
HOTEL
OCCIDENTAL


Teakwood
HITACHI

Neïl

Beloufa


Barquettes
à l'Abricot
LEADER PRICE
3 BARQUETTES
POIDS NET 120g
AXTON
Reed Exposition
SPAX
4 x 20
500

MAKING FILMS, SCULPTURES *AND* INSTALLATIONS THAT REFLECT *HIS* REJECTION *OF* HIERARCHY *AND* UNAPOLOGETIC MIX *OF* INFLUENCES, FRENCH-ALGERIAN ARTIST NEÏL BELOUFA *HAS AN* INTENSE 2016 AHEAD, *WITH HIS* US INSTITUTIONAL DEBUT COMING UP *AT* NEW YORK'S MOMA ALONG *WITH* EXHIBITIONS *IN* LOS ANGELES *AND* SHANGHAI. *WE* VISITED *HIM* AT *HIS* STUDIO, *A* MESSY WAREHOUSE *IN* SUBURBAN PARIS POPULATED *BY A* BUSY CROWD *OF* COLLABORATORS *AND* FELLOW ARTISTS, *AND* TOOK *A* SNEAK PEEK *AT* HOTEL OCCIDENTAL, *THE* SETTING *OF HIS* AMBITIOUS, SOON-TO-BE-RELEASED MOVIE.

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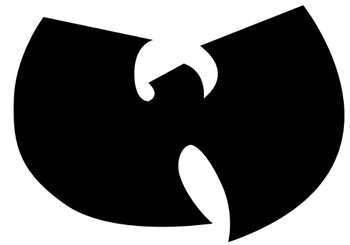
ESSAY BY MYRIAM BEN-SALAH

"IF YOU WANT TO MAKE A DOCUMENTARY, YOU SHOULD AUTOMATICALLY GO TO THE FICTION, AND IF YOU WANT TO NOURISH YOUR FICTION, YOU HAVE TO COME BACK TO REALITY."
—JEAN-LUC GODARD

Having Having a conversation with Neil Beloufa feels quite like experiencing his work: the flow is swift, the ideas are atomized, the connections are uncertain, the tone is candid, and the information doesn't follow any kind of hierarchy—or any order, for that matter. Aby Warburg casually meets Angelina Jolie in the course of a retort: you feel confused at first, but in the end, you realize that everything boils down to a cohesive and sharp argument.

The French Algerian artist (b.1985) has an off-putting ability to bring together the customary disenchantment of his generation with a sincere belief in alternative systems. "I spend 60 percent of my time stressing out about money, which is sad," he says, underlining the ever-present concern that put him through a dauntless search for productive autonomy. "I'm trying to find a way to reach independence so I don't depend on people to produce my projects." Obviously, Beloufa has no issues whatsoever talking about money, a necessary convenience he constantly re-injects into the production of art—"taking and making," as he puts it. The time he spent in the United States (he studied at Cooper Union in New York and at CalArts in California in 2007 and 2008, respectively) almost certainly has something to do with his openness towards mundane economic matters. In conversation, Beloufa turns, somewhat surprisingly, to the Wu-Tang Clan. Indeed, his ideal business model takes its cue from the American hip-hop crew that launched the careers of a number of affiliated artists, collectively known as the Wu-Tang Killa Bees. "They laid down a certain number of rules to create a hip-hop dynasty that would last for centuries," he says. "They didn't depend on the market or on institutions, but rather on one another. It would be great to imagine a similar system for the production of artworks, with established artists helping younger ones."

Just as the Wu-Tang was associated with Brooklyn, Beloufa settled in Villejuif, a suburban area south of Paris (and, like Brooklyn, likely a future fiefdom of gentrification). At first glance, his studio— a 7500-square-foot warehouse—looks more like an industrial garbage dump than a proper production platform: piles of resin foam, remains of plywood walls, screws, nails, blowtorches, houseplants tangling with MDF, Coke cans and coffee filters melt into a merry chaos that leaves the outsider dumbstruck. Soon enough, though, one finds a human presence, crossing paths with (and probably bothering) a busy crowd of collaborators who cover a substantial spectrum of skills: from builders to film editors, set designers and cooks to movie extras and multitasking artists, the team seems efficient, forceful and totally hermetic towards outside interference, be it a visiting



