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A future world of forgotten and decomposed barriers: an interview with Natalie Bookchin

Um mundo futuro de esquecimento e barreiras em decomposição: uma entrevista com Natalie Bookchin

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Abstract

In this interview, the American artist and filmmaker Natalie Bookchin shares her reflection on formal practices of social and mediated experience in her working method. Bookchin is a gleaner of online video fragments organized into operatic films. She also shared some ideas about her new project, about the fate and meaning of physical barriers.

Keywords

Social media | new media | performance | barriers

Resumo

Nesta entrevista, a artista e cineasta norte-americana Natalie Bookchin partilha a sua reflexão sobre as formas e as práticas da experiência social mediada, do seu método de trabalho. Bookchin é uma respigadora de fragmentos de vídeo online organizados em filmes operáticos. Também

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Palavras-chave

partilhou algumas ideias sobre o seu novo projeto, sobre o destino e significado das barreiras físicas.

Redes sociais | novos media | performance | barreiras

Introduction

Natalie Bookchin has been working in her films and installations through different media archives as kaleidoscopic compositions of cinematic materials, gleaning the vernacular video platforms and composing foreseeing commonalities in visual collectives fragments with a *foundness* gesture. Several works, *Mass and Ornament* (2009), *My Meds* (2009), *Laid Off* (2009), *Now he's out in public and everyone can see* (2012/2016), *the act of changing something's position* (2020) and most recently *Ghost Games* (2021) reveal this transversal methodology. As Chun's analyses in her *Updating to Remain the Same—Habitual New Media* (2016, 172) Natalie Bookchin's projects “take on the complex relationship between private and public, individual and collective” where the neoliberal spectre remains, and individual intimacy becomes central. But is also this “chorus of dissent” “pointing to the complexities of individuality in collectivity” that becomes part of a regenerative process, not only of the devalued vernacular images, but of those who become its synecdoche. Again in Wendy Chun's words in Natalie Bookchin's films “through these moments, to try to inhabit the inhabitable, to give in excess and in advance, so that we can re-member differently” (2016, 174).

Natalie Bookchin kindly agreed to give us an interview, reflecting on some of these recurrent political and artistic questions on previous projects, her recent work *Ghost Games* (2021) that frames a pandemic trace and unveiling a new insightful project on physical barriers.

Throughout the years your work and thought have modulated the apparatus of “prosumer” online video technologies, since your first works. How do you reflect on that and what are your methodologies in this creative process?

Social Media platforms have been designed for surfing, for inducing semi-conscious frictionless joy rides through continuous flows of online media, losing track of time, place, and thought. In my work, I’ve tried to break the trance induced by surfing the web. I try to create friction and arrest the flow, to create space for reflection on what we’re doing and making, and who and what it’s serving and revealing.

Looking back to my earliest works from the 1980s, before I started working with video and before the web. I was already working with arresting the flow of documents circulating in the media. I’m thinking of a series of embroideries I made based on photographs of the first Gulf War (1991) that I selected from the daily newspaper, *The New York Times*. Pictures of the war with Iraq had been highly censored and carefully curated by the U.S. government and were cleansed of death and bloodshed. I thought they sometimes looked like landscapes, not just cynically masking the realities of the war, but also made to appear picturesque.

