Anthony Downey, ed., *Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practices in North African and the Middle East*, I.B. Tauris, 2014, 359 pp., $28.00 US (pbk), ISBN 9781784530358.

Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practices in North Africa and the Middle East looks at the role of new media and its relationship to technology and the global market of image circulation and consumption in contemporary visual art practices. The book, the first volume of two publications on contemporary art practices from the Middle East and North African region compiled by *Ibraaz*, an online forum on visual culture in North Africa and the Middle East founded by the Kamel Lazar Foundation, is comprised of 34 scholarly, practitioner, and artistic contributions. The book contains material previously published on the *Ibraaz* website in immediate reaction to events as they unfolded across the region during the critical year of 2012-2013 after the heady and hopeful early moments of the Arab Spring. The edited volume also includes specially commissioned essays by scholars and practitioners as well as reproductions of artists' works. These include works from well known artists such as Wafaa Bilal, Ganzeer, Sophia Al-Maria, Hans Haacke, Rabih Mroué, Tarzan and Arab, Sarah Abu Abdallah, and Fayçal Baghriche amongst others.

In line with the "cultural turn" which had its most noticeable impact in Middle East Studies since the 1980s with the work of Edward Said, cultural production in its various forms has become an increasingly important site of research for scholars of the Middle East broadly interested in the varied national, ethnic, religious and political ethnographies in the region.[1] As a result, scholars of the region have in recent years produced a series of compelling studies on the cultural production of postcolonial nationalist cultures focused on identities, trauma, memory-making, and other forms of non-essentialist cultural practices.[2]

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[1] See, for example, Christiane Gruber and Sune Haugbolle, eds., *Visual Culture in the Modern Middle East: Rhetoric of the Image* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

[2] In addition to Gruber and Haugbolle, *Visual Culture in the Modern Middle East*, see: Susan Slymovics, *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); Rebecca L Stein and Ted Swedenburg, eds., *Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Hamid Dabashi, ed., *Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema* (New York and London: Verso, 2006); Abu-Lughod Lila and Ahmad H. Sa'di, eds., *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Laleh Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine: The Politics of National Commemoration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Lina Khatib, *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the Civil War and Beyond* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008); Kamal Boulatta, *Palestinian Art from 1850 to the Present* (London: Saqi Books, 2009); Rochelle Davis, *Palestinian Village Histories: Geographies of the Displaced* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2011); Sune Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Kamran Rastegar, *Surviving Images: Cinema, War and Cultural Images in the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Located in but also departing from this recent pattern in studies that has broadly addressed various aspects of cultural production, hegemonies, and resistances to them in the region through a focus on literature, cartoons, poetry, music and other forms of popular culture, a boom in a new body of work located in specifically visual cultural studies, media studies, and Middle East Studies, and focused on addressing the role of the visual in political processes and social transformation is also occurring.[3] This literature, triggered for the most part by the Arab revolutionary process's early days in 2011, and which is more interested in the role of arts in countering the State, has begun the difficult task of critically addressing the traditional tendency to bypass visual aesthetical considerations as crucial sites of research in the study of the politics, society, and cultures of the region. However, it has yet to theorize the role of the aesthetics of resistance and solidarity beyond the mere acknowledgement that visual cultural production is a site of dissent because it enables the galvanization of anti-establishment sentiment within the context of the region. Hence, while Anthony Downey's edited collection *Uncommon Grounds* joins this growing inter-disciplinary approach that emphasizes visual aesthetical considerations as crucial sites of research in the study of the politics, societies, and cultures of the region, it also goes a step further. It expands the conceptual and theoretical research net outwards, beyond the local and the national, to consider the multiplicity of discursive spaces in which the creative representations and visual mediations of the repercussions of contemporary conflicts are being played out within transnational circuits of production and global frames of aesthetical references. As such the book offers a unique multi-leveled analysis of how visual cultural practices in the Middle East, as everywhere, are today affected by and responsive to globalization. Specifically, it is the question of how markets intersect with the democratizing practices of new media and how that may in effect impact how we conceive of the emancipatory potential of this new media that consumes most of the contributors to the volume. This is no mean feat for a book that falls within the purview of Media and Cultural Studies as well as Middle East Studies. For these are disciplinary fields that have traditionally under-emphasized the region's rich non-mainstream media and cultural practices until the outbreak of the Arab revolutionary process in late 2011. Once the revolutionary process began to unfold, art and media became objects of study for those specifically interested in galvanization processes in social movements. Yet, the afterlife of the galvanization process, that is, the question of what happens to visual cultural production once it's past its need to galvanize popular discontent for the purpose of overthrowing a regime and once it begins to make its journey into the world of global consumption and circulation has largely been left unanswered, until this volume.

