

Natalie Bookchin in Conversation with Alexandra Juhasz: Performances of Race and White Hegemony on YouTube

Natalie Bookchin and Alexandra Juhasz

In November 2019, in her house in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, I joined friend and fellow artist Natalie Bookchin for a conversation about her installation and film *Now he's out in public and everyone can see*. The installation, which premiered at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), a venerable Los Angeles art space, in 2012, was remade into a film and released as a DVD double feature along with her film *Long Story Short* by Icaras Films in 2016. Our loose and lively conversation was recorded and transcribed and forms the basis for what follows. We have been in conversation about digital culture, YouTube, video, social media, art, and politics for many years, and thought that this would be a productive way to gain new insight into Natalie's project and its themes of internet publicness. Her work is especially relevant today given the current landscape of online media and its relationship to our troubling political climate. It is telling that the work we discuss was made in 2012 (and then 2016), and that the work that had cemented our friendship and ongoing professional engagements was made even earlier in social media history — my book *Learning from YouTube* (2011),¹ and Natalie's significant body of YouTube-built video works from the early 2000s. These time shifts, in a quickly changing media landscape mapped by our work alongside it, and our shared, if changing, senses of publicness, possibility, and politics form the heart of a conversation that anticipates the American reckoning on anti-Black racism and violence that was renewed and intensified in summer 2020.

Alexandra Juhasz: We're here to talk about *Now he's out in public and everyone can see*. I'm really delighted. To begin, can you describe *Now he's out in public* for someone who's never seen it?

Natalie Bookchin: In the installation, 18 monitors of different sizes hang at varying heights and distances around the perimeter of a darkened room. Monitors light up as vloggers appear on the screens, standing or sitting in bedrooms, bathrooms, and other domestic spaces. They begin to recount incidents of some concern apparently involving a famous Black man, forming a chorus of voices, faces, and opinions envelope the space. Voices ricochet around the room, producing a rhythmic cadence and an affective sonic and visual environment. The space feels crowded and charged with impassioned, sometimes threatening, and antagonistic chatter. Periodically, the narrators speak in unison, other times one speaker echoes, completes, or contradicts a previous speaker's thoughts, or adds details or comments to a remark. The film version, on the other hand, is mostly composed of extended close-ups, relying on a dense layered soundscape of voices to create a claustrophobic and antagonistic space.



Figure 1. *Now he's out in public and everyone can see*, installation.

AJ: The installation and the single-channel work are both built from hundreds of “narrations” made by everyday YouTubers that originally took the form of vlogs. From these private stories and testimonies do you think it is fair to say that you build a “public narrative”?

NB: Yeah, public and collectively produced. The “story” is a composite of reactions, responses, reenactments, and descriptions of a series of incidents and a racist conspiracy theory

(initialed and promoted by our current president) that went viral involving four famous African-American men. I removed the names of the men and edited different commentators together to create a winding narrative about a famous, rich, Black man who, whatever he has done, or is, provokes very strong reactions from a disparate public who can't stop talking about him.

AJ: Albeit a man who keeps slipping between your fingers...

NB: The work also reflects the incredible contagion of media narratives involving race, and how social media revels in them, spreading, circulating, and prolonging their lives. The narrative is, in fact, composed of YouTube narrated stories, lies, rumors, projections onto, and incidents involving four black celebrities in completely different fields — there is a politician, a golf player, an academic and TV celebrity, and a singer. The narrative I build focuses on the repetition in the language used as vloggers recite and perform their narrations, and the way that those performances diverge along racial and gender lines.

AJ: As well as stylistics and formats taken up online to discuss and share.

