

# Even



## An interview with Neil Beloufa

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When he was just 22, the French-Algerian artist Neil Beloufa made one of those student artworks that defines a career: *Kempinski* (2007), a tour de force of improvised science fiction that offers a glimpse of utopia in a dusty Bamako suburb. It was the first of many shotgun marriages of fact and fabrication that Beloufa would arrange over the last decade. His numerous films, as well as the ramshackle and often modular environments he builds to display them, don't deconstruct Hollywood formulas and digital commonplaces; they capitalize on them, redeploing conventions to often anarchic ends. This spring, after previous outings in Los Angeles and London, he's presenting a new work at the Museum of Modern Art that continues his investigation of politics, desire, and the technologies that broadcast and shape them.

Beloufa was born in Paris in 1985, and he works in a massive studio just south of the city — which he recently kitted out as a 70s-era hotel, the backdrop for a new film and a 30-artist group show. We meet

two days before Christmas, at a dive of a café next door to the Théâtre de la Ville. He seems bemused that I speak French; he talks fast, chases ideas as they come. The country is still under a state of emergency, and the streets are quiet, with fewer tourists than the season would imply. A few hours after we part, the prime minister holds a press conference to announce a new constitutional reform: people who hold two nationalities will be stripped of their French citizenship if convicted of certain crimes. To be French is an unsettled thing these days; what was once unsayable now is aired on the nightly news, and *égalité* doesn't mean what it did in 1789. × *Jason Farago*

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Your installations are usually precariously constructed and made with cheap materials, but the films you show within them are rather more polished. Was cinema your first love?

I was doing graphic design from the age of 15. I didn't want to be involved with cinema. I went to art school in large part to not do cinema. My father made a film, just one movie in 1979, and went crazy. He was a director in Algiers — he was very passionate about the Tricontinentale, the Non-Aligned Movement, international networks of developing countries. So he made one movie, set in Beirut during the first phase of the civil war, and then it was cut out of my history. I saw it when I was 18, but by then I didn't live with my father. My mother was a film editor until I was four, but I didn't know much about her work. I must have been frustrated, I think. I come from a cinema culture; my mother was showing me films; but I was defining that as something I didn't want to do.

You were doing graphic design as a commercial proposition, as a teenager?

Yeah, to make money. First I was doing it for fun, and then I wanted an income. I wanted to make cartoons, but I'm bad at drawing — so the cartoon school said no. I ended up applying to go to Arts Déco [*École nationale supérieure des arts décoratifs, one of France's leading art schools*] to study graphic design. I was admitted, and at that time I was also selling cars. The first month of my studies coincided with the annual car show in Paris, so, you know, I wasn't really going a lot to Arts Déco. Besides, I really hated it — it was so scholastic, and they were really heavy into applied arts.

You completed *Kempinski* (2007), your first major work, when you were still a student.

Yes, I was a third-year.

Had you been to Mali before?

No, I was sent there. Arts Déco sent my whole class. Until I was six I went back and forth between France and Algeria. I had been to Senegal, and I lived in Egypt for a very short time.

There was a partnership with the development bank. We were supposed to do something in the new hospital. Imagine a whole class of French people, coming through with cameras. Basically, I wanted to send a fuck-you to my teachers — well, not to my teachers, I liked them, but to the idea of being paternalistic, of going to Africa with a camera and filming miserably poor people in a hospital. I wanted to do something cleverer.

It is an ingenious conceit: the Malians you speak to describe their visions of the future, but they use present-tense verbs while doing so. *We have light-speed travel. We have telepathic sex. We communicate with the stars.*

*Kempinski* is a documentary, but it doesn't take anything from them. The way I was proposing my idea to people on the street was to say, "Let's say 'fuck you' to the west." I used my dual position, and I wanted to play with that ability to go between north and south. Let's not play the game of these French miserabilists, and let's say, "We live in the future, you don't."

This is the first of many works in which you worked with amateurs. Why did you want to work with not-trained actors?

At the time of *Kempinski* I still wanted to make documentaries. But I've always liked working within constraints, and I guess non-professionals appealed because it was the easier way of producing something. I wasn't good at writing, and I liked the qualities of these characters that I would never have been able to invent. If you talk to someone and try to bring him somewhere, where he goes never correlates with any of my presumptions.

I thought everyone at Arts Déco would be pissed off, and instead they were so happy. My point had been to rebel against the program's expectations, and to be able to defend fiction as documentary. I tried to say: *No, no, this is a documentary. I never wrote anything. It's just a grammatical mistake.* But my teachers didn't even care about that, it was already over. For them it was a fiction.

