

Text by Leonie Radine

Palais deTokyo
13 Avenue du Président Wilson
Paris, France
palaisdetokyo.com
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The enemy of my enemy is not necessarily my friend. It's not as simple as a wide range of media, advertisements or political propaganda tend to suggest. Although asserting power through simplifying notions and images of good and bad seems to function better than ever before. The more complex and unstable our global political reality, the more calculable and effective, it seems, is the appropriation and circulation of key visuals and slogans through blunt emotional outbursts of shares, likes, or dislikes on social media. It is not by chance that for the show's title Neïl Beloufa adopts only part of the notorious ancient proverb, which has been reused as a doctrine in various foreign policy conflicts and wars all around the world, and leaves out the rest. It is as if he is putting us to the test, like the eponymous quest in the video game World of Warcraft.

Visitors to Beloufa's exhibition at the Palais deTokyo are confronted not only with a selection of his past works—as one might expect of an artist given the stage of 2,000 square meters—but moreover with a vertiginous number of enemy images, figures of identification and enigmatic in-betweens. Highly power-political visual material, copied or reprocessed from newspapers and the internet, but also taken from film sets and gaming worlds, as well as borrowed originals from international art, history and war museums, and replicated miniature sceneries of historic events are assembled and collaged on wall charts that are constantly moved, turned, and rearranged around specific buzzwords on the floor by robots.

Having passed a dark room introducing us to Beloufa's lambent mindset and futuristic universe furnished by his ever-changing video installations and sculptures, one is lost in a cacophony of voices, some of which are loud, frightening and aggressive, some of which are subtle and manipulative, some of which you can hardly stand and some of which you might feel passionately about. A replica of Gaddafi's shirt with photos of pan-African

political leaders placed next to portraits of *Star Wars*' Princess Leia mounted on protest banners for Women's Marches is only one example of many that culminate in a replicated bomb simulator from the Tehran Museum of Holy Defense. This exhibition echoes the boundless worlds of images and symbols of power that reach far beyond the bubbles of the limiting networks and algorithms of our individualized news supply.

But what does it mean for a 1985 Paris-born French-Algerian artist to fill these enormous halls of one of France's flagship institutions for contemporary art that is known for its experimental formats like "Carte Blanche" which augur the boundless freedom and autonomy of the artist? What defines the autonomy of an artist today and how democratic, liberal or neoliberal has the (art) world become, now that institutions call for institutional critique and thus internalize the criticism of their own system?

Beloufa first takes us back to the nineteenth century and the figure of Courbet, this proud and pretentious, provocative and highly politically engaged artist, who at the same time declared his independence—for instance by opening his own Pavilion of Realism in 1855 or raging against the Vendôme column during the Paris commune in 1871—but also didn't conceal his own dependence on private capital by caricaturing himself as a social outcast or side by side with his powerful patrons, like in *Bonjour Monsieur Courbet* (1854). A persona that is impossible to grasp in a simplified reading.

Our gaze wanders over to the output of central figures of twentieth-century art history caught by Picasso's Stalin portrait in the Communist cultural journal *Les Lettres françaises* from 1953, Andy Warhol's poster promoting the German Green Party from 1978 (at the suggestion of Joseph Beuys, who also appears in the exhibition), or Robert Rauschenberg's poster for the United Nations' International Conference on Population and Development in 1994.

Artists today are still facing the challenge of finding a unique and stable position not only in a politically and socially complex global art network and its dependencies but also in a constant overkill of visual and textual influences. Overlooking the chaos, they are con-

fronted with the everyday task to develop a unique language of abstraction that takes on the power to change certain perspectives of the international viewer, the critique, the curator, the gallerist and the collector. Beloufa invited some artists to contribute who have managed over the past years to gain consistent credibility by raising urgent issues of current socio-political development, among them Hito Steyerl, Thomas Hirschhorn, and Pope L., and also a younger generation of artists like Katja Novitskova and Camille Blatrix.

Beloufa kicks the ball back. The mass of information and mix of copy and original, fact and fiction that is presented here cannot easily be consumed. Except for extensive labels aiming to capture the contradictions of the exhibits, there are no instructions or suggested methods of perception. One is forced to find one's own way. Even having seen the exhibition twice, it is impossible to perceive it in its entirety, but "that's the game," Beloufa says with his usual nonchalance and cunning modesty. Indeed, this challenging, nervous, maybe piercingly painful game has a serious reference: the exhibition is a commentary on the state of civilization now and points to the interchangeability and contradictions of (empty) power gestures. Today, what we expected to be the entities and basic values of our democratized civilizations is questioned again. So that we come to the point that leaders of authoritarian regimes adopt terms like Trump's "fake news" to obscure their human rights abuse. When it becomes harder and harder to draw a clear line between "fake news", "alternative facts" and propaganda, we are not far away from robots moving content from one context to another. "Strong and stable my arse," as artist Jeremy Deller put it in a poster campaign in London reacting to Brexit, which is also documented in the exhibition.

