



Figure 1. Attending to the ephemeral and insignificant, Natalie Bookchin exposes synchronicity in the cacophony of online expression. *Mass Ornament* (dir. Natalie Bookchin, US, 2009)

Small Effects from Big Causes: The Dialogic Documentary Practice of Natalie Bookchin

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The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from that epoch's judgments about itself.

—Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament"

The videos come from online social networks, which offer exalted promises of creating social relationships and making the world more open and connected, but instead, produce a cacophony of millions of isolated individual voices shouting at and past each other. What I am trying to do through my editing and compilation is reimagine these separate speakers as collectives taking form as a public body in physical space.

—Natalie Bookchin, "Out in Public: Natalie Bookchin in Conversation with Blake Stimson"

Documentary has long been a technique for engaging the public as an audience with sounds and images of its own everyday experience.

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rience. In particular, makers of documentaries and other realist forms have labored to find textual ways to transform ordinary people's stories into narratives that might bring forth what Jane Gaines calls "political mimesis," or an affinity with the struggles and experiences of those depicted on-screen.¹ From Dziga Vertov's use of the fragments of modern life to recalibrate the audience's sensorium and the Griersonian filmmaking tradition's use of typicality and composites, to neorealism's slight narratives of ordinary lives and Frederick Wiseman's mosaic structures of "reality fictions,"² the project of comprehending the everyday has been tied in part to the formal problem of making it visible and audible. As a movement attuned to the challenges this posed from the outset, feminist documentary and video work traditionally has been preoccupied with both giving voice to the unheard and placing an emphasis on media making as a collaborative process for the development of political consciousness.³

US artist Natalie Bookchin's digital video pieces made using material gleaned from YouTube—*Mass Ornament* (2009), the *Testament* series (2009), and *Now He's Out in Public and Everyone Can See* (2012)—are large-screen immersive gallery installations made up of montages featuring multiple frames and screens showing short snippets of solo dance and first-person speech.⁴ They use the abundance of individual expression that occurs online to make visible and audible the simultaneous aloneness and togetherness of, as Bookchin puts it, "private domestic spaces that have been temporarily transformed into public theaters."⁵ Although in some ways Bookchin's approach is consonant with the appropriation aesthetic of found footage filmmaking, its commitment to engaging with experiences of everyday life and finding new forms of politico-aesthetic collaboration also pushes the feminist documentary project forward in significant ways. Indeed, whereas found footage approaches, according to Paul Arthur, often focus on the "micropolitical critique of historical exclusion or distortion enacted by disenfranchised groups on the terrain of dominant representation," Bookchin by contrast examines the self-representations made by these very constituencies.⁶ Bookchin began making these pieces in the year following the financial crisis of 2008, a moment

when vlogs (video blogs) emerged as a prominent cultural form.⁷ As a result, her work may be said to document the social relations that digital platforms and social media enabled at a particular historical moment. In addition, the pieces utilize the formal capacities of immersive media, particularly sound, to recalibrate the kinds of political engagement usually pursued through documentary.

The installation of these works enhances the experience of the importance Bookchin grants to ephemeral voices. In a darkened gallery setting, faces and bodies appear large, and the sounds they create envelop the listener. The pieces run on short loops—ranging from a little over one to seventeen minutes—enabling the viewer to pay attention in different ways. The loop form manifests repetition, but it also signifies unfinalizability as the pieces, like the experience of digital media itself, refuse to give the audience the structure of clear beginnings and firm endings. Just as the horizontal lines of images evoke repetition, they are also reminiscent of the experience of online browsing and YouTube's own interface in which one video leads inexorably to another in an algorithmically determined chain. The pieces are all available in single-screen, nonlooped versions on Vimeo and YouTube, which provokes a different experience altogether. In this context, the viewer is called on to reflect on his or her own digital practices, navigating through the Internet in an experience that is at once connective and isolating.

In what follows, I wish to argue that Bookchin attends to these stories in ways that model the (im)possibility of the emergence of political collectivity online but also uses repetition to offer the viewer a glimpse of the sublime scale of digital expression. The two modes of engaging with these pieces, as immersive installations in public gallery settings or through the privatized online space of a personal computer, speak to the very different scales and modalities in which both public and private life are experienced today. Bookchin uses the fragments of meaning she finds in the vlogs as well as in the ephemeral form of the videos themselves to make viewers aware of the ambivalences of experience in times of economic instability and social change. Documentary becomes a form of intersubjective political recognition by Bookchin (and by

extension her audience) rather than merely the representation of multiplicity. Her attention to these pieces of ephemeral, largely unwatched video and her exploration of the ambivalences they contain exemplify a politics of listening.

In particular, Bookchin's use of found sound as an organizational principle invites a consideration of the sonic composition of the polyvocal and polyrhythmic digital fragments. Documentary studies' piecemeal adoption of sound studies through the increasing consideration of voice, music, and ambient soundscapes has not been accompanied by a related interrogation of associated practices of listening.⁸ Yet feminist scholars of rhetoric have contributed work on the importance of listening in both political and everyday contexts that examines the interrelation of sense perception and political subjectivity. Such work seems well suited to thinking about documentary practice. For instance, Kate Lacey argues that the capacity of audiences to listen within mediated publics is just as important as the ability to speak.⁹ Listening, in this respect, is a gift of attentiveness, but it might also be a political modality. One of the things listening can reveal, for instance, are moments of misunderstanding and miscommunication that highlight the "problematics of mediation."¹⁰ Similarly, one may attempt to listen for the "(un)conscious presences, absences, unknowns" that structure our lives via power relationships.¹¹ Indeed, for feminist scholars of rhetoric such as Krista Ratcliffe, eavesdropping, or positioning oneself on the "edge of one's knowing," might be a way to break down the assumptions that structure our knowledge and take one out of oneself "to overhear and learn from others" (90).

