

# The Institute of Complex Systems

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NEÏL BELOUFA // PROFILE OF THE ARTIST

By Guillaume Désanges





For French-Algerian artist Neïl Beloufa, cinema belongs to an aesthetic model that is both industrial and moral. Throughout his practice, the conventions of film are often made into materials for sculpture. While films also exist within the artist's oeuvre—installations that function like the pans of a movie, elements that perform as stage sets, and collages that appear like story-boards—Beloufa's relationship to cinema is most closely observed through the many genres of film itself: Western movies, spy thrillers, science-fiction, or college-movies. It is through the regime of cinema that the artist conducts his work. Within this context, the component of Beloufa's practice that remains within the 'visual arts' appears only in the ways in which the structure of his films is built; through either absence or potential. While it is true that cinema is an art, it is also an industry.<sup>1</sup> The economy generated by film is paradoxical; at once technological and symbolic, narcissistic and collective, commercial and idealistic. Each of these dichotomies contribute to the confused state of *where* the capital in film lies. It is this same complex economy that haunts

Beloufa's practice, which allows viewers to grasp the invisible coherence across his purposefully disparate works.

— In the aftermath of the May 1968 events in France, the professionals at the head of the *États Généraux du Cinéma*<sup>2</sup> imagined an aesthetic revolution—one that was political, but also firmly economical. They attempted to not dissociate the critique contained within bourgeois content from a critique of the systems that dictated production at the service of the bourgeoisie, instead responding equally to new ways of both making and disseminating film.

— This connection—between artistic and economic means, which had long since boiled below the surface of the film industry—positioned Jean-Luc Godard as its (evil) genius. Until this time, no other director had attempted to dismantle the very mechanism of cinema through cinema itself. Godard did so in a way that did not only refused to spare the artist, but further insisted on pronouncing the insufficiencies of all artists. An idealism realized through fatalism.

Over the length of his career, Godard developed new relationships between mythology and industry, poetry and politics, the sublime and the contemptible. His feeble arrogance belongs to an identity that is at once liberal, but also subordinate, which the director's work continues to draw on today. Perhaps it comes as no surprise that Neïl Beloufa, who was immersed in the world of political cinema from a young age,<sup>3</sup> has drawn such a renewed attention to positions that do not separate critical modes of production from the criticism of modes of production.



## SYSTEMS OF SCULPTURE

The ‘molecular’ structure that characterizes each level of Beloufa’s work, (i.e. his installations, exhibitions, his global approach to production, and the *mises en scène* of his films), exists as a system of autonomous modules, which are more or less interconnected, that use and diffuse energy. From mechanized sculptures, which incorporate elements of architecture and integrated exhibition design, to a series of *tableaux* that adopt penetrable robotic structures, Beloufa’s ‘entertainment machines’ are conceived through their relationship to the body. Their logic is at once pragmatic and disorderly. The aesthetic of the artist’s installations within the walls of galleries and museums would appear equally at home in the chaos of a geek’s bedroom. The works are at once artisanal and technological, ergonomic and precarious, and readily associate with DIY digital practices and video projection, or pizza boxes and cigarette butts. The works function like a type of sensory carnival, blurring the viewer’s perception while actively producing images, to create sensations between a spectrum of delight and disgust, without ever quite succeeding in completely reaching one or the other.

—In doing so, Beloufa’s work recalls the origins of cinema itself, which was originally presented as a technological attraction, more so than a spectacle to be viewed. By exhibiting within unconventional spaces—such as commercial showrooms, game halls, fabrication labs, and ephemeral concept stores—this range of exhibition contexts plays upon the ambiguity of the work’s role between industry and service, function and décor. As such, they remain open to interpretation (a function of art) as well as to use (a function of utilitarian design). In this way, Beloufa’s work forms a series of open systems, rather than closed circuits—they exist as networks, rather than sole units. The exhibition site becomes a space in which the transaction of

images, films, objects, and the viewers themselves are exchanged. The global economy of the artist’s work follows the same logic; a set of clusters of activities in permanent negotiation with one another, whose positions are inherently mobile. Identifying as a producer, director, screenwriter, decorator, and distributor, Beloufa assumes all of these roles within his definition as an ‘artist,’ which is to say, an autonomous individual that maintains connection to the centers of production and profit.

