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## Network Effects: Natalie Bookchin, Media Works 2008-2017

Natalie Bookchin

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

## Network Effect

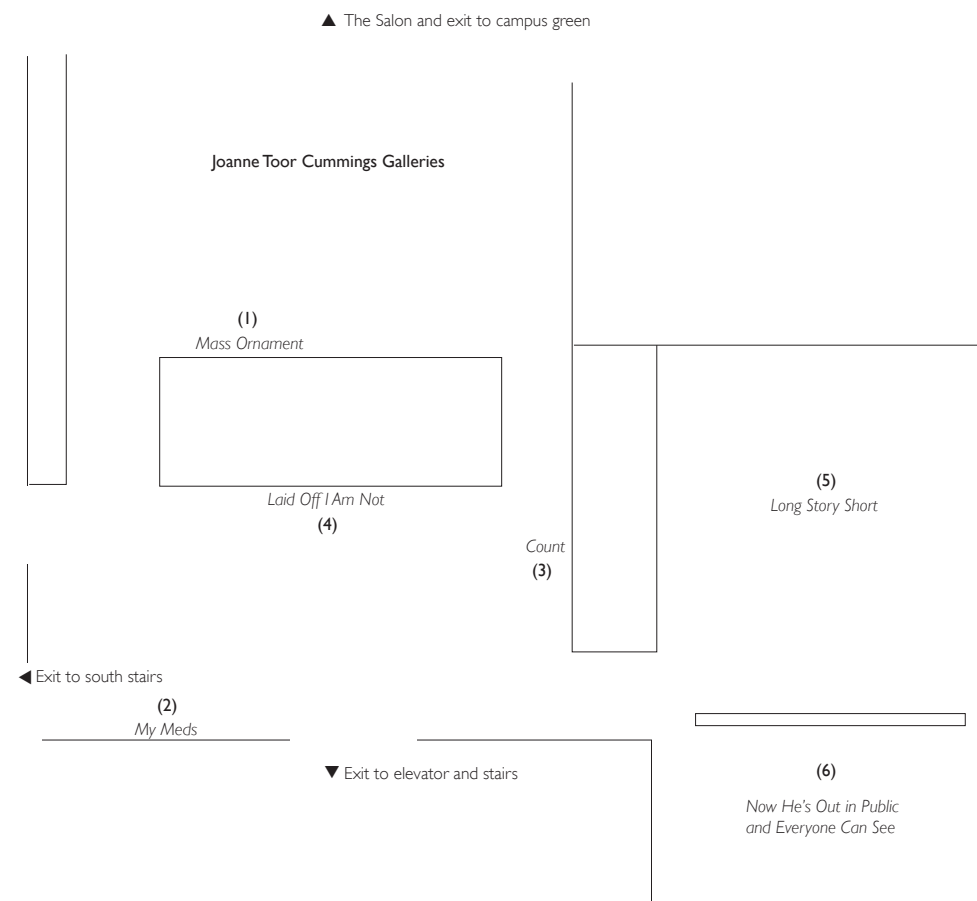
noun: ECONOMICS

*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.



THE CONNECTICUT COLLEGE ART DEPARTMENT AND  
THE AMMERMAN CENTER FOR ARTS AND TECHNOLOGY PRESENT:

# Network Effects

## Natalie Bookchin: Media Works 2008-2017

January 22 — March 2, 2018



**ammerman center**  
[ arts & technology ]



ARTIST LECTURE: Thursday, February 15, 4:15pm Oliva Hall, Cummings Arts Center.  
Reception to follow, 5:30 – 6:30pm in the Cummings galleries

*Made possible by the Dayton Artist-in-Residence Fund and the Ammerman Center for Arts and Technology. Network Effects is the featured exhibition of INTERSECTIONS: the 16th Biennial Symposium on Arts and Technology at Connecticut College.*

## Background

In the 1990s, soon 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 screengrabs 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 2008, 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.

