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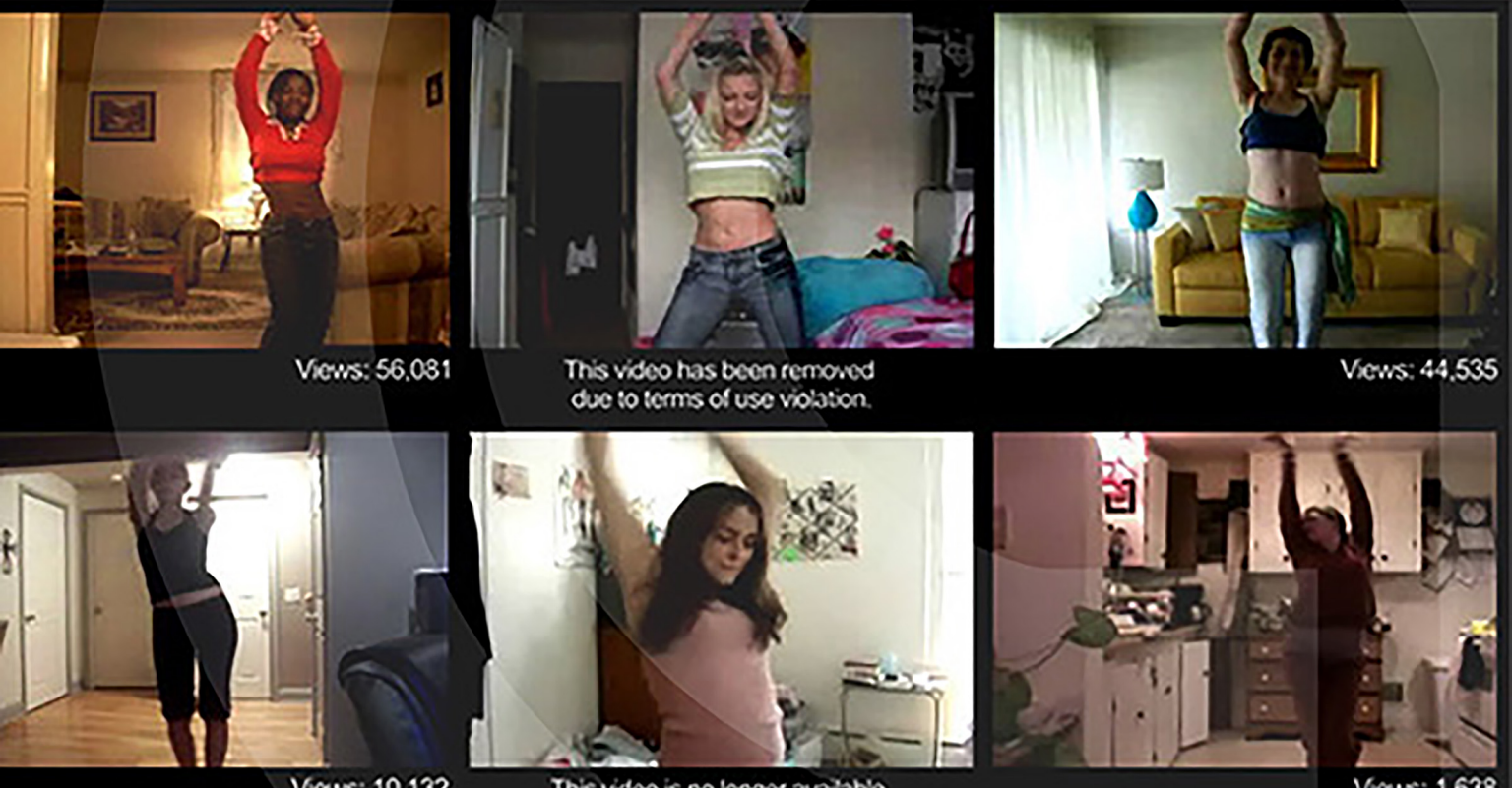

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ARTICLE

YouTube Scenes and the Public Re-seen: Natalie Bookchin and the Digital Public

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ABSTRACT

From the 1990s onwards there has been an increased and growing interest among artists in making participatory and collaborative work. Recent films and video installations by the North American artist Natalie Bookchin can be counted within this field of interest. Bookchin's works draw on the video diary or video log (vlog) format now so ubiquitous on the Internet in participatory forums such as YouTube and Vimeo. In these forms of user-generated, web-based television, individuals share personal content with a frequently anonymous public. Bookchin's works appropriate these formats for the specific purpose of examining the effects of such technologies, and the possibilities of their use, on the lived experiences of vloggers and in the broader digital economy. This article discerns a particular concern within Bookchin's work: the notion of "the public" as it is made possible by user-generated media. This may seem like a peculiar idea given these platforms' significant co-option by commerce, while the "public sphere" has been all but subsumed by private interests. Nevertheless, through a close analysis of recent works, this article argues that Bookchin's practice uniquely locates the public's possibilities in user-generated digital and social media. Central to this discussion is the artist's distinctive evocation of the public in her art in economic and political terms.