As with any project that assembles granular media, mediated listening often involves the organization of fragments, a process typically described using the dead metaphor of "orchestration." However, with its attendant associations of classical form and the ritualistic harmonic resolution of differences, *orchestration* is hardly a neutral term.¹² Notably, counterpoint and polyvocality, both better metaphors for thinking about the unresolvable multiplicity in social discourse, are at the root of feminist discussions of listening. In this regard, feminist interests dovetail well with Mikhail Bakhtin's "dialogic principle."¹³ For instance, Lacey's state-

ment, “Listening out is the practice of being open to the multiplicity of texts and voices,”¹⁴ reverberates with Bakhtin’s statement on polyvocality when he writes, “The centripetal forces of the life of language, embodied in a ‘unitary language,’ operate in the midst of heteroglossia.”¹⁵

What counts as political speech in political theory is often strictly limited to voices engaged in rational debate. Nineteenth-century political theorist Benedetto Croce characterizes rhetoric as an ornament on the more serious matter of public deliberation. Like art, rhetoric was deemed inappropriate to the masculine public sphere, except as distraction and entertainment.¹⁶ Feminist scholars have challenged Croce’s distinction, pointing out that embodiment is one of the repressed features of rational deliberation. The body is the source of aesthetic experience, and it is therefore impossible to divorce the political from this organic and socially organized physicality.

Nancy Love argues that deliberative democrats tend to “translate voice into speech and, more narrowly, argument.”¹⁷ This emphasis on argument tends to exclude the voices of people from identity groups deemed overly emotional, spiritual, or material, such as women, children, the religious, and the racialized. It also sidelines rhetoric and storytelling as what Iris Marion Young calls mere “supplements” to rational argument.¹⁸ By contrast, Bookchin emphasizes polyvocality and the form of the chorus as structures for the organization of diverse but related utterances.¹⁹ In her reliance on musical and theatrical tropes, she subverts the presumed authority of rational speech in the public sphere. Similarly, her anachronistic appeal to a social genre closely associated with ancient Greek democracy, the chorus, is resonant with political possibilities.²⁰

Database and Documentary

Comprising hundreds of video clips found on YouTube and organized in serialized and database form, Bookchin’s work shares some attributes with the database documentary, which tends to be composed of digital media and online platforms.²¹ Databases are computerized systems for organizing information, and for obvious

reasons, database aesthetics have become increasingly important for a culture immersed in digital media.²² Its very *raison d'être*—managing large amounts of data—means that the database seems to privilege multiplicity over singularity, simultaneity over hierarchy, and collection over selection, although database documentaries and other artworks often find ways to balance the opposing tendencies. Database imagery recapitulates serial imagery's emphasis on horizontality and multiplicity. Moreover, databases, like serial imagery, are often engaged in an archival project of equivalency.²³ While the forms of database documentary continue to evolve, arguably “database documentaries prompt recognition that meaning is always polyvocal, unstable and contested.”²⁴

Database aesthetics are both part of a long cultural history of information management and emblematic of the “distracted concentration” of our current media habits. We tend to operate as though we are always aware of the excess of data beyond that with which we are currently engaged.²⁵ Indeed, there can be an effect of the sublime in database works that expose the unfathomable scale of digital culture.²⁶ Another, more sonic way of thinking about database aesthetics would be through the musical analogy of theme and variation. While databases in some ways reduce difference to similarity by defining the organizational parameters, they also (potentially) index enormous plurality. As with serialized imagery, the formal premise of infinite variability reflects back on the theme, in some ways making it all the more meaningful.

While a strong current in what Tom Waugh calls the “committed documentary” has been concerned with representing the unseen and unheard, database documentary arguably takes this imperative to a new scale.²⁷ Numerous projects, such as Sharon Daniel's *Public Secrets* (2012) or Katerina Cizek's *Highrise Project* (2010–), use what might be termed an aesthetic of the multitude. Rather than choose a single person who embodies and discloses the experience of injustice in public institutions, as “typage” might operate in a Sergei Eisenstein film or composites in a Griersonian documentary, directors mobilizing this aesthetic include as many voices as possible.²⁸ Daniel, for instance, includes five hundred stories of women incarcerated in the California state prison sys-

tem by which, according to her, “the scale and scope of injustice is forcefully revealed.”²⁹ For her part, Cizek’s project to document the experience of living in tower blocks—the vernacular of expedient urbanization around the world—has numerous large-scale components that allow the visualization of residential towers around the globe through both Google maps and uploaded photographs taken “out the window.” These interactive database works provide the user with an interface through which he or she can select individual stories (audio recordings, videos, or transcriptions) and sometimes upload his or her own contributions.³⁰

Another aggregative model involves collecting and organizing existing expression at the level of anonymous data.³¹ Massive aggregation is most apparent in early real-time interactive work such as Mark Hansen and Ben Ruben’s *Listening Post* (2002–5) and Jonathan Harris and Sep Kamvar’s *We Feel Fine* (2006–) in which algorithms create patterns of visibility among live feeds from the Internet.³² As with the majority of database documentaries, these projects, though reliant on user-produced content, do not involve participants in what Sandra Gaudenzi calls the “interactive architecture of the project.”³³