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 **NOW HE'S OUT IN PUBLIC AND EVERYONE CAN SEE**, a work that foreshadows the resurfacing of white nationalism in the Trump era. A meditation on collective perceptions about race and racial identity in the Obama era, the work is drawn from an archive of video blogger's rantings and musings as they describe, judge, prescribe behaviors for, attack, and defend four unnamed famous black men. The impassioned accounts bleed into one another, highlighting shared language and racialized and racist tropes.

In 2012, Bookchin began producing her own archive of video—ones 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.

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.

### A Note on Algorithmic intervention

The work Bookchin has done for the last decade lies somewhere between a collaboration with and intervention into Google's algorithms. Bookchin digs into online databases to collect videos, and by varying search terms and going deep into search results, aims to circumvent the search's algorithmic biases. She rescues videos lost in the cacophony or buried by secret algorithms that favor more "shareable" data.

Algorithm-based recommendations offer people films, books, or knowledge based on past choices, providing what the algorithm thinks they want. Like algorithms, her montages suggest relationships between different sets of data, but unlike algorithms, which are invisible and individualized, she make her biases visible through editing and montage, and the semantic relationships she create reveal larger social truths that go beyond the individual.

YouTube's algorithms organize videos by popularity, tags, and titles. They can't easily detect subtext or irony, falsehoods, or disinformation. Any politics, preferences, ethics—or lack thereof—embedded in the algorithms are company secrets. Bookchin's intervention aims to highlight our algorithmic condition, how we come to see and know what we do though automated algorithmic mediation, as well as to underscore the value of embodied, situated, creative human intelligence and perspectives.

## Works in the exhibition:

**(1) MASS ORNAMENT** 2009, 7 min  
*"With a keen eye for detail, a terrific sense of timing and a killer instinct for editing, [Bookchin] has clipped and combined hundreds of vignettes from YouTube and set them to the soundtracks from Busby Berkeley's GOLD DIGGERS OF 1935 and Leni Riefenstahl's TRIUMPH OF THE WILL. [...] To watch the split-screen extravaganza is to feel as if you are at once enjoying a god's-eye view of a vast, everyday parade of vulnerable human beings and also an intimate part of a democratic drama that is deeply moving."* —Los Angeles Times

**TESTAMENT (4 CHAPTERS)** 2009 - 2017  
Testament presents a series of collective expressions of the shared self. The series reflects on the peculiar blend of intimacy and anonymity, of the simultaneous connectivity and isolation of contemporary social relations.

**(2) My Meds** 2009, 1:10 min  
A chorus of speakers recite the psychotropic medications they are taking.

**(3) Count** 2008/2017, 10:07 min  
In the final chapter in the series, people state their weight with disappointment, shame, or pride. Heard in sequence Count seems to suggest the way that that all efforts to express oneself online ultimately end up as digits destined to be ingested and monetized by host platforms.

**(4) Laid Off** 2009, 4 min  
**I Am Not** 2009/2016, 2:07 min  
In LAID OFF, narrators describe losing their jobs in the wake of the Global Recession of 2008. I AM NOT offers a series of denials, disavowals and proclamations of sexual identities.

**(5) LONG STORY SHORT** 2016, 45 min, Courtesy Icarus Films.  
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.

**(6) NOW HE'S OUT IN PUBLIC AND EVERYONE CAN SEE** 2012/2017, 24 min, Courtesy Icarus Films.  
A riveting account of an unnamed man whose racial identity is repeatedly redrawn and contested by masses of impassioned vloggers. This intricately edited, deeply political film explores our new social landscape, one where cascades of disinformation, rumors, and insinuations spread wildly across electronic networks.  
*"An absolutely staggering work of art ... A stunning reflection of a society that is grappling with the notion of African American men as threats; that there might be places where they should and shouldn't be."* —Los Angeles Times  
*"Inventive and revealing."* —New York Times

**(7) READING CORNER**  
Sit and browse a selection of articles and books that inspire and inform Natalie Bookchin's process, and an assortment of texts that analyze and reflect on her work in the exhibition.