

FINAL
Vocabulary

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An Object of Ten Years

Malak Helmy

I'M NOT EXACTLY SURE how one describes in words the shape of an object of ten years.

I was asked for three words to describe my practice. I wrote down three words that kept interrupting my thoughts. They became the dimensions of a feeling I had been carrying for some months.

I did not exactly have an image for this feeling, or a name, but writing these three words began to plot an area for something between a sense of bodily compression and a need. An exhale trapped in the chest, a bubble in the throat, an unexcitingly blank prism in the mind that expands and contracts; it comes too from the outside, as the meters of distance that press on one when standing face to face with friends. As to what this need is, it is yet to be articulated.

...

To plot the space of this feeling it seems wise to start with a line. A solid width. I assign the name CLARITY to this dimension. Strong, simple, and clean, like a pencil line.

The second dimension is in the place of a possible height. But I am not sure yet where it starts or extends to, so I say I do not know. I say I might assign the word PATIENCE to it, but probably not. So for now it is this potential but also a flat or suspended dimension.

The third dimension to the object would have been length. I want it to extend across the shortest distance of the room and I describe it to be ten years. This causes a bit of alarm. If one was to unfurl a length of ten years as a dimension of need from one's mouth into a room of people, it would most likely push us with great force onto the edges of the walls, flattening our bodies into the concrete. It might also just put people off – that length of time – the burden of a commitment of that length. It is the main cause of the pressure in my chest. I assign the name LONGEVITY to it.



To arrive at the object of ten years one must travel by way of other objects: a sentence, *he has a lot of knowledge but no information*; a force, *the universal hormone*; the image of an ark; and a pattern of actions that come together over time.

He has a lot of knowledge but no information

I have been thinking a lot about a sentence I heard in an interview with – I think – Chris Kraus, where she said something about a character: He has a lot of knowledge but no information.

I had been thinking of what that means, especially given that I had been feeling that kind of thing increasingly lately. I feel I am knowledgeable but I feel I have no information. And by that I mean that I 'know things', be it intuitively, by sensing or otherwise, but that I am increasingly realizing I know things less precisely – it is this overwhelming sense of approximations and guesstimates, because, quite simply, at least in the current context in Egypt, if not also elsewhere, there is an absence

of clean data, and information as such is usually coloured by the current political ideology. So the information that I can try to reread, interpret, or colour by my own past knowledge, I am unable to really process into making it new 'knowledge' as such. The feeling one is left with is a sense of becoming more ignorant. In this context of having no givens, the ground one stands on seems to increasingly slip and warp, leaving one with a sense of a slow sinking or drowning and sensing ... discomfort.

I asked a friend recently about his opinion of what that sentence means. And he said, that having knowledge without information is like having faith. I asked him what he makes of this condition here, in Egypt, and he extended the same idea. He said, what has come to be regarded as knowledge is in fact ideology, and when information is received that is suspected to be untrue or misinterpreted data, it is made sense of according to one's ideology, which we think of as our 'knowing'. And so increasingly ideological belief becomes the only recourse to a sense of meaning or truth, because there is little recourse to actual evidential facts or data in our current context. As such we are in this situation where there is no ground because of this battle of ideological interpretations and colouring of evidence.

Around the same time as this conversation, I read an extract from a new book by Shuman Basar, Douglas Coupland, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, *The Age of Earthquakes: A Guide to the Extreme Present*, which you could say identifies with this condition of having knowledge and no information, however, they attribute it to the Internet and what they say to be the unexpectedly early arrival of the future. They offer a few terms to describe the feeling: being 'smupid', meaning that we are probably smarter than we've ever been, but feel incredibly stupid faced with the knowledge of everything we don't know; and 'stuart', meaning we are intelligent beings but have reserved our brain capacity for a certain amount of information, and have resigned the rest of what we should or need to know to an Internet connection, and without an Internet connection we are unable to display said intelligence; and 'denarration', meaning the process by which one's life stops feeling like a story.

In the case of the condition I had felt in Cairo, there is this sense of drowning in a thick goopy flood, and in this book they

say the world is melting. Be it a consequence of political upheaval or the Internet transforming the structure of our brains and the structure of the planet, both are surely two ends of one shared or connected phenomenon.