Another approach, initiated by YouTube itself in July 2010, was to solicit videos from users and organize them into a more or less conventional narrative. The result is the film *Life in a Day* (dir. Kevin MacDonald, US, 2011). The film’s conceit is to cover a representative sample of all that takes place in a circumscribed time period, in this case on a single day: 24 July 2010. The footage was gathered from forty-five hundred hours of video uploaded to YouTube in response to a series of questions: What do you love? What do you fear? And what is in your pocket? The film uses the diurnal structure established by the city symphony film of the 1920s, twenty-four hours from dawn to dawn, in this case expanded to a global scale. Yet another strategy to manage the excess is to compile video clips according to scripts and scores. Perry Bard’s *Man with a Movie Camera, The Global Remake* (2007–), for instance, is quite different from *Life in a Day* because it continues to grow as people add to it, using the avant-garde film *Man with a Movie Camera* (dir. Dziga Vertov, Soviet Union, 1929) as a template.

Bookchin's project is different in important ways from all these approaches to the database form. First, she gleans her material from video voluntarily posted online and makes her finished pieces available on Vimeo and YouTube. However, she does not create an algorithm or use software to organize her material (e.g., programs such as Zeega, Klynt, Popcorn, Korsakow, or Storify), nor are her pieces live and constantly updating. She also does not employ a preexisting script with which to match her images. Rather, Bookchin collects vlog posts and then sifts the mass of data according to what she *hears* to reveal shared elements of personal struggle, trauma, or hardship. Her projects thus highlight the work of listening, as a cacophony is organized into a meaningful polyphony.

Private Moments in Public

In *Mass Ornament*, Bookchin uses a noninteractive database aesthetic to evoke a feminist reading of Siegfried Kracauer, investigating the way that the technologically mediated body in movement—that of the dancer—appears to us today (fig. 1). Unlike the mechanized female chorus lines that Kracauer wrote about in the 1920s such as the Tiller Girls, today's dancers are not visible as aesthetic embodiments of the machinery of capitalism.³⁴ However, technology is just as essential to this form of expression. Whereas the rationalized bodies of the Tiller Girls and their ilk express the operation of the machine as a mirror of sorts to the watching masses “themselves arranged by the stands in tier upon ordered tier” (76), Bookchin's dancers are isolated in their rooms contributing—as are their viewers—to the functioning of what Jodi Dean calls “communicative capitalism,” watching, clicking, liking, and commenting.³⁵ In other words, the pieces allow us to imagine the isomorphism of the cultural form at different registers of life—from work to socializing and entertainment. This corresponds with Bookchin's analysis of the post-Fordist labor that *Mass Ornament* illustrates:

Just as rows of spectators in the 1920s and 1930s sat in movie theaters and stadiums watching rows of bodies moving in formation, with YouTube

videos, single viewers sit alone in front of computer screens watching individual dancers voluntarily moving in formation, alone in their rooms. . . . Also, as the Tiller Girls dance embodied characteristics of Fordism and Taylorism, the YouTube dance, with its emphasis on the individual, the home, and individuated and internalized production, embodies key characteristics of our economic situation of post-Fordism.³⁶

The analyses that both Kracauer and Bookchin perform on these “inconspicuous surface level” cultural expressions afford a response to a capitalist totality that is incomprehensible when considered in a fragmented state.³⁷

For Kracauer, the mass ornament was the manifestation of the mass of people as an object for their own consumption. In this, Kracauer was less hopeful than Joel Dinerstein, who reads the jazz age as the African American–led response to modernity. Whereas Kracauer finds that the chorus lines of “sexless bodies in bathing suits” epitomize the mass ornament,³⁸ Dinerstein notes the ability of big-band jazz of the 1920s and 1930s, and the dancing that went with it, to “swing the machine,” an innovative response to the dehumanization of the modern machine age.³⁹

Both Kracauer and Dinerstein consider human bodies involved in circuits of mimesis with their machines. In so doing, they anticipate Miriam Hansen’s theory of “vernacular modernism,” as both diagnose the cultural production and participation of a population undergoing the deeply unsettling experience of rapid modernization.⁴⁰ By highlighting the embodied experience of modernity, the concept of vernacular modernism troubles the rigid separation of politics and aesthetics, the public and the private, as well as high and low art. Kracauer and Dinerstein also draw attention to the desire created by the gendered and racialized bodies associated with the machine, cultural formations that evocatively express many cultural contradictions.

The dancers in *Mass Ornament* are all atomized, alone in their rooms with their video camera and computer. Each frame is tagged with small text indicating the number of views the video had on YouTube (a strategy that Bookchin later abandoned). Many of the dancing bodies’ maneuvers suggest the bravado of the cin-

ema of attractions combined with the narcissism of the video mirror. But in organizing their bodies in horizontal lines that echo the Tiller Girls chorus line, Bookchin reveals synchronicity: they are all performing the steps of Beyoncé's 2008 music video for her song "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)." As a political text, the music video for "Single Ladies" could not be more confounding. It features Beyoncé and two other black female dancers tightly framed in a white cube as they demonstrate remarkable—and synchronized—physical prowess. Beyoncé is cybernetic, sporting a bionic-looking left hand, presumably in place of an engagement ring. Yet the song's lyrics of apparent female strength are filtered through a retrograde narrative of failed matrimony in which agency is attributed to the man and the woman is reduced to a body: "If you liked *it* then you should have put a ring on *it*" (emphasis added).

