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1000 WORDS

Neil Beloufa

TALKS ABOUT HIS CURRENT EXHIBITION, "COUNTING ON PEOPLE"

MUCH, PERHAPS MOST, art demands the allegiance of viewers; it seeks to persuade of its own relevance, to proselytize a worldview, or to guide you, however subtly, in what and how to think and feel. Neil Beloufa's work does this too, but in a deeply equivocal way, one that recognizes the perpetually fraught nature of such a relationship between viewer and work. The Algerian-French artist's practice invites a different kind of engagement, one akin to what art historian Malcolm Bull has dubbed reading "like a loser": refusing—or being denied—the privilege of being the viewer who "gets it," who understands all the references, and is thus affirmed and flattered as a cognoscente, even a bona fide art-world VIP.

Beloufa questions the strange authority the artist has in today's society, the contradictions of art's role within the "creative economy," and the intellectual betterment art is supposed to provide. Is art a mirror, a lamp, or a hammer—a blunt instrument with which to shock the spectator into awareness? Beloufa seeks a way to bypass all of these hoary constructs, remaining skeptical about art's relationship to mimesis, on the one hand, and to control, didacticism, and propaganda, on the other.

In his new exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (and in the show's near-simultaneous staging at the Banff Centre in Alberta, Canada), the artist's sociopolitically themed videos; technologically and materially complex, seductive sculptures; and live CCTV feeds are brought together within an overarching installation characterized by a "logic of dismantling," as writer and curator Mihnea Mircan put it earlier this year. This results in an encounter in which things fall apart as much as they come together, based on the idea that opening something up is more productive than closing it off, that art should not be a puzzle that can be solved or mastered, that there is always something extra that cannot be domesticated or fully understood. Yet even as they recall the open work, Beloufa's sprawling concatenations aren't simply there to let meaning loose or shroud it in hermeticism; their unruliness seems particular to our time, to our sense of a surfeit of information, things, and even experience. The exhibition environment is thus filled with objects that are not quite props and not quite artworks, with various layered technological interventions (an electric people-counter attached to a metal swinging door, a moving wall onto which a video is projected) that dramatize the tension between control and its undoing—a tension that must remain unresolved to be meaningful.

—Alexander Scrimgeour

"Counting on People" is on view at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, through Nov. 16; travels to the Walter Phillips Gallery, The Banff Centre, Canada, Nov. 8, 2014–Mar. 1, 2015.

FOR A LONG TIME, I've been interested in notions of singularity and standardization—I once made a series of works with pictures of Chicken McNuggets, which are made using four different casts and become unique only when they get fried. My new show, taking place almost simultaneously at the ICA and the Banff Centre, will work in a similar way. The same pieces will be present in both locations, but they will be articulated differently, like two interpretations of a musical score.

I've also been thinking about how affect is represented in modern societies through different interfaces and digital tools, and how we try to rationalize it. And that led to the title "Counting on People": I wanted to have something about both emotional dependency—counting on someone—and the other kind of counting, from data processing, economics, finance, and mathematics to basically any kind of statistical control. To put it more romantically, I'm hoping the exhibition will be about data rationalization, politics, and love.

One of the big works in the show is going to be a new film, *Data for Desire* [2014], which I'm shooting with some North American party kids and some French mathematicians—all in their early twenties. The kids are going to enact a fantasy house party, with beer pong, romance, seduction, jokes, and drugs, and deer wandering around the garden. We'll interview the kids and track their biological data: hormone levels, sweat, heart rate, and so on. Then we'll show the French group the footage and give them a set of biological data—some of which will actually be fabricated—and they'll come up with equations to predict who's going to get together and what else might happen at the party. The variables they'll define will inevitably be based on the global fantasy of North American culture, and the attempt to rationalize the party will be a failure from the beginning, because of these cultural differences and the unpredictability of attraction.

Desire is also central to another new video, *Home Is Whenever I'm with You* [2014]. It's an hour-long goofy sci-fi drama about how everyone, including me, wants to be somewhere else, in contact with half of the world, all the time. With Skype, for example, it doesn't matter where we are, whether we're at our desk or in front of a CGI background with a 3-D fish tank. I want to convey something of how our relationship to imagery has changed through interfaces like YouTube and Vine (a postmodern haiku generator). Part of the movie is CGI: There will be monsters attacking the world in windows on the screen behind the characters skyping one another about love.

