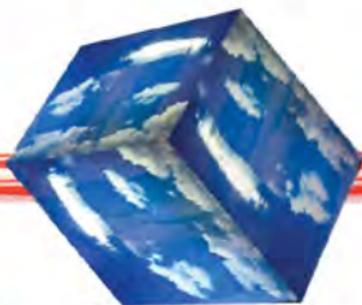


Neil Beloufa

Counting  
on  
People



EN

# Neil Beloufa

## Counting on People

In his video works and installations, artist Neil Beloufa plays with and rearranges the boundaries between reality and fiction. He creates settings in which actors and amateurs explore topics as alien life, the future, terrorism, love and world politics. Beloufa has devoted several video projects to possible futures, new worlds who despite their strangeness are conceivable because they are rooted in existing developments. It is clear that we are dealing with fiction and constructions of new realities, yet they touch upon real events, innovative technological possibilities, trends or stories that intrigue the artist. As in the best science fiction books and movies we see a world that is firmly rooted in our world while also reaching out far ahead into the future.

Beloufa often works without a script for his films. Actors, both professionals and amateurs, improvise and help shape the course of the films. His visual language borrows from idioms that we know from Hollywood movies, TV shows or commercials. Hence the strange scenes and confusing stories can still feel familiar and known.

Beloufa considers his video works as objects, as part of or even the carrier of an installa-

### Neil Beloufa, *Counting on People*

26 April - 21 June 2015

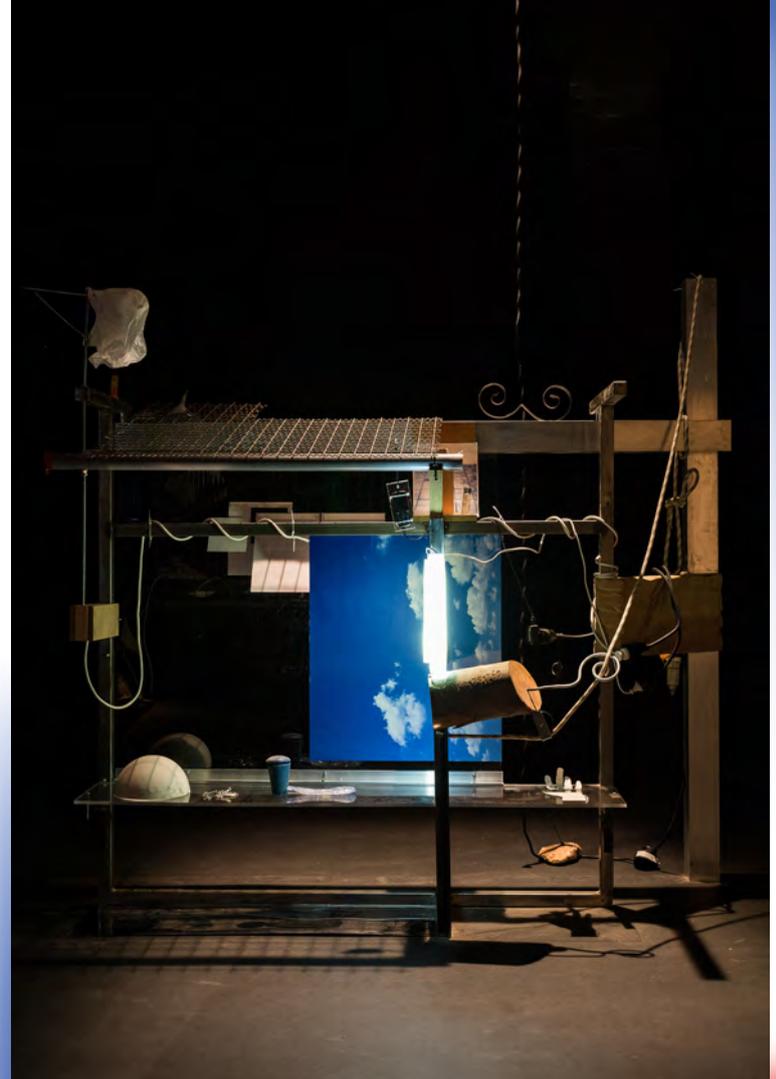
Saturday 25 April, 16 hrs: talk with Neil Beloufa and 17 hrs: opening

Cover design: The Rodina

tion. Constellations of wood, paper, metal, plastic, glass, technology, prints, et cetera gather in a sculptural arrangement around the films and affect how the viewer experiences the work.