In choosing to showcase the widespread popularity of the virtuosic dance moves of Beyoncé's video (though separated from the original song), Bookchin explores a part of mass culture usually derided for encapsulating high-production popular dance music and antifeminist sentiment. But, unpredictably, Bookchin finds in these gyrating bodies the expression of a kind of embodied politics, as teenagers and young adults of both genders try performing this particular script with all its contradictions and, by broadcasting themselves, bring a little swing to the machine. What moves these individuals to capture themselves awkwardly dancing and then to broadcast and archive the footage on YouTube speaks to the vlog form, the fantasy of what Dean calls "exposure without exposure."⁴¹ Their mimetic relationship to the Beyoncé video is received in turn by Bookchin, who makes their solos into chorus lines and demonstrates a new way to listen—and to provide an answer—to the utterances of others. Rather than despair about the lack of political communication online, Bookchin unearths the potential, for example, for challenges to gendered norms of both moving and looking. In so doing, she illustrates Nancy S. Love and Mark Mattern's observation that "the sites of political participation are . . . expanded by the arts and popular culture, especially for those who enjoy little, if any, access to institutionalized politics"—in this case, youth.⁴²

The ambivalences are given concrete form in the sound track, which is mostly composed of music borrowed from two films from the 1930s that explore the organization of bodies into “mass ornaments,” *Triumph of the Will* (dir. Leni Riefenstahl, Germany, 1935) and *Gold Diggers of 1935* (dir. Busby Berkeley, US, 1935). Yet throughout the piece, Bookchin has included sounds such as footsteps, the rustling of fabric, and the tapping of keyboards that evoke the everyday. In one lengthy sequence that runs for a full forty seconds of the seven-minute piece, the music is replaced by sounds of dancers inelegantly bumping, tripping, and dragging their bodies, a sonic antidote to the silent images of the perfectly disciplined bodies that make up the choreography of both Hitler Youth and Hollywood musical numbers. Bookchin remarks, “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.”⁴³ Using found sounds such as these, Bookchin highlights the significance of mediated listening for understanding the nuances of human experience beyond the facile dismissals of both popular culture and digital oversharing.

The *Testament* series continues to investigate the hybrid private-public spaces in which political expression takes form online and the corresponding types of listening appropriate to this new context.⁴⁴ Bookchin synchronizes what April Durham calls a “percussive voicing of ‘self’” on the sound track while simultaneously highlighting a multitude through the mosaic or serial imagery of the database.⁴⁵ The material she uses reveals the peculiar, sometimes awkward, blend of public and private found in the genre of vlogging. *My Meds*, the shortest of the series at just over one minute, is arguably also the most poignant (fig. 2). In this piece, a chorus of upset people—seen uniformly through the vlogging interface of talking heads shot with webcams in bedrooms and basements—has taken the time to “introduce you to my medications.” Quickly coming in and out of horizontal configurations, the vlogs feature a spoken list of the pharmaceutical brands that

have become a common component of twenty-first-century life in industrial societies. Calling out, sometimes singly, sometimes in unison, the vloggers subject the listener to a pharmacopic litany: “Depakote,” “Prozac,” “Xanax,” “Ritalin,” “Trazodone.” The second beat of the piece comes when a woman with short red hair appears alone on the screen. Weeping, she says in a timorous voice, “I’m in the process of switching my medications.” She is immediately joined by a chorus of the hopeful and desperate who are all changing their medications: “Paxil,” “Pristiq,” “Voloxatine,” “Carbamazepine,” they call out, each name resonant with the possibility of feeling better.

Bookchin organizes the speakers in multiple horizontal lines; often when one person is speaking, you can see the others’ lips moving silently in their slightly dimmed frames. In this way, although the piece invites listening to points of convergence among her assembled chorus, Bookchin uses visuals to remind the listener about the other parts of the story that are not being heard, the reservoirs of the database. Finally, after the lists have been recited, a lone woman different from the one we saw before pauses to wipe her face. She is joined for the final line of the piece by numerous others, all insisting that they are “feeling much better.”

These solitary, unhappy testimonies joined together in a chorus evoke the insight of feminist documentary and other peda-

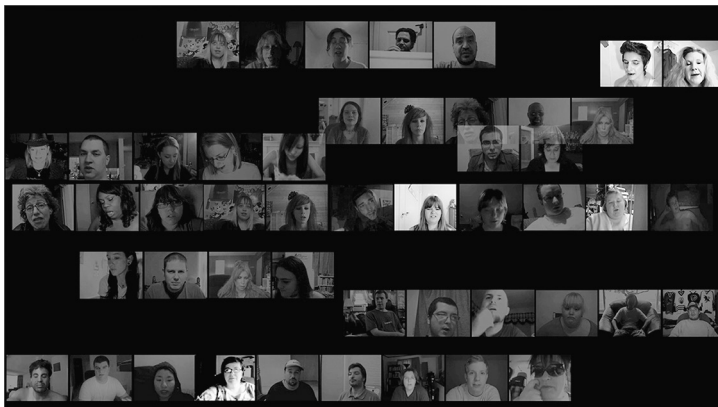


Figure 2. The database made visible in the *My Meds* segment of the *Testament* series (dir. Natalie Bookchin, US, 2009)

gogies that seek to link experiences of the oppressed through consciousness-raising. There are potentially shared structural reasons for unhappiness, and the pharmaceutical industry that has displaced talk therapy in many health-care schemes preys on the individuation of psychic torment. Drugs used to treat social ills are the perfect encapsulation of commodification, producing markets for the potentially insoluble affective responses to social and political factors beyond individual control. Through the strategy of vertical or paradigmatic repetition, Bookchin powerfully presents these stories as at once individual and collective. She uses the “grain of the voice,” as Roland Barthes calls it, and the telling emotional pauses that algorithmic pieces like *We Feel Fine* eliminate to compose a shared story that simultaneously maintains differences at the level of its form.⁴⁶ In this respect, through seriality and repetition, *My Meds* evokes without representing the structuring trauma of the Lacanian real that motivates the compulsion to speak out in the first place. Bookchin teaches us how to listen to stories of trauma otherwise lost in the overabundance of personal digital expression.

