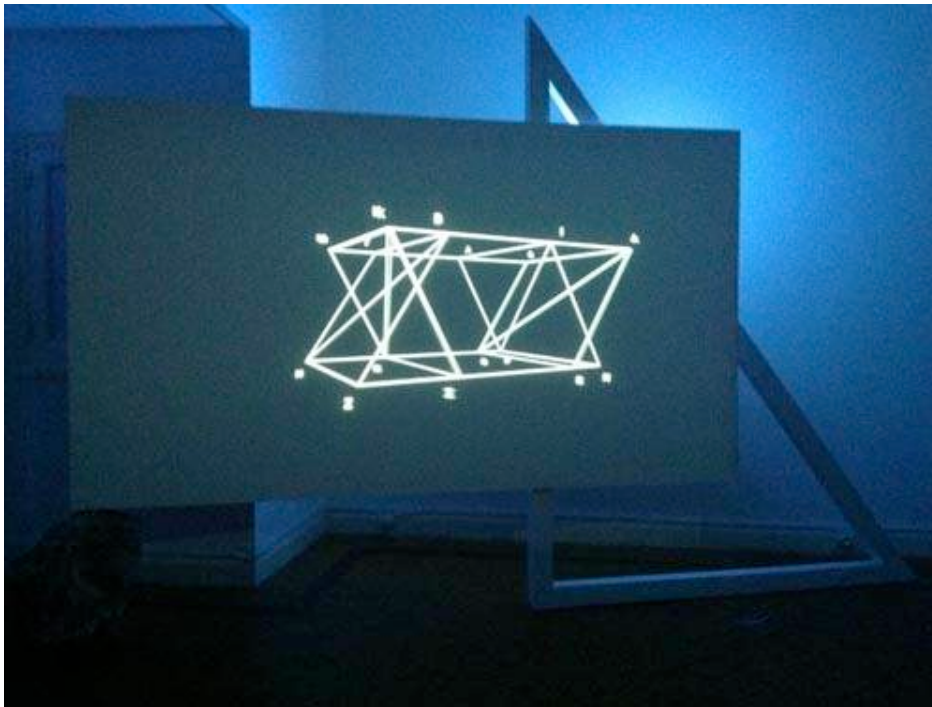


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‘The Magic of the State’: An ambitious and relevant art show in Cairo



“The Magic of the State,” held last month at the Beirut art space in Agouza, took a lot of time. Dreamy and odd, but also super-informative if visitors wanted it to be, the four pieces on the villa’s ground floor and the three fairly lengthy sound/video pieces upstairs took more than one visit to grasp, not to mention the option of attending the three events that accompanied the exhibition, an off-site project, and Beirut’s library — to fill oneself in on events and theories that were alluded to in the artworks.

Fortunately the show was enjoyable. It had been installed with an attention to detail

that seems fairly rare for a show in Cairo's low-budget art scene, and certain themes or motifs connected to its title popped up — money, Greece, Sun Ra, religion, borders, mysterious diagrams, strange hand gestures — in various works.

Downstairs artist Christodoulos Panayiotou displayed some quite hilarious archival photos of a robed religious figure walking ritualistically, puppet-like, among different types of crowd. Nearby he also showed some photos of people in a museum looking in a bemused way at a huge naked god statue, who looked like he might be doing a camp dance.

There was also Rana Hamadeh's beautifully made cabinet with various drawers and surfaces that visitors could examine, filled with images and objects that relate to the performative talk she gave on 7 March. And there was a small, barely-there piece by Ryan Gander, opposite two massive boards with words by the musician Sun Ra copied out — "What America Needs" and "There Are Two Ethiopias" — by artist Lili Reynaud-Dewar, which were used in her collaborative performance on 3 March.

Upstairs, there was a two-channel video by Liz Magic Laser called "The Digital Face." One showed a man dressed in a full-body leotard, raised above the heads of a patient-looking audience, and the other was identical except the performer was a woman and the gestures they made were quite different. It turns out that he was mimicking the movements of George Bush's 1990 state of the union address, and she was copying Barack Obama's from his 2012 version. It is uncanny how spot-on they are.

There was also a visually striking video installation by Anje Kirschner and David Panos called "Ultimate Substance." The video is a slickly produced collage of different types of scenes, filled throughout with cicada sounds and the cracking noises of stone hitting stone. There were close-ups of muscled bodies covered in metallic dirt, eating or sorting stones and moments of taut bronzed bodies cracking their bones on a green screen. In contrast there were pale blemished contemporary bodies in a kitchen, a milk carton dropped on the floor, and motorbike drivers racing on a quarry. There were sections with a black screen and inexplicable shifting geometric diagrams or a voiceover about democracy.

