

# Art in America

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## The Pleasures of Being Watched: Neil Beloufa's "The Colonies"

by William S. Smith



Neil Beloufa: *People's passion, lifestyle, beautiful wine, gigantic glass towers, all surrounded by water*, 2011, video, approx. 11 min, at Schinkel Pavilion, Berlin. Courtesy François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles, Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo, and ZERO..., Milan. Photo Andreas Rossetti.

visitors—captured at extreme angles, distorted by the plastic's sheen, obscured by the scrapbook array of feel-good pictures—appear in real time.

Being surveilled is supposed to make us feel tense, but there's a funhouse quality to Beloufa's work that renders the experience pleasant and goofy. (It might even make visitors temporarily forget that MoMA's "real" security cameras aren't missing a thing.) It's hard to feel threatened while sitting on one of his benches, which include seats made of repurposed bicycle saddles. The visual language of "The Colonies" is familiar and inviting. There's even a "Friends" DVD positioned in one the Plexi vitrines.

This feeling of ease is underscored by the soundtrack to the CCTV feed, playing on speakers, which features the

In addition to producing videos that blend utopian and dystopian modes of speculation, Neil Beloufa also establishes, through architectonic structures, specific conditions for viewing those videos—and for being viewed in turn. In "The Colonies," on view at New York's Museum of Modern Art through June 12, these conditions are defined by a group of clunky metal, epoxy resin, and Plexiglas fixtures, occasionally adorned with crushed aluminum cans and cigarette butts as well as speakers, cameras, and other electronic components. A wall text informs visitors that some of these pieces can be used as benches and seats. But it's not always apparent what's sculpture and what's furniture, and the invitation to touch runs counter to ingrained habits of polite museum behavior. The awkwardness of deciding how to engage the installation—whether to sit on or look at it—is heightened by the eventual realization that everyone in the space is also being recorded on closed-circuit video.

Positioned throughout the installation are Plexiglas cylinders and spheres with small cameras on rotating arms inside them. On the interior surfaces of these structures, Beloufa has affixed an assortment of banal images: stock photos of women jogging, a snapshot of a funny-looking dog, a printout of some attractive partygoers. The moving cameras' output runs on two monitors hung on one side of the gallery. The result is a live video collage, where images of museum

voices of several enthusiastic young adults speaking about their enviable lifestyles in a coastal North American metropolis. They describe having achieved the pinnacle of twenty-first-century success: a perfect, even utopian, work-life balance. Weekends are for water sports and hiking. Evenings are spent enjoying wine that makes them tipsy but never drunk. Every moment can be spent in the company of a conscientious community where class distinctions don't matter.

Though hyperbolic to the point of parody, these descriptions also implicate the MoMA visitors pictured on the monitors. Wouldn't a healthy lifestyle of tasteful leisure also include a trip to the museum to take in some inspiring art? And after an impassioned engagement with this art, might we not retire to one of MoMA's three dining establishments for some nice wine, and perhaps take a stroll along the High Line later, at sunset?

The soundtrack was originally recorded for Beloufa's 2011 single-channel video *People's passion, lifestyle, beautiful wine, gigantic glass towers, all surrounded by water*. The entire MoMA installation could be considered a setting for viewing this work, even though the video itself is hidden from view. It's installed around a corner at the "end" of the exhibition, so that encountering it is almost like a revelation of the installation's meaning. In addition to the scripted interviews that can be heard in the main gallery, *People's passion* features tranquil scenes—parks, calm neighborhoods, strolling families—similar to the images seen in karaoke videos.

Beloufa, who is French-Algerian, has exhibited *People's passion* in New York previously, as part of the Migrating Forms film festival and at MoMA PS1. But the environment that he's created here adjusts the focus to highlight the older work's exhibitionist thread. The new context, in a gallery that offers views of the museum's sculpture garden through a glass curtain wall, makes it easier to perceive a meditation on modernist architecture and the dynamics of surveillance. At one point in *People's passion*, a man describes the excitement and drama of living in a glass high-rise, catching glimpses of neighbors through their windows and realizing that he, too, can be seen at such vulnerable moments. Rather than a source of distress, however, this reality of urban living is a selling point: "It's better to live in a world where there's not a lot of privacy," he says.

In a sharp essay for a pamphlet accompanying Beloufa's project, curator Thomas Lax places "The Colonies" within a tradition of surveillance art. He mentions Dan Graham, among other artists of the 1960s, who used video and film cameras to dramatize the dynamics of watching and being watched. Yet Graham's later work might be a more relevant touchstone, particularly the glass pavilions he has been building since the 1970s. As an essayist, Graham has chronicled the devolution of glass architecture, showing how a material with utopian overtones for modernist designers became a symbol and instrument of corporate dominance. Buildings clad in two-way glass allow inhabitants to peer out without being observed themselves: "Surveillance power is given to the corporate tower," he writes in his 1996 essay "Two-Way Mirror Power." Graham's pavilions, such as the one installed on the roof of New York's Metropolitan Museum in 2014, transform this power dynamic into a source of leisure. Viewers can hang out around the human-scaled glass edifice with no clear inside and outside and, thus, no hard distinction between the observers and observed.

Similarly, Beloufa's work underscores the pleasure of surveillance. Seeing oneself and others juxtaposed with goofy animal pictures from distorted angles while navigating the maze of Plexiglas in the installation is, in truth, pretty funny. Instead of mimicking the slick look of corporate architecture, as Graham's pavilions do, Beloufa's structures appear like something a committed, eccentric tinkerer might construct in a garage on the weekend.

"Rather than representing surveillance as a total threat *out there*," Lax writes, citing a recent blog post by media critic Rob Horning, "Beloufa renders it as something specific that is mediated by people and thus, perhaps, more susceptible to critique and dismantling." It's hard not to compare Beloufa's project to Laura Poitras's "Astro Noise," the exhibition now on view at the Whitney Museum. Poitras confronts surveillance as it applies to drones and inaccessible NSA sites. There is a sublime beauty to the overwhelming power implied by such militarized systems, but there's also something stultifying about pondering them. Once these inaccessible drones have us in their sights, where do we go from there?

The terms of surveillance presented by "The Colonies," on the other hand, seem to be an allegory of sorts for social media. Beloufa's installation captures the effect of those self-constructed, surveilled worlds. Rather than casting it as a threat he acknowledges its appeal. The myth of the perfect lifestyle is often one that we construct for ourselves, even if it is at times threadbare and made of scraps.