NB: Right. Language is arranged in the work around common themes, shared and overlapping rhetoric, words, and phrases, producing a kind of catalogue of popular tropes used to discuss race and Blackness. The speakers debate how well the man is managing his status and position as a leader and role model. For some, he has been treated unfairly, held to impossible standards. Others say he's been a disappointment and hasn't lived up to expectations. Some say he was arrested outside his own home after being mistaken for a burglar by a white neighbour. Others insist that he crashed his car into a hydrant outside his home, at which point his white wife began smashing something — himself? a window? — with his golf clubs. Throughout, the man's identity, especially his status as a Black man, is repeatedly called into question. He is referred to variously as: "a fucking god", "the Messiah", "a black male", "the motherfucker", "a black guy", "not black", "half white", "an African American", "half-African American", "56% white", a "Muslim", "a mask", "a fraud", "more of a white guy", "one of us", "not really one of us", "a usurper", "a socialist", "a paedophile", "a kid at heart",

“an idol”, “a hero”, “a role model”, “the second coming”, “a wonderful guy”, “the negro”, “boy”, “you”, “a human being”, “the Black Prince Charles”, “a fucking billionaire”, and “the most desirable guy — as far as females are concerned — in the world”.

AJ: These many interpretations are edited into a single composite narrative that unfolds across 18 screens relayed by what feels like uncountable speakers. Why create a composite of four African-American men and their four public scandals, and why don't you name the man?

NB: Weaving the various scandals and rumors together and removing the names suggest that the specifics don't really matter. The man in question is a figment of the speakers' and the viewers' imaginations, composed of rumours and gossip, speculations, and judgements. The language and the stories themselves keep repeating — different man, different incident, but same old story. Just as vloggers try to “authenticate” the man, so do viewers of the installation. But as soon as an audience recognises one story, it changes and the man in question “slips from their fingers”. An authentication can never happen; viewers can never “master” the narrative. Just as they can't see all the speakers in the installation at one time — there is always someone speaking out of view, in another corner — they never “get” the whole story. The view is always partial and fragmented.

AJ: As a viewer of *Now he's out in public*, you can't help but note the differences between the famous Black men who are subjects of the media and the ordinary people who are making media about them. Of course, one of the prime motivators of social media in general, and YouTube specifically, has been a vague promise of Internet fame. Each vlogger seems to enact, or anticipate their own possible parallel fame, an elevated state signaled as available to all by a social media still in its infancy, one full of potential and desire and hope. They ridicule, analyse, pick apart, and somehow also hope to be *him*, even though this fame, and his publicness, as your piece suggests, produces his or their downfalls. That said, the piece also depicts the ambivalence, anger, jealousy, and ridicule focused on these men in

particular because *Now he's out in public* is less about being famous per se as it is about being famous while Black.



Figure 2. *Now he's out in public and everyone can see*, installation.

NB: Yes, absolutely. The work explores how antagonistic performances of race and white dominance were a significant part of online spaces like YouTube even in its infancy. The piece also looks at how white anger against so-called elites and the wealthy, from the beginning, online, took on a racist tone, and due to their volatility, and thus their tendency to be watched and spread, were promoted and amplified on YouTube. Many of the vlogs in the piece were produced just after Obama's election and the anxiety and discomfort of some of the white vloggers as they discuss Black success is palpable. The Black vloggers, on the other hand, mainly express discomfort that the man has been caught in public in some unnamed act of transgression. They fear for his publicness. What it boils down to in each of these so-called scandals, is that to be a Black man and in public *is* the scandal. Things start to go wrong, as one blogger states, when the man “steps outside his door”.

AJ: Your installation builds from a set of interests and practices you had been working on for quite a while: making art out of YouTube videos and vlogs. Can you talk about your earlier work and how you began to develop your now signature method,

voices woven like a chorale where you arrange multiple speakers (found in the wild) to say the same word or the same sentiment in unison, or relay, or even opposition, as if they were choreographed or scripted?