Whether this exhibition is good or bad is the wrong question. It is a courageous and radically new attempt to lay all the cards on the table. It doesn't offer solutions, but rubs salt into the wounds. It can be questioned and criticized in the same ways that we can question and criticize our own double standards, self-legitimized authorities, easily polarized opinions and everyday appropriation, but that is what makes it so brilliant.

Zach Blas: Contra-Internet

Interview by Ana Teixeira Pinto

Art in General
145 Plymouth Street
Brooklyn, NY, US
artingeneral.org
Through April 21

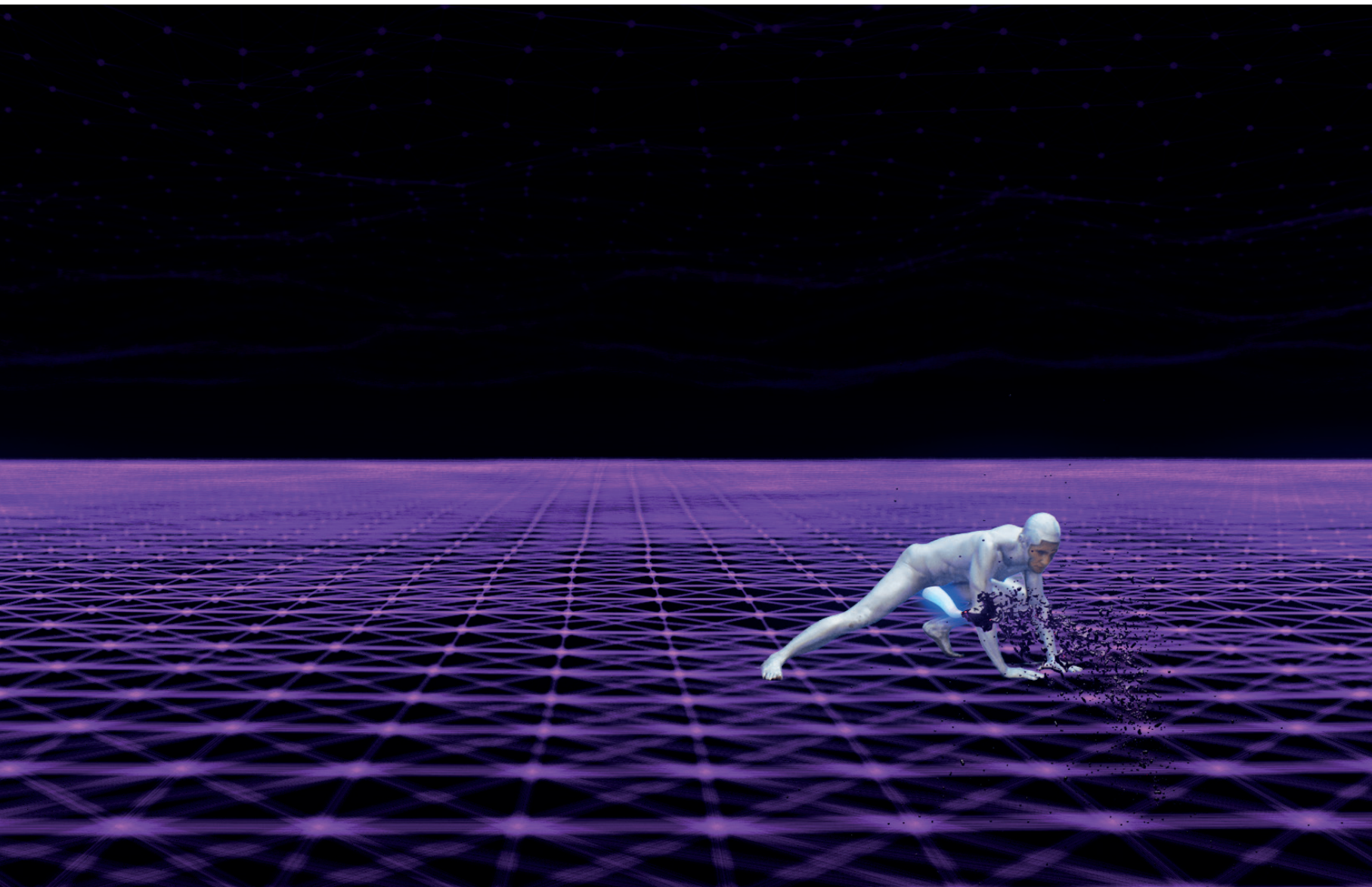
Zach Blas's exhibition *Contra-Internet* is a queer science fiction whose centerpiece, *Jubilee 2033* (2017), fictionalizes the "end of the internet as we know it." The story begins in the 1950s, when, having taken acid, libertarian philosopher Ayn Rand and two of her devotees, Alan Greenspan and Joan Mitchell, hallucinate an anime-interface AI named Azuma, who tells them that Silicon Valley has built a cult-like culture around Rand's writings. Rand is eager to see the future, her ideas brought into being, but as Azuma leads the