—At the heart of Beloufa’s network, film, object, but also *software* is at play, capturing and redistributing the ‘energy’ of the artist’s varied outputs across the ‘hardware’ of the works themselves. Film is used as a sort of fuel, an ‘input’ and ‘output,’ that feeds both the process and the product, though it is not made clear which feeds, or serves as the pretext for, the other. Beyond the circuit of the works, the systems they employ are connected to the ‘outside’ world—contemporary current events, political contexts, and cultural ideologies, among other factors. Given that Beloufa pointedly does not participate as a mere observer within these contexts, but also as an agent for change, one could even consider the complex problematics that emerge from the chaotic state of economic and social issues in our current twenty-first-century state of globalization through his work. Within this position, Beloufa’s practice is one that is constantly striving to outmaneuver the potential insular field of the artworld by confronting adjacent economic realities—be that the market of real-estate speculation, as explored in his 2016 exhibition *The Next Tenant* within a model apartment, supported by the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Germany, or his research into the film distribution industry, which he activates through his feature-length videos.<sup>4</sup>

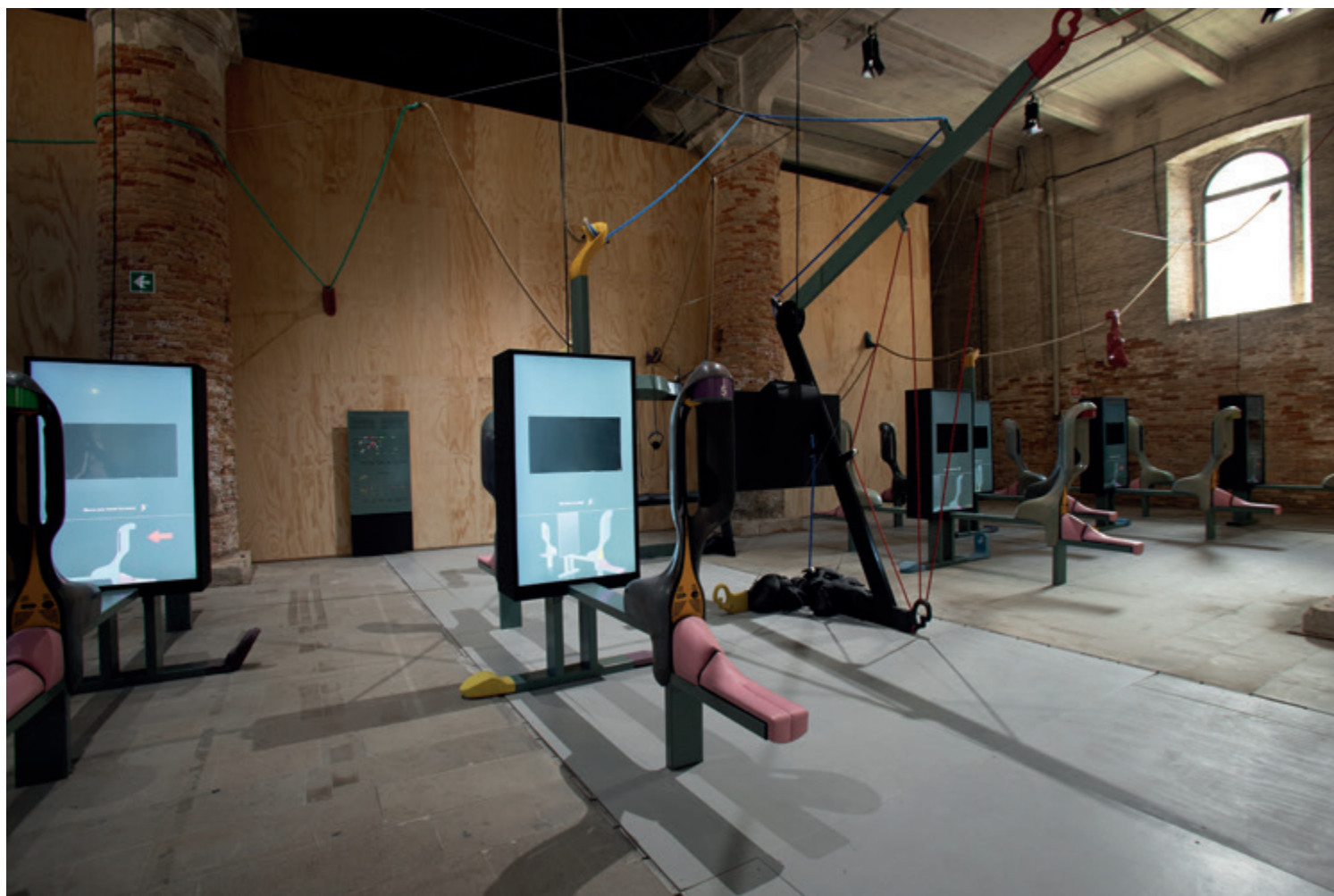
BEHIND ‘SOCIAL REASON’  
AND ‘MORAL PERSON’

