In December 2003, the French philosopher Alain Badiou gave a talk at the Drawing Center in downtown Manhattan. Standing before one of Mark Lombardi’s diagrammatic map drawings, Badiou elaborated on a short polemic he had written titled “Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art.” As its title made clear, Badiou’s text combined the condensed rigor of the thesis form with a universalizing, epochal argument about the status of art today. Badiou opened his talk by invoking Lombardi as an example of art’s capacity to create new modes of knowledge and perception. The philosopher proceeded to explicitly position Lombardi’s practice as an illustration of his own first thesis, which held that art is “the production of an infinite subjective series through the finite means of a material subtraction.”

Although the exact significance of this claim may not have been immediately clear, the larger implications of Badiou’s argument were unmistakable: the role of art should be to publicize and analyze the machinations of empire while also making visible all that such power

---

1. Badiou’s “Theses” were first published in English in *Lacanian Ink* 23 (2004).
constrains or represses. This point is made programmatically in Badiou’s twelfth thesis: “Non-imperial art must be as rigorous as a mathematical demonstration, as surprising as an ambush in the night, and as elevated as a star.”

Subsequent events would affirm the timeliness of such a position. Over the next two years a controversy arose surrounding plans to move the Drawing Center to a new location at the site of the 2001 World Trade Center attack. Emboldened by persistent incitement from the New York tabloid press, the project’s critics ultimately prevailed in blocking the move. In light of this sequence of events, we might find it tempting to align Badiou with Lombardi as defenders of nonimperial art—defined by Badiou as practices that challenge the hegemony of “Romantic-formalism”—if perhaps also questioning the philosopher’s assertion that “Empire no longer censures anything.”

Yet however comfortably we might make such judgments, a more recent presentation of Badiou’s text would suggest we do otherwise. In 2011, the Egyptian curator Bassam El Baroni invited a group of artists from the Middle East to produce works in response to the “Fifteen Theses” under the auspices of the Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum (ACAF), assigning each artist an individual thesis. The resultant body of work was then published under the title Fifteen Ways to Leave Badiou, alongside a reprint of Badiou’s “Theses,” a transcription of his Drawing Center talk, and a critical essay by Suhail Malik. The participants included Akram Zaatari, Doa Aly, Hassan Khan, and the STANCE collective, and formed a group mainly comprising emerging and midcareer artists, most of them Egyptian.

If the unconventional format of El Baroni’s project occupied a terrain somewhere between the artist’s book and the group exhibition, its larger objectives were clearly to contest the universalism of Badiou’s aesthetics, signaling these intentions in its title by inverting the familiar Badiouian trope of fidelity. How can we evaluate the aesthetic, political, and philosophical efficacy of such deliberate unfaithfulness? In what ways could the ACAF project serve as a model for other forms of curatorial and critical intervention? And on what sort of map might we plot the two divergent scenes sketched above?

3 Ibid., 17, 9.
This essay explores such questions by contextualizing Badiou’s “Theses” within an ongoing encounter between contemporary art and Western philosophy. If such a connection has become ubiquitous, its fundamental contradictions too often remain uninterrogated. As I argue, *Fifteen Ways* rerouted the asymmetrical global circuits structuring much of this discourse, exposing them to scrutiny. The essay proceeds to analyze individual artworks from the ACAF project, examining the various claims and forms with which they responded to Badiou’s specific theses, as well as to his philosophy and public image.

One key issue in these analyses concerns the means by which artworks are able to contest the premises of aesthetic theory. Can such resistance be said to constitute a form of immanent critique? If so, what are its capabilities and its limitations? The essay closes by considering how such crossings between art and philosophy have been transformed by recent events, particularly those associated with the Arab Spring, which Badiou and other Western intellectuals have vocally championed. Should those operating within this conjuncture heed Badiou’s call to fashion themselves after mathematicians, guerrillas, and stars? Or do such circumstances call for less programmatic models of action, ones that might instead resemble the resistant forms and more provisional methods of art?

