



Visual Culture in the Middle East & North Africa

IBRAAZ PLATFORM 004 QUESTION

With the benefit of hindsight, what role does new media play in artistic practices, activism, and as a tool for social change in the Middle East and North Africa today?

In addressing this question, Ibraaz's Platform 004 seeks to explore a number of issues, not least what exactly is meant historically by the term 'new media'. For our purposes, we define it simply as digitised media that can include social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, the Internet (podcasts, RSS feeds, text messaging, blogs, and virtual worlds), and other less traditional forms of digitised visual culture. A central component here concerns the degree to which, if indeed at all, new and emerging media has altered the relationship between art practices, activism, and social change.

More specifically, Platform 004 will explore the extent to which artists, who have long been using new media in their practice, continue to develop the field whilst simultaneously examining how such practices are being co-opted, via mass media, into the 'aesthetic' of revolution or the art of 'protest'. Additionally, and in light of the perceived role of new media in recent events across the region, we need to enquire into the emphasis placed on such media in both artistic practices and as a tool for social change. Whose ends are being served by these emphases and do we need to reconsider the perceived role of new media in both recent events and as an aesthetic gambit in recent art practices?

Amongst other issues, this question aims to elicit responses that address a number of interrelated questions:

How has visual culture appropriated and coextensively developed new media and the opportunities presented in the real-time generation of new, relatively unregulated content?

To date, new media has been largely defined in the virtual terms of digital media but do we need to think of it in terms of process: the way in which, for one, it opens up new networks of interactivity and forms of real-time communication?

What are the opportunities presented by digital media in its nurturing of user feedback, creative participation and community formation? Likewise, what precisely is meant by these terms: are they merely stock terms used to effect the ascendancy of publicly quoted companies and the neo-liberal formation of further forms of consensus?

Is there a productive comparison to be had in detailing how new media operates within the context of revolution and the Arab Spring and the way it has been utilised by anti-globalisation movements, the 'Occupy' movement, and other anti-capitalist organisations? Such a question may further engage us with the manner in which all forms of protest are liable to become territorialised within accepted parameters of information distribution and containment.

In relation to this latter issue, and the platform as a whole, this question seeks to elucidate new forms of research into what constitutes 'new media art histories' in the Middle East and North Africa. What constitutes 'new media art' or 'media arts' for artists working in the wider region? Is there a localised history of new media for artists working locally or are these pre-determined by western art historical norms? What are the boundaries for the development of this practice, in terms of access (to technological resources), as well as to (education), i.e., learning the skill set for using such technology?

Does new media, in channelling alternative forms of creation, publishing, distribution and consumption of material (both textual and visual), offer a productive 'democratisation' of visual culture or merely capitalise upon the affect of immediacy at the expense of depth and engagement? To this question, we could also add: does this 'affect' pose a problem in terms of critical engagement with an event or, conversely, does it expose new ways of understanding an 'event'?

To what extent has the grassroots popularity of new media such as Twitter and Facebook been co-opted into the mainstream media's characterisation of 'revolution' – and, coextensively, should artists be wary of being co-opted, by the mass media and curators alike, into this 'revolutionary' event? To which, we may add, why has the western media in particular been so interested and supportive of the role that new media appears to have played in recent events across the Middle East and North Africa?

Moreover, do we need to draw and maintain a distinction between artists and activists or have such distinctions become obsolete?

Bearing in mind the role that new media has played in the revolutions across North Africa and the Middle East, is there a danger that artists who have been using such processes for some years now will be subsumed within the curatorial demand for artists to explicitly address and engage with the Arab Spring? And whose interests are being served in this co-optation?

Furthermore, if we support the suggestion that aesthetics has a radical potential that sees practice imbricated within and acting alongside the exigencies of social and political agendas, then we must also question the historical, political, and societal circumstances out of which new and emerging media have developed across the region and, ultimately, whose interests have been served (or, indeed, elided) in this process?

Finally, in a slight rewording of our original question, can art as a practice offer an interrogative space within which to consider activism as a practice and how new media acts as a tool for social change?

© Ibraaz, 2012