



ART WORK / DREAM WORK IN NEW MEDIA DOCUMENTARY

by

Karen O'Rourke

ACTE Institute (UMR 8218)

CNRS-University of Paris 1 (Panthéon-Sorbonne)

korourke@univ-paris1.fr

INTRODUCTION

In any case, one thing is certain: the human body is the principal actor of all utopias. After all, isn't one of the oldest utopias about which men have told themselves stories the dream of an immense and inordinate body that could devour space and master the world?

– Michel Foucault ¹

Creativity, autonomy, community. Today new media artists and blue-jean clad entrepreneurs alike lay claim to these ideals of 1960s counter-culture. Silicon Valley start-ups have spawned a corporate culture

Figure 1a. *Laid Off*, Natalie Bookchin, 2009. This choral work edited from a compilation of video blogger's stories of losing their jobs was exhibited at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2009 as part of the four channel video installation *Testament*. Whole chorus. © Natalie Bookchin, 2009. Used with permission.

A B S T R A C T

Today new media artists and entrepreneurs alike lay claim to the ideals of 1960s counter-culture. Silicon Valley start-ups have spawned a corporate culture that aims for maximum creativity, greater employee initiative and workplace autonomy. Has this "new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski and Chiapello) let capitalism recuperate the Left's "artistic critique" of the division of labor while undermining its traditional "social critique?"

In the highly competitive "winner-take-all" system of contemporary art, has "artistic critique" become obsolete? This article examines contemporary new media artworks that critically activate the ideals of creativity, autonomy and community.

that aims for maximum workplace creativity. Rumor has it that Google allows its employees to devote one day each week to personal projects with the idea that this could lead to successful products.

In their 1999 book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello argue that in the 1970s, corporations began to abandon the hierarchical Ford-

ist work structure in favor of a networked organization predicated on greater employee initiative and workplace autonomy. They define the spirit of capitalism as "the ideology that justifies people's commitment to capitalism and renders this commitment attractive."²

Studying French management theory from the period 1965-1995, the authors show how this new spirit allowed capitalism to recuperate the Left's "artistic



Figure 1b. *Laid Off*, Natalie Bookchin, 2009. This choral work edited from a compilation of video blogger's stories of losing their jobs was exhibited at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2009 as part of the four channel video installation *Testament*. Three individual faces. © Natalie Bookchin, 2009. Used with permission.

critique" of the division of labor which alienated workers from their own work (the product of their labor), while undermining its traditional "social critique".

Employees in post-industrial societies are increasingly offered a lifestyle modeled on that of artists, which affords them greater responsibility for their work and the opportunity to exercise their creativity. But this relative autonomy comes at the expense of their material and psychological security. In today's project-based systems of production, which require flexibility and rapidity, short-term and freelance assignments have become the norm. Workers earning low wages often hold more than one job to support their families.

Although artists tend to advocate egalitarianism in society, they are at the same time part of a highly competitive "winner-take-all" system. Has "artistic critique" become obsolete? In a world where workers, like artists, compete with each other for scarce resources, is it possible to build a common culture – a culture of the commons?

This article examines three contemporary new media artworks that mobilize the ideals of creativity, autonomy, and community in critical ways: Natalie Bookchin's *Laid Off* (2009); Esther Polak's *Nomadic Milk* (2010); and Tommaso Facchin's and Ivan Franceschini's *Dreamwork China* (2011). All three use digital video and deal with some aspect of work, how particular people make a living in a globalized neoliberal economic system, how work as an activity and as part of a

person's identity can structure ambitions, movements and relations with others. This article will focus on the way these media objects function as experimental forms of documentary and pose the question of their possible use-value for artistic critique.

Webster's dictionary defines *creativity* as the "ability to produce something new through imaginative skill, whether a new solution to a problem, a new method or device, or a new artistic object or form,"³ while Mihály Csíkszentmihályi emphasizes "the process of producing something that is both original and worthwhile."⁴ Focusing on particular art works and the way they were made, we will consider it from the viewpoint of process.

DOWN(SIZED) AND OUT(SOURCED)

In the past few years, Natalie Bookchin has been making increasingly complex multi-screen video installations with footage found on YouTube. *Laid Off* is a four-minute long choral projection edited from multiple video bloggers' (vloggers) accounts of losing their jobs.

