INTERVIEW WITH NATALIE BOOKCHIN

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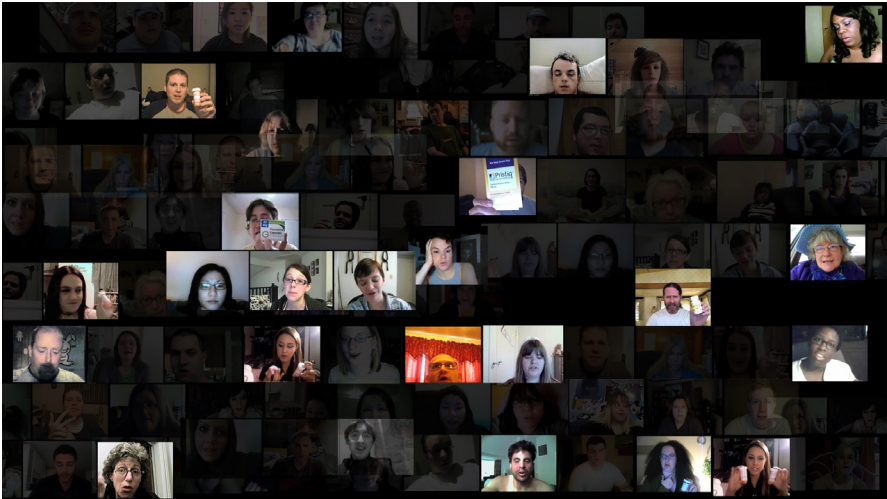
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Fig. 1: Natalie Bookchin, My Meds, 2008

For me, Natalie Bookchin's work is synonymous with Video Vortex and the rise of YouTube. Although we got to know each other's work during the turbulent years of net.art in the late nineties, this particular story began with a DVD I received from Natalie. It contained *The Trip* (2008), a video collection of early YouTube fragments shot during car trips on all continents, which Natalie found and reassembled into an imaginary journey across the globe. What has always defined Natalie Bookchin's work is her ability to generate a unity out of distributed fragments. We, as users, may feel lost and desperate but the artist gives us hope that we can overcome distraction and senseless multi-tasking by creating an all-together new meta narrative that is human — again.

We first had our conversation in the summer of 2017. And then we had an additional exchange in March 2020, confined to our homes during the coronavirus crisis.

Geert Lovink: Your 2016 work *Long Story Short* (longstory.us) is defined by its silences. It feels like the work simply could not be rushed. Society does not want to speak about its underclass: they do not exist, and thus they do not have a voice. It is part of your work to make the shadow existences visible, making us see what most of us look away from. In

this fast, multitasking world silence is increasingly pushed aside. Is there something like an aesthetics of silence? Silence design?

Natalie Bookchin: *Long Story Short* is built around the interplay between speech and silence. There are instances where someone lingers on the screen as a silent witness while another person speaks, appearing to listen along. There are other moments when someone who has just spoken remains on the screen, appearing to gaze out at viewers in silence, returning our gazes. The silence of the film's subjects slows the tempo and acts as a counterpoint to orchestral moments of layered speech. The silences give listeners time to reflect on words just spoken, allowing them to gather weight and importance. Even while the film uses some tropes of online participatory culture, including the first-person narrative, the web cam, it also, through its tempo and use of quietness, suggests a refusal. It points to an interiority that we don't have access to. It suggests that some things remain unspoken, that narrators decide on what to reveal and to withhold.

Fig. 2: Natalie Bookchin, Long Story Short, 2016

GL: There's a harsh school of radical Marxist analysis, which states that the written-off 'surplus class' will inevitably face genocide. The poor will have to be deleted. Extinguished. Some of your witness accounts voice a similar opinion. On the other hand, we do not get the idea that these Americans necessarily have a political analysis of their situation. Poverty does not lead to political consciousness. Marx himself was even skeptical about the 'lumpen proletariat' and distrusted them. Do you think that's still the case?

NB: I don't think membership in any economic class in and of itself leads to political consciousness. Extreme poverty can, however, give those facing it an acute awareness of and sensitivity to class and class status — something that, especially in the U.S, is often disregarded ('We are all middle class here!'). Those excluded from the mainstream often have a finely tuned understanding of their own exploitation, and of the contrasts between their lived experiences and the many false assumptions that others project onto them. A Marxist might argue that an awareness of the harsh material conditions and destructive effects of capitalism could lead to a nascent political consciousness.