In database aesthetics, narrative and database hover together closely, a trait that Bookchin’s work illustrates well.⁴⁷ She is able to animate the database/paradigm of narrative elements into a syntagma resonant with multiplicity. While arguably all audiovisual production begins with the assembly of elements from a database of collected or archival choices, in the *Testament* series Bookchin keeps her database constantly close to the surface if not perpetually in view. Durham suggests that the multiple frames resemble a “bank of surveillance videos.”⁴⁸ The paradigm of voices becomes a horizon against which individuals are picked out as “close-ups” (usually through the fading away of other faces and voices). While the dominant motif may be serialization, the organizing principle of Bookchin’s work is resolutely sonic. Her interest in the synchronization of found stories differentiates Bookchin’s work from received practices of found footage filmmaking, which tend to focus on what Jaimie Baron calls “intentional disparity.”⁴⁹

Another piece in the *Testament* series, *I Am Not*, displays a different arena of private life that is subject to extensive social atten-

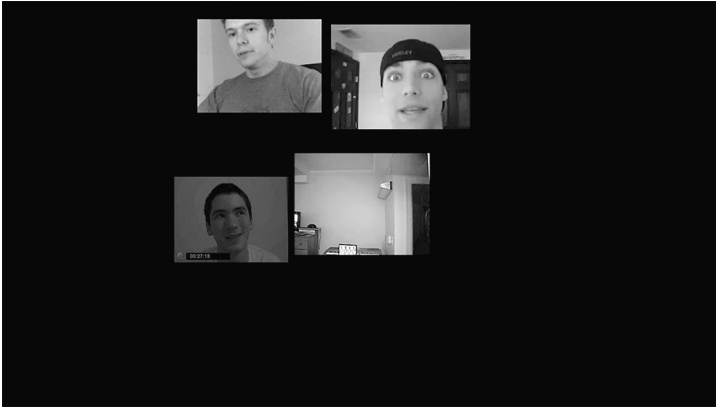


Figure 3. *I Am Not* (dir. Natalie Bookchin, US, 2009), part of Bookchin's *Testament* series. The central position of the image of an open laptop on a bed in an empty room through much of the piece signals the new hybrid public-private space of the Internet.

tion and much miscommunication (fig. 3). In this piece, Bookchin has collected clusters of expression that people have posted online regarding whether or not they are gay, a seemingly unconventional way to communicate personal information to an unknown public. When numerous people declare that they are not gay, they seem to be trying to clear their name in some sort of public way. A white teenager with short hair and playful eyes underneath dark bushy eyebrows who wears a white T-shirt begins the piece with the ambiguous statement, “For those of you who doubt I am straight. . . . For those of you who don’t know, I haven’t always been straight.” He laughs, presumably at his revelation, and then his image stays frozen in his frame while a new frame opens to his right. In the new frame, a young black man with short hair wearing a green T-shirt turns on his camera and, with a dismissive look, walks away, revealing a laptop that sits open on a bed for the rest of the piece. Meanwhile, a number of images of other people emphatically insisting on clarifying their sexuality emerge erratically around the frame (as opposed to the straight rows of *My Meds*). Their comments are not synchronized, but they are clearly responding to the same set of social discourses: “I was gay, but I’m not anymore,” “It’s okay to be

gay, but I am not,” “I wish I was gay!,” “I am *too* gay!,” “I wish I wasn’t gay,” “It is wrong to be gay,” “Most people wouldn’t care if I was gay,” and so forth. Finally, after this chorus of disavowal, homophobia, and self-affirmation, the white boy from the beginning adds his own disavowals: “That is not what is inside of me, and I know that in time it is going to fade.” While he speaks, a bearded white man preaching about Christianity’s judgment of gay people appears to his left. The everyday trauma of being gay in a homophobic society is encapsulated by the penultimate speaker, the man in the green T-shirt who has returned to the camera. His emotion becomes apparent in the way he grabs the camera and trains it on himself as he declares, his voice cracking with emotion, “I am so sick and tired and *hurt*.”

Michael Warner notes that, traditionally, being in public required the repression of anything deemed private.⁵⁰ By this standard, “particularized views” and the “gendered body” always seem like matter out of place in the “disinterested, abstract, universal public” (41). Yet particularized views and the gendered body are the very stuff of vlogging of this kind, wherein intimately shot video and full disclosure are the norm. In this regard, vlogging about queerness evokes the “archive of feelings” that Ann Cvetkovich so deftly describes.⁵¹ Cvetkovich argues that the struggle to preserve the history of gay and lesbian lives means turning attention to the ephemera of the everyday and the traumas that may or may not be recorded there. Bookchin investigates the status of these videos as archives dedicated to feelings rather than knowledge per se. They are records of how people find spaces for their individual emotional work. This part of people’s lives is so highly policed and monitored that their own feelings are virtually public, tangled up with the words and judgments of many others. The kind of listening, gleaning, and organizing that Bookchin undertakes in *I Am Not* establishes her work as what Bakhtin calls a “contact zone” for a variety of socially circulating discourses, an approach that significantly challenges the location of political speech.⁵²

