

NEÏL BELOUFA RELIES ON OTHER PEOPLE

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JANUARY 19, 2015



Neïl Beloufa's "Counting on People" (2014). Walter Phillips Gallery, The Banff Centre. Photo Rita Taylor.

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French-Algerian artist Neïl Beloufa recently debuted *Counting on People* (<http://www.banffcentre.ca/wpg/exhibitions/current/>)(November 8, 2014 – March 1, 2015) at The Banff Centre's [Walter Phillips](#)

[Gallery](http://www.banffcentre.ca/wpg/)(<http://www.banffcentre.ca/wpg/>), a solo exhibition of the same name that was collaboratively co-commissioned for London's Institute for Contemporary Arts three months prior. In describing the difference between the two, Beloufa articulated the Banff version as being one of his "cleanest" exhibitions yet – although I had the opposite first impression. Learning more about the causal links binding each work, in both its chronology and complexity, helped clarify the underlying question Beloufa posits: how autonomous can an artist be in this hyper-mediated present?

Beloufa's most-recent work in this exhibition was produced an hour before the opening reception, with the artist officiating a race amongst the gallery staff, where he instigated a timed competition during the last push to finish the show, and rewarded the winner by posting their hastily-scrawled results. The exercise is indicative of contemporary art's latest phase of inter-relational frames, the gallery positioned as a stand-in space for a studio that envelopes the tenets of exhibition-making, the rituals of installation, the art community at hand, and the audience themselves, and utilized for the production and content of the work itself.

Beloufa superimposing his studio practices on the gallery context is a reflection of the complicated role an artist inhabits, right now, where a reliance on the conditions and institutional support offered him can be the very source for the creation of new work, while reinforcing his distance from any true association. The metaphor of this faux-residential setting within the gallery would be, of course, the superficial and disparate connection you can find with your 715 "friends" on Facebook. At this point in contemporary culture, I don't know if an artist could function independently even if they tried to. The desperation of the exhibition's title (*Counting on People*) prepared me to get lost in the visual rhetoric of the exhibition: but ultimately, it's hard to count on people, as an artist – in so many, and newly complicated, ways.

During his last public speech as the Walter Phillips Gallery curator, Jesse McKee examined Beloufa's intense interest in the dominion of social-media platforms that connect globalized "creative types" (through Vine, Skype, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram etc.), stressing the evident democratization of their media. Beloufa's stylistic references play on our familiarity with these accessible formats but points at these artworks' potential political agency. Each film challenges a territorialized and

bordered approach to media valuation, mocking scenes of official news reportage and boardroom dramas while emphasizing that in a post-Wiki-Leaks era, any illusion of freedom within our technology has been lost. The Darwinian nature of social media is dependent on groomed 'likes' by the majority, which neutralizes and generalizes all content by the sheer impact of its own largess, becoming a numbing hulk of extinct digital 'information'. Given this, Beloufa's works unravel with their personal references, quotidian traces; mirrored, interlaced narratives, and backstories upon backstories.

McKee relates this idea to the apparent "sovereignty" of the internet, a benign being that only achieves power when a mass invests in its potent capability. Beloufa represents this concept as a Jurassic façade dividing the gallery space, a front propped up and dependent of its body 'politic', the audience. As soon as you invest in the artifice projected on this sliding, hulking screen, you walk around the form and see the elaboration of its construction, and the illusion in front of you collapses. Beloufa's sculptural illustration of the concept, for instance, visibly evolved from his *The first dinosaur, lampshade, fertility and complete denial* (2014) presented at the ICA, where the reverse side of the 'dinosaur' is designed with an intent to be, debatably, more visually complex as a support structure than its relief frontage. With a skeleton of metal armature and wires, the projection seeps through the fiberglass back of the creature, flattening into a 'true' reflection across a mirror on the back gallery wall, reduced to a picture in motion.

Beloufa's second video installation, with a hovering image filtered through layers of Plexiglas, is distractingly beautiful. Eventually I focus on the elaborate drama unfolding before me, drawn through the camp narrative of *Home Is Whenever I'm with You* (2014) by the sudden recognition that a friend of mine is costumed as its bow-tied newscaster. I learn that Beloufa hires local talent for his videos, further inculcating the social network of his art audience, capitalizing on a rich sub-narrative of provincial artworlds, and creating an immediate web of familiarity between his viewing audience and the film itself.

