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CRITIC'S PICK

# The French Artist Who Saw the Pandemic Coming

Six years before the coronavirus, Neil Beloufa imagined a global outbreak of disease and digital bewilderment. “Screen Talk,” his new project, erases the line between fiction and real life.



Still from “Screen Talk,” an online video exhibition by Neil Beloufa targets the art world and Zoom culture. [www.screen-talk.com](http://www.screen-talk.com)

**By Jason Farago**

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The accomplished young French-Algerian artist Neil Beloufa has a knack for seeing the shape of the future earlier than most. His proudly disjointed videos and sculptures, seen in this country in solo shows at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, take the chaos of our information stream as both their subject and their medium: furniture can sprout phone chats or Google Maps indicators, and lovers and criminals talk like they learned English from reality TV. He turns a gimlet eye, too, to the workings of fake news and real bigotry, as in his powerful project “Occidental” (2017), a film about racist policing and urban unrest that feels disarmingly relevant again this week.

Protests and prejudices, elections and ecosystems, cable news chatter and Facebook-fueled freakouts: these are the wellsprings of art for Mr. Beloufa, who was born in Paris in 1985. And also pandemics. For his new online project “Screen Talk,” a pressing, kooky, brilliantly uncomfortable new hybrid of mini-series and video game, Mr. Beloufa has choreographed a soap opera set against a global virus outbreak, narrated through the front-facing cameras of smartphones and laptop screens. “Screen Talk” is a new work. But its component scenes, of Purell-slathered scientists and maniacs in quarantine, were shot all the way back in 2014.



Yes, the artist saw it coming six years ago, when he filmed what would become “Screen Talk” with amateur actors in Banff, Alberta. (Mr. Beloufa and Bad Manner’s, the Paris production company he collaborated with, have taken pains to insist that the series is not meant to reflect or respond directly to the coronavirus pandemic.) But the real prescience of “Screen Talk” doesn’t lie in the lab; outbreaks of the H1N1 flu and Ebola had already set the stage for this black comedy of hygiene and quarantine. It’s the communication technologies and digital networks that these doctors and patients trust — above all video chat programs like Skype — that Mr. Beloufa really indict as bad for your health.

The video’s narrative is broken into five short films, and orbits around the race to quell the outbreak of a novel respiratory virus, first identified in Hong Kong and threatening to infect the whole planet. It is “a spectacular virus, one of the most lethal,” a cable news host stumblingly tells us from her janky stage set, and cases have already been identified in Italy, Brazil, and ... Liechtenstein.

Labs are racing to find a vaccine — among them, the San Diego lab of Dr. Martin and Dr. Suki, virologists who are also having a less than discreet affair. On a whiteboard in their lab is a graph that gently rises and falls: a

flattened curve, which can only be reached if the World Health Organization acts in time.

Among the infected is Dr. Martin's wife, Betsy, who is quarantined in a high-priced London hotel and seems to be losing not just her health but her mind. She paces and panics, wearing a fluffy white bathrobe and a string of pearls. She prattles on a video conference about her son's school performance and her dwindling supply of pretzels. She begs her husband via Skype to let her leave quarantine — even though, from her hotel window, it looks like the British capital is rioting. (“Can't I put on a mask or something?” she begs.)



In “Screen Talk,” a woman quarantined in a high-priced London hotel seems to be losing not just her health but her mind. [www.screen-talk.com](http://www.screen-talk.com)

