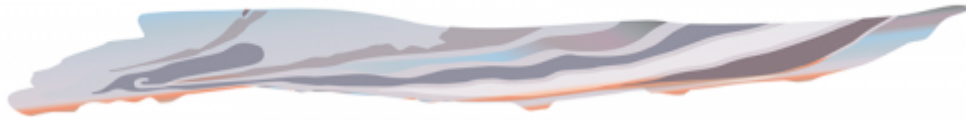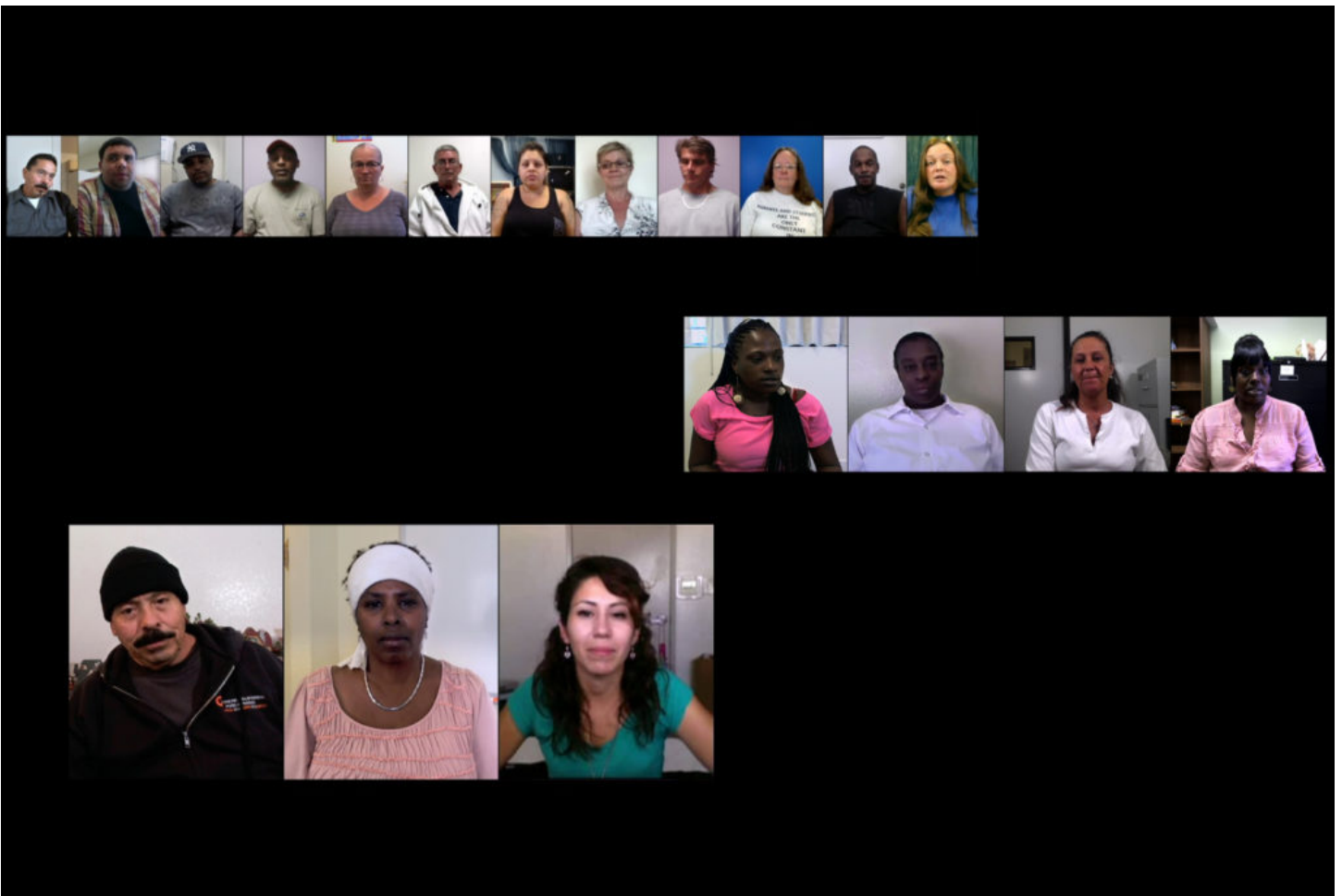Eden Osucha • Interviews, Vol. 2, No. 3: Spring 2017