Poverty often produces isolation. People isolate because they are ashamed of or overwhelmed by their situations. To counter that, in the film, I interweave many individual accounts and perspectives to make visible a collective body that is not easily seen when people are isolated. The visualization reveals overlapping subjectivities,

interdependencies, shared experiences, and perspectives, and it suggests the potential for political alliances. It challenges the neoliberal fiction that individuals are fully and solely responsible for themselves, Hannah Arendt wrote that all political action first requires what she called the 'space of appearance', 'the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together…no matter where they happen to be'. For Arendt, this organization is not tied to a physical space but only to the words and action of people together.
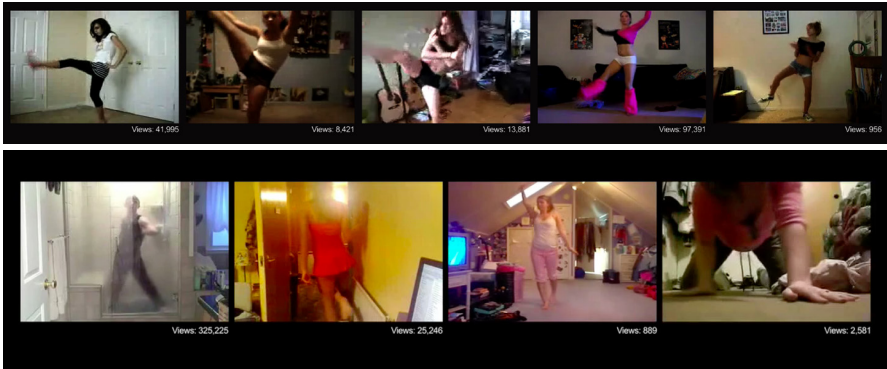

Fig. 3: Natalie Bookchin, Mass Ornament, 2009

GL: *Long Story Short* combines insights on race relations in the USA with a socio-economic analysis. Can you give us some insights on how you analyze race and poverty?

NB: You can't separate the long and sordid history of systemic racism in the United States from any analysis of urban poverty. Most of the narrators in *Long Story Short* are people of color, which reflects the demographic make-up of those facing poverty in Los Angeles and the Bay Area of San Francisco, where I shot the film. Throughout the 20th Century until the 1970s, in what is known as the Great Migration, millions of African Americans migrated from the South to northern cities to find work and escape Jim Crow segregation. Instead, they were systematically redlined and isolated in neglected neighborhoods and denied rights to buy property. This wasn't arbitrary or just the whims of individual actors; it was the product of deliberative government policies. There was a great book that came out a couple of years ago by Richard Rothstein, uncovering the shameful history of racial segregation in the United Sates. The increasing income and wealth gaps between rich and poor over the last 50 years, together with the crisis of affordable housing in U.S. cities, has only made economic and racial inequality worse.

GL: A decade ago people would shoot videos with cheap hand-held cameras. Then smartphones with built-in cameras appeared. We're now 15 years into vlogging. What has this all done to your own artistic practice? In previous work you used to scour the web for video fragments. In this work you shot the material yourself. Can you discuss this?

NB: I first started making videos from material I found on the web in 2006. I animated screen grabs of live streams of private security cameras that I watched for months: private backyards, front porches, workers washing dishes in kitchens and dozing in office chairs, which I found using a simple Google hack. I would enter an obscure technical search string and Google would spit out dozens of security webcams that were ironically left unsecured. The videos depicted the asynchronous and non-linear space and time of the internet, where one could jump from continent to continent and from day to night with a single click of the mouse.

The following year, I began working with amateur videos shared on YouTube, to explore the role of the social internet in erasing lines between public and private space. The first work I made, *Parking Lot*, is composed of recordings that people made of themselves in parking lots around the world— gathering, playing, and staging performances against the backdrop of glowing corporate logos and large concrete buildings. These actions, appropriations of anonymous, corporate space to create temporary public space seemed to mirror the videos themselves as they circulated on YouTube— little acts of rebellion hosted by a corporate giant.

Fig. 4: Natalie Bookchin, Parking Lot, 2008

In 2008, the year the Global Recession began, I started working with videos that people made of themselves performing, dancing, and talking to cameras connected to the internet. This was before mobile video had really taken off, and people were spending a lot of time

in front of their desktops and laptops. What struck me was how the videos conveyed the intimacy and trust many people had with strangers on the internet, as they shared their feelings, worries, and desires. Many writers, pundits, and critics were gushing about the positive, world-changing effects of internet connectivity and mass group think. I wanted to offer a more complicated picture—how the videos people were producing revealed both the absence of and longing for both public space and real social connection.

Now he's out in public and everyone can see, my final work using vlogs, explored the early stirrings of the darker, more nihilistic, and polarized space the internet has become – and helped produce. It focused on the question of race, looking at the ways that blackness itself produces a scandal in public space where whiteness is the norm. The work wove together numerous vloggers' narrations as they discussed a series of scandals or conspiracy theories involving four famous African American men, each of whom won power, wealth, and fame in spaces historically dominated by whites.

Fig. 5: Natalie Bookchin, Now he's out in public and everyone can see,, 2012

With *Long Story Short,* I wanted to make the connection between the growth of the internet and the widening gap between the rich and the poor. I continued working with the popular internet form of the vlog and with webcams. But this time I created my own archive, since I couldn't find what I was looking for online. Although people share details about most aspects of their lives on social media, stories about experiences of poverty are mostly absent. It may be that people withhold these details because of stigma and shame, or it may be that they are not popular with the algorithms, or maybe a combination of the two.

