

Uncommon grounds: new media and critical practices in North Africa and the Middle East

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Uncommon grounds: new media and critical practices in North Africa and the Middle East, edited by Anthony Downey, London/New York, I.B. Tauris, 2014, 359 pp., £17.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-78453-035-8

It is only in the last few decades that products from Arab cinema have achieved more of a crossover or breakthrough kind of success, at least in art house terms, with films such as Annemarie Jacir's *Shamma Loftak/When I Saw You* (2012) or Khalil Joreige and Joanna Hadji-Thomas' *Je Veux Voir/I Want to See* (2008) featuring Catherine Deneuve, to take two recent examples. Concomitantly, the establishment of the Sharjah Biennial (since 1993) and Art Dubai (this spring 2015 will be its ninth iteration) provides at least the beginnings of an art infrastructure and visibility that surpasses what was extant for generations. Much of the best recent Arab cinema owes its existence to a freewheeling experimentation that grew out of video, short film, installation, visual arts, performance, theater and new media – produced by artists who ‘think through’ the different forms, as Etel Adnan has suggested (Adnan 2009, 6). These are often created with newfound support systems or just as frequently outside of or despite them. Many of these specific types of exploration (such as the ‘microfiction’ film, the Arab ‘road movie’) have been exacerbated in an environment not only of widely distributed cell phones, pirated videos, Twitter and Facebook, but also now in the aftermath of the political and social convulsions related to the Arab Spring.

Uncommon Grounds is an ambitious anthology that attempts to take the measure of these developments – the widespread impact and appropriation of social/new media throughout visual culture in its broadest sense – geographically across the Maghreb to the Levant. One prominent thread that runs throughout the book is an extraordinary ambivalence towards the uses or stances of the ‘political’. While the editor in his introduction writes that ‘art as a practice ... is always already political’ (27), many of the artists and theorists in the collection (there are 20 contributions by curators, critics, artists, theorists,

filmmakers, academics and nine artists' project-pages) sometimes resist any blunt appropriation by political discourse, or compartmentalization into social event. The frequent invocation by contributors to philosopher Jacques Rancière's notion that the 'aesthetic' is somehow an incommensurable realm that can only be displaced, 'just as doing politics means displacing the borders of what is acknowledged as the political' (Qtd 53) provides a rich measure of division in how the works discussed in *Uncommon Grounds* 'act' in any social manner. Artmaking is a key to creating new spaces and forms of social and political engagement, yet must avoid the reductive assessments that often come with this. In this situation, the digital image has an especially contestatory and challenging role. In their manifesto-poem 'Revolution Triptych', the independent media collective Mosireen (veterans of the Cairo Tahrir Square protests) speak of the counter- or 'anti-image' as a kind of 'imagination', suggesting that 'the reiterations of these frames continue to live by becoming the carriers of the revolt itself that is in constant motion' (51). By urging 'counter propaganda montage' imagery produced using a mobile phone or a screen built on the street to inspire another 'counteraction' (which would be a 'dangerous weapon' on the 'side of the enemy') becomes instead an 'active agent of resistance' (52). In detailing the vagaries of images of Bahrain's Midan al Lulu, or 'Pearl Square' in Manama, the iconic, historic roundabout demolished by the government months after it became the site of protests in February 2011, curator Amal Khalaf relates how:

the distinctions between reality and fiction become as difficult to identify as the boundary between original image and copy, with the endless tampered images of the Pearl Roundabout consistently presented as evidence or validation, rather than a marker of fictitious, alterable entities. (288)

This fugitive, chameleon Pearl Square can force us to rethink our relation with images in general, and digital ones in particular, 'where images cannot be destroyed since they exist in code' (288). In this sense, with the agglomeration of symbology and conflict around the Square, Khalaf concludes, 'this digital monument – has become a vanishing point of reality. The image itself has become violent' (288).

Perhaps echoing Italian theorist, Franco Berardi's contribution that far from simply heralding the democratic potential of social/new media, he warns of how it further virtualizes and attenuates social affect and experience, actually 'making social solidarity more and more difficult to attain and build' (44). Nat Muller describes playwrights Rabih Mroué and Lina Saneh's electronic play *33 Rounds and a Few Seconds* (2012) as 'it challenges the premises of disembodied political agency' (94). Reportedly, based on the suicide of a young Lebanese secular activist, Mroué and Saneh's installation of a living space or domestic workplace with large TV screen, featuring a social media newsfeed of cellphone calls and Facebook posts, that continue without any response from the now deceased activist is a perfect performative absence without human actors. In their mediatized play, Mroué and Saneh push the much remarked upon 'withdrawal of

visuality' of post-Civil War Lebanese artists into a fuller 'withdrawal of presence' (93), invoking the ultimatum of death against the 'hyper-presence' of online activity. This sort of searching dark humor of absence contains as one of its many levels a political allegory – the absence being in part that of an Arab Spring that never arrived for Lebanon.

Given that so many works problematize history and historicization, perhaps it is understandable that few writers have looked at new Arab cinema, video or new media in the context of earlier militant precedents of the '60s and '70s. Brenez (2011) is, however, alongside a few others the exception. In treating the phenomenon of 'glitch' as an expressive device Laura U. Marks points out the potential 'historical consciousness' (270) involved when artists ally themselves with the conditions of poor resolution, scraping and loss instead of seeking the perfect seamless image. This exploitation of low-resolution video, in extremely multifaceted work by Roy Dib, Gheith Al-Amine, Rania Stephan, Roy Samaha, Kareem Lofty and many others, often exploits the resistance to representation within the digital process itself, making it a wide-ranging tool against forgettings and repressions of all sorts.

Such essays highlight the larger use of an anthology like *Uncommon Grounds* in that it not only sheds light on a complex moment of aesthetic, social and political post-Arab Spring transition, but also provides leads as to how this rugged laboratory's results can illumine the struggles and semiotic tangles of other politics of location far from its own.

References

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