

### William James and the mosaic of networked experience

In the radical empiricism of William James, mosaics are less images than modes of moving thought and life along. James calls his philosophy of pure experience “mosaic” because it concentrates on the relations that allow thought to conjunctively expand (James, 1912: 42, 86). James’s thought wants to replay the movement of pure experience, pushing out from its own edges to conjoin with and separate from the next flow (of) experience. Events transition from one into the next, sometimes continuously and sometimes discontinuously, and it is in these very transitions that both experience and the amorphous, diffuse development of life lies: “Experience itself, taken at large, can grow by its edges. That one moment of it proliferates into the next by transitions which, whether conjunctive or disjunctive, continue the experiential tissue, can not, I contend, be denied. Life is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected” (James, 1912: 87). The image of a mosaic is useful for James because it gets at that sense of bits butting up against one another—bits that might snugly fit together or bits that might jaggedly push away all, moving, via an overall “second-order” process, to form a pattern or a whole (James, 1912: 41–42). Mosaics emerge processually as a bringing-into-relation that traces and delimits the outer edge of one event, conjoining/differentiating it from the inner edge of the next. It is the edge that is the mosaic’s force and that drives its patterning, not the pattern or mosaic “bed” determining where the pieces should sit.

The term *edge* also makes an appearance in graph theory, the mathematical backbone of network analysis and networked topological imaging. An edge, more commonly referred to as a “link,” is just that line depicting a relation between nodes or vertices. But in almost every topological depiction of networks, the edge has lost its adjunctive, cementing and edging out capacities that it holds in James’s mosaic thought. Instead, the edge as link becomes either a vector for the expansionist growth of node-driven additions to the network and/or a dead connector smoothing the flow of traffic between node-things. What we have lost in the model of the network delivered to us via the image and theory of the graph is the *experience* of the edges, the experience of relation, “the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations” (James, 1912: 43).

Mosaics are of course everywhere in contemporary data visualization. In fact, a standard mode of representing and comparing data sets that depend on another variable or contingency—for example, the number of women compared to men working part time in a call center—is called a “mosaic plot” (Hofman, 2003: 619). Here the mosaic is rendered nondiagrammatic, operating only as, to summon Peircean semiot-

ics, a symbol: “A *Symbol* is a Representamen whose Representative character consists precisely in its being a rule that will determine its Interpretatant” (Peirce, 1998: 274).<sup>7</sup> The mosaic as image in ordinary computational visual culture loses the power it holds in Jamesian mosaic thought—unless it creeps in again, diagrammatically.

*Mass Ornament* (2009), by Natalie Bookchin, is a video installation made up of downloaded YouTube videos, in which people video themselves dancing in their lounges and bedrooms.<sup>8</sup> It would be easy to call the installation a “mosaic” of online video experience. Rectangular video windows temporally unfold across the screen to reveal rows, indeed arrays, of similarly dancing girls (and the occasional boy), captured by their webcams, creating a rhythmic pattern—a “mass” of display, of “ornamentation.” Bookchin acknowledges the influence of the grid or “array aesthetics” of Fordist industrialism, by using music from Busby Berkeley’s 1933 film *The Gold Diggers* in the soundtrack. The connection is cemented by Bookchin’s references, in both artist statements and interviews about *Mass Ornament*, to the ways in which Berkeley’s dancers performed a machine choreography of the early automated factory: “‘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’” (Bookchin quoted in Willis, 2009).

But to discern the mosaic at the level of visual pattern alone would fail to get at the way *Mass Ornament* unfolds networked diagrammatics. The display of hundreds of YouTube downloads, edited together across the 63 minutes of video installation, creates a twofold rhythm of difference and repetition. The installation carefully sets in place a space-time of sameness as it opens—with eight YouTube videos popping up in line across the screen in no particular order—revealing both a similarity of mid-shot webcam angle onto the ordinariness of contemporary domestic architecture. Throughout the installation we return to these interiors as both backdrops to the dancers and to the empty spaces of mirrors and frames, occupying the same position on bedroom walls. We see multiples of unoccupied lounges, made by the same furniture companies the world over, and computer screens dotted globally on desks, positioned opposite the webcam and all glowing with the same blue-cyan light. So too, as the dancers walk into webcam view to begin their “routines,” do we watch their uncannily similar entrances; their gestures that repeat and mimic one another, as if one connected monotonous rhythm were infecting online dancers’ performance everywhere.

