

introduction

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We make a vessel out of mud, but it is the empty space that is useful to us, it is the intangible space, the void that is important... and this is the premise from which creating “spaces” can be understood as necessary. In Cairo there is no path that is necessarily clear, both literally and metaphorically, yet there is a unanimous unspoken realization and urge that drives people to organize themselves into institutions...and subsequently, creating spaces, even, if they stand at times, empty.

- Sarah Rifky,
*Reading Chinese in Arabic*¹

The present volume aims to trace the working processes and the source material of Malak Helmy’s work, the ‘lost referents’ we discern from the videos, sounds, texts, photo prints, books, objects and scattered materials that comprised her exhibition *Lost Referents of Some Attraction*. What all of Helmy’s works share is an auratic yet unfulfilled presence, an inclination, a material desire rendered into form. Oddly shaped plinths long for transcendence, echoing forms of the space around them. We encounter stories of carbon wanting to be diamond, and of communities dreaming of an existence as spotless and shiny as photographic paper, and artificial grass sprouting from cracks in an uncracked floor, embodying hopelessly displaced pieces of vegetation in the middle of the desert, the environment where the American University in Cairo resides.

¹ From a text read as part of “Total Décor”, an event on the occasion of Malak Helmy’s exhibition *Lost Referents of Some Attraction* at the Sharjah Art Gallery, April 2014.

Within the space of the Sharjah Art Gallery these pieces gradually unfold as an intricate meshwork of interrelated clues, and disseminated fragments of a larger poetic edifice. It is one that invokes the immediate space—its architecture and site—as well as time. The narration of a memoir of ‘we’ who once resided in a residential compound, which Helmy had placed on unfixed photographic paper, slowly evaporates through extended exposure to light. The recorded sound installation of a messenger bird is followed in space by the immediate noise of a bustling air conditioner, which lifts stacks of paper across the floor sheet by sheet, leaving a scatter. Fragmentary sentences pop up here and there on walls like unexpected subtitles.

The entirety of the exhibition, too, could be explored as a kind of referent, as something distant even while present.

For the public event we hosted during the exhibition, we asked artists and curators to present a reaction to the works on display. The responses were as varied as they were illuminating, highlighting notions of perception, translation, imagination, artificiality, objecthood. Taha Belal and Jenifer Evans from the art space Nile Sunset Annex temporarily installed mirrors inside the exhibition itself, which provided the organizing points in a guided narrative tour of their perceptions and the limits of ekphrastic language. Their improvisational conversations at each of the sights revealed in the mirrors served to highlight alternative sets of relations between the works on display and the bodies encountering them. *Beirut* curators Sarah Rifky and Antonia Alampì each read out texts on the construction of languages and imagined communities, taking *Teachings of the Tao* and Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* as their generative paratexts. Artist Brian Conley took clues from the optical preoccupations of the exhibition to speak about medieval theories of perception, by which objects are ‘radiating bodies’ that are sending out indexes that are devoid equally of resemblance and arbitrariness. Signification here becomes a process of a ‘peeling off’ from a condition Conley called “deep flesh,” i.e. an emanation of the world’s indeterminate and fluctuating relations.

Berlin-based writer Matthew Rana, who writes on Malak Helmy's work for this publication, concluded the evening with his poem "Total Décor":

total décor

this room this
inversion
into which was
paneled with a dark
and glistening burl
is now furnished with
acanthus egg
unfurling all its gaudy
leaves, this humid
spangle this accent curve
it furnishes the room
with time and it does so
from inside see
that is what it does
or makes its walls
decorous still this
desk of marble laminate
its things will be arranged
it pens them say
or ink upon its surface
which strictly speaking
has no content
when it spills its
in false or decorous flower
it ate its weight
and its weight alone
pricked this interior
with lies that were nothing

but of bronzing ash
so we elaborated passivity
in a volute and so wrapped
became impersonal
descriptive comedic
that is plushly carpeted
and silently withdrawn
or unnatural we
tried to embellish it
with thinking that
takes place in beds
in down or satin
its sheets this fountain
this babbling sluice
was dark as shadowy hedge
its open gate a trellis
as heavy as nocturnal
vine or fragrant as of
sonorous rivulets
perfumed and glimmering
this potted tinsel
it is false of stem
a bleated branch
not arborescent arms
of glowing filament
and fixed there with a ribbon
it tends this watery vase this
hungry beacon this
overstuffed chair
it eats up all the essence
and gulps it down upholstered
with brimming horns
an edifice
that in truth was petaled of
this garbled sentence this

phantom arch it
hoisted up a lintel or a crown
and we lie upon the crest
then call the form a practice
stretched out atop the colonnade
to fall in shafts and limbs
but neither is identity
a curtain as obscure as
a cube of lard and this
slicks and mats the fur
when rubbed it
spoke of sincerity
and does its work in silence
in sticky steps or
padding feet a mask
concealed a mouth
of unfired clay
or embellished
a licking tongue
the gaping just a
comical maw rag
of perception it
it is rendered in
descriptive skin
its lies become bronze
impressed and cracked
of fumbling finger
it is knotted to
a tapestry
a piece of string a wrist
an ankle or claw
footed it is hollow
and so threads
looped through a buttonhole
and also through a hole in a coin

it is a bauble
an awkward piece
as bone of ripened thorn
as drunk as drunken dog its
opulence does not show
its laziness stretched
out among the furrows
it licks all wounds
and heals them with its spit
it is antiseptic
buttressed of the eyes
the lobes the mouth
was a conquest of
this recessed god who
fidgets with the grapes
of crumbling plaster
and flaking paint
was a titan now just
clutches at his furs
his pelts as draped
as veiled or embroidered
its piping tongue with drains
and shifts the hips a snake
is self surrender
a cornice leaf
cementing falsity
upon falsity's scroll
in time the scroll
becomes an edifice
and this is called inhabitation

The works that Helmy exhibited in the space of the Sharjah Gallery assert the presence of life within conditions of evasion or emptiness. Within the experience of *Lost Referents of Some Attraction*, we find ourselves speaking of an ever changing surface, and, sometimes, an impulse to adorn or to ornament. We speak of something 'called' inhabitation, but is not. A 'deepness' of flesh that does not exist in a fixed place. Indeed, as we discussed with Helmy in the interview to follow, a crucial referent for her own psychobiography as an artist is the 'new city' of the Gulf and of Egypt's North Coast, the producer of glittering life amid nothing. As she explores, what comes to form through the circumscribed codes of *Autocad* and sterilized desires of corporate architects becomes productive of life nevertheless: growing, producing patterns, bacteria, space, contagion, education, citizens. The artworks that result—and they are collective in format precisely because they engage with these created, empty spaces—seem to offer a pathway to reconfigure perceptions of the distribution of energy into forms natural and recorded, internal and outside, flesh and not flesh, diamond and dust.

