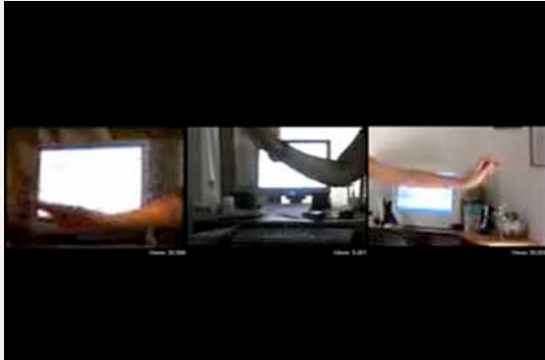


Blur + Sharpen



Natalie Bookchin on YouTube

By Holly Willis
May 16, 2009 1:32 PM



A young girl's face appears as she turns on her webcam, steps back, folds up her shirt, and begins shaking her hips. Then another girl does the same thing. And another, and still another, until a line of frames unfolds across the wall in the darkened gallery, and the girls, each alone in her own room, form a chorus line dancing in machine-like synchronization.

"This seems to me to be a perfect reflection of our contemporary circumstances, each of us alone in our rooms doing these same moves, yet connected to each other," explains artist [Natalie Bookchin](#) sitting outside the Municipal Art Gallery at Barnsdall

Park where her most recent video installation, [Mass Ornament](#), is on view. The piece is part of the larger exhibition of projects funded by the [Department of Cultural Affairs'](#) City of Los Angeles Individual Artist Fellowships, and it offers an intriguing vision of YouTube as the locus of cultural identity. Bookchin, who is co-Director of the Photography and Media Program in the Art School at CalArts, continues, describing YouTube's power over her as an artist...

"The first piece I did through YouTube was called [trip](#)," Bookchin says, "and it was just that, a road trip through 70 countries and 20 different languages, and it's about the idea of travel - the travel of images, the travel of people, the travel of culture and of ideas." The 63-minute video strings together dozens of clips by hundreds of anonymous travelers of differing backgrounds and occupations, each journeying from one place to the next. The images are at once similar - shots from car interiors of the landscapes outside - and very different, the specificities of the varying topographies commenting on the world's tremendous variety.



"I was thinking about the way that the gaze with the Internet can be splintered off into many gazes," says

Bookchin. "I can make films that are about not the single gaze of the single filmmaker, but the gazes as they move in multiple directions." In a sense, Bookchin has relinquished her role as camera operator in video production in favor of cobbling together projects based on other people's videos. Cheerfully acknowledging the shift, Bookchin adds, "I found on YouTube that there was an abundance rather than a scarcity of material."

With [Mass Ornament](#), Bookchin says she was still driven by the desire to understand YouTube videos as records of the world. "I was interested in the documentary potential of these images," she says, "and what we could know and what we couldn't know." However, rather than merely understanding each individual video as a "document," Bookchin looked instead at a group of videos - namely dance videos made by people dancing alone - with the goal of distilling a statement about contemporary culture.

"The name of the piece - [Mass Ornament](#) - comes from an [essay](#) of the same title by the German cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer," says Bookchin. "In the essay, he talks about the [Tiller Girls dance](#), a popular form in the 1930s created by John Tiller, who was this cotton magnate in Manchester who went out of business, and then decided that even though he knew nothing about dance, he wanted to train girls to become chorus line dancers."

Tiller's innovation - which was to create machine-like dances in which individual dancers get lost in the larger spectacle - was taken up by many choreographers and made famous in the dazzling sequences captured by filmmaker [Busby Berkeley](#) in films produced during the 1930s and '40s such as [Gold Diggers of 1933](#). "What was so spectacular about the dancing," says Bookchin, "was that it was a perfect reflection of mass production, right? Of the way things move in a factory, and how people lose their individuality in service to this abstraction. And the key is that people like it so much because it reflects their experience."

Bookchin's [Mass Ornament](#) works in an analogous manner, offering a way to understand contemporary experience. "While we still have factories and production lines, there's been a shift in emphasis toward people working alone, working in separate places, in separate countries," she says. "But they're connected by technology rather than connected by a conveyor belt. So these videos, with people alone in their rooms yet connecting through the Internet, seemed to be a reflection of our culture."



Bookchin says the project came together

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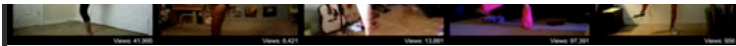
Dora Jacildo
Executive Director of Children Today

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Blur + Sharpen is an insider's look at Los Angeles' vibrant and globe-trotting community of new media artists. It is curated by [Holly Willis](#). You can also keep up with Holly and Blur + Sharpen on Twitter by following [@blurandsharpen](#).

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very quickly, between January and May as she

searched YouTube for videos of people dancing by themselves. She found hundreds and hundreds of clips, and began arranging them according to various notions - specific gestures, similar locations, the same music. "A lot of what I found had to do with people dancing within the limitations of domestic interiors," Bookchin explains. "So in some places I show people pushing against a wall, or sliding down a wall, to remind you of the architecture of the spaces. And I think it's important that these used to be private spaces and now they're public theaters."

The artist was also intrigued by how the practice is a way for exploring identity. "It's what we used to do - put on music and dance around in front of the mirror, but now it becomes public, which is very different than my generation." Given the intimacy of this exploration, Bookchin admits that she was wary of turning the project into a sexual spectacle. "At first I was worried that I was showing all these scantily-clad young women," she says, "but the bodies are objectifying themselves, they're turning themselves into spectacles and I think by showing the gesture over and over again, as it's done by a lot of different people, it becomes a quote, a kind of quotable gesture."

Bookchin's seven-minute video is projected on a wall in a dark gallery space within the museum, with five channels of sound creating an immersive experience that moves from exuberant visual pageant to intimate display. Bookchin has arranged multiple frames within a single very wide panel, and the careful choreography of gestures is often breathtaking, a feeling buoyed by the effervescent big band music (taken from *Gold Diggers of 1933*.) The music gives way at certain moments to the sounds of breathing and thumping bodies, capturing the shift from public to private. By the end of the video, you're left not only with a sense of elation by the visual dynamism of the projection, but with a realization about contemporary behavior and the contradictory isolation and shared experience of dancing alone together, all these people doing the same dance, performing the same gestures, linked only by cameras, screens and the desire to move.

For Bookchin, YouTube and the Internet offer a treasure trove of material. "I think it's so rich!" she says. "I'm so excited by what's available on the Internet that I don't shoot anymore. There's so much out there that's already been shot that I want to organize." And well she should. It's easy to dismiss YouTube and user-generated content, but Bookchin has found a way to query its meaning. To quote Kracauer, "No matter how low one rates the value of the mass ornament, its level of reality is still above that of artistic productions which cultivate obsolete noble sentiments in withered forms."

The 2009 C.O.L.A. Exhibition opened last Thursday, May 14, and an opening reception will take place Sunday, May 17, from 2:00 pm to 5:00 pm.

Municipal Art Gallery at Barnsdall Park
4800 Hollywood Boulevard
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