

OUT IN PUBLIC: NATALIE BOOKCHIN IN CONVERSATION WITH BLAKE STIMSON

NATALIE BOOKCHIN AND BLAKE STIMSON

Natalie Bookchin and Blake Stimson first met in New York in the early 1990s when they were both affiliated with the Whitney Independent Study Program. This exchange took place over email, for the most part between their respective homes in Southern and Northern California during the summer of 2010.

Although she has a rich and varied artistic background, one theme that has regularly come to the fore in Natalie Bookchin's work is a concern with documentary. In some of her early work, this concern seemed to emphasize the inhumanity of recording machines in the way that Andy Warhol's, or perhaps Gerhard Richter's, work did. In a different way, the entire 'found object' tradition associated with Duchampian indifference, and still so manifest in much contemporary art, also seemed to feature in Bookchin's work. Here, we might recall an early piece for which Bookchin photographed everything she owned, object by object, down to the last paperclip; or perhaps, in a different sense, the *Universal Page* she created with Alexei Shulgin in 2000, which promised an algorithmically derived objective average of all web content. In one sense, her recent work of gathering videos from the internet might be said to continue in this vein—at least insofar as she is functioning as an aggregator of existing content drawn largely from YouTube, in a way similar to a service like Digg or any of the many interest or attention measuring functions of the web (not the least being Google and other search engines).

On the other hand, Bookchin's work possesses a strong, even impassioned, activist element of the sort consistent with the reportage tradition extending back to John Heartfield and Sergei Tretiakov, or Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine before them. For example, in the interview Bookchin and Shulgin published in conjunction with the exhibition of *Universal Page*, Bookchin spoke of that time as one that demanded 'superactivity' because 'there are vitally important things that need to be done' to 'resist total corporate, technological, and institutional takeovers'. In addition, her multiplayer game *agoraXchange* was created in collaboration with the political theorist Jackie Stevens, and called for 'an end to the system of nation-states, the demise of rules rendering us passive objects tied to identities and locations given at birth', and the elimination of 'those laws requiring us to live and be seen largely as vessels for ancestral identities'. And finally, there was her very funny announcement, in 1999, of her intention for a journal titled BAD (standing for Burn the Artworld Down) that was 'committed to the documentation of acts of terrorism and agitation against the institutional art world'. All of these works have performative dimensions to them, and as such call up a sense of tongue-in-cheek detachment from the subjects they purport to represent. Yet, to varying degrees, they also seem earnest and forceful political statements.

Blake Stimson: With all the political history that lies behind it, is 'documentary' a useful label to describe your work?

Natalie Bookchin: There's always been a strong documentary thread running through my work, and this has only increased in recent years. My work aims to make visible social facts, as well as my role in shaping and skewing those facts. In my newest projects I've been drawing from the archive of online videos – the stuff that at first glance might be dismissed as throwaway junk consisting of banal chatter and trivial displays of mass media mimicry. Yet I see it instead as a vast, largely untapped stream of constantly updated source material out of which I can document the present seen through the eyes of many others, and build new composite documents, rich with descriptive accounts and reflections of both current attitudes and social conditions. I'd say that the work is part of the Readymade tradition only insofar as the source material is found. But rather than presenting the footage as is, most of my work is in reshaping and reworking it into something new.

trip, from 2008, was the first piece I made from YouTube videos. It's a 63 minute video in which I edited and assembled dozens of traveling shots to create a road movie that followed the route of technology around the world, in other words, traveling only where others with their cameras and cell phones have already gone. Viewers move through a physically impossible geography connected by an always-present road, like disparate sites linked on the internet, across dozens of countries and borders, through war zones, tent cities, and tourist centres. Viewers see a world framed by the car window from continuously shifting perspectives of missionaries, truckers, soldiers, locals, tour guides, human rights workers, and tourists. The road acts as a kind of stand-in for the internet – a conduit for the circulation of images, attitudes, and goods around the world, occasionally stalled by conflict, but ultimately, like the rows of trucks plodding across borders that appear throughout the video, relentless and without an end.