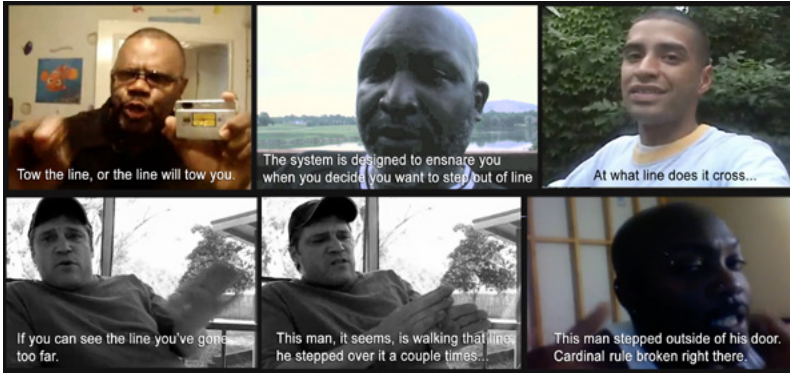


Figure 3. *Now he's out in public and everyone can see*, captioned film stills.

NB: You're referring to work like *Testament* and *Mass Ornament*, both from 2009 — video installations in which I constructed a chorus and a mass dance (respectively) out of numerous found online videos. On YouTube, ordinary people began making and sharing videos, spontaneously posting their thoughts and opinions, or performing for the camera and to the world. The videos felt like inadvertent, or found self-portraits to me, and suggested a collective yearning for publicness. Yet, these collectivist yearnings were mostly buried beneath interfaces and designs that highlight and reward single users. On YouTube, users have their own “channels”, subscribers, and playlists, and are forced into competition with each other for likes and views. I was interested in the tension between these public and collective desires, and the site's design constraints which isolated and monetised single “users”. I wanted to depict overlapping subjectivities and interconnectedness — something that was hard to see in viewing single videos alone.

Now he's out in public is an extension of this earlier work, but it also goes in a different direction. The earlier work focused on people intentionally exposing or revealing something about themselves, highlighting precarity, vulnerability, and desire for connection. The vloggers in *Now he's out in public* mostly appear less concerned with connecting with others than with broadcasting their own opinions. Instead of talking about themselves,

they are self-appointed judges, or protectors, of others. They mostly seem oblivious about what they are exposing about themselves. When they speak in unison, particularly with ad hominem attacks on the man in question, it can feel less like a chorus and more like a digital mob.

AJ: So true! At times it's hard to be in the room with them. But at the same time, there's a way in which you are providing a service at a point in digital history that the platforms are not yet able to produce for themselves, or for us. You're making connections (by hand!) that happen now, something like ten years later, through algorithms. In 2012, your project as an artist was to find, show, and make into collectivity for and from a place where that was not yet publicly renderable, even as these very platforms were encouraging and then collecting masses of individual voices and data about them under the hood.

NB: Right, although it is not that the so-called platforms weren't able to produce images of collectivity; I'm just not sure they have a financial interest to do so. Where is the revenue stream in that? The term "platform", which companies like YouTube, Facebook, etc. use to describe themselves, suggests a neutral, horizontal base onto which the media we share freely circulates. But we know that is not what happens. Content with more views rises to the top, while less "popular" material is buried. I created montages that attempt to make visible associations that might otherwise not be seen or noticed.

AJ: Associations known and used by the corporations! The bullies. And sometimes movements, I suppose. In that earlier work, you revealed the vlog's intimacy and a connection between that intimacy and the isolation of YouTubers. Your service as an artist was to connect people, ideas, words, themes, feelings. And so, your work reveals a tension between the intimacy of the encounter between people and their cameras, between people and their videos and their imagined audience, as well as the aloneness of these subjects — so much of your work shows a person in their own room mirroring us in ours — and what was still a live belief in a promise of publicness.

NB: I think the willingness with which people exposed themselves in the early days of social media carried with it a hope that the Internet and social media would build community and

social relationships that are missing in our society. But we were sold on a lie. Instead of opening the world up, the big tech companies who took over the internet make the world more constrained, narrow, and limited, sequestering each of us into our own micro-targeted universe. That isn't to deny that some progressive communities did form and still thrive despite the tech takeovers. Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, Black Twitter, and many of the progressive protest movements around the globe make use of social media. But even so, right now the racists, propagandists, and nationalists empowered by big tech have been threatening democracy around the globe. It's finally become common knowledge that Silicon Valley won't save us.