Yet *Mass Ornament* also distributes and punctuates its amassed choreography, conjoining each separate dancer in rhythms that suggest a dispersed “withness.” As five separate girls turn on the webcams and prepare to pose in a sequence that plays out



### 1.3

Screenshot from *Mass Ornament*, Natalie Bookchin, 2009, single-channel HD video installation. Copyright Natalie Bookchin. Image courtesy of the artist.

across the entire installation screen in a row, Bookchin also has each separate video begin at different moments into the dancer's walk toward the camera, before they turn to face it for their performance. Bookchin deploys this editing technique throughout the installation, temporally staggering and qualitatively differentiating the sameness of gestures performed (figure 1.3).

One movie, one dancer, one "mosaic" tile, is never quite in sync with its conjoining piece. Instead, gesture, dance, and movement "flow" out of one element, infecting the neighbors. Rather than simply moving in a row, the next dancer modulates the last's gesture in a vast relaying of movements across the screen, across bedrooms and continents, never quite stabilizing into "one" style. Our attention shifts from the actual mosaic pieces, the individual YouTube "nodes," to a diagram that relentlessly seeks edges with which to conjoin and makes edges through which it disperses—less the spectacular screen-based experience, as Bookchin notes, than a shuddering pulse of networked relationality:

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 with my editing and compilation is reimagine these separate speakers as collectives taking form as a public body in physical space. (Bookchin and Stimson, 2011: 308)

For James, a relation cannot simply *be* experienced as this or that, be consumed once and for all *qua* experience. For relations only unfold in duration, "[Personal] histories are processes of change in time, and the *change itself is one of the things immediately experienced*" (James, 1977: 198). Relationality is the experience of passage—a vague edging with, against, between, away from—that actualizes the related things. It is experience *as* conjoining/disjoining. To take the edge seriously means to also value the force of relation—its capacity to change the things in relation at the very moment change itself relationally occurs. The book on the table is different from the same book on the bookshelf by being brought into proximity, into a different relation of "withness" with the table, says James (1977: 222–224). It has changed not in and of itself (that is, essentially, although what that may be is also up for debate, according to James) but for something else—the table, the other furniture in the room, whom or whatever is knowing/experiencing the book. This is especially so for the experience of knowing the object, for an object (thing, node) can only be known via its associated milieu, "*To know an object is here to lead to it through a context which the world supplies*" (James, 1977: 156, emphasis in original).

It is not simply that the dancers in *Mass Ornament* are implicitly connected by the internet's infrastructure or by ubiquitous portals such as YouTube, which harbor techniques for soliciting the same kind of templatelike, user-generated content. By drawing on James's understanding of the force of the edge in mosaics, the force of relations generating transitions, we shift away from the pieces—the "tiles"—sitting in their bed or structure. We move instead toward the capacity to connect nonlocally via rhythm, cross-sensory relays, patterning. Bookchin's installation conjures the ways in which globally dancing bodies, intimately performing subjectivations, emerge in the reassemblage of packets of video files. In YouTube, packets, aggregated to eventually display as video files, are uploaded by a solitary dancer in an empty domestic setting, one devoted to home-brewed celebrity. As the files are reassembled in Bookchin's single-channel mosaic work, we sense the way in which this emerging, technically inflected subjectivation is nonetheless a collective refrain.

In *Laid Off* (2009), a work that develops this mosaiclike compositionality, Bookchin collects "vlogs," online video confessionals, mainly from North Americans who have lost their jobs.<sup>9</sup> Each "mosaic" window of an individual vlog recounts and reflects on the moment an employee was told (usually by their employer) that they had lost their job. Using the same strategies of rolling out edited together "rows" of the video