Presence + Polarization: Natalie Bookchin's Portraits of America

Natalie Bookchin, still from Long Story Short, film, 45 min, 2016. Photo courtesy Icarus Films.

by Eden Osucha

*I*n advance of a screening of her work at Portland's SPACE Gallery, I interviewed internationally acclaimed New York-based artist Natalie Bookchin about her films *Long Story Short* (2016) and *Now he's out in public and everyone can see* (2017). Bookchin's extensive body of installation and web-based video work registers the artist's longstanding interest in the impact of the digital on everyday life, tracking its transformations of even the most intimate textures of our collective dailiness as found in the visual and sonic aesthetics of personal expression in a medium that now confounds any credible distinction between *online* and *off-*.

Collecting YouTube video diaries from 2009–11 in which speakers film themselves commenting on public scandals involving famous African American men, *Now he's out in public and everyone can see* documents how the digital context transformed and amplified political speech and the vocabularies and modes of racist expression in the early Obama Era. For the film, made in 2016, Bookchin reimagined a 2012 immersive art installation as a video montage that now seems tragically prescient in foretelling our present national political crisis in the wake of 2016 U.S. Presidential election. Its speakers both comment on and perform the public surveillance and scrutiny of black and brown bodies in the U.S. and reproduce, through these political performances, racial scripts that appear simultaneously as cause and consequence of the Trump presidency.

Working with original footage that mimics the representational forms of the vlogosophere, *Long Story Short* examines the personal and collective experience of poverty and wealth inequality in contemporary America through direct-to-camera interviews with over 100 people conducted at homeless shelters, food banks, adult literacy programs, and job training centers in Northern and Southern California. Bookchin's subjects discuss their own experiences of poverty and offer their own analyses of the systems of inequality and conditions of precarity to which their lives bear first-hand witness. The polyphony of voices that results from Bookchin's deft suturing of her footage uses, in the artist's own words, "the tools and forms of the sharing economy to amplify the voices of those most displaced by it."

Below are highlights from an hour-long interview, in which we discussed some of the ways in which these two pieces document a history of the present, wherein the political crises and phenomena in which we are currently living bear the imprint of the digital transformations of ideas of publicness, identity, and self and what counts as political speech and what kinds of topics constitute its proper subject. We also touched on the work's relation to the 2009 single-channel video installation *Mass Ornament,* an earlier found-footage piece in which Bookchin collated YouTube videos of dance performances shot in users' homes, synchronized into a choreographed assemblage that comments on the collective experience of personal expression in commercial media as both constrained by

and at the same time exceeding and reinventing cultural scripts of commodified gendered and racial embodiment.

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Eden Osucha: With *Mass Ornament* in particular, it seems that there is a paradigm shift involving your work with the Internet in how you engage with YouTube and the vlogosphere. Would you speak about its importance to your artistic practice and in terms of the intellectual and political commitments of your work as leading you there?

Natalie Bookchin: *Mass Ornament* is the first in a body of work in which I began collecting and working with found videos where people position themselves in front of their webcams and perform — as themselves — for the camera and for the world. I had been thinking how shared performances expressed and revealed certain ways of being in the world. People were documenting themselves alone, isolated, in front of their screens, performing and reproducing scripts learned from mass culture. But people are also having fun, making themselves public, and making or, at least desiring, connection with others. The montage and repetition of videos in *Mass Ornament* suggests that each singular performance is a part of something larger and potentially more powerful than each one alone, that there are collective impulses in the individual performances. I also wanted to visualize the way behaviors, attitudes, and identities move and spread virally, as a chain of connected media, where public and private behaviors intersect and circulate.

EO: That work really nicely captures this paradox: that on the one hand, in relation to a lot of those videos — the genre of personal performance YouTube — there's a feedback loop between the individual amateur performer at home and the commercial media choreography from the music video they're mimicking; on the other hand, as I think your work is suggesting, there's something else happening as these performances are working to liberate personal expression from mass media, something more interesting and unpredictable at the level of the collective that is happening online.

NB: Yes, and I think that the work — in fact all the work in this series — moves between two poles. One is that it looks at the dystopian effects of reenacting dominant scripts on commercial internet platforms where the privileged form of being is an entrepreneurial individual competing for visibility and attention. But then it also tries to look for resistance, for moments were people seem to push against the constraints of those scripts and forms of being.

