LEFT TO WIN

You're Breaking Up

Neïl Beloufa
Digital Mourning

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Pirelli HangarBicocca

EN

Neïl Beloufa
Digital Mourning

February 2021 – January 2022
Curated by Roberta Tenconi

Cultural Mediation
Cultural mediators are present in the exhibition spaces to answer questions
from the public. The dialogue between mediator and visitor should take place
in compliance with social distancing policies and the norms on the protection
of personal health.

Public Program
The exhibition is accompanied by a series of events that allow visitors to
learn more about some of the themes of the show and of Neïl Beloufa's work.
Discover more on our website.

Neïl Beloufa

Neïl Beloufa in his studio, Paris, September 2019

A unique voice in the generation of artists born during the 1980s, Neïl Beloufa (Paris, 1985) drives his interest in the world of the web and social media, the aesthetics of videogames and the formats of reality TV, as much as advertisement and communication dynamics of political propaganda. His artistic focus is on contemporary society, the way it is represented and mediated by digital interaction and the related technologies. Beloufa's interdisciplinary education includes the visual arts, design, and cinema. Through his practice, he thus investigates both the artistic and the cinematographic realms.

With his videos, sculptures and technologically complex installations, Beloufa plays on the sensory experience of viewers and on the set of beliefs that conditions them. Concerned with questions closely related to the contemporary world—ranging from power relations and digital surveillance to data collection, nationalistic ideologies, identity and post-colonial perspectives on the world—his works are intricate systems and environments in constant transformation of which the visitors are an integral part. Balanced on a thin line between fiction and reality, the visitor's body dialogues with different projection surfaces, thus conjuring up imaginary science-fiction scenarios.

Beloufa emphasizes the construction of an experience and its evolution rather than the work in itself. Therefore, the visitor becomes an integral part of the mechanisms of the exhibition as a whole. Through his works, the artist portrays multiple points of view without imposing a hierarchy or an established idea on predefined canons and stereotypes. These multifaceted visions also characterize how the installations take shape: an overlapping of moving images projected on various surfaces such as screens, objects and architectural elements. Walking through the exhibition, visitors are confronted with unusual volumes and forms; these evoke tridimensional collages that incorporate, assemble and multiply information, mimicking the constant flow of data on the web.

Occidental, 2017
(video still)
Feature film, color,
sound, 90'
Courtesy Bad Manner's,
Paris/Miami/Ibiza

In this context, Neïl Beloufa uses the vocabulary and language of the information age to reveal the paradoxes and conventions of a society pervaded and governed by digital technology, in which personal habits and preferences, ranging from dietary choices to the use of our spare time and human relations, are conditioned by computational procedures. In unmasking the contemporary value system, the artist describes himself as an "editor" of information who breaks down and re-presents what already exists without adding any judgment of value or questioning its moral character.

From single-channel videos to feature film sets, from resin sculptures and low-reliefs to highly complex installations in metal, wood and Plexiglas, Beloufa constructs all his works in his studio—a creative forge and independent production company, as well as a reference for other artists and inspiration for critical and theoretical thought on the notions of work, authority and the economic system. Many people work with him in his space, including friends and young artists, who are in charge of each stage of production, following a practice that is the antithesis of industrial standardization. The studio is thus an alternative model of production and economic sustainability, a structure based on sharing and on the development of skills: with the aim of also supporting the up-and-comers, the activity of the studio is integrated into Beloufa's practice.

The Exhibition

"Digital Mourning" is the first solo show by Neïl Beloufa held in an Italian institution. The exhibition brings together numerous videos that range from the beginning of the artist's career to recent productions, and presents them inside sculptural and multimedia environments. Starting with the title, the exhibition alludes to one of the paradoxes of contemporary reality: the existence inside a technological world and its concurrent disappearance. The association of the terms "digital" and "mourning" sheds light on the duality between reality and what is simulated using artificial models that emulate life. Made specifically for Pirelli HangarBicocca's Shed space, Beloufa's intervention is a fluid system of activation and recomposition of works, realized by the turning on and off of moving images, sounds, colors, and lights, in an intertwining of themes and narratives that prevent possible hierarchies or positions of authority.

In transforming existing pieces into a total work of art that plays with the flow of information, the exhibition offers a grotesque interpretation of the codes and ways in which culture and artistic experiences are consumed today. Almost all video works in the show appear as extracts of an overall choreographic sequence, of which the full length versions are accessible on smartphones through QR codes.

