

Excerpt from Christopher Grobe, *The Art of Confession: The Performance of Self from Robert Lowell to Reality TV*, NYU Press, 2017 p. 235-238

Natalie Bookchin, a video artist, thinks she has found an answer to this question—has found a way to look at people through the search engine's eyes without going blind to their intimate particularity. Like Umbrico, Bookchin trawls the Internet for vast stores of other people's material—in her case, videos posted on sites like YouTube and Vimeo—and, just like Umbrico, she turns the material she finds into sublime mosaics that can fill whole gallery walls. This superficial resemblance, though, masks a deeper disagreement about the purpose of such art. Umbrico's art is primarily critical, using these mosaics to undermine people's claims to individuality. Bookchin's art, on the other hand, is primarily political, and aims to make out of these individuals a new collective. She is focused, in other words, on finding out what commitments are possible on the far side of critique. Of course, this may mean calling into question people's overblown claims to originality and individuality, but it also requires a measure of sympathy toward the people whose material Bookchin repurposes.

This is true even of Bookchin's most critical (and perhaps most famous) installation, a video-mosaic called *Mass Ornament* (2009). She owes the title to Siegfried Kracauer's famous 1927 essay comparing mass choreography (all the rage, at the time) to Taylorist models of factory work.¹⁹ As Kracauer sums up this argument in a later essay:

When they [the Tiller Girls, a wildly popular dance troupe] formed an undulating snake, they radiantly illustrated the virtues of the conveyor belt; when they tapped their feet in fast tempo, it sounded like *business*, *business*; when they kicked their legs with mathematical precision, they

joyously affirmed the progress of rationalization; and when they kept repeating the same movement without ever interrupting their routine, one envisioned an uninterrupted chain of autos gliding from the factories into the world.²⁰

Like Kracauer's essay, Bookchin's video installation concerns the cultural meaning of dance—and, like his essay, it finds this meaning by way of a rather unflattering comparison. Bookchin started with a trove of amateur videos culled from YouTube showing people (mostly young women) dancing alone for their webcams. In *Mass Ornament*, snippets of these videos appear and disappear in rows, forming a troupe of unwittingly synchronized dancers. (This virtual chorus line stretches, at one point, to include as many as twenty-one dancers at once.) Meanwhile, Bookchin underscores their dancing with the soundtracks of two different 1935 films: the Busby Berkeley movie musical *Gold Diggers of 1935* and Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*. Her message is clear: "In seeming displays of personal expression, the YouTube dancers perform the same movements over and over" like goose-stepping fascists at a rally—except the operative force here is not military discipline, but the codes of social dance and gender expression.²¹

Bookchin's editing of this material can feel cruel as it exposes the hidden choreography in supposedly free expression, but this cruelty belongs not to the artist, but instead to the social forces she's revealing in this piece. As Jaimie Baron observes, "The bodies of these dancers seem to have been colonized by the same hand—even before Bookchin's hand entered the picture."²² Something in Bookchin (or in her medium) holds her back from simply reveling in these dancers' dehumanization. They "may be placed in a collective unit at different moments" in this piece, Bookchin concedes, "but they aren't standardized or abstracted. The pathos and vulnerability—and the specificity—of their original expressions with their unpolished, clumsy, yet urgent intimacy, remains intact."²³ By lining these dancers up side by side, Bookchin also trains our eyes to see every unscripted flourish, each deviation from the norm. Each one feels like a glimpse of possibility—of power *in potentia*.

That last quotation—about the "urgent intimacy" of Bookchin's subjects—captures the difference between *Mass Ornament* and Umbrico's *Sunset* works, but now I must confess: she wasn't describing *Mass Orna-*

ment in that passage. She was, in fact, describing the video work that she's done ever since. For the past eight years, Bookchin has worked exclusively with troves of direct-to-camera, confessional monologue—mostly vlogs or video diaries, though also (in her latest project *Long Story Short* [2016]) original interviews shot in roughly the same style. Editing many of these monologues together into the same sort of mosaic she constructed in *Mass Ornament*, Bookchin conducts choral monologues on issues of social concern, ranging from sexual identity to economic precarity. "Once I choose a topic I want to explore," Bookchin explains, "I look for patterns in the way people talk about it: the words they choose, their tone, their attitudes, the narrative arcs they follow."²⁴ Just as *Mass Ornament* shows what secret forces lie behind the bodies of amateur dancers, this work highlights the rhetorical and emotional patterns that shape the way people talk about their lives. Bookchin's aims, again, are not merely critical; this work has a constructive, political bent. Like a second-wave feminist consciousness raiser, Bookchin hopes that when we see these patterns, we will feel compassion—and then feel moved to action.