Keywords: Natalie Bookchin; participatory art; public; public sphere; YouTube

Introduction

How is it possible nowadays to conceive of "the public"? In nations including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, to name but three, decades of neo-liberal economic policy have all but decimated many aspects of public life. This is apparent, for example, in the diminishment of the "public sphere," the multitude of spaces, physical and conceptual, in which public activity takes place. Attacks on

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the public sphere grew notably in the 1980s with greater moves toward privatisation instigated by conservative Western governments, particularly in the UK under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and in the US under President Ronald Reagan. Neo-liberal economic policy has supported scale-backs to, or the dismantling of, the public sector across the health, education and welfare sectors (Hursh 2007, 495). It has, of course, become commonplace for private corporations to partner with, and in some cases take over, services that were previously the domain of the state. From the perspective of political scientist Wendy Brown, the neo-liberal agenda has renounced the idea of the public, "recogniz[ing] and interpellat[ing] the subject only as human capital" (2015, 183).

It is perhaps no coincidence that, almost concurrently over the last three decades, elements of the art world have also been anxiously gripped by concepts of the public. In Australia, for example, the public has become a buzzword for state-funded arts institutions and funding bodies alike. Public galleries appeal with what seems like an ever-increasing urgency to attract visitors with "blockbuster" exhibitions and family-friendly amenities housed onsite. Urgency in this regard often reflects a need to justify to government and to corporate funding bodies their continued financial support, with the arts sectors in Australia, the US, and the UK, three key casualties of decades of government funding cuts. On some fronts it may appear that publically-funded art galleries are a last bastion of the public sphere, seemingly accessible to all, apparently critical of the socio-economic and political status quo. Obversely, such institutions rely heavily on the enduring bourgeois history of financial and cultural capital, the latter suggesting an educated eye for art—one apparently not possessed by the vast majority of the public (Bennett 1995; Bourdieu 1979; O'Doherty 1976).

Nevertheless, there is a growing interest among contemporary artists in making works that invest in the viability of a particular idea of the public—the public as a form of *potential*. The origins of what is currently, vaguely, understood as "the public" can be attributed to classical times and especially to the activities of the *demos*, the common people of the ancient city-states. Drawing on Rosalyn Deutsche, "the term 'public' has democratic connotations. It implies 'openness,' 'accessibility,' 'participation,' 'inclusion' and 'accountability' to 'the people'" (Deutsche 1999, para. 3). "The public" is also frequently used to suggest the "average" or "ordinary" person, often under the politically rhetorical catch-all "the general public." It almost goes without saying that it cannot really mean this; the public is an incalculably large and diverse number of people (it is, of course, multiple, innumerable, *publics*). The public exists in its unknowability, in many ways in its definitive excess. To draw from philosopher Jacques Rancière, the notion of the public suggests a "fearsome … raw power of a large number" (2013, para. 3).

To be clear about terminology, the public should not be conflated with other art-related terms including "audiences," "communities," "spectators" and "viewers," all of which suggest more or less quantifiable groups of individuals, often particular individuals who

are present at an exhibition, event or performance. Just what the concept of the public means with respect to art is generally ill-defined by those who use the term and rarely interrogated by art theorists. This is an oversight considering the increased and growing interest among artists and art historians in works that directly involve members of the public through participatory and collaborative practices. The term "audience" tends to delimit the public as a group of viewers or listeners, while "community" suggests a group of individuals defined by a common location, interests, and so on, as opposed to the greater indefinability of the public (Kester 1995; Senie 2003). As critic Gretchen Coombs and cultural theorist Justin O'Connor argue, "[t]he importance placed on 'community' tends to privilege unity and consensus over multiplicity and dissensus and is defined as static rather than dynamic"—characteristics that are at odds with the multifariousness and unpredictability implied by the term "the public" (2011, 148; Bishop 2012). In relation to art, the public is unknowable; it is latent. It includes both *potential* audiences and communities for art, *potential* art-makers and participants. The following pages seek to further theorise these ideas through a close analysis of two works by North American artist Natalie Bookchin, the video installation *Mass Ornament* (2009) and the film *Long Story Short* (2016). Bookchin's works imagine a latent public that may be readily evoked by user-generated, digital media. These works, I argue, envisage the public in political and economic terms as a broad-ranging "underclass."[1]

Mass Ornament

Since 2009, Natalie Bookchin has worked repeatedly with footage appropriated from video-sharing platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo. The artist uses portions of videos, including vlogs, the video diary or video log format so ubiquitous on the Internet in forums such as YouTube. She meticulously splices these to create her video installations and films, a number of which capture vloggers candidly discussing personal issues: their recent job lay-offs, declarations and denials of homosexuality, their lists of medications taken for mental illnesses or vociferous opinions on African-American celebrities. At a basic level, YouTube itself might readily be considered a kind of participatory, web-based television, where individuals share personal content with a frequently anonymous public. In this sense, "the public" can be understood as any number of non TV-professionals who can readily access and contribute content. This is despite the fact that much of this content is not produced by amateurs, but by advertisers, entertainment companies and media corporations. Bookchin's first major foray into video installation, *Mass Ornament* (2009), comprises hundreds of moments of user-generated footage captured from YouTube. While Bookchin and others have written about and discussed this work in significant depth (for example,

1 Notably, many of Bookchin's works are available in full to be publically viewed on her personal website or Vimeo site without the commercial considerations that would frequently apply.