It had become a science fiction film, almost. The quality of the images, the fact that you filmed at night, gives it the appearance of something closer to science fiction. But there's no invention on your part at all. They're just holding a neon tube you provided.

No, it's just a live reaction. What makes it feel that way is the neon light. I always say this, but if you look at cartoons from the 1950s, there's always this game they play: you know it's drawn, you see the layers. If Bugs Bunny is going to open the door, it's not in a wall, it just stands there in space, like an outline. When you're a kid, instead of watching the cartoon and being absorbed in the fiction, you look at that outline of a door, and you're like, *It's going to open, I know it. Something is going to happen.* What happens is that you double-cross the fiction; the film becomes real. That's what happens with the neon light, that's what happens when you leave the wire visible. It's not science fiction — it's just a neon light — but it is.

It's interesting to hear you say all this, because you were a student at the exact moment when the art scene in Paris was regaining international visibility after decades in obscurity. So much of the work that was around at that time — Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno, but also lots of other people from the early days of the Palais de Tokyo and such — were playing with these questions of how cinema can intercede in reality, how fiction can infect the real.

In one sense I'm totally a child of that generation. I make super-Frenchy work. But I was quite uneducated about that generation when I was a student, to be honest. It was in the air, more likely. I was an assistant to Laurent Grasso, one of the artists of the generation under them. When I was at school, Laurent would insult me because I didn't know anything. The thing is, the world of fine art wasn't connected up then in the same way it is now. Arts Déco was really remote from the art world, and we didn't have things like Contemporary Art Daily. Our connection to the art world was almost folkloric. I saw things shift in my fifth year in art school: suddenly the freshmen were much more plugged in. It was the internet, but also they became cooler, they knew New York, and they spoke English. But when I first arrived, looking up at the people five years older than me, I miss that time. You were producing some shit that looks like a Thomas Houseago, but you were a loser. No one knew anything.

That's part of being a student.

It was part of being in a less globalized, less connected world. People were bad at making things that looked like what art was "supposed" to look like. And then people started to know everything. Boom, boom, boom.

In *Brune Renault* (2010), you have this bitter portrait of Parisian youth — driving aimlessly around town, mouth-ing a few superficial observations. Then you see that the Renault is sliced in pieces, so that you can shoot in on a soundstage.

That was my thesis work. It was two years after *Kempinski*, and I had only been making movies

with non-actors. That had become easy, like a formula, so I was a bit scared. I decided to switch my endgame, and to rethink that balancing line where you don't know if it's fiction or not. When you see the car is cut into four parts, then the actors are not acting anymore; they're *people who are actors* who are trying to act, and they're caught on a set.

But what's the motivation behind a cinema that's always questioning itself? To expose the mechanisms by which movies work — to show that actors are only actors — is not much of a goal in itself. It has to be the means to get somewhere else...

Now that I've done 18 movies, I can see that many are shitty, but I like the ones that are not successful. What interests me in life is relations to representation and relations of power and authority. It's the system. What interests me is having something that doesn't affirm, but still produces something that makes your suspension of disbelief your own decision, a conscious decision. You know what you're doing. If you get absorbed, that's something you *choose* to do. So the metafiction becomes a kind of political gesture.

Sure, and all of this is alongside an often global examination of politics, colonialism and economic systems. *Kempinski*, like you said, is an act of postcolonial one-upmanship. In *World Domination* (2012), games are being played with the language of representation, and yet the improvised dialogue is shocking.

If you look at all the works chronologically, you can see that each work is always trying to undermine the success of the work before it. In *World Domination*, I threw out the whole question of fiction and documentary. There's no mystery anymore. *Kempinski* has this all-encompassing world, a mysterious world with nice music and strange lighting. This one is pure, flat, radical. It's like vomit. And you understand its principles in three seconds. The tension derives from how far they're going to go, what they're going to say next. The participants are totally racist and violent, and you want to laugh, but you're not sure you're allowed.

The non-actors are in the roles of presidents, foreign ministers, security forces — and almost every one of them sounds like a dictator. Everyone wants to go to war.

There was a screening during the Nuit Blanche one year, right next to the Hôtel de Ville, on a big screen by the city hall. All of these passersby were watching these political speeches right next to a major political building, and people were stunned by the violence. One character talks about Turks in Germany and actually uses the words "final solution." Some people were pissed off. An old woman said it was not funny for me to do that. I like that she can refuse the movie.

How do you get from cinema to installation in galleries? A lot of your early work was shown in a black box; now they almost always appear as part of janky, makeshift installations. How did you begin to think of these things as sculptural?

