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 center—which is to say, as a distraction, or in anticipation of content that might never arrive. Beloufa’s viewing formats bring televised 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 architecture 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 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 networks like Facebook allow you to 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. Mega-corporations sell services and products to billions of people yet oversee delivery and monitor satisfaction through single-person units. Beloufa mines 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 specific site—an institution or a collector’s home—with 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 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.

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 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 cellphones and publish them in real time via social media—whereby 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 present. The artist would also like to thank Dorian Gaudin, Elissa Medina, and Steffani Jemison for their feedback on earlier versions of the essay and for their insight throughout; and to Neïl Beloufa for his ambition, fight, and support; to Ramona Bannayan, Stuart Comer, Peter Eleey, and Laura Hoptman in the Department of Film, Video, 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.

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks go to Sean Anderson, Giampaolo Bianconi, Rujeko Hockley, and Josephine Weil. More recently, Hito Steyerl, Jory Rabinovitz, and Alexander Scrimgeour, and Steffani Jemison for their feedback on earlier versions of the essay.

Project Credits

Production: Christyale Nécot
Video Production: Jesse Mckee, Westerm Front
Logistics: Holy 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′ 9 1⁄2 " × 6′ 2 1⁄4 " × 6′ 30 1⁄4 " (300 × 250 × 210 cm). Installation view, Love Is Colder Than Capital, Kunsthalle Bregenz, February 2–April 14, 2013


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.

Notes


Projects 102: The Colonies
March 12–June 12, 2016
The Werner and Elaine Dannheisser Lobby Gallery

High definition and objectives: expansion and transparency. 2016. Steel, plexiglass, aluminium, paper, motor, computer, speakers, and Ferrum, 6′ 8″ × 14′ 4″ × 0′ 9″ (203.2 × 497.8 × 205.7 cm)

Safety: live, at ease. AT and fun. 2016. Three seating sculptures with six CCTVs, six Raspberry Pi cameras, steel, wood, epoxy resin, aluminium, plexiglass, foam, cigarette butt, rüdes, plexiglass, acrylic, plastic.

References


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