"I see Wu Tang Clan as an ideal business model because they didn't depend on the market or on institutions, but rather on one another. It would be great to imagine a similar system for the production of artworks, with established artists helping younger ones."

collector or a pizza delivery. Apart from direct collaborators, parts of the studio are sometimes rented by fellow artists, a list of whom reads like a veritable Who's Who of the young French scene: Camille Blatrix, Jonathan Binet, Mohamed Bourouissa and Oscar Tuazon, to name a few, have shared space, and possibly beers and ideas in the vast and unheated former car factory. In October 2015, during the last edition of FIAC, Beloufa took advantage of the studio's ongoing remodeling by organizing a temporary exhibition in the space, gathering the works of all the artists that passed through the workplace, from interns to long time collaborators. Beyond the outlandish sight

of museum directors, advisors and collectors stepping out from the Villejuif-Léo Lagrange subway station for the opening, the show was notable for its generosity: with its open roster, it was a true "proposition," a refreshing format for the Parisian landscape, which is sometimes fossilized by a constant craving for hierarchy.

As outlying as they might seem, the gravitating systems Beloufa builds are not completely disconnected from his practice as an artist *stricto sensu*. "In the studio, as in my work, I address the notions of work protocol, authority and human relations." Beloufa has spent the better part of the last decade thinking about what is at stake when one apprehends reality and its representation. The main raw material of his films, sculptures and installations is what actually exists and how it is interpreted, a subject he explores without moral judgment, cultural cynicism or any kind of irony. He places himself on the same level as the images he is catching, playing on their ambiguity, promising them a new fate and, in the process, scrambling the lapsed dichotomy between fiction and reality. He establishes an implicit pact with his viewer, who agrees to play the game of credulity, just as we do when responding to everyday media stimulation. For his 2012 solo exhibition "The Functions of Light" (Balice Hertling New York), he stated, "When Superman puts on his glasses, nobody recognizes him as Clark Kent, even if it's obviously the same person." By accurately grasping and controlling his viewer's suspension of disbelief, he manages to bare the processes of representation that make ground for contemporary stereotypes and conventions *(People's passion, lifestyle, beautiful wine, gigantic glass towers, all surrounded by water*, 2011). In many of his films, Beloufa sets one simple rule as a formal constraint, creating situations in which characters convey things that may or may not have happened. He then steps aside and watches the situation unfold and run idle until it becomes something else, until his object's status is transformed and put back into play. In one of his earliest works, the fourteen-minute video *Kempinski* (2007), Beloufa lights his subjects with neons that are visible onscreen, the beams of light appearing like laser swords, leaping from function to fantasy. Along the same lines, he asks his subjects, ordinary Malians, to speak about the future in the present tense. The effect of these simple tweaks of tense and lighting is eerie and dystopian: our exotic expectations (cinematic and otherwise) are unsettled as science-fiction reveals an odd form of truth about what's going on outside of the screen rather than inside, underlining paternalistic Western expectations (of the viewer) and the circumstances of the filming (of the artist), stressing our permanent speculation on situations rather than giving a hint to any documentary attempt.

To go one step further, the films often literally operate as a "reflection," as they look at themselves through the very exposure of their own illusory codes, reinforcing the conditions in which they were produced. In Brune Renault, a 2010 video shot in a typically French low-tech teleplay aesthetic, four teenagers flirt and simper during a car ride over a Johnny Hallyday soundtrack. As soon as the viewer notices the shabby off-camera special effects included in the frame, the car becomes a sculpture and the video becomes a comment on the making of an artwork. The fiction, the commentary on the fiction and the commentary on the making of the fiction overlap into a dizzying meta-discourse, confusing the boundaries between documentary and fiction, blurring unrealism and credibility, and ultimately breaking any remaining norm or convention.