I don't like authority, but I believe in conventions. I've enjoyed building things since I was a kid. But I always built poorly. When my mother saw my first show, she said, "When you were making those wobbly shelves, and I was throwing them away, was it art?" My father went to a show and said the gallery must not have had much money because the benches were shitty. And I said, "No, that's my work."

If I want to do cinema I do cinema. I take responsibility for where my stuff is shown. But the art gallery offers a certain critical distance that you can't get in cinema. Maybe in the 70s it was different. But today cinema is a global industry, with the constraint of a certain audience. Today, if you refuse the conventions of the screen, you're a douchebag. Whereas in the 60s and 70s they were really thinking about it. The Nouvelle Vague, or Pasolini, or even Nicholas Ray — *They Live by Night* is beautiful for that. Those guys wanted to be artists, and now it's the opposite. Artists want to be in film.

*Tonight and the People* (2013), this bizarre riff on American film and TV which you made during your



Hammer Museum show, begins as a work of video art, and then the components cohere into a feature film.

It's a meta-feature film. The purpose was to look like a feature film because it was about Hollywood. The history of America is contemporary with the fictionalizing of the history of America. Griffith's westerns, for example, the first western movies, were happening when the American west was still full of cowboys. So if fiction and history are written at the same time — if the big American myth, especially in California, is written through fiction — then I am allowed to say my fiction is reality.

You set up your shots with an almost pitiless *mise-en-scène* — sitcom lighting, flat stage sets —and what's amazing is that your performers play along so seamlessly. It's like reality TV in reverse.

Everyone wants to be something else. My actors are real gangsters, or real cowboys, but they want to be actors. I found them on Craigslist. We cast cowboys with horses, their own horses. It's really an experiment with ideology, the same ideology that Griffith was working with.

I can take for granted that whatever I film is real, because everyone wants to be an actor in LA. It was the first time in my career where meeting non-actors was hard. Everyone was an actor, even the gangsters. One of them was an extra on *Training Day*. He's a gangster, and all he wants is to be an actor.

But I feel as if I missed the target with that work. I wanted it to be flat, sure, but usually, even if it's flat, there's a meta-question, something in the structure of the film that makes you want to keep watching. For *Kempinski*, it's: is it real or fake? For *World Domination*, it's: what are they going to say next? And it becomes hypnotic. And with *Tonight and the People*, that didn't happen. No one realizes it's not written, there's no screenplay. So it just looks like bad fiction.

But that's its own kind of success, isn't it? When non-professional actors slip into the language of Hollywood — when *real* gangsters talk like *fake* gangsters pretending to be *real* gangsters — that's actually quite successful.

They were bad versions of themselves, which I like. I took every community that is widely represented in Hollywood, for me — I'm a tourist, I learned about America from the movies. I had my McGuffin: a red handkerchief, because I was fascinated that so many different communities use the same accessory to signal that they're different. So I imposed this rule: every community that wears a red bandanna and that is in movies, was in my movie. I cast activists, Occupy Wall Street protesters, revolutionary ultra-left types, and I wanted to make a movie about ideology and singularity, and to see how they would connect. Everyone has the same amount of time to speak. People who are boring, I let them talk. I wanted to establish no hierarchy between any ideology. That was the idea.

If you compare it with Thomas Hirschhorn — I mean, he's one of the best artists in the world, but he should be one of the worst. He's into propaganda, and I hate propaganda, whether it's left or right. When an artist starts to denounce historical violence, I want to kill him most of the time. What is beautiful in Hirschhorn's work, I suppose, is that it becomes poetic *because* it's so heavy. He pushes you to a point where the work is you. That is a kind of beauty. That should be something I hate, but I'm always taken with it.

Was Los Angeles intimidating for you? Having spent years deforming or irritating the mechanisms of Hollywood cinema, did you feel that pushing back while in Hollywood was futile?

I wanted to play with my frustration with cinema — I have this frustration, like many people. I have this fantasy that it's the last glittering place, or it's one of the last. I think in our parents' generation, it was still seen as impressive to be a writer or a doctor or a lawyer. Now, in society, everyone is a singer or a filmmaker or an actor. Art is coming back, as a social category. Being a doctor, it's like, *why?* So the work plays on the fact that I was making a wannabe movie; I'm a wannabe

director, and it's a wannabe film set. Also because in certain contexts I like watching shit. If I'm on an airplane, I'm happy there's no video art.

Nobody wants to watch Godard in coach.

And I'm happy there's *The Avengers*. I would be super pissed off if Hirschhorn's works were shown on the airplane.