Baron 2011; Bookchin and Stimson 2011; Kane 2009), the pages to follow explore *Mass Ornament*'s specific evocation of the public in digital media.

The seven-minute video work features individuals dancing in their homes and in front of their webcams. In kitchens, narrow hallways, bedrooms, living rooms and a bathroom, and in front of mirrors, Christmas trees and doorways they gyrate, tap-dance, twirl, twerk, kick and perform handstands. Each segment of the YouTube footage is displayed inside an individual, rectangular frame against an otherwise black screen, the frames often multiplying in a row or rows across the screen to show several dancers at once—a format that resembles the look of YouTube with its many thumbnail-sized videos (Figure 1). Under each frame, a number and the word "views" indicates how many times that video has been publically viewed on YouTube (a mark of its popularity), while other videos have since been "removed by the user." *Mass Ornament* is set to sound and music sampled from the videos themselves: individuals turning on their cameras, cars driving by, and the background hum of cicadas. In addition, we hear the alternately triumphal and jaunty strains of music from two Depression-era films from 1935: Leni Riefenstahl's piece of Nazi propaganda *Triumph of the Will* and Busby Berkeley's musical comedy *Gold Diggers of 1935.*

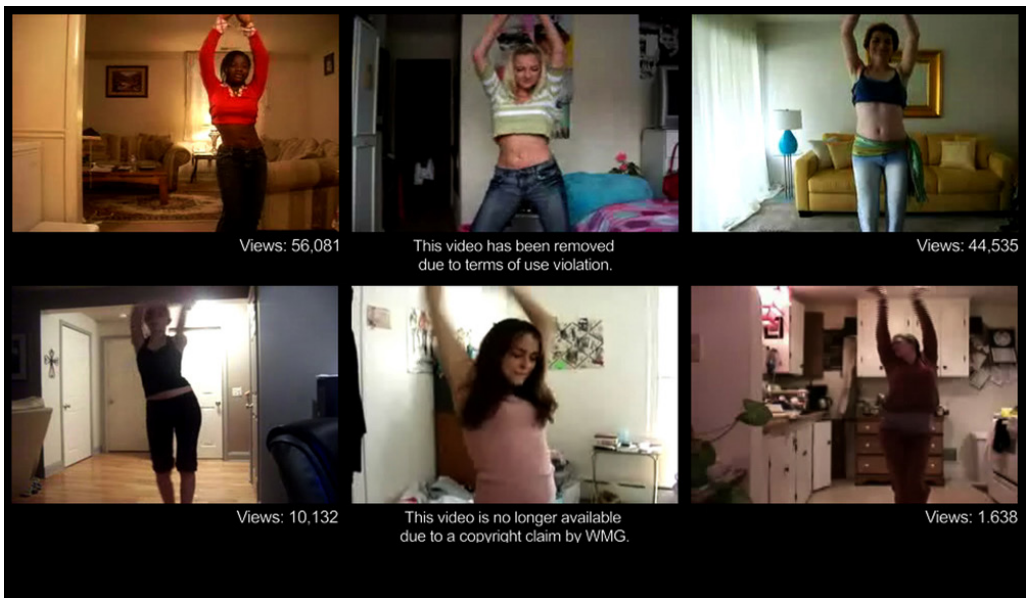

Figure 1: Natalie Bookchin, still from *Mass Ornament*, 2009, single-channel video installation, 7 minutes. Image courtesy the artist.

The multiple rectangular frames that appear and disappear throughout *Mass Ornament* operate as though they are "windows onto the world," a kind of virtual screen-capture of the amorphous Internet public brought together at a single time and in a unified screen

space. Here, as on YouTube itself, we experience seemingly authentic, documentary encounters with the lives of others, in this case, hundreds of dancers inside their homes. Bookchin edits her footage to create a precise visual synchronicity between the individual YouTube clips, while the soundtrack, which includes the intense, exacting rhythm of tap-dancing from Berkeley's *Gold Diggers,* aurally unites the footage. In one such moment early on in the work, a young woman dressed only in tight, white pants and a cropped top walks across her bedroom to turn on her webcam in readiness for her performance. In a rectangular frame to the right of this, a second woman in short shorts does the same. Three more frames appear one after the other across the remainder of the black screen; each contains a young, scantily dressed woman who moves toward her webcam. The woman in the white pants begins to sexily gyrate her hips, cocking her arms at right angles as she dances. *Mass Ornament* trades on the voyeuristic nature of YouTube: the work itself is utterly absorbing in its presentation of unselfconscious individuals and their dancing which, by turns, is funny, extremely skilful, and tragically amateurish. Bookchin maintains the amateur qualities of the videos themselves, replete with bad composition and moments where their makers fumble around with the technology. These elements preserve the videos' apparent authenticity as documents of "real life."

