

## Neil Beloufa Simulates the Pandemonium of Pandemic



BY TRAVIS DIEHL

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The artist's online game, 'Screen Talk', satirizes the bad politics and fake news muddling responses to COVID-19



The video vignettes at the centre of Neil Beloufa's 'Screen Talk' – a satirical, amateurly acted miniseries about a respiratory pandemic – were written and recorded in 2014, in the wake of the 2012 outbreak of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS), and have been shown in various configurations. The web-based gameboard that now ties them together, however, was conceived during COVID-19. (Actor Arnold Schwarzenegger's lockdown PSA, with his pet donkey and pony, makes an appearance, for instance.) Each video, and the website on which it is screened, includes a disclaimer to this effect. This is reassuring: the work's absurd, sometimes flippant tone – rife with sexual innuendo, off-kilter references to volleyball and squirrely scientists charged with saving the world – doesn't match the dire atmosphere of the present crisis, in which hundreds of thousands have died. On the other hand, Beloufa's game perfectly skewers the madcap tenor of the media through which information, both good and bad, spreads: the cognitive assonance of the international-political response to COVID-19, the rants of anti-vaxxers and pro-business martyrs, and the vivid claustrophobia of Zoom meetings and family FaceTime. A 'fake news' ticker hovers over all.



Neil Beloufa, *Screen-Time*, 2020, video still. Courtesy: the artist, Mendes Wood DM, Brussels/São Paulo and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles

The 'Screen Talk' videos are arranged on a grey void, accented with electric pinks and greens, and linked by angry, red dashed lines. The 'player' chooses an avatar (options include a voluptuous cheetah on a Vespa and a Fauvist blob) and the game begins with the fifth and final episode. To proceed to another clip, you perform the sorts of captcha-like tasks that litter the internet, such as typing in a credit card number or a Netflix login. There are also trivia questions: one prompt sends you to the Wikipedia page for video-rental stores; others ask about Beloufa's videos themselves, as if to make sure you're paying attention. This knowledge builds to nothing much, beyond confirming our already aimless, fragmentary condition. The game paths cross and loop.



*Time*, 2020, video still. Courtesy: the artist, Mendes Wood DM, Brussels/São Paulo and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles

True to life, the story that emerges is as tedious and disjointed as the game mechanics. The ‘Screen-Time’ clips are viewed out of order, but it’s not clear that order matters; the characters repeat themselves and talk past one another, and their conversations don’t appear constructive. Finding a cure seems less important than learning or establishing the ‘truth.’ Mostly, the doctors and scientists attempt to reassure one another that their predictions are authoritative by naming their alma maters and citing impossibly high percentages. ‘Without my solution,’ one doctor declares, ‘60 percent of people won’t be 99 percent OK.’ Their jargon is punctuated by the red ‘Screen Talk’ logo stamped over a picture of the Earth from space, like a flat-earth meme or a wacky transition in a television detective series.



Neil Beloufa, *Screen-Time*, 2020, video still. Courtesy: the artist, Mendes Wood DM, Brussels/São Paulo and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles

The nature of the fictional pandemic is especially prescient, not just to COVID-19 but to the political climate surrounding it. Symptoms of the disease, according to one doctor, include hallucinations, coughing and ‘acute malice to everything and everyone.’ It is, says another, a ‘spectacular virus.’ Indeed, the amateur cast of scientists and family members that flicker through the series seem afflicted by cognitive glitches, disappearing and freezing like bad feeds. As with COVID-19, ignorance and fear help the disease spread – as well as being a disease in themselves. One doctor’s son seems afflicted: he posts moshed, greenscreen rants about DNA and horsepower. Patient Zero is literally translucent. No one seems to take their incessant coughing seriously. (Half of the characters smoke.) Instead of empiricism or altruism, Beloufa’s protagonists ultimately appear driven by the urge to burnish the credentials of their own realities. How many numbers, how many advanced degrees, do you need to convince a high enough percentage of people of your truth? What does it take for your hallucination to win?

Main image: Neil Beloufa, *Screen Talk*, 2020, video still. Courtesy: the artist, Mendes Wood DM, Brussels/São Paulo and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles

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