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Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practices in North Africa and the Middle East Review

Text: Wided Khadraoui

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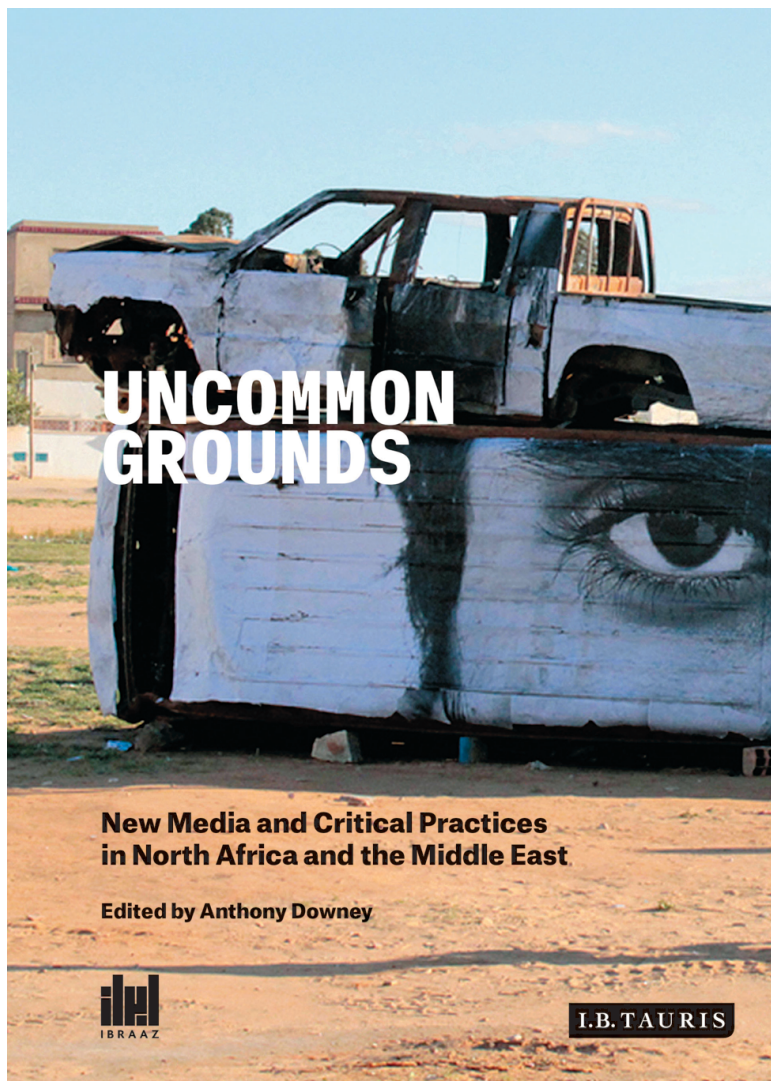
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Book cover - courtesy of Ibraaz

Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practices in North Africa and the Middle East's (<http://www.ibtauris.com/Books/The%20arts/History%20of%20art%20%20art%20%20design%20styles/Uncommon%20Grounds%20New%20Media%20and%20Critical%20Practice%20in%20the%20Middle%20East%20and%20North%20Africa.aspx?menuitem=%7bFFBFBE33-EB9B-42A6-A1EA-EDF1AEE2D92F%7d>) primary contribution is to frame revolutionary features in various countries in the Middle East and North Africa by contextualising the region and the role that enormous new media has played in dismantling regimes and creating new social movements.

The anthology of essays edited by Anthony Downey, Editor-in-Chief of Ibraaz, pulls together critical essays and full-colour inserts of artwork with a socio-political slant exploring the overlap of the role of new media and visual culture. The book

Twitter

Image of posters made for the exhibition. Left poster by #MohammadMelehi and right by #DiaAzzawi....
<https://t.co/5UBXi3fG8X>

11 hours ago

From rashasalti's great presentation "The international art exhibition in solidarity with..."
<https://t.co/2FqDCd24UL>

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Spotted at the @goldsmithsuol #design department. #Internet
<https://t.co/JLp3FQhgfi>

2 days ago

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presents a new analysis paradigm that moves beyond merely framing the elements of the social movements within their historical backgrounds and political interpretations, and instead engages with the specifics of the accountability of new media in the democratic movements.