On a darkened wall, small frames light up – one by one or several at once along a horizontal line. In each frame, a single person addresses the camera. When he or she stops speaking, the frame darkens. Several speakers begin in unison, "So today," followed by a few short individual melodic lines capped off with a ringing

soprano "sucked." The voices chant in unison: "I went to work," a tenor takes the melody: "like any other day and." Other solos fill in the details, one at a time: "my clock-in card was missing," "one of the directors called me into the office." "Aaannndddd..." intones the chorus. "I wasn't sure what was going on," replies a woman's voice. "I went down and, basically, some of the larger people in the company... someone from human resources was there."⁵

Little by little, the story unfolds from one person to the next: who, how, why, how long. "Next thing you know the hiring manager walks in," "And he started off with: 'this is the part of the job I really don't like.'" "And I'm like, what the fuck. What's going on?" "I'm really sorry; you're a really great worker." A short silence precedes a resounding choral "...laid off." "Due to financial reasons," sings a tenor. The vocabulary is familiar: "going out of business," "redundant," "downsized", "removed from my duties." The speakers highlight the injustice: "They're outsourcing my job." "I had been working at that place for nine years," "nineteen years," "since I was sixteen." "It came as a kind of shock," "I feel betrayed."

Bookchin's editing reveals archetypal patterns in the speakers' expression of loss. As she puts it, "It's almost like the stages of mourning – you start with anger, then disbelief, and then acceptance."⁶ They are a kind of spoken responsory of the kind used in religious liturgy, when a cantor, hazzan or prayer leader chants sacred verses and the choir or congregation responds with a refrain.⁶ Here the melodic line uses the periodic refrains to advance while gathering (or provoking) individual riffs and variations, as if members of the congregation were improvising on a theme.

Laid off was first shown in 2009 as part of *Testament*,⁷ a four channel installation for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA).

Testament [...] explores contemporary expressions of self and the stories we currently tell online about our lives and our circumstances. Clips are edited and sequenced like streams and patterns of self-revelation and narrative that flow and dissipate over space and time. [...] The project reflects on the peculiar blend of intimacy and anonymity, of simultaneous connectivity and isolation that characterizes social relations today.⁸

Laid off was itself deployed over two channels, while the other two channels showed *My Meds* and *I Am Not*. "They were each self-contained chapters, or vignettes," notes the artist.⁹ In the online documentation that she provides¹⁰ only the bloggers' general traits can be distinguished: male, female, black, white, with a predominance of younger people; the experience is more audio than visual.

THE JOB REQUIRES MOBILITY

On the left screen, Dutch artist Esther Polak, standing at the edge of a dirt road, holds a professional microphone toward Mr. Idiris, a Fulani herder. Between them is a translator. All three are watching what looks like a toy, a plastic water bottle on wheels as it moves about jerkily, spitting out sand. Idiris gestures toward the robot as he talks animatedly. The right screen shows him guiding his herd along the road.

For the project *NomadicMILK* (2006-2010), Polak worked with a team of researchers including an anthropologist and a robotics engineer, in order to explore milk distribution systems in western Africa.¹¹ In Nigeria, they used Global Positioning System technology to track the paths of Fulani herders, and truckers transporting the imported Peak brand milk from the harbor in Lagos, where it arrives from Europe, to the capital, Abuja, and from the city to the outlying

Figure 2. *Nomadic Milk*, Esther Polak, 2010, video stills. Fig. 2a. The Peak Milk truck sometimes takes the same road as the Fulani herder. Fig. 2b. Esther Polak asks Mr. Idiris, the Fulani herder to comment on his tracks. Fig. 2c. Here, Mr. Usman, the Peak Milk driver, comments on his own itinerary. © Esther Polak, 2010. Used with permission.



suburbs (Figure 2). The data was fed to a custom-built robot, which used sand to draw the recorded routes, allowing the participants to see and comment on their own tracks. Inspired by nomadic practice, this output device, which does not need a projector or even electricity, allows groups of people to gather around the sand map. The nomads, the artist says, “immediately recognized themselves in the sand routes as the robot carried them out. [...] It let people look at the patterns they made based purely on memory, based on their own route.”¹²



The results have been shown in Europe as a multimedia installation (Figure 3). In one configuration, Polak displayed a GPS drawing representing one day of cow herding in Plateau State, Nigeria. The film footage was projected on a wall while the robot moved around the room, spitting out sand as it progressed. Waypoints (such as river crossings) were indicated on the floor by photos planted on sticks. In later shows, individual routes were pictured in a set of twelve 70 by 100 centimeter sand-colored monoprints made by the robot. They were completed by a two-screen video projection to form a self-reflexive *mise-en-abyme*: one video stream documents the participants’ itineraries over the course of a working day; and the other, narrated by the artist, shows the same participants commenting their tracks displayed on the ground.



