

Book Review: Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practices in North Africa and the Middle East, edited by Anthony Downey

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Uncommon Grounds is a stimulating exploration into art practices in North Africa and the Middle East, and also a thought-provoking look at the fluid relationship between art and society more generally, writes **Arek Dakessian**. Chapters cover media activism, social media and contemporary art, and critical analyses of aesthetics and politics in the digital age.

Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practices in North Africa and the Middle East. Edited by Anthony Downey. I.B. Tauris. 2014.

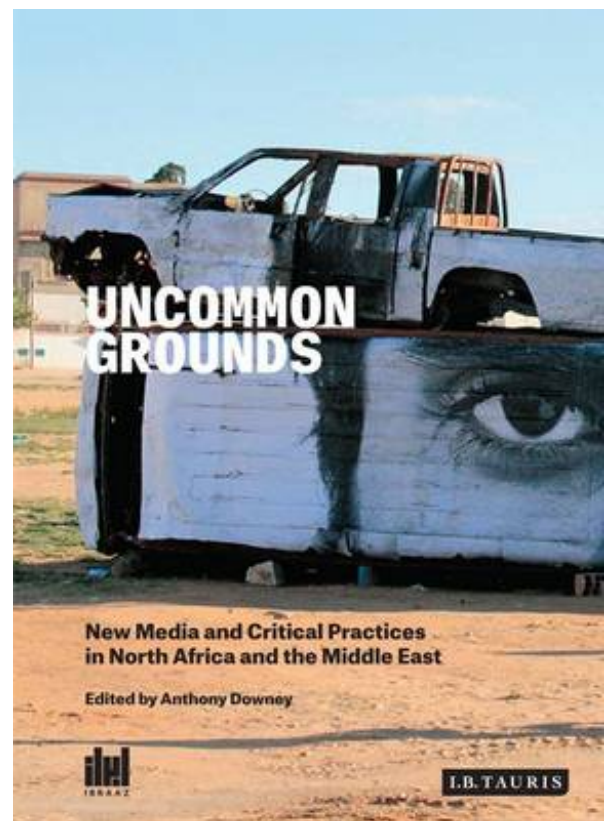
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Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practices in North Africa and the Middle East is the first book in a series that aims to make sense of visual culture in relation to the so-called Arab Spring. Indeed, since the start of the Tunisian revolution in January 2011, middle-class English-speaking activists and artists alike have been relied upon in varying degrees to narrativise and make familiar the strange events unfolding in the Middle East, as Philip Rizk observes in the opening chapter “2011 is not 1968 – An Open Letter to an Onlooker” (pp. 30 – 39).

In this volume we find contributions from artists, academics and students pushing to spark informed debate on the production and consumption of visual culture associated with the Arab Spring. Anthony Downey, an academic with a long-standing interest in the arts in the Middle East and the editor of the collection, provides a loose but coherent framework through which to read the chapters. While differences in discipline, language, and levels of critique are apparent throughout the book, it is very difficult not to enjoy and

be stimulated by the passionate contributions pieced together in a sort of coherent chaos – coherent in that contributors row in a direction towards a critical debate on artistic and cultural practices in light of the Arab Spring, and chaotic in the variety of assumptions implicit in these contributions. What readers get out of this book is an intimate and close reading of certain arts practices situated in various local contexts within the Middle East; a reading that does not claim to represent or diagnose, but rather pools together the raw materials for an interdisciplinary discussion into the politics of visual or artistic representation, grounded in case studies and inserts that illustrate some of the theoretical discussions being had. Indeed, the book reflects on artists’ use of new media throughout, with no less than eight inserts illuminating how film, photography, and art have adapted to an ever-changing and tense socio-political landscape.

This coherent chaos of contributions was readily apparent in two chapters in particular. Chapter 10, Maxa Zoller’s “Potential Media: The Appropriation of Images, Commercial Media and Activist Practices in Egypt Today”, looks into the appropriation of images from the Egyptian revolution by different stakeholders with different interests. Zoller,



conscious of her own position as a ‘foreigner’ in Egypt, engages critically with how Coca-Cola, for example, opportunistically transformed itself into a progressive, revolution-friendly brand through its ads. She also considers, and wonderfully so, how the agenda of ONtv, one of Egypt’s most prominent television channels, is embodied in their own video representations of the Egyptian revolution.

The object of the book is in itself divisive and sensitive, and its framing as a critical foray into the cultural production of the Arab Spring imposes a specific reading of the discussions in there. This tension is most evident in Zoller’s discussion of Mosireen, a Cairo-based image collective “situated somewhere between media activism, knowledge production and image appropriation” (p. 157). Activism, broadly defined, has been at the forefront of the cultural product that is the Arab Spring, and Zoller’s identification of Mosireen as an “interesting model of revolutionary image production” (p. 157) brings to the fore pertinent questions of legitimacy and representation. There is a tension for legitimacy here between activism, art, and representation in the west. In the preface to the book, Kamel Lazaar asserts that “the Arabs do not know the Arabs” and that “the Western world does not know the Arabs” (p. 9). Zoller’s chapter implicitly touches upon some of the ethics and politics of representing, producing, and constructing Arabs in this regard. Incidentally, Ibraaz, the research and publishing initiative behind the book, is part of the Kamel Lazaar Foundation’s projects, and I have to say from personal experience as a researcher into cultural production in the Middle East that such initiatives serve an extremely important purpose in providing a platform and space for deeper engagement.



A mural on Mohamed Mahmoud Street in Cairo, Egypt. Credit: [Aslan media](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

The title of Chapter 11 – Dina Matar’s “A Critical Reflection on Aesthetics and Politics in the Digital Age” – seems to bounce off Zoller’s chapter perfectly. This is a short but powerful piece calling for caution in the discussions the book aims at sparking. Matar touches upon the blurring of lines between activism, the arts, journalism, and history in the hypersocial and fluid context of the Arab Spring. This is something Downey himself alludes to in the introduction, when he comments that artists increasingly have to make political sense of events as they unfold (p. 14). Matar makes two important programmatic contributions here: that one should not look into the relationship between new media and artistic practices as removed from wider historical contexts and power structures, and that any enquiry into this relationship must consciously move away from binaries and become more sensitized to complex interdependencies.

It is worth remembering that this book is the first of a series and as such it would not be realistic to expect substantive conclusions to be drawn; rather a research agenda of sorts to be earmarked for deeper, more systematic, consequent interdisciplinary engagement. Matar’s chapter streamlines well with the agenda Downey sets in his introduction: she observes, crucially, that digital spaces and new media are not inherently neutral. “They can be and can produce privileged places, particularly at their junction and access points” she asserts (p. 167).

Overall, *Uncommon Grounds* provides more questions than answers, which reflects how successfully it has achieved its aims. Located somewhere between cultural sociology, media studies and contemporary art studies, this interdisciplinary chaos sheds light on a black box that is severely underexplored in the academy. To this end, perhaps the greatest praise I can offer this book is that this exploratory illumination is sensitized to questions of representation, privilege, power and sense making that texture the cultural product that is the Arab Spring. The main question looking ahead seems to be whether or not such sensitivity and critical engagement can be cohesively maintained as the discussion develops and deepens. Researchers interested in cultural production would do well to engage with the book, especially so if new media is a central interest of theirs. Irrespective of the territoriality of one's interest, whether the Middle East or elsewhere, *Uncommon Grounds* is a stimulating exploration into art practices in the region, but also a thought-provoking look at the fluid relationship between art and society more generally.

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