Grassroots movements once relied on handwritten pamphlets and word of mouth, while now the resources available to create specific change or to push for certain issues are expansive, powerfully visible, and, critically, they are immortal. The central role played by YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter ties the whole collection together. “The internet helped create the aura that all this was familiar...the Internet replaced the Kalashnikov” writes Philip Rizk, an independent filmmaker based in Cairo, in his essay ‘2011 is not 1968’ (p. 31).

The transmission of important news events via citizen broadcasting is actively transforming the landscape in the Middle East and North Africa. Countries such as Syria and Egypt who once were able to block their citizen’s access to international news channels are now finding it almost impossible to effectively control access to such information. It makes it increasingly difficult for those culpable to bypass consequences or feign ignorance.

Another effect associated with narratives provided by new media is the fabrication of collective memory, a constant theme throughout the book. In Jens Maier-Rothe, Dina Kafafi, and Azin Feizabadi’s essay ‘Citizen Reporting and the Fabrication of Collective Memory’ the oftentimes “uncategorized and chaotic” information sharing still proves to be effective in disseminating information and thus radically alter society’s collective reality. The piece later goes on to explore the concept of ‘citizen journalism’ associated with the prevalence of new media and how “new forms of reporting also condition new forms of spectatorship...”(p. 75). The role of observers and their manifestation in visual culture

as a means to explore, promote, and understand events and movements is another consistent theme in the anthology.

Other articles establish new conceptual terrain by framing newly forming implications for the regional art movement as a whole. The entire approach to art is explored in Derya Yucel's essay, 'Art's Networks: A New Communal Model.'

Developments in technology altering language and creative expression in Turkey is explored and fascinatingly delves in to how 'net art' is further developing new positions against established art institutions in the country's more established art landscape.

Sheyma Buali's 'Digital, Aesthetic, Ephemeral' explores the change produced works of art undergo throughout the different stages of revolutions, observing the cycle of raw material being sourced, and how materialisation of visual culture is constantly altering based on a society's sentiments.

The rest of the chapters unfold as a more traditional examination of various issues related to the role of certain artistic manifestations in the social movements. The strength of the book lies in the diversity of the selection of art as well as the scope of area studies and theoretical frameworks. The range of subjects and approaches provides a wide degree of concepts developed. Some chapters include an expansive, sophisticated theoretical framework while others are mostly explanations of certain events. Short artistic briefs explaining their artworks are scattered throughout the book. The variation is refreshing and allows the anthropology to be appreciated from a multitude of angles and perspectives, despite the subsequent unevenness in the chapters.

Tarek Khoury argues in his essay 'The Art of the Written Word and New Media Dissemination: Across the Borders between Syria and Lebanon' that "Syrian activists are constantly doing at least one of the following: expressing, recording and/or

disseminating (p. 302).” The statement can be applied across the board to all activists working in the Middle East and North Africa.

While several of the chapters discuss the impact of geopolitics, none provide a thorough examination of the crucial importance of how the cultural scene in the Middle East and North Africa intersects with the rest of the world, which would have provided additional insight.

Anthony Downey writes in his article ‘For the Common Good? Artistic Practices and Civil Society in Tunisia,’ “If art is indeed increasingly positioned as ‘political’ by virtue of being denied a role in the political realm, it is obvious that it is considered capable of potentially altering opinion, not to mention reconfiguring engagement with various communities” (p. 60).

It’s the revolutionary potential of art, with the facility provided by new media platforms that ensures art’s impact remains unpredictable, yet steadfastly critical in social relations. *Uncommon Grounds* provides a comprehensive narrative of the region’s current transitional moment and the expansive role of new media, for the first time.

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Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practices in North Africa and the Middle East is published by I.B.Tauris in association with Ibraaz. More information on the book via I.B. Tauris

(<http://www.ibtauris.com/Books/The%20arts/History%20of%20art%20%20art%20%20design%20styles/Uncommon%20Grounds%20New%20Media%20and%20Critical%20Practice%20in%20the%20Middle%20East%20and%20North%20Africa.aspx?menuitem=%7bFFBFBE33-EB9B-42A6-A1EA-EDF1AEE2D92F%7d>)

ibraaz.org (<http://ibraaz.org>)

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culture, and politics in the Middle East and North Africa.

Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practices
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