Anthony Downey, ed.. *Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practices in the Middle East and North Africa.* London: IB Tauris, 2014. 256 pp. $28.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-78453-035-8.

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Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practices in North Africa and the Middle East is the first volume of a planned series of publications on contemporary art practices from the MENA region put together by Ibraaz, a self-identified online "critical forum on visual culture in North Africa and the Middle East."[1] The volume includes contributions previously published on Ibraaz's online platform, as well as newly commissioned essays and reproductions of artists' works. *Uncommon Grounds* addresses the role of new media and technology in contemporary art practices throughout the MENA region and brings together contributions by thirty-four scholars, curators, artists, and other cultural practitioners. As the rest of the world has turned its attention toward the Middle East in the wake of 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Arab Spring, "artists [have been] called upon (and often [have put] themselves forward) to make sense of events as they unfold," in the words of the volume's editor Anthony Downey (p. 14). While acknowledging the important role that artists'

works in new media have played in understanding and bringing attention to the contemporary social and political climate of the region, the volume also importantly addresses the problematics of focusing on these types of issues in art from the Middle East and North Africa. As Downey goes on to state in his introduction, "we ... 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" (p. 17). The volume's contributors clearly take this concern seriously, and turn their attention to issues such as the overemphasis on social media as a democratizing tool in the Arab Spring revolutions, and the appropriation of the death of Egyptian artist Ahmed Bassiony, a victim of sniper fire in Tahrir Square, by the Venice Biennale.

The essays are interrupted twice in the volume by "Artists' Inserts," brief statements by artists and collectives working in new media in the MENA region, followed by a selection of images of their works. Included are the artists Wafaa

Bilal, Sarah Abu Abdallah, Fayçal Baghriche, Ganzeer, Roy Samaha, Tarzan and Arab, Sophia Al-Maria, Hans Haacke (for Gulf Labor), and Rabih Mroué. These inserts serve to break up the rich but long volume, as well as provide an opportunity for an in-depth look at some of the projects emerging from the political climate discussed in the essays.

In "2011 is not 1968: An Open Letter to an Onlooker," which opens the volume, filmmaker, writer, and member of the Egyptian collective Mosireen Philip Rizk critiques the ways that the international community, and especially the media, represented the 2011 Egyptian revolution in its immediate wake. Remarking on the comparisons that were made with the events of 1968 in Europe, Rizk points out that because of the focus on the educated, English-speaking elite in the media, this small group of individuals "became translators of a collective uprising of which [they] were far from representative" (p. 30). Rizk credits the Internet with filtering the raw images of the revolution through a familiar format, complete with carefully crafted narratives edited by the major news networks which chose what would and would not visually represent the revolution. Rizk's critical eye, while focused on the Egyptian revolution, could certainly have widespread application to those events we consume through new media.

In "The Paradox of Media Activism: The Net is not a Tool, It's an Environment," writer and self-identified "media-theorist and media-activist" Franco "Bifo" Berardi questions the prominence attributed to social media in the Arab Spring revolutions. Berardi remarks on the widespread belief that "new media plays an unequivocally emancipatory role, and that the diffusion of information is *ipso facto* promoting democracy" (p. 40). Looking at the case of Egypt, Berardi notes that despite the removal of a dictator from his position, the revolution has not resulted in a democratic order, but rather has led to the rise of religious power and sectarianism. Berardi references theorists of

politics and technology Evgeny Morozov, Arthur Kroker and Michael A. Weinstein to emphasize that in a neoliberal society, it is economics rather than democracy that determines the position of new media, and that the "'Information Highway' [is] not really enhancing the space of freedom, but only optimizing the markets, thus resulting in 'more information, less meaning'" (p. 41). Berardi closes the essay by outlining the role of media activists in maintaining an awareness of the abilities and problems inherent in new media.

Curators Jens Maier-Rothe and Dina Kafafi and artist Azin Feizabadi echo Rizk and Berardi's critique of media portrayals in their contribution "Citizens Reporting and the Fabrication of Collective Memory." The essay provides an assessment of citizen journalism in the Middle East, focusing especially on Egypt. The authors analyze the potential power of these new modes of journalism, as well as "the alterations of proximity and distance these create," and close by considering these issues through the works of the artists' collective Mosireen and the artist Abbas Kiarostami (p. 71). Remarking on the appropriation of both citizen journalists' images and artists' works by local and international media, as well as the international art world, the authors note that the international art market often expects artists from the Arab world to respond to the politics of the region. Additionally, they argue, artists' work is often read through the lens of the contemporary political climate regardless of any actual reference or connection. This critique of the problematic removal of criticality for the sake of market, familiarity, and simplicity or accessibility, is repeated by a number of authors throughout the volume.