AJ: It's strange to see something we've both known and spoken about for so long — in public, in art, in writing — now, finally, being understood as itself a social, or public truth. As the perception of digital and social media has shifted for its everyday users, did your approach to an analysis of it also change? For instance, before *Now he's out in public*, you had been showing your work made from vlogs as projections on walls in galleries or museums. What moved you to build this argument into an installation with multiple screens? Why did you have to spatialise what was changing for people and video on social media? Is this related to what the editors of this book propose as a “traumatic fragmentation of the social body” following the global financial crisis of 2008?

NB: The installation of *Now he's out in public* conjures a mass that is fragmented and dispersed — a reality shattered into shards of opinions. There is no centre, no shared or agreed upon truth. Instead, there are clusters of opinions, instances of partial unity that quickly scatter and break apart. There are instances, for example, when all the speakers on all 18 monitors say the same thing at the same time, but this unity is brief, and quickly replaced by smaller groups of speakers where one group claim one truth, while another claim a different one.

AJ: Can you discuss another aspect of the installation: the embodied experience of the viewer moving through, and interacting in the room with the vloggers, the physical experience of a narrative unfolding in space? Being in the installation felt almost as if you were in the room with each of the speakers.

The viewer became part of this unseemly chorus in a way that hadn't been true with your previous videos, where we watched from the outside looking in.



Figure 4. *Now he's out in public and everyone can see*, film still.

NB: Yeah, with this work, instead of multiple frames of videos on a single screen, the montage is spatialised, and viewers must traverse the space to see and experience the work. In this way, the viewers' bodies are activated. This embodiment reiterates the themes of the work, which suggests that bodies, and embodiment, matter. There were a lot of claims in the early days of the Internet that, with experience becoming increasingly virtual, physical bodies no longer mattered. Related, when Obama was first elected as president, many claimed that we were entering a "post-racial" era, one where race, where the historical specificity of bodies no longer mattered. In *Now he's out in public*, bodies are affected. In order to experience the visceral, affective installation, you also have to *be there* in the flesh. The narrative points to racial violence against specific bodies in public space, even virtual public space, suggesting that language has an impact on real bodies, including — especially — Black bodies under scrutiny.

AJ: But things have changed since then. We are now in an age of social media that's fully disembodied. Twitter and Instagram are populated by unseen speakers.



Figure 5. *Now he's out in public and everyone can see*, installation.

NB: Right, on Twitter, people can hide behind handles, and you can never be sure if a tweet's been written by a person or generated by a bot. In *Now he's out in public*, viewers are face-to-face with the speakers. You can look behind them into their homes, and at their things arranged or left in the frame by accident or indifference. I would look for these details as I edited, as well as for moments when the vloggers were silent, when they lingered, hesitating, or sipping on a drink, glancing at themselves on the screen, adjusting props, arranging the camera. I searched for moments when people stopped performing, or when they slipped out of the performance — learned by heart from Fox News or whatever other media they were watching — for moments where they let their guard down, when you can detect instances of uncertainty or vulnerability. On Twitter and Instagram, those moments are much harder to find. It's much easier to hide behind poses and talking points.

AJ: Agreed! In vlogs, we get a chance to see the human being at the end of the chain of signification. In our recent post-truth era, we can't as easily get there: to the person who made and said shit. Now everything's possible to say, but by whom? We need systems that can help us render what just might stay live between two people. Yes, words, and bodies, and places, but also affect. That is one reason why my own work on fake news has turned to poetry and performance over indexical images.²

Instagram and Twitter offer certain freedoms, but performative embodiment is not one of them. You register that for us when we embody a room with these people. But later, you decided to make this work into a single-channel piece. Can you talk about what happens thematically when you flatten and make linear our encounter? What do people learn when they engage with these narratives as a film?