Badiou’s appearance in New York took place during a sharp surge in the philosopher’s international renown—since 1999 over two dozen of his books have been published in English translation. Not only was Badiou’s philosophy scrutinized in numerous conferences and journal issues, it was also the subject of a special feature in a 2006 issue of *Artforum*, his second appearance in the magazine. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of this development was how unsurprising it was, at least insofar as it conformed to a well-established pattern of reception in the United States. Dating back to the translation of key structuralist and poststructuralist texts in the 1970s, French philosophy has found ardent support within the US academy—in some cases, like Jacques Derrida’s, much more so than in France. Following successive waves of imports, these often disparate figures came to be grouped together under the heading of *French Theory*.  

---

6 The emergence of this singular rubric, which simultaneously connoted an intellectual trend and a publishing brand identity, depended on cultural and commercial conditions that differentiated the reception of French philosophy in the United States from that in other Anglophone countries.
While the notion of “theory” has its own complex genealogy, one rooted in the critical rejection of philosophy’s disciplinary autonomy, the American term French Theory bears its own particular connotations. Whatever critical purchase theory may once have had as a counter to the perceived exclusions or biases of Anglo-American academic philosophy, its generality erased differences between figures with varying degrees of allegiance to philosophy as a discipline. In this sense, theory was liable to function as a rather empty negative category, not unlike the qualifier French, which may have amounted to little more than a sign of otherness, a type of luxury import. Ultimately, the philosophical implications of French Theory—however these may have been construed—were in many ways overshadowed by its transformation into a battlefield during the so-called theory wars: the De Man affair, the Sokal hoax, the tenure battles, the diatribes in liberal journals like the New York Review of Books.  

Theory was embraced—and resisted—with similar intensity across the various precincts of the US art world. Nowhere was this more evident than in the reception of Jean Baudrillard’s work during the mid-1980s. In 1983, Baudrillard toured American universities to promote a new translation of Simulations under the Semiotext(e) imprint. After meager turnout, his editor Sylvère Lotringer suggested they target an art audience instead. The book soon went viral; as one curator would later tell Lotringer, “within two years, everyone had read Simulations.” In part due to persistent misinterpretation, Baudrillard’s readership crossed parochial borders. He was cited by curators exhibiting appropriation art; he was cited by painters promoting themselves as simulationists; he was cited by critics of spectacle and neo-fascism. Baudrillard’s 1987 lectures in New York City attracted thousands, but also inspired a polemical counterexhibition by the artists’ collective Group Material, titled Resistance (Anti-Baudrillard).  

8 As cited by Cusset, French Theory, 235.  
The reasons behind this unprecedented sequence of events, while interesting and largely unexamined, might ultimately be less important than the example it set. Select American artists had been working with philosophy since the 1960s—among other examples, one thinks of Robert Morris’s engagement with Merleau-Ponty, Joseph Kosuth’s uses of the philosophy of language, or the return to Marx undertaken by the photographers Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler. However influential these approaches may have been, they achieved (or desired) nothing like the publicity afforded Baudrillard and his many advocates. While Baudrillard would eventually go out of fashion, his reception demonstrated not only that Art Theory was a highly marketable brand, but that the Art Theorist was now a recognizable public figure, even a sort of highbrow pop icon with his or her own cult following. This trend arguably shadowed more rigorous attempts to integrate art and philosophy, such as Les Immatériaux, the landmark 1985 exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, which was co-curated by Jean-François Lyotard as an intervention into ongoing debates regarding information theory, the poststructuralist critique of representation, and the impact of technoscience. Encounters between art and philosophy—or art and theory—would no longer be the province of specialists, but would also occur within the spaces of a rapidly enlarging art world, spaces that were at once more public, more commercial, and more spectacular.

These developments suggest that we be skeptical of any claims invoking a timeless or universal relationship between art and philosophy. This is not to dispute that such a relationship has existed historically, or that its deep history might help elucidate some of its current contradictions. Neither should this be read as an endorsement of a cynical interpretation of this relationship as solely self-interested: the notion that philosophers lend art the impression of rigor or gravitas in exchange for a broader, nonacademic audience, as well as the sheen of topicality. The point is rather that the dyad “art and philosophy” must be revised; we need to speak instead about “the mass mediation of art and philosophy,” or about “art, philosophy, and economies of spectacle.”