Essays by art historians Maymanah Farhat and Laura U. Marks highlight how the language and materiality of technology has been examined and critiqued by artists from the MENA region. The artists discussed in these essays have adopted the characteristics and technology of the new media that has dominated the cultural landscape of

postrevolutionary MENA region and utilized these techniques in order to further their own critique not only of media, but the societies that consume it. Farhat's "New Media and the Spectacle of the War on Terror" shifts the focus from artists working in the Arab world to examining how diaspora artists in the United States "have explored the interventionist potential of new media … within the context of the American spectacle" (p. 184). Farhat discusses this phenomenon through an analysis of works by Jackie Salloum, Hamdi Attia, Nida Sinnokrot, Wafaa Bilal, and Rheim Alkadhi. She demonstrates that these artists cannibalize the language of images from Hollywood films, news media, political theater, and drone warfare in order to critique these pervasive purveyors of information. While Farhat's essay examines how artists have co-opted the language and innovative technology of new media, Marks' essay "Arab Glitch" investigates the notion of the faulty aspects of new media—"[g]litch, compression and low resolution video"—which "reveal the materiality of the support underlying the digital image" (p. 257). These "glitches" are a persistent problem in the Middle East and North Africa. Marks discusses the work of a number of new media artists who play with this notion of glitch in their work.

Scholars Amal Khalaf and Annabelle Sreberny's essays analyze the powerful role of images as symbols in forging and maintaining state power, rebellion, and critique. Looking at Bahrain and Iran respectively, the authors suggest that these disparate circumstances reveal the way that media and images can be used to create and control narratives, yet still become spaces (either virtual or real) ripe for subversion and critique. Khalaf's "The Many Afterlives of Lulu" tells the story of Bahrain's Pearl Roundabout (Dowar al Lulu), renamed Pearl Square (Midan al Lulu) by the international media, a civic space which became a location of protest. The space became a site so threatening to the Bahraini government that they ultimately destroyed it and removed its image from the public. After its destruction, "it took on a life of its own, becoming a symbol of a protest movement; the star of tribute videos and video games, the logo for internet TV channels and the subject of contested claims, rebuttals and comment wars" (p. 272). Pearl Square demonstrates the persistence of resistance—it remains "a powerful symbol for thousands of people … one that no longer exists as a physical 'thing' but rather lives on as an image-memory" (p. 272). While Khalaf's essay focuses on a symbolic image that became a threat to the state, Sreberny's contribution, "Cardboard Khomeini: An Interrogation," turns to a symbolic image reproduced and promoted by the state. In her essay, the author analyzes the production and display of a cardboard cut-out of Ayatollah Khomeini at a variety of ceremonies and events in conjunction with the thirty-third anniversary of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Sreberny investigates the possible meanings and implications of the cut-out within Iran, as well as reactions from the international community, which responded by producing memes of "Cardboard Khomeini." Upon discovering that one website devoted to the meme solely contains images produced by a single Islamophobic American, Sreberny closes her essay exploring the questions of what effect the author of the images has on their "value" and "[w]ho is allowed to make fun of Khomeini" (p. 297).

While the publication aims to present issues and practices in new media from across North Africa and the Middle East, the volume is heavily weighted towards discussions of the Egyptian Revolution and its aftermath. Egypt is the focus of eight of the twenty essays in the volume, while Tunisia is featured in only two, and Libya mentioned only in passing. Likely the reason for the focus on the events of the Arab Spring are due to the fact that many of these essays were produced as these events were unfolding and in their immediate aftermath. Interestingly enough, the focus upon the Arab Spring's manifestations in Egypt appears to reflect the general focus of the media at that time. This may very well be because of the

role new media played, or was perceived to play, in the revolution itself. A number of contributors discuss the role of citizen journalism in disseminating information from the streets, the (sometimes misunderstood and overestimated) role of social media, and the ways new media artists have been persecuted or co-opted by the government, news, and art market in the name of revolution and reform. While these are issues that have resonance with topics unconnected with the revolution, the large number of essays on the Egyptian Revolution can overwhelm these more subtle critiques. The volume would benefit from clearer organizational divisions, such as grouping those essays dealing with revolution together into one section. This would have allowed for a more in-depth concentration on artist and cultural responses to a particular moment, while allowing those projects that deal with other issues to stand alone and have greater resonance. However, organizational concerns aside, *Uncommon Ground* provides a crucial and necessary discussion and critique of recent cultural phenomena and artistic practices in new media throughout the MENA region.

Note

[1]. Anthony Downey, "About Us," Ibraaz website, http://www.ibraaz.org/about-us/ (accessed May 20, 2015).

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