small group around the Bay Area they chance upon a ransacked Google headquarters, widespread mayhem, and a mutilated body whose ID badge reads "Peter Thiel." Inside Thiel's Palantir Technologies, now occupied by insurgents, the group encounters Nootropix (played by postgender performance artist Cassils). Nootropix is a contra-internet prophet, and their victory dance to Andrea Bocelli's "Con te partirò" (Elon Musk's favorite song) is the most earthshaking contrasexual manifesto since Lynda Benglis's 1974 *Artforum* ad.

ANA TEIXEIRA PINTO: Not many people associate your protagonist, Ayn Rand, with Steve Jobs or Mark Zuckerberg, and Alan Greenspan was pretty much forgotten after he gave us the great recession. Did you ever fear *Contra-Internet* would be inaccessible to a wider audience?

ZACH BLAS: When I was a teenager, a relative put a copy of Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* (1943) in my hands and said, "Read this if you want to be an intellectual." I think encountering Rand's literature was—and still is—typical and widespread in the United States. Her fiction is frequently read in American high schools, for instance, which is not surprising, as her tall tales of individual heroes fighting against the strictures of society to pursue their selfish ideals is truly the stuff of the American dream. Her writings even reached me in an isolated, working-class town in Appalachia!

ATP: Still, Randian egotism is hard to reconcile with Silicon Valley's post-capitalist ethos and its (however hollow) promise of community building and direct democracy.



ZB: After Adam Curtis's 2011 documentary linking Rand to Silicon Valley as well as numerous high-profile magazine features also making the connection, such as *Vanity Fair* in 2016, I think Rand's influence on Silicon Valley is becoming better known, even celebrated.¹ You even find write-ups on why millennials should choose Rand over Karl Marx.² It makes sense: Americans with a lust for business and start-up culture love what Rand embodies in her very biography: fleeing Russia and state communism for the land of the free, aka US capitalism in sunny California. Preserving such sentiments, the Ayn Rand Institute now resides in Irvine, California, where you can study through online learning how her philosophy of objectivism applies to today's world. And speaking of followers, you're right, many people are surprised to discover that Alan Greenspan was basically a lifelong Rand devotee, even though his economic proclivities align smoothly with Rand's objectivist principles. Recall that in 1966 Rand published a collection of essays titled *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*. Didn't Alan Greenspan give us one possible answer to this unknown in 2008? Perhaps what's more confusing is the artist Joan Mitchell. When *Contra-Internet* was installed at Gasworks in London in the fall of 2017, visitors were stumped by Mitchell's inclusion. Yet there just so happens to be two Joan Mitchells who are both painters: the well-known Abstract Expressionist and a lesser-known "romantic realist" who was briefly married to Greenspan. It's the latter who features in the film. In the end, I have faith that the queer theorist Lisa Duggan will clear up any remaining Randian confusion in her forthcoming book on the author. Have you caught the title yet? I believe it's *Mean Girl: Ayn Rand and Neoliberal Greed*.

ATP: Your film *Jubilee 2033* is also loosely based on the narrative structure of British filmmaker Derek Jarman's 1978 queer punk film *Jubilee*.