The narration of the show, as the artist explains, «gives rise to an unreal lecture in an ethereal amusement park which users are forbidden to access due to the current global scenario.» All works, including videos, installations, light sculptures, posters, and fake gadgets, are arranged against the backdrop of the remains of a film

La morale de l'histoire,
2019 (detail)
Mixed media installation,
variable dimensions
Installation view,
François Ghebaly,
Los Angeles, 2019
Courtesy the artist,
François Ghebaly,
Los Angeles, kamel
mennour, Paris/London,
Mendes Wood DM, and
ZERO..., Milan
Photo: Andrea Rossetti

set that Beloufa built for an actual movie that he was planning to shoot in April 2020.

The project is shaped around contiguous thematic sections, each color-coded and inhabited by fictitious entities, three "host" figures (A, B, C): like fake sculptures, they change continuously. They interact with each other trying to capture the visitor's attention, giving directions and activating the works in different moments. Each figure presents the pieces through stereotypes, embodying different attitudes: from progressive to conservative, cynical, sincere or optimistic. Each of them also encapsulates a monitor with a playlist of video extracts from Beloufa's entire filmography, including *Tonight and the People* (2013) and *Occidental* (2017).

As a further reflection on the real and virtual dimensions and on the value of an artwork, the hosts are also digital entities and are collectible as crypto-art and non-fungible tokens (NFT), allowing users to trade them on the web as cryptocurrency.

INTRODUCTION

As a prelude, the entrance of the exhibition introduces the people who have worked with the artist throughout the years, by displaying the whole series of writing tests from 1 to 10 that Beloufa always asks each collaborator to complete within the shortest time, as in a competition. The narrative of "Digital Mourning" arises in the fictitious environment of the remains of a set that was previously created by the artist for the shooting of a film, and which stays as the reproduction of the city of Agrabah in a well-known amusement park.

1 *Screen Talk*

Created in 2020 by the artist with his production company Bad Manner's, *Screen Talk* is an experimental online production and distribution project that has adapted the video *Home is Whenever I'm With You* into a web-based mini-series. Shot by Beloufa in 2014, it portrays a world affected by a pandemic and the race among rival pharmaceutical laboratories to develop a cure for the virus. Although conceived as pure fiction, today the scenario takes on a new meaning, offering the chance for a critical reinterpretation of current reality linked to the digitization of social experiences.

The project can be accessed on an interactive online page built as a work of art (on Pirelli HangarBicocca website) of which the exhibition presents a version that can be activated by the viewer. Similarly to online videogames, it is possible to play on the website. The user is guided by a non-linear series of events generated each time by answering the quiz questions. This unlocks further levels and gives access to the different episodes of the *Screen Talk* mini-series.

The project also offers an exploratory look at a new production model of artistic work and its diffusion online. Using the internet as a place for creation, *Screen Talk* is an experiment on working in an artistic and economic context whose paradigm differs from the traditional one, as it is based on an exchange of visibility and the activation of the energies able to reach a wider audience, while simultaneously strengthening the sense of community.

HOST A – TRYING TO REACH OUT TO ITS AUDIENCE

Colored in blue and with various signs defining its character, host A tries to seduce the viewer by presenting its favorite works in the show.

2 *Kempinski*

The video *Kempinski* (2007) is shown on a monitor placed in a complex homonymous structure conceived by the artist in 2016. Made from MDF and resin, it comprises rows of seats for viewers to sit on.

Shot while he was still a student, it is Neïl Beloufa's first video work. It features themes that were already central to his poetics, such as the blurred line between reality and fiction. Awarded several prizes and achieving recognition on the independent film circuit, *Kempinski* is a science-fiction documentary that offers a utopic vision of our contemporary world. Interviewed by the artist, the inhabitants of the Malian city of Bamako talk in the present tense while offering their vision of the future. All non-professional actors, the protagonists are presented as emerging from the darkness lit by a neon light held in their hands.

