

In this groundbreaking book, a range of internationally renowned and emerging academics, writers, artists, curators, activists and filmmakers critically reflect on the ways in which visual culture has appropriated and developed new media across North Africa and the Middle East. Examining the opportunities presented by the real-time generation of new, relatively unregulated content online, *Uncommon Grounds* evaluates the prominent role that new media has come to play in artistic practices—and social movements—in the Arab world today.

Analysing alternative forms of creating, broadcasting, publishing, distributing and consuming digital images, this book also enquires into a broader global concern: does new media offer a 'democratisation' of—and a productive engagement with—visual culture, or merely capitalise upon the effect of immediacy at the expense of depth? Featuring full-colour artists' inserts, this is the first book to extensively explore the degree to which the grassroots popularity of Twitter and Facebook has been co-opted into mainstream media, institutional and curatorial characterisations of 'revolution'—and whether artists should be wary of perpetuating the rhetoric and spectacle surrounding political events. In the process, *Uncommon Grounds* reveals how contemporary art practices actively negotiate present-day notions of community-based activism, artistic agency and political engagement.

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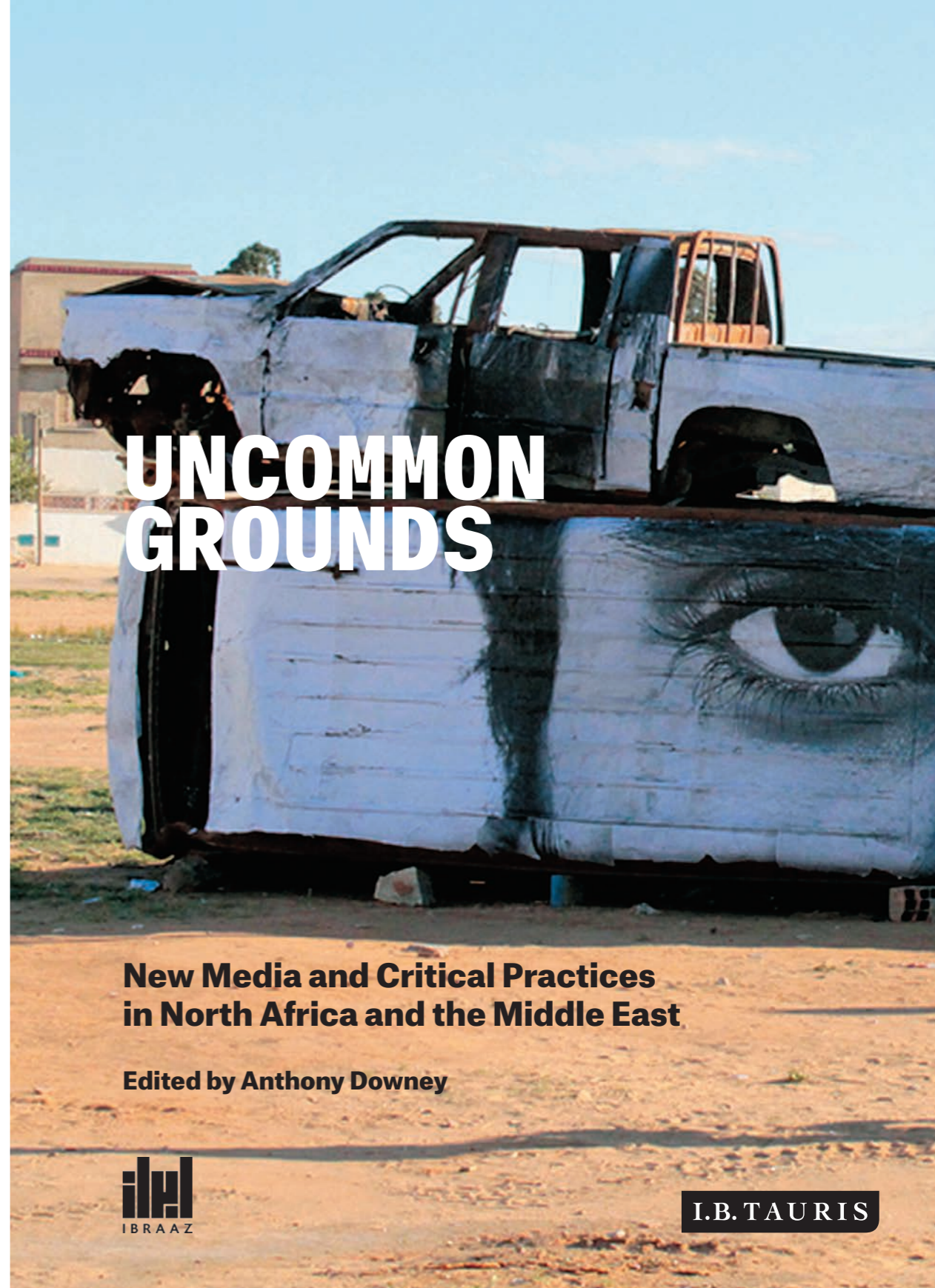
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Preface

In 2011, the Kamel Lazaar Foundation responded to the urgent need for access to critical and historical texts about visual culture in North Africa and the Middle East by launching a research and publishing initiative, Ibraaz (www.ibraaz.org). The decision to do so grew out of a number of private and professional issues that I have encountered over the last two decades or so. Firstly, in a professional capacity, I have travelled around the region for many years and the one thing I have observed again and again is the fact that, to put it simply, the Arabs do not know the Arabs. Secondly, in a private capacity, I have been privileged to travel to many other countries across the world and to have experience of many different cultures. During this time, I have observed a further related point: the Western world does not know the Arabs. Again, cultural, political and historical indifference, for whatever reason, seems to be order of the day. I am unsure why this is the case, but it represents, for me, a missed opportunity—never more so than now, when mutual understanding and co-operation are so thin on the ground.

In setting up the Foundation, and subsequently launching Ibraaz, we sought to somehow bridge this gap in knowledge, albeit in an admittedly modest manner. The choice of visual culture as a way to address cultural indifference came out of my own knowledge of both Western and Arabic art forms. It may seem obvious to some, but visual culture is able—in my experience—to transcend the entrenched positions associated with political, religious, economic, and historical antagonisms. It can, thereafter, open up a generous level of engagement for both self-understanding and for the understanding of others. This is not to suggest we should all agree on the value of cultural forms. On the contrary, we should openly and critically analyse culture at all times. Perhaps this is the ‘gift’ of art: cultural debate is a bonding agent of sorts that promotes open discussions around similarities and, indeed, differences.

This is not, moreover, to promote an instrumentalized version of culture as a form of ‘soft power’—a move that sees culture deployed for political ends and as a way of opening up markets. On the contrary, the Foundation’s initiatives seek to promote culture as a platform for critical and creative debate about visual culture and its role in open societies. The creation of *Ibraaz* in its online version, and now in this series of books, answers to these aims; in particular, the aspiration to create a sustainable dialogue around visual culture and develop systematic forms of historical knowledge for future generations. The long-term, perhaps quixotic, goal is to effect informed levels of debate within the region and beyond. We are conscious that there is much to do in relation to this, but at least this is a step in the right direction.

Although the focus of this series is and will remain North Africa and the Middle East, this is not simply a regional issue; rather, it is a global one. For the Foundation, the promotion of visual culture in the Arab world can only be fully effected if we consider worldwide issues too. The complexities of the region are seen as a prism through which we continue to examine culture within its broader, global contexts. To this end, we are dedicated to providing a forum through research and publishing initiatives, support for exhibitions, conferences, educational seminars, and the development of a collection, that will provide an international context for the region and, reciprocally, develop regional contexts for a global audience.

