

Framing temporalities in Natalie Bookchin's *Now he's out in public and everyone can see* (2012)

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Abstract

Multiscreen media art installations create immersive experiences for audiences by relying on opposing techniques of rupture, dissonance as well as convergence of space and time. Artists use various techniques in the production and display where screens become the fields of overlapping spatial and temporal differences. This article analyses Natalie Bookchin's multiscreen installation *Now he's out in public and everyone can see* (2012) to explicate the multiple temporal ranges and durations at work in the installation. Diverse spatio-temporal experiences in the installation are facilitated by the physical arrangement of multiple screens and through the rhythmic editing of the work.

Keywords

Screens, Frames, Natalie Bookchin, Temporality, Multiscreens

Introduction

The multiplicity of screens and frames prevalent in media art installations can fractalize the space-time continuum of narrativity, delivering differing audience experiences of installations. Such an experience is guided by the profusion of frames and screens — a distribution of multiple spaces on the screens and between the screens of an installation — involving differing spatio-temporalities. By analysing Natalie Bookchin's video techniques in the multiscreen installation *Now he's out in public and everyone can see* (2012), I will discuss the crafting of temporal layerings to configure experiences of space and time in this work. *Now he's out in public and everyone can see* was first presented as an 18-channel installation in 2012 and reworked as a single-screen short film of the same name in 2017. The variegated temporalities in this work are a result of movements generated in its editing and display. Moreover, the already complex temporal experience of a multi-screen installation becomes more complicated as the out-of-frame influences the frame.

Although the multi-screen installations have existed in media art since at least the 1960s, I find *Now he's out in public* to be particularly notable in marking a change in social and aesthetic conditions. This work is at the outset of social media influence in polarizing social and political life. Bookchin compiled excerpts from video logs (vlogs) and video diaries of people in the USA voicing their opinions on

news stories about African American men without revealing their names. The work addresses the personal and collective experiences of how news stories effect, shape and replicate ideas and biases. The content of the work foretells the political crisis that engulfed USA post-Donald Trump's presidential term in 2016.

The ensemble of vlogs in the content of the work is replicated in the composition of the installation where eighteen screens of different sizes are suspended at different heights and angles. Walking into the installation, the viewer can position themselves anywhere in a sea of screens but cannot view all of them at once. The viewer's attention is guided by the screens lighting up with video sometimes many at once and other times just one at a time; immersed in the installation, they hear voices on screens in the front, behind and either side. In this paper I will first discuss the spatial organisation of frames, that is what kind of spaces are seen and referred to in the vlogs as well as the arrangement of screens in the installation space. In the installation, the videos often play simultaneously and continuously while at other times only the speakers' voices overlap. Bookchin compiles disparate voices into one installation space while maintaining their distinctness through multiple screens and frames. In the second part I will examine the temporal quality generated by the multiple frames of many screens. The entwinement of multiple temporalities is produced both inside and outside the frame, editing of the work by Bookchin and the audience's interaction with the work.

Reconfiguring spaces inside and outside the frames

Now he's out in public uses a similar method to other works by Bookchin, including *Mass Ornament* (2009), *Laid Off* (2009), and *My Meds* (2009). These works are a collection of clips constructed from publicly available videos from websites such as YouTube and Vimeo. The networked relatability offered by vlogging is recomposed into new ideas of sociality and interaction in the artworks. Bookchin is interested in the social experiences that the online spaces offer, as they are a form of public space to connect and exchange experiences accessed and delivered through screens. She states, "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.”[1] The work *Now he’s out in public* recognises sociality by segregating, arranging and displaying the individual voices in a way that makes them “more of a social experience than it currently is.”[2] Although on several occasions these multitudinous voices across numerous screens create a cacophony where everyone is speaking yet no one is listening.

There are several ways in which the multifarious spatial organisations of the frames in Bookchin’s works enact a convergence and divergence of people, their collective socialities and public performance on-screen. The multitude of spaces, both geographic and temporal, of the speakers in *Now he’s out in public* converge in various ways. The videos and vlogs uploaded from different parts across the USA are grouped into similar categories and have identical keywords. The frames of the vlogs and video diaries seen in the work resemble each other: flat, frontal, talking heads, medium shot or medium close-up angle. These videos come together on the desktop screen(s) of Bookchin’s workspace while she also fragments them, editing to highlight a *similarity in difference*. For example, what we see are similar opinions and biases, often edited congruously and as overlapping voices. At several points, instances of synchronicity arise when several screens in the installation relay the same phrases by speakers, such as “show your ID,” to emphasize a collective demand. However, just as the frames appear as points of unity, they also execute a multiplicity of differences through the situatedness of the speakers; that is, the position of each speaker registers as specific to a social, political and cultural setting. The similarity of frames, activities, voices and opinions coming together on the screens are indicative of heterogeneity as they signal different relations playing out in each instance.

Arguably, the vlogs and video diaries in the installation reproduce the default aesthetics of frontality associated with cameras attached to a computer. But the setting up of the frame to signal a certain appearance is evident in some of these vlogs. For example, a few speakers are set against the backdrop of an American flag; someone else has an African American flag; a few others have Barack Obama’s image in the form of posters and even a t-shirt with Obama’s face in the background. Moreover, angles and lighting in these frames vary. The speakers are mostly framed in a home environment, which discloses their personal space, adding details about their identity in addition to their recorded opinions. In the viewing of the installation, these frames are also *framed* by the display screens.