Uncommon Grounds's starting premise that "if artists are going to respond to the immediacy of events…we nevertheless need to remain alert to how the rhetoric of conflict and the spectacle of revolution is deployed as a benchmark for discussing, if not determining, the institutional and critical legitimacy of these practices" (17), is also the rallying point of the many themes discussed by the authors throughout the book. From the

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[3] For instance: Zeina Maasri, *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009); Tarik Sabry, *Cultural Encounters in the Arab World: On Media, the Modern and Everyday* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010); Lina Khatib, *Image Politics in the Middle East: The Role of The Visual in Political Struggle* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012); Samia Mehrez, *Translating Egypt's Revolution: The Language of Tahrir* (Cairo: Cairo University Press, 2012); Mona Abaza, "Walls, Segregating Downtown Cairo and the Muhammad Mahmoud Street," in *Theory, Culture and Society* vol. 30, no. 1 (2013): 122-139; Demerdash, Nancy, "Consuming Revolution: Ethics, Art, and Ambivalence in the Arab Spring," in *New Middle Eastern Studies*, 2 (2012), <http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/archives/970>; and Charles Tripp, *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

relationship between surveillance and social media, to representation and global art markets, to subversion and resistance, and to the meanings and manifestations of new media as art historical material in the global south, the volume is an ambitious attempt to tackle timely and expansive questions in both the scholarly as well as practitioner fields.

Franco Berardi's chapter, "Uncommon Ground," interrogates the assumption that new media and, especially, social media was an indubitably democratic space as it is often portrayed. Drawing on sociologists Arthur Kroker and Michael A. Weinstein, Berardi makes a compelling case that media activism finds itself in a difficult situation. On one hand it is necessary for the "creation of social consciousness and the denunciation of fake ideologies of power…and the critical dismantlement of power's discursive machines" (45). Yet on the other hand, "media activism is adding noise to the overcrowded infosphere and further virtualizing social relation and attention" (45). Phillip Rizk's "2011 is not 1968: An Open letter to an Onlooker," which focuses on the 2011 Egyptian revolution and its relationship to other historical revolutionary moments, similarly expresses a deep skepticism toward the notion of an independent image. Rizk shows that what we experienced as the spectacle of revolution in Egypt is ultimately owned by commercial agencies that profit from its circulation. This suspicion of what *is* new media in the context of revolution and how it is to be reckoned with was tackled in different ways by most contributors to the book.

Honing in on aesthetical paradigms, content, and form, Laura U. Marks and Maymanah Farhat choose instead to read the works of specific artists that subvert, foil, and contest these market-inflected representations of conflict. Through a focus on what she terms "glitch" to describe the employment of compression and low resolution video in "poorer" infrastructural contexts such as Lebanon which suffers severe electricity cuts, Marks argues that, "Many Artists in the Arab World explore the aesthetics of low resolution video as a metaphor for selective memory and forgetting, an examination of archives and a direct indication of practices of copying, pirating and making due with inferior copies" (260). For Farhat, who takes US-based artists of the Arab Diaspora as her focal point, the act of protesting the spectacularization of imagery of war is done precisely through giving antagonistic meaning to what seems most obvious by the "deployment of détournement strategies, the rearrangement of semiotic formulas of myths and the facilitating of interactive performances or online platforms" (199).

Artist interventions such as the Egyptian art collective Mosireen's contribution "Revolution Triptych," which makes like a manifesto of how images distort reality while also hiding the undercurrents of an ongoing revolution in Egypt, comprise a central component of the volume and demonstrate Farhat's point. Providing rich evidence and examples of the themes discussed throughout the volume, the interventions, such as Lebanese artists Roy Smaha's "Untitled for Several Reasons" (2002-2003) and Rabie Mroué's "The Pixelated Revolution" (2012), hint at the vast and rich body of work produced in the region. This body of work spans a generation of artists and activists that have had to unwittingly or not respond to a series of traumatic and violent ruptures emergent from what seems at the moment to be an ongoing cycle of revolutions and counter-revolutions, internecine warfare, violent civil conflict, and atrocious human rights abuses. The artists are, at any given time or in any given situation, simultaneously witness, archivist, commentator, and historian.

It is precisely this conundrum that senior curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, Omar Kholeif, tackles in his "Re-examining the Social Impulse: Politics, Media and Art after the Arab Uprisings." Kholeif ponders the role of the artist in such circumstances and asks if the relationship between the open source ideology in recent new media history and the proliferating "share" culture of revolutionary dissidence has created a grey area