We began in 2011 with an online publishing project, and we subsequently decided that a print volume—collecting online and newly commissioned essays—was necessary. It seems, despite declarations of their imminent, internet-induced demise, that printed books are still both popular and sought after. We were therefore very pleased, in this respect, when I.B.Tauris also agreed that a volume on these and other topics was not only needed, but an entire series should evolve from these concerns. The broad reach and scope of the essays and artists’ projects included here will hopefully provide ample acknowledgment of our ambition to see the region develop a better understanding of itself and—in time—for the world to better understand culture from the region. I would like, finally, to thank family and friends for their guidance on these matters and the contributors to this volume who have been so generous with their ideas and support.

Kamel Lazaar

Chairman

Kamel Lazaar Foundation

www.kamellazaarfoundation.org

Notes on Texts and Artists' Inserts

A number of essays included in this volume were published as part of Ibraaz's online platform in 2012 and 2013, and therefore refer to specific cultural moments and live events as they unfolded across the Middle East. Rather than substantially revise them, we have chosen to maintain the immediacy of reactions to these events, specifically in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, and the timelines associated with them. We are grateful, however, to all our contributors for reviewing anything that has changed radically since original publication. We are also grateful to the artists included here for reviewing their inserts and redesigning them for inclusion in this print volume. The full projects, including videos and interviews with the artists, are all available at <http://www.ibraaz.org/projects> and <http://www.ibraaz.org/interviews>



▲
Wafaa Bilal, *3rdi*, year-long performance, 2010–2011.
Courtesy of the artist.

Introduction

Anthony Downey

In 2010, the Iraqi artist Wafaa Bilal had a camera surgically inserted into the back of his head. The process involved implanting a titanium plate onto which a camera was mounted and, from the outset, his body rebelled against this foreign object by cutting off blood supply to the area. Through his own unwavering commitment, Bilal persisted with the project and for one year used the embedded camera to record one image per minute of his daily life. The results, covering a period dating from December 14, 2010, to December 18, 2011, or 369 days in total, were streamed live to a global audience via a dedicated website.¹ Presenting acute angles and unexpectedly vertiginous views, the images look arbitrary, distant, lopsided and yet disconcertingly intimate. The first was taken from a car in Doha, Qatar, whereas the last shows a hotel room in Jakarta, Indonesia, complete with a curtain rope framed by a window. The curtain rope, in one of the many visual allusions in this series, resembles a wrecking ball—a perhaps fitting end to a project that was brought to a close when the computer finally crashed.

Technology and new media brought *3rdi* (2010) into being and also, somewhat appropriately, announced its end. However, the concept for the work alludes to more enduring concerns that, according to the artist, arose from a need to objectively capture his past from a non-confrontational point of view.² Bilal's own past has been indelibly marked by historical events in Iraq and elsewhere over the last two decades, including the invasion of Kuwait (and the ensuing wars in his homeland); the death of his brother Haji in 2004 (killed by American forces); the subsequent death of his father (from the resulting grief); his time in refugee camps (in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, respectively); and, presently, his life in the United States (where he now teaches at Tisch School of the Arts). In conversation with Bilal, two things become immediately clear about his practice: firstly, his work, produced within the relative comfort zone of the United States, often reflects upon the conflict zones he has left behind; with the difference between the two generating a poignant creative friction.³

Secondly, when he looks back on his tumultuous travels there is a keen sense of regret that he lacked the means to record those journeys in all their chaos and uncertainty. This ambition to record no doubt appeals to a broader human desire for things—be they the apparently random events of everyday life or the singularity of a tragedy—to make sense. Making sense of a past riven by conflict and uncertainty, moreover, acts as an ameliorative of sorts—a point of reference for the subject to negotiate the precariousness of life.

In its use of new media and digital platforms, *3rdi* offers a significant point of departure for any discussion of contemporary art practices in the Middle East and beyond. It also alludes to a fracturing of historical reality that, for many, has impacted upon how we understand the relative relationship of the subject to both time and space. The invasion of Kuwait in 1990, two wars in Iraq, 11 September, 2001, and an ongoing war in Afghanistan; protests across the region from 2010 onwards, subsequent upheaval in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and elsewhere; and the catastrophic destruction wrought by civil war in Syria—all of these events have arguably created a quandary in both formal representation and interpretation for artists, institutions and critics alike. How, that is to enquire, do you represent such events in a digitized visual continuum where images circulate in an apparently context free, groundless, circle of self-reference and media-based hysteria? This is not, I should observe, an attempt to rehearse the all too weary defeatism of a Baudrillardian-inspired belief in the referential bankruptcy of images and the devolved authority of reality (conflict) in the face of a simulated reality (the representation of conflict); rather, it is to argue that the last two decades—broadly commensurate with the rise of digital technology and ready access to it—has seen a dilemma in representational strategies that has subsequently found considerable purchase in the context of artistic practices, with artists being called upon (and often putting themselves forward) to make sense of events as they unfold. Furthermore, this is not a regional crisis in representation, but a global one: events today, no matter how localised, have become instantaneous in their reach through forms of digital dissemination. Visual culture, in these contexts, positions itself as a key interlocutor in, if not a precursor to, these developments and new media offers, in turn, an increasingly significant if not essential element in understanding the immediacy and contingent impact of events across global sites of reproduction and reception.

Revealing as it does an international horizon of aesthetic engagement that is far from regional, the undoubted role of historical conflict in Bilal's work should not be therefore over-estimated. The artists and discussions encountered throughout this volume, likewise, engage with the practices and subject of new media to explore the flux of historical events and their impact upon the global politics of representation. They often utilize, as a result, new media as a way of critically negotiating, if not realigning, the aesthetic, political, social and historical co-ordinates of their time and respective global locations. Moreover,



▲ Wafaa Bilal, *3rdi*, year-long performance, 2010–11.
Courtesy of the artist.



▲ Wafaa Bilal, *3rdi*, year-long performance, 2010-11. Courtesy of the artist.

the use of new media in contemporary art practices across North Africa and the Middle East, indeed globally, did not emerge from an ahistorical vacuum; nor should they be considered 'new' as such. All developments in contemporary art have international and regional precedents, and it is invariably the interaction between the two that proves most interesting. In *3rdi*, for example, we can see formal and conceptual elements that stretch back to Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929, a film in which the aperture of the camera and the eye of the cameraman are often superimposed, suturing the gaze onto an animated, machine-like regime of looking. At a key moment in Vertov's film the eponymous man with the movie camera appears above a thronging crowd, his face and head subsumed into that of the camera, becoming one — in an image akin to that of the tripod-like figure of Bilal — with the apparatus of recording.