Unsurprisingly then image signification is not bound to the images in the frames. The speakers in *Now he’s out in public* refer to African American men who are never seen in the installation — even their names are never heard, always remaining outside the frame. Frames are not simply spaces that include and exclude images but are always open to something else. Michael Tawa argues that they are also “an extensive and excessive field that both delimits content and

harbours its transgression — a setting that enables this *mise en scène* of appearance-disappearance to take place because of its openness to the unframes and the out-of-field.” [4] Arguably then the on-screen or in-the-frame and the off-screen are co-constitutive.

Framing temporal multiplicity in editing and viewing of the work

Now he’s out in public can be considered as a work that creates multiple temporalities through its multiple screens, which allow it to perform variable modes of framing. One of the ways in which these multiple temporalities are felt is in an intensification of framing, realised by both the making and viewing of the work. Multiple frames are more than a number; they are a composition and experience of varying temporalities mixing, clashing, changing and shifting altogether. Focussing on the temporal qualities of *Now he’s out in public*, develops an understanding of how these are produced in relation to the movement of and in frames.

The multiplicity of frames engenders a relation with different temporal experiences. In the installation, this is prompted by Bookchin during the editing of the work. Both her editing technique and the arrangement of the screens in the installation work to create distinctions between the speakers. In the editing process, Bookchin creates “slippages” which are seen, heard and felt in the distributed appearance of the video.[3] For instance, several screens display the video when the speakers recite the phrase “straight to the facts” in unison. While the phrase may indicate their quest for objectivity, it is followed by individuals voicing their different (yet similar in racist ideology) opinions. Referring to the black man in question, one white man remarks, “He’s no blacker than I am really...I mean if you look past skin tone,” following up with opinions such as “I don’t know what race you are”, “No one knows anything about him”, and “Even his name is a mystery.” These slippages create affective voids in which some information is missed between what is said and what is heard.

However, temporal qualities cannot only be understood by what is internal to frames. There are various techniques that Bookchin employs in the *Now he’s out in public* installation to stretch experiences of time. Pauses, bridging words such as “and” and “but”, and vocal expressions indicating hesitation, such as “hmm” and “umm” are highlighted and multiplied by juxtaposing and overlapping. In editing, Bookchin dissects the shaking voices, pauses, and uncertainty of the speakers by delaying their words, lengthening inbetweenness. This also places the edited video in contrasting temporal rhythm to the original vlogs. Moreover, the length during which viewers engage with the work, as well as the daily cycles and opening hours of the institution where the work may be displayed, are both open to external change. For example, public health situations can

compel galleries to change access to artworks. In the recent pandemic, several art institutions displayed exhibitions online. These steps are temporal, considering that they were made to feel necessary, when in fact this option could also be implemented as part of their routine functioning. Moreover, viewing the work online changes the experience of the viewer.

In the installation, the fading in and out of the videos creates a movement of images, bodies and objects at different scales and angles through the organisation of elements inside each frame, as well as through the arrangement of screens in the gallery space. The careful edits place the speakers in a particular relation to each other (as discussed above), illustrating the variety of opinions and at the same time consolidating them at two levels: the semantic-aural level, registering as the specific points where voices overlap; and the general social-contextual level, which is focus of the work — African American men in news media.

However, the different scales and durations in the installation version of *Now he's out in public* is what works to produce temporal multiplicity. Temporality is nested, elongated and differently experienced via the aesthetics of the work. As Tim Barker explains, the interplay of “multiple temporal rhythms” of asynchronous and non-sequential time of the user, machine, software, and database changes our experience of time. [5] By this, Barker does not mean the numerous ways in which time is experienced by a viewer but the “multiple variants of time” as the relation of composition and viewing the work. [6] The layered temporalities of the work are performed both in and with the viewing of the installation. Here only fragments of the speakers’ original videos are used. Viewers are not always drawn to distinctions between people speaking but are more attentive to the content of the speech as they try to figure out the person to whom the speaking refers, adding one speaker’s comment to the next comment. To this, the arrangement of the portions of the speakers’ videos also qualify the viewing-listening experience, as their differing parts are relayed to the viewers’ present/presence. Frames here are generative of time here and as coiling clusters of multiple durations, the produce: the entwined durations in which the artwork is viewed; the vlogs in their moments of recording; and the sequences as arranged by Bookchin, which themselves nest durations.

Conclusion

Through various techniques including editing, arrangement of multiple screens and frames, Bookchin produces a dynamic spatial movements and temporal shifts. *Now he's out in public* generates movements through which we

experience time as simultaneous yet discontinuous. These temporalities depend on various kinds of movements, both of images inside the screen and those of the audiences. Importantly, the multiple frames and screens displace, merge and expand into many spaces. This discussion provides us an understanding of some of the techniques used by artists to experience spatio-temporalities disclosed by multiple screens and frames in contemporary art installations.

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- [5] Timothy Scott Barker, *Time and the Digital: Connecting Technology, Aesthetics, and a Process Philosophy of Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 14.
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