

Natalie Bookchin

Interview Conducted by: Pooja Vyas



Natalie Bookchin is an artist based in Brooklyn, NY. She is also a professor at Mason Gross School

of Arts at Rutgers University. Her films and installations have been shown internationally, and

have been commissioned by LACMA, Urbane Künste Ruhr and Creative Time Among others. Her most recent project, Ghost Games, is set to open in May 2021.

Her work generally features a complex, innately human experience through archived video testimonials and other personal footage that she edits to harmonize with one another. The collage of videos chorally speak the same phrases or share the same movements, revealing the hidden unity in the human experience that is often dismissed by the isolation of the Internet and individualist culture.

Pooja Vyas: So I wanted to get a background on your history of filmmaking. What drew you to filmmaking?

Natalie Bookchin: I started out in photography and got my Master of Fine Arts at the Art Institute of Chicago. As an undergraduate I studied film theory, film practice, art history, photography, and the liberal arts. I got an interdisciplinary degree, something called a “Bachelors of Art in the Liberal Arts”. I’ve always moved around between different areas and have never felt comfortable sticking to one discipline. I don’t even call myself exclusively a filmmaker, although these days I’ve been working primarily with moving image and sound. I would first call myself an artist.

I started focusing on moving images and sound around 2006 when I began working on a series of animations compiled from screenshots of live security cameras that I found online. Entering a string of information into the search box would return a long list of unsecured security cameras from all around the world, installed in restaurant kitchens, in front yards, on street corners, and other private and commercial spaces. I had been thinking about how to document the internet, jumping from location to location across the globe, as well as how the internet crossed boundaries into private space. I would visit the cameras often for months, taking screenshots as little things happened, as light changed, as seasons changed, as bugs landed on the camera lens. One of the videos, *Location Insecure*, is named after the technical term if I remember correctly, often included in the search term used to find the unsecured webcams.







Location Insecure, 2006

PV: There's this beautiful visual in my head from that film of the view from a soccer goal and it switches from daylight to evening, and you can see that passage of time.

NB: Yes I fell in love with so many images generated by those cameras, images where nothing happens, where time passes and the light changes. The untended camera seems to merge into the space it is recording, as if it was always there, and will always be there.

Prior to this work, I had been making works about the internet that lived on the internet. With this series, I thought the work would be best experienced offline, as a film.

PV: Is that one of the reasons why you tend to lean towards installations, where you can see all these images in a physical space, instead of somewhere on the Internet?

NB: That's a great question. For my installations, I am often trying to create an immersive, fully embodied experience using sound, space and video, to highlight the embodied nature of the internet, which is often seen as being only virtual, only in the mind. I don't make sharp distinctions between the virtual and the physical, I think being online is as much about bodies as being offline.



Testament Installation, 2008-2017

07:12



Mass Ornament, 2009

PV: One of the things that I wanted to discuss is how you landed on the way that you present films like *Now He's Out in Public and Everyone Can See* or *Long Story Short*, where you have a collective of people. I found it really engaging, despite the fact that you would just see people talking to you on a screen. It's still moving. How did you develop that editing style?

NB:.. In part this came about because I had wanted to find a way to make visible—and audible—the way ideas, images, and attitudes circulate and propagate across networks on and off the internet,

and how they are always part of a continuous chain, a conversation of images, ideas, and attitudes that came before, and those that follow. This is particularly apparent on the internet, because it's so easy for anyone to share a thought or a video, and once something becomes digital it can be shared and propagated instantly and widely. With *Mass Ornament* and later with *Testament*, people by themselves are doing similar things. I wanted to show how people are in a sense together, producing things collectively even when they are seemingly alone and isolated. These little boxes of videos I made..... I never knew that they would become our new reality, a technique of survival in 2021 with Zoom having taken over some of our lives.

PV: With *Mass Ornament*, I noticed the detail of the view count at the bottom of each screen, especially the ones that said they were removed by the user. I found it fascinating that even though there were so many different view counts, and people still had control over whether they threw it on the Internet or took it back down, it was still a shared, unified experience.

NB: I included the view count to remind viewers that they are viewing a video that was uploaded on a site whose purpose is to attract views. In fact, people are rewarded for and compete for views. Even when videos are removed by the viewer, they still circulate, and are still owned by the site. At first, participants make a choice to upload their videos, but then there is no choice, the material is potentially on the internet and in the hands of the platform owners forever.