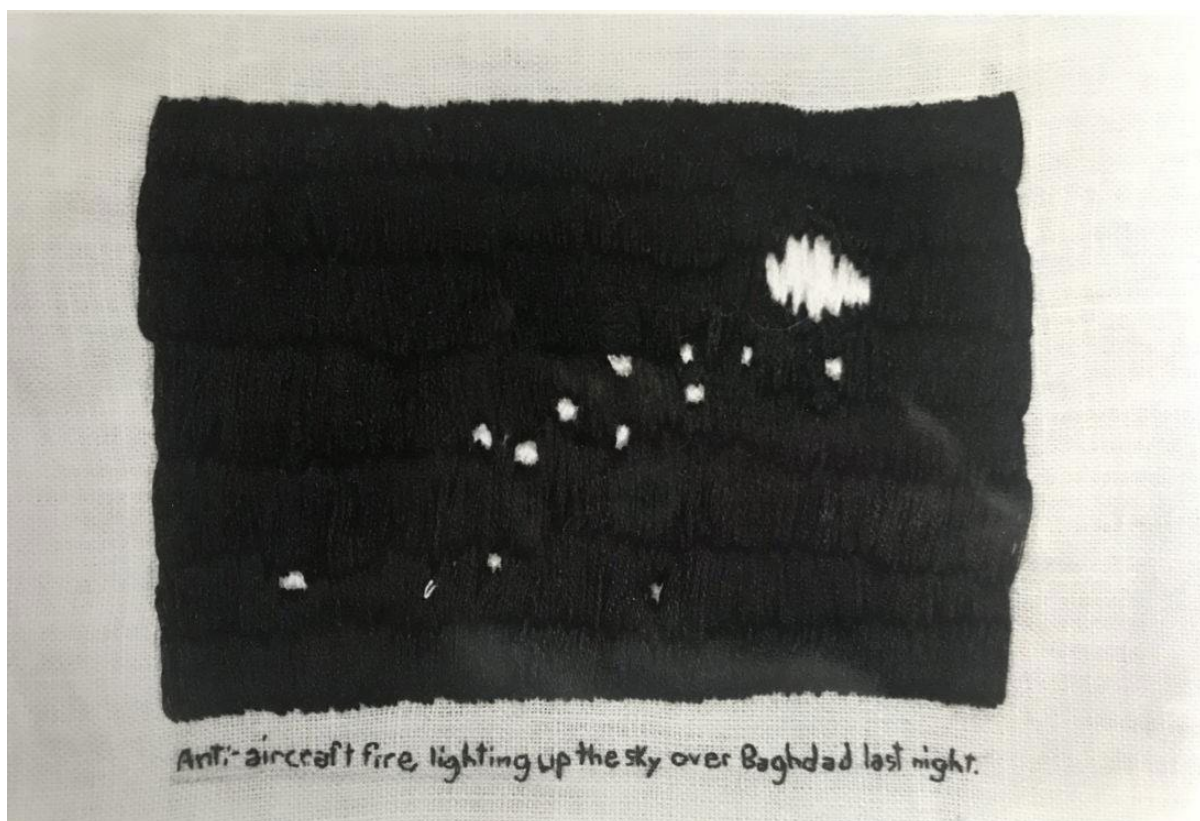


Image 1
Natalie Bookchin. *Landscape 4*,
1991.

I made a series of small embroideries, the size of the newspaper photos, of some of the more scenic images, replacing one mediated form with another. I embroidered the text caption below the photograph, which jolted scenic depiction back into the reality of what was being pictured¹. Embroidery, a time-intensive craft, slowed down and arrested the transient newspaper photographs, transforming them into acerbic mementos and intimate keepsakes of an opportunistic American-led war.

How do you organize in your montage, through the “found” mass image of visual platforms, the sound, and montage, hence they are structural to the detachment of your films and installations, from the flood of internet images?

I think of editing as a kind of writing with sound and image. I have a general idea of what I’m doing beforehand, but it really takes shape through the process of editing. It’s time-consuming and involves a lot of experimentation, trying things out and making many wrong turns. Sometimes as I edit, I am thinking more about the image, and other times I prioritize the sound. Rhythm matters a lot to me. So do the silences and the absences. I may be thinking about repetitions or trying to create continuity among a collection of disparate video clips, where a gesture or sound in one might appear to trigger an action, a gesture, or a sound in another. I think of this as a kind of Rube Goldberg effect², creating the illusion of a chain reaction among the different clips to suggest interconnections that might not otherwise be visible.

Did you consider some cinematic genres to compose your soundtracks and their significance?