The universal hormone and the other hormone

I had been reading Lisa Robertson and Matthew Stadler's contribution to *A Needle Walks into a Haystack* (the book accompanying the 2014 Liverpool Biennial), which was composed as a series of letters between friends. In it they discuss their exhaustion with production under extreme time pressure, the market, and capital, which they rename between them as 'the one element'. They also begin to refer to it as 'the universal hormone' and 'the general metabolism that devours human life'.

At times Cairo allowed one a small reprieve from being totally devoured by the 'metabolism of the universal hormone' and the space to find patterns other than the pattern of the 'one element'. However, another element enters this space, which too begins to devour human life.

If the 'one element' is an irregular pattern of acceleration, uncertainty, precarity; the 'other element' manifests as patterns of convictions, which repeat again and again over long periods of time, fuelled by ideology.

As this other element becomes more pronounced here, an exodus ensues – a fleeing in any direction in fear of being consumed. All seem to be scrambling for any quick chance at survival. And this fleeing itself begins to breed a precarious, irregular, temporary, and fragmented life. Each year is lived as its own. Ten years are lived as single years lived ten times. And in this process something is lost – friends, shared ground, commitments to others that one might have had, and also a commitment to an attempt to find a pattern other than the pattern of the 'one element' or the 'other element' that the respite of being here had once afforded as a possibility.

The possibility of an ark

It seems increasingly vital to do the work of transcribing the scattered experiences that brought us together and now scatter us again. I think of tracing what I know. I think of biography. I think to document the forces that have sedimented in my body and the bodies of those around me. I think I want to do it with a group, to extract any relevant knowledge of the sources of our condition that we might have in our bodies, together. I think I want us to come out being able to say this clearly, to create with it data and information, to begin building a framework. A framework in the sense of building a body of knowledge about the making of our bodies, and which sustains them.

I'm not so interested in the biblical meanings of an ark as much as I am in the idea of an ark as a collation of life (knowledge) that survives a moment of destruction and scattering. And, what appeals to me more is how this knowledge survives with the aid of two structures. One of the structures is that of a vessel, and the other structure, which interests me most, is that of a routine, or a pattern which the residents of the ark must design themselves – and which must adequately serve them through the unknowns to come. This pattern is like a commitment, it is also a language, it is the work, the work of making a framework, or a ground to stand on that will carry you and also endure beyond you, for others.

The ark, as a pattern of actions, becomes the vehicle through which we process our lived experience and create frameworks of reference for our histories.

A pattern of actions that come together over an extended period of time

Recently, I began thinking about On Kawara's work, currently on show in an exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum that I haven't seen but only read about, which is dedicated to a record of every day. The basic knowable data of every day that he recorded was this: the date; I am alive; I spoke to X; I woke up at this time. It is both a biography and a self-portrait

in their most basic forms. And this structure (or pattern of work), as a practice, is maintained throughout a lifetime.

This practice becomes a vessel and a ground, a holding pattern: this is what I know; this is what is concrete; and I will make a record of that every day.

Since I've started thinking about his practice, I've become occupied with this kind of structure and how he makes it a language. I've also been thinking of how this commitment to a pattern can be exercised as a group. A daily pattern of actions that maintain togetherness and that establish a shared framework through a set of givens.

It is not only necessary to apply this kind of commitment to the future, but it is also important while doing so, to use it as a language through which to transcribe the history of one's making. Through this commitment over time, we can create a framework, a lexicon of experiences: a way to sustain and draw reference, for oneself and for the group.

The object of ten years is a desire for a shared pattern of actions extended over time, over a lifetime even. Ten years then becomes tenacity, the measure of our commitment to establishing the existence of our own ground.

Malak Helmy is an artist living in Cairo. Her work has been shown widely, including at the 63rd and 64th Berlinale Forum Expanded, Aspen Art Museum, EVA International, Bienal do Mercosul, and the Gwangju Biennale. She co-initiated *Emotional Architecture*, a writing project whose first two publications will be released in 2015.