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NB: *Now he's out in public and everyone can see* is a work I first completed as an installation in 2012, but I remade it as a film this past summer. The work is composed of found vlogs mostly made between 2008 and 2011, the early days of the Obama Era.

The film also archives and documents a period in media history which no longer exists, before Google had figured out how to monetize YouTube. There are no product placements in these videos, just expressions of raw desire and attitude, showing people who just want to be seen and heard, and feel like they needed to say something in public. The work tries to show the ways this media circulates, propagates, and replicates, and in turn shapes how the world — incidents, events, and conditions — is experienced and understood. A single news event or incident, for example, can set off a torrent of media, where individuals, one after another, echo, mimic, comment on, and narrate either the event itself or someone else's view of the it, producing an endless chain of connected videos.

Today, people are less likely to make vlogs and more likely to post opinions about current events on platforms like Twitter. Something is lost for me when you can no longer see the face and gestures of the speaker, or the room where they are speaking and the stuff that surrounds them. This presence is something that goes beyond the sometimes upsetting and wrongheaded opinions they might be sharing. All that presence is lost on Twitter, where all you get is a disembodied short text from an often anonymous writer (or bot!).

Natalie Bookchin, still from Now he's out in public and everyone can see, film, 24 min, 2017. Distributed by Icarus Films.

HO: I wanted to go back to what you said about seeing people in this earlier medium that isn't constrained by commercial imperatives or evacuated of specificity, compared to the social media platforms that have come to displace it. What I found really moving and interesting about *Now he's out in public and everyone can see* is how this public square that you've revealed for us, is its setting is the speakers' private homes — and these are private homes that we don't often see in media culture. They're not particularly mediagenic — stylized or staged along the lines of home makeover reality television or decorating blogs. Seeing people where they live, both politically and quite literally, seems an important part of the content of this film.

NB: *Now he's out in public* is essentially a portrait film, mostly made up of self-portraits by the vloggers. Speakers each in their separate rooms look directly out at viewers. Behind them we see unmade beds, kitchens, bathrooms, and offices. American flags and other props are sometimes pinned up on the walls, it seems for the sake of the performance. I love the careless staging of these videos. On the one hand the vloggers often speak with certainty and authority, but also there is a casualness and solitude to their performances. They take long sips of beer, drags on their cigarettes, and linger and sigh in front of the camera, watching themselves on their computer screens. They seem very much alone in their gestures and their speech, even as they publicly address the world.

I felt, when I was working with this material, like it was a privilege for me to be able to enter the rooms of strangers, who were sharing their private spaces with the world. Not that I would have wanted to encounter some of those speakers in person! But still, it was a strange and interesting way to encounter them and watch them make their solitary performances.

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NB: You asked an interesting question about the difference between showing *Now he's out in public* in 2012 and showing it now. I first exhibited this work as an installation in 2012, where viewers were surrounded by 18 monitors immersed in a cacophonous space, with voices and faces ricocheting around the room creating a space of a troubled agora. I decided to remake it into a film five years later because the material and the topic seemed to eerily foreshadow our current political crisis. The activity the film documents, where, instead of looking outward, people point cameras at themselves and document themselves alone but connected to the web, passionately expressing personal opinions and feelings about the world to the world in short monologues, seems to depict the fraught nature of contemporary publicness. There is the personalizing of the news, non-experts giving expert opinions, monologues replacing dialogue, and the circulation and presentation of opinions, rumors, and conspiracies theories as fact in cacophonous echo chambers where bigoted and thoughtful views are often leveled and undifferentiated.

It is much more unsettling to watch today, for me at least, than when it was first shown in 2012. This may be because, in part, because we are now living with the effects of this polarization and have witnessed social divisions in our recent election that sometimes feel insurmountable.

EO: Regarding *Long Story Short*, can you talk about why you shot your own footage and what your interest was in making a film about poverty and inequality in the U.S. at this particular moment and on the West coast, specifically, a setting that seems important to the film?

Natalie Bookchin, still from Now he's out in public and everyone can see, film, 24 min, 2017. Distributed by Icarus Films.

NB: California is one of the richest regions in the U.S., and also a place of tremendous income inequality. Housing is also extremely expensive in California, which has one of the highest rates of homelessness in the country. Some of the subjects of my film came to California to follow their dreams, and others came as children, part of previous migrations north.