The *Laid Off* piece in the *Testament* series uses personal testimonies posted online by workers who have lost their jobs in the wake of the economic crash of 2008. There is a three-part structure to the collective story: the trauma of being fired, expressions of a

sense of betrayal, and, finally, the tentative hope associated with a new start. The workers describe their experiences in terms of hurt feelings and a brave resolve to pick themselves up and begin again. Overlapping voices, variously accented, speak about similar experiences that still retain distinctive elements. In one particularly telling sequence, the speakers list the many ways that management talks about firing workers (using terms like *liquidated*, *downsized*, *resized*, *suspended*, and *outsourced* and phrases like “made redundant” and “removed from my duties”); indeed, the title of the piece comes from one of the most popular of these euphemisms. In this sequence, we can hear the struggles accompanying the linguistic sanitization of the devastating and destabilizing experiences that these individuals have gone through. One vlogger, a young man in an orange Hollinger T-shirt sitting at a computer desk in his bedroom, explicitly highlights the language of the experience: “Suspended, whatever, fired—whatever word you want to use.” Toward the end, two individuals speak in counterpoint: the first is a bleached blond man with a British accent who rails in rapid staccato against the wealthy bosses (“some dumb asshole on top of his pile”) who still have work; the second is a white American man with a southern drawl who speaks mellifluously about his trust in the mystery of God’s will. In this duet, as in so much of the *Testament* series, the texture of each life comes through via a combination of performance, cues picked up from the speakers’ surroundings, the grain and rhythm of their voices, and the differences from and similarities to those they speak with and against. Bookchin’s attention to emotion, work, home, and the regulation of the self in the new private-public spaces of the vlog contributes to a feminist analysis of and reflection on the normative public sphere.

Whereas social documentaries of earlier periods relied on representational spaces such as the street or the state institution, Bookchin’s work explores the chronotope of the hybrid public-private spaces of YouTube vlogs. In their iteration as immersive gallery installations, the pieces create an acoustic space where the boundaries of the individual self are broken down. The challenge to atomized individualism that the installation enacts on a sensory level has a gendered dimension as well. Not only do the pieces

challenge the kind of speech that is seemingly appropriate for the public sphere, they also manifest a form that incorporates the supposedly autonomous subject into a larger affective collectivity, similar to how music does. Love writes, “As moving sound, music blurs and crosses, defines and expands relationships between self and other, challenging established identities and institutions.”⁵³ Not unlike the chorus invented in fifth-century Athenian theater as a mirror to represent the people to themselves,⁵⁴ Bookchin’s pieces highlight multiplicity and “trans-subjectivity,” in Durham’s characterization, and therefore express a utopian vision quite different from that presented by liberalism.⁵⁵

Inka Mülder-Bach explains that in *The Salaried Masses*, Kracauer’s 1930 study of unemployed workers in the wake of the 1929 stock market crash, which resonates with *Laid Off*, Kracauer attends to the “fugitive and imperceptible phenomena that most stubbornly resist interpretation, that fall through the mesh of theoretical systems and elude conceptual generalization.”⁵⁶ These are what Kracauer refers to as the “small effects” that derive from “big causes,” a succinct way of expressing the simultaneous importance and insignificance of the everyday.⁵⁷ Bookchin has pursued a similar project in the *Testament* series, merging it with the self-expression that conveys to an unknown audience a “desire to be heard.”⁵⁸ The small effects are profound for the individuals involved. Yet as the big causes are invisible, their existence is dependent on interpretation. Combining the individual stories into what Baron insightfully calls “found collectivity” allows for them to be heard on a more fitting scale.⁵⁹

In her follow-up piece *Now He’s Out in Public and Everyone Can See*, Bookchin modified the technique she used in the *Testament* series, which features large screens composed of myriad windows, to create a three-dimensional manifestation of the Internet. Instead of combining video clips in horizontal lines on a single screen, Bookchin arranges them on eighteen different monitors in the same space. This installation allows for a greater diversity of experience for a spectator in the space and a sense of even less synchronization of the voices. In this piece, people discuss various prominent but unnamed African American male celebrities

(news images of Barack Obama, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Michael Jackson, and Tiger Woods give us clues), demonstrating the vast range of readings their bodies are compelled to bear. Unlike the *Testament* series in which people testify about their own situations, in *Now He's Out in Public and Everyone Can See*, speakers emulate the mass media evaluation of well-known figures. As in the other pieces, then, we become aware of the close connection between collective linguistic resources and narratives of individual identity. Ideas that people expound as their own are closely shared by others, even down to the same phrases. For instance, we hear numerous commentators talk about the figure in question in terms of whether or not he should be held to different standards than anyone else: "He's not a messiah," "No one is perfect." The chorus joins together to mention, "He's black," a statement that is inflected differently by white speakers, some of whom have expressed explicitly racist views, and black speakers who acknowledge the prevalence of discrimination. *Now He's Out in Public and Everyone Can See* complements the *Testament* series by foregrounding the social and collective tensions inherent in individual expression as well as the ambivalent public-private forms that social media enables. As in the earlier pieces, Bookchin highlights both the distinctiveness of each variation and the thematic public discourses in which the expressions take shape.