Whilst it is true that events across the extended region — including the so-called 'Arab Spring' — have informed key elements of cultural practice, for better or worse, the artists and artworks explored throughout *Uncommon Grounds* are not endemically provincial in their subject matter, nor, indeed, are they localized in their ambitions. In art historical terms the use of new media has frequently revealed an aesthetic ambition to explore the often inconsistent relationship of the subject to history, and it is precisely these inconsistencies, amongst others, that inform many of the discussions in this volume. The topographical, cultural and political complexities of North Africa and the Middle East are subsequently a prism through which to elaborate upon the widespread usage of new media. In so doing, as we will see, the practices discussed here reveal the political intransigencies and representational conundrums that mark present-day debates about the Middle East, its history, and how it will come to be understood in the future — a future where, hopefully, we no longer have to resort to using the reductive phrase 'Middle East' as a conceptual point of definition and cultural discrimination.⁴

If artists are going to respond to the immediacy of events, and who is to say they should not, 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. Revolution, uprisings, internecine warfare, civil conflict, and human rights, all of these points of reference have been deployed in an intensification of interest in the region and the coextensive demand that culture either condemns or defends such events and notions.⁵ Again, this is an international rather than provincial concern, inasmuch as there remains the ever-present interpretive danger that visual culture from the region is legitimized through the media-friendly symbolism of conflict — the latter rubric being redolent of colonial ambitions to prescribe the culture of the Middle East to a set of problems that revolve around atavistic conflict and extremist ideology. Such concerns, voiced in the wake of uprisings across the region, remind us that colonial paradigms are not only far from defunct, but easily

resuscitated through an evolving neocolonial preoccupation with topics such as an (apparently) irresolvable form of atavistic conflict brought about by an equally irredeemable strain of dogmatic extremism.

To the extent that there would appear to be an ineluctable logic to these developments, it is all the more crucial that we observe how the rhetoric of revolution effects a subservience of the aesthetic to the spectacle of conflict, not to mention the claims and counter-claims of politics and the often ideological expectations of historicization. Observing the use of new and social media, **Philip Rizk's** essay conveys a monitory note to those who see recent events across the region as being somehow involved in a continuum that stretches back to protests in Europe in 1968.⁶ Warning against the inherent spectacle of images associated with revolution, Rizk argues that the agency of the image is key here, circulating as it does in a rhetoric of revolution and owned, ultimately, by commercial agencies that profit from this circulation. For **Franco 'Bifo' Berardi**, there is a similar sense of scepticism when he considers whether new media, specifically social media, has actually, as opposed to ideally, contributed to the democratic expression of popular revolution. For Berardi, social media may not be about enhancing the space of freedom, nor the freedom to organize and protest, but, rather, the optimization of markets and forms of social surveillance that ultimately virtualize social relations and buttress an already overloaded global attention-span. It would be interesting to enquire, for example, into the market share increase in social media companies every time the so-called Facebook or Twitter 'revolution' is mentioned; as it would be to enquire into their respective market shares when news of the National Security Agency's (NSA) involvement in digital surveillance broke as a result of Edward Snowden's revelations.

If art is being increasingly positioned as 'political', 'activist', or 'revolutionary'—capable, that is, of potentially altering public opinion and reconfiguring forms of social engagement—then another investigation emerges: is it now the case that art, by utilizing elements of activist practice, not only generates social debate but also offers unique ways of engaging with these debates? Perhaps the easiest way to understand these developments, which often involve collaborations between artists and publics, is to acknowledge the manner in which culture—which has always adopted an autonomous yet embedded role in social debates—is increasingly placed on the frontline of discussions about public and private space in, say, Tunisia or Egypt. In my own contribution to this volume, 'For the Common Good: Artistic Practices and Civil Society in Tunisia', I examine how recent art practices in Tunisia, including those using installation, participation and new media, have opened up debates around what is meant by the public sphere and civil society in the context of cities that have majority Muslim populations. Implicit within this enquiry is a contiguous questioning of whether art can support a 'common good' and, if so, how do communities support such practices in turn. We alight here upon

a fundamental concern of our time: if we can all agree that art as a practice has a social value, and few would disagree with that, then what obligation, if indeed any, does society have in supporting such practices and the manner in which they recalibrate the relationships that exist between cultural development and social activism.

The sense that visual culture has become a key site of antagonism for the forces of secularism and, for want of a better term, extremism — although both terms elide a multiplicity of subject positions — is all the more notable when we reflect upon how new media and interactive, participative artworks encourage community-based actions and citizen-based forms of self-representation and enquiry. This is made explicit in **Mosireen's** 'Revolution Triptych', a collective manifesto of sorts included here in all its immediacy and forcefulness. Established during the Egyptian uprising in 2011, Mosireen is a non-profit media collective based in downtown Cairo. Initially dedicated to the documentation of widespread protests, it has since become a platform for cultural activism and exchange, supporting worldwide public screenings, open discussions, and events. The organization also provides training and technical support for citizen-based journalism that further discloses the abuses carried out by Egypt's Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and the way in which information has been controlled for political ends.

These concerns are taken up by **Jens Maier-Rothe, Dina Kafafi** and **Azin Feizabadi** in their collective essay 'Citizens Reporting and the Fabrication of Collective Memory'. The rise in the popularity of citizen journalism, they argue, has effected a blurring of the lines between journalism, social media and other professional fields, which could eventually contest censorship and restore a degree of transparency across heavily politicized media channels. For the authors the implications are profound, determining as they do a potential shift in how we understand citizenship, cultural practices, social participation, historiography and collective memory.

If we can talk cogently and consistently about collective memories and the call to action brought about by social media, as but one example of new media, there is a simultaneous need to focus on the micro level of such developments: the site of the performative self as a contested means of being in the world. For **Nat Muller**, social media platforms are the realm of body-free interaction and the performative promotion of the self. Focusing on *33 Rounds and a Few Seconds* (2012), a work by Lebanese playwrights and visual artists Rabih Mroué and Lina Saneh, Muller details how the disembodied hyper-presence of social media confronts us with the ultimate form of absence; namely, death. In a move that explicitly reconstructs an absent subject through the use of new media, *33 Rounds and a Few Seconds* is devoid of human actors; it therefore produces an uncanny mirror of the performative forms of self virtualization implicit in social media.

In the specific environment of Turkey, **Derya Yücel** further examines the collective element implied in social media and argues that digital practices have, in part, released art from its status as an object and thereafter expanded the scope of its sociopolitical import. For Yücel, who is careful to note how historical events impact upon contemporary practices and the ideal of collectivity, social media represents both an unprecedented platform for social activism and a means for artists to engage in forms of institutional critique that were until recently unavailable to them. In **Hamzamolnár's** joint contribution, a series of similar points are addressed in an inquiry into how recent events in Egypt and elsewhere not only pose new levels of pressure for artists and citizens alike, but reveal a perennial consideration: do artists living in a perpetual state of crisis have more responsibility to act—through their practices or otherwise—than those who live under 'normal' circumstances? This question is of course moot—artists do what artists do—but it is not so easily dismissed if we consider how pressures from international institutions and global curatorial preoccupations seem to call for artists to be more socially and politically active if they are to be considered legitimate in both revolutionary and post-revolutionary contexts.

The co-option of revolutionary images, by institutions and curators alike, are also central to **Maxa Zoller's** analysis of what the 'market' does to images of revolution. This enquiry is directed to artists working in the wake of revolution in Egypt and also the commercial appropriation of revolutionary images. The uncritical market co-option of such images, and the literal use of revolutionary images by curators and art institutions, reveals how imagery can become not just redundant but reactionary; a force for conservatism that disavows any attempt to self-reflexively critique how images are deployed to 'market' products and art alike. As **Omar Kholeif** usefully proposes, the art produced with the so-called Arab world also has its own generative conditions of production and reproduction that extends beyond engaging with the curiosity of international cultural brokers, who are more often than not interested in such practices only insofar as they answer to often limited institutional concerns—a common refrain throughout this volume.