SMALL DREAMS

Multiple pairs of legs advance toward the camera. In the Guanlan district near Shenzhen, on the south coast of China, the street is crowded with young people walking to work (Figure 4). Dressed in navy blue jackets for the boys, gray and pink for the girls, badges clipped to a pocket or worn as a pendant around their necks, they arrive every morning at daybreak. They have migrated from the provinces of Henan, Sichuan, Hubei and Qinghai to take jobs in the Foxconn factory making parts for iPhones.

In the photographer’s studio “Real Woman Photoshop” across the street, they pose in front of artificial scenery (Figure 5). A slight young woman in pants and ballet flats looks over her shoulder at the camera; behind her, a path covered in red and ochre autumn leaves. Two others hold hands in front of a seascape. Slender, adolescent bodies: shy, a little stiff, they wear the same boots, jeans, and layered sweaters as students in London or Paris. They are having their pictures taken to keep or send to friends and family back home.

In late 2010, Italian photographer Tommaso Bonaventura replaced the studio’s owner for two weeks, while Tommaso Facchin and Ivan Franceschini interviewed his subjects. The result was “a multimedia project aimed at giving voice to the new generation of Chinese migrant workers.”¹³ The work is comprised of a website, a series of photographic portraits and a documentary video called *Dreamwork China* (2011), in which the workers describe their everyday lives, their projects for the future, their struggles for rights.¹⁴

“Dreams cannot come true, but everyone has a dream, don’t they?” says a young woman smiling. The camera frames a couple. The young man says: “Go on. Tell them.” She begins: “I love cosmetics; I want to open a beauty salon.”

The dreams - open a cosmetics shop, a skating rink, a photo store - have, for the most part, the same underlying theme. One boy declares: “I want to start my own business before I am 25.” The camera captures the dreamers’ hesitations, their giggles, their pride. Most are in their late teens or early twenties. Two young men stand in front of a bamboo forest, one poses in contrapposto, with his left hand on his hip, a bright yellow keychain attached to his belt; the other puts both hands on his shoulder. The wide shot shows the studio: props stacked on the floor, lamps, reflective umbrellas, part of the lavender field in the next backdrop.

For western viewers, this is no dream job. The migrants live in dormitories near the factory, if not above it: they must be available at any time. To meet short production deadlines, twelve-hour working days are not uncommon. One man declares proudly that he and his colleagues can deliver a finished product in 48 hours. In many factories, cameras are placed above the assembly line to make sure that the work is done in silence.

A talkative young woman declares straight away: “I am already 24. I’m old now, but I still look very young.” Her dream? “To earn more money and find a good husband.” She smiles, but her eyes refute that smile. Later, still smiling, she describes her arrival in Shanghai six years earlier, and the homesickness that made her burst into tears at the slightest provocation: “I could not stop myself.” Another comes from Qinghai, a 30-hour train trip from Shenzhen: it is no wonder she can’t afford to go home just now. After a ten-hour day at the factory, she attends night classes in cosmetology from 8:30 to 11:30 pm: “Foxconn won’t maintain me for my whole life.”

She was one of several interviewees who replied that working at Foxconn was “not bad,” although she

qualified this by saying there was a lot of pressure. So much that she added with a giggle: “I’m losing my hair.” “Where does this stress come from?” the interviewer asked. “Life, money, everything.”

Another migrant notes that working conditions are better than in the small factories. At least employees have a guaranteed salary and one or two days off every week. As for the spate of suicides at the Foxconn plant in 2010, a colleague maintains that the media coverage was biased: some of those suicides were caused by romantic disappointments. Besides, if workers are feeling stressed, they can take a break, go to the library, the swimming pool or the gym. His voice continues as the camera pans across large blocks of buildings with bars at the windows and façades covered with netting. Foxconn installed these devices to prevent employees from jumping into the void. Today employment contracts stipulate that the company does not compensate families of suicide victims.

WHAT CREATIVITY?

