

How to Build a City With Two Nails and a Wire

17 Feb - 31 March 2022

Bassem Yousri & Ahmed Badry

Gypsum is pleased to present How to Build a City with Two Nails and a Wire, a dual artist exhibition investigating the form and function of structures born of a culture of improvised troubleshooting in a shifting cityscape. Featuring wall sculpture by Bassem Yousri and drawings and sculpture by Ahmed Badry, the show takes its cues from the creative pragmatism that has created the trademark vernacular aesthetic that permeates public space in Cairo.

Characterised by visual clutter, provisional assemblages, and a hybridity that suggests new meanings for commonplace objects, the prevalence of this vernacular aesthetic is a physical manifestation of an infrastructural vacuum. In this space of potentialities, new strategies of versatile problem-solving emerge, highlighting an acute awareness of temporality and a mistrust of anything but the lived present. The exhibited artworks by Bassem Yousri and Ahmed Badry respond, in various ways, to this state, edifying structures that give tangible form to strategies of self-reliance in an amorphous and evolving urban space, and to the forms of social interaction they inadvertently create.

Appearing at first as an incoherent mishmash of materials, Yousri's tongue-in-cheek, mixed-media wall sculptures retain a functionality that bypasses conventional notions of urban planning and utilitarian design. Their lopsided grids of pipes, bulbs and wires display a disregard for a streamlined form, presenting instead a visual randomness that is purposefully constructed to circumvent a specific material reality. A state of excess characterises the works, intentionally creating a sensory overload that foregrounds conflicting claims over public space. The works fall under Yousri's ongoing project, Guideposts, in which the artist investigates what he terms the "institutional aesthetic," a slapdash approach to problem-solving that he first noted in government buildings in Cairo, but which is also prevalent throughout the city.

In an expansive series of architectural drawings, Badry continues his speculation on non-functional objects, through depictions of seemingly impossible, but actually existent homes. Applying acid bleach to coloured paper, Badry uses this common household cleaning material to render his drawings of unusually constructed houses. Buildings perch precariously on narrow bases, houses crowd one another like shoppers in a queue, and aspirational towers teeter tentatively over absent cityscapes. Borrowing the blueprint-like aesthetics of lighter lines on a darker background, Badry's drawings, ironically, propose plans for an inherently unplanned phenomenon, referencing the politics of informal housing. An accompanying series of mock-up-like building sculptures cluster together conspiratorially, functioning as a strangely anthropomorphic representation of the unseen social relationships between the inhabitants of these spaces, who have moulded these buildings according to their living needs.

The show takes place in parallel to a complementary solo exhibition by Bassem Yousri titled Guideposts taking place in Medrar for Contemporary Arts, in which the artist presents further iterations of his sculptures that involve interactive elements. In combining his sculptures with a series of absurd prompts and injunctions, Yousri probes the existing authority between artwork and spectator, questioning in the process the dissonance between the demands of institutional authority and the hybrid, inconsistent facade through which they are communicated. The Medrar exhibition runs from 10 February till 10 March 2022.

Yousri's work was realized thanks to a grant from The Culture Resource (Al Mawred Al Thaqafi) and to technical support provided by ADEF (Arab Digital Expression Foundation).

An accompanying panel discussion between architect and urban planner Omar Nagati (CLUSTER) and urban researcher and designer Ahmed Zaazaa (10 Tooba, Madd, Megawra) moderated by Gypsum Co-Director Lara El Gibaly will take place at Medrar on March 1 from 6 - 8 pm. The speakers will expound on the implications of the vernacular aesthetic to which the artworks respond to our lived experience of the city.

Bassem Yousri (b. Algeria, 1980) is a visual artist, filmmaker, and art educator working with mixed-media installations in art galleries and public spaces, and experimental and documentary films. Yousri leverages sarcasm and irony to criticize common stereotypes and social taboos, presenting pertinent commentary on contemporary Egyptian socio-politics through a focus on the individual experience. His work also investigates issues related to the relationship between form and representation in the context of exhibition and public spaces. Yousri received his MFA in painting, drawing and sculpture from Tyler School of Art – Temple University in Philadelphia in 2009, and his BFA in painting from the School of Fine Arts – Helwan University in Cairo in 2003.

Yousri's work has been exhibited at the Museum of the Moving Image (MoMI) in New York, Centre Pompidou and l'Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, Sharjah Art Foundation, Mathaf: the Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, the State Museum of Egyptian Art in Munich, and IVAM (Institut Valencià d'Art Modern) in Valencia. He was the recipient of a Fulbright Art's Grant in 2006, and an AFAC grant in 2012, and has been the recipient of several artist-in-residence fellowships by institutions including ProHelvetia Switzerland, 2020; Vermont Studio Center, 2013 & 2018; Kultur Kontakt Austria, 2017; Arte East in New York, 2016; Sharjah Art Foundation, 2016; Kansas State University, 2011; and Kala Art Institute in California, 2010.

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Ahmed Badry (b. Egypt, 1979) works across sculpture, installation, and the moving image. Often proposing hybrid objects without utility attempting to manifest usefulness, Badry's creations offer speculation on alternative narratives of production. Simultaneously, they enact a disruption in communication by transgressing the category of codified objects, situating his practice at the crossroads of sociology, economy, and language. Badry completed the Home Workspace Program at Ashkal Alwan, Beirut, in 2017 and a BA in Art Education at Helwan University, Cairo, in 2003. He holds an MFA from the Oslo National Academy of the Arts, 2020.

Badry has participated in residencies at Delfina Foundation, London, and Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris. Solo exhibitions include Portmanteau at Letitia Gallery Beirut, Lebanon (2018) and The Provisionary That Lasts at Medrar, Cairo, Egypt (2014) and AB Gallery, Luzern (2014), as well as Two Minutes Delay, AB Gallery, Zurich (2011); and Made in China (with Anastasia Katsidis), Kasko, Basel (2011). His work has been exhibited as part of group shows at Delfina Foundation in London, AUB Gallery and Beirut Art Centre in Beirut, D-CAF and Gypsum gallery in Cairo, as well as institutions in Zurich, Basel, Freiburg, Algiers and Amman, among others.