There are, needless to say, broader philosophical concerns to be examined here that further interrogate any easy dissociation of the aesthetic from the political and, in turn, any cursory co-option of the former by the latter. Throughout **Dina Matar's** concise and insightful reflection on the politics of aesthetics in the digital age, she notes that artistic and political practices have been increasingly shaped with digital platforms in mind. In both instances, these platforms produce and make visible alternative modes of social and political engagement. Matar argues that we can only fully develop critical arguments about new media if we examine the synthetic, cultural, social, political and historical dynamics and materiality of digital transformation. This call for historicization is crucial to any analysis of contemporary art practices

across the region, recalling as it does the imperative that such developments are not seen in a conveniently ahistorical light but as embedded events with their own internal, if not localised logic.

In a series of key essays presented here, historicization and its contexts forms the basis for discussions of how new and social media have reconfigured artistic practices and how artists have, in turn, defined the ways in which new and social media interact with social spheres. For **Sheyma Buali**, the digital can often mask the elemental and quotidian elements of revolution in the name of its own internal aesthetic, one that emerges in so-called 'revolutionary art' and the popularity of exhibitions across the world that address the 'Arab Spring' or, indeed, revolution in general. Viewers, in turn, have become accustomed to the digitized, highly aestheticized, spectacular images of emotive events, so much so that the reality of political processes in flux can be forgotten or occluded, and this despite the latter's radical interrogation of what it is to represent such events in the first place. For **Nermin Saybaşılı**, in an essay that foregrounds the more obviously formal elements of new media, the digital world can indeed act as a potential site for forms of freedom (by triggering a collective aspiration for meaning), but it can also, alternatively, alienate individuals from what lies directly in front of them. Digital media can produce, in sum, absence as a predicate to a radical, albeit simulated, virtualized presence. With these points in mind, Saybaşılı focuses on how the digital voice in audiovisual artworks maps the performative and temporal elements involved in artistic production. Interrogating the technological regime of inherent reproducibility that underwrites digital media, these and other essays explore the degree to which it offers a productive 'democratisation' of visual culture or merely, as some have argued, capitalises upon the affect of immediacy at the expense of depth and engagement?

This line of enquiry is continued in **Maymanah Farhat's** 'New Media and the Spectacle of the War on Terror'. Examining a selection of works from Jacqueline Salloum, Hamdi Attia, Nida Sinnokrot, Wafaa Bilal and Rheim Alkadhi, Farhat explores how they each contest, through the appropriation of imagery, the spectacularization of conflict in the wake of the so-called 'war on terror'. Through co-option, quoting, appropriation, interactive performances and online platforms, the artists examined in this essay thwart the inner workings of the spectacular and its digitization. For **Laura U. Marks**, in her perspicacious essay on 'glitches' in new media, it is the fallout in representation, rather than the reproduction or appropriation of images *per se*, that becomes key to these complex discussions. Marks observes that the initial urgency with which videos of unrest and revolution were recorded, uploaded, and downloaded ultimately relied on forms of digital compression that produced conspicuous glitches. These glitches, she argues, were subsequently registered as a problem—a conflict in communication and interpretation—and not necessarily explored for their expressive qualities. For Marks, it is precisely



▲▶
Roy Dib, *Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear*, 2012.
Copyright and courtesy of the artist.



this expressiveness that needs to be explored. Discussing works from Roy Dib, Gheith Al-Amine, Rania Stephan, Roy Samaha, Ahmed Kamel, Tariq Hashim, Kareem Lotfy and Ahmed Elshaer, Marks writes that,

Glitch is a regular occurrence in countries where electricity is undependable, where sudden power outages interfere in the electronic production of screen outputs ... 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 do with inferior copies.

Again, there is a sense here that artists are exposing the fault-lines in representation that have emerged in new media as a way of critically engaging with the aesthetic, political, social and historical moments out of which these practices emerge.

In his examination of events in Syria, **Tarek Khoury** argues that the digital can also reveal other more easily overlooked aesthetic paradigms. In the proposal that video activists in Syria today are also 'capturing one of humanity's most fundamental forms of communication—handwriting', Khoury argues that these handwritten placards and street graffiti reveal a lineage between traditional forms of communication and the aesthetics of new media. This issue of digital memorialization re-emerges in **Amal Khalaf's** reading of images associated with Manama's Pearl Square, the locus of short-lived protests in Bahrain in early 2011. For Khalaf, the subject of civic responsibility and responsiveness is located not so much in practice, to begin with, but in an object: Bahrain's demolished Pearl Roundabout, or *Dowar al Lulu*, a key site that became famous in the international media as the symbol of the Gulf State's answer to the 'Arab Spring'. Today, Khalaf argues, Lulu has become a powerful symbol for thousands of people recasting their ideals in the monument's image: as a 'public space', or *midan*—Arabic for civic square—it no longer exists as a physical 'thing' but, rather, lives on digitally as an image-memory.

The image-memory and its performative unpredictability is examined in **Annabelle Sreberny's** occasionally amusing, if not astonishing, exploration of a phenomenon that draws on the physical reproduction (and subsequent online dissemination) of a cardboard cut-out of Ayatollah Khomeini. Forming the centre-piece of a ceremony on February 1, 2012, this cardboard cut-out, in its outsized, misguided venture to represent the Ayatollah's triumphant return to Tehran in 1979, is a bewildering attempt to apparently counter the virtualization/death of a subject through the, admittedly contradictory, formal use of digital, reproductive media. The cut-out *is* the Ayatollah incarnated for the purposes of these events and, in all its stoicism in the face of such an ignominious resurrection (and the manner in which it went viral), it references,



p.msharh@rednet] has joined #openblood The port in the square brackets contain
Don't join them. If you absolutely MUST know what happens, if you do, don't cry
READ the topic! AnonOps, the network that wrote this guide, is currently one o



they are together, they work together
then they start working against each other



Intelligence agents and We have
important information to transmit



we keep changing our clothes and in the dream



Isaiah 19 King James Version The burden of Egypt.

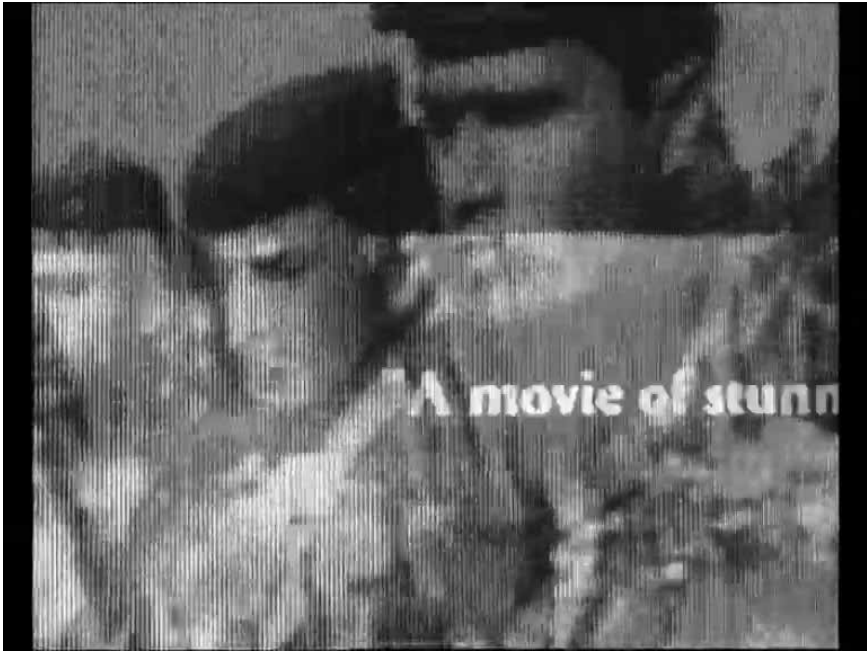


And I will set the Egyptians against the Egyptians:
and they shall fight every one against his brother,



And the Egyptians will I give over into the hand
of a cruel lord: and a fierce king shall rule over them,

▲ Roy Samaha, still from *Transparent Evil*, 2011. 27 minutes, HD video. Images courtesy of the artist and Gallery Tanit.