In the library, an essay by Richard Seaford in a catalogue for Kirschner and Panos' "Ultimate Substance" shown at Secession last year, explains how much of the film was shot in the silver mines of Lavreotiki, Greece, and that silver formed the basis of Athens' prosperity in classical antiquity, and the first pervasively monetized society contributed to a massive shift in the way Greeks imagined the cosmos: power became impersonal, attached to a semi-abstract substance. All it had required, apparently, was collective confidence in money's conventional value.

This idea followed on nicely to the last work in the show, by Goldin+Senneby, called "The Decapitation of Money." In an almost completely dark room, Angus Cameron (an economic geographer) spoke from a TV monitor on the ground about the more recent history of money in relation to Bataille's ambiguous idea of sovereignty. It's a

surprisingly entertaining story that includes the introduction of double-entry bookkeeping in the 1450s, an explanation of how banknotes were convertible into silver until the late 18th century, the creation of Eurodollars in 1957 (letting money escape into a fictional legal space dislocated from the state), all the way to naked short-selling, weather futures, and, basically, the “dark forest of money” we are in now.

“We’re trying to claw back sovereign control,” says the narrator of the current situation. Every now and then, a light clicked on and off four times and on one of the room’s black walls one briefly glimpsed some sort of map or diagram.

The show was named after a 1997 book by Michael Taussig, an anthropologist whose semi-fictional ethnographical writings have perhaps made him more famous in the contemporary art world than in his own field. His art-aura of celebrity drew crowds to Beirut on 5 March, when he gave a talk, so many people that they were spread out, standing up, all over the ground floor – a fairly small proportion got to sit in the space where he was rather quietly speaking. The talk meandered and for stretches of it those at the back heard little more than mumbles with the occasional exclamation, such as “We didn’t talk about the kids!” — but nuggets of substance meant it was somehow worthwhile.

“States exude a magical force without which there are no states,” he said, talking of spies and magic realist novels and phone tapping and his own experiences with a healer in southwest Columbia. He spoke of the magic of the art of immigration officers, describing a moustache seen through a hole in dark glass and a mysterious piece of paper that lets you pass (or not). He talked how states are born through violence, and about riot police and their grotesque, suddenly global uniform – he pointed out the codpiece with glee – and said that it is evidence of a need to scare people, create a spectacle, to change the face of reality. He spoke about attraction and repulsion and loyalty to the state; about how states and religion create intimacy, and how there are magical unknown dangerous things outside of civilization. Reynaud-Dewar’s performance (“Interpretation”) involved a performer called Mary Knox who dramatically read aloud from Sun Ra’s texts and musician Hendrik Hegray who used a Kaossilator and other electrical devices, as well as a photographer documenting them. At the same time, Reynaud-Dewar played some amazing jazz records. The audience crowded up to two double-doorways to glimpse these four protagonists, and this formation and the performance’s apparent lack of self-reflexivity really brought out Beirut’s community-center feel.

The third performance was Hamadeh’s, which seemed much more self-aware and perhaps even humorous. At points she wore sunglasses and paused to stare down the audience, at other times referred to herself in the third person, and at one quite climactic point took the hands of Beirut co-director Jens Meier-Rothe and had the two of them use each other as leverage to go round in circles, getting dizzy and sweaty and almost out of control while she tried to continue her lecture.

But mostly sitting at her prop, her cabinet of curiosities, she used pictures of

Muammar Gadhafi and Bashar Al-Assad wearing sunglasses, a prison for immigrants in the Netherlands, a hygiene school in Algeria, the Louvre in Abu Dhabi, and a Lebanese Palestinian refugee camp called Al-Karantina (also known as “the slaughterhouse”) to talk about how she prefers using the word contagion to the word resistance. She connected the government-appointed quack doctors during the plague in ancient Athens to the current Arab uprisings via Nazism and the story of Sun Ra literalizing African-Americans’ alienness by going into outer space through jazz music and destroying or provincializing Earth in the process.

Difficult to follow as it was at times, Hamadeh’s performance, commissioned for the show, somehow tied the whole ambitious exhibition together with its jumble of references and anecdotes about belief, doubt, theater, health, criminology and revolution. Her idea of the state, she said at the end, is the inflexible state of affairs, immunized, fortified, and closed to contagion.