Home Is Whenever I'm with You presents an elaborate melodrama demonstrating what dominates the news in 'real' life, with the clumsy actors responding to the effects of a global pandemic that threatens their immediate environs, and the film providing a political metaphor for its author's own position onto the gallery, his being a globally-recognized

artist who makes work in a very small town.

A directional column of sound lures me to the mobiles flanking the entrance of the gallery space, their futuristic and chandelier-like Plexiglas umbrellas leading me to a series of suspended puzzle-piece images that are literally 'cut and pasted' on fiberboard: a dildo, a Facebook "thumbs-up" icon, a "text-fail" icon. As the pervasive symbols slowly turn on their transparent mobile strings, I try to piece together their meaning.

My face turned to the mobile, I was unaware of the CCTV camera positioned at its center generating a content feed for *VENGEANCE* (2014). This film is a real-time construction of a narrative Beloufa transcribed from a group of urban youths near his studio in the south of Paris. Their meeting was administered by a social justice scheme that attempts to give at-risk children fulfilling and meaningful encounters with a mentor. Beloufa asked his students to tell a story and narrate its key elements for a visualization of these suspended puzzles. Exterior to the gallery space, a computer program assembled the correct corresponding symbol of the story together in real time with the captured surveillance footage of the unassuming audience, creating a clumsy screenplay of this adolescent drama.

Beloufa describes this work as a failure, however without giving any further details I'm left to suspect the top-down origin of his relationship to his young subjects gives him this feeling more than his actual attempts to connect and relate to his teen neighbors. Most audience members seem delighted to engage, and unbothered by the trickery of the surveillance tactic. It's as if the work was a "selfie" of the viewers' exhibition experience and this is where the true sentiment of disappointment resides, in a collective social failure that makes us all complicit in its ubiquity.

The most poignant work was the final piece, *Data for Desire* (2014). Where international artists pass through Banff's transient and resort-like community with the same frequency as those in town for a snowboarding stint, Beloufa adroitly cross-pollinates two social scenes in one film, the first presenting a group of local hospitality workers entrenched in classic Banff escapades, and the second presenting an elite group of young French mathematicians. Beloufa films the flirtations and social nuances of the Banff visitors in a documentary style as they

chug beers around a barbeque. He then films French students analyze and statistically estimate the probabilities of hookups between them, as if they were wildlife. As the master puppeteer, the artist manages to equalize the class differences and settings of the two groups, inviting its viewers to perceive attraction and rejection equally in both tests, while effecting an uncanny portrait of current-day “Banff Life,” an impressive portrait for an outsider.

The tenuous thread connecting Beloufa’s directorial projects is most apparent in the spot-welded rebar scene of *Data for Desire*. Situated outside a constructed living-room window, I had to adjust my stance to see it from the best perspective, where the crudely-cut and fused pieces of metal combine to form the silhouette of a female form. The artist’s gestures draw through rebar the careful weight of a breast, the inviting curve of a clavicle connected to a turned shoulder and then a delicate wrist holding what might be a gun to what is likely her temple.

After experiencing so many complicated works within close proximity to one other, I was reminded of an overwhelming studio visit wherein the experiments and process overshadow any resolved work. Despite my general aversion to participatory *mise-en-scènes*, I did leave this exhibition with a sense of intended attachment to these carefully constructed scenarios. Punctuating domestic touches, like Plexiglas coffee-tables supported by cut-out metal feet and a duct-taped packing sectional sofa affected a sense of comfort designed to appease my reticent collusion.

A shelf lies underneath the mirror on the wall, doubling and bettering the appearance of several hand-built ceramic abstractions: hand-built forms so badly made they’re good. With a dismissive wave of his hand, the artist seems to mock his very consignment, stating “everyone makes shitty ceramics at The Banff Centre, so I should too.” It would be easy to accept this as a flippant remark if I didn’t know it was a subtle homage to the ceramic garden, and a nod at the unspoken artists’ ritual to leave a handmade object among the temple of plants where the artists gather to rest, discuss, and intimate.

A committed smoker, Beloufa’s cigarettes linger as the only trace narrative connecting the installations. A rebar frame of resin on the wall encases the tiny flecks of ash as they float in their relative position to the timing of a small personal action, some closer to the foreground and

some in the background. The remnants of his experience in this place produce an archeological mantel of the exhibitions' final crystallization over time, and stays present in my mind well after the fact. The humor, pathos, and ego of this final arbitrary and postured gesture reveals the closest self-portrait of the artist in the exhibition: his humanity and ultimate interdependence with the audience, and the futility of the individual who must count on people, despite the fallibility of their relationships.

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