASS ORNAMENT**, a mass dance is constructed from hundreds of found online videos of people dancing in front of their webcams in their rooms. In this exhilarating work, the dancers seem to make small claims of embodiment in the face of its supposed disappearance in the virtual realm. Also on view is the longer 2012/2017 work **NOW HE’S OUT IN PUBLIC AND EVERYONE CAN SEE**, a work that/ foreshadows the resurfacing of white nationalism in the Trump era. A meditation on collective perceptions about race and racial identity in the Obama era, the work is drawn from an archive of video blogger’s rantings and musings as they describe, judge, prescribe behaviors for, attack, and defend four unnamed famous black men. The impassioned accounts bleed into one another, highlighting shared language and racialized and racist tropes.

In 2012, Bookchin began producing her own archive of video—ones she couldn’t find online—of people in poverty discussing their experiences of being poor, how they got there, and how they hope to get out, along with the misperceptions they faced from others. She shaped this material into a long-form film called **LONG STORY SHORT**, released theatrically and on DVD in 2017.

Throughout her career, her artistic goals have been unchanged: to bring challenging, timely ideas into public conversation, open up new spaces for reflection, and challenge habitual ways of seeing and understanding, inviting people to consider and feel something about the world that they otherwise might not have even noticed.

A Note on Algorithmic intervention

The work Bookchin has done for the last decade lies somewhere between a collaboration with and intervention into Google’s algorithms. Bookchin digs into online databases to collect videos, and by varying search terms and going deep into search results, aims to circumvent the search’s algorithmic biases. She rescues videos lost in the cacophony or buried by secret algorithms that favor more “shareable” data.

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

YouTube’s algorithms organize videos by popularity, tags, and titles. They can’t easily detect subtext or irony, falsehoods, or disinformation. Any politics, preferences, ethics—or lack thereof —embedded in the algorithms are company secrets. Bookchin’s intervention aims to highlight our algorithmic condition, how we come to see and know what we do though automated algorithmic mediation, as well as to underscore the value of embodied, situated, creative human intelligence and perspectives.

Works in the exhibition:

(1) MASS ORNAMENT 2009, 7 min
“With a keen eye for detail, a terrific sense of timing and a killer instinct for editing, [Bookchin] has clipped and combined hundreds of vignettes from YouTube and set them to the soundtracks from Busby Berkeley’s GOLD DIGGERS OF 1935 and Leni Riefenstahl’s TRIUMPH OF THE WILL. [...] To watch the split-screen extravaganza is to feel as if you are at once enjoying a god’s-eye view of a vast, everyday parade of vulnerable human beings and also an intimate part of a democratic drama that is deeply moving.” —Los Angeles Times

TESTAMENT (4 CHAPTERS) 2009 - 2017
Testament presents a series of collective expressions of the shared self. The series reflects on the peculiar blend of intimacy and anonymity, of the simultaneous connectivity and isolation of contemporary social relations.

(2) My Meds 2009, 1:10 min
A chorus of speakers recite the psychotropic medications they are taking.

(3) Count 2008/2017, 10:07 min
In the final chapter in the series, people state their weight with disappointment, shame, or pride. Heard in sequence Count seems to suggest the way that that all efforts to express oneself online ultimately end up as digits destined to be ingested and monetized by host platforms.

(4) Laid Off 2009, 4 min
I Am Not 2009/2016, 2:07 min
In LAID OFF, narrators describe losing their jobs in the wake of the Global Recession of 2008. I AM NOT offers a series of denials, disavowals and proclamations of sexual identities.

(5) LONG STORY SHORT 2016, 45 min, Courtesy Icarus Films.
In the moving and immersive LONG STORY SHORT, over 100 people at homeless shelters, food banks, adult literacy programs, and job training centers in L.A. and the Bay Area discuss their experiences of poverty: why they are poor, how it feels, and what they think should be done about American poverty and homelessness today. While individuals whom Bookchin filmed in separate spaces appear on screen in their