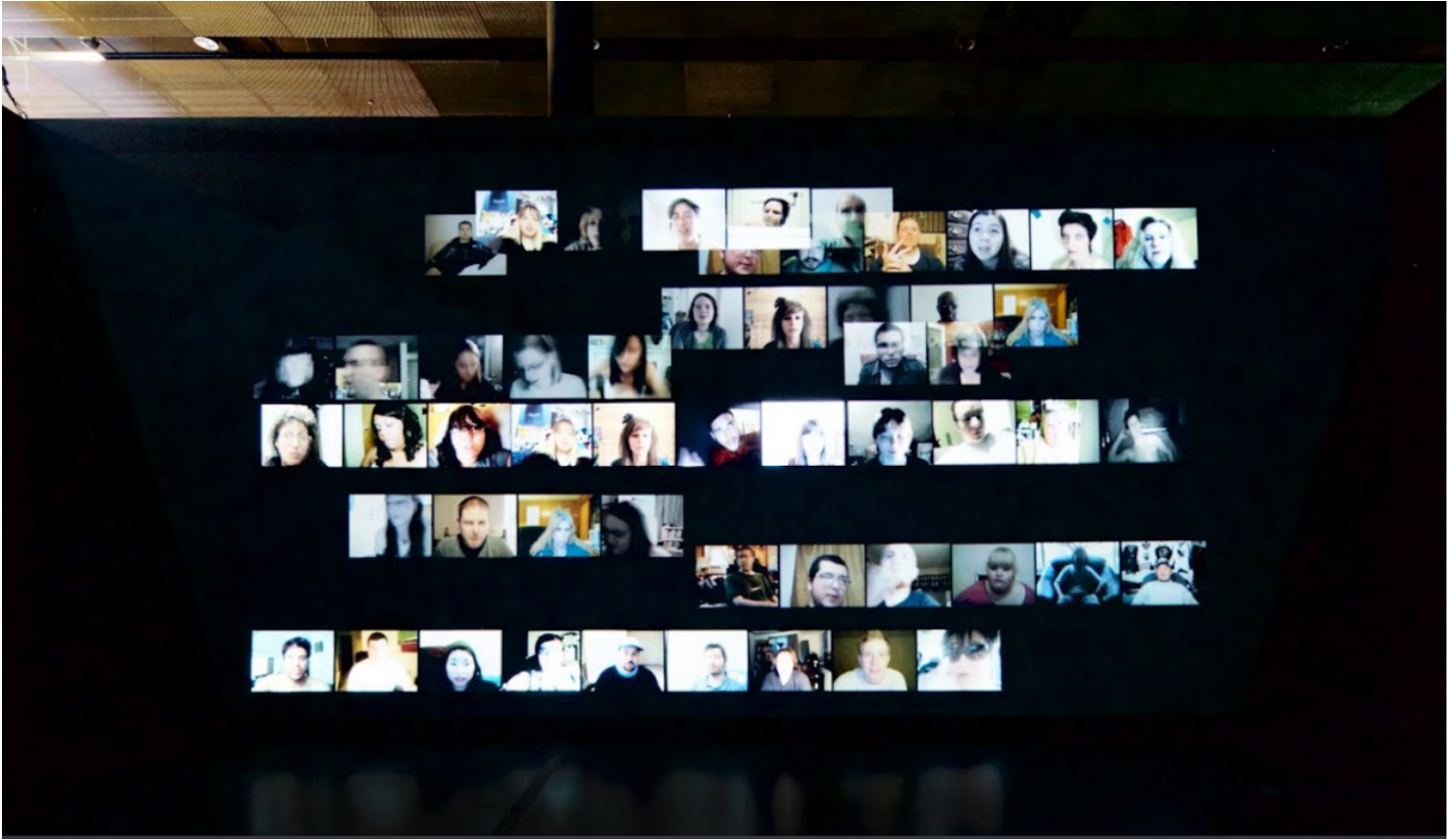
PV: With *Mass Ornament* there was a lot of matching visuals and gestures, but in other films

like Long Story Short and many of your other installations, you have to look for not only matching words but also matching thematic ideas because they're not always the same phrases.

NB: Yes, after *Mass Ornament*, I began working with voices, working with vlogs where people spoke about similar topics. One of the first works I did using this form is called *Laid Off*, from the series *Testament*. I worked on this piece in 2008, during the last recession, gathering an archive of vlogs of people talking about losing their jobs. I would start with a few videos, and match the story's structure to other videos, including variations and repetitions. I wanted to show the overlaps, but also the differences, the "chorus" and the soloists. I thought of it like music, with variations on a theme, and improvisation.

PV: I was just going to mention it's like a harmony: if every sine curve was perfect you wouldn't be able to hear the overtones and the layers of the music.

