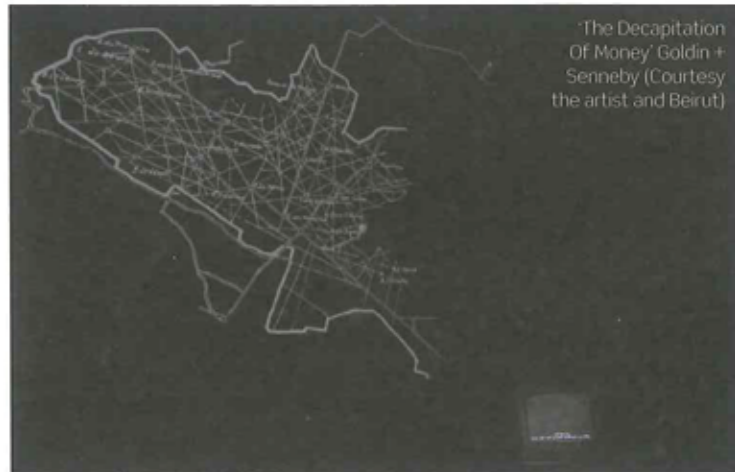


BEIRUT, CAIRO

THE MAGIC OF THE STATE

Kevin Jones visits Beirut's new show in Cairo, 'The Magic Of The State' and assesses the various facts of power, corruption and lies that pervades contemporary power structures as seen by a complement of artists from Rana Hamedah to Liz Magic Laser



'The Decapitation Of Money' Goldin + Senneby (Courtesy the artist and Beirut)

Beirut doesn't exist,' confides Jens Maier-Rothe, slyly. The co-director of the newly established Beirut space in Cairo has a will to confound. Gallery, non-profit organisation, institution-federator – hard-to-label Beirut is a self-proclaimed 'context-responsive' art initiative whose seasonal programming is as politically charged as it is curatorially sophisticated. One of a spate of independent art spaces recently opened in the Egyptian capital, Beirut cunningly plays with its own definition: artist duo Goldin + Senneby have been tasked with legally 'defining' the initiative; its branding will change with the seasons; and of course there is the deliberately elusive name.

The pillar of Beirut's second season is 'The Magic of the State' – a multi-artist journey into the 'dark side' of governance. Examining the points of contact between the allegedly rational, reassuring state and the occult, irrational undercurrents that inform it, 'The Magic of the State' deftly raises hard questions about how authority is crafted and sustained. Timely stuff, particularly in Egypt, where governance is increasingly unfathomable.

If statecraft is stagecraft, as many of the works suggest, it is unsurprising that performance plays such a critical role in this show. Rana Hamedeh's specially commissioned work 'Al Karantina' is an image-rich performance/installation about virus and immunity. Wrapped in bio-medical metaphor, 'Al Karantina' walks us through ancient Athenian plague doctors, early Palestinian refugee camps, Libyan and Syrian uprisings, foregrounding how the discourse of dictatorial control is paradoxically rooted in the rhetoric of resistance.

Liz Magic Laser's 'The Digital Face' evacuates language from two televised State of the Union speeches, spotlighting only the speakers' gestures. A nimble critique of hollow political rhetoric,

this videoed performance features two dancers silently replicating the body language of George Bush senior's 1990 address and Barack Obama's 2012 speech. The emphatic gestural dialogue between the two leaders, rhythmically-timed to the robotic ticking of a stop-action camera, raises the curtain on an arcane code, unknown to the passive citizen.

Performance is also an instrument of power for Ryan Gander in his 'I Had A Message from the Curator', staged off-site in a downtown Cairo café. Every day throughout 'The Magic of the State', an actor sits in the café writing a screenplay about an actor in a café. 'Are you Ryan Gander's work?' is the typical question for those coming to 'see' the performance. While curatorial authority remotely guarantees that question is never answered (the actor never reveals him/herself), that authority is also insidiously undermined, since the work is never actually experienced.

Gander's 'In Use, Alchemy Box #39', from his ongoing series of 'Alchemy Boxes', ostensibly contains elements of 'power, corruption and lies' plucked from the artist's collection. The compact box is accompanied by a text detailing its voluminous contents. Like power-wielding rulers, the artist involves us in a tacit game of trust; a dubiously rational system (alchemy) is reason enough to suspend belief.

'All money is imaginary,' reveals the economist in Goldin + Senneby's installation 'The Decapitation of Money', a spooky examination of increasingly non-transparent economics, coupled with the anti-sovereign antics of Georges Bataille's secret society Achéphale. Part of a vast project by the artist duo called 'Looking for Headless', this riveting installation seems to harbour a hidden criticism of the art world – another market based on imaginary value.

While little of the work in 'The Magic of the State' is new, there is still an exhilarating feeling of novelty to this show. Ideas ricochet off each other, creating a complementary narrative of how irrationality and outmoded belief systems continue to haunt 'modern' nation-states. Exiting Beirut for the Cairo streets, there is tangible proof of just how insightful 'The Magic of the State' really is. **HBA**