BS: Terrific—'making visible social facts' strikes me as a great short definition for documentary generally, particularly insofar as 'social facts' can be distinguished from the social isolation of facts as such. It also seems spot on with my experience of pieces like *I am Not or Laid Off* or your work in progress on race, *Now he's out in public, and everyone can see*. What thrills me the most about these pieces has little or nothing to do directly with the found videos themselves as isolated facts unto themselves, but instead with the sociality you draw out of them. The videos are what they are: typically heart-wrenching signs of human suffering of a disturbingly common sort. Your authorial voice, on the other hand, comes through loud and clear as a form of mediation between the videos and in so doing, it seems to me, gives rise to both the 'making visible' you refer to and to a living, human form of sociality for the facts in question.

My sense is that there is a lot that can be said about that function and so I would like you to elaborate further about what it means for you and your sense of what it means for others, but before I pass this screen back to you I'll share one impression of mine. What seems so refreshing about your use of woman-on-the-street commentary is that it seems diametrically opposed to the sort used routinely by politicians, news media, and marketing departments in advertisements, anecdotes passing as news, individual exemplars of the effects of good or

bad policies, editorial contributors, focus groups, social media product updates, consumer feedback loops, crowdsourcing, etc. It seems nothing like a Tea Party event or an Amazon consumer review or a reader response to a piece on Fox News or *The New York Times*, for example, which any one of your source videos on its own might. Put more simply, it seems nothing like the vlogosphere from which you have drawn the videos. Can you say a bit more about your role as compiler and how it transforms the videos you take from YouTube and elsewhere?

NB: The videos come from online social networks, which offer exalted promises of creating social relationships and making the world more open and connected, but instead, produce a cacophony of millions of isolated individual voices shouting at and past each other. What I am trying to do through my editing and compilation is reimagine these separate speakers as collectives taking form as a public body in physical space.



Installation of *Mass Ornament*, 2009.

In *Mass Ornament*, a video installation from 2009, I edited videos of people dancing alone in their rooms, to create a mass dance reminiscent of historical representations of synchronized masses of bodies in formation, from Busby Berkeley to Leni Riefenstahl. I wanted the work to continually shift between depictions of masses and that of individuals. The dancers, alone in their rooms, seem to perform the same movements over and over as if scripted. But at the same time their bodies don't conform to mass ideals, and their sometimes awkward interpretations undermine the 'mass ornament' produced by synchronizing their movements. I added sounds of bodies moving about in space, thumping, banging and shuffling, as well as ambient sound emphasizing geographical differences, from crowded urban dwellings to the suburbs. Dancers push against walls and slide down doorways, as if attempting to break out of or beyond, the constraints of the rooms in which they seem to be encased.

In *Testament*, a series I began shortly after I completed *Mass Ornament*, 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 – some-

times 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. For the most part people appear to be at home, giving unprompted monologues to an unmanned camera on their computers. Maybe they have no other platform. Maybe they are enticed by the opportunity to broadcast their thoughts to untold numbers of strangers. Though what they say may not always surprise, the fact that they are saying it in this environment and platform is pretty strange and compelling. We have entered another level of alienation when our equivalent of a public forum is a person alone in his or her room speaking to a computer screen. But, my work suggests, we are not alone in our need for public conversation and debate about the circumstances of our lives.

The source material 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. I edit for repetitions and patterns, and create a kind of mass choir out of seemingly individual expression.