In *Mass Ornament* (2009)³, I refer to popular films made in the 1930s depicting masses of bodies in motion. I include some of the music from Busby Berkley’s spectacular tap-dancing production in the film *Gold Diggers of 1935*. I also include a section of music from *Triumph of the Will*, also from 1935, a film glorifying Hitler’s massive 1934 Nuremberg Rally.

Some of your previous work, like *Parking Lot* (2008)⁴ and *Mass Ornament* left an impression of candor as opposed to the videos we currently see on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. People dancing in front of a camera has become a trend again, but it seems to me that, 10 years ago posting online yourself dancing was a form of expression, an end in itself, now it’s first and foremost a performance, a means to achieve something. Do you agree with

1 *Landscape* (The Gulf War) 1991. See more about the project in: <https://bookchin.net/projects/untitled-the-gulf-war-1990/> Accessed on November 27, 2021.

2 Cartoonist Rube Goldberg created devices in his drawings that performed simple tasks in indirect and extremely complicated ways.

3 See more about the project in <https://bookchin.net/projects/mass-ornament/> Accessed on November 27, 2021.

4 See more about the project in <https://bookchin.net/projects/parking-lot/> Accessed on November 27, 2021.

this premise? Was this “loss of innocence”, this professionalization of content, one of the reasons that made you start working directly with subjects, producing your own content?

I think that appearing in front of a camera has always been performative. Originally, in those early works of mine, I was drawn to the spontaneity and casualness of the performances and touched by the vulnerability and intimacy that people seemed willing to reveal so publicly. I’ve since moved on from this work, and I think it’s got more to do with my own trajectory than with the changes in social media. As to your point, about the “loss of innocence”, I agree and I don’t think that the work I made more than a decade ago could be made today. With the introduction of filters and special effects, and the professionalization of many of the platforms’ users, the shared images and videos often feel overproduced and homogenous. The human stuff that I was attracted to is now mostly filtered out and glossed over.

The Internet today is very different from 10 years ago, and it is natural that some creations are dated, being a portrait of its time, but some of your works are still frighteningly current. It’s impossible not to watch *My Meds* (2009)⁵, from the Testament series (2009-2017), and think about the opioid overdose epidemic in the US or imagine that many of the white supremacists who invaded Congress on January 6th are present in *Now he’s out in public and everyone can see* (2012)⁶. Did you expect these works to have such a resonance a decade later? How does it feel?

Some of the works’ prescience is quite disturbing to me, given what it foreshadowed. I can’t look at *Now he’s out in public and everyone can see* right now. It feels too raw and too close to what we’re living through. I am still trying to recover from the daily stress and horror of the Trump years and am terrified by their potential return in 2024. I think that what followed that work has forever changed how it is seen and experienced.

This is also true with the aesthetic approach of that work—its multiple frames of videos montaged into a single screen. After more than a year of the pandemic and with Zoom, this has now become an everyday aesthetic, one that many of us are really very sick of! I do wonder how this will bear on the life and reception of that body of work in the future.

⁵ See more about the project in: <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/my-meds-from-the-series-testament-natalie-bookchin-b-1962-usa/9gHB9eHTLyR1Kw> Accessed on November 27, 2021.

⁶ See more about the project in <https://bookchin.net/projects/now-hes-out-in-public-and-everyone-can-see/> Accessed on November 27, 2021.

Image 2
Natalie Bookchin.
*Now he's out in public
and everyone can see.*
2012-2016.



I actually haven't thought of *My Meds* as foretelling the opioid epidemic, as most of the medications that are recited are psycho-pharmaceuticals. I think the work may speak less to dependency than to emotional longing to be seen and recognized in one's pain and isolation. *My Meds* was made around the time of the global financial crisis and is the second chapter of *Testament*. In the first chapter, *Laid off* (2009)⁷, people collectively tell the story of losing their jobs. I think that within this context *My Meds* conjures the emotional fallout from sudden mass employment. I suppose, in both cases, over-prescribing drugs is a way that society avoids or circumvents social problems, or creates new ones.