NB: I decided to remake *Now he's out in public* as a film the summer before Donald Trump was elected as president. The themes of the work — the fracturing of truth, and the growing prominence of racist speech and angry white crowds, the increased polarisation, misunderstandings, and isolation among our population scaled up thanks to the tools of big tech — seemed increasingly relevant. Even though the work was made before these themes became such a prominent part of the public conversation, I thought it might add something to the current debates. The installation is complex and expensive to install — and impossible to document — so I decided it would be worth making it into something accessible: a film. I released the film in 2017 as a double feature with another film of mine, *Long Story Short*, which I had finished the year before.

AJ: Those two works share an editing language that you refined across this body of work, but they are almost polar opposites in the nature of the speaking and visibility of the voice in video. To make *Now he's out*, you found people who spoke online but remain anonymous to you and us; while for *Long Story Short*, you shot the footage and, thus, the speakers become known to you and then us through a kind of loving, intimate support in your editing that you had not given to the video of, and by humans you had worked with previously.

NB: In *Long Story Short*, I interwove interviews I'd shot with over 100 people about their experiences and perceptions of, and insights into living in poverty. People talked about what they thought the media got wrong in their depictions and what they wanted to see instead. Each interview lasted over an hour. On YouTube, videos used to be limited to 10 minutes or less, and most of the vlogs I collected were a lot shorter. Part of the strangeness of vlogs is that people are alone, talking to

themselves, hoping for someone to hear. In *Long Story Short*, I was in the room, so people were, at least at that moment, being heard.

AJ: The affect that is so live in the video you shot for *Long Story Short* seems critical in relation to the loss of place and person that currently defines social media. Looking back at *Now he's out in public*, it anticipates a now commonly understood alienation in the face of social media's promise of community. Does it also anticipate possibility and hope in terms of people's access to democracy via technology and representation?

NB: We all now know and have experienced the significant negative effects of technology controlled by big corporations and repressive governments. I think the hope is in local embodied practices where protest and resistance happen both in media space and in person with other people. I'm thinking, for example, of practices where groups of people find ways to use technology and commercial platforms to reinforce and sustain visibility and already existing connections around particular issues or identities. I'll give you an example from a project I am currently working on. It is a film with the working title *Sonidos Negros (Black Sounds)* that I'm making in collaboration with a Roma association in Spain, Lacho Bají, and a Spanish artist collective, LaFundició. Together, we are developing a collective cinematic portrait of, and with, the local Spanish Roma community, exploring modes of representation of, and by, a group of people long stigmatised and discriminated against by the majority white Spanish society. Although Roma history has for centuries been repressed by the Spanish majority, local Roma groups are actively reconstructing their hidden pasts — their histories and traditions in Catalonia and their deep roots in Spain. People use Facebook and WhatsApp groups to share instances of “antigypsyism” and pro-Roma material. They are not looking to these sites with the goal of creating community that doesn't yet exist, but rather to sustain existing connections. So, these sites are not substitutions for “community”, but rather media channels for distributing forms and content that aren't easily seen elsewhere. The film will offer a radical pastiche that utilises visual aesthetics inspired in part by social media feeds. In contrast to stereotypes about “gypsies” as primitive and pre-modern, the film counters mainstream and stereotypical

depictions of the Roma as anti-modern and underdeveloped, out of touch with current trends, technologies, and realities. We're also exploring how these tools are appropriated by groups such as the Roma, whose vitally active community life and economies of sharing and giving offer significant lessons for, and radical alternatives to hyper-individualism and dehumanising neo-liberal economic models.

AJ: All of your work allows us to see how places, bodies, and media are critical, if we are to retain a public that can nourish, engage, and empower us. Thank you.

Notes

1. Alexandra Juhasz, *Learning From YouTube* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), [http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/learningfromyoutube/\[born-digital "video-book"\]](http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/learningfromyoutube/[born-digital%20video-book%20]).

2. See: fakenews-poetry.org; and Alexandra Juhasz, Ganaelle Langlois and Nishant Shah, *Really Fake!* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021); and *Open access*, Meson Press, 2021: <https://meson.press/books/reallyfake>.