

The Colonies

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Walking around the installation *The Colonies* (2016) by Neil Beloufa (Algerian-French, born 1985), you'll find a large-scale kinetic sculpture, custom-made walls and seating structures, and cameras and monitors that are part of a closed-circuit television (CCTV) system. But you might not immediately catch the video *People's passion, lifestyle, beautiful wine, gigantic glass towers, all surrounded by water*, which is both visible everywhere and hard to see. Made by Beloufa in 2011, the video shows people fervently describing their experiences living in an unnamed but presumably North American city. Their accounts resemble fantasies of a cosmopolitan bourgeois urban culture and are paired with images of the natural world—parks, waterfalls, mountain ranges—perfectly suited to their lifestyle needs.

Beloufa worked collaboratively—as he typically does—to make *People's passion*, teaming up with the actors who appear in the video to generate its script, which has them exclaiming, “People are beautiful here,” “They have a really good work-life balance,” and “Nothing says class, . . . power, elegance, romance, . . . human ingenuity like a city full of these glass towers.” The subjects’ sheer enthusiasm, their visible microphones, and the constant sound of chirping birds give the video a familiar artificiality. Evocative of several recognizable genres—documentary, infomercial, science fiction—it transforms statements about how the world could be into descriptive statements in the present tense, covering any social antagonisms with an uncanny sheen.



Still from *People's passion, lifestyle, beautiful wine, gigantic glass towers, all surrounded by water*. 2011. Video (color, sound), 10:59 min.

Watching *People's passion* as the artist has installed it might overwhelm or, on the contrary, sedate you. In the center of the space, it is projected through multiple layers of transparent plexiglass adhered to a steel armature that moves back and forth on its track. The video also plays on a flat-screen monitor positioned on a wall, where it can be viewed in the same way one might glance at advertisements in the supermarket or watch surveillance cameras in an operations control center—which is to say, as a distraction, or in anticipation of content that might never arrive. Beloufa's viewing formats bring televisual forms associated with consumption and control to the experience of looking at art.

Yet another iteration of the video appears at the gallery's rear, in front of a sculpture that is a wall of translucent blue resin scaled to the adjacent windows, which overlook MoMA's Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden and the city beyond. As you watch the video, then perhaps look out into the Garden, and watch the video again, the performers' descriptions seem to connect their ideal city with the glass windows of the Museum and the high-rise apartments visible from it. The actors' accents and the footage signal that their city is not this city, but the gap between where *People's passion* was shot and where it is currently being shown only strengthens the video's sense of placelessness.

Even when presenting a video he's shown before, Beloufa often makes a new architectonic structure in which to project, migrate, translate, and refract it, as is the case here. He conceives each structure expressly for the location where it will be exhibited and makes it by hand using inexpensive construction materials and techniques and computer software, with the help of a small crew of artist friends and neighbors. This way of working resembles contemporary models of economic production that are pegged to individualized models of mass consumption. At their best, social networking sites like Facebook mine your data so that you might reconnect with a cousin recently released from prison; more perniciously, performance management systems enabled by big-data analysis have also allowed companies to maximize economic output at the risk of compromising the personal well-being of employees. Megacorporations sell services and products to billions of people yet oversee delivery and monitor satisfaction through single-person units. Beloufa mimes the fabrication and distribution chains of these modular forms of mass culture, albeit in ways that maximize critique rather than efficiency. He presents his videos like products, tailoring each viewing structure to the



Still from *People's passion, lifestyle, beautiful wine, gigantic glass towers, all surrounded by water*. 2011. Video (color, sound), 10:59 min.

specific site—an institution or a collector's home—where the work will be consumed by individual viewers.

In this regard, it is interesting to consider how *The Colonies* inhabits the environment for which it was made. The video's images are reflected onto the translucent sculpture that is scaled to the gallery's windows, turning the sculpture into both a wall and a surface. MoMA's building, designed by Yoshio Taniguchi and completed in 2004, emphasizes transparency in its use of glass; the material has been central to the Museum's architecture since its first permanent home, designed by Philip L. Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone, opened in 1939. But if in modernist architecture glass has been imagined as a material that can diminish distinctions between interior and exterior, reveal the actions of the powerful, and thus transform society, Beloufa demonstrates how it can also be used for subterfuge. His 2010 video *Untitled*, for example, is inspired by a rumor about a house with floor-to-ceiling windows on all sides that was abandoned by its owners during Algeria's civil war in the 1990s and occupied for three years by a terrorist group. The short video features interviews that vary but are linked by a recurring narrative: the terrorists managed to remain clandestine despite the fact that they chose to live under potential 24/7 scrutiny. The work shows how something that can promote ideals of clarity, openness, and rationality can also create dissimulation, artifice, and lawlessness.

Beloufa's recent feature-length film *Occidental* (2016) is similarly caught in a loop beyond the law, where distinctions between guilt and innocence, reality and fiction, are suspended. The dystopian narrative is set in the near present or recent past, at the Occidental, a hotel located just outside a Paris beset by riots. When the hotel is bombed, no one knows which guests or hotel workers are potential terrorists and which are victims. In its depiction of a French metropolis at war, the video recalls the psychoanalyst and theorist Frantz Fanon's notes for “Surveillance and Control,” a series of lectures he was supposed to give in 1957, at the height of decolonization. He posits that modernity can be analyzed through the surfeit of records and documents that the colonial state organizes to form a biography of the subject. He goes on to describe the effects of CCTV on sales clerks in large department stores, suggesting that the cameras are trained not only on potential thieves but also on employees, who internalize the video's watchful eye.¹ Today, Fanon's analysis can be read as an annotation of Beloufa's film, in which the Occidental's hotel manager, who is *rebeu* (of North African descent), is depicted in an ambiguous way: she surveys as much as she is surveyed. Beloufa's character, like Fanon's critique, reminds us that the various forms of surveillance that have intensified since September 11, and again after the 2005 riots in France and the 2015 Bataclan attacks,

are not novel; rather, their technologies are extensions of capitalist and colonial systems of control.