In countries with high social media penetration rates and high unemployment, such as Brazil, social networks are one of the main ways to sell products and services. Thus, if a few years ago when social networks went down it didn't have big implications for most people, nowadays it means that many self-employed workers are left without their work tools. Not only "the user is the product", as we also put ourselves in a position to become hostage to social media to survive. Could you comment on this increasing dependence on social networks?

This dependence is bad of course! At least it's finally become generally acknowledged that social media platforms are monopolies and cause significant harm to society. I guess the next step is to actually do something about it... Breaking these behemoths up and regulations are long overdue.

⁷ *Laid off* is available at <https://vimeo.com/19364123> Accessed on November 27, 2021.

In the actual context of our “zoomed” life, where the intimate digital imagery has become part of an exhaustion apparatus itself, you started a new artistic project, if it is ok to talk about it, researching physical barriers and its materiality. What wave of thought goes with this precise and political gesture?

I am starting a new project on permeable physical barriers and walls. This follows my 2021 multi-channel installation *Ghost Games*⁸, which was a site-specific installation installed in an empty apartment in the Ruhr Valley in Germany. It focused on environmental sounds and scenes of daily life in its wildly different scales—the granularity of ordinary domestic life and the enormity of political, racial, and social crisis experienced in domestic space during the Covid pandemic. *Ghost Games* evokes an altered world, where the spectre of death, disease, and social unrest becomes increasingly part of intimate life for those who may have once felt sheltered. This is experienced in the installation through porous walls and windows through which sounds and images of protests, ambulances, riots, workers outside the home—leak in.



Image 3
Natalie Bookchin. *Ghost Games*. 2021.

At first I thought I would make a film based on the installation, but I realized that the videos and sounds works I made for *Ghost Games* needed to be installed in a physical space. I decided that the next step in my work was to focus on actual physical walls

⁸ See more about the project in <https://bookchin.net/projects/ghost-games-geisterspiele/> Accessed on November 27, 2021.

and barriers and their paradoxes. I am still in the process of conceptualizing and researching the film, but as of now it's about the barriers that divide land and people, and the non-human life forms and earth's natural and unnatural processes that live on, pass over, ignore, corrode, permeate, rust, and degrade them. The premise is based on two paradoxes. The first is that as soon as barriers are built, they begin failing and coming down. The earth's processes, such as wind, rain, fire, erosion, and the earth's non-human life forms, such as birds, small creatures, and plants live on, pass through or over, ignore, damage, and degrade barriers. Barriers eventually crumble, decay, and return to the land, or they survive as historical relics. The second paradox is that as the globe warms, more walls and barriers are erected in attempts to halt swelling migration from increasingly uninhabitable land, to contain rising sea levels, and to protect the wealthy from supposedly unruly populations. Yet this same warming globe creates extreme weather that speeds up the decay of walls and barriers.

All this is in the very early stages, but I think that the film will take a speculative approach to its subject, combining the real with conjecture into the future, using observation and imagination to envision a future world of forgotten and decomposed barriers, where many of the world's deepest cuts have healed. There is a lot of important reporting and research on how border walls are damaging the environment. I want to focus instead on the non-human life and process as agents that damage walls. Barriers are porous and in flux, and they will never fully succeed in their attempts to contain human and non-human life and processes, which are always in motion and uncontainable. Part of what I hope to present is non-human transgressions as healing and self-correcting, and to suggest that healing wounds, instead of building yet more walls, is a much more viable and sustainable way forward.

MADALENA MIRANDA

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Biographical note

Madalena Miranda is a filmmaker and researcher. At the moment she is an Invited Professor at NOVA-FCSH and an integrated member of ICNOVA at the Culture, Mediation and the Arts cluster. She holds a PhD in Digital Media, Audiovisual and Interactive Content Creation, from Nova University. She graduated in Communication Sciences in Nova University of Lisbon, Cinema and Television and has a Masters in Anthropology from ISCTE-IUL. Besides Digital Media Theory and Critique and Cinema and Visual Studies, her research interests also delve into EcoMedia Studies.

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