

Dancing Machines: An Interview with Natalie Bookchin

CAROLYN KANE | Wed May 27th, 2009 3 p.m.



Image: Natalie Bookchin, *Mass Ornament*, 2009 (Still)

Natalie Bookchin is a California based new media artist trained in photography, film history, and theory. Her most recent video installation, *Mass Ornament* (2009) appropriates YouTube clips of different people dancing alone in their rooms and edits them together in a single-channel video installation. The piece takes its reference points from the classic dance and movement routines of the *Tiller Girls*, *Busby Berkley*, and *Leni Riefenstahl*, filtered through Siegfried Kracauer's 1927 theory of the *mass ornament*. Kracauer argued that synchronized acts, such as the *Tiller Girls*, reflect the mechanized gestured involved in the industrial factory work of a mass society. The installation addresses issues of globalization, post-Fordist economics, and the new forms of visuality and perception they engender. This interview was conducted by Rhizome's curatorial fellow, Carolyn Kane, in conjunction with Bookchin's upcoming exhibition of *Mass Ornament* at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, May 14--Jul 12, 2009.

Carolyn Kane: Could tell me why you are returning to the mass ornament, a concept popular in the 1920s, today? Also, how are *Mass Ornament's* dance movements distinct from the original *Tiller Girls*, *Berkley*, or movement in *Riefenstahl's* work?

Natalie Bookchin: I have taken up the idea of the Mass Ornament because it is a provocative way to speak about today's social and economic realities. Kracauer analyzed a dance genre popular in the late 1920s, one that would become even more popular in the 1930s, during the Depression. The dance involved rows of choreographed bodies moving together in synchronicity. Kracauer described the image produced by the movement of the *Tiller Girls* as a lifeless monster that he termed the Mass Ornament. Individual dancers had no say in its form and it held no value for them. In its formation, they lost their individuality, humanity, and sexuality. The Mass Ornament reflects the abstraction involved in capitalist profit formation. Workers in a factory, like dancers in a stadium, labored to produce surplus value that existed for its own sake.

The installation makes reference to the *Tiller-Girls* dance, and samples music from Busby Berkley's *Gold Diggers* of 1935, *The Triumph of the Will*, and from the original YouTube clips. While Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda films had a radically different set of effects than a Busby Berkley musical, or the *Tiller Girls* routine, they all depict a mass movement that was controlled, efficient, and rationalized, also defining features of modernity that cut across the economy, politics, and entertainment.

The *Tiller Girls* dance line-up, with its precise geometry, dynamism, and machine-like quality was seen by critics as the perfect expression of the age. The YouTube dancer alone in her room, performing a dance routine that is both extremely private, and extraordinarily public is, in its own way, a perfect expression of

our age. Just as rows of spectators in the 1920s and 1930s sat in movie theaters and stadiums watching rows of bodies moving in formation, with YouTube videos, single viewers sit alone in front of computer screens watching individual dancers voluntarily moving in formation, alone in their rooms.

Also, as the Tiller Girls dance embodied characteristics of Fordism and Taylorism, the YouTube dance, with its emphasis on the individual, the home, and individuated and internalized production, embodies key characteristics of our economic situation of post-Fordism. If Fordism once described a social and economic system that focused on large-scale factory production, post-Fordism describes a shift away from the masses of workers in the same space, to smaller scale production by workers scattered around the world. These workers are linked by technology rather than an assembly line, and there are more temporary or contract workers, often working from home, producing more specialized, less standardized goods. If the machinery of the Fordist era was mechanical, post-Fordism is digital. The vehicles for production today are information and communication technologies, rather than conveyor belts and assembly lines.



Image: Natalie Bookchin, Mass Ornament, 2009 (Still)

The choreography of *Mass Ornament* works on several levels. First, you have selected clips according to specific movements. Second, they are composed within the installation according to a particular themes, and third, the overall “compilation” of dance clips tells a story: the images set an empty stage (often in the bedroom), the dancers enter the stage, tease a bit, do their thing, and through your editing, a meta-level of choreography emerges. Could you talk about this process?

I begin the piece with a series of empty rooms: a few bedrooms, a bathroom, a couple of living rooms, a kitchen, and a hallway. This introduces the private domestic spaces that have been temporarily transformed into public theaters. The rooms and the props (the things in the rooms) are like characters in the dance. Then there is a repetition of these things and their arrangements in the rooms (framed paintings over the couch, TV sets, laptops, mirrors, also the repetition of the dancers, their outfits, and their movements). In the sequences that follow, dancers dance to their objects--to their mirrors, television sets, paintings, and of course, to their computers.

The arrangement of multiple clips in a single row across the screen mimics a chorus line but it also reflects the viewing conditions of YouTube, where videos are shown with an accompanying row of thumbnail images linking seemingly similar videos. The installation progresses from one video to many, reflecting the culture of video sharing, where one video can produce chain reactions—that can include hundreds of copies, responses, and variations.

I use music to blend individual dancers’ movements into a unified whole. It is enormously pleasurable, even hypnotic, to see people moving in sync, appearing as a part of something larger than their separate selves. I think this is why people tear up at parades and rallies, even parades that promote national and racial superiority and other really bad ideas. While reproducing this effect, I also try to undercut it by including sounds of individual bodies moving about in different spaces--thumping, banging, and jumping around. This creates a tension between the individual and the mass. I’ve also added ambient sounds that articulate and differentiate separate locations--such as a room in apartment building, in an inner city, a suburb.