In the newest chapter of *Testament*, titled *Now he's out in public, and everyone can see*, currently in progress, I am constructing a narrative out of found vlogs in which speakers describe and evaluate four very prominent African American public figures, as they recount a number of highly charged, racialized media scandals. I construct a narrative out of the assorted clips, interweaving multiple stories and descriptions as they intersect around themes of racial and class identity. Out of these clips, I create a collective performance that explores current popular attitudes, anxieties, and conflicts about race. In a time of instantaneous 24-hour news cycles, emotionally charged media stories spread virally across the internet and are filtered through social media sites where commentators make videos responding to, reenacting, remixing, and retelling the stories. The project seeks to examine these often polarizing responses, which dominate our media-driven conversations about race and class, driven and inflamed by fears over demographic changes, by tough economic times, and by reactions to the our first African American president. My aim is to create an installation that offers greater depth and a broader critical context to otherwise scatter-shot individual online voices by drawing links and making connections and locating tropes and commonalities between different individual rants, responses, and interpretations.

BS: You have used a number of metaphors to describe what you have generated through your selection and editing for repetitions and patterns—mass choir and Greek chorus, among them. The latter characterization is particularly appealing insofar as it suggests a separation of chorus from actors and harmonic parts from spoken parts. As I understand it, the chorus in the original Greek model often took on a separate theatrical role or voice as a kind of figure of the social as such—“the ‘vox humana’ amid the storm and thunder of the gods”, in the words of one interpreter. If this analogy is correct, could you say a bit more about the separate meaning and significance of that choral voice that you have drawn together?

NB: That's exactly right. 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 com-

ments on the action. Aristotle also suggests that the chorus embodies the reactions of audiences and the people against the kings and their misdeeds.

In the various chapters of *Testament*, I've created choruses of vloggers who comment on actions that have taken place off screen. This is especially apparent in *Laid Off*, where I've compiled and edited together videos in which people discuss losing their jobs into a kind of talking choir. The actors, that is, those that have produced the tragedy – heads of companies, Wall Street, Alan Greenspan, our political system – are not heard from directly. Instead, we hear from a choir of 'the people' or 'the masses', united in their language, as well as in their anger, frustration, and their despair over the economic crisis and its impact on their lives. I should add that though they often speak in unison, the vloggers are still depicted as distinct individuals speaking in their separate and unique private spaces.



Installation of *Testament* showing a detail from *Laid Off*, 2009.

Although their experiences are shown to be collective – even the language they choose to describe their situation is similar – they aren't reduced to an abstraction in the way the Gods or the key actors are. They are not perfect machines, reciting in absolute unison, but instead unique individuals who interpret the choral script to fit their own story.

In *Now he's out in public, and everyone can see*, I represent greater discord among different choral groups. Although the various choruses still reiterate and respond to the primary actors – in this case the mass media – as well as to the secondary actors – the media celebrities – they don't speak in harmony. And some of what they have to say is pretty repellent as they recite and reenact themes they pick up from conservative actors like Fox News.

BS: When it is repellent, is the choral 'vox humana' still morally distinguishable from Fox's 'storm and thunder' and thus also sympathetic? In other words, is it a symptom speaking or is it the disease itself? What is the political role of your voice insofar as you are responsible for the choral unity of otherwise disparate repellent voices and the resulting gain of social and political emphasis or force?

NB: The choral voices work somewhat differently in the various projects – sometimes it's unified, and people appear to speak in unison without conflict. There the analogy of the collective as a choir performing against the backdrop of dominant forces is most vivid. Other times, the choirs aren't unified: in *I Am Not*, and in *Now he's out in public, and everyone can see*, individuals perform struggles over identity and self-identification, and there is no consensus. Someone once described *I Am Not* as a punk rock song – fast, intense, and compact – a 2-minute ensemble that creates a map with different points of identification around the word 'gay' and its associative identities.



Installation of *Testament*, showing *I Am Not*, 2009.