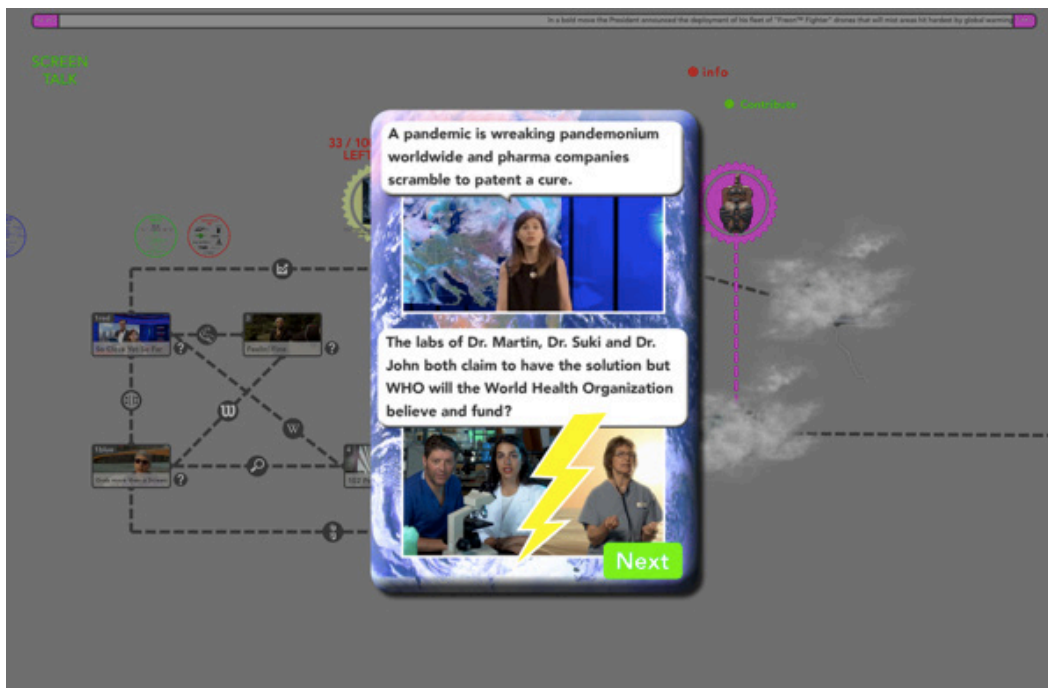
Betsy only has the screen to talk to, where she recounts her symptoms to her ne'er-do-well son; to a gaggle of infectious disease specialists, some suffering from a suspicious cough; as well as to her uproarious harridan of a mother, berating Betsy via a badly-framed video call from a Swiss lake resort. “A one-way guilt trip on the Pity City Express!” she spits at the complaining Betsy.

In museums and galleries, Mr. Beloufa often presents his films within glitchy, cheaply constructed installations. The footage is broken into clips that play on multiple screens, sometimes mounted on motorized platforms, which have to be watched in a nonlinear fashion. “Screen Talk,” likewise, embeds the episodes within a purposely awkward interactive schema that takes its aesthetic cues from the doofiest days of the early web. The site heaves with slapdash pop-up notifications, featuring silly Clipart and tacky fonts and to see each episode you have to take a quiz that you would have to be dumb as a post to fail; one question explicitly recommends that you cheat and look up the answer on Wikipedia.



Indeed the antic interface of “Screen Talk,” like the projection displays that Mr. Beloufa built at MoMA, underscores how far these videos lie from your average YouTube or Netflix mini-series. “Brechtian” is hardly a sufficient word for the deadpan accuracy of the amateur Canadian actors here, who speak directly in the camera with bottles of hand sanitizer and Vitamin Water at hand. The newscaster has trouble speaking English, and the doctors spew out pseudo-epidemiological statements like “If my calculations are undistorted, and I think they are, then we will be in the 14th percentile of class structure.”

Watching “Screen Talk” is like being plunged into a bonkers, upside-down Zoom discussion without much of a destination. For ultimately what matters in “Screen Talk” isn’t the future of Martin and Betsy’s relationship or even the epidemiological fate of the world. What matters are the technologies that the pandemic has forced them to rely on, and how they reprocess human life into mere data and human feelings into mere communication.



“Screen Talk”’s narrative is broken into five short films, each of which you unlock by answering dopey brainteasers. [www.screen-talk.com](http://www.screen-talk.com)

Mr. Beloufa has an enduring interest in what happens when citizens turn into avatars of themselves — whether in “Tonight and the People,” his Hammer Museum exhibition, which featured real-life gangsters talk as if they’re movie characters; or the bitterly funny “Data for Desire,” in which young mathematicians watch a reality show and write equations to predict who’ll hook up with whom.

And in “Screen Talk” the pandemic functions as an accelerant to an already in-progress reduction of persons to profiles — how the screen disciplines you to talk, to look, to behave in prescribed ways. The project’s real target

is not the health system but the art world, which is desperately overproducing supposedly relevant “content” in these locked-down days. Its chosen format, Mr. Beloufa acidly observes, is similar to the disjointed ranting about disease and desire he foresaw in “Screen Talk” (and for which artists are rarely paid).

And the task of artists, rather than to fit into the narrow confines of Zoom, Instagram and the online viewing room, is to envision new forms that unsettle those technologies, which might preserve art’s distinction within the homogenizing flow of our screens.

Mr. Beloufa has said that he plans to build out the website of “Screen Talk” further in the coming months. Still, it was already obvious in 2014 that a serious pandemic was on its way, and that the technologies we would then rely on for communication and culture would cost us more than we gained from them. The absolutely wrong question is: ooooooh, how did he predict this? The right question is: How incompetent are our leaders if a future pandemic reinforced by digital misinformation was so obvious that even a 29-year-old artist could see it coming?