To make *Long Story Short*, I worked with a similar form to my previous works, using first-person amateur vlogs. This time though, instead of working with found material, I decided to shoot my own footage, because as far as I could tell, an archive where people addressed their own experiences of precarity and economic inequality didn't exist or didn't rise to the top of the databases of social media platforms.

To make the archive, I borrow tools and forms of technology — including webcams and laptops — to highlight the voices of those left beyond during the technology boom. In the 20 years or so that the internet has been publicly available, it has helped create extraordinary wealth for a few, while many others have lost jobs or job security, widening the already large gap between the rich and the poor. Much of this concentrated wealth is in Northern California, the home of the technology boom.

Instead of selecting one or a few subjects to stand in as the voice of many, an approach often used in more conventional documentaries, I wanted to depict the interconnected experiences of many people. I think that the risk of telling a story of poverty that focuses on an individual is that it can reproduce the view that poverty is an individual problem, the fault of the individual. I wanted instead to show the way that many different stories or experiences of poverty, even in their particularity and specificity, align and connect with others.

EO: Beyond California's role as the site of this new gold rush of Silicon Valley wealth, there is also an earlier media history of Hollywood, which helped extend the nineteenth-century idea of California as the land of dreams and wealth and opportunity into the twentieth, by way of Los Angeles and the medium of the personal image. That history, too, hangs over the conversations you have, and also seems to be another way there is an imminent critique of technologies and discourses of "publicness" within the film.
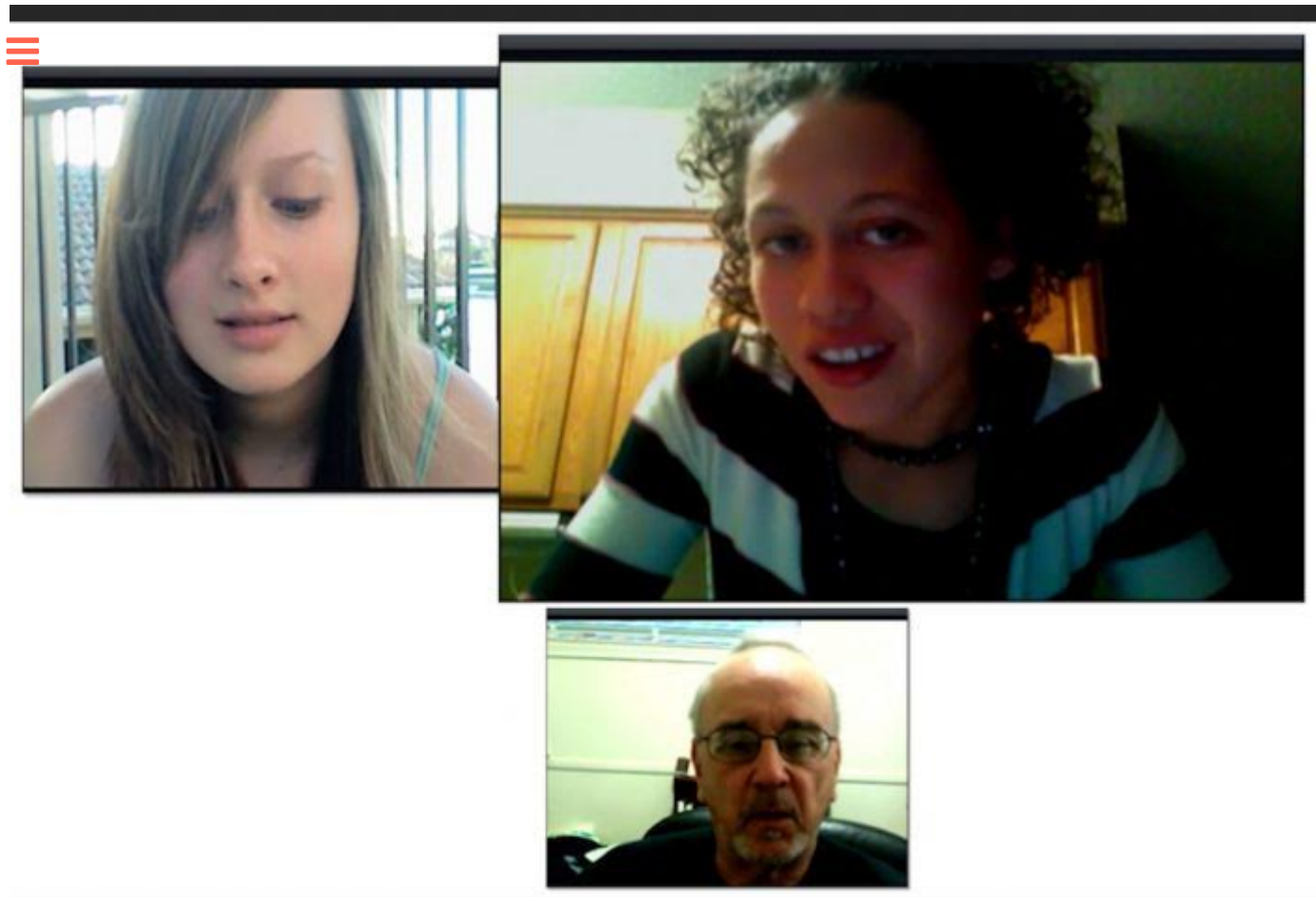
Natalie Bookchin, still from Long Story Short, film, 45 min, 2016. Photo courtesy Icarus Films.