The thing is: if you're right about art's "comeback" as a social category, it's no longer artists starving in garrets who are in vogue. The prestige we now afford to artists is tied up with their economic power.

Exactly. At my studio in Villejuif we started to produce other people's works, and we even organized a big show about gentrification — criticizing what we ourselves were indirectly doing. The show [*"C'est la vie?"*, a 30-artist show presented in 2015] was about how we were the bad guys, because we were gentrifying the neighborhood. We self-produced a feature film behind the show, without asking for money or permission or help. And we produced it without anyone noticing it. The goal was to make it outside the rules of the art world, in a pirate procedure. It's not going to go to the art world; it's going to theaters. Maybe it'll just remain on my computer, but if it doesn't go to theaters, it won't go to the art world. We'll see.

Something of your own resistance to authority comes back.

Yes! My own authority is as bad as any other. Increasingly I want to make projects without a set purpose, without an exhibition in mind. Finance a video without knowing whether I'll show it. Start a production of a sculpture that I have no place to exhibit. The biggest danger is using art as a way to communicate some clear message, like it's propaganda. I think that's the true enemy.

That kind of easy consumption is not just a risk in galleries. There is also the communicative aspect of art when it's experienced online, as JPGs or Instagram hits.

It's so weird. I was in Tehran, and I met a super artsy 23-year old. Being interested in art for him is the equivalent of a New Yorker being a skateboarder in the 80s. He'd read everything. He did a talk with me even though he had never seen one of my shows, and using the Internet in Iran is complicated, so he has to really dig. This kid did Iran's first Harun Farocki retrospective by himself, at 23, in a non-profit space, financed by other artists from abroad. And this guy, he talked to me only about documents because he said the new art is the art of the document, because his relationship to Contemporary Art Daily is a political relationship. He doesn't have access to the shows. For me this was beautiful. He's aware of the global discourse, but he's constrained by politics — so it means something totally different to him. For me Contemporary Art Daily is just fashion, but for him it becomes political. I really loved him.

On the subject of geography, can I ask you about Paris? It's exciting to see more and more French artists stay here. People now go to New York, to study, or California, but then come back.

I think I have a love/hate relationship. I want to leave, but I've been saying that for ten years. Paris has become a good place to work, or maybe it's that other places became bad places to work. I'm spending more time in New York now, because I have projects coming up in the US, and I have to show my face at MoMA, but I think New York is not very good for a young person. Berlin is not really good, and there is no market, like Paris. It's cheap, but it's not that cheap anymore, and there are too many artists. And then there's Brussels, where they start drinking, rather than working, because your life is too easy.

And a lot of the work that you do is about colonial history and racial difference, and that's quite rare in the French art world. I see a lot of provisional, poetic sculpture, and a lot of easy formalism. One of the reasons I find your work so interesting is that I don't see a lot of artists in France really probing questions of citizenship, of belonging.

One of the few things I really like about this country is the tradition of the essay. Not “French theory,” but a fresher, faster, less grounded sort of thinking. People like Serge Daney...

He’s one of those major French figures who has no foothold in the English-speaking world. Unless you’re a student of *Cahiers du cinéma*.

In the 80s, he would watch TV and then he’d write about what he saw, every day, for the newspaper. That culture of fast, ungrounded thinking, that is political and also conscious of itself: that’s the French culture I feel close to. But I’m a product of a double culture. I’m not a migrant, but I have a migrant’s story in a way. I have two passports; I was not supposed to live in France. I am the son of nationalist Algerians.

Were your parents in the FLN?

My grandparents. My parents are too young. I have this history: I happen to have been born in Paris because my father was supposed to make a movie. When they split up, my mother and I went back to Algiers until I was six. There were tanks in the street, and so she took us to France, but in her mind, it was temporary, and I wasn’t French. For her, France is the enemy. That is her culture; she is afraid to deal with French public services because her father was interrogated by the French. Even in Paris, when I was a kid, my grandparents encountered graffiti that said “The OAS Knows” — the Organisation de l’armée secrète, the nationalist paramilitary.

So many of those latent questions about who is French and who is not have come back with a vengeance. Over in the Place de la République I saw a sign on the makeshift memorials: Algerians stand with France...

You know that they archive all of those offerings every day? It’s crazy. They’re already archiving for the future.

We did that after 9/11.

I guess it depends on the scale of your city. It felt so weird for me that they were taking all that stuff in République, storing it, framing it, as if it were already history. It soon will be, but I never thought people were thinking about it now. Nearly planning it. Tomorrow I will go to grab the thing that has not yet been produced, to keep it for the future.

× *Jason Farago is editor of Even.*