NB: That is a great way to put it. I want single voices to be heard, to make the sound polyphonic so as not to suggest that all speakers were the same, only that they were related and interconnected, with variations in thought and texture that matter, that make for better music.



My Meds: Testament Series, 2009

PV: I read an interview that you don't really like to call it 'confessionals'. Is that why you stuck with the title *Testament*? More people presenting themselves and not really giving something away like a shameful sin?

NB: I don't remember saying that, but that's interesting.

[pause]

I think that I partially agree with myself! I suppose I don't see vlogs as purely confession, although there is a confessional aspect to them. Back in 2008, people used to be unclear about who was being spoken to. There was more innocence about the internet—we were all much more innocent.

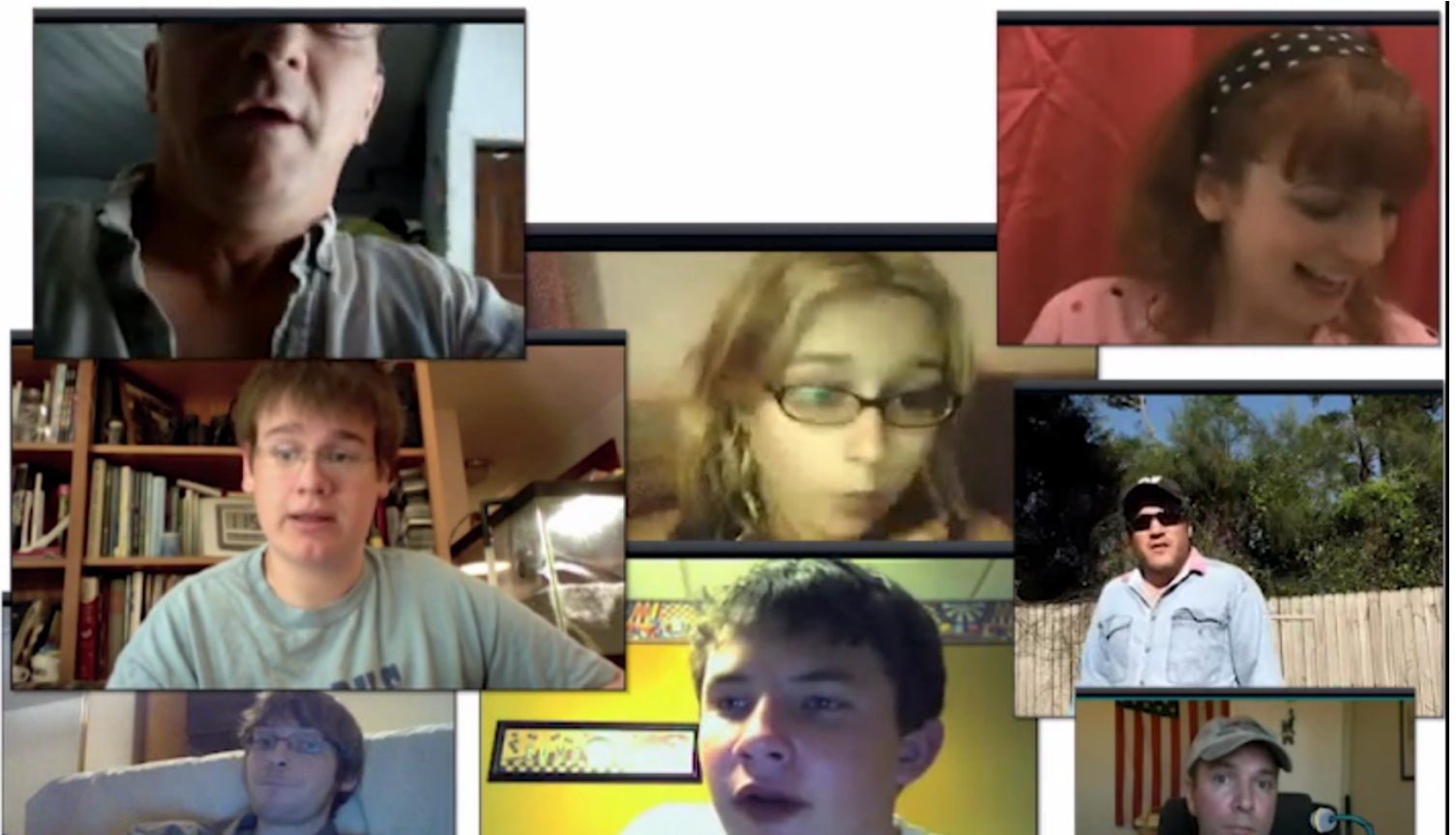
Confession is really complicated. I think the vlogs reveal a desire for visibility, as well as redemption or a recognition of vloggers' existence and their pain.