Beloufa's movies have both the strength of sharp observation and the unobtrusiveness of an approach that refuses any position of authority. He asks us to engage with his propositions, removing himself as if to say, *this is your problem now, you deal with it.* "I don't like authority," he says. "My movies are neither true or false, and I try not to communicate my own view of the world. They put the viewer in a free but uncomfortable position that should lead to thinking about what is shown instead of believing it." It is indeed quite uncomfortable to step upon visible wires or pass between unsteady plywood rails, to try and embrace a moving image diffracted and atomised between several supports. Beloufa embraces such strategies of installation to challenge the authority of the black room/white screen theatrical convention and deny the lure of the cinematic or simply photogenic—integrating and fragmenting his videos into irregular environments that are either meticulously detailed or arbitrarily mismatched, in which precarious sculptures, pop-culture references and

everyday objects become the frame and setting for the video projection. “We’re in a world in which there is no more hierarchy between images, content, and sources,” he notes. Reflecting a landscape wherein Google, Wikipedia, and YouTube are the models of a horizontal platform in which films, objects, viewer and artist are placed on an equal flat level, the artist insists on a similar reception for his work. “My shows should be a mess where you can decide what you want to look at.” Indeed, his presentation is a visual *cadavre-exquis*, including items as eclectic as frames without a surface, tubes, balls of glue, plants, cigarette butts alongside tubular steel structures, shelves and hangers. The status of the objects is similar to their position within the space: unstable, shifting and fragile.

Beloufa’s gestures employ a vocabulary proper to the practices of our information processing era, often defined by the hackneyed term “post-Internet.” Although he participated quite early in setting such standards, he denies that any specific style or aesthetic has ever defined his work. Though his pieces are, at this point, quite recognizable and starting to constitute a proper and cohesive body, Beloufa’s practice is not about mastering one single form that would become a signature. Quite the opposite: as soon as he is comfortable with a material, technique or format, he will actively put himself at risk, challenging his own systems in order to move forward. He goes fast—earning him the apposite nickname “Beloufast & Furious”—and is not afraid of failure. “I’d rather fail doing something I like rather than succeed doing something I don’t believe in,” he says. “I work with failure because I don’t know how to succeed. I like when things get stuck, when there is something to unblock. As soon as it fits in, I need to move on”. From docu-fiction to fiction, from plywood to wire sculptures, from Beyoncé to cigarette butts and from wooden volumes to resin foam, Beloufa’s practice expands while remaining manufactured within the studio, flawed and man-sized, as a form of resistance to some sort of industrial and mass produced superego.

Beloufa is often considered the heir apparent of artists like Pierre Huyghe or Philippe Parreno. Having studied art in France in the 2000s, he was obviously influenced by their input: their experimentations with exhibition formats, as

Occidental, 2016
Two men—fake Italians, real schemers—stir up trouble in the aptly named Hotel Occidental, grandiloquent ersatz and scaled down epitome of our post-colonial disquieted era. In a deft game of actions at cross-purposes, the protagonists—nimbly interpreted by Idir Chender, Ana Ivachef, Paul Hamy, Louise Orry-Diqueirro and Hamza Mezziani, a handful of French cinema's vanguard—engage in a wicked play with our contemporary obsession for image and representation as means of surveillance and domination. On a backdrop of social protests and identity investigations, Beloufa explores the hows and wherefores of a paranoid, security-driven society through an unintentionally realistic yet masterfully timely fiction.

well as the rehabilitation of the viewer as an active subject and a vigilant presence in a given space, are things Beloufa has absorbed into his own practice. Describing Huyghe's 2013 exhibition at Centre Pompidou in the French magazine *May,* he wrote: "Moving through the exhibition, one perceives that the pieces that one recognizes have changed in nature through contact with the others and are muddled... They have given way to more open-ended forms and combinations, like a musical score played freely by someone who knows it so well that they can attempt to reinvent it, even to the point of forgetting it altogether." But this might be where Beloufa parts ways with his elders: as far as he's concerned, the pieces have to exist independently of context, exhibitions or otherwise. He doesn't consider the exhibition as a medium per se, although he acknowledges that, like his films, it can become a meta-work, a self-generated system responding to a constraint, technical, financial or formal. For his solo show "Les inoubliables prises d'autonomie" at Palais de Tokyo in 2012, his challenge was to integrate the conditions of making of exhibition (the institution, the budget, the PR requirements, the communication) into the exhibition itself. Each gesture in the show connected back to a sense of meta-narrative about what it was to produce such a project, and what it was to challenge and reverse that system by using a pirate economy.