Image: Natalie Bookchin, Mass Ornament, 2009 (Still)

The choreography of the dances reflect, as you put it, a "post-Fordist social structure that reaches further into private space: our homes, our bodies, our senses of self, and social relations." Do you see these dances as evidence of this capture, or as an attempt to escape, a form of resistance?

I think it is both. In seeming displays of personal expression, the YouTube dancers perform the same movements over and over, as if scripted, revealing the ways that popular culture is embodied and reproduced in and through individual bodies. They often perform utterly conventional gender roles, but the fact that they are performed--repeated, mimicked, and quoted again and again, undermines any pretence of their being real, authentic, and immutable.

Collective self identity is formed around video clips, and around particular dances and dance styles. A set of lifestyle choices get produced and reproduced with each new video and video view. On YouTube, like other user-generated content sites, the product is produced by the consumer. There is no need for a director or choreographer (or foreman) to keep production flowing or to keep the dancers moving in sync. It is a perfectly individualized self-generated, self-replicating system. (The only problem, of course, is that Google has not yet figured out how to capitalize on this product).

At the same time, each of the hundreds of videos I've sampled is singularly about physicality and the body. In this way, the YouTube dancers seem to make small claims for embodiment and public-ness in the face of their seeming disappearance in the disembodied, isolated, screen-based virtual environment of the Web. One central sequence has no music and only the exaggerated sound of bodies pushing against and rubbing against the various textures of objects and the spaces. They bounce off the walls and push against doorways, as if attempting to break out of and push beyond the constraints of the spaces in which they are encased.

Some of your earlier artwork involved programming your own animations and games, such as *Metapet* (2002), *The Intruder* (1999) and to some extent, *agoraXchange* (2003). Could you discuss the turn to the appropriation of public and anonymous media materials in your recent work?

Since the mid 1990s I have been exploring the ways that new technologies expand our capacity to control, track, regulate, and rationalize bodies. I have also been interested in bodies that are under surveillance, defined by genetics, commodified through biotechnology, or positioned in computer games. I've been equally committed to exploring visual and aesthetic forms made possible by "misusing" commercial media, that is, using them in ways unintended or antithetical to their original purpose.

In 2004, I became interested in the documentary potential of photographic and filmic footage I was finding on the Internet. At first, from cameras transmitting images, and then with material that was shared across the Internet. The clips I began to collect were photographic and filmic documents, indexical accounts of the world, source material with documentary potential. The films and installations I made were an attempt to follow the footage, ordering and organizing it in a way that allowed existing narratives and stories that were

being told about the world to emerge. The work looks at the way collective attitudes and representations become social facts. Each piece combines hundreds of found clips, challenging the single gaze of conventional filmmaking, which is splintered into numerous gazes, and then pieced back together.

There is another shift in your recent work. In *All That Is Solid*, from the *Network Movies* series (2005-2007), data is appropriated from private security cameras. But with *Mass Ornament*, *Trip*, and *Parking Lot* (still in progress) you are using public material from YouTube, material that people have intentionally exhibited to be seen. Could you reflect on these different tools / materials?

I found the cameras for the *Network Movies* series by doing simple Google hacks, but after a while I got frustrated by the limitations of the search. I was trying to depict a global landscape, but I couldn't find cameras for large sections of the world, even though I knew they were out there. On YouTube there was a surplus, rather than a scarcity, of material. In my first project using YouTube footage I make a travelogue, a road movie that consists of a drive across an impossible geography pieced together from road trips from around the world, with locations connected by the road, like disparate sites linked on the Internet. The continuous travel shot is seen from constantly shifting perspectives of tourists, soldiers, missionaries and migrant workers, and many others. The trip follows the route of technology, I go where the camera, the cell phone, and ultimately the Internet, has gone, across more than 70 countries and 20 languages. It's a travel film that is intrinsically bound up and coupled with the movement and conflicts of migration, war, commerce, and technology. *Trip* reflects the circulation of images, people, and goods around the world, occasionally stalled, but ultimately, like the lines of trucks in the film driving across borders, relentless, plodding, and without end.



Image: Natalie Bookchin, Trip, 2008 (Still)

Many of the artist's statements accompanying your artworks note a strong historical influence, whether from earlier artists (Hollis Frampton), intellectuals (Kracauer) or inventors (Edison). What is about these figures that interests you?

That is a great question. I tend to look backwards, to history, in order to speak about the present. It has to do with the fact that my work grapples with the need to be reflective in the present, with something that we are right in the middle of. History allows us to gain perspective. In my remake of Hollis Frampton's structuralist film *Zorns Lemma* from 1970, I was thinking about what it would mean to make that same film in 2007, how was it different from making it in 1970 - as filmmaker and also for a spectator -- what might remain relevant about some of the original questions, and what had changed. These historical juxtapositions allow the present to appear anew.

You teach at CalArts, a school in southern California that has an important history of experimental practices that integrate various art genres, such as dance, media, writing, computing, and theory. Has this interdisciplinary tradition influenced your practice as well?

Yes. More than anything else I do, teaching at CalArts keeps me on my toes. Classes are structured around topics, ideas, and themes rather than around specific media. Although most of the students and faculty in my

program (Photography & Media) come from a lens-based practice, and much of the work has some significant indexical attachment to the world, we all end up engaging many different approaches and media and being open to a multiplicity of practices.

This interdisciplinary flexibility is clearly reflected throughout your body of work. Thank you for allowing me to interview you.

You are welcome, thank you.

Natalie Bookchin's Mass Ornament will be on display at C.O.L.A. (Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery) Thursday, May 14, 2009 -- Sunday, July 12, 2009. Location: 4804 Hollywood Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90027; (323) 662-8139.

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