People would speak to webcams in incredibly personal ways, as if they were talking to a friend, only they were alone, speaking to an audience of no one, and of course, after uploading their video to the internet, to a potential infinite audience. Now, twelve years later this behavior, I suppose, is pretty familiar, broadcasting personal struggles or reflections in such a casual and public space, but I still find it very strange. I was drawn to this strangeness, to people sharing private thoughts in public, and I wanted to reflect on why people did it. Back in the early days of vlogging online, there was often less performance, less branding, and more spontaneity in what people said and how they said it. People are more cautious now, rightfully so.

PV: What you said reminded me of this Bo Burnham quote he has in this one comedy special, he said something about culture and how generations are labeled as the “me” generation and looked down on, but the idea of filming yourself and presenting yourself enables you to not only be the performer that you want to be, but also to be the consumer of your own performance, and I think your work really embodies that idea.

NB: Oh that's super interesting! I think that it is absolutely true in the sense that when you record yourself on the screen, you see yourself recording, and you are, in effect, talking to yourself on the screen. There is no dialogue, there is no real connection, just one person by themselves consuming

their own performance. Our lack of public spaces and social spaces that are not about consumption are so limited, that I think people turned to the internet, where, unfortunately they were consumed by others, by themselves, and by the platforms themselves. It speaks to the substantial failure of our society and by extension the internet. There are exceptions, there's Black Twitter, there is the use of technology platforms to connect marginalized groups, but there's also QAnon...





Now He's Out In Public, And Everyone Can See (Film), 2017

Now He's Out in Public, And Everyone Can See (Installation), 2012

PV: Along those lines of voices rising that you wouldn't necessarily hear without the Internet, *Now He's Out in Public* really challenged me. I would find myself kind of getting lulled into a sense of security hearing voices that I tend to hear of support for the black community and how this can't be happening, only to be met with people that are saying the same things, but they are racist and they're trying to use the same words.

NB: That's a really interesting comment, thank you for that comment. Did you watch the film?

PV: Yeah.

NB: I first completed the installation in 2012, and I feel like right now I wouldn't show the work. It was

disturbingly prescient in the way it represents the relationship between the internet and the extreme right. But I made it during the Obama era, when Trump was just like a stupid, horrible blip on the scene. Some of the vloggers in the work speak about the racist conspiracy theory about Obama and his birth certificate which Trump helped to promote and with him in his wretched rise to power. Because because the work gives vloggers, some of whom are extremist and racist, a voice, even though it is critical of that voice, I prefer not to share it at the moment. There's so much trauma in this country, and there is so much work that needs to be done to dismantle white supremacy that I just don't see a place for it at the moment. I think we need to hear other voices, not those have been given way way too much airtime over these last long 5 years.

PV: Given that you have this relationship of wanting to make sure the work that you put out is something that you still believe in--even if you can't take it off-- and you reflect on that often, would you accept the title of a Feminist Artist? What does that label mean to you?

NB: Well... I have a problem with labels. I always have. I call myself a feminist, absolutely, but not a Feminist Artist, because I think that puts me into a box. I don't want the work, or me to be looked at first and only through the lens of gender. For me feminism is a form of activism, and I don't think of my artwork as activist even though there is an ethics to my work, and is informed by my politics. But at the same time, my artwork is not my politics.

PV: I wanted to ask you about your relationship with the Internet and how you've seen it develop and change in any way, because you have been archiving it at certain increments of time.

NB: My relationship to the internet has always been one of love, hate, and skepticism. Today, I, like so many others, are utterly dependent on it. I'd like to be able to loosen its grip on my life, but I can't. It's a part of life, just as the near collapse of private space is. The internet is a mess, it needs to be redone and rebooted and at the very least, regulated. But I don't think that's happening anytime soon. The tech industry has too much power and too much money. In the meantime, I and the rest of us will continue to use it, and have mixed feelings about it.

My name is Pooja Vyas, currently a third year student at University of California, Davis, studying Cinema, Digital Media as well as Psychology. This conversation with Natalie Bookchin illuminated the core allure of the Internet and peoples' desires to put themselves on a platform in order to fulfill a need to be seen. There is a massive collective that shares a similar story, waiting for a public, non consumptive space to speak and be heard.

.This interview was conducted via Zoom on February 10, 2021.