Kempinski, 2016
Mixed media installation;
video *Kempinski*, 2007,
13' (Courtesy Bad
Manner's, Paris/Miami/
Ibiza)
Installation view,
Kunstmuseum Luzern,
2017
Courtesy the artist,
Balice Hertling, Paris,
François Ghebaly, Los
Angeles, Mendes Wood
DM, and ZERO..., Milan
Photo: Jonathan Muzikar

In this work, Beloufa deals with Western expectations and conception of the African continent. The imaginative power of the narrative transforms reality through language by the simple expedient of speaking in the present tense about a non-existent future. Using science-fiction and attenuating the differences between the genres of documentary and fiction, the artist subverts the narrative mechanisms of the Western gaze, developing an account that illustrates the complexity of an external look onto another reality.

3 *Global Agreement*

Global Agreement (2018) addresses some of the central issues in Beloufa's poetics: the military world with armies subtended by the logic of violence, and aspects of the cult of the body and physical care associated with power structures. The work is composed of a series of sculptural installations recalling gym benches and equipment, on which are shown interviews conducted by Beloufa with male and female members of armies from around the world. It thus focuses on the reasons why the interviewees became soldiers and investigates their daily habits. The subjects discussed range from life on military bases and the emotions felt during action in the field to the most significant experiences they had in the army.

The interviews were held using messaging apps, such as Skype, Facebook, FaceTime and WhatsApp, and the soldiers are often dressed in ordinary clothing and interviewed in their homes. Using these means, the artist questions the predetermined modalities typical of the relationship between the institution and the individual while narrowing the distance between the public and the interviewees.

4 *People's passion, transparency, mobility, all surrounded by water*
5 *Nice Table*

Created in 2011, the video—at the center of the large installation titled *People's passion, transparency, mobility, all surrounded by water* (2018)—appears to be an unusual documentary featuring a series of people animatedly

describing their experiences in an unknown city, presumably in North America, which they refer to as a heavenly place for a successful professional and personal life. The stories are presented as utopian fantasies of a cosmopolitan urban, middle-class culture and are interspersed with idyllic images of nature, such as palm trees, waterfalls and green meadows. The actors' enthusiasm, the visible microphones, and the continuous noises in the background of chirping birds and flowing water instill a strange feeling of familiarity and artificiality at the same time. Like many of Beloufa's works, the video was a collaborative project shot during a residency in Vancouver in 2011, when the artist engaged non-professional actors in the creation of the screenplay.

Projected on a structured kinetic sculpture composed of transparent Plexiglas panels mounted on a metal frame that moves along a rail, the images in *People's passion, lifestyle, beautiful wine, gigantic glass towers, all surrounded by water* are seen layered and fragmented on different levels. A secluded monitor in a corner shows the interviews. The display modes used by the artist call to mind television formats of consumer programs, while the transparent structure suggests the modernist architecture in the urban landscape described in the video. The sculpture also heightens the idea of artificiality, thereby creating an interplay of refractions and illusions with the surrounding environment.

The work has been exhibited on several occasions—at the MoMA in New York, the Taipei Biennale, the Schinkel Pavillon in Berlin, and more recently at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris—each time revisited by the artist according to the exhibition and architectural context. Moreover, it

often integrates a system of CCTV cameras to modulate the interpretation of the images on several levels, thus increasing their complexity.

The exhibition also includes the work *Nice Table* (2011), one of the first structures Neïl Beloufa designed over the years to present the video. With its reduced scale, the installation suggests a domestic dimension, one of the possible interpretations *People's passion, lifestyle, beautiful wine, gigantic glass towers, all surrounded by water* can embrace.

HOST B – TRYING TO REACH OUT TO ITS AUDIENCE

Through stereotypes and characterized by the color yellow, host B transmits its experience on the works by giving orders.

6 *World Domination*

The video *World Domination* (2012) is projected onto the irregular and motorized surface of a 2015 sculpture with the same title. It develops around five imaginary tables that represent different countries, whose heads and officials of government are involved in a discussion in an attempt to solve social problems afflicting their state. The topics discussed reflect actual problems in our contemporary world, such as abortion, obesity, and youth unemployment, but whose resolutions, in the context of the work, are inevitably linked with motives that lead to war and policies of attack. The absurdity of the pronouncements made by the characters is furthered by Beloufa's decision to work with non-professional actors, to whom he gave full freedom in the creation of the dialogue, provided each character's choices were justified. As a

World Domination, 2012 (video still)
Video, color, sound, 19'
Courtesy Bad Manner's, Paris/Miami/Ibiza

consequence, the viewer has the opportunity to detect the false logical implications of the dialogues at each diplomatic table, where the debates often take on racist and elitist opinions, and which indicate how easy it is to fall into the trap of extremist rhetoric.