What of the dancing itself? Many of the dance steps that appear in *Mass Ornament* are recognisably drawn from mass or popular culture—culture that has become vastly more publicised in the era of the Internet. Moreover, since the dawn of Web 2.0 in the mid-1990s, popular culture has become readily available for appropriation by the public. The "viral" video is perhaps the current zenith of the Internet's permeability, suggestive of its enormously broad public reach, yet aided, undoubtedly, by the most dominant of media corporations with the capital to maximise such opportunities through well-placed advertisements and by boosting search rankings. The "twerk," a dance step seen in the opening moments of *Mass Ornament,* has not so much "gone viral" but it can be readily seen in user-generated dance videos, as these comprise one facet of popular cultural distribution *en masse*. We can consider in this vein the work's title, *Mass Ornament*, which finds contemporary relevance in the context of popular culture and fashion as frequently associated with "surface" or populist concerns, with the superficiality of the "ornaments" so readily consumed and reproduced by the "masses." Images and their circulation are prime currency within this extension of the capitalist economy. *Mass Ornament* engages with such economies of social media. It plays on the ways in which YouTube produces, transacts and reproduces images of culture—images of, and for, the "masses." I want to dwell on the notion of the masses here, in order to distinguish it from my understanding of the public in Bookchin's work, to which I return shortly.

Mass, Public

When viewed within an historical context, the ideas of the "masses" and the "mass ornament" have a much more sombre or sinister underpinning. The mass ornament is associated with various modern totalitarian regimes, namely Stalinism and Nazism, which considered their publics as veritable ornaments shaped by political will (North 1990, 867). These seemingly malleable publics found their creative expression in such mass crowd scenes of, for example, Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (from which Bookchin appropriates the musical score and its attendant—albeit more extremist—suggestion of manipulable bodies choreographed *en masse* at Nazi rallies). In the late 1920s, the German cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer developed the concept of the mass ornament in an essay of the same name, published in 1927. Kracauer's essay does not refer to the European or to the Soviet political contexts of the time (although the analogies it draws would become stark) but to the "massification" and deindividuation of society under the economic machine of Western capitalism (North 1990, 867).

In the 1920s, Fordism (named after the industrial processes developed by the Ford Motor Company) had revolutionised early twentieth-century factory production through its pioneering of mass production techniques. Kracauer's "Mass Ornament" deals with the notion of "body culture" through a discussion of the Tiller Girls, a series of formation dance troupes formed in the late nineteenth century by the dance manager John Tiller in the English industrial city of Manchester (Kracauer [1927] 1995, 75). Tiller Girls sought to move in total unison and they were also matched to perfectly accord with similarities in height and weight to form a cohesive unit of movement (Victoria and Albert Museum n.d.). According to Kracauer, culture, and "body culture" in particular, is an expression of the current social order, and the Tiller Girls represented veritable cogs in a machine, a representation of capitalist society where the individual is subsumed by the insensible mass in the process of mass production. The machine-like uniformity of the Tiller Girls was reflected in other forms of dance of the time, including in the striking Busby Berkeley tap-dance scene that features toward the end of *Gold Diggers of 1935*, from which Bookchin appropriates sound and music.

Bookchin's *Mass Ornament* explicitly borrows from Kracauer's essay to consider forms of "body culture," namely contemporary forms of mass subjectivity instigated by new technologies. However, in the current post-Fordist era of networked technologies, the labouring "bodies" once rooted in place on the factory floor are globally dispersed. As Bookchin (in Kane 2009, para. 6) observes:

> If Fordism once described a social and economic system that focused on large-scale factory production, post-Fordism describes a shift away from the masses of workers in the same space, to smaller scale production by workers scattered around the world. These workers are linked by technology rather than an assembly line … If the machinery of the Fordist era was mechanical, post-Fordism is digital.