Conclusions

In his comments on *The Salaried Masses*, Walter Benjamin characterizes Kracauer as a "rag picker at daybreak, lancing with his stick scraps of language and tatters of speech."⁶⁰ This well-worn image of cultural gleaning is one also used to great effect in Agnès Varda's film *The Gleaners and I* (France, 2000). Like Kracauer and Varda, Bookchin shows herself to be a linguistic rag picker and digital gleaner as well. Not relying on automatic listening, she has sifted through the online cacophony to find—and attend to—the little-heard voices ruminating on what life has thrown their way as well as the sounds and improvisations of isolated dancers. As Bookchin puts it, she draws on "the stuff that at first glance might be dismissed as throwaway junk consisting of banal chatter and trivial displays of mass media mimicry."⁶¹ The junk or waste she

recuperates through her craft “is nothing more or less than a by-product of human attention and affection: it is what we designate as unworthy of our concern or feeling,” as Tina Kendall puts it.⁶² Through her careful gleaning of the YouTube database, Natalie Bookchin demonstrates a new purpose and methodology for documentary in a digital age.

In grappling with the inherited form of the committed documentary, Bookchin simultaneously challenges what passes for political speech and mobilizes the chorus, a political art form from a much earlier, formative period in democracy. Both ordinary voices, diversely embodied, and musical forms are usually excluded from the normative discourse of the public sphere. Bookchin carefully gleans among what many on the left would consider to be the waste products of communicative capitalism: the false agency of vlogging, free labor, and flimsy semblance of participation that fill the coffers of digital capitalists. And by listening to what she finds there, she is able to highlight both the impossible situation and the potential for political expression that currently exists in atomized form, while providing space for hearing about the everyday traumas that have been silenced and avoided in the neoliberal attention economy.⁶³

In her composed choruses, Bookchin is able to comment on the subjectivities formed in neoliberal times in and through the spaces, technologies, and genres available to us. Bookchin highlights the Internet’s false promise—to provide individual freedom and collective organization—demonstrating just how clearly YouTube operates as a site that replays “in performance mode, the values and logic of neoliberalism.”⁶⁴ Yet, as I have tried to show, database documentaries like Bookchin’s that rely on distributed authorship for their fragments and snippets are in an excellent position to demonstrate the dialogic tensions involved in this popular form of expression. While her work, perhaps more than other database documentaries, evokes the distributed differences of the multitude, Bookchin’s subtle attention to how people engage the scripts and choreographies of mainstream culture to comprehend their own experiences gives it an added dimension. Although she finds evidence of the struggles and fissures, and even failures, in the cohesion of dominant narratives, she also highlights the power

of both language and technology to contain political potential. Whether or not the alienation, sadness, and dispossession we witness will be able to become a politically mobilizing force, Bookchin offers a radical antidote to the failures of communicative capitalism: begin by listening, emphasize polyphony, and then scale up.

Notes

1. Jane Gaines, "Political Mimesis," in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, ed. Jane Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 84–102.
2. Thomas W. Benson and Carolyn Anderson, *Reality Fictions: The Films of Frederick Wiseman*, 2nd ed. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002).
3. See Alexandra Juhasz, "No Woman Is an Object: Realizing the Feminist Collaborative Video," *Camera Obscura*, no. 54 (2003): 71–98; Julia Lesage, "The Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 3, no. 4 (1978): 507–23.
4. *Mass Ornament* and the *Testament* series were first exhibited at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2009. *Now He's Out in Public and Everyone Can See* was first exhibited at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) in 2012. Since their debuts, all three works have been displayed at numerous galleries and museums worldwide.
5. Quoted in Carolyn Kane, "Dancing Machines: An Interview with Natalie Bookchin," *Rhizome* (blog), 27 May 2009, rhizome.org/editorial/2009/may/27/dancing-machines/.
6. Paul Arthur, "The Status of Found Footage," *Spectator* 20, no. 1 (1999–2000): 60. See also Vinicius Navarro, "Nonfictional Performance from Portrait Films to the Internet," *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 3 (2012): 139.
7. Michael Wesch, "YouTube and You: Experiences of Self-Awareness in the Context Collapse of the Recording Webcam," *Explorations in Media Ecology* 8, no. 2 (2009): 21.
8. See, for example, Holly Rogers, ed., *Music and Sound in Documentary Film* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Leo Murray, "Authenticity and Realism in Documentary Sound," *Soundtrack*

- 3, no. 2 (2010): 131–37; Jeffrey Ruoff, “Conventions of Sound in Documentary,” *Cinema Journal* 32, no. 3 (1993): 24–40.
9. Kate Lacey, *Listening Publics: The Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013).
 10. Justine Lloyd, “The Listening Cure,” *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 23, no. 4 (2009): 485.
 11. Krista Ratcliffe, “Eavesdropping as Rhetorical Tactic: History, Whiteness, and Rhetoric,” *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory* 20, no. 1 (2000): 91.
 12. This observation is by no means new: Claude Lévi-Strauss described structuralist method in his analysis of the Oedipus myth by referring to a score of music. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Johnson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 229.
 13. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 271.
 14. Lacey, *Listening Publics*, 198.
 15. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *Dialogic Imagination*, 271.
 16. Kristeva discusses Croce’s views in Julia Kristeva, “Word, Dialogue and Novel,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 55.
 17. Nancy S. Love, *Musical Democracy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 6.
 18. Iris Marion Young, *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 69.
 19. Natalie Bookchin and Blake Stimson, “Out in Public: Natalie Bookchin in Conversation with Blake Stimson,” in *Video Vortex Reader II: Moving Images beyond YouTube*, ed. Geert Lovink and Rachel Somers Miles (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2011), 309.
 20. According to Damon Young, attending fifth-century Athenian theater arguably was designed to make “people specifically capable of participating in democratic cultural life.” Citizen audiences learned to fear hubris and embrace justice and ethical