The exhibition *Counting on People* considers questions about the rationalisation of our present world and visualises how (digital) technology increasingly invades our society, our daily lives and affects contact between people. Emotional interdependency - counting on people - is contrasted by Beloufa with other ways of counting. We take more and more decisions based on big data, statistics and algorithms. We seem to have become addicted to numbers instead of daring to trust our intuition.

Neil Beloufa,  
*Counting on  
People*,  
installation view  
at the ICA in  
London, 2014  
Photo: Mark  
Blower



# Attempts to Read the World (Differently)

“For at least 2500 years every generation thinks that the time has come when the changes taking place can no longer be overseen. The saying by the Greek philosopher Heraclitus ‘Everything flows, nothing stays’, is an example of this and every generation since has retained this feeling. But all this time, there have also been attempts to navigate together in this chaotic world.” Philosopher René Gude shows us that the fundamental changes and consequent lack of clarity, which many people now experience, are not new. But there is more at stake now. Transition expert Jan Rotmans speaks of a tilting point: our time is not an era of change, we are actually in the midst of a change of era, a paradigm shift. A change of era is a special period in which existing structures change irreversibly. Such a tilting period does not only provide opportunities but is also characterised by chaos, turbulence and uncertainty. Especially now because we are, in the words of Rotmans, in the middle of this transition phase. Things that were familiar are shaken to their foundations and this means that we experience the world as unreadable.

The changes that characterise our current time vary from almost too large and global to fathom (financial, economic and political crises, climate change, ethics of medical technologies to name a few) to small and personal (the use of social media, the way healthcare is organised). Our familiar navigation systems are in need of recalibration.

With the program *Attempts to Read the World (Differently)*, Stroom Den Haag looks in a searching, intuitive way at our present world, the rapid developments therein and possible futures. We make an effort to develop tools and appoint ways in which we can read this tipping period. After all, from within a paradigm shift it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine the new world that is emerging. Artists are eminently good guides for such a quest. Their antennae, sensitivity, open minded and unbiased look (they are, after all, not subservient to certain structures) allow them to imagine that new world.

A first step in this program was taken in September 2014 with the *WeberWoche*, a program focusing on the ideas of sociologist Max Weber. Weber described in 1919 in *Science as a Vocation* how rationalisation continues to spread and ‘enchanted’ forms of knowledge are pushed out of the public domain. For several days Stroom sought with artists, performers, filmmakers, composers and theorists for forms of enchantment and knowledge production. The polyphonic program offered reflection and a broader framework in

*WeberWoche*,  
2014  
performance  
Plastique  
Fantastique at  
Stroom Den Haag  
Photo: Kosta  
Tonev



which the importance of the non-rational in our contemporary secularised Western society was stressed.

*Attempts to Read the World (Differently)* is developed in collaboration with Fernando Sánchez Castillo, Céline Condorelli, Dunja Herzog and Neil Beloufa. These artists take the first steps in a different reading, interpretation and imagining of the world, the recalibration of a navigation system, the search for new forms of knowledge, information or communication. It is not the search for an overarching central truth but rather for a variety of possibilities and interpretations.

The program will consist of exhibitions and various public activities, including those of other artists. The program also encompasses, among others, the exhibition *A Burning Bag as a Smoke-Grey Lotus* by Gareth Moore, which Stroom realises in collaboration with La Loge in Brussels. The work of Moore focuses on the meaning, function, production and use of sound. This exhibition is on view between April 23 and May 20, 2015 at La Loge in Brussels and opens on July 4, 2015 in The Hague.

## Neil Beloufa Interview

**Neil Beloufa talks to Matt Williams, the curator of the exhibition *Counting on People* that was developed and co-produced by the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London and The Banff Centre Walter Phillips Gallery, Canada.**

**Matt Williams:** *Counting on People* is a hugely ambitious exhibition both conceptually and physically, with a wealth of work that has been presented in London, Banff and Madrid before arriving in The Hague. When you were developing the exhibition were the multiple locations a factor that you took into account?

**Neil Beloufa:** When I was developing my ideas for this exhibition I decided that I wanted to do a show centered on Western ideologies, rather than decentralizing and playing with different cultures in the way that I have in the past.

The works in the show all refer in some way to post-imperial symbols, although some are obscured. For example, during the filming of *VENGEANCE* – a work that was a collaboration with a group of French school children – some of the kids refused to include a banana as a prop. Instead they wanted to just have references to North American mainstream culture, so they argued for popcorn to replace it.

What was interesting to me symbolically was that many of the kids were coming from former colonies



Neil Beloufa,  
*VENGEANCE*,  
2014  
video still

and that the banana is an archetypal representation of colonial economies. These post-imperial references also existed in the video *World Domination* whereupon I requested that foreigners speak French and to then pretend to be president of their ‘foreign’ country, with a noticeable accent like how blockbusters represent nations other than the Western one, as I played that “imperialist” game that forbids any of them to look serious I tried to contradict myself and to highlight this gesture by letting them speak in their own language from time to time.