World Domination is a dystopian take on the diplomatic (and non-diplomatic) mechanisms that underlie the political, economic and social relations existing between world powers. Even the structure on which the video is projected deforms the images, creating a sinister yet fragile atmosphere. In spite of the work's strong socio-political character, Beloufa does not wish to interfere with the public's moral convictions: by creating purposeful yet twisted situations, he forces viewers to assume responsibility for their own judgments and prejudices.

7 *Not titled yet*

The installation *Not titled yet* (2011/2021) was reconstructed specifically for the exhibition in Pirelli HangarBicocca. The labyrinthine structure is completely accessible to the public. Walking through it, visitors feel to be behind a two-way mirror in a police interrogation room. The video *Sayre and Marcus* (2010) is shown inside, which, on the

lines of a TV crime program, stages a hypothetical trial featuring a group of American men and boys. Sitting in a circle, all the characters are both judges and accomplices in a possible murder. The video offers a crescendo of tension and suspense, feelings heightened by the camera circling continuously behind the characters' shoulders, narrowing the field of vision to the faces of each suspect. The soundtrack accompanying the images creates a dark, impenetrable atmosphere in which a single person—a woman—moves freely, whispering into the characters' ears possible clues or information that remain concealed from the other members of the group. The unfurling narrative leaves the viewer uncertain, unable to understand whether what is taking place has been scripted or is a role-playing game in which the invented dialogue is taking over to the point of becoming real. The sense of ambiguity and the impossibility of understanding presented by the video are also reflected in the environment.

HOST C – TRYING TO REACH OUT TO ITS AUDIENCE

Marked in red, host C—unlike the critical positions of the others—plays ironically and with a more superficial attitude on commenting the works.

8 *Data for Desire (Rationalized room series)*

This installation from 2015 is presented as a three-dimensional drawing made entirely of tubular metal wire that creates a structure similar to the silhouette of a house interior. Inside this hypothetical domestic setting is a screen that shows the images of the two stories told in the video *Data for Desire* (2015).

*Data for Desire
(Rationalized room
series)*, 2015
Mixed media installation;
video *Data for Desire*,
2015, 48' (Courtesy Bad
Manner's, Paris/Miami/
Ibiza)
Installation view,
YARAT Contemporary
Art Space, Baku, 2015
Courtesy the artist and
ZERO…, Milan

On the monitor, a group of youngsters is seen at a garden
party in Banff, Canada. In the style of the most popular re-
ality TV shows, Neïl Beloufa interviews six of them, who
turn out to be the unsuspecting subjects of a socio-math-
ematical study being carried out simultaneously in France.
Indeed, the screen shows a group of French students us-
ing the images on camera to analyze the behavior of the
youngsters at the party, with the aim of developing an al-
gorithm able to predict the actions and preferences of the
Canadian peers. However, the experiment will not be suc-
cessful, showing the impossibility to determine certain
social balances a priori and on the basis of stereotypes,
especially with regard to feelings. To increase sponta-
neity, Beloufa did not give the actors a script, who were
thus able to choose which role to play.

The dual and ambivalent nature of the work once again
emphasizes the artist's inclination to consider the act

of looking as a real action. Not passively experienced through a reproduced image, it implies active participation by the viewer in order to develop the meaning of the work.

9 *Monopoly Podium*

An iron platform with synthetic leather seats, this 2017 installation is a podium on which visitors can get, as hinted by the title. A screen installed on the structure's surface obliges the viewer to take a top-down view of the projected video, breaking the customary frontal view of a work. Using this device, the artist seems to have arbitrarily placed the visitor in a hierarchical position within the installation.

In the video *Monopoly* (2016), a group of teenagers in Kiev is playing a game of Monopoly, the famous board game in which the aim is to create income by buying the largest number of properties on one's path, through negotiations with opponents. Under the direction of Neïl Beloufa, the game becomes a metaphor and soon the girls and boys literally divide up Ukraine by bargaining and speculating in Machiavellian terms in order to take possession of the lots on the board, along with the income they bring. Projected onto a basic fabric backdrop, images of Kiev alternate with live views of the city. The work indirectly refers to the 2014 Ukrainian revolution and, in particular, the clashes in Majdan Nezaležnosti (Independence Square) in the capital city. The board game thus becomes an allegory of the dynamics and logic of the power that underlies capitalist society.