In *Now he's out in public, and everyone can see*, a longer and more elaborate chapter, I am looking at the way vloggers discuss a series of media stories involving four celebrated – and vilified – African American men. Each has been accused of occupying his powerful position under false pretenses and of holding a false identity, whether because of mixed ethnicity, apparent racial identification, relationships, appearance, public persona, or social class. The piece explores the ways that media propagated stories are embodied, articulated, and interpreted by vloggers. I highlight instances where it appears as if the men in question are being judged for having crossed a racial boundary, and look for moments vloggers attempt to define and articulate the limits and the boundaries of an authentic or acceptable black identity. Often the vloggers appear unaware of the racial aspects of their positions. I have a cluster of speakers recite the too familiar phrase 'I am not a racist, but...' followed by 'some of my best friends are...'. I form clusters of choirs around types of articulations, some of them familiar racist or anti-racist tropes, reading between the lines of vloggers' monologues, looking at subtexts that mask themselves as something else – as racialized – in a time some had imagined would be 'post-racial', making connections between seemingly disparate media stories and gossip. I think that by showing these articulations to be collective, rather than necessarily giving them political force for the cause, of say Birthers, or segregationists, it distills various positions and reveals them as scripted. I also depict a large dissonant choir, filled with disharmonious voices and discord. That still doesn't necessarily make some of the racist scripts or those that recite them sympathetic, but it reminds us that they are malleable formations – open to change and just one mode of expression in a large complex musical number.

BS: One of the most appealing aspects of all these recent works for me is the way in which they are at one in the same time scripted (and thus conceptually and rhetorically polished in the manner of Fox/RNC talking points cum mass-mediated commonsense) and emotionally raw and authentic. It seems to me that there are two ways this combination might be under-

stood: first, as the nexus of any effective propaganda (such as, at one end of the spectrum, the historic response to blood and soil imagery in Nazi Germany, for example, or, at the other end, the likely response to the recent television advertisements for the iPhone video-calling feature that have their emotional engineering down to a T); and, second, as the nexus of any and all effective emotional expression. We all need rhetorical and conceptual conventions to understand and communicate how we feel. This comes through strongly for me in *I am Not*, for example, where the rhetorical form of denial seems at once so conventional, so disturbing, and so human, and in *Laid Off*, which plays out the stages of grief in a manner that is both immediately predictable and profoundly heart-wrenching. Something related might be said about the work in *Now he's out in public, and everyone can see*. In each case, because your editing brings out choral expression around emotional keys, the humanity of the convention is foregrounded in such a way that it makes it hard for me to see them as strictly mass-mediated affect.

I take this accomplishment of yours to be very valuable because it escapes both the undue objectivism of sociological or statistical understanding and the undue subjectivism of the isolated individual exemplar. In this way it enables the beholder (at least this beholder!) to experience and respond to that emotion more substantively than otherwise. In other words, my own experience is one of coming away from your work with the sense of having a richer understanding of the human dimension of the various constituencies represented, and therefore a better sense of how I might respond as a critic or friend or otherwise. In this way it strikes me as a distinctive form of documentary. I'll try to elaborate on this last point in a question to follow, but for now could you say a bit more about the emotional complexity of these works? Particularly, could you say something further about the emotional valence of your voice? For example, if we were to say that you are performing the role of choir conductor, how would your performance compare to this or that bravura conductor's performance in which her emotion, energy, timing, expressive hand-waving, etc. are understood to successfully carry or direct or enlarge the performance of the group?

NB: I'm not really sure how much I can add to your very precise analysis. I've thought about my approach as very different from some other art works that also orchestrate archives of chatter and personal blogs online such as *The Listening Post* by Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin, and *We Feel Fine* by Jonathan Harris and Sep Kamvar. Both works use the tools of the statistician, algorithmically processing large quantities of online material to produce data visualizations and audio streams. While compelling in their depictions of the flow and magnitude of voices chattering across the internet, individual voices are all treated the same, subsumed in an undifferentiated whole. In my work, single speakers may be placed in a collective unit at different moments, but they aren't standardized or abstracted. The pathos and vulnerability – and the specificity – of their original expressions with their unpolished, clumsy, yet urgent intimacy, remains intact.