Perhaps most importantly, Beloufa’s use of components within an interchangeable system echoes the concept of convertibility, which exists at the heart of many of the ideas within his work. The guiding question of the work belongs to that of observation—to how the role of each object, statement, or event is altered within any given scenario. Objects and images can be observed as much as people. It is in this way that the artist’s films (notably, *Monopoly* (2016), *Real Estate* (2012), *World Domination* (2012), or *Sayre & Marcus* (2010) function under the guise of wargames—the sort of roundtable negotiation or sociological panel, where each actor defends an arbitrary position, pretending to be able to take the place of another. More than a cynic position, the guiding tenets of Beloufa’s work conceives of the world as a field of diplomatic tensions and contradictory strategies, both of which recall the function of the artist and his studio.

—An acknowledgment of how Beloufa operates is essential in capturing the work of the artist who, from a very young age, has questioned his work as equally as he has questioned its means of production—focusing both on the place of the artist within systems of valorization alongside the means in which one can become autonomous while simultaneously being in command of operations. In response to these challenges, Beloufa has developed the model of a studio/workshop that is fully integrated into his practice. More than just a tool for production, the artist’s workshop is a project in itself, driven by a social and political ideal that is directly related to themes Beloufa deals with in his work. In short, the artist studio is a critical space as much as it is a physical space. It is a reality, but also an image—a form of a branding, a site that is invested in producing desires and fantasies. This is the immensity of warehouse in Villejuif, a commune in the south suburbs of Paris, which

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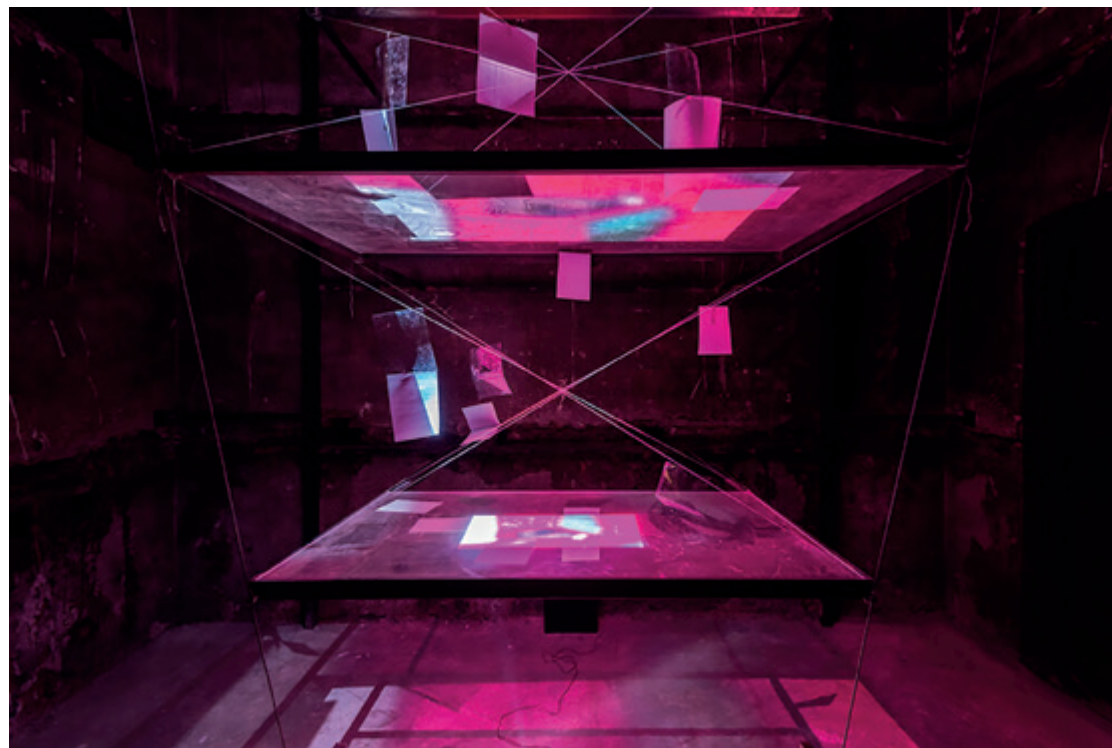




had been gradually transformed from the *trompe l'œil* set of a hotel for the artist's film *Occidental* (2016),<sup>5</sup> before becoming a live/work-space for the artist known as 'Occidental Contemporary,' which involved artists and curators, but also the public, each pursuing separate activities within the same structure. The significance of a hotel as a backdrop to what became this multi-use space is emblematic in this respect: the hotel is an area for circulation, a fixed system within which relationships are formed, and where parallel lives can either intersect or diverge—all with the potential for affective, perhaps even libidinal, action.

