



# UPDATING TO REMAIN THE SAME

HABITUAL NEW MEDIA

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## Conclusion: Found Habituation

This book has argued that what matters most is what and how things linger. Rather than focus on the new and the fading—the bleeding edge of obsolescence—it has examined what remains, and how. Starting from a basic question about networks, namely, “Why have networks become the concept to explain everything new about our current era?,” it has discovered habit (+crisis) as central to the temporality and logic of N(YOU) media. In imagined networks, connections are habits.

Habits, creative anticipations based on repetitions, ground network analyses, even if these analyses seek to explain what seems antithetical to habit: viral spread, crisis, and catastrophe. This is because habit itself is changing: it is increasingly understood as addiction (to have is now to lose). A significant number of popular and scholarly studies of habit treat it as something that needs to be changed, hence the coupling of habit with crisis. Now, to be is to be updated: Habit + Crisis = Update. This formula drives new media development. Further, through habit, networks are scaled. Habit allows us to move from individual tic to collective probabilities, for habits, however personal, are also things that collect. Habit makes possible YOUR value, “Big Data.”

At the same time, this book has not simply condemned habit and N(YOU) media, but rather sought to comprehend the modes of inhabitation that they can shelter. Instead of mourning the loss of a ‘we’/‘they,’ it has addressed habit as a way to inhabit the inhabitable. It has sought to understand the possibilities of YOU as singular-plural, as an entity that makes possible what Nancy has called an “inoperative community.” Central to this effort has been the reframing of habit as publicity, as the remnants—or even scars—of others that one shelters within the self. Thus, to make explicit the larger argument driving this book (and the books that have preceded it): to address the pressing issues posed by the many networks around us, we need to focus on modes and modalities of publicity,

instead of simply and constantly defending a privacy based on outdated notions of domesticity (privacy, that is, as house arrest). As many before me have argued, privacy and publicity are not opposites: privacy is a way of doing publicity. To be clear, this does not mean that privacy is not important, but rather that, in order to create a viable privacy, we need to grapple with—rather than cover over or ignore—the fundamentally intrusive nature of networks.

This book is a call for us to develop public rights, rather than accept the notion that if one is (un)wittingly exposed, one is then forever denied protection. Rather than “consent once, circulate forever,” we need to find ways to loiter in public without being attacked. We need a politics of fore-giving that combats the politics of memory as storage, that fights for the ephemeral and fights not only for the right to be forgotten but also the right not to be stored in the first place. This reengagement with memory also entails a change in our habits of using—and our refusal of designs that undermine habituation by turning habits into forms of addiction, a refusal of undead information that renders us into zombies. It means inhabiting and discovering how our habits collect, rather than divide, us.

To conclude, I want to describe two projects that take on the complex relationship between private and public, individual and collective: Natalie Bookchin’s *Mass Ornament* and *Testament*.<sup>1</sup> *Mass Ornament*, a single-channel video installation with five channels of sound, is a mass dance, constructed from clips of hundreds of vlogs. Starting with ambient noise and the mise-en-scène of these vlogs—private enclosed spaces such as bedrooms, living rooms, etc.—it then intercuts music from Busby Berkeley to Leni Riefenstahl films, as it sets the scene for the “chorus line” that follows (see figure 5.1).



**Figure 5.1**

Still from Natalie Bookchin’s *Mass Ornament* (2009)

Crucially, before we get to the dancers in motion, screens and mirrors are used to emphasize the relationship between audience and vlogger. As Bookchin explains:

I edited videos of people dancing alone in their rooms, to create a mass dance reminiscent of historical representations of synchronized masses of bodies in formation, from Busby Berkeley to Leni Riefenstahl. I wanted the work to continually shift between depictions of masses and that of individuals. The dancers, alone in their rooms, seem to perform the same movements over and over as if scripted. But at the same time their bodies don't conform to mass ideals, and their sometimes awkward interpretations undermine the "mass ornament" produced by synchronizing their movements. I added sounds of bodies moving about in space, thumping, banging and shuffling, as well as ambient sound emphasizing geographical differences, from crowded urban dwellings to the suburbs. Dancers push against walls and slide down doorways, as if attempting to break out of or beyond, the constraints of the rooms in which they seem to be encased.<sup>2</sup>

*Mass Ornament* captures 'our' neoliberal condition, in which 'we' are all allegedly individuals and in which the private (corporations, individual rights, etc.) seems to have triumphed over the public or social. Through a brilliant reworking of Siegfried Kracauer's reading of 1920s chorus lines as reflecting the logic of Fordism (neatly organized rows of dancers and viewers), Bookchin's rows of *Youtube.com* videos reveal private actions as forms of repetition. Focused on actions shot in the home, *Mass Ornament* is not simply a negative critique—hey, we're all the same—but also a hopeful revelation of an unconscious community or what Jaimie Baron has called "found collectivity," which we can trace through the mass archive.<sup>3</sup> The work reveals the traces of publicity that form users' habits and their seemingly private "revelations."

This found collectivity—which transforms the chorus line into an involuntary chorus of actions and voices—is also central to the poignant and insightful multichannel video installation *Testament*. *Testament* too draws from hundreds of vlogs, but rather than being set to a soundtrack of 1920s film, it uses the original words of the vloggers to create a chorus that addresses issues such as getting laid off, coming out, and taking medication. In this series—which makes the experience of the database strangely affecting—Bookchin uses instances of synchrony (such as moments in which everyone says "Xanax") to create magnetic moments that reverberate. Bookchin's project also focuses on dissonances (moments of outing) that reveal the uglier sides of communities (something further explored in *Now he's out in public and everyone can see*).<sup>4</sup> As Bookchin explains, the Greek

chorus “embodies the reactions of audiences and the people against the kings and their misdeeds [in Greek dramas]. ... In the various chapters of *Testament*, I’ve created choruses of vloggers who comment on actions that have taken place off screen.” As she notes, this is especially clear in *Laid Off*, in which she “compiled and edited together videos in which people discuss losing their jobs into a kind of talking choir. The actors, that is, those that have produced the tragedy—heads of companies, Wall Street, Alan Greenspan, our political system—are not heard from directly. Instead, we hear from a choir of ‘the people’ or ‘the masses,’ united in their language, as well as in their anger, frustration, and their despair over the economic crisis and its impact on their lives.”<sup>5</sup> This chorus, though, is also dissonant: the members do not speak in unison, pointing to the complexities of individuality in collectivity.

The task before us is simple: to grapple with these moments, which are as much instances of found habituation as they are of found collectivity. And, through these moments, to try to inhabit the inhabitable, to give in excess and in advance, so that we can re-member differently.