Through my edits, there is a movement between individual speakers and collective units, and viewers can linger over the details, the shared characteristics, and the differences among the environmental self-portraits the vloggers have produced. My edits build up to key movements with shared pregnant pauses, snide asides and interjections, emotional outbursts, and

personal insights or revelations. The movement between the isolated individual (isolated in their room, and in the video frame) and the much larger collective units may invite what you describe as your sympathy for (or identification with) the speakers regardless of the correctness or originality of their perspectives.

BS: Yes, I think you are right about the movement between the individual and the collective inviting (I would say 'enabling') my sympathy, and it does so in a way that the algorithmic works you cite don't even touch on. In the end, the distinction that concerns me may come down to a rudimentary modern/postmodern divide over the definition of the public or publicness. For example, we might take a Bergsonian like Brian Massumi to stand for the latter when he writes 'From the network's point of view, the human will is an interrupter', an 'irruption of transductive indeterminacy', an unformed 'raw material or natural resource', and Karl Marx to stand for the former when he writes, 'It is not the fact that the human being objectifies himself inhumanly, in opposition to himself, but the fact that he objectifies himself in distinction from and in opposition to abstract thinking, that constitutes the posited essence of the estrangement and the thing to be superseded'. That is, where Massumi casts the problem as one of the relation between individual nodes of human will and the collectivized abstraction of the network, Marx casts it as a matter of good and bad – or better, subjectivized and objectivized – abstraction.

In a nutshell, the experience I take your work to offer is something akin to the point of tension that Marx describes, and to be further afield from that taken up by Massumi. In other words, the experience offered by a piece like *Laid Off* seems to be one where the tension between the storm and thunder of the gods and the 'vox humana' is palpable, whereas in the algorithmic works you cite, human will registers only as a natural material expended in the free-market economy of the network. The critical difference between the two models to my mind is the difference between having you or the algorithm in the conductor's seat, or, put differently, it is the difference between the 'vox humana' and the 'vox mechanica'. Either way, it is an abstraction, but in one instance that abstraction is reaching towards class-consciousness and thus towards humanity, and in the other towards the false, machine-modeled naturalism of network or market time.

NB: Another way to put it is that I am trying to orchestrate a variety of quests to define and describe the self as a part of (and agent in) a larger social body. The tension is between this depiction of active attempts at self-identification and political subjectivity, and that of isolated individuals in an alienated space.

BS: Yes, terrific! It seems to me that the presence of your desire to orchestrate those quests, to give form and expression to their collective life, is what is so exciting and resonant and compelling about your recent work. In sum, I'd say that desire is the living embodiment of what I have been calling the 'vox humana' even when the chorus fails to achieve its humanity by merely mechanically parroting the storm and thunder of the gods.

This brings me to the promised further question about documentary. Documentary has always been socially minded and often that has manifested itself in forms that are meant to

realize that sociality themselves. We might think of the redistribution of the authority of representation from management to labour by the worker-photography movement in the 1920s and the public funding of various documentary projects in the 1930s, for example, or the grand efforts in the 1950s to use serial photography to represent social form in the *Family of Man* exhibition, Robert Frank's *The Americans*, and the first formulation of Bernd and Hilla Becher's life project, or the efforts to bring out multiple intersecting layers of psychosocial experience in the photographic essays of Allan Sekula, Martha Rosler, Mary Kelly, and others beginning in the 1970s. In each of these cases, the distributed, multipart form of the work itself served as both the bearer and the enactor of sociality or social being by making the relations between the parts, and of the parts to the whole, a central formal concern. In each of these examples it might be said that the form of distribution represented both passively reflects the social world it documents and actively reconstitutes, and thus transforms, that world. One of the features of your recent work that seems so appealing is the way in which it takes up the question of documentary as a question of distribution or socialization of form and reinvents it once again. You said before that your work 'aims to make visible social facts'. If you agree with my premise about documentary and its application to your work, could you speak further to how the multipart form itself achieves not only a revelation of social fact but also an enactment or realization of sociality itself? If you agree with my genealogy, how does it do so differently?