▲ Roy Samaha, still from *Untitled for Several Reasons*, 2003. 12 minutes, SD video. Images courtesy of the artist and Gallery Tanit.

albeit unintentionally, 'the immense power of a satirical image to deconstruct a hegemonic discourse ...'. Again, we are well served here to remember that representation, be it digital or otherwise, has a tendency to reconfigure the relationship between history and politics in often unexpected ways.

In amongst these pertinent issues there is one that underwrites a number of discursive elements in this volume: what effect, if any, do artists have on their social and political environments? In their appeal and broad reach, can artists, to put it bluntly, engage constituencies beyond the art world? This topic is no doubt the subject of another book, but it needs to be raised if we are to fully engage with new media and critical practice as components in social and political orders. These questions find purchase in **Timo Kaabi-Linke's** essay, where he argues that artists, writers, actors, choreographers and filmmakers must find subversive ways to undermine governmental restrictions and extra-governmental repressions if they are to engage in a broader discussion about the role of, for example, religious freedom and cultural expression. These debates are all the more germane in countries that have achieved hard-won freedoms at the expense of subsequently withdrawing similar freedoms from others.

In relation to critical practices and new media, the coalition of international artists working under the name **Gulf Labor** was set up to ensure that the rights of migrant workers are protected during the construction and maintenance of museums in Abu Dhabi.⁷ In May 2009 Human Rights Watch published a damning report on labour conditions in Abu Dhabi and the widespread abuse of migrant labourers, including forced labour, the confiscation of passports, the withholding of wages, and working conditions deemed unfit, if not fatal, for many. In March 2012, despite noting improvements since the beginning of their involvement, Gulf Labor observed continued failings across a number of areas in relation to the building of Saadiyat Island, the location of what will eventually be the world's biggest cultural district, featuring the largest Guggenheim Museum to date, an outpost of the Louvre, a Zaha Hadid-designed arts centre and concert hall, and a New York University campus. The precarious nature of global labour is not only a situation to be investigated by artists, but also, it appears, a structural necessity for elements of the art world to continue to develop and capitalise upon structural investments in culture.

Contemporary artists across North Africa and the Middle East today are not only developing the critical field of new media, but also suggesting alternative platforms for social and political engagement. In an attempt to rearticulate the relationship between artistic practices and art as activism (not to mention art and its apparent relationship to politics), whilst also addressing new and social media, this volume nevertheless abides by one relatively clear point: art as a practice — inasmuch as it is about what can be seen, said and heard in a given social order — is always already political. The overall focus of this book is accordingly not so much on the role of artists as activists — a role

that can be readily co-opted into the often divisive, issue-led world of political activism—as it is on how artistic practices expand the very notion of cultural engagement, political activism, popular protest and social participation. To this end, and whilst the essays collected here are varied in tone, register and content, the concerns are broadly similar: how does new media, in its relatively nascent practices and dispersed networks, produce social formations and evolving ways of reimagining the often prescriptive and reductive rhetoric of political, historical and cultural debates? Finally, can cultural production, in opening up how we understand (or fail to understand) the world in which we live today, not only reflect upon existing events but offer ways for communities to engage in discussions about the meaning and undoubtedly profound impact of those events on their lives and futures?

1. See: <http://www.3rdi.me>.
2. See: <http://wafaabil.com/thirdi/> (accessed 24 November 2013).
3. In other works, such as *Domestic Tension*, 2007, Bilal subjected himself to a constant barrage of paintballs, covering in a room for 30 days trying to avoid 60,000 random shots from a computer-controlled paintball gun (which was in turn controlled by online participants who could direct the gun).
4. I have addressed the issue of regional topology and the politics surrounding cultural practices elsewhere. See 'Beyond the Former Middle East: Aesthetics, Civil Society, and the Politics of Representation', *Ibraaz*, June 1, 2011. Downloadable at <http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/8> (accessed February, 2014).
5. A far from comprehensive listing of recent exhibitions that sought to reflect upon artistic practices through the prism of revolution would include *Creative Dissent: Arts of the Arab World Uprisings* (Arab American National Museum, USA, 2014); *Bamako Encounters: Arab Spring* (Bamako Biennale of African Photography, Mali, 2012); *Culture in Defiance: Street Art from Syria's Uprising* (Rich Mix, UK, 2013); *Culture in Defiance: Continuing Traditions of Satire, Art and the Struggle for Freedom in Syria* (Prince Claus Fund Gallery, 2012); and *View From Inside* (Fotofest 2014 Biennial, USA, 2014).
6. There were also many attempts during the Egyptian revolution to compare the occupation of Tahrir Square with other occupations in New York and London. Occupy London were *in situ* next to St Paul's Cathedral from 15 October 2011–14 June 2012. Occupy Wall St began its occupation of Zuccotti Park in New York's financial district on 17 September 2011; it was forcibly ended on 15 November 2011. Both events occurred during uprisings in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. To this end, comparisons seemed opportunistically allusive rather than analogical. More specifically, it may have been to do with a simple degree of simultaneity rather than a confluence of concerns.
7. Amongst the artists involved in Gulf Labor are Haig Aivazian, Shaina Anand, Ayreen Anastas, Doug Ashford, Doris Bittar, Tania Bruguera, Sam Durant, Rene Gabri, Mariam Ghani, Hans Haacke, Brian Holmes, Rana Jaleel, Guy Mannes-Abbott, Naeem Mohaiemen, Walid Raad, Michael Rakowitz, Andrew Ross, Gregory Sholette, Beth Stryker, Ashok Sukumaran and Murtaza Vali.

Arab Glitch

Laura U. Marks

Glitch, compression and low-resolution video reveal the materiality of the support underlying the digital image—a materiality that constitutes an everyday problem in countries with poor infrastructure, including most of the Arab (Arabic-speaking) world. They also indicate the power relations that undergird the Arab world. Low resolution diminishes individuality—compression forces data to conform to filters and glitch interrupts the intended message with a more urgent one. In what follows, I will examine some works by media artists in the Arab world who experiment with glitch and draw out its aesthetic and political implications. We'll see that textiles offer interesting precedents for compression, loss of resolution and glitch in a matrix-based medium.

The subject of glitch media may make readers think about the mobile phone videos produced by activists in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria. Certainly, the urgency with which these works were recorded, uploaded and downloaded relied on compression and produced glitches. But glitch is just a problem in these works; a problem for communication and interpretation and not something that the activist makers are exploring for its expressive qualities. For this reason I won't be discussing activist works here.

Whether analogue or digital, moving images lose resolution when they are reproduced, despite rhetoric to the contrary regarding digital media. Resolution diminishes when video is transferred from one system to another—for example, from PAL to NTSC. Low resolution shows up when movies shot with consumer equipment or mobile phones are screened on platforms for high-definition video. It also occurs because digital media use compression algorithms to allow images to be transmitted and reproduced more efficiently. Compression algorithms try to get the best resolution for a given bit-rate: if the bit-rate is low, the image will be more approximate. Compression is an economical way to store and reproduce data by omitting superfluous detail. It is the norm in poor countries where bootlegging is common and bandwidth

is slow. A compressed image loses the depth and quality of the original. Often, it exaggerates features that were negligible in the original.