**MW:** *In your practice you operate a studio with a crew that involves a lot of delegation and collaborative working on a daily basis that challenges the traditional understanding of authorship and the role of the artist et cetera. This dichotomy is evident in the collaborative work VENGEANCE. How did the collaboration with a group of French school children come about, and how was the experience?*

**NB:** Artists are often used as a government’s tool for gentrification, so I was invited by an association to work with a classroom of difficult 12-14 year old kids in the Paris suburbs. I had good intentions and a strong desire to approach it in a morally correct way. I didn’t want to use them, so I proposed that I would become their tool and interface, in order to do a project that wouldn’t be mine. They would write a script and direct the movie; I would not use it nor sign it afterwards, but just produce it. They agreed at the beginning. But during the making of the project it started to fail, the kids then told me the project wasn’t theirs but mine and that they didn’t care about it anymore. So, I decided to respond to them in the same fashion, in a conscious attempt to avoid being paternalist or feel guilty and just be honest. The material then became my own, and I finished the project without them and used a robotic voice over theirs as a method of displaying the conflict in the film. To really resolve the situation and make that project totally mine, I decided that it should be shown and that the institutional failure would make it a piece. It would have been a lie to present it as a democratic social process.

These questions of authority, authorship and honesty are always present in the works and even in the way the studio works. The balance is always interesting to define.

**MW:** *You talk a lot about the standardisation of language and forms of communication, which are key themes in Home Is Whenever I’m With You. You attempt to formally represent it in the video by the use of*



Neil Beloufa, *Counting on People*, installation view at the ICA in London, 2014 (photo: Mark Blower)

*digital interfaces such as Skype and Facetime to highlight the changes in the way that we communicate, but also to illustrate how culture distinctions are becoming more and more homogenised through technology and production.*

**NB:** I am basically interested in our relationships with imagery. The world appears to be at a moment of cultural re-evaluation. This has certainly happened many times in history – at the end or beginning of knowledge structures or political systems. Today, we are definitely re-evaluating most hierarchies that are in place. For instance, in the artworld curators are increasing in number, a Wikipedia article can be written by a 14 year old with no legal expertise, a cat playing piano is as famous as Barack Obama, French presidents date pop stars and feature in tabloids, and soccer players can publicly discuss their emotional and psychological reactions following the 2010 World Cup. There's an increasing global common cultural ground (or at least, there is for the 2 billion people with Internet access and a similar level of wealth). Other than that, I'm not sure there is any proper 'change'.

What interests me in *Home Is Whenever I'm With You* is that it is a simple 'Vaudeville', classical theatre comic/drama structure. Nothing more complex than Molière. The visual-conference structure that makes it happen all around the world at the same time, allowing games with CGI, Photobooth taken as real *Lord of the Rings* type of landscapes, doesn't change anything besides making it look with a 'more real' aspect. It's the same with the whole 'Post-Internet' idea: the interface or the tools have always existed.



Neil Beloufa,  
*Home Is Whenever  
I'm With You*,  
2014  
video still

In Stanley Kubrick's *2001* there is the most beautiful ellipse of human history. The monkey discovers the tool by breaking a bone, it flies to the air and fades to a spaceship with artificial intelligence ready to take over man...

**MW:** *During your residency in Banff you made Home Is Whenever I'm With You and another work entitled Data for Desire, which I recollect discussing with you when we first met, your description of it at the time sounded like a bastardised version of Richard Linklater's Dazed and Confused and A Beautiful Mind. Why did you want to make a video about American high school kids and young French mathematicians?*

**NB:** The same way *Home Is Whenever I Am With You* plays with love and affection through technology, I wanted to look at how we like to rationalize desire and relationships. It's funny because a big trend nowadays is to calculate and create algorithms to inform how



Neil Beloufa,  
*Counting on  
People*, instal-  
lation view at  
the Institute of  
Contemporary Arts  
in London, 2014  
Photo: Mark  
Blower

we make decisions; we want information, we want numbers, we want statistics, and we base our judgment on them. What we were calling it intuition for at least 2000 years, but now it must be maths; a mystical technologic god that for most of us is pure abstraction. So for the video *Data For Desire*; I took 19-21 year old party kids from Banff in Canada and I had them build a standard fictional structure involving love affairs during a house party in a classical North American landscape with deers, beer, barbecue et cetera. I then showed the footage to French kids the same age coming from major engineering schools that study mathematical algorithms, with that old nation elitist 'academia' feel to it through the location (old amphitheaters in Les Beaux Arts de Paris).