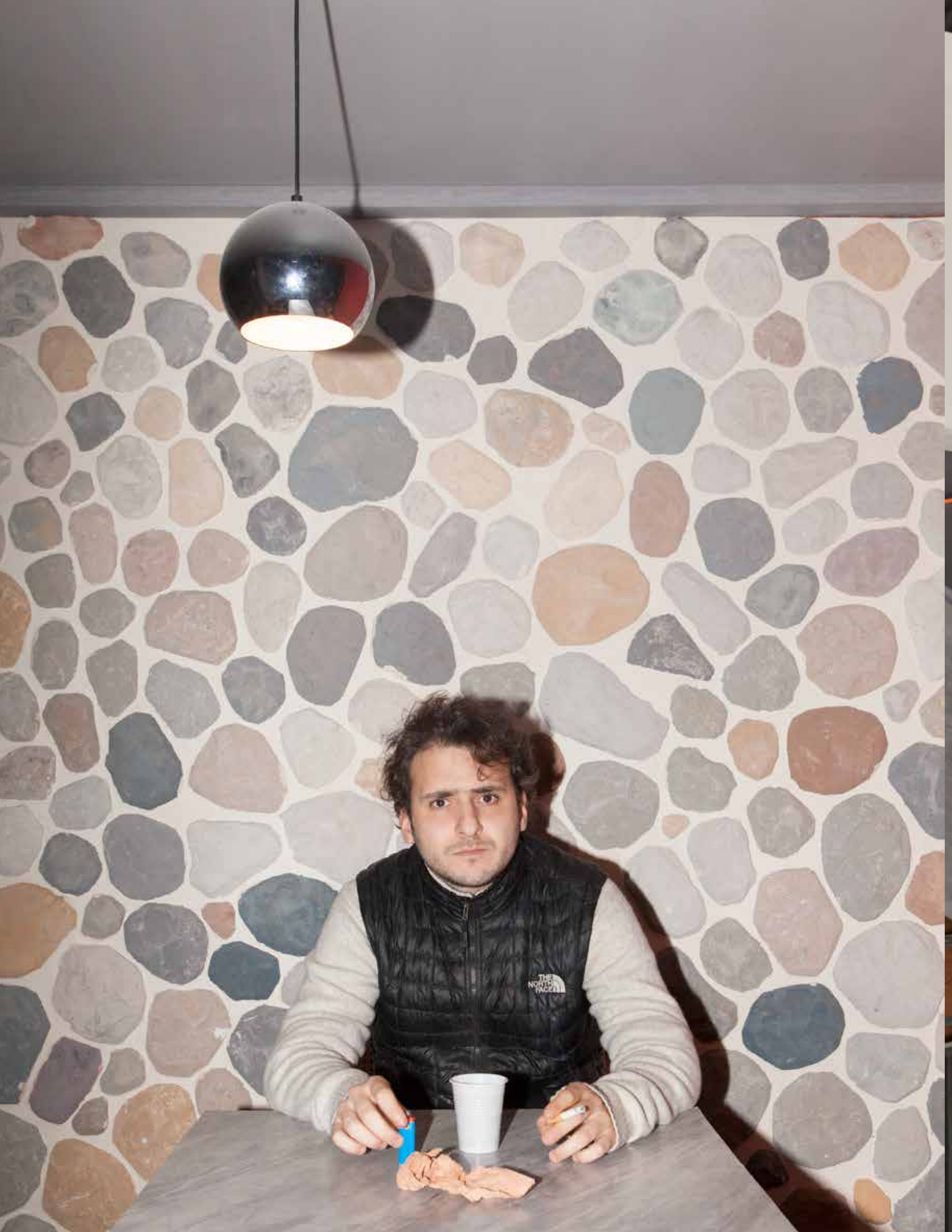
His current work in progress is a movie. The ultimate achievement—or is it? "It isn't so much about making movies as about having art allow me to make movies," he explains. "I like inverting the system." With his team, Beloufa transformed his studio into a hotel set to shoot *Occidental,* a long feature entirely self-produced (and self-commissioned) and currently in post-production. Although cinematographic attempts would sometimes poke out in previous works, the formal challenge here was to create a popular object, a film with a narrative continuity from the beginning to the end. "I think there are good movies and bad movies, but I don't think there are art movies and cinematographic movies.." The issues raised by the plot are a clever metaphorical combination of the ideological debates appearing through his other works—surveillance society, religious and ethical expectations, gender representations—but this time, the dialogues are scripted and the actors are casted professionals. "I don't think there is a difference in value between a beautiful mannerist image and a goofy close-up, as I don't think there is a difference in value between a Robert Bresson movie and *NCIS,* except that most of Bresson's movies are good and most of NCIS episodes are bad." This would explain the unapologetic mix of influences that discretely transpire in this new work: from references to Nicholas Ray or Douglas Sirk in the scenery to Alain Resnais in respect to the distantiated stage direction and spontaneity of dialogue, as well as some goofy French teleplay gimmicks echoed in the DIY special effects. When asked about artists' longstanding fascination with movie production, Beloufa retorts, "It's the last job that glitters. Artists want that, the same way filmmakers wanted to be artist in the 70's"