- ideas, and, according to Young, this gave citizens an “emotional commitment” to democracy. Damon Young, “The Democratic Chorus: Culture, Dialogue and Polyphonic *Paideia*,” *Democracy and Nature* 9, no. 2 (2003): 225.
21. Hart Cohen, “Database Documentary: From *Authorship* to *Authoring* in Remediated/Remixed Documentary,” *Culture Unbound*, no. 4 (2012): 328.
 22. See Victoria Vesna, ed., *Database Aesthetics: Art in the Age of Information Overflow* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); and Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).
 23. John Coplans, *Serial Imagery* (Pasadena, CA: Pasadena Art Museum, 1968), 10.
 24. Dale Hudson, “Undisclosed Recipients: Database Documentaries and the Internet,” *Studies in Documentary Film* 2, no. 1 (2008): 96.
 25. Kristin Veel, “Information Overload and Database Aesthetics,” *Comparative Critical Studies* 8, nos. 2–3 (2011): 310–15.
 26. Spieker, *Big Archive*, 141.
 27. Thomas Waugh, “Why Documentary Filmmakers Keep Trying to Change the World, or Why People Changing the World Keep Making Documentaries,” in *“Show Us Life”: Towards a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*, ed. Thomas Waugh (London: Scarecrow, 1984), xi–xxvii.
 28. For Eisenstein’s discussion of “typage,” see Sergei Eisenstein, “Through Theater to Cinema,” in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949), 8–9.
 29. Sharon Daniel, “On Politics and Aesthetics: A Case Study of ‘Public Secrets’ and ‘Blood Sugar,’” *Studies in Documentary Film* 6, no. 2 (2012): 217.
 30. “About *Highrise*,” *Highrise*, highrise.nfb.ca/about/ (accessed 4 July 2014).
 31. This work has been given many terms, including *scattered*, *expanded*, *Internet*, *vast narrative*, *interactive*, *database*, *distributed*, *open source*, and *collective cinema*. See Steve Anderson, “Select and Combine: The Rise of Database Narratives,” *Res Magazine*, January–February 2004, 52–63; Adriene Jenik and Sarah

- Lewisohn, "Moving in Place: The Question of Distributed Social Cinema," in *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives*, ed. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 79–91; Marsha Kinder, "Designing a Database Cinema," in *Future Cinema: The Cinematic Imaginary after Film*, ed. Jeffrey Shaw and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 346–53.
32. This kind of interactive art is characterized as being *of* the Web rather than as simply *on* it. Jon Dovey and Mandy Rose, "We're Happy and We Know It: Documentary, Data, Montage," *Studies in Documentary Film* 6, no. 2 (2012): 163.
 33. Sandra Gaudenzi, "Strategies of Participation: The Who, What and When of Collaborative Documentaries," in *New Documentary Ecologies: Emerging Platforms, Practices and Discourses*, ed. Kate Nash, Craig Hight, and Catherine Summerhayes (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 134, 144.
 34. Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*, trans. Quintin Hoare (1930; repr., London: Verso, 1998).
 35. Jodi Dean, "Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics," *Cultural Politics* 1, no. 1 (2005): 51–74.
 36. Quoted in Kane, "Dancing Machines."
 37. Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 75. For more on Bookchin's reference to Kracauer, see Brian Willems, "Increasing the Visibility of Blindness: Natalie Bookchin's *Mass Ornament*," in Lovink and Miles, *Video Vortex Reader II*, 293–305.
 38. Kracauer, "Mass Ornament," 76.
 39. Joel Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology and African American Culture between the World Wars* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).
 40. Miriam Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999): 59–77.
 41. Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010), 65.

42. Nancy S. Love and Mark Mattern, "Introduction: Art, Culture, Democracy," in *Doing Democracy: Activist Art and Cultural Politics*, ed. Nancy S. Love and Mark Mattern (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 9.
43. Bookchin and Stimson, "Out in Public," 308.
44. Zizi Papacharissi, *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2010), 128.
45. April Durham, "Networked Bodies in Cyberspace: Orchestrating the Trans-Subjective in the Video Artworks of Natalie Bookchin," *Art Journal* 72, no. 3 (2013): 70.
46. Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image/Music/Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 179–89.
47. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 231–32.
48. Durham, "Networked Bodies," 72.
49. Jaimie Baron, "Subverted Intentions and the Potential for 'Found' Collectivity in Natalie Bookchin's *Mass Ornament*," *Maska Performing Arts Journal* 26, nos. 143–44 (2011): 33.
50. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2002), 23.
51. Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
52. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 346.
53. Love, *Musical Democracy*, 11.
54. Young, "Democratic Chorus," 228.
55. Durham, "Networked Bodies," 67.
56. Inka Mülder-Bach, introduction to Kracauer, *Salaried Masses*, 10.
57. Kracauer, *Salaried Masses*, 91.
58. Durham, "Networked Bodies," 71.
59. Baron, "Subverted Intentions," 37.
60. Walter Benjamin, "'An Outsider Attracts Attention'—On *The Salaried Masses* by S. Kracauer," in Kracauer, *Salaried Masses*, 114.
61. Bookchin and Stimson, "Out in Public," 307.

62. Tina Kendall, "Cinematic Affect and the Ethics of Waste," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 10, no. 1 (2012): 51.
63. Jonathan Beller, *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2006); Nick Couldry, *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics after Neoliberalism* (London: Sage, 2010), 147.
64. Couldry, *Why Voice Matters*, 131.

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Figure 4. *Laid Off* (dir. Natalie Bookchin, US, 2009), part of the *Testament* series: A feminist critique of the normative expectations of the public sphere