Network Effects: Natalie Bookchin, Media Works 2008-2017

Natalie Bookchin

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Network Effect

noun: ECONOMICS
A phenomenon whereby a product or service gains additional value as more people use it. ‘Instant messaging is a market with strong network effects’
-Oxford Dictionary

In the 24 years since the internet went public, the gap between the rich and the poor has deepened, secure jobs and the safety net have vanished, and political divides have widened in the U.S. Natalie Bookchin’s work explores the links between these trends, grappling with questions about what is at stake as the ground has fallen out from under the poor and middle classes. It explores the intimate ways ordinary people interact with technologies built and controlled by Silicon Valley and the military. It looks at how these technologies and algorithmic systems shape and alter who we are, what we see and know, and the truths we tell about ourselves and the world.

Bookchin is a pioneering media artist and a virtuosic editor who creates mass portraits of the shared self. Her montages are composed of fragments of found videos from YouTube as well as those of her own making and suggest a modern equivalent of the ancient Greek chorus, where ordinary people comment and reflect on the deeds and missteps of those in power.

Network Effects
Natalie Bookchin: Media Works 2008-2017
January 22 — March 2, 2018
In the 2000s, after the Web was invented, Bookchin started working with the internet as a site, medium, and distribution platform. Her artwork took the form of computer games, collaborative performances, texts and manifestos, interactive installations, and hacktivist interventions. It addressed topics often sidelined by the utopianism and celebratory clamor that dominated conversations about the internet. These included technology’s increasing capacity to track, rationalize, and control bodies—bodies under surveillance, defined by genetics, or gendered through computer games.

By the mid-2000s, as the internet grew more commercial and cacophonous, Bookchin took her work offline, and made a series of short videos and installations documenting global landscapes compiled from screen grabs of found security webcams and online videos, exploring the internet’s erasure of lines between public and private spaces and its flattening of time and space.

In 2006, as social media was remaking the Internet and identity itself, Bookchin began working with found videos of people recording themselves in front of cameras connected to the web. These were more innocent times, before Twitter took off, before the Arab Spring, and before online shaming got really bad, and the videos reveal the sometimes disarming trust people still felt online. While many commentators gushed over the democratic, even revolutionary, capacity of these new forms of communication, Bookchin offers a more complicated picture—showing how these oddly public-private videos reflect isolation and a longing for public space, social interaction, and community. In the four-part series TESTAMENT, spanning the years 2009-2017, Bookchin collected and edited fragments of found online video diaries (vlogs), shaping them spatial montages that reveal and reimagine overlapping and interconnected subjectivities. Addressing subjects ranging from mass unemployment to homophobia on the web, TESTAMENT reflects on the peculiar blend of intimacy and anonymity, of the simultaneous connectivity and isolation of contemporary social relations.

Throughout her career, her artistic goals have been unchanged: to bring challenging, timely ideas into public conversation, open up new spaces for reflection, and challenge habitual ways of seeing and understanding, inviting people to consider and feel something about the world that they otherwise might not have even noticed.

In 2012, Bookchin began producing her own archive of video—one she couldn’t find online—of people in poverty discussing their experiences of being poor, how they got there, and how they hope to get out, along with the misperceptions they faced from others. She shaped this material into a long-form film called LONG STORY SHORT, released theatrically and on DVD in 2017.

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In 2009, 2010, and 2011, Bookchin worked with found videos of people recording themselves in front of cameras in their rooms. In this exhilarating work, the dancers seem to make small claims of embodiment in the face of its supposed disappearance in the virtual realm. Also on view is the longer 2012/2017 work of the same name, where individuals who Bookchin filmed in separate spaces appear on screen in their rooms, mirroring the isolation of their experiences, words flow between them like a musical ensemble. Together in the film for the first time, Americans who are rarely acknowledged or listened to form a virtual collective.

In the widely acclaimed 2009 work MASS ORNAMENT, a mass dance is constructed from hundreds of found online videos of people dancing in front of their webcams in their rooms. In this exhilarating work, the dancers seem to make small claims of embodiment in the face of its supposed disappearance in the virtual realm. Also on view is the longer 2012/2017 work of the same name, where individuals who Bookchin filmed in separate spaces appear on screen in their rooms, mirroring the isolation of their experiences, words flow between them like a musical ensemble. Together in the film for the first time, Americans who are rarely acknowledged or listened to form a virtual collective.

In 2016, 45 min, Courtesy Icarus Films.

In LAID OFF, narrators describe losing their jobs in the wake of the Global Recession of 2008. I AM NOT is a series of denials, disavowals and proclamations of sexual identities.

In the moving and immersive LONG STORY SHORT, over 100 people at homeless shelters, food banks, adult literacy programs, and job training centers in L.A. and the Bay Area discuss their experiences of poverty: why they are poor, how it feels, and what they think should be done about American poverty and homelessness today. While individuals whom Bookchin filmed in separate spaces appear on screen in their own visual spaces, mirroring the isolation of their experiences, words flow between them like a musical ensemble. Together in the film for the first time, Americans who are rarely acknowledged or listened to form a virtual collective.

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