It is quite funny to hear him speak about the glitter and the glam while cultivating a constant escape from any outward sign of achievement. His singularity—a word he loathes—probably makes for such a lucid view of the world that he rarely takes anything for granted. He is that severely opinionated guy who frowns at compliments, who uncomfortably makes jokes to deflect questions regarding his upcoming solo show at MoMA. Raised between Algiers and Paris, he somehow kept the *je ne sais quoi* of overrunning humility that comes with "that" identity. He is the kind of artist that can strengthen, if not restore one's faith in the art world; not so much for the goodness of his intentions but for the truthfulness of his enterprises.

Neïl Beloufa (French and Algerian, b. 1985) is an artist who lives and works in Paris. He is represented by Galleria Zero, Milan; Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo; François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles; and Galerie Balice Hertling, Paris. He was nominated for the Duchamp Prize 2015.
Upcoming exhibitions include "Project 102," part of The Elaine Dannheisser Projects Series at MoMA, New York, from 12 March–12 June; as well as solo shows at Pejman Fondation, Tehran, and Mendes Wood DM in September; at K11 Art Foundation, Shanghai, in October; and at François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles, later in 2016.

Myriam Ben Salah is Associate Editor of *Kaleidoscope.* A curator and writer based in Paris, she has been coordinating special projects and cultural programming at the Palais de Tokyo since 2009. As an independent curator, her recent exhibitions include "Shit and Die" in Turin; "Dirty Linen" at Deste Foundation, Athens; and "Like the Deserts Miss the Real" at Galerie Steinek, Wien.


Coca-Cola
depuis 1886
VOLUME



“I don’t like authority”

WITH *AN* ACUTE REVERENCE *FOR* THE TRADITION *OF* ART HISTORY *AND* SHIFTING FROM ABSTRACTION

You don't listen to music, at least not unless you have to dance; you buy a coat only if you're cold, and then only in the nearest shop; you've long resisted looking for color in your work. So at what point do you make decisions in your sculptures? When does it please you?

As far as music is concerned, when I was in junior high, I realized that music was a way to affirm my identity. But as my listening habits proved restless, constantly changing, I became aware of the fact that I didn't have specific tastes. So I just let it go. Later, taking the underground, I would see people listening to some epic, very emphatic music; it allowed them to space out and forget their banal circumstances. It seemed to me a way of controlling people. I think it explains why the English were so effective in pop music, Beatles-style: it deadened people into a lord system; it justified Margaret Thatcher. It's like Woodstock during the Vietnam War, driving people to go to gigs and "protest" through music rather than protesting for real. At that moment, I truly agreed with my adolescent choice.

Now that I don't care so much about "radical" positions anymore, it's too late to get back to it; a whole musical education would have to be set up, and to be honest, I'm too lazy. I do love music when it's there—I just don't want to be responsible for what's being played.

Regarding clothing, for long time I tried to be cool, but it didn't work. So I quit caring about it and focused only on the function of what I wore. At present, I like having a dress code that's perhaps not approved socially but always easy to recognize. I like to think Obama's trick is to choose neither his clothes nor his meals, in order to eliminate those decisions from a day already filled with decisions.

