# RE-EDITING THE AMERICAN CRISIS: NATALIE BOOKCHIN'S MONTAGED PORTRAITS

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*Excerpts from interview with Natalie Bookchin by Angela Maiello, Sapienza University of Rome. Published in* Dentro/Fuori. Il lavoro dell'immaginazione e le forme le montaggio, *2017.*

**Angela Maiello: In *Long Story Short* you created your own archive. Why?**

Natalie Bookchin: I wanted to make a film where people living in poverty in the U.S. speak about their experiences—how poverty feels, what they find wrong with popular media depictions of poverty, and what they think the middle class, the wealthy, and politicians need to know. I wanted to hear people usually not heard from in society defining their own situations rather than having others define it for them, as is too often the case. I was so fed up with seeing, in films and in the media, poverty depicted as something shameful, pathetic, ugly, or outside the norm, the subtext being that if only the poor were more clever, glamorous, industrious, or more conforming, they wouldn't be in such lousy situations. I wanted to get the other side of the story.

**In your work, it seems to me that you often give new or renewed meaning to words. Is this a correct assessment?**

Well, sort of. I try to maintain the integrity of the original documents, to be true to what I think is being expressed. I re-edit words and phrases in an attempt to reveal not just text but also subtext, and to portray, by using a collection of video interviews, what might not be understood in one interview alone.

**How would you describe your process of editing these images and the montages you create?**

I start by gathering—or in the case of *Long Story Short*, producing—an archive of videos. I begin editing almost immediately, while still accumulating videos. I let each individual video lead me, and as I combine one with the next over time, the work's shape slowly starts to emerge. It's a continuous back and forth, with each new video adding to and altering the shape of the edited whole. I arrange and rearrange fragments according to the interplay between thematic, sonic, and visual patterns, paying attention to tone, gesture, content, and mise-en-scène.

I would describe the montages I create as taking two forms: either simultaneous or sequential spatial montages. In the case of simultaneity, the same gestures may appear or the same words may be uttered in unison in separate videos that are laid out across the screen. Spatializing the montage is a good way to create the illusion of simultaneity, and it allows me to reveal commonalities among separate individuals. Sequential spatialized montages, on the other hand, are instances where an action or narrative unfolds over time. Here again, multiple videos appear on screen at the same time. To give a simple example, on a three-frame screen, someone begins a sentence on the left side of the screen, someone else continues the thought in the center, and another person completes the sentence on the right side of the screen, while the two preceding videos remain in place. Viewers get the sense that the subjects are listening to each other, that there is a conversation happening, while at the same time they can see through the editing that they're watching a constructed conversation that did not really take place. This kind of fiction takes place all the time in conventional editing. The most obvious—and annoying—example is where the
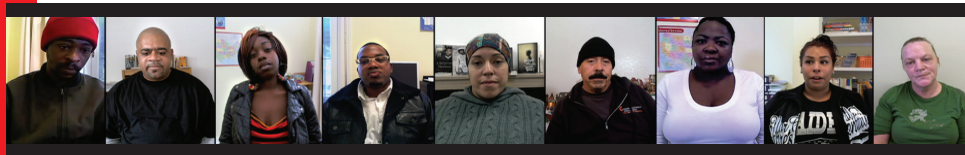


*Long Story Short* (2016)
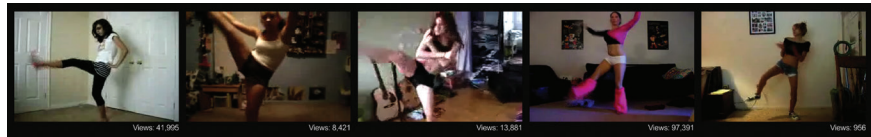


*Mass Ornament* (2009)
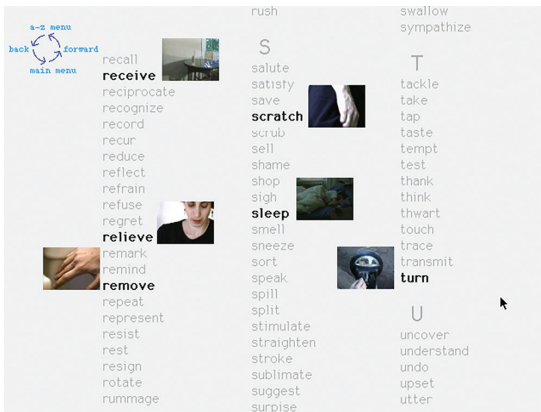
*Databank of the Everyday* (1996)

B-roll of an interviewer's nodding head is added to an interview to create the impression of them having nodded in agreement. The difference is that in my work, the editing is visible. You simultaneously feel its effects on the narrative and see it as an artifice.

      In his 1996 essay "Digital Cinema," Lev Manovich wrote about an early work of mine, *Databank of the Everyday* (1996)—he was also the cinematographer on that piece—as the beginnings of digital spatial montage, where "as the narrative activates different parts of the screen, montage in time gives way to montage in space." He argued that while "cinematic" montage produces a record of perception, "digital" spatial montage produces a record of memory—both what came before and what follows remain visible. This is interesting—and part of my intent— but doesn't fully describe what is going on in my recent work. In the spatial montages I create, I present a record of memory— for example, different words spoken by different people at different times—but I also present them as if they are happening at the same time.

      **Why is your montage always visible? It seems like you leave traces of it on purpose.**
Yes, I think of the editing of these works as more akin to weaving or sewing than cutting. I want viewers to be aware of the threads and the stitches. Viewers experience the pull of the narrative, while at the same time are aware of the form and hopefully the metaphors it invokes. For example, in *Long Story Short* speakers are portrayed alone, enclosed in a room and the video frame, hinting at the isolation that poverty, social media, and life under neoliberalism all

produce. At the same time, the montage interrupts this isolation. With its visualization of a collective body, it suggests overlapping subjectivities, interdependencies, and potential connections or even alliances among strangers. In the montage, each fragment is dependent on the next to depict a complete action or idea. One cannot function without the other.

The montage in *Now he's out in public and everyone can see* functions differently. More often than not, individual faces fill the screen. The overlapping sounds of many different speakers suggest cacophony, not connection. Even when people appear to speak in unison, the multiple frames of videos are chaotically dispersed across the screen rather than in visual alignment.



*Now he's out in public and everyone can see* (2017)



*Mass Ornament* (2009)

What I'm trying to suggest is that this group of people—vloggers whose videos I collected from YouTube and who are responding to a series of media scandals involving famous African American men—may be hearing and responding to the same media, but there is no conversation taking place. Instead there are isolated monologues competing with one another, reproducing and amplifying existing social divisions.

> **Your work allows something like the "truth" to emerge amidst all the noise of the web, where truth is getting lost, a casualty of new, very rapid forms of communication. Can you describe, in your personal poetics, this reality?**

I try to reveal what is at stake in America today as the ground continues to fall out from under the lower and the middle classes—as secure jobs and the safety net disappear, innocent people get attacked, arrested, or shot because of their color, online algorithms reproduce bias and corrode the news, and people have fewer opportunities to interact with others outside their own tribes. In my portraits, I pay special attention to the basic humanity that can be felt when in the presence of someone revealing or displaying their vulnerable selves on camera in all their imperfection. It is something that Roland Barthes described as 'punctum,' the parts of the picture that 'prick' you, touch you, and produce a visceral response. I think this can be felt in the moments people let their guard down and you can feel something of their longing and their desire to be seen, heard, and paid attention to.



Melinda Emilien, *Long Story Short* (2016)