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EO: I wanted to ask you about the title of this program, *Polyphonic Portraits of a New America.* Where did it come from?

NB: The title points to the links between the two films in the program. Both speak to a contemporary American condition, exploring aspects of contemporary identity, and the ways the intimate and singular intersect with the public and collective. Both depict the presence of many people connected by shared language and attitudes even within their isolation. In *Long Story Short*, the images and sounds of polyphony are moments of reprieve, pushing against images of isolation that the separate frames of speakers also suggests.

They're both very dark pieces. But there is hope in *Long Story Short*, because of the dignity the subjects exude and in the fleeting and virtual assembly of the many depicted together.

EO: In the moments of silent witnessing and the gaze of the subjects, that also really comes through.

NB: And maybe that's a sign of some kind of way out, that is the need for presence, for people to be the company of strangers, and for there to be more careful listening and witnessing of others outside of our immediate circles as a way to resist this period of fractured and divisive communication.

Polyphonic Portraits of a New America: Films by Natalie Bookchin will screen at SPACE Gallery on Sunday, May 7th. Following the event, Eden Osucha will lead a live video chat with Natalie.
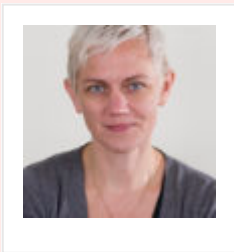
Doors open at 6:30, films start at 7pm. Tickets are $8 for general admission and the screening is FREE for SPACE members and students with ID.

You can see more of Natalie's work at her website: http://bookchin.net/

SPACE Gallery
538 Congress Street, Portland, ME | 207.828.5600
Gallery hours are Wednesday through Saturday 12–6pm, or by chance or appointment.

Eden Osucha

Originally from California, Eden Osucha is a professor and scholar of American Literature and Cultural Studies at Bates College. She earned a Ph.D. in English from Duke University, an M.A. in English from U.C. Davis, and a B.A. in American Studies from Wellesley College. Her research in the areas of American literature and visual culture focuses on interrelations of U.S. racial discourse with concepts of publicness and privacy in media culture and law.

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Emilie Stark-Menneg & the Sweet Cool of Material Nostalgia

Emilie Stark-Menneg, Summer in Maine, 2016, 70" x 70", acrylic, oil and spray paint on canvas. Image courtesy Elizabeth Moss Galleries.

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The Chart is an online journal for art criticism by artists, writers, and cultural producers. The Chart features critical discourse, interviews, exhibition reviews, essays on art practice and process, and spotlights on artist-run spaces, projects, and initiatives. Based in Maine and looking outward, we hope to connect Maine's artists to each other and to national and international artistic contexts. The Chart has been funded in part by generous grants from The Kindling Fund and the Maine Arts Commission.