The three works outlined here extend twentieth-century aesthetic traditions through formal invention involving different methods of collaboration. One feature they have in common is the way they highlight the creativity brought to bear by their subjects in their everyday lives both on-screen and off.

DÉTOURNEMENT: FRIENDLY FIRE?

“Hijacking” found imagery had long been a disruptive strategy in experimental cinema, even before Guy Debord and Gil Wolman began calling it “détournement” in the 1950s.¹⁵ In *Crossing the Great Sagrada* (1924) Adrian Brunel used stock footage from travel films to which he added facetious inter-titles to satirize

the genre with its imperialist, often racist subtext. In one well-known example, a title identifies a desert scene as taking place in Blackpool beach. In his first film *A MOVIE* (1958), Bruce Conner spliced together pieces of found footage taken from B-movies, newsreels, and soft-core pornography. Conner’s editing created associations between the snippets of found footage by matching movements or juxtaposing similar compositions.

Natalie Bookchin renews and extends this practice in her polyphonic installations. The YouTube remixes create a Busby Berkeley style synchronic dance by juxtaposing videos of people dancing alone in their rooms (*Mass Ornament*, 2009) or a mosaic of speakers reciting lists of medicines they take (*My Meds*, 2009). The resulting videos can be funny without being facetious or ironic. Although they do emphasize similarities in the vloggers’ testimony, they also reveal idiosyncratic reactions, the singular in the midst of the collective. In *I am not* (2009), for example, vloggers attempt to correct their public image, expressed both negatively (“I am *not* gay”) and positively (“I am *so* gay”), moving from “I am no longer gay” to “I can admit I am gay & most people will accept that.” Although *I am not* is often a disclaimer (e.g. “I am not homophobic, but...” followed by a homophobic remark), it is not used that way here.

ARTIFICIAL CONSTRUCTIONS

Bertolt Brecht famously questioned whether “the mere ‘reproduction of reality’” in a photograph could say anything about that reality: “A photograph of the Krupp works or the AEG reveals next to nothing about these institutions.”¹⁶ Responding to Brecht’s challenge, artists have imagined artificial means to represent those phenomena that elude photography. Going beyond the mere juxtaposition of media, they have

developed an aesthetic of the hybrid that now encompasses the global positioning system (GPS), digital nonlinear montage and multi-screen installation. GPS tracks are mathematical visualizations of a chronological sequence of track points. In this sense, they are diagrams. Esther Polak’s projects combine GPS tracks with sound sampling and photo or video imagery. Each component is indexical in that it was produced by objects in real space, but it is digital as well, which means that whatever we see or hear is just one of the ways the same information can be apprehended.

Her work combines the graphic and narrative possibilities of GPS to make a kind of documentary that explores human landscapes in a networked world. For the multimedia project *MILK* (2003) she and Ieva Auzina interviewed people involved in the milk commodity chain, from dairy farmers in Latvia to cheese eaters in the Netherlands. Participants were given a GPS device to carry during the course of an ordinary working day. The artists then showed them their own paths and recorded their reactions. The final work is a documentary hybridization of GPS tracks, video and audio that brings Latvian farmers to the attention of Dutch consumers whose lives they impact. In an economy dominated by factory farms and opaque agribusiness dealings, Polak and Auzina show a specific economic circuit: cheese eaters can see where their food comes from and dairy farmers where their milk goes.

Polak thinks the techniques of media hybridization she foregrounds in her practice will allow artists to renew the documentary genre. *MILK* was based “on the equal use of several documenting techniques: visualized GPS-tracking, sound recording and photography. . . . Although recording the subject as realistically as possible, each technique gives a different point of view.” The “special combination of comments, photography and GPS-imaging . . . transforms the people into active ‘pencils,’ drawing in their own landscape, instead

of passive objects whose ways were being documented.” When the artists showed participants their tracks, the result looked realistic, while clearly showing “the limitations of every one of the media we had used.”