These political aims seem clearest in *Laid Off*, one of four video-mosaics that Bookchin included in a 2009 installation called *Testament*.²⁵ Created less than a year after the 2008 stock market crash—which, in the United States alone, would eventually wipe out nearly nine million jobs—*Laid Off* collects the voices of vloggers who have just been fired and—only now, right in front of our eyes—are beginning to grapple with this fact. It begins (with a musical precision that I can only represent in the following poetic manner):

so
TODAY
I enter a new phase *really*
 sucked
in my life

This opening passage is representative. *Laid Off* revels in these vloggers' cadenzas of euphemism and false hope—especially those moments in which they try to ventriloquize their oh-so-caring bosses—but it always undercuts this virtuosic bullshit with blunt talk, raw anger, and despair:



Figure C.2. Nathalie Bookchin, still from *Testament: My Meds* (2009/2016). Courtesy of the artist.

“What the fuck . . . Are you firing me?” “They’re outsourcing my job.” “Now I’m, uh, fighting for my life, basically.” By calling our attention to such contrasts, Bookchin exposes the inch-deep delusion (or mile-high privilege) of those who embrace their unemployment as a blessing—a chance to “work on my skills,” to “be reckless,” to “go for a little vacation,” or (worst of all) to “do [more] video blogs.” (Or perhaps, to be a bit more generous to her subjects, Bookchin shows an assortment of people who feel the same “pathos and vulnerability,” but admit to their precarity to varying degrees.) By helping us hear the rage beneath the hope, the precarity behind the privilege, the critique within each justification of the system, Bookchin hopes to forge a new political will—one that could help us, together, *fight for our lives, basically*. Putting the cold, disinterested gaze of aggregation to use, Bookchin doesn’t reproduce its ideology; instead, she offers a searing new vision: these people, once brought together and freed from their frames or cells, might eventually amount to a social movement.

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On November 12, 2015, at one o’clock in the afternoon three students, women of color, staged a sit-in near the entrance to the Robert Frost

Library at Amherst College. It was supposed to last an hour—a quick show of solidarity with antiracist protests going on at Yale and Mizzou—but pretty soon, the conversation turned to students’ own experience of racism, especially during their time at Amherst College. An hour stretched into two, three, and four. The news spread and the crowd grew until over a thousand students—“some estimate . . . as many as three-quarters” of the student body—had packed into the library to speak and to listen.²⁶ The sit-in had spontaneously turned into something else: something its leaders later dubbed an “open discussion” and that the campus newspaper named a public “forum,” but that the *New York Times* called “a confessional” where students of color had risen “to talk about feelings of alienation and invisibility.”²⁷

The stories students told that day had mostly been told before, but behind closed doors to friends, mentors, or therapists. The feelings expressed, if they’d been aired publicly at all, had only been telegraphed in silent side-eye and knowing glances. Now, a microphone and amplifier had appeared, and these feelings were booming out over the heads of a capacity crowd. The room’s ethos, according to one leader of the Uprising, was one of “radical compassion,” and students’ testimony was “full of anger but not aggression.”²⁸ But the prevailing mood—this the *Times* got right—was one of pathos and vulnerability. As one white student said, speaking to a reporter for the Amherst student paper, “I didn’t know how deeply that pain cut . . . I knew that as an abstract, racism exists, but to see it on such a personal level, people who were breaking down because they were finally able to explain everything—that was eye-opening.”²⁹ But I should note: this wasn’t a spectacle staged for the edification of white students. It was a rite held by, and for the benefit of, students of color. People “were breaking down” at the mic, and these public breakdowns felt—to the students who had them—like a kind of collective breakthrough.

A funny thing: everyone recalls the feeling in the room that day, but few remember more than a couple of the stories people shared. For several hours, we told and heard—not just heard, *listened to*—personal stories being aired in public for the first time, and what remained most of all was a feeling: some mix of private sentiment and public commitment. Let’s call it a new consciousness. People had “jump[ed] from topic to topic as new ideas flew from one to another, fragmenting the political