I can actually ask you the same thing: what does it mean for you to steal the accessories of ultra-chic barbers while you're completely beardless? Is it more enjoyable to have a barber kit when you have no beard, or to have a beard and no kit, simply because you don't care? To me, it'd be a trick, reproducing some romantic cinematographic figure through your actions and accessories. For instance, you might see a Starbucks cup in a film. That can become a romantic image, a virginal and new relationship without questions of consumption and corporate product. As I include myself in my practice, you include yourself in yours, and just as I never differentiate between what's true or false, fictive or real, pop or noble, the same is true for you. The only difference is that I invest everything with political value, whereas you charge everything with an emotional one.

I completely agree—although if I don't regularly shave my "non-existent beard," I'll end up with a terrible preteen goatee. I'm obliged to shave every day to look my age. If I had a real beard growing, not just three hairs, it might give me a bit of the refined, careless artist look that you have. Then, the kit would surely be obsolete. This brings up something that has always fascinated me in your work: your ability to achieve a real productive force using ineffective tools.

My sculptural practice is that of an assembler rather than that of an artisan; it's more about putting together forms and ideas than about technical skill. This way, a pragmatic condition takes over an aesthetic one. I think that when one masters a form, when the form becomes too seductive, it leans towards communication, manipulation and industry, which to me are the enemy. I do the same in my films: I want the viewer to able to see how it is made. I reveal my aptitude to spectators so that, in the end, they're not able to believe me.

Getting back to your first question, regarding the choices I make in my sculptures: one of the roles of art is to have a critical distance from the world and its phenomena, allowing us to see, to be neither completely in or outside it. As I truly believe this, making decisions in a work of art is a heavy responsibility. In the beginning, I tried to eliminate them as much as possible, especially as they relate to communication's disciplines (design or pop music) and all the other things I reckon one should view with suspicion. But the problem is that this tough position never lasts very long. In mastering a technique, you get a formal pleasure from what you produce, and there's nothing with that. It took me a long time to understand that a major part of art's social role is its being able to hang in people's places, which I now accept with pleasure.

I wonder whether one can grow older without getting sweeter.

I think it takes too much effort not to get sweeter. Roughly, you either choose to be part of society and consequently be less binary—which is the position I chose—or you refuse it completely, which leaves you to suffer and fight all the time. When I read interviews with some "great people" at the end of their lives, tears come to my eyes—I know that I don't want to resemble to them. At 90 years old, Godard keeps on addressing the institution as the enemy; Orson Welles said that Hollywood destroyed him. Nicholas Ray ended up homeless. It's interesting, though: I have the impression that there's less of this violence and sourness among old great artists.