In the presentation system devised for *NomadicMILK*, the proportions are distorted so as to make the result more legible. The robot containing a bottle full of sand with a hole in the lid, moves along the ground, and draws the shape of the GPS tracks by leaving a trail of sand behind it. Sand drawings are made both on site (to present the tracks to the participants) and afterwards, when the project is exhibited, so “the robot functions as a performative tool, making the GPS tracks tangible and physically present.” The artist found it difficult to represent the tracks in a way that was understandable to the audiences. Like the dream work in Freud’s analysis, with its emphasis on condensation and displacement, “[t]he representation of both time and space had to be compressed, scaled, and deformed in order to make the robot draw a sand line that is a representation to which the participants and audiences can relate in a direct manner.”¹⁷

To combine “the vastly different spatial and temporal scales of the two dairy economies . . . into one intersecting drawing,” she built a basic editing tool for GPS data. The GPS lines are made mathematically, and are visualized by linking a series of positions on a map, unlike tracks that are made by a foot hitting the ground or a tire moving on a soft surface. Relating the lines to a shared knowledge of mapmaking conventions, we can evaluate only whether they are believable. She was surprised to discover that “when GPS tracks become elastic,” the “manipulated tracks became even more ‘real’ in the experience of the participants [...] if being recognizable as belonging to the self is a criterion for realism.” Then, to give this same impression of realism to European audiences with no direct personal relation to the GPS data, she had to add still another layer of editing.¹⁸



Figure 3. *Nomadic Milk*, Esther Polak, 2010, installation.
Presentation at the Balie. Photo by Ivar van Bekkum. ©
Esther Polak, 2010. Used with permission.

WORKING METHODS, CRAFT AND COLLABORATION

Adopting the methods of anthropology and oral history for their interviews, Esther Polak and her team, Tommaso Facchin and Ivan Franceschini all set up and documented artificial situations, while Natalie Bookchin edited footage shot and posted online by others. The web has encouraged transdisciplinarity, developing research methodologies that extend across, beyond and between the arts and the social sciences.

Tommaso Facchin maintains that “*Dreamwork China* is a documentary work. Sometimes it is close to journalism, sometimes to visual anthropology, but it is also something different. We used our own sensibility in relating to those people, let them talk and be themselves, and then, in editing the stories together.” He sees his film as part of a documentary tradition that includes Pierpaolo Pasolini’s *Comizi d’Amore (Love Meetings)*: “His capacity of relating to people, young and older in this long trip along Italy’s seashores in 1964 is for me a great example and a far-to-reach goal.”¹⁹

Esther Polak says:

*We planned in our project [...] to mainly experience space with people, which gave us a sort of freedom. Working that way sets up a very equal relationship with people from Africa or Latvia or wherever because you’re not there to solve a problem, but to enjoy spending time together. Some of them thought we would bring them medicine for the cows or new technology to increase the amount of milk they produce [...]. There was a family who refused straight away, and were not interested in working with us if we were not going to give them something back, which was fair enough. It was very equal, we were clear about our intentions by telling them that the only thing they would gain from collaborating with us would be to show the way they live to a big audience [...]. When some of them agreed it was already a success for me, a good start.*²⁰

She says that she and her team also agreed “to edit out all material they would feel uncomfortable with, so we showed them the clips before they were put in the project.”²¹

Natalie Bookchin collaborates by editing, remixing and projecting footage shot by others. In a time when many high-profile artists admit to (even brag about) having their work made by art fabricators, she writes: “I do my own videos. I can’t do it any other way, because it is how I figure out what I am doing with them. Editing is like writing for me, and I figure out what I am doing by editing, not beforehand.”²²

Her relation to her subjects came after the fact, when she posted her video on YouTube in response to each of the sampled videos. On YouTube, it has garnered seven comments, but only two from the vloggers whose videos she sampled. One wrote: “This is really beautifully done. It has great depth and sensitivity.”²³

WHAT AUTONOMY?

Research-oriented Art

These works participate in what could be called the academic or research-oriented branch of contemporary art, as opposed to the market-oriented branch. Academe has its own circuits of legitimization - public galleries, festivals, academic conferences - that only slightly overlap with those of the international art world with its biennials, fairs, galleries and auctions. As Simon Biggs notes in a recent message on the Emypre discussion list, “Art schools have always been an entry point to the art world - although not the only entry point. At this point in time the PhD does not appear to represent such an entry point. To some extent it seems to lead to another door, with the art world rather keen to keep its door firmly closed to those who might knock on it from this direction of entry.