NB: Yes 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 what I'd describe as a continuous stream of video instant replays with analysis or commentary about everyday life. I'm documenting life mediated through other people's descriptions, creating both a document and an interpretation of current rhetoric, including how people speak in online space. My relationship to my subjects is further mediated by the camera and by the computer screen. 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, and it's one that is pointed to in my use of multiple screens of single people framed within their individual cells.

The serial form the work takes – that there are many speaking in unison about a particular set of conditions and circumstances – also suggests its sociality. I take many original 'I's and make them into 'we's. In this respect, my project is both documentary and aspirational, taking material already out there, and aspiring to make it more of a social experience than it currently is. The collective 'we' cuts through even aspects of life we often think of as most private, such as our psychic states and their treatment. In *My Meds*, clusters of speakers recited a long, rhythmic list of psycho-pharmaceuticals they were prescribed. On the one hand the piece reflects our heavily medicated society, but on the other, it shows how people now speak about what once was considered extremely private in new public forums, attempting to transform personal experience and trauma into something social and public. This is true as well in *Laid Off*, where people's private, personal experiences of the impact of the economy on their lives are made social and public.

The installation of *Testament* may also speak to your question of sociality. Unlike with viewing the source material, the installation tries to create both a physical and a social experience. Sound comes from different speakers at different moments, and the images, much larger than they are on a computer screen, appear in different parts of a room, on different walls or screens, requiring a viewer to move around the work and the room. Whereas the standard viewer of the source material is a single person at her computer, the installations enable a viewing experience that is active rather than passive, public rather than private, and social rather than isolated.

BS: Consistent with the best part of the documentary tradition, it seems like your position as an artist hovers somewhere between those of the anthropologist, the labour organizer, and the composer or dramatist. With that middle term in mind – organization – could you say something about how your upbringing has influenced your current work, focusing particularly, perhaps, on your uncle Murray Bookchin? He had an unusually long career that shifted in various ways over the course of the 20th century, but I'm thinking of a piece he wrote in 1995 taking on Hakim Bey and the later work of Michel Foucault, among others, in a manner that might be said to be characteristic of his thought as a whole. His main critical concern was with what he referred to there as 'lifestyle anarchism' or an anarchism that mistakenly and 'arrogantly derides structure, organization, and public involvement'. This tendency is only one small and relatively insignificant branch of what he referred to as 'ideological individualism', of course, but it would be easy to see how it overlaps with various tendencies in the art world such as those sometimes associated with the term 'relational aesthetics'. So, I guess I am asking you two things: to say something about how your family history formed your social thinking and how that social thinking sits in relationship to existing efforts made by artists to produce socially relevant or resonant art.

NB: The article you mention 'Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism' reflects Murray's frustration with the way he saw the term anarchism being emptied of value as it had come to represent a fierce individualism, more a fashion statement than a term grounded in the transformative social movements he held so dear. He began to distance himself from anarchism – didn't like to be referred to as an anarchist, as he had been for years.

I have always had great admiration for and attachment to Murray, his ideas, his incredible commitment, and his mind. He's part of a family history that I feel very close to, and includes my grandparents and great aunts, all very active in union organizing in New York City. My great aunts were smart, tough, and witty Russian women, living in Brooklyn, communists and members of The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. My parents, New Deal liberals, met and fell in love at a red-diaper summer camp in upstate New York, where they were both counselors. We grew up singing union songs and protest songs that my Dad played on the guitar (though as a teenager my interests switched from folk songs to Punk rock, equally filled with protest and anger, but maybe less directed!) During the summers we went to a Quaker camp in Vermont, where my Father worked as the camp Doctor in exchange for our tuition. The camp's emphasis was on cooperative work and living. I remember hanging out with – and being dazzled by – the Shabazz girls (Malcolm X' daughters), who were a little older than me and who also attended the camp.