In Bookchin's own words, *Mass Ornament* focuses on "the ways that new technologies expand our capacity to control, track, regulate, and rationalize bodies" (Kane 2009, para. 16). Her observations recall philosopher Michel Foucault's theoretical work on disciplinary power as enacted by modern governance and presided over by technologies. Foucault theorised that "disciplinary societies" emerged as a modern means by which to control the body through forms of surveillance, and he included "the worker" as one such body (Foucault [1977] 1995). YouTube could be considered the zenith of Foucault's disciplinary epoch. As its users seemingly volunteer, ever so eagerly, to turn the camera on themselves in acts of "self-surveillance," they also open themselves up to surveillance by others. Here, any privacy afforded by the domestic setting is notably absent as users willingly collapse the distinction between private and public space. With respect to Bookchin's *Mass Ornament*, this is a form of public surveillance wrought *en masse*. Extending these ideas, we can consider the ways in which Kracauer and Foucault, to name only two writers on this subject, describe the modern body as utterly objectified and frequently made abject by technologies of the economy and of disciplinary power. Here, the individual subject is wilfully absented or unacknowledged, as in Kracauer's evocative description of the Tiller Girls, where he decries that "[t]hese products of American distraction factories are no longer individual girls, but indissoluble girl clusters" (Kracauer [1927] 1995, 76).

Mass Ornament draws an historical analogy between the machine-styled body of the early twentieth century and the self-styled uniformity of the dancing bodies on YouTube. Both forms of bodily representation can be viewed as rooted in popular culture and ultimately in capitalist profit-making at the expense of a certain notion of individuality, also observed by Kracauer above. While the concept of individuality is readily associated with the neo-liberal valorisation of the individual's "journey" toward economic self-sufficiency, it may also be understood in the context of Bookchin's *Mass Ornament* as a form of uniqueness or distinction from "the mass," one that disrupts the mass's formal homogeneity (also see Chun 2016). There is a deliberate contradiction here. The work's multiple frames draw our attention to the similar yet nonetheless distinctive way in which each person moves, and to the differences between their domestic settings: a striped couch here, a yellow one there, a door here, a door there. And, as Bookchin writes, the dancers' "bodies don't conform to mass ideals, and their sometimes awkward interpretations undermine the 'mass ornament' produced by synchronizing their movements" (Bookchin and Stimson 2011, para. 10). At times, individuals in the work slip, trip up or stand motionless for overly long periods of time as if waiting for their videos to start recording. Film theorist Jaimie Baron asserts that part of "the pleasure of the piece lies in the play of differences that derive from the contingent elements of everyday existence that are visible seemingly in excess of the performers' intentions" (Baron 2011, 34). *Mass Ornament* gestures toward the "imperfections" of human movement and to the individual idiosyncrasies that distinguish human bodies from the uniformly "machined" bodies that were condemned by Kracauer, above. This

is to say that *Mass Ornament* oscillates between invoking the homogeneity of popular culture, and those moments that appear to have "escaped" such uniform cultural co-option, wittingly or not.

I want to dwell on *Mass Ornament*'s play between homogeneity and heterogeneity, or between the mass and the individual, before connecting this to the idea of the public in Bookchin's work. This point can be extended by way of a further historical analogy present in the work concerning the specific economic circumstances of the 1930s (to which *Mass Ornament* alludes through its musical scoring) and 2009, when *Mass Ornament* itself was made. Both periods experienced economic depressions; *Gold Diggers of 1935* was made just after President Roosevelt's "New Deal" of 1933, while *Mass Ornament* was made in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis. We can consider the ways in which popular culture has provided entertainment and escapism during these periods in particular. Film theorist Barry Keith Grant writes about the potential for escapism offered by the genre of the 1930s musical film, the period in which *Gold Diggers* and a number of other films like it were produced. Grant (2012, 56) observes that:

> Bursting forth in song implied optimism, an important message at the time, and the very nature of dance suggests a sense of social harmony, for dancing partners move in step with each other. And while dance was a useful metaphor of communal order, the lavish spectacles created by Hollywood musicals also took audiences' thoughts away from the economic depravations in their own lives.

Grant highlights the way in which Hollywood films of the 1930s moved in step with the political agenda of the time, to relieve American citizens of the pressures they felt while Roosevelt implemented his New Deal (Grant 2012, 56). We can also read in Grant's description of "communal order" elements of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's bleak description of mass culture under capitalism in their chapter titled "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). The Marxist theorists illustrate the ways in which art and culture had fallen victim to capitalism, to become another of its ideological arms in the form of the "culture industry." According to Adorno and Horkheimer, escapism from work is merely an extension of work itself (Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 2002, 109). In their view, culture itself had become characterised by its sameness (a "sameness" also seen in Bookchin's *Mass Ornament*) and its capacity to recuperate any instances of difference or "nonconformity" into its overarching cultural schema.