The door the PhD leads to is also closely guarded by guardians who seem rather nervous about what might happen if they let these new arrivals in. Every group has its gatekeepers (often self-appointed).²⁴

Means of Production

Unlike artists who make their living from their art, and are directly exposed to the whims of the art market, artist-researchers often rely on income from teaching. Those with permanent positions undergo less day-to-day financial pressure, although if they want to have large-scale works produced, their projects must be compatible with the objectives of grant-making bodies. This entails channeling time and effort into writing grant applications and progress reports.

Europeans can apply to state and local structures for funding, as well as private industry. They often receive aid in kind and collaborate with professionals, scientists, and programmers. Realizing *NomadicMILK* entailed travel and production costs. The “about us” page lists ten sponsors, ranging from Friesland Campina, the Dutch dairy producer (they make condensed Peak milk sold in Nigeria) to The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), the Dutch embassy in Abuja and the NIMk Netherlands Media Art Institute.²⁵ Increasingly, the once independent European cultural organizations are embracing a culture of accountability. Frequent audits require grantees to jump through more and more hoops, to perform well in statistical ratings, just as academics need to boost their publication counts. Even in these conditions, the NIMk had to close down at the end of 2012 when the Ministry of Culture denied it further funding.²⁶

Artists in the United States often turn to private foundations. Natalie Bookchin has received a number of grants from private organizations, including support from California Institute of the Arts, where she

teaches. Yet she does not let the funding determine how she will work:

*My projects have always tended to shift in scale from very large scale to modest. For a large scale feature-length film Long Story Short (working title!) is still very DIY and I am doing all the editing and much of the story collecting myself. The major difference in this work and work I have done before is that I am going out in the world and working with people to make their own video diaries rather than starting with material on the web.*²⁷

The relative autonomy attributed to artists could be contrasted with the lack of freedom felt by other categories of workers. As Theodor Adorno puts it, “absolute freedom in art, always limited to a particular, comes into contradiction with the perennial unfreedom of the whole.”²⁸ The migrant workers in *Dreamwork China* describe their days as monotonous: eating, working, sleeping. When they aren’t working, they either “kill time” by surfing the Web or shopping, or use it to prepare for a new future (after a ten-hour day, the young woman from Qinghai still finds time to attend night school). It is telling that they all aspire to what they see as the independence of small business owners and shopkeepers: being their own boss.

As if in echo, the laid-off workers in Bookchin’s compilation cite their newly found freedom as an advantage gained from losing their jobs. At one point, the chorus intones: “I’m looking forward to having a little time on my hands.” With this time, one speaker declares “I’m going to work on my skills to pursue what I really want”, while others plan to: “take a vacation”, “laze around the house” and, the chorus picks up, “make some videos”. Has the “unfreedom” remarked by Adorno begun to give way to something resembling the artist’s freedom?

What Community?

A number of recent studies have focused on the qualities of communities that foster creativity. As Scott Rettberg puts it, “creativity is not best understood as a manifestation of genius or inspiration within any particular individual, but instead as the collective, performative practices of communities.”²⁹ Noting that “breakthrough ideas” are “cobbled together from whatever parts that happen to be around nearby,” Steven Johnson describes the environments where these parts can be found in abundance: the coffee shop, for example, offers optimal conditions for exchange, as it is a place where people from diverse milieus meet, allowing many wide-ranging ideas to “collide.”³⁰

Did these works benefit from environments that support artists and incubate new ideas? To what extent have the artists themselves contributed to building collaborative communities?

Tommaso Facchini and Ivan Franceschini refer to the community of migrant workers, activists, union organizers and members of non-governmental organizations who defend workers’ rights in Shenzhen and the Pearl River Delta. These are the people they have interviewed and whose points of view come across most strongly in the film. Again, their contribution seems straightforward, as they aim to make these people’s lives better known in the West. Tommaso Facchin writes: “There’s no explicit link between Foxconn workers and NGO [non-governmental organization] activists in the second part of the video, even if those NGOs operate exactly in the same area, so we may say that the two - workers and NGOs - may meet one day. While I was there, and during the editing process I was more and more convinced that I should make a documentary only on the young workers of the first part, and probably I will. But this time we wanted to give a broader view of the issue and show different stories divided into separate chapters.”³¹

Natalie Bookchin’s videos gather individual English-speaking vloggers into an entity whose collective voice may be stronger than any individual. Many of them appear to be North American, although the occasional British accent can be heard. She has built her structure on top of YouTube’s social network. The sampled videos communicate each author’s distinctive voice and storytelling flair, and show the inventiveness that people deploy in dealing with unexpected situations.