GL: Can you say something about the position of the camera? Unlike classic documentaries, the camera does not move around. Is sitting down in order to tell the story still powerful?

NB: The camera is a little bit below or at eye level. The gaze is direct. I have always been inspired by August Sander's portraits of German society, which reveal a quiet dignity and equal exchange between photographer and photographed. I used a webcam attached to a laptop, and people took whatever time they needed to consider their responses and saw themselves on screen as they spoke. I did not want to follow subjects around, to catch them off guard, or least of all to reproduce overused images of urban decay, but rather to enable people to present themselves as they wanted to be seen. The casual set-up, sitting face-to-face with the camera, produces the intimacy of a one-to-one exchange.

GL: It's widely believed that political messages in the arts are good and worthy — but not in art. There's a growing fatigue about political works that do not look good and merely express politically correct intentions. What's your response to this?

NB: I think we are long past debates about whether something made by an artist is or is not actually art. 'It's art if I say so', to quote Duchamp. I think calling something political art is a redundancy. All art is political. As for art with a message, I think there is a time and a place for it: it depends on where the art is circulating and who its audience is. Think of the work of Gran Fury around the AIDS crisis in the U.S. during the 1980s, John Heartfield's anti-Nazi montages, and RTMark's messages about corporations. The artwork that I care most about often does much more than transmit a message. It asks questions and opens up new spaces of reflection, offering new ways to see, understand, feel, and be in a world among others.

GL: When we speak about YouTube in 2020 we mainly talk about its manipulative algorithm and the extreme video suggestions of what's up next. The good old days of participatory culture and self-confessions seem over, at least on YouTube. The informal video cultures have moved to platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Would you say that the original online video aesthetics has been destroyed by the slick professionalism of the influencers? Is the informal culture of confession still there?

NB: As companies became more adept at finding ways to monetize their platforms, small producers making casual, informal videos were, for the most part, squeezed out I also think that many people who post material online are now more careful, less optimistic about finding authentic relationships, and more guarded about exposing themselves to the potential hostility of anonymous commenters.

GL: You are working on two new projects, one being a film in collaboration with the Spanish Roma association Lacho Bají and the Barcelona-based artist collective LaFundició, with whom you are developing a collective cinematic portrait of and with a local Roma community. The other will become a series of video montages of mass protests and uprisings. Can you tell us more about both?

NB: Sure. A couple of years ago I was approached by LaFundició, an artist collective that work on long-term, collaborative projects periphery neighborhoods of Barcelona. They do

incredible projects with local neighborhood groups, working on magazines, radio shows, performances, and exhibitions. They have been collaborating with a local Roma collective, Lacho Bají, for a number of years, and together began developing a film project. Their idea was to work with residents and neighbors on a collective portrait of the neighborhood and the street they inhabited. They were planning to work with super8 film and analog animation, but the teenagers they usually work with were much more interested in using their cellphones and making dance and music videos that emulated YouTube stars. So they put the project on hold to rethink their approach. At the time, I had an exhibition of my work in Barcelona up, and they went to see the show. They found the use of montage and popular internet forms to reflect the preoccupations of marginalized groups in American culture inspiring, and it occurred to them that this might be a way for them to move forward. They reached out to me and proposed a collaboration. After a series of exchanges, in person and remotely, we began working together. Since then, we've been meeting remotely and in person, running informal workshops, discussions, screenings of works-in-progress as well as work by other artists and filmmakers working on related issues. We've been collecting videos and other material shared on social media and in WhatsApp and Facebook groups, and working locally on making videos with neighborhood participants, students, after-school groups, and attendees of the Lacho Baji association. The process of creating the film is necessarily slow, complex, and deliberative, especially given my outsider position as a paya (non- Roma), an American, and a non-native speaker.

Right now, we envision the film's visual aesthetics as a radical pastiche of current digital forms: social media feeds, cellphone footage, music and dance videos, TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp chats. This aesthetic counters mainstream and stereotypical depictions of the Roma as anti-modern and out of touch with current trends, technologies, and realities. We're also exploring how to appropriate these forms to reflect the vitally active community life and economies of sharing in the local Romani community.

My other project in progress is a series of short looped video projections that combine hundreds of amateur video fragments of street protests. It's sort of a reimagining of radical photomontage of the 1920s. Each montage will focus on a single or aligned global social movement, from recent women's marches to Black Lives Matter. We've been so bogged down in gloom that I wanted to do something positive, even celebratory. The montages are fantastic, optimistic spaces filled with colors, handmade signs, megaphones, gestures, and bodies in motion—people together, performing and enacting resistance. Now, with the coronavirus, these images, gathered just in the past year, suddenly feel like relics of the past (hopefully not though!). They also remind us that we need to keep going, and that we can only do it together.

INTERVIEW WITH JUDIT KIS

GEERT LOVINK