Meanwhile, we experience glitch as a disruption of picture or sound normally delivered via quantified packets of information: a flash of blossoming colours on the screen, often contained in a tidy square. Glitch is the surge of the disorderly world into the orderly transmission of electronic signals, resulting from a sudden voltage change in an electrical circuit.¹ Ideally, transmission is perfect, but in fact it almost never is. In this disorderly behaviour of electrons, glitch reminds us of digital information's analogue roots.

Glitch's material base

Olga Goriunova and Alexei Shulgin write that glitch doesn't reveal the true functionality of the computer, but 'shows the ghostly conventionality of the forms by which digital spaces are organized'.² Glitches remind us of the ideology of convention, which includes assumptions that users have up-to-date platforms, legally acquired software and access to customer support, and that users' computers are able to stream data at optimal speeds on reliable electric systems. Thus conventions of optimal performance assume an ideal system, which is the case almost nowhere.

Glitch is a regular occurrence in countries where electricity is unreliable, where sudden power outages interfere in the electronic production of screen outputs. Thus, glitch also indicates incompetence or corruption by governments that are supposed to deliver basic services. In Lebanon in 2012, people burned tyres in the streets to protest at the poor service of *Electricité du Liban* since the Hezbollah-dominated government came to power. In Cairo, electricity used to be more dependable than in Beirut, but there too serious problems have arisen in the past couple of years, a function of the disorganization of civic services since the first Tahrir Revolution in 2011.

People in poorer countries need to take shortcuts and to make do with the materials at hand. This entails using old or obsolete hardware–software platforms, making do with slow connections and often using pirated software. Hardware and software companies design their products to become obsolescent, forcing dependent users of their platforms to keep upgrading. The costs of keeping up to date are significant for many users in wealthy countries, and are out of the question for most users in poorer countries. Most of us feel a simmering rage as a result, directed at the proprietary companies or more generally at the international economics of dependency.³ Glitch releases that rage, as Goriunova and Shulgin write: 'When the computer does the unexpected ... it releases the tension and hatred of the user toward an ever-functional but uncomfortable machine.'⁴



▲ Stills from *The Three Disappearances of Soad Hosni*, 2011, by Rania Stephan. Courtesy of the artist.

Low resolution, compression and glitch index images are recycled over several generations or imperfectly transferred. Often what looks like glitch is just low bandwidth or low transfer speed: the heartbreak of Skype and similar media that turn our beloveds into grotesque metallic masses. This happens everywhere, but again is more common the worse the infrastructure is.

Pirated media relies on compression. Most Arab countries are signatories to the 1886 Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works, as well as to the Arab Convention for Copyright Protection of 1981. But only Jordan, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and the UAE have signed the much more recent World Intellectual Property Treaty of 1996, which includes protection of computer programs and databases.⁵ Even though the Berne and Arab Conventions de facto cover media works, copyright is blithely ignored in most Arab countries. 'More than half of the DVDs, CDs and software sold in Lebanon are copies, according to the International Intellectual Property Alliance.'⁶ In Rabat, Cairo, Ramallah, Damascus or Baghdad, there are shops and street stalls doing a brisk business in pirated media.

When people buy pirated movies and music, they're accustomed to a little randomness; some error; some gaps. We might look for beauty in these dropouts, like the openness to the world that André Bazin wished for in the cinema, which spectators would fill with their own imagination or memory. But I doubt we'll find it, for it is easy to fill in the gaps with expectations and clichés: compression, in its spiritual aspect. There's not much to romanticize about everyday Arab glitch.

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 do with inferior copies—far more than I can do justice to in this brief essay.⁷ Glitches, distortion and artefacts arise in digital copies of analogue video, themselves often copies of films. For example, Roy Dib's *Under a Rainbow* (2011), which begins with glitch colour bars, works through Civil War trauma through low-resolution VHS tapes of the famous Lebanese child singer Amani. In Gheith Al-Amine's *Once Upon a Sidewalk* (2009), differing resolutions of video versions of an encounter he recorded suggest the distortions of memory and the evanescence of the event itself. Rania Stephan's *The Three Disappearances of Soad Hosni* (2011) imagines the life of the famous Egyptian movie star Hosni, who committed suicide in 2001, in a brilliantly complex weaving of clips from her many films. Glitches scrape into the video image like the voracious desires of Hosni's fans, eating into the image as memory appropriates the past.

Roy Samaha deploys electronic distortion in many of his works, often in an aniconic gesture. In some works, the artist inflicts pain to his own body, and here glitch and analogue feedback appear as the medium's sympathetic expression of suffering: this is the case in *Untitled for Several Reasons* (2002–3)



▲ Gheith Al-Amine, *Once Upon a Sidewalk*, 2009.
Courtesy of the artist.

and *Pink White Green Black: Noise/Silence Insinuated* (2004–5). Samaha seeks numerous ways to scrape away the image surface, sometimes to parallel his own plunges into delirium and recovery, sometimes to diminish the significance of the visible. In *Pink White Green Black: Noise/Silence Insinuated*, Samaha binds his head with tape, blocking all his senses in a way that is painful to watch. The camera zooms into the video screen, and the image gives way to illegible pixels. This, together with images of the guts of electronic equipment, gives a feeling of being plunged inside the video: our senses are muffled. High-pitched electronic rasps and scratches scrape the listener's ears, demanding that we partake in the insensate suffering of both the artist and the medium.

Again, in *Video for the End of Time* (2006), the camera stares deep into the pixel screen, as though trying to excavate an image more enduring than the one on the image's surface, and we see hands assembling electronic circuits, accompanied by a high-pitched squeal. Samaha shot the images for this video while working as a news videographer during the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon. As with other Lebanese artists' responses to that war, there is a feeling that the image world is polluted and incapacitated. Shooting into the screen, through and past images that might be people and buildings, the camera discovers fundamental *moiré* patterns, a distortion that underlies all image playback. Similar aniconic strategies characterize the complex *Transparent Evil* (2011), made with Gheith al-Amine, in which the Lebanese artists, finding themselves in Cairo in January 2011, despair of achieving a meaningful image of the revolution taking place.

Glitch, the sign of longing

The compression and glitch caused by poor internet connections are expressed creatively and with great power in Tariq Hashim's film *www.gilgamesh.21* (2007). It documents a long-distance collaboration between Hashim, in Copenhagen, and his collaborator Basim, in Baghdad, as they rehearse a play of the eighteenth-century BC epic *Gilgamesh* via webcam, YouTube and text messaging. In Baghdad the connection is poor and electricity cuts out often, interrupting their communication and introducing metallic echoes into their speech. Each bemoans his condition: tariq@Copenhagen writes, 'I live in the chilly hell of exile, up in the north of this planet.' basim@Baghdad replies, 'Me, I am in a burning hell, in the city of death.' The deprivation of post-war Iraq and the pain of exile are compounded when together (that is, by uploading movies of themselves watching the screen) the actors watch YouTube videos uploaded by American soldiers in Iraq. These movies reveal sickening bigotry and ignorance; and they usually boast much higher resolution than the actors are able to achieve in their own communications. In silence, the actors

watch these puerile, racist movies that reach much larger audiences than their erudite Babylonian adaptation probably will.⁸ But Basim and Hashim's low-quality, long-distance montage, achieved by great effort, yields images of much greater intensity.