As for where all this fits into existing art world efforts: it's pretty daunting to try to step back and place my work – especially current work – into a tread. Anyway, isn't that your job as art historian? I guess I'd like to believe that I work in the gaps, in the areas that are missing from current conversations. But here's an attempt: I have for a long time felt an affinity with most of the artists you've mentioned in your genealogy. As we talked about before, I am very interested in documentary and in interrogating and reworking of its forms, and so I am drawn to works like *Nine Scripts for a Nation at War*, by Ashley Hunt et al, Harun Farocki, Sharon Hayes, some work of Pierre Huyghe, Omer Fast, Eyal Sivan, Chantal Akerman, Zhang Ke Jia, Ken Jacobs, among many others. Chantal Mouffe's writing on agonistic spaces, and Rosalyn Deutsche's discussions of political philosopher Claude Lefort's ideas about radical democracy and public space have also been important to me.

BS: Well, truth be told, I'd rather my job not be artworld trend-tracking! Could you say a bit more about your role as a teacher? For example, what place if any does your role educating young people in an art school environment play in the social imagining that you develop so effectively in your recent work – in *Laid Off*, for example, or *My Meds*, or *I am Not*, or *Now he's out in public, and everyone can see*? For purposes of comparison I am thinking of Joseph Beuys and the role his notion of 'social sculpture' played in the context of his teaching, and later, his organizational work on behalf of the Green Party. Or we might think of others closer to home like Hans Haacke's career as a teacher at Cooper Union or Ron Clark's Whitney Program and the tremendous legacy they have had through their students. Or we might think of the plethora of recent DIY educational initiatives, like 16 Beaver in New York or the Public School in Los Angeles and elsewhere, or even the student protests, teach-ins, etc. that have emerged in response to the privatizing of the University of California and other institutions around the world. Is the social work of teaching connected to the social work developed in your recent art? What about the fact that, on some basic material, sociological, anthropological, and economic level, you are teaching art to artists? What role, if any, does that play in your work about race or employment or sexuality?

NB: I think of art making and teaching as fundamentally creative social practices. I teach from the position that most art making is collaborative, that in the current parlance, artists edit, remix and sample ideas, attitudes, and images, working from within culture rather than outside of it. I think some of the best work comes out of dialogue, critical awareness, and active engagement in the world.

It is really disturbing that art education – that all higher education in this country – has become prohibitively expensive, and that students are being shut out or are leaving school with enormous debt. We're witnessing a crisis in higher education that I think is going to reach a breaking point soon, although it's unclear how it will end. So, while I don't think the DIY initiatives replace college or universities, it is great to see them out there.

BS: Perhaps we should end with a general question about your role as a manner of anthropologist or ethnographer. I find this to be one of the most exciting aspects of your recent work because it seems to realize much of the promise of Malinowski's old 'ethnographer's magic' (or an accurate narrative expression of how the experience and affective orientation of a social group can be realized through the subjective impressions of the writer or artist) even

as it avoids many of the pitfalls of counter-identification, scientism, primitivism, and the like that anthropology came to be wary of during its self-critical phase, for example, or that Hal Foster detailed for contemporary art in his study 'The Artist as Ethnographer'. Could you say something about your status as a participant-observer? That is, insofar as, on the one hand your participation is registered in the view count below the video postings of others and in your own postings in return, and on the other hand, your work is about reflexive observation: to what extent is back-and-forth, insider-outsider, intersubjectivity a constitutive meaning for your work? In other words, to what extent is the meaning and significance of your work about a way of relating to, and participating in, the attitudes, beliefs, and values of others as well as depicting those attitudes, beliefs, and values?

NB: I'll go back to a discussion of the function of the chorus in Greek theatre to answer your question. 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.

Online documentation of *Mass Ornament*:
<http://vimeo.com/5403546>

Online documentation of *Laid Off*:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoWzWrsugdY>
<http://vimeo.com/19364123>

Online documentation of *My Meds*:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzFhEdht5bo>
<http://vimeo.com/19588547>

Online documentation of *I Am Not*:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8G78sFBPU_4
<http://vimeo.com/19588631>