While "The Culture Industry" is outdated, the prevalence of digital culture renders this text more so, particularly in terms of Adorno and Horkheimer's ready assumption of audiences' passivity (Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 2002, 100). Indeed, it can be argued that YouTube represents a contemporary pinnacle of "audience activation," an almost complete collapse of the distinction between cultural producers and consumers. And yet, as Bookchin's *Mass Ornament* suggests, this seeming "public sphere" of cultural production is replete with commercial popular culture, which uses YouTube

as yet another means of publicity. YouTube itself is, of course, a commercial venture, owned by Google, the largest and most profitable of global media corporations. With its former tag line, "Broadcast Yourself," YouTube purports to help users create and express a "unique" self, all the while recuperating this uniqueness as part of a neo-liberal fiction of individual empowerment. As argued above, *Mass Ornament* appears perhaps perversely to force the point about cultural homogeneity and co-option, or to stage it as a *fait accompli*. Bookchin actually finds or creates a "mass ornament" out of what is otherwise a much more incongruous and dispersed public of YouTube. However, as Baron writes (2011, 37):

> [I]f these mass ornaments can be "found" rather than produced from above, then the potential for collectivity and collaboration—rather than simply co-optation—lurks within digital archives, awaiting a moment in which users may join together for their own purposes.

Baron's argument is compelling and aligns with my own argument around the public as an ongoing possibility. *Mass Ornament* underscores a key "quality" of the public seen through the "screen" of the digital: its anonymity, its dispersion and nebulousness, its lack of mass (where the notion of mass now seems anachronistic in the context of *Mass Ornament,* an idea that belongs to the heavy industries of twentieth-century Fordism observed by Bookchin, above). Herein, the individuated public depicted in *Mass Ornament* appears, on one level, entirely, blithely, unaware of its relation to any collective. Each dancer appears inside a single frame, separated in Bookchin's work in a way that suggests each person's distance from the other in physical space. Conversely, the work's multiplying frames, meticulously synchronised, also gesture toward the potential for collectivity engendered by the digital realm and, with an apparent hopefulness, to the potential of an emergent public. The work suggests that, at least in these seconds, we see "flickers" of a more transparent or documentary reality, one that somehow "escapes" mass cultural co-option (Baron 2011, 36). As described above, *Mass Ornament* is punctuated by moments where discordant and fumbling movements undermine the mass ornament's unity. Here, the public exists in the idea that it is multifarious and unpredictable. It cannot be "pinned down," literally or figuratively. And, while Bookchin seems sceptical of the idea of the public (as seen in her creation of a mass ornament), her practice returns time and again to evoking the public's viability. This is in spite of, or even because of, its digital mediation or mediatisation. I turn now to a later work, which expands on these ideas to explore a further idea of the public as it appears in Bookchin's work.

Long Story Short

Departing from Bookchin's method of capturing footage from user-generated media, her later film, *Long Story Short* (2016), directly elicited the participation of around 100 individuals. In this 45-minute film, the participants describe what it

feels like to live in poverty in the US, from the emotional and physical experiences of homelessness to the practical minutiae of everyday life on the streets (Figure 2). Bookchin spent two years in the San Francisco and LA areas in 2012 and 2013 in the wake of the global financial crisis, where she interviewed individuals in homeless shelters, food banks, adult literacy programmes and job training centres. There, she attempted to ascertain "how they define [poverty], their everyday experience of it, misperceptions they face, and what they thought should be done" (*Long Story Short*, opening frame of film). According to a 2014 US income and poverty survey, a significant number of Americans, around 15 per cent, live in poverty (DeNavas-Walt and Proctor 2015, 12). Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of the subjects in *Long Story Short* are African American or Latino, indicative of the ongoing inseparability between race and poverty in the US.

While not "vlogging" as such, Bookchin nevertheless captures her participants' responses on webcams and laptops to mirror the direct, amateur and intimate quality of vlogs. The footage is raw, frequently awkward and emotional. Bookchin's subjects are shot in close up using laptops and webcams to frame their heads and shoulders, as is common in vlogs. Participants were given the chance to create the videos themselves. As Bookchin (in Arden 2016, para. 7) writes,

> during the interview, they saw a live feed of themselves on the screen, and were able to present themselves as they wanted. They could redo sections, skip over questions, and elaborate on topics not included in the prompts. They were treated as the experts, the insiders—and that's something many of them don't feel very often in the eyes of outsiders, where they may feel judged, feared, or not seen at all.

Despite her own manipulation of the recordings, Bookchin observes that she gave the individuals the opportunity to frame their own identities, in a process which recalls participatory anthropology or so-called participatory action research developed over the last century—forms of research in which participants themselves are seen to "ow[n] the discourse: seiz[e] the power!" (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014, 4). Bookchin speaks about her own role in the film as "that of a careful listener," while her editing "performs a kind of close, subjective listening and distillation of the large body of narrations [she] collected" (Bookchin in Cutrona 2015, para. 1).

Figure 2: Natalie Bookchin, still from *Long Story Short,* 2016, film, 45 minutes. Image courtesy the artist.