Coming together over poor internet connections is also a theme of Mahmoud Khaled's *Camaraderie* (2009), a meditation on the culture of male body builders, composed of videos posted to YouTube: men posing, competing, oiling and massaging each others' bodies, cheering. As the athletes' gleaming bodies break into pastel pixels, we occupy the position of a viewer accessing this material at home online, a position of unofficial or unauthorized spectatorship. The voyeuristic feeling is even more pronounced in a shot of a young man recording himself in the mirror as he raises his shirt to reveal his buff torso.

At one point a group shot of athletes and their shouting supporters breaks up into a spectacular single moving mass of flesh- and fuchsia-coloured pixels. Over it the following text, in Arabic and English, is placed:

comments off, no explanations needed.

no discussion or questions will be answered on this piece either.

it's going to take me time to even process the fact that I posted this, hard as it was. I have taken courage to challenge myself and you have taken the time to allow this to effect you.

the pay off is well worth it.

In this address, the glitchy, low-resolution images indicate the longing of the lonely internet viewer, in countries where homosociality is the norm but homosexuality is illegal—while also revealing their ways of building connections. The energy of effort, display, mutual support and desire unites these men as a collective—both those who perform onscreen and those present as online spectators. The Egyptian national anthem accompanies one of these exhibitions; Khaled points out that it refers to the years when official Egyptian television played the anthem at the end of the broadcast day. Yet to me, the sound of the anthem gives the feeling that this unofficial culture of body building may have more staying power—more 'legs'—than the moribund Egyptian national culture circa 2009.

Compression aesthetics: the textile matrix of compression media

Textiles, the oldest of matrix-based media, offer a genealogy for compression in digital and other quantified media. Designers and weavers of textiles such

as carpets have long cultivated ways to convert continuous signals into discrete packets of information. Compression is 'lossy' in carpet weaving; that is, it omits information in order to minimize the size of the file. In carpets, high resolution and lack of interference are signs of an expensive platform. Looking at pre-industrial carpet production in Iran, Turkey and Egypt, we find that expensive carpets, made for courtly and important religious clients, have a fine weave in knots per inch. Cheaper trickle-down imitations—such as carpets made for the merchant class, which adapt designs of royal carpets to a lower-resolution matrix—as well as carpets made for export, show the materiality of the medium.

Maintaining resolution is especially challenging when translating from one medium to another. For example, many Persian carpets made during the Safavid Empire (1502–1736) were translations of painting. They thus had to deal with the difficulty of rendering curved lines in a knot-based matrix. The asymmetrical Persian knot can approximate a curve decently at a high knots-per-inch ratio, but the pictures get wonky at lower resolutions. Curved lines are especially challenging to adapt to carpet when the carpet is made of Turkish-style square knots, resulting in blocky renditions of curves that look like low-resolution digital video.

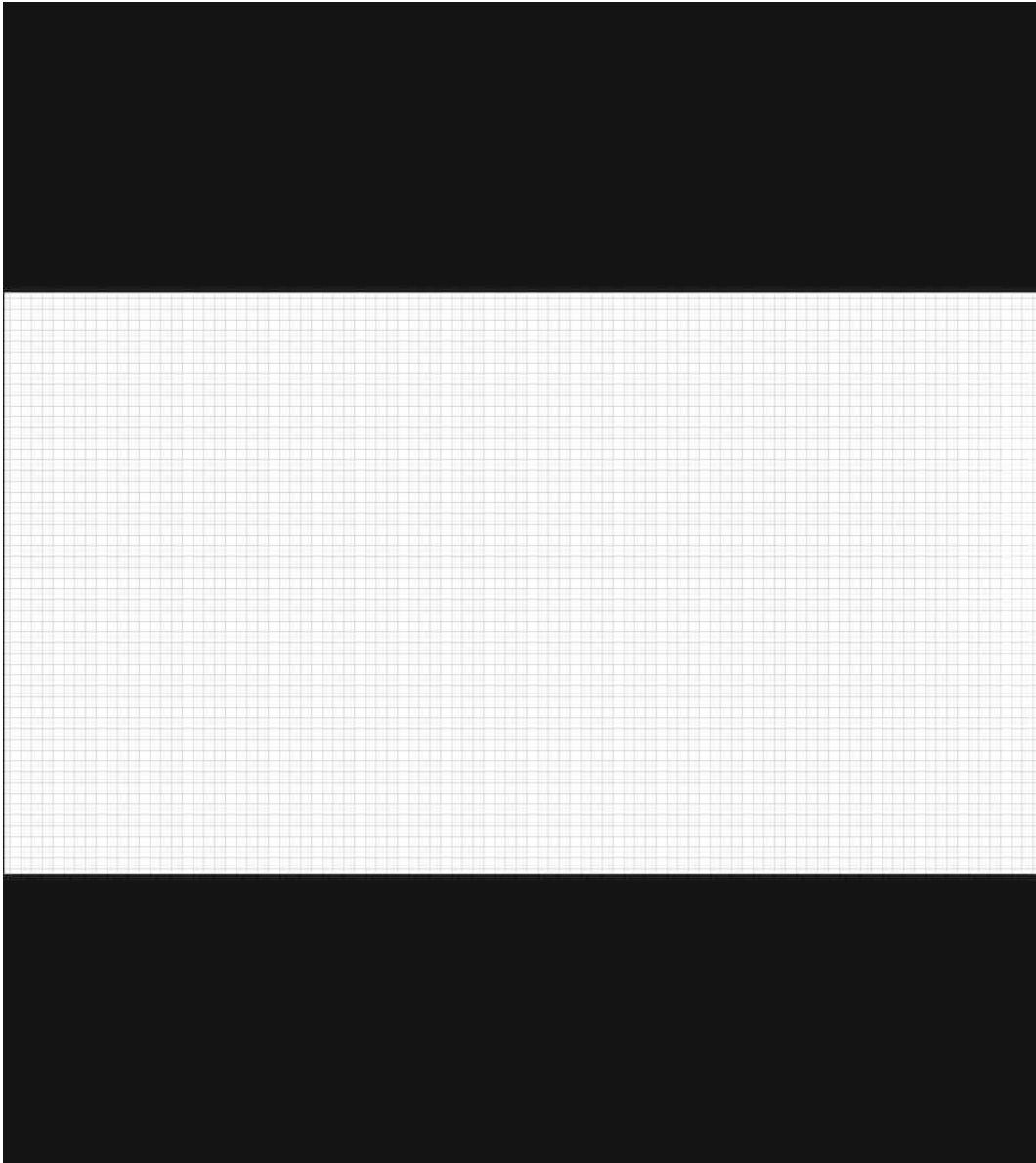
The lower the resolution, the more these carpets reveal the materiality of the medium and its means of production. They show how compression produces glitch, often creating new forms that subsequent designers and weavers take up. This is one explanation for the geometric reductions of biomorphic forms in many carpets. They also show the shortcuts designers and weavers devised: the 'affordances' of the medium. In these ways, carpet weaving offers a sturdy precedent for the aesthetics and politics of glitch in computer-based media.

Compression generates abstraction, an abstraction not always desirable in art because it indexes not the wishes of the maker, but the exigencies of the machine. A compressed image loses the depth and quality of the original, creating an approximation of it. A curving line, compressed, translates into a choppy series of rectilinear lozenges. Over the centuries, carpet designers and weavers have found ways to make compression a desirable aesthetic quality rather than to reproduce a realistic image.