CONCLUSION

Like any story, the exhibition ends with "the moral of the story," literally with the work *La morale de l'histoire*; part fairytale and part debate, it stages a hypothetical ending, summing up the previous reflections.

10 *La morale de l'histoire*

Conceived as a techno-fairytale, *La morale de l'histoire* (2019) is an immersive installation in which sculptures, projections, texts and sounds combine to generate rhythms and textures that seem to elude the dimension of reality. Written by the artist himself, the narrative features imaginary figures derived from both classical and children's mythology, and generates an environment in which technological devices and traditional idioms intersect.

The work has been presented in numerous settings, including the Venice Biennale and gallery exhibitions, each time with different approaches and forms. The version shown in Pirelli HangarBicocca is the largest and most complex evolution of the installation. It features a vast space populated by sculptures, elements resembling sand dunes, and low-reliefs on the walls similar to landscapes.

La morale de l'histoire is structured in chapters: as the story progresses, videos and projections of fields of color activate objects and sculptures, investing them with a biomorphic identity. The voice of the narrator (the football player Éric Cantona in the French version, a computerized voice in the English one, while the Italian version is inserted as a subtitled text) tells the story of a

La morale de l'histoire, 2019 (detail)
Installation view, kamel mennour, Paris, 2019
Courtesy the artist, François Ghebaly, Los Angeles, kamel mennour, Paris/ London, Mendes Wood DM, and ZERO..., Milan
Photo: kamel mennour archives

camel and some fennec foxes, who build a wall of stones in the desert to shelter from the sun at the expense of a colony of ants who are forced to reorganize themselves compactly and, in doing so, save themselves from the arrival of a catastrophic rainstorm.

Using narrative codes from childhood, the work creates an allegory of the contemporary world featuring references to such themes as the capitalist economy, extinction, and the intimacy of the family to highlight the limits of an individualistic approach.

Selected Exhibitions

Many institutions have presented solo shows by Neïl Beloufa (Paris, 1985), such as Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt (2018); Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2018 and 2012); Pejman Foundation, Tehran (2017); K11 Art Foundation, Shanghai, MoMA Museum of Modern Art, New York (2016); Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin (2015); Banff Centre, Canada, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, Fondation d'entreprise Pernod Ricard, Paris (2014); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2013); New Museum, New York (2011).

His work has also been displayed at important group exhibitions, such as Busan Biennale (2020); Venice Biennale (2019 and 2013); Biennale de l'Image en Mouvement, Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève (2018 and 2007); Taipei Biennial, Shanghai Biennale (2014); Biennale de Lyon, Manifesta 8, Murcia (2010); Prague International Triennial of Contemporary Art (2008).

Beloufa's films and videos have also been featured in many international film festivals, such as Toronto International Film Festival, International Film Festival Rotterdam, London Film Festival, Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen.

Beloufa was one of the finalists of Artes Mundi and Nam June Paik prizes (2016) and Prix Marcel Duchamp (2015); he was awarded the Meurice Prize for Contemporary Art (2013), Audi Talents Award (2011), Agnès B. Studio Collector Award (2010), the Grand Prize, the Prize of the Jury and the Arte Prize at the 57th and 54th Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen (2011 and 2008).

This publication accompanies the exhibition "Digital Mourning" by Neïl Beloufa

Pirelli HangarBicocca is a non-profit foundation, established in 2004, which has converted a former industrial plant in Milan into an institution for producing and promoting contemporary art.

This dynamic center for experimentation and discovery covers 15,000 square meters, making it one of the largest contiguous exhibition spaces in Europe. It presents major solo shows every year by Italian and international artists, with each project conceived to work in close relation to the architecture of the complex, and explored in depth through a calendar of parallel events. Admission to the space and the shows is completely free of charge, and facilitators are on hand to help the general public connect with the art. Since 2012, Vicente Todolí has been the foundation's Artistic Director.

The complex, which once housed a locomotive factory, includes an area for public services and educational activities, and three exhibition spaces whose original twentieth-century architectural features have been left clearly visible: Shed, Navate, and Cubo.

As well as its exhibitions program and cultural events, Pirelli HangarBicocca also permanently houses one of Anselm Kiefer's most important site specific works, *The Seven Heavenly Palaces 2004-2015*, commissioned for the inauguration of Pirelli HangarBicocca.

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