

# The Shared Self and Other Anxieties: In the Dark With Natalie Bookchin and Doug Rickard

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"Due to financial reasons," "The company is going out of business," "My position at work...", "My position became redundant," "No more." One after the other, long, serious, melancholy faces appear on the screen. They look at us from above, from below, driving, lying down, sitting, dwelling in their living spaces, or in someone's living spaces. We cannot be sure. The flux of words, gestures and facial expressions expropriates the intimate monologue, avalanches a swell of human suffering into a single anguishing narrative. Artist Natalie Bookchin mined hundreds of YouTube videos, redirecting, choreographing and montaging users to create *Testament*, in which she examines the distinctions between private and public domains, and the presentation and representation of a "shared-self," as she indicates. Her explorations resulted in a series of categorised monologues, divided according to their themes, ranging from self-medication to sexual orientation. "I explore elements and contractions of the pact between the self, the social, and the so-called sharing economy, and examine its forms and constraints," she tells editor Paula Kupfer in an interview published in conjunction with the exhibition *Public, Private, Secret*.<sup>1</sup> Curated by Charlotte Cotton, this project inaugurates the new exhibition space of the International Centre for Photography in New York City.

They talk to their cameras, their phones, their computers. They talk to a nameless mass that will never redeem their pain. They talk to themselves. As more and more unidentified individuals appear, completing each other's sentences, they chart a mechanism of personal trauma. Joining voices

unwittingly, in a collage that excavates their presence online, their story loses its idiosyncratic quality: rendered as a repetitive stream of words, a storyline they all share. Bald head, reading glasses, blond highlights, British accent, pierced lips, kitchen, car, baseball cap, leaning back, leaning forward – the distinct features resonate similar failures, similar structures of human experiences, anxieties and traumas. By sharing personal diaries with the world, they relinquished their privacy, or the right to be captioned, identified and asserted as an individual user. As users in social media, they become materials utilised by a bigger, anonymous, demanding community, which categories, stores and retrieves them according to the operations of a search algorithm.

Although they might seem to emerge from different ancestries, here I suggest the photographic logic of these moving images functions like the tableau of a family album: of a family you never met in person, or perhaps hope to never become a member of.<sup>2</sup> Bookchin regards the audio-visual collages as documents that "reveal how people perform to the camera and present themselves in public."<sup>3</sup> Much like the photo-album and its edited presentations of preserved memories, these videos depict a selectively performed personal identity. Selective, yet never fully controlled.<sup>4</sup> The consumption, reception and circulation of this fragmented identity cannot be pre-scripted. Highlighting these performative gestures and displaying them as such, Bookchin unravels not only the economies of self-presentation, but also the financial and technological systems in which

these users circulate, which impact and transform their (and our) lives. Another reason makes me think of the photo-album in relation to this work: the intimate experience of flipping through the album, encountering our own experiences or those of other people, other families. Verna Posever Curtis regards the empty album as *tabula rasa*, an organising framework in which the pages are open to signification. Curtis indicates how the narrative of the album is conveyed by the design and layout. The positioning of the photographs, their reshaping, sequencing, their montage or captioning; these are series of choices and editorial selections that determine the context in which the image will be encoded and decoded.<sup>5</sup> Claiming a place for the photo-album as a unique genre in the history of photography, Curtis sees the album as a flexible, open form of expression.<sup>6</sup> Here I suggest the videos and the platform in which they were posted function in a similar way, in a twofold process of signification: first, users organise and sequence their materials, and second, the artist detaches the videos from their original framework and inserts them into a different field of meanings, behaviours and decoding practices – that of the museum.

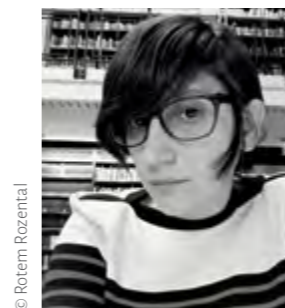
*Testament* is one of four videos on view at the entry level of the exhibition. The videos are shown in two separate spaces, forcing the viewers to navigate back and forth. In between, visitors find themselves reflected in a version of circus mirrors, commenting quite literally on the connection between our identity, self-presentation and the distorted ways in which we both see ourselves and others perceive us. Across from Bookchin's work, Doug Rickard presents a video also based on materials he excavated from deep in the web.