Often, compression exaggerates features that were negligible in the original. Artefacts, reproduced in generations of media, become features. Again, carpets offer an interesting precedent, specifically what I think of as the smeared-rose rugs from Iran. The *gul farang* or foreign rose, a European cabbage-rose motif, was adapted in Kirman and Senneh, probably in the eighteenth century. These might have been made for export to the European market, or they might have been innovations that appealed to local customers. Certainly at some point European clients did not welcome this kind of innovation. A German trader, Emil Alpiger, wrote in his diary between 1872 and



▲ Still from *Transparent Evil*, 2011, by Roy Samaha. Courtesy of the artist.



▲
Still from *Recycle (the Code)*, 2010, video art, 2:47 min,
by Ahmed El Shaer. Courtesy of the artist.



1878, 'The oldest and most traditional designs and patterns are the best; i.e. the rose design is to be completely avoided.'⁹ Sometimes the rose motifs are fairly naturalistic; other times they are increasingly approximated with each generation. Gradually the edges of the figure smear into the lines of the weft and look increasingly 'digital'. From European cabbage roses to high-resolution adaptations, which cease to index roses and transform into a new form: this is intercultural glitch.

Egyptian artist and musician Kareem Lotfy makes digital works that exploit the exaggeration of errors and extraneous details. One of these is *moiré* patterns, which index an incompatibility between overlaid matrices. Lotfy uses a remarkable variety of means, but the output medium is the computer screen.¹⁰ Some of his works begin by making and scanning a simple ink-and-brush painting. He processes the image until the brushstroke breaks down, generating interference patterns (*moiré*) and producing new artefacts. Recently he has been working with explicitly carpet-like forms (*Untitled 753*, *Untitled 754* (2010–11)). One of Lotfy's online works, *left-right* (2010–11), can be played with a slider, and when you do this, the matrix of the image interacts with the matrix of your computer screen to make a kind of *moiré* animation. In other works you can attain a similar effect by zooming in and out (for example, *DGCF*, 2010–11). The effect is a kind of giddy nausea, as the final mix produces sensory artefacts in the perceiver (rather like Marcel Duchamp's *Roto-Reliefs*, made to be played on a turntable).

Compression (and its sisters glitch and *moiré* pattern) seems to function as an allegory in Lotfy's digital media art. Some of his works suggest that the tendency for copied media to exaggerate artefacts metonymizes Arab vulnerability in the face of economic and political powers beyond individual control. As with most work that uses machine error as one of its components, the human-scale intention of the artist competes with, and is often overwhelmed by, the horde activity of much smaller, less conscious entities: pixels, in this case. Artefacts take over when top-down control gets stymied by pixel-level activity. This might sound like a model for a revolution. But the pixels do not self-organize; instead, they give rise to nonorganic life that is, of course, beyond the individual pixel's control as well.¹¹ Lotfy's art does not try to repress the nonorganic life of computer-generated artefacts but encourages it experimentally.

Moiré patterns result when two matrices that don't match up are superimposed, as when an image made in one resolution is imported into another resolution. Where their lines cross, distracting interference between the matrices emerges, creating a shimmering pattern that is often more interesting than the original image. We can see *moiré* patterns occurring in social situations. For example, if one matrix consists of places where (internet-using) women go about their business on the streets of Cairo, and another matrix consists of places where sexist idiots hang out, the resulting *moiré* pattern shows where women are regularly harassed in Cairo: you can see it on harassmap.org.

Recently, Tahrir Bodyguard have been organizing both online and on the streets to protect women from the mob attacks in Tahrir Square that have taken place since 2011.

Interestingly, interference makes curves emerge from a linear image, as in Lotfy's digital image *DGCF*, and rectilinear forms emerge from curves, as in his *Paste 504* (2010–11): as though the organic is lurking within the inorganic, and vice versa. This reminds us that people get organized in matrices too, such as the army, or even the obedient mass of civilians, like the citizens in Sherif Arafa's *Terrorism and Kebab* (1992), who line up for days inside Cairo's Mugamma building in hopes of bureaucratic resolution to their problems.

Ahmed Kamel's video *Monologue* (2010) documents the breakdown of the human matrix that supported Egyptian national ideology in the Mubarak era. It begins with a low-resolution montage of nationalistic song-and-dance numbers from 1950s and 1960s movies. Men's voices sing 'Ana al shab' (I am the people). But the people in the movie are reduced to a blurry, indistinguishable mass, and the marching dancers look like robots or drones; machinic sounds and electronic glitch interrupt the music. Then, over a seemingly endless descent in an elevator, more recent songs like 'Where are you from, my countryman?' (*Min wayn, ya baladi?*) sound sweeter, less jingoistic. Finally the sound falls almost silent but for electronic whooshes over an intimate, hand-held but sharp shot of people getting off a bus that shows each person clearly. It is as though these are the real individuals who comprise the nation: not a mass, not automata. In *Monologue* repetition gives way to glitch and breakdown; what's left at the end is no ideology; only people, each one fragile and unique.

Ahmed Elshaer ('The Poet') creates both machinima and live-action videos that document how machinic repetition and distortion have infiltrated human actors. In Elshaer's *Recycle (the Code)* (2010), a close-up of the artist's mouth on one half of the screen repeats HTML codes that correspond to the colour on the other half: codes for patented Pantone colours. It suggests that when people must conform to internationally imposed conventions they are colonized at the infra-human level of the code. Like many Egyptian artists, Elshaer expresses disgust with the way Western art-world conventions and desires have been imposed on Arab artists. He notes that after 9/11, many art organizations in the Middle East have demanded that artists in the region work through stereotypical concepts that appear to interest more the machinations of art marketing in the Western world.¹² Many artists have responded similarly to the compression-like phenomenon whereby Western curators and clients approach the Arab world with preconceived notions, and Arab artists engage in self-orientalism in order to appeal to that audience. Elshaer and Kamel are members of the cheekily titled Cairo Documenta, a group of artists who exhibit without curation in order to avoid this kind of art-world compression.¹³

Glitch and its interfering siblings arise in imperfect conditions; that is, almost all the time. The artists I've mentioned here are among those who abandon the search for a sharp, faithful, 'lossless' image and instead look with curiosity at the conditions that cause loss, 'artefacts' and poor resolution. What they find often proves to be a keen metaphor for historical consciousness; what they create constitutes an act of historical consciousness.¹⁴

1. Olga Goriunova and Alexei Shulgin, 'Glitch', in Matthew Fuller (ed.), *Software Studies: A Lexicon* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), p. 110.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
3. Though I think it's good to pay designers and programmers for good products, usually those are not the people who get rich on the cycle of platform dependency.
4. Goriunova and Shulgin, 'Glitch', pp. 115–6.
5. Nayiri Boghossian, 'Copyright Protection in the Arab World', *Newsletter of the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair*, 29 September 2010, pp. 12–13.
6. Paige Kollock, 'Piracy Greeted with Collective Yawn in Lebanon', *NOW Lebanon*, 6 June 2010.
7. My book *Experiments in Arab Cinema* will include a chapter on archives as well as a chapter on algorithm and glitch.
8. In fact the film screened and won awards at the Gulf Film Festival, Ayyam Cinema Beirut, Rotterdam Arab Film Festival, and Dubai International Film Festival and was shown on Emirates TV.
9. Annette Ittig, 'Ziegler's Sultanabad Carpet Enterprise', *Iranian Studies* 25/1 (1992), p. 127.
10. Helen Stuhr-Rommerein, 'Living in a Digital World', *Egypt Independent*, 7 October 2012.
11. For more on nonorganic life in textile and digital media, see chapter 10 of Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).
12. See: www.ahmedelshaer.com.
13. See: www.cairodocumenta.com.
14. This essay is inspired by conversations with Kareem Lotfy in Cairo in May 2012.