ZB: I have had a long love affair with Jarman's film, and am particularly taken by its often overlooked science fiction elements, like time travel. The film begins with Queen Elizabeth I journeying to late-1970s London, where she bears witness to a wrecked future England—a future that she, of course, was complicit in bringing into being. Similarly, when I decided to make a queer sci-fi film on the internet and tech culture, I knew right away that Ayn Rand was surely a—if not *the*—philosophical queen of Silicon Valley. *Jubilee 2033*, in a sense, gives Rand and her acolytes a chance to ascend to the throne, even if it is burning. This transpires in the

film through an acid trip, so the film is like a fever dream, created via computer graphics. In this context, it struck me as necessary to visualize Rand's hallucination through CGI, a technical apparatus innovated/subsumed by Silicon Valley (which is why the Adobe headquarters *had* to be burning in the film). At this point you can probably gather that there are many jokes throughout the work; they're not private but rather in plain sight. To grasp them, they might demand multiple viewings or some independent sleuthing. This is not to be obnoxious. Rather, it comes from a place of cinematic passion, as the films I've always loved—and that have marked me—deliver some revelation even after the tenth, twentieth, thirtieth screening. In that sense the film is like a software stack of layers and details, often humorous. For example, at the start, there's a flash of a 1944 essay written by Rand titled "The Only Path to Tomorrow," which reads like a kitschy sci-fi slogan, and also recalls Tomorrowland at the Disney theme parks.

ATP: Is the internet evil?

ZB: To keep things concise, I'll just list the material with which I wanted to think this question through: Friedrich Nietzsche, Matt Fuller on evil media, Al Gore on democracy, cruel optimism, network pessimism, internet kill switches, disappearing the internet, redefining the internet as a condition à la J. K. Gibson-Graham, the world and Michael Jackson, Hannah Arendt—I could say the internet is evil in some capacities, especially when it presents as a totalized condition.

ATP: Cassils—my newest crush—who plays Nootropix, is a contra-internet guru. Would it be fair to say their dildo is an anti-phallus?

ZB: Welcome to the crush club! Cassils is a magnificent artist and human being. I'm still reeling that they're in *Jubilee 2033*! I once did a personal training session with them in Los Angeles, and no one else has ever made me hurt so good. It was all queer love from that point forward. *Contra-Internet* began as an essay I wrote that attempted to imagine an aesthetics and politics beyond post-internet, out of Paul B. Preciado's *Manifiesto Contrasexual* (2002). I would term this relation between contra-internet and the contrasexual as one of "utopian plagiarism." I learned about this conceptual practice from Ricardo Dominguez. When he was still a member of Critical Art Ensemble, the group wrote of such a practice, which in short encourages the taking up of an existent idea and slightly altering it to open up a different pathway for thought and action. Alternately,

we could think of this relation as a kind of Deleuzian *enculage*, in which a philosopher is taken from behind to give birth to a monstrous mutation of their thought.

ATP: Utopian *enculage*?

ZB: That's *enculage* in its ideal form! At its core, contrasexuality is not just a critique of sexual norms but also a celebration of the dildo. Preciado (breathtakingly, I might add) develops a practice of dildotectonics throughout the manifesto, in which the reader is presented with the dildo as a kind of diagrammatic form that is capable of activating contrasexual potentiality. For instance, drawing a dildo on one's arm and masturbating it is a possible technique. Importantly, Preciado distinguishes the dildo from a penis or phallus, claiming that the dildo is not a symbol for patriarchy or phallocentrism. All of this is to say that if contra-internet comes out of contrasexuality, then at least one dildo has to come along for the ride! In the film *Jubilee 2033*, Nootropix, played by Cassils, does indeed possess such a contrasexual dildo. During their lecture, a black liquid continuously flows out of it, coating the entire room. Is this piss, cum, some other bodily fluid, or a substance we don't yet know or understand? When Nootropix dances, the dildo is erect, spewing liquid like a fountain. In fact, Nootropix's dildo here gives us a nice counterpoint to Rand's *The Fountainhead*. Here is a contrasexual fountainhead! It sprays a lush and shimmering liquid, not unlike the glorious water fountains in Kenneth Anger's *Eaux d'Artifice* (1953). Nootropix even does the dildotectonic exercise of arm-masturbation, which perhaps helps keep the liquid flowing. If the name Nootropix is a variation on *nootropics*, which means "mind bending" in Greek, then I like to think of their dildo-fountain as emanating a liquid drug that's poisoning the Californian ideology. To bask in this shower might be the ultimate water sport.

1. Nick Bilton, "Silicon Valley's Most Disturbing Obsession," *Vanity Fair*, November 2016, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2016/10/silicon-valley-ayn-rand-obsession>.
2. Leisa Miller, "3 Reasons Millennials Should Ditch Karl Marx for Ayn Rand," Foundation for Economic Education, December 18, 2017, <https://fee.org/articles/3-reasons-millennials-should-ditch-karl-marx-for-ayn-rand/>.