—It is interesting to note that in French, certain jargon purposefully adopts a philosophical or moral connotation. For example, the technical term for 'legal entity' is '*personne morale*,' which literally means to signify a 'moral person.' From this perspective, one could say that Beloufa's studio is, in effect, a moral person. Or, at least, a type of autonomous and industrial entity that assumes a vague identity, but is no less legally responsible. This semantic relationship can be said to inform the very system the artist denounces across his work; all power is a fiction that is held together by nothing other than myth. Yet, it is the role of a 'moral person'—which is to say, a reflective person—to never cease in questioning, both in concept as well as in production, the line between the true and the false, sincerity and posturing, or rigor and seduction. In short, the morally good and the morally bad, while continuously playing with the potential volatility and reversals inherent within these polarities of thought. Following the same logic, the term for 'business name' is '*raison sociale*,' which directly translates to 'social reason.' A closer acquaintance with these semiotics resonates with a kind of organizational structure that attempts to denounce hierarchy—responding to an almost egalitarianism or collectivist idealism, in which material and symbolic capital is shared.

—This systematic and moral approach reflects Beloufa's own function within the artworld. From the start of his career, he has challenged his autonomy as an artist (such as in his first film *Kempinski* (2007), made as a student), while also positioning this derailment as an acceptable response. Rather than ignore this reversal of expectations, Beloufa has made an entire regime of his practice that is found subtly across all his works. By revisiting the historical positions between formalism and



politics in art, one could say that Beloufa's vast reflection on material research into economic systems is also met with a facet of spirituality; the critique of agency, but with a certain love for the same system that produces it. A system that integrates its own criticism, its own negotiations. In this way, the work does not offer definitive solutions, but instead underscores an aberrant complexity of values, whose aesthetic and moral horizon is constantly blurred. Beloufa's hybridization of the organic, the material, and the technological could pass for a type of nihilism—but it could just as easily be the mark of an unshakable faith in the power of forms when they confront forms of power.

*Translated from French by Stephanie Cristello.*

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**Neil Beloufa, as part of the *Méthode Room* led by Guillaume Désanges, will be in residence in Chicago at various points in 2019–2020.**

- 1 Known from the famous line, "Par ailleurs, le cinéma est une industrie", the last phrase of *Esquisse d'une Psychologie du Cinéma* (1946) by André Malraux.
- 2 *Les États Généraux du Cinéma* was founded in the end of May, 1968, and was the location for political debates across the profession. The group assembled through 1500 professionals (directors, producers, technicians) as well as students.
- 3 The artist's father, Farouk Beloufa, is an Algerian director. His only film, *Nahla*, was released in Lebanon in 1979. His mother was an editor for Apostrophe Films, who notably produced films by Alain Cavalier, Chris Marker, and Orson Wells, among others.
- 4 *The Next Tenant* by Neil Beloufa took place in the frame of the exhibition *Hausbesuch*, from November 5–26, 2016, at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Germany.
- 5 *Occidental* was the first feature-length film by the artist. At the end of the filming, the studio was transformed into a center for contemporary art, named OCCIDENTAL TEMPORARY, in which exhibitions, marriages, and smaller productions took place over the course of one year.

**TITLE IMAGE:**

Installation view, Neil Beloufa, *Neoliberal*, 2015. Balice Hertling, Paris.

**PAGE 99:**

Installation view, Neil Beloufa, *Counting on People*, 2014. Institute of Contemporary Art, London.

**PAGE 101, TOP:**

Neil Beloufa, installation view, *The Enemy of My Enemy*, 2018. Courtesy of the Palais de Tokyo, Paris.

**PAGE 101, BOTTOM:**

Neil Beloufa, Various works, 2018–2019. Mixed media. Photo: Italo Rondinella. Courtesy of La Biennale di Venezia.

**ABOVE:**

Installation view, Neil Beloufa, 2017. Pejman Foundation, Tehran.