Has YouTube’s ecosystem fostered a sense of community? After a period of undue idealization of “the wisdom of crowds,” we have settled into the opposite trope: social networking is a fool’s bargain. If user-contributed content undoubtedly lines the pockets of large corporations, it is no less true that people appropriate these platforms to their own ends. For example, one of the vloggers in Bookchin’s sampling uses her YouTube channel to launch a speaking career.³²

Vloggers tend to talk informally as if conversing with friends and they can often receive many comments. Why did this particular group not respond to Bookchin’s remix? Could they have thought that, because she posted no personal laid off story, she was not a member of the club? Were they at a loss as to how to interpret her meta-narrative? Or was it simply that, by combining their voices, her video said it all? Was there really nothing more to add?

“Someone interviewing me recently said my role as a collector and editor of these videos was somewhere between an anthropologist, dramatist and labor organizer because I’m taking individual voices off of a small screen and making 3-D spaces that assume a collective resistance to alienation and isolation.”³³ Anthropologists are usually not members of the communities they study. In her recent project *Long Story Short*, Bookchin initiates and carries out interviews locally. As she puts it, “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.”³⁴

Esther Polak made different communities intersect during her project. The idea first came to her when a Nigerian friend in the outskirts of Abuja mentioned seeing Fulani herdsmen lead their cattle past his office window. Making a project only with nomadic people would be too nostalgic, so she decided to contrast this milk route with that of the imported power milk that Nigerians use in tea. To this end, she contacted the Dutch headquarters of the dairy firm Friesland Campina. In Nigeria, where she made a number of six-week research trips, she worked with the non-governmental organization Pastoral Resolve.³⁵

What Critique?

None of the artists claims to be making art that is specifically political. Their agendas may vary, but most seem to see their art as a form of knowledge or a way to increase understanding. *Dreamwork China's* authors describe their film as a documentary. Ivan Franceschini, a PhD candidate at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice, has done research into Chinese labor rights and civil society and has published several books on the subject.³⁶ Both Franceschini and Tommaso Facchin lived in China for several years before making the film.

Tommaso Facchin notes that the recent “media obsession around Apple and Foxconn in China” has blurred the real issues: “Yes, Foxconn is a hard place to work in. Yes, there have been a lot of suicides there. But do we have any real idea of how hard a Chinese migrant worker's life is in today's China? I'm sorry to delude

many, but Foxconn still is one of those factories millions of Chinese workers would want to work in. Higher wages, better working conditions, better working environment and much more. Foxconn and Apple are so big and important, so we have to talk about them, I'm not denying it. But I think that, if we just point at Foxconn and Apple when we are talking of Chinese workers' rights, we miss the real problem. We seem not to be interested in the real working conditions in the thousands of real sweatshops around the country.”³⁷

Esther Polak insists that, while she is interested in being critical in general, as a citizen, as a member of the audience or with regard to other artists' work, she refrains from outspoken criticism in her own work so as to leave it open for “all kinds of interpretations. This is both an esthetic and a political decision.”³⁸ What sets both *Dreamwork China* and *NomadicMILK* apart is the attention given to details. At first sight it might seem rather repetitive to ask one person after another to tell the story of his or her everyday life or movements. While contemporary art has never shied away from the boring (indeed this is one of the ways it distinguishes itself from popular art forms), it is just this precise observation that gives both works their critical edge - and their interest.

As it turns out, the two milk economies charted in *NomadicMILK* aren't mutually exclusive. Peak Milk has not wiped out local production. Nono is like yoghurt; it can sustain one for a whole day, whereas Peak Milk is better in tea. Does this mean *NomadicMILK* functions as a support to facilitate neoliberal globalization? Such a simplistic approach would be short-sighted. Let us interpret it as a call to refine our analysis.

Natalie Bookchin says that her work “tries to make sense of the flood of information that we're producing about ourselves.”³⁹ In the past, she has been known



Figure 4. *Dreamwork China*, Ivan Franceschini and Tommaso Facchin, 2011. Video 55 mins. In the Guanlan district near Shenzhen, on the south coast of China, the street is crowded with young people walking to work. They have migrated from the provinces of Henan, Sichuan, Hubei and Qinghai to take jobs in the Foxconn factory making parts for iPhones. © Tommaso Facchin, 2011. Used with permission.

for explicitly “political” content, such as the Gatt.org parody website, made with activists who later became known as the Yes Men, and *Metapet* (2002-2003), an online game that satirized corporate culture, made with Jin Lee. Players managed a virtual, genetically engineered employee (brought in to replace uncooperative human workers): the game defied them to motivate the pet to work harder and more efficiently by “the right balance between a firm hand and a gentle coax, without ever losing sight of the bottom line.”⁴⁰ The artists lampoon business's managerial ethos, its relentless goal orientation, and the jargon that smooths over questionable practices like the patenting of genes.