And, in fact, I also want to make a gigantic dinosaur sculpture, using every formal vocabulary I can find. I want it to address the Internet's effects on hierarchies of imagery—that a cat playing piano can be as famous as Madonna or Jurassic Park—and so on. It feels superromantic to me, reducing all that discourse about technological change to children's stuff, prehuman history, which at the same time only exists in fantasy and fiction.

These meditations on fantasy scenarios—on desire and rationalization—tie back to a video I shot a few years ago called *La domination du monde* [*World Domination*, 2012], which will also be on view. For this project, I asked people that I found on the street to take on the role of president in a fictional scenario. I told them they should solve a local problem by declaring war on another continent and then explain to me how that war will solve it. Their rhetoric becomes borderline racist at times, but in a way that might reflect how extremist ideologies arise, or shed light on the psychology of waging war in general, since what they describe is not that far from Thatcher's Falklands rhetoric, George Bush's Iraq rhetoric, etc. At both the ICA and Banff, the film will be projected onto a motorized wall. The wall is a deceptive machine: It is made to be useless, as the image projected on it won't move. Its only function is to theatricalize the display and create tension for the viewer as it deforms the image and creates a kind of special effect.

I'm not a sculptor, I'm an editor: I edit in videos and I edit in sculpture and I edit in space; I construct meaning by relation. A work isn't the actual object but the relations I have built with it; my intention is to facilitate intersections between the different meanings that viewers might build on their own. Often the production of a work is explicitly collaborative, too, and the relationship between myself and the participants is always changing: Recently, for example, I was sent by an arts organization to do a project in a school in the banlieue. As I am a bien-pensant person, I didn't want to use the kids for my own benefit, so I proposed that they make every decision about a movie that I would make for them. I wanted to be the interface, to be their iPhone, to play their robot. At first, when I asked them to write a script, they were like, "Fuck you." But when I started writing FUCK YOU on the blackboard, they realized I was serious, so they started to talk about things that really interested them: Cristiano Ronaldo, love and betrayal, WALL-E, the wrestler Rey Mysterio, a soccer field, a private plane, a gym room, and a fight, that kind of thing. I really liked the scenario.

But in the end, it failed: The kids stopped caring about the project and didn't want to go through with it. Though they're twelve years old, with way more difficult lives than mine, I decided that if they didn't want the film, then I would make it mine, almost like I was taking advantage of child labor. It might be slightly perverse, but acknowledging the failure of a kind of institutional gentrification project (through an artist working in a school) felt more honest than being paternalist or just feeling guilty.

The result is another new video, *VENGEANCE* [2014]. Since the students didn't finish doing the voices for the characters, we added a robotic voice on top of their arguments with me, which will be dispersed through the space of the show and synchronized with CCTV cameras remaking the movie by shooting live footage, filming sculptures in the show as if they were Disney cartoon characters and making the exhibition into a film set.

I didn't want to be so precise and didactic, because earlier this year I did a show at the Fondation d'Entreprise Ricard in Paris in which I became somewhat fascist and authoritarian—usually I am more interested in opening meanings up than in controlling them. I structured that exhibition like a movie: I was controlling the way people moved through it, the way they thought, and the way they laughed. I tricked the viewers a bit.

In theory, I prefer it when an object or a film stays unbalanced, when viewers aren't sure they can believe me and have to take responsibility for their own opinions. This is why I like failures and “betrayals” so much, as they offer tools with which viewers can step back from the works.

Sometimes I bring people with me and then I lose them, or sometimes I lose them first and try to catch them back; it's always a game. But as much as I may hate authority, the question of power is something I ask myself about all the time. Even if I shoot with real people without knowing what I'll get out of it, I know that I control things. Maybe that's why I try to undercut myself, so that I don't brainwash the audience too much. It's a permanent fight—but it's also mostly a losing one, and one that certainly involves me lying to myself.