The French try to calculate an algorithm to predict the behavior of the North American kids and to know who is going to date whom. What was really interesting for

me was to set up the cultural barriers in the project so that the game is crooked from the beginning because the French mathematicians, like most of us, have a fictional understanding and fantasy of North American culture through movies and TV. So the project becomes more about our relation to fiction and the impossibility of rationalizing love or adolescence rather than a serious scary scientific experiment.

**MW:** *And for the script did you research lots of American movies and TV shows?*

**NB:** I watch a lot of those of course, but *Data For Desire* was not really scripted; the structure is loose and my control was really distant. It's not like *Home Is Whenever I'm With You*. I asked the actors what character they wanted to be and who they wanted to try to date in the movie et cetera and then they improvised.

**MW:** *What was interesting for me when I first saw the works made in Banff was the emphasis on the narrative of the film and how they would relate or co-exist with the sculptures. Can you expand on the relationship between the sculptures and the videos?*

**NB:** I am not a real sculptor nor a good formalist, or a serious filmmaker. In everything I do I mostly work as an editor, all the works are works of collage and montage. My works resides between the piece itself and the relationship the viewer has to it. I want to do cinema in the gallery, because moving image has an incredible power on the audience and I don't want my work to appear too authoritarian. That's why I try to undercut it all the time. What interests me is when the viewer steps back and questions me and my

decisions, as well as questioning his position towards what I'm playing with. I don't want people to experience a total suspension of disbelief, I don't want to communicate and present propaganda in my voice. That's why I like to show mistakes and betray my artifices in the exhibition. At the end it's a lost fight and a lie to myself, because whatever I do, it will still be authoritarian at some point.

**MW:** *For VENGEANCE you have expanded it into an installation that features a series of sculptures with CCTV cameras and images placed in front of each of the individual cameras, which are responsive to the narrative of the video of four protagonists. The video has a descriptive, but comic dialogue that echoes throughout the lower gallery. Is the use of CCTV cameras in the exhibition a comment upon the use and proliferation of CCTV cameras in major Western cities and the general acceptance of them?*

**NB:** The CCTV element of *VENGEANCE* is perverse and ambiguous. It looks like a funny cartoon made live, meanwhile it's a societal control system that is omnipresent, particularly in London and other major Western cities. The project then becomes self-critical. Another thing that interested me in doing this is that the show constantly produces images 24/7 and refers the proliferation of images in our society. However if we step back, it is deceptive as to whether the CCTV footage is live; would change anything if it wasn't live? I like the notion of deceptive artifacts and useless interfaces seem to supersede the project the same way my iPhone looks more important than the information I'm trying to access with it. I hope showing those mechanisms allow the viewer to be responsible of its

decisions and to look from a critical distance.

**MW:** *The installation of CCTV cameras in VENGEANCE actively encourages people to engage with the work as does Missed date, sunny romance, afternoon drink which has a mobile phone attached to it that people can call; the participation and involvement of the audience seems key to your practice.*

**NB:** The gesture of allowing people to telephone a sculpture is another deceptive device. It intends to humanise the work while making the 'phone' an object of mystical power. We all know putting a phone on top of a sculpture is useless and doesn't make the sculpture an intelligent being. But the viewer can be in connivance with the gesture; laugh about it, and if they decide to activate it then it becomes part of the work through a decision that doesn't require too much consideration.

**MW:** *Is it used to purposely distract and manipulate the viewer?*

**NB:** It invites the viewer to step inside the work while simultaneously stepping back from it, forcing them into a relationship with the work that is unbalanced, that is ultimately authoritarian too. But I hope it still opposes communication or design; which are in a way its enemies.

**MW:** *When you say 'enemy' do you mean that you dislike contemporary modes of communication, propaganda et cetera or are you referring to the saturation of it within society?*

**NB:** I have no problems with design or communication... What I mean is that the way I understand my role as an artist, is that my works should contradict what's presented as efficient, and what's being controlled in our society. I'm supposed to step back, analyse, reveal systems of imagery, and open cracks into pre-existing relationships, whether they come from entertainment, communication, politics or anything et cetera. The limit is that I shouldn't engage in any type of propaganda myself. This is another reason why I also try to constantly undercut myself and always show how my works are built.

