

A File  
that has  
nowhere  
to end

Hagar Ezzeldin

## Cairo

While attending an editing workshop conducted by an independent producer who owns an independent film production company along with his day job, one of the participants mentioned a common Hollywood scriptwriting technique known as “The hero’s journey,” which describes the start of the hero’s adventure in the ordinary world, overcoming this world’s challenges and starting anew. In 2019, I contemplated that writing structure. While crossing downtown streets in a taxi, I saw two young men wearing old traditional warrior costumes, both of them dueling with plastic swords, while a middle-aged man in sportswear was filming them in front of “Cosmos Cinema” in “Emad Eldin St.,” one of Cairo’s well-known streets for theatres and cinemas from the beginning until the middle of the twentieth century.

It took me a second to grab my phone and take some pictures to upload them to my Instagram archive, as usual, and a long while to write about the Don Quixote fights in Cairo.

Here, I am going to enumerate some notes and questions on invisible labour in arts and culture, which I have been dealing with for the past two years during the lockdown.

Starting with being a part of the “Qaaf-Laam Collective”<sup>1</sup> followed by the “Roznama 8” exhibition and competition. The discussion was organized by “Medrar for Contemporary Art” and moderated by Nariman Abou al Soud (the exhibition curator).

During the lockdown, I had a doubt regarding radical artwork. Is it such a luxury for emerging artists to be concerned about producing radical works while barely living on social and health insurance coverage? Which artistic strategies should be offered in such a case?

While I was doing some research in preparing for a podcast interview, I happened to find a collective performance called “A Score for Sharing Negativity”, which was a part of the exhibition “We Are the Time Machine (2015).”<sup>2</sup>

It was inspiring to see that some artists use art practices and performance as an artistic strategy for solidarity with each other. In one of the “Qaaf-Laam Collective” essays and panel discussions<sup>3</sup>, we debated the issue of individual liabilities for artists working in the culture sector. Spending years developing

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1 “Qaaf Laam Collective”: A group of researchers, artists and cultural workers who collect and study art and cultural work in Egypt.

2 Mattin, Casco Art Institute team and audience, “A Score for Sharing Negativity”, part of the exhibition “We Are the Time Machine (2015).”

3 “Qaaf-Laam Collective”, “Why do we form collectives?” part of “Rooms: Notes on Collaboration” publication and events, edited by Mai El-Wakil, coordinated by Engy Mohsen and hosted at the “Contemporary Image Collective” in (2021).

their artistic skills, in addition to forming the social capital they rely on. Friendships and informal relationships can be either downsides or solidarity networks, and how friendship has or hasn't been institutionalized in terms of cultural work. Amid these interrelations, the dynamics and economic conditions for artists working only from studios aren't enough. Many artists choose to make a career shift, as not all of them have the financial and social capacity to sustain a career in the arts and culture field. This includes emotional labour that stems from these individual liabilities without any security coverage on the one hand, on the other, it doubles for women and mothers in the artistic field for their expected roles.

In 2020, I had the opportunity to discuss working conditions in the Arab region when we conducted a radio show on "Radio al Hara." It reached out to wider audiences, art collectives, and institutions in the Arab region. We covered variant topics such as labour solidarity, alternative strategies for accountability and sustainability in independent work environments, and precarity, such as freelancing and volunteering activities. This developed into an audio group discussion on the theme of "Working from home."<sup>4</sup>

In this piece of writing, we collectively wrote about our experience of the process of forming a collective. This process was fruitful with many projects and skills, sometimes challenging because of our professional backgrounds and different ideas of how a collective would function. Regarding that writing, I was personally inspired by Yazen Khalili's article, "The Institution as an Ideology"<sup>5</sup> the idea of interlacing knowledge with practice and vice versa, within the work of the institution and how it offered a reimagination of a revised structure and the concept of "The Total work of the Cultural Institution,"<sup>6</sup> which restructured the boundaries between the administrative, the cultural work and audiences, where audiences and workers become cultural producers within the institution's practices.

At this moment, I believe that my idea about cultural and collective work requires some time to reflect on my productivity, especially after my visit to "Documenta 15" with its theme of collective potential in the art world on an artistic and structural level, which I will elaborate more on such questions that inspired me to reflect more on my practices and positionality, concerning theories and practices, starting from the studio experience as a place to produce artwork, acquiring knowledge, and doing loads of administrative work.

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4 "Working from Home", Qaaf-Laam collective published on "Mada Masr" website, (2020).

- Link: <https://soundcloud.com/mada-masr/workfromhome>

5 Yazen Khalili, "The institution as an ideology", on "A\*Desk institution" website, (2020).

6 An interview by Rayya Badran with Yazen Khalili, on "Makhzin magazine" website, (2020).

## Artist's studio and the city.

As an emerging artist, most of the time home is my studio. However, I have shared studios with other artists on different occasions. Occasionally, I get the urge to write about my studio experiences at times like boredom or when I am not working on a particular project and have to keep myself busy. At such times, I go for walks, sit and write in coffee shops and work-spaces, do my administrative work, or apply for grants. Home time is mainly for producing art, texting and editing.

Afterward, my thoughts and experiences were inspired and transformed by Wouter Davidts and Kim Paice's book "The Fall of the Studio: Artists at Work."<sup>7</sup> It has opened a new perspective on the relationship between shared and individual spaces, the production and reception of art, the medium of culture, and audiences.

I was intrigued by Bruce Naumann's studio experience. How he transformed his repetitive practices and oversimplified tasks in his studio with the context of his surrounding industrial society, in which we see the artist walk in a narrow wooden corridor built inside his studio while trying to maintain the contrapposto pose and going beyond the limits imposed by the technology available in the late 60s, by using network televisions as a mainstream platform.