In addition to providing a critique of colonial forms of power, Beloufa's work builds on the history of postwar art that relates to technology and media, and surveillance in particular. The CCTV system inside *The Colonies*—which captures footage of visitors to the installation and is played live on two monitors—uses commercially available analog cameras that have served surveillance functions for governments and businesses since the mid-twentieth century. In the 1970s, artists including Vito Acconci, Dan Graham, and Bruce Nauman used this technology in participatory installations in order to undermine its ideological underpinnings. More recently, Hito Steyerl responded to what she calls “horizontal” forms of surveillance—in which people take countless pictures on their cellphone cameras and publish them in real time via social media²—with her software-file essay set on a drone-testing site, *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013). Going against prevailing logic, Steyerl proposes that to become invisible one should take a picture of oneself or even turn into a picture, implying that hyper-visibility can also be a form of disappearance.

Beloufa follows a similarly counterintuitive logic about surveillance technology, using CCTVs productively to create participants in a surveillance loop. As you look at the fiber-optic cables Beloufa reveals in the Museum's architecture or at other visitors looking at themselves looking at the installation, an excess of technology is rendered dramatically visible. The environment positions viewers as collaborators in a specific surveillance apparatus and possibly encourages them to care about fellow gallery-goers being watched next to them. Rather than representing surveillance as a total threat *out there*, Beloufa renders it as something specific that is mediated by people and thus, perhaps, more susceptible to critique or even dismantling.³

In Beloufa's projections, light is obstructed and dispersed onto multiple surfaces. Emphasizing the way in which images easily bleed across supports, his work presents the apparatuses that enable visual culture in their unadorned materiality. His work draws your attention to the unframed gaps in the image's appearance—the places where the ground becomes the figure—and the lapses in the circuit, where, for example, you have to look at the real person to understand her virtual mediation, or vice versa. Beloufa insists that his work “isn't the

actual object but the relations I have built with it.”⁴ These relations—between object and viewer, between the virtual and the real—are simultaneously articulated and interrupted. Images slide between critiquing and imitating disciplinary forms of surveillance and consumer culture. Editing space and sculpting images, he invites us into the blank screens and technological misfires where we might reach out to—or just bump into—one another.

Notes

¹ See Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

² See Hito Steyerl, “The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation,” in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), pp. 160–75.

³ Rob Horning, “Surveillance Notes,” *The New Inquiry* blog, January 31, 2016, <http://thenewinquiry.com/blogs/marginal-utility/surveillance-notes/>.

⁴ Alexander Scrimgeour, “1000 Words: Neil Beloufa,” *Artforum* 53, no. 2 (October 2014): 234–35, 304.

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Projects 102: The Colonies

March 12–June 12, 2016

The Werner and Elaine Dannheisser Lobby Gallery

Checklist of Works in *The Colonies*

High definition and objectives: expansion and transparency. 2016. Steel, plexiglass, aluminum, paper, motor, computer, speakers, and Formica, 6' 8" × 16' 4" × 6' 9" (203.2 × 497.8 × 205.7 cm)	aluminium cans, and computers, dimensions variable
Safety: live, at ease, JIT and fun. 2016. Three seating sculptures with six CCTVs, six Raspberry Pi cameras, steel, wood, epoxy resin, aluminum, pleather, foam, cigarette butts, rebar, plexiglass, acrylic, plastic,	Paravant view: nice and clean. 2016. Steel, expanded foam, resin, and pigments, 14' 1" × 23' 11" × 2' 9" (429.3 × 729 × 83.8 cm)
	People's passion, lifestyle, beautiful wine, gigantic glass towers, all surrounded by water. 2011. Video (color, sound), 10:59 min.
	All works courtesy the artist

Project Credits

Engineering: Raphaël de Staël
Construction: Dylan Le Dean, Mehdi Moujane
Computer and AV Design: Pierrick Saillant, Johan Lescure

Production: Chrystele Nicot
Video Production: Jesse McKee, Western Front
Logistics: Holly Stanton

Organized by Thomas J. Lax, Associate Curator, Department of Media and Performance Art. The Elaine Dannheisser Projects Series is made possible in part by the Elaine Dannheisser Foundation and The Junior Associates of The Museum of Modern Art.



Les Manques Contenus. 2011–13. Video (color, sound, 10:59 min.), plexiglass, steel construction, computer prints on paper, tape, paper, plastic sheets, clay, medium-density fiberboard, and found objects, 9' 10 1/8" × 8' 2 7/16" × 6' 10 10/11" (300 × 250 × 210 cm). Installation view, *Love Is Colder Than Capital*, Kunsthau Bregenz, February 2–April 14, 2013

Cover: Detail of *Superlatives and Resolution, People's Passion, Movement and Life.* 2014. Video (color, sound, 10:59 min.), plexiglass, steel construction, digitally controlled motor, computer prints on paper, tape, plastic sheets, medium-density fiberboard, and clay, dimensions variable. Collection K11 Art Foundation, Hong Kong. Installation view, *Hopes for the Best*, Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin, April 4–May 31, 2015

All photos courtesy the artist; Galerie Balice Hertling, New York and Paris; François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles; Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo; and ZERO..., Milan.

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Neil Beloufa