"whereby artists who work with new media as a resource from Egypt and the whole region are asked to comment or subscribe to an artistic interpretation of the Arab World's uprisings"(217)? This question, which strikes at the heart of the structural and institutional framework in which artists are compelled to function, in fact runs intermittently and in different articulations throughout the course of the book. Lecturer and curator Maxa Zoller's analysis of what the art market does to images of the Egyptian revolution, for instance, shows how the insistence on curators and art institutions alike to show images of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions may in fact de-politicize, coopt, and commodify dissent. In an atmosphere where the artist is expected to act as pundit and the art loses its critical edge, one ponders, as Zoller relays about Egyptian artists' own questions regarding this matter, "what is to be done, for whom and for where? How does the creative output of the revolution (stretching from self-made banners to the famous graffiti wall on Mohammad Mahmoud street) change the very definition of art? How can we support this development of a new kind of art production" (157)? Curators Aleya Hamza and Edit Molnár, writing as Hamzam Molnár, in their chapter, "When the Going Gets Tough," ask a similar set of self-conscious questions about the role of the artist vis-à-vis the art market and international onlookers of the local art scene. They wonder if there are certain pressures from the market and from the international art scene for artists to be socially/politically active and to react to the conditions of the revolution (138). Looking at the question of "roles and duties" they ask whether artists should carry more responsibility toward their society in times of revolutionary change to report on what they see as opposed to artists elsewhere (138).

As if answering these very queries from the perspective of the particularities of local contexts from which images originate before they travel, both Anabelle Sreberny and Amal Khalaf's essays on Iran and Bahrain respectively unravel the multiple ways in which powerful images such as a physical reproduction of a cardboard cut out of Khomeini and the acquired symbolic meaning of the famous Pearl Roundabout in Manama—which the government attempted to eradicate from memory—may simultaneously become the loci of subversion for activists and critics of the State. Sreberny and Khalaf both redirect our thinking to the agency of the image, reminding us of its power to seduce, manipulate and subvert through the ability it possesses to re-distribute what visual and political theorist Jacques Rancière has termed the "distribution of the sensible."[4] Similarly, Tarek Khoury's "The Art of the Written Word and New Media Dissemination Across the Borders between Lebanon and Syria" reveals that despite the exoticization of revolution that Kholeif emphasizes and protests, as well as the anxieties that curators express about pressuring artists, video activists in Syria today are "also capturing one of humanity's most fundamental forms of communication—handwriting" (307). Drawing on videos and images of the Syrian revolution that combine the image and the written word, Khoury shows that somewhere in between the sexy politics of representing revolution, transgression, and dissent in the global art world of international museums, galleries, and biennials, lies a an exciting site of knowledge production where one may in fact study the relationship between the aesthetics of new media and traditional forms of communication. Like most of his fellow contributors, what Khoury seems to be at pains to show is that the question of how and with what consequences new media has seemingly come to play a prominent role in the visual cultures of the region as of late is not a simple one to answer. For how we read, receive, perceive, study, circulate, mediate, and express revolution, violence, and political discontent manifests at different levels both globally and

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[4] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).

locally. Sometimes these two levels conflict and sometimes they work succinctly together. Here Anthony Downey's own contribution to his edited volume becomes most relevant, precisely for his insistence that art's function in the development of civil society in the Middle East is indispensable (53-69).

While the volume sets out to cover the practices and problems of visual cultural production's appropriation of new media in the region as its title suggests, in reality this is not the case. For even though the book makes an effort to divide chapters by theme rather than geography, the book still dedicates most of its attention to the Egyptian Revolution and its aftermath. Egypt alone is the focus of at least 8 of the 20 chapters of the book. Interestingly, the book falls into the very trap it critiques throughout: that of the disproportionate attention paid by international onlookers to the revolutionary content of art production. Granted some of these contributions, as stated in the beginning of this review, are a re-publication of pieces posted on the *Ibraaz* website in immediate reaction to the events as they unfolded in the region in 2012-2013; so this may explain the overwhelming focus on Egypt. Yet countries like Yemen and Jordan as well as the Occupied Palestinian Territories, in addition to the Palestinian citizens of Israel, had artists, activists, and art collectives reacting to and reflecting on these monumental events that they were experiencing differently through new media in ways similarly described in the book. The 63rd anniversary of the Palestinian Nakba in May 2011 for instance, which erupted in deadly clashes as thousands of Palestinian refugees marched from Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, the West Bank, and Jordan to mark the event, and which triggered an unprecedented wave of transnationally coordinated protests inspired by the popular uprisings that had swept throughout the Arab region that year, is but one example. Scores were wounded and killed by both Israeli border patrol and security apparatuses of neighboring states and the march was ultimately contained. Despite the containment, images of that historical moment whereby a collectivity took their political fate into their own hands and chose to physically embody their very own resistance circulated around the Internet through social network sites and blogs, and triggered conversations, writings, poetry, and artworks in Palestine and beyond.

Finally, the book would also have benefitted from a more coherent structure whereby chapters could have been divided by themes in a more intuitive manner. Subheadings of different sections such as "Revolution," "Travel," "Representation," or "Violence," would have been helpful for readers in navigating the rich content of the book. Aside from these organizational glitches, *Uncommon Grounds* is ultimately not only an engaging read but also a powerful plea to relevant academic disciplines to expand the lens through which we read the intellectual, political, and social histories of the Middle East. The book is a must read for students of the region and of media and visual cultures more generally that are interested in the multitude of ways by which transnational circuits of solidarity, resistance, and dissent interact with the politics of reception and representation in our transnationally connected world.

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