In Davidts's and Paice's book, they discussed an interesting topic between boredom in Nauman's works and the radical boredom in Siegfried Kracauer's essay "Boredom" (1924)<sup>8</sup> where he entails the idea of doing nothing, neither drudgery work nor focused play such as sounds and the flaneur detachment, in which "extraordinary, radical boredom" revolutionizes the everyday distractions of modern life.

## Inside/Outside the Studio. Germany

During my stay in the "HBK studio" residency, I had enough time to contemplate the past two years' discussions in Egypt. I was able to work and reflect on my artistic practices and experience in the studio. Particularly after my visit to Kassel, "Documenta 15" this year, and the rising debates on collective work.

I wanted to think of my position between theory and practice. When theories end, artistic practices begin. Throughout my practices in Germany and Egypt, I noticed a similar vagueness when it comes to art festivals as an art-related activity and

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7 Wouter Davidts and Kim Paice, "The Fall of the Studio: Artists at Work, (2009)."

8 Siegfried Kracauer's, "Boredom (1924)," „The mass ornament: Weimar Essays“, Translated by Thomas Y. Levin, Harvard University press, (1995).

what we used to call art or artwork. Even though “Documenta 15” was interesting to me this year as it challenged our perception of the collective and the artistic process. I found it necessary to contextualize the practice by referring to theory and practice.

After Documenta, as I approximated the invisibility of the artistic process and domestic labour in my work, a friend suggested that I should read an article written by Katja Praznik, in which she mentioned, “since art as an autonomous field has traditionally been established based on the artistic value connected to the art object rather than on creative labor (process), this poses a problem for labor’s value and remuneration in art production.”<sup>9</sup>

However, when I returned to the studio and discussed this with my fellow artists, we agreed that something was missing related to the twist and the creativity behind the artwork that makes it stand out, along with the accumulation of the process that I think comes from practicing and doing. On various occasions, people would call it the sublime of artwork.

Back in the studio, my project evolves around domestic and artistic labour in the arts, and women’s role in the domestic sphere, with a unique draw on the aesthetics of Egyptian middle-class interiors in the 80s.

I wanted to transform the time spent in the studio into something physical. At the beginning of the work, I started knitting and arm knitting. That was very helpful when I needed to figure out where to begin. While doing that, I used to listen to a podcast on writing or write some notes about knitting to share with my mother.

Through tremendous conversations with my mother, recording, and hours of knitting, I realized that knitting, drawing, and designing have a lot in common.

I can design endless shapes and textures just by learning the basic stitches. Freedom to play with shapes and tactility, even with a few repetitive stitches and steps.

This intrigued my interest as an artist, so I called my mother to find out if she shared the same experience. In her case, the utility aspect was more significant. This is what adds meaning to the piece besides its aesthetic value. We discussed the definition of creativity for both of us. Consequently, I thought of the distance between the idea, the concept and the craft. Is the concept of design and creativity the same for all of us?

To approach this concept more profoundly, I reconsidered a workshop’s discussion on storytelling and weaving, which was held in Cairo at the “Contemporary Image Collective” along

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9 The Paradox of Artistic Labor: An Interview with Katja Praznik, *Art Margins Magazine*, (2017).

with the artist Kerstin Schroedinger. The workshop included a visit to the “Wessa Wasef art center”. There, we saw pictorial weavings that include stories and scenes of daily life in the village made by the villagers who are also working at the center.

Reading Annie Albers’s chapter “Tactile Sensibility” in her book “On Weaving” (1975) and her analytical approach to the tactile sense as an increasingly regressive sense of opposition to verbal articulation regarding writing and reading. In which, she compares the surface qualities of a material with its inner structure.

She mentioned that “structure is related to function and requires our intellect to construct, analyze, or decipher it. Material, on the other hand, is mainly non-functional and non-utilitarian. In that respect, just like color, it cannot be experienced intellectually. It has to be approached, like color, non-analytically and receptively. It has to be enjoyed and valued for no other reason than its intriguing performance of the play on surfaces. But it takes sensibility to respond to the material.”<sup>10</sup>

What interests me about Annie Albers’ work is that she makes a clear distinction between thinking and making. On the other hand, the intersections between art, history and narrative remain an open question. Through our senses, how would we read history or reshape our view of the world?

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10 Anni Albers. “On weaving, Chapter eight: Tactile Sensibility,” Princeton University Press, Princeton, (2017).

## References:

1. “Qaaf Laam Collective”: A group of researchers, artists and cultural workers who collect and study art and cultural work in Egypt.
2. Mattin, Casco Art Institute team and audience, “A Score for Sharing Negativity”, part of the exhibition “We Are the Time Machine”, (2015).
  - Link: <https://casco.art/en/archive/a-score-for-sharing-negativity>
  - You can listen to the complete score at:
  - Link: <https://archive.org/details/ScoreMattinMASTERallEditsUNTIL24112016>
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– *Text written by Hagar Ezzeldin, 2023.*  
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### **Hagar Ezzeldin**

A Cairo-based artist, working with a wide range of art mediums. For the (2022–2023) academic year, she is a fellow artist in the “BS projects scholarship program” at HBK, Braunschweig, Germany. Her current art project engages with the aesthetics of family and domesticity in the 1980s in Egypt. She wrote and exhibited her M.A. project on “Women’s Visual Representations in Modern Egyptian Art.” She paid special attention to how women’s everyday experiences are narrated and imagined through video art, paintings, magazine covers and illustrations. This research was developed at the 5th International Visual Methods conference: Visualizing the City at the “Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT)”.