As in *Mass Ornament*, the individuals in *Long Story Short* are composed within familiar settings, sometimes in domestic spaces. Their footage is set inside individual rectangular frames or "thumbnails," which variously appear and disappear in horizontal rows against a black screen. And, as in the earlier work, elements of coalescence or "sameness" are depicted through Bookchin's exacting, rhythmic use of editing: here, moments of footage are brought together as individuals speak certain words or phrases in unison: "backed into a corner," "minimum wage," "roof over our head," "Hispanics," "Latinos," "African Americans," "a liquor store on every corner," "it's just not enough," "hungry," "gangs," "drugs," "shootings." These moments audibly rise and fall throughout the film, as if voiced by a chorus, before the individual participants take over again. Bookchin's politics are explicit here: poverty in the US is not an individual problem but a systemic one, and thoroughly linked to race. *Long Story Short* confounds expectations or stereotypes of homelessness and poverty. Some of the participants have college degrees. Some of them work and are still in poverty or homeless. One woman works in a bank and makes $12 an hour. It is impossible to afford rent in Southern California on this income, she says. *Long Story Short* highlights its subjects' humanity as it focuses on the everyday experiences of poverty.

More than in *Mass Ornament*, *Long Story Short* is framed as a "transparent" or direct encounter with its "vlogger"-participants. Bookchin preserves her "bad" footage of individuals clearing their throats, covering their faces with their hands in embarrassment, or becoming tearful. The individuals are posited as relatively unmediated; Bookchin's shift in methodology toward soliciting material directly from people would suggest that what we see in this film is precisely a more documentary or indexical encounter—a view from the inside, as it were. Many of the individuals name themselves as they speak, and each of their names is listed at the film's conclusion. Any sense of the public as an anonymous and abstracted "mass," as in moments of *Mass Ornament*, is absent here. *Long Story Short* presents its vlogger-public as highly individuated, and with the available screen-time to narrate their individual experiences.

Vloggers are discussed in Bookchin's previous works as a form of contemporary Greek chorus: "ordinary people" who were both "set apart from," yet reflected "the action of the drama" (Bookchin and Stimson 2011, para. 15). Here, we can imagine the *demos* of the Roman forum or the Greek agora, which opined on and collectively bore witness to scenes of emergent publicity. Unlike in previous works (including a video installation titled *Now He's Out in Public and Everyone Can See*, 2012), the individuals in *Long Story Short* seem to be very much part of the "theatre of life" which they describe, often in unison. Now, Bookchin seems to suggest, there exists a viable version of the modern public sphere, where action may be taken for the good of the collective.[2] This is to suggest that the participants in *Long Story Short* are those who are not typically "out in public," at least not on their own terms. Most compelling for my argument is the idea that the public evoked in *Long Story Short* is defined by its relationship to those "from below." That is, the public depicted in *Long Story Short* is a poor "other"; an other which is like "us" (physically and emotionally) but which is not us as viewers—detached (presumably) from the reality of extreme poverty. I want to support this claim that the public is "from below" in terms of two aspects of the film: its creation of vlog-style imagery and the way in which *Long Story Short* depicts the poor.

The Public From Below

In a well-known essay by the artist Hito Steyerl, titled "In Defense of the Poor Image" (2009), Steyerl discusses the "poverty" of certain digital images. She describes the circulation of what she calls "poor images" in and out of the dominant

2 The classic text discussing the public sphere is Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962). The book's description of a consensual political stage, where political action could be taken in the interests of all, has been widely critiqued, seen by certain postmodern theorists to support normative, hegemonic power structures.

economy of professional cinematic production. Poor images are bad quality images, frequently pirated, "distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution" (Steyerl 2009, para. 1). They are poor images not just because of their low-grade quality, but also because of their lower status in terms of capital. Poor images also have the capacity to undermine the economic dominance of professional cinema and to circulate itinerantly. Thus, the poor image (Steyerl 2009, para. 23),

> builds alliances as it travels, provokes translation or mistranslation, and creates new publics … It is no longer anchored within a classical public sphere mediated and supported by the frame of the nation state or corporation, but floats on the surface of temporary and dubious data pools.

This accounts for the proliferation of poor images as an effect of the neo-liberalisation of culture, the stranglehold of the cinema multiplex and the edging out of small-time film production (2009, para. 10). While Steyerl does not directly address the amateur-style YouTube videos of the type Bookchin draws on or creates in her vlog works, we can nevertheless consider these as very much within the poor image economy that Steyerl describes. This thrives on its capacity to bring together otherwise completely dispersed "new publics" through networks of common interests, and it is interdependent with the economy of "legitimate" imagery. The point is that, for Steyerl, poor images are resistant to the dominant economy and can dissolve the boundaries between legitimate producers and audiences.

Bookchin writes that in *Long Story Short*, as in previous works, she again "decided to shoot with webcams, to again use a low-res digital image, in part to suggest that these are images that should and could travel across networks, and become a part of our digital image streams" (cited in Arden 2016, para. 19). In other words, Bookchin actively attempts to create poor images and to insert them into the "mainstream" digital network. Additionally, and in a longer passage that is worth dwelling on, Bookchin describes her interest in the clandestine economy of image networks and the ways in which digital images can move between private and public modes of viewing. Referencing Steyerl's essay, Bookchin (in Arden 2016, para. 18) writes that her interest in "bad images," in "poor images," so to speak,

> came out of series of videos I made between 2005 and 2007 that documented anonymous landscapes I found by looking through online security webcams. I documented my online travels through these cameras, into back yards, alleys, street intersections, inside restaurants, front porches, ordinary private spaces around the world, private space inadvertently made public when a googlebot detected and indexed its url. In relation to that work, I wrote about the poetics of the images I collected—low resolution and highly pixelated—unmanned by a human operator and indifferent to blinding bursts of light or hours of darkness, and how they bore the marks of their travels across low bandwidths of electronic networks.