Neil Beloufa,  
*Counting on People*, installation  
view at La Casa  
Encendida, 2015  
Photo: Manuel  
Blanco

**MW:** *So you want the CCTV and the sculptures to reveal the process of making and the staging of the work?*

**NB:** In a way yes.



**MW:** *By removing the separation between the process and the production of the work until it is finalized, do you want the work to contain all of these elements and processes within itself?*

**NB:** The people that produced most of the works in the show with me are the actors from *VENGEANCE*. The cigarettes in the show are the cigarettes that we smoked during the production of the work. Everything can be used or re-used, there is no hierarchy between imagery or fields of interest. A political discourse isn't taken more seriously than a Cristiano Ronaldo movie where the main location is the gym. I guess what I am trying to do is include myself in the discourse of how the works are produced to illustrate that there is no separation between fields nor hierarchies, and that everything can be of use and how it is made as part of the show. The decision to believe in it or not is up to you, the viewer.

An extended version of the interview was published on occasion of the Autumn/Winter 2014 issue of Noon Magazine. The ICA and Stroom Den Haag would like to thank Hannah Barton and Jasmine Raznahan for their permission to republish the interview on occasion of *Counting on People* at Stroom Den Haag.

# Colophon

## Neil Beloufa: *Counting on People*

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Mark Blower, Rita Taylor, Kosta  
Tonev

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Stroom Den Haag presents *Counting on People* as part of the two-year program *Attempts to Read the World (Differently)*. This program is an extended collaboration with four artists: Neil Beloufa, Fernando Sanchez Castillo, Céline Condorelli and Dunja Herzog.

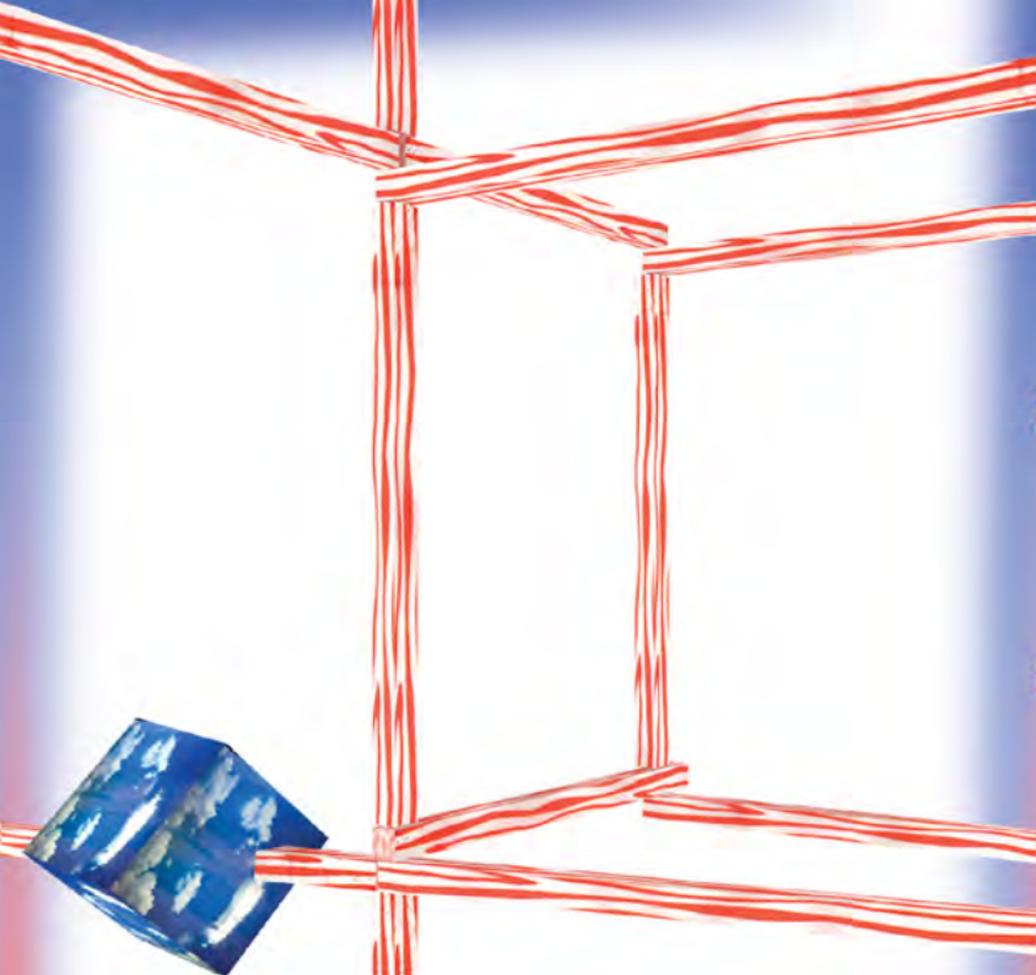
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