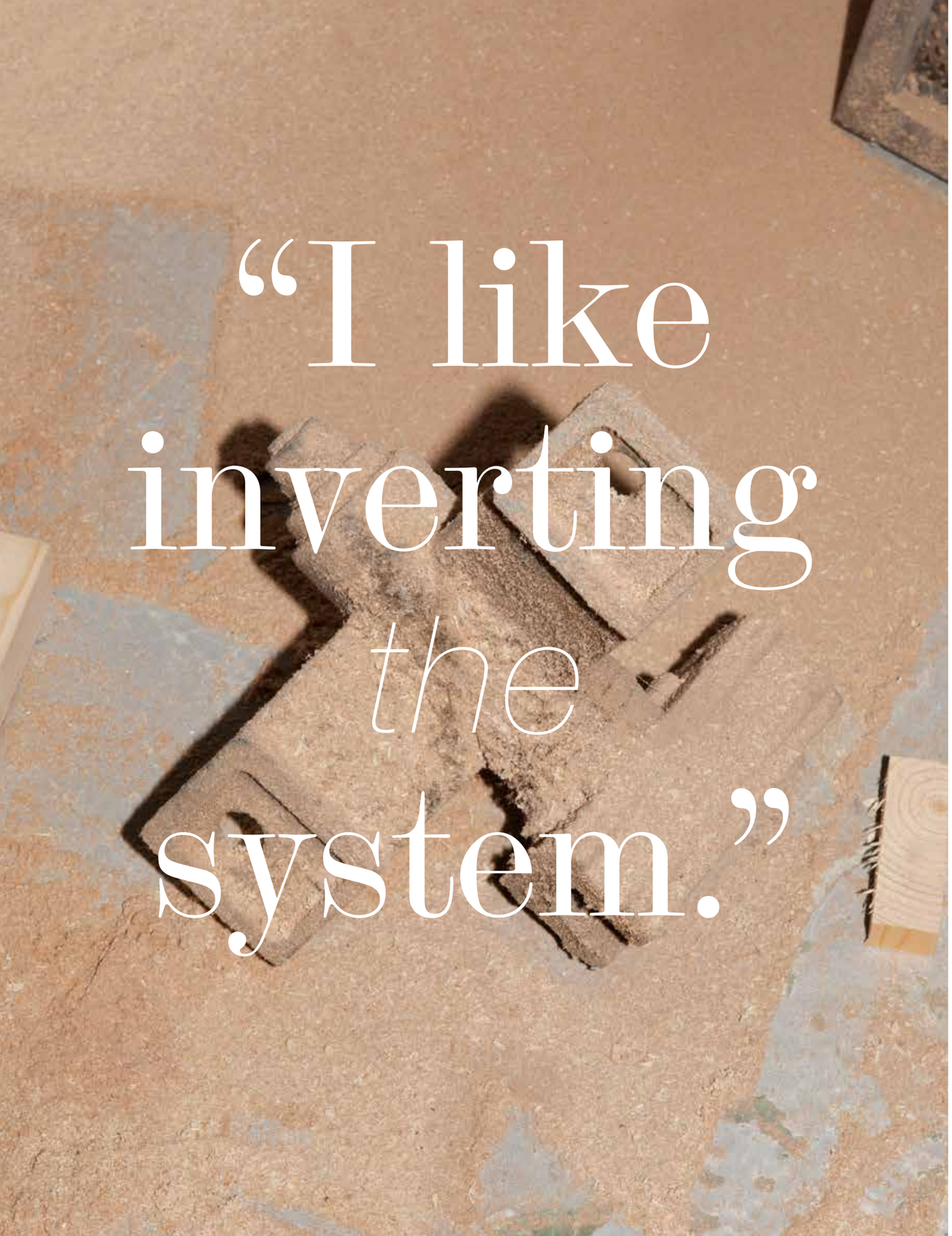
In the end, I think the ideals of youth always stay with us, growing less severe, more pondered and measured. It may be puerile, but I don't want to lie to myself: I know I am part of this world and its systems, and that deep down, I'd love to have a Porsche and a house with exterior glass walls, were it possible.

Your father made an important film in Algeria at the end of the '70s and then stopped abruptly. Your career started with a short film you made as a student in Africa and never stopped; ten years later, you keep on linking things together without a break. I have the impression that rather than just a cool pursuit of success, you're in fact motivated by a fear of failure. Am I wrong?

Failure doesn't bother me. I love it, because it's motivational. I actually have a productive neurosis linked to my history and those close to me which makes me value the act of doing something, the absolute merit of work, above all else.

I am afraid of not being able to do things anymore, or of not being allowed to do things anymore.

I am aware of the fact that nothing lasts, that it's a privilege to be able to do what I do, although I do get bored or frustrated at times. But again, I think that I've calmed down quite a bit and fixed these issues over the years.



“I like inverting *the* system.”

In a James Bond film, would you more likely be the villain seeking revenge, or James, who wants to succeed simply in order to hang out with girls and have drinks?

I don’t really want revenge—what I want is not to be disturbed. Nor do I particularly want to succeed. I just don’t want to stop. And in the end, I surely want to hang out with girls and have drinks as well. (laughs)

But when I ask you how is it going, you usually reply, “C’est la guerre”, a French idiomatic expression that literally means “it’s war” and describes a feeling of constriction as if an interfering force (even laziness) may prevent from accomplish a task.