Bookchin appears invested in the idea that the digital realm is one in which images from below: poor, informal, haphazard and—perhaps paradoxically—"private" images can operate in an alternative image economy. The poor images that Bookchin creates in *Long Story Short*, imperfect and shot using webcams, suggest this other economy. In *Long Story Short*, "poor images" embody the kind of (private) public activity that may be largely unseen in the more dominant digital streams of commercial or institutional media: activity that might be low-grade or amateur, informal, or which is somehow unrecognised within the current discourses on poverty.

There is a further sense in which the public in *Long Story Short* is "from below." The phrase "from below" is associated with the tradition of Marxist "history from below" practised by twentieth-century English historiographers including E. P. Thompson. Thompson and his contemporaries, including Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé, sought to write the history of English workers' struggles. This was distinct from "English History Proper," as Thompson wryly observed in his widely cited essay "History From Below" (1966, 279). In this article, published in the *The Times Literary Supplement*, Thompson reviews the literature on Labour history (with a capital "L") to discuss the positive evolution in recent worker historiography from the academic conventions of the time.

However, the historian Martin Lyons has more recently observed that Thompson and his contemporaries represented an "old" history from below in that "the actual members of the lower classes remained an anonymous mass" (2010, 59.2). Lyons argues that, while Thompson and his contemporaries "restored a sense of power and agency to the working-classes, they were primarily interested in public action rather than private lives" (2010, 59.2). He means that the earlier historiographers focused on collective actions and the emerging organised labour movement rather the yet-to-come "personalization of History from Below," which focuses on people's lived experiences. Lyons (2010, 59.2) observes that the "new" history from below

> is new for three main reasons: it re-evaluates individual experience; it searches for the personal and private voices of common people, however they may be mediated through institutional and other channels; and it considers ordinary readers and writers as active agents in the shaping of their own lives and cultures.

By "individual experience," Lyons means a kind of "exceptional normality": highly personalised or distinctive behaviours and beliefs that both encompass, and yet are different from, the popular "norm" (2010, 59.3). I dwell on Lyons' description of this new history from below because it evokes Bookchin's political project in *Long Story Short*. Although not dealing directly with history, *Long Story Short* invokes and complicates historical representations of poverty, particularly in abject photographic portrayals by such key examples as Dorothea Lange and Paul Strand. As Bookchin writes: "I wanted to avoid overused images of poverty, so-called 'poverty porn' and to present new images conjured entirely from the language of

those on the inside" (in Arden 2016, para. 12). Lyons's above distinction between "public action and private lives" is also worth considering in light of Bookchin's film. *Long Story Short* is as invested in one as it is in the other: in the potential for digital forms of collectivity and in the lived experience of poverty as told by "insiders."

In these ways, *Long Story Short* confounds its subjects' otherness through the artist's attention to individual experience, to physical and emotional experiences of humanity that can be readily identified with—and not just by those in poverty. Bookchin's film keenly emphasises the sense of disenfranchisement and systematic socio-economic failures in the US, which are not limited to the film's participants but are experienced by a broad public, and one that is becoming larger on a daily basis. Indeed, *Long Story Short* emphasises its participants' commonality, their "exceptional normality" (to borrow from Lyons, above), acknowledging the widespread rates of poverty in the US. Bookchin gestures toward the public as a much larger and broader number of "common people" (to recall Lyons), to the idea of the public as a kind of "everyperson" within the neo-liberal order. That is, while *Long Story Short*'s power lies in its direct address to an invisible audience (most likely a gallery-going audience) its reach is plausibly far greater than this.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Bookchin's works reinforce the idea of the public as something akin to the "average" or "ordinary" person. We can read in this approach a long-standing, avant-garde disavowal of bourgeois forms of culture and an imperative to retain forms of the public that have been threatened by neo-liberal capitalism. The leaking of the Panama Papers in early 2016 emphasised the economic reality that "the one per cent" owns the great majority of the world's capital, while most of the rest, the vast amount of the public, represents the 99 per cent. Bookchin's works can be seen to frame the concept of the public in economic terms, where it contrasts starkly with the public's modern, bourgeois associations (Habermas [1962] 1989). Bookchin is undoubtedly sceptical about the notion of the public. Nevertheless, her video installations and films locate its possibilities in user-generated digital and social media. Now, they suggest, the public exists in the "poor image," the subversive image, and in lived experiences communicated publically.

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