confessions across the scene, the networked diagram here is driven by voice and timbre. On the one hand, the job loss narratives are remarkably similar, signaling the widespread use of “management-speak” to flexibly maneuver through contemporary industrial relations. Video fragments of each individual’s working day flow into the others to create a shared narrative of insecurity and job loss in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. We listen to similar stories as people’s jobs are pulled from under them: “one of the larger people in the company and someone from human resources was there”; “‘well,’ he said, ‘this is the part of the job I really don’t like’”; “and finally the owner cut everybody’s hours down to nothing” (Bookchin, 2009). But the “shared” narrative falls away at the same time as feeble excuses are proffered by managers, and pauses, sighs, and gaps are all they can find to replace their words. A different moment of collective enunciation suddenly crashes through this feeble narrative of excuses. “Laid off” resounds through each tile, as each employee speaks the phrase simultaneously. From a centered window, Bookchin arranges two lines of almost simultaneously speaking tiles of recently unemployed people, fanning out and diminishing in size, as they edge toward each side of the screen. It’s a startling moment both because the synchronicity of the editing amplifies the vocal volume and because the very slight temporal delay incurred by visually scattering each speaker/tile across the screen also creates a slight reverberation through the phrase “laid off.” The voices speak together but not as one. It is the reverberation that gives the sound its peculiar timbre—a vibrating chorus in which neither unity nor disparity prevails. As if we were listening, not to the same experience, but instead from the inside of (a) collective multiplicity.

### Diagram and *dispositif*

To engage diagrammatically with works such as *Mass Ornament* and *Laid Off* is not to deny the spectacular uniformity of globally connected bodies or voices that unknowingly perform similar movements or say the same things. To return, then, to the mechanosphere, *Mass Ornament*, for example, does not escape the overcoding of the network by spectacular aesthetic machines (links and nodes, grids, mechanical dancing). *Laid Off* does not avoid the monotonous tone of protocols and the language used to justify corporate restructuring and job loss after 2008. Both videos slip along the conjunctions of a network that is becoming—generating itself dynamically as relations form and play out transversally across diagram and the network as *dispositif*. We need something like Foucault’s concept of the *dispositif* or “apparatus” to continue metamodeling networked experience:

What I’m trying to single out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous set consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. *The apparatus itself is the network* that can be established between these elements. (Foucault, quoted in Agamben, 2009: 2, my emphasis)<sup>10</sup>

For Foucault, “the field” is coextensive with “the social” but we might think about the field aesthetically too. The diagram is an immanent tracing of the qualities or traits of relations at play and operates aesthetically across a field—the recursive arraying of networking, for example. The *dispositif* is an actualization of the concrete network or assemblage—the concatenation that joins networks *with* hacker culture, for instance—that is produced as a specific individuation out of the conjunctive work of these traits (Deleuze, 1988: 36–37). The diagram will never simply function demonstrably as “proof” of what exists in the *dispositif*, although it is also always indicative of the kinds of conjunctions that any field will be likely to make.<sup>11</sup> Yet diagrammatically things are always moving, creating more conjunctions as they become, across a *dispositif*, and as the concrete assemblages of the *dispositif* concatenate with new assemblages: “From one diagram to the next, new maps are drawn. And there is no diagram that does not also include, besides the points which it connects up, certain relatively free and unbound points, points of creativity, change and resistance” (Deleuze, 1988: 44).

Aesthetic forms such as representational images of networks or “mosaic plots” or arrayed formations of crowds comprise part of our contemporary network *dispositif*, our “network condition” (Munster, 2009: 4). Tiziana Terranova sees the emergence of network science, responsible for the proliferation of, especially, the ubiquitous maps of networks, as a powerful element of this *dispositif*’s discourses and sets of scientific statements (2007). According to Terranova, the key mechanisms of this *dispositif* are security and the market. But, she argues, it is the relation of these mechanisms to each other that is crucial. Although what needs to be secured is the ongoing life of the population, giving security a biopolitical vector, it is risk—calculated as the series of events that will incur potential economic loss—that must be managed bioeconomically and minimized. What must be secured, then, is not life itself and not the risk to life but rather any potential damage to ongoing growth of the market. The network model and image play a key role in simulating risk events and predicting outcomes, hence their use in both organizational analysis and antiterrorist detection: “The network intervenes in this calculation as a productive machine *and* as a predictive/preemptive mode of simulation. As a mode of simulation, it allows one to model and rehearse possible strategies of preemption. As a productive, concrete assemblage, it