Unlike Bookchin's straightforward montage technique, *N.A.* presents an ominous and ambiguous sphere, consisting of YouTube clips the artist collected for three years. Its title, we are informed by the wall text, can refer to "National Anthem," but also to "North America," or to the shorthand "not applicable," and, of course, to "Narcotics Anonymous." Interestingly, Rickard constructs new narratives by searching increasingly more loaded terms as the project advanced. Invoking American suburbs, dreary nightlife and enigmatic acts of violence waiting to happen (although we cannot be sure of what the "what" is), Rickard amasses spinning cars, hands holding bills, phones, guns, talking mouth filled with gold teeth, a hand writing *FAG* on a sleeping cheek, gathered unto a dreamlike sequence that comments on a collective subconscious, on what lurks in the Internet's deepest spaces and, consequently, IRL.

This, of course, is not Rickard's first excursion into the uncharted waters of the Internet's hidden corners. In MoMA's *New Photography 2011*,

Rickard presented the project *A New American Picture*, which took him on a "virtual road trip." Rickard assembled images from Google Street View, photographing them from his screen, and erasing the Google watermark.<sup>7</sup> He then created a panoramic view of the images; collecting and presenting scenes of poverty from across the US, a manipulation that contests the very notion of private sphere. Commenting on the endless stream of materials found across the web, he outlined the emergence of photographic practices at the intersections of montage and appropriation practices – which have a concrete history within photography – issues of identity and social conflicts, and, of course, online technologies.<sup>8</sup> By so doing, he joined a growing group of practitioners, among them Trevor Paglen<sup>9</sup> (whose work is also on view at the ICP) and Mishka Henner,<sup>10</sup> who employ various techniques in order to uncover the hidden mechanisms that document, survey and determine our behaviours in public spaces and on our private screens. Seen together, these works demonstrate a shaping of an identity that detaches itself from notions of nationality, or of national belonging. These explorations of identity render individual users as an anonymous collection of similar experiences. The users become active players in a world wide network that demands their privacy at the door in order to gain access. This space, then, might produce what Slavoj Žižek, in the terminology of Lacanian psychoanalysis, understands as a shared Imaginary "which holds a community together."<sup>11</sup>

It is with this community that I wish to conclude these brief comments: with a community that is at once removed from emotions but provides an intimate outlet to its users, a community that is illusive, whose borders are slippery, and yet it defines and redefines the codes of our engagement, behaviour, self preservation and self presentation. This community creates (and recreates) its rituals, languages, views and opinions, while it is negotiated by its users and controls their social field. It forms a seemingly open yet increasingly regulated space, in which we are asked to play by rules and regulations, otherwise we will not be able to take part. These works by Bookchin and Rickard then demonstrate a slippage, a way to see this visual and textual content beyond its anticipated existence, beyond the technologies and spaces for which it was created. As the artists download and save these materials to their computers and re-sequence them, they shift the moving images to a new regulated context, in which they function according to different rules and regulations. The way these images lend themselves to this slippage, then, is essential for their circulation and consumption. Consequently, this forced visual migration also redefines the presence and identity of their creators, now seen as unknown participants in a human tapestry of mediated experiences.



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<sup>1</sup> Paula Kupfer, *Interview: Artist Natalie Bookchin with Editor Paula Kupfer* in a catalogue to the *Public, Private, Secret* exhibition @ International Centre of Photography, NYC (June 23, 2016 – January 8, 2017) -> [www.publicprivatesecret.org](http://www.publicprivatesecret.org)

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the video diaries can also be considered in relation to selfies and their social media sharing and categorising. See: Jerry Saltz, *Art at Arm's Length: A History of the Selfie* @ vulture.com (January 26, 2014) -> [www.vulture.com/2014/01/history-of-the-selfie](http://www.vulture.com/2014/01/history-of-the-selfie)

<sup>3</sup> Paula Kupfer, *Interview: Artist...*, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Social media platforms such as Snapchat, which supposedly guarantee the disappearance of visual materials, were also criticised for keeping materials documented by users. Meaning, we as users can never fully anticipate the routes of the materials we share. See: Rheana Murray, *What Really Happens to Your Deleted Internet Messages and Photos* @ ABCNews.com (May 9, 2014) -> [www.sabcnews.go.com/Technology/deleted-snapchat-photos/story?id=23657797](http://www.sabcnews.go.com/Technology/deleted-snapchat-photos/story?id=23657797)

<sup>5</sup> Verna Posever Curtis, *Page by Page: The Album as Subject in Photographic Memory: The Album in the Age of Photography* (Aperture, New York City, 2011), pp. 6–13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Doug Rickard, *A New American Picture* @ Museum of Modern Art's *New Photography 2011* exhibition (NYC, September 28, 2011 – January 16, 2012) -> [www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2011/newphotography](http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2011/newphotography)

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> -> [www.paglen.com](http://www.paglen.com)

<sup>10</sup> -> [www.mishkahenner.com](http://www.mishkahenner.com)

<sup>11</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Nation as Yourself! in Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Duke University Press, Durham, 1993), pp. 200–238.