The YouTube remixes chart a different path: “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.”⁴¹

Since then, she has been working on a larger scale documentary project. “*Long Story Short* is a three part project - a feature film, a web documentary, and story archive. It uses innovative forms of storytelling and shapes its narrative by interweaving hundreds of first person video diaries made by people in California living below the poverty line.” Its use-value is greater, although it could also be seen as one of those much-criticized cultural bandages, by which participatory art projects serve to soften some of the harshest effects of neoliberal capitalism and the free market.⁴²

CONCLUSION

Although we are a long way from Guy Debord's injunction to “never work,” these new media documentaries do insert a (brief) pause in the 24/7

always-on, just-in-time cadence that has become the norm in today's globalized economy. While among the European "creative class," artistic critique often takes the neo-luddite form of "unplugging" (rejecting cell phones and/or the Internet), the authors of these documentaries hone closer to the ideal of the "hi-tech gift economy."⁴³ In each case, technology has facilitated the contact between the documentarists and their subjects and allowed new forms of exchange.

The laid-off workers in America engage in unproductive play and carry on video-mediated conversations with their peers. The young migrants in *Dreamwork China* inflect the course of their lives by formulating "small dreams." The urban truck drivers and pastoral

nomads in Nigeria reflect on their itineraries, as they move more or less fluidly between cutting-edge technology and ancestral tradition. In this, they all assume the critical distance necessary to comment on the worlds they inhabit, and to imagine others possible.

At the same time, it would be overstating the case to say that these works contribute much to (let alone create) communities outside of the art sphere. The non-artists tend to lose interest in a project once its instigator has left: both interviewers and interviewees move on with their lives. Tommaso Facchin notes that it was "hard to keep contact with those workers, their lives change so fast and when later I wanted to get back to them their phone numbers had already

Figure 5. *Dreamwork China*, Ivan Franceschini and Tommaso Facchin, 2011. Video, 55 mins. One of the Foxconn factory workers interviewed in the photography studio. © Tommaso Facchin, 2011. Used with permission.



changed, or they were not reachable because they had probably moved to other cities. At present I'm in contact only with one or two of them. From the messages I got, they seemed to like the video, without showing much interest in it, but I hadn't the occasion to talk to them in person about this."⁴⁴

Here, unlike participants in community art projects, the subjects of these documentaries are not their main audience. And the secondary audience deemed necessary for art to be validated by history is to be found in the art world, or more precisely, the academic art world.⁴⁵

It may be significant in the long run that I can write about these works although I have never set eyes on any of them in a gallery, a museum or a movie theater. The Internet's potential for leveling the playing field has been partially realized. Even as Natalie Bookchin reworks material on YouTube to exhibit in a museum (the installation was bought by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art), she undermines this gesture by posting footage of the exhibition on YouTube and on the competing video-sharing site Vimeo, where they can in turn be remixed by others. The *Nomadic-MILK* and *Dreamwork China* projects are also visible online.⁴⁶

Yet how can these works be "visible" when, according to YouTube, the site streams 4 billion online videos every day, and 60 hours of new videos are uploaded every minute?⁴⁷ The fact that they find their audience amongst this outpouring of online material is due in part to their (broadcast) media visibility. It is the same media circus decried by Tommaso Facchin that led me to his film in the first place. Natalie Bookchin, a pioneer of Internet art in the 1990s, has gradually built up an oeuvre and an audience online and, on occasion, in museums. Esther Polak came to the attention of the "new media" art community in 2002 with her

large-scale GPS project *Amsterdam Realtime*, and has developed a corpus of work since then.

Of course, these secondary audiences take notice primarily because there is something to notice. The overall shape of each project is striking; all three are crafted as language, sound, and image. In other words, the artists have framed situations and produced outcomes that transform experiments into experiences capable of affecting audiences at several levels. ■

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