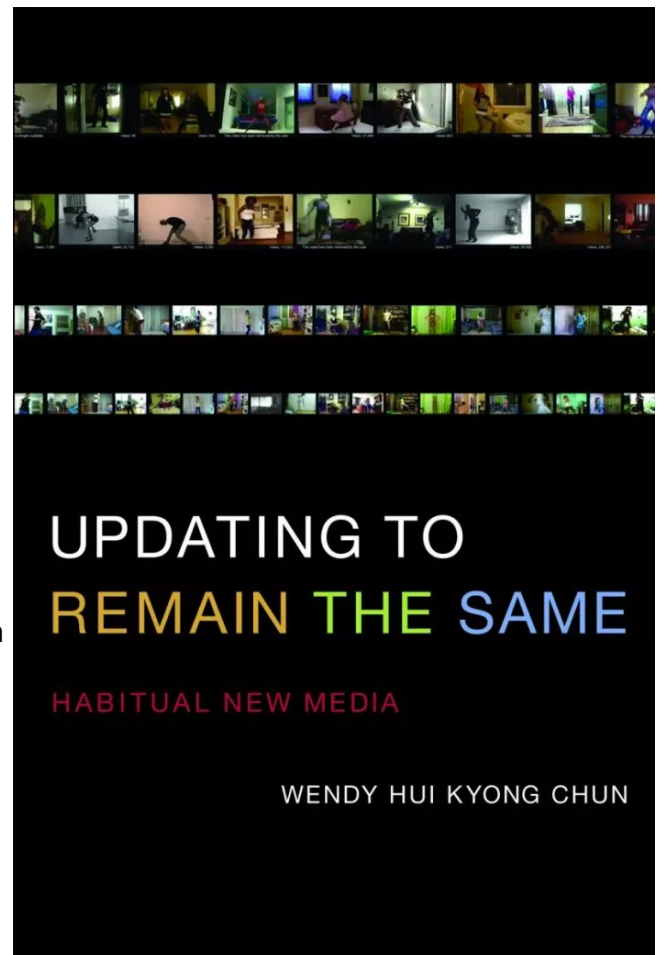




Social Media – New Masses / Updating to Remain the Same

December 7, 2017 / in [Autumn 2017 #Dress](#), [Book Reviews](#), [Reviews](#)

In many ways, the work of American media artist Natalie Bookchin perfectly captures what is at stake in both books discussed here. A snapshot from her work titled *Mass Ornament* from 2009 actually figures quite prominently on the cover of *Updating to Remain the Same*. The same work also makes an appearance in *Social Media – New Masses*, in Sascha Simon's article on new digital forms of mass customisation. A multi-screen installation, *Mass Ornament* choreographs hundreds of dance performance videos posted on YouTube by users who, even more than Siegfried Kracauer's famous Tiller girls to which the title of the



work refers, might not be explicitly aware of each other's activity but nevertheless operate in a common space, forming an 'anonymous figure'. Out of the mass archive that is YouTube, Bookchin constructs a serialised visual assemblage that questions the relation between the individual and the collective in today's digital media networks. By selecting, editing, and composing these videos in this way, she traces the contours of an unconscious collectivity in the very heart of a media environment normally understood as hyper-individualistic. These dancers filming themselves in their own private rooms are actually 'part of something larger than their separate selves'.^[4]
[\[# edn4\]](#)

However, this is not to say that this collective dimension only exists by the grace of the artist's activity. As Jodi Dean has shown in the case of selfies and image macros, what appears at first glance as the pinnacle of individualism on second inspection reveals a 'commoning of faces' oriented not so much to the affirmation of individual identity but to the selfie form as a template of vernacular expression.^[5]
[\[# edn5\]](#)

This is also true for the dance videos Bookchin choreographs, where each move always already incorporates and anticipates another, by an other. For Chun, Bookchin's video installations reveal plurality in singularity, and collectivity in individuality (p. 163). Individuality is shaped from 'an originary multiplicity' to which it must return, rather than severing itself from it. Seemingly personal gestures, facial expressions, never belong to me but are individuated from a reservoir of common visual and gestural components. Thus, in the very precise and beautiful statement by Bertolt Brecht, 'Man does not become man again by stepping forth from the masses but by sinking deeper into them.'^[6]
[\[# edn6\]](#)

In her work, Bookchin inquires at what point historical forms resonate with contemporary ones, tracing structural similarities while also attending to what is irreducibly different about the mass phenomena of 1930s Weimar modernity and contemporary global media culture. If Kracauer's Tiller girls reflected capitalist modernity and the Fordist organisation of the laboring bodies of the industrial proletariat into mechanized collectives, Bookchin's protagonists exemplify the neoliberal, post-Fordist organisation of labor as prosumers of a freelancing, entrepreneurial precariat.^[7] And yet the mass still asserts itself through these single performers and their viewers in ever new social, cultural, and political configurations. Both books reviewed here contribute in no small way to an understanding of what is at stake in the interface where media and masses collide.

Daniël de Zeeuw (University of Amsterdam)

References

Bookchin, N. 'Dancing Machines: An Interview with Natalie Bookchin', *Rhizome*, 27 May 2009, <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2009/may/27/dancing-machines/> [https://rhizome.org/editorial/2009/may/27/dancing-machines/] (accessed 1 October 2017).

Brecht, B. 'Against Georg Lukács' in *Aesthetics and politics* by T. Adorno, W. Benjamin, E. Bloch, B. Brecht, and G. Lukács. London-New York: Verso, 1977.

Dean, J. 'Faces as Commons: The Secondary Visuality of Communicative Capitalism', *open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain*, 31 December 2016, <http://www.onlineopen.org/faces-as-commons> [http://www.onlineopen.org/faces-as-commons] (accessed on 1 September 2017).

Kracauer, S. 'The Mass Ornament' in *The mass ornament: Weimar essays*, edited by T. Levin. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995 [1963]: 74-86.

Sloterdijk, P. *Die Verachtung der Massen. Versuch über Kulturkämpfe in der modernen Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009.

Thacker, E. 'Networks, Swarms, Multitudes. Part One', *CTheory*, 2004, <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=422> [<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=422>] (accessed 15 November 2017).

[1] [[# ednref1](#)] Sloterdijk 2009.

[2] [[# ednref2](#)] Stage 2013, p. 1.

[3] [[# ednref3](#)] Thacker 2004.

[4] [[# ednref4](#)] Bookchin 2009.

[5] [[# ednref5](#)] Dean 2016.

[6] [[# ednref6](#)] Brecht 1977, p. 69.

[7] [[# ednref7](#)] Bookchin 2009.