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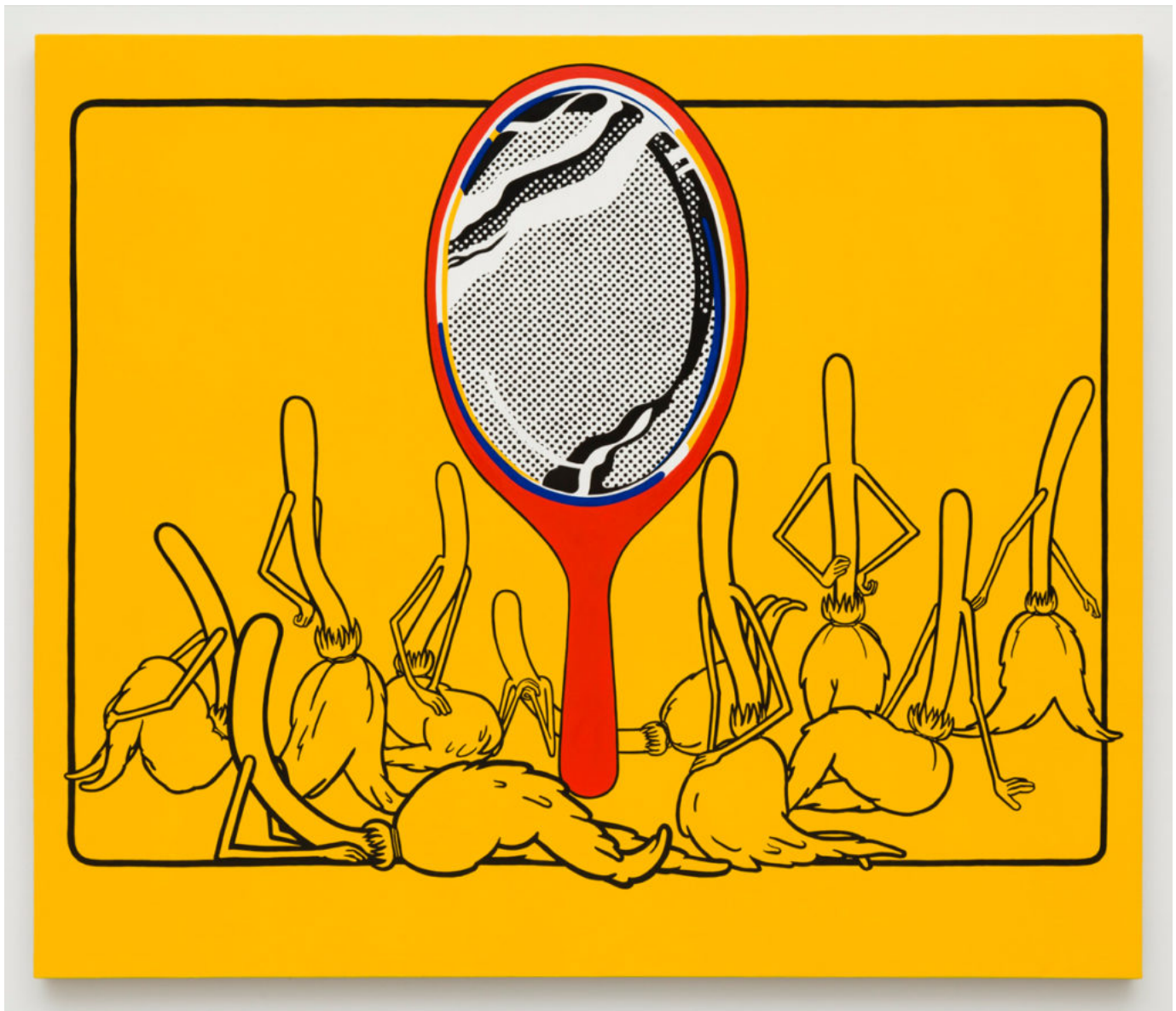
Emily Mae Smith, The Mirror, oil on linen, 46 x 54 inches, 2015. Image © Emily Mae Smith

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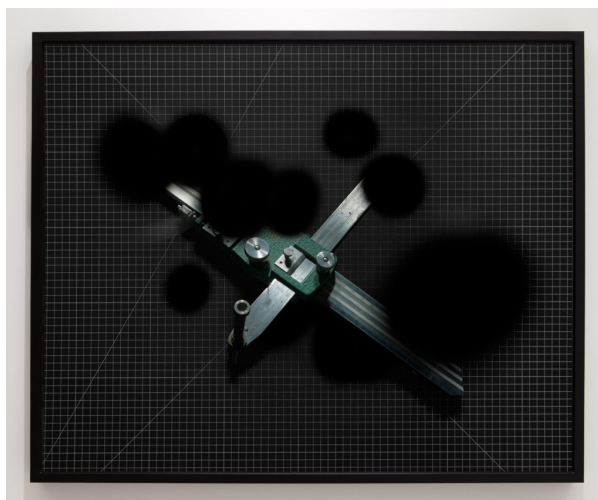
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