I often use a slightly strong, almost militaristic vocabulary in talking about production. Generally, I think my practice is often driven by feelings of constraint and urgency, which allows me to do things directly instead of thinking what I should do, which can often lead to depression. It allows me not to let doubt interrupt my projects. It also forces me to accept that certain projects are not worth it, which is not bad in the end. This is my method at the moment. I often wonder how it would be to have less to do, but honestly, I don’t know if I’d be able to work pushed only by my self-motivation.

You’re able to summarize a book without having read it, and you have an extremely personal theory about anything you discover. At times, I have the impression that you work the same way as you speak, as if you were offering an illustration to look at, through the immediate construction of shapes and your rhetoric on world and society. It’s a very pictorial attitude.

I love to see art as a laboratory of "uncultivated" sciences; there's nothing to know, nothing to search for, but it's still done. I'm fascinated by the functional systems of the very simple things in our society, always with some representational tricks, a bit of politics and a perverse loop. Today, for instance, I think that those games on iPhones in which you can pay to be stronger than other users are very perverse. They describe a violent neoliberal society where those who win are usually those who already had the most effective means to begin with. This is not set as a basic rule in the society—it's not written in the American Constitution, for instance, that the person with the biggest resources will be president—but in reality, that's undoubtedly what happens. So these smartphone games affirm something extremely harsh, something that goes against the very notions of game or sport.
I feel that my work is not an illustration, but rather a sort of mirror, a bricolage of phenomena that interest me. I show the system as I perceive it, but since I never fully understand it, I present it to the spectator as questions rather than an explanation.

Speaking of mirrors: you spend half the year in hotels, due to exhibitions or fairs where you present your work; then, once you're back at your place, you construct a hotel in your studio as a film set.

Put simply, it's quite fun. It's basically ground zero of representational art: you reproduce what's in front of you. I saw an interview with Scorsese in which he was asked why he was not showing Italian bad boys in his films anymore. He replied that at the present time, when he opens the shutters and looks out of the window, he doesn't see gangsters—he sees his garden and some deer in it.
At the same time, I love hotels as places—they're at once neutral and politically charged. The touristic resorts are all a bit like this, but they have magniloquent names: the Imperial, Best Western, Continental. They're all sort of symbols for the replacement of imperial systems by mass tourism—they're now suffering due to the emergence of Airbnb, just as the occidental societies economically suffer from "Uberisation," and so on.

Do you wish to talk about your film, its purpose?

This film, *Hotel Occidental,* is the biggest project I've engaged in my whole life, but it's also one of the first projects that I've undertaken with no specific purpose in mind. I'm tired of always producing for things—an exhibition, a context, an opportunity, a fund. What I wanted to do with this project was to break the traced path. No one is expecting the project, there's no recipient, none asked for it nor sponsored it. We self-financed the project, and though it has been done slowly, it's been done on our own.
This is the project that's taken up the biggest amount of my time, energy and stress. When you produce within the "hell circle," you slowly start to interact with an audience, which I find dangerous. Here, I tried to embrace the risk, which could allow me to produce in order to produce, and ensure that the conditions necessary for my project to exist were those enacted by the project itself, autonomously. It's a way of defining a form of independence from the artistic practice: it is not the work of art that needs the institution to exist, but vice versa.
My hope is that this work becomes a little popular. It would mean making a fictional film in a pirate system which could be seen by all, and which addresses the constrictions of the industry without having been constrained by them. I want it to come out publicly. I want it to live autonomously, without having to lean on the art context, and that people laugh, cry or are frightened while watching it.

Usually, in my projects, there is neither empathy nor the vocation to move people. Here, there is. I know that despite the effort, it's possible that the film will be a big failure, and that it will stay on my personal computer. I'd be disappointed, of course, but at the same time, that's what this system allows: to be satisfied with having made it, having tried. Its "public" success (or lack thereof) won't change that.

If an end should come, a sort of revolt in the Beloufa studio, what would it be like?

It happened already! I found myself all alone, like a fool, in my huge studio with no electricity.

So what did you do?

I waited for the end of the day on the couch.

Camille Blatrix (French, b. 1984) is an artist who lives and works in Paris. He is represented by Galerie Balice Hertling, Paris. He has exhibited in several international venues, including the Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Centre Pompidou, Paris; and Sculpture Center, New York, and won the Prix d'Entreprise Ricard for Emerging French Artists in 2014.