---

Such reformulations need to account for the considerable differences that separate conditions of reception, but also for the fact that Art Theory has itself been taken up by the culture industry, most famously in the various product placements and cameos featured in the trilogy of *Matrix* films, whose basic premise is overtly Baudrillardian. Interestingly, some of the most provocative responses to this conjuncture have come not from theorists, but from artists like Thomas Hirschhorn, who has constructed shrine-like monuments to philosophers as a self-described “fan” of theory. We can hope that such an approach might succeed in identifying and resisting the manifold risks of Art Theory celebrity (a lure that Hirschhorn himself cannot be said to have avoided entirely). Many of these dangers are posed by the structural position that Art Theory occupies, irrespective of its content, at the unstable intersection among experimental art, critical philosophy, pop culture, the academy, and the art publicity apparatus. Some pertain to what De Man famously diagnosed as “the resistance to theory”; others to the seemingly ever-shortening cycles of hype and backlash, which often track the vicissitudes of the market, rather than the more gradual, deliberative tempos of judgment.

This overdetermined conjuncture suggests that we proceed carefully in evaluating Badiou’s recent success in the American art world, which must be understood within this context but nevertheless cannot fully be explained by it. While there might well be a quasi-structural need for a new French Theorist to emerge every so often in the United States, such conditions obviously do not prevail in the same way elsewhere. And however we might schematize the forces driving the market for Art Theory, these tell us little about Badiou’s own qualifications for the position.

In fact, there is very little about this particular philosopher’s output that makes his popularization seem to have been in any way predictable, let alone preordained. It is commonly noted that a central feature of Badiou’s philosophical output is its formidable level of technicality. Unlike the work of virtually all other celebrated exponents of French Theory, Badiou’s systematic philosophy is largely restricted to those conversant in advanced mathematics. This is paradigmatically so for his major work, *Being and Event*; one needn’t have read Heidegger to comprehend this text, but one must understand Cantorian set theory. As critics like Peter Osborne have argued, both the content and form of *Being and Event* forsake the transdisciplinary tendencies of much
theory in order to stage a return to what is in many ways a deeply traditional model of philosophy.\textsuperscript{11}

If such concerns would seem altogether remote from questions of art, this is even more the case with the text’s central objective—to refound ontology through a mathematical analysis of multiplicity. It is of course true that Badiou has published texts on art apart from the “Fifteen Theses,” most notably the collection \textit{Handbook of Inaesthetics} (2004). However, such works would also appear to have relatively little pertinence to many of the key debates around contemporary art. Like \textit{Being and Event}, the \textit{Handbook} is motivated by a strong investment in Platonism, such that the aesthetic is understood primarily as the vehicle for the apprehension of truths. While Badiou’s definition of truth is not what it might first appear, it is still unclear why art might need to align itself with truth seeking—as opposed to persuasion, inquiry, or negation. Any confusion over the potential relevance of this approach is only amplified by Badiou’s choice of objects, which are exclusively European and almost classically modernist: Mallarmé, Malevich, Beckett.

These problems would seem to admit two possible explanations, the first of which is that the inaccessibility of Badiou’s thought is in some sense its attraction. It is not just that difficulty is often taken as proof of the writer’s credibility or the reader’s prowess. Rather, a certain degree of opacity can enable the sorts of productive misreadings—or “structural misunderstandings,” to use Pierre Bourdieu’s term—that have characterized the reception of French Theory.\textsuperscript{12} Such dynamics might well be amplified by the legend of Badiou’s militancy, given his well-documented involvement with the militant left in post-1968 France. On this view, Badiou’s actual philosophy matters less than his image, which functions as a screen upon which readers might imagine some potential union between theory and radical praxis.

A less skeptical explanation is that certain of Badiou’s commitments do in fact intersect current debates but do so from an oblique angle, thus appealing to those who might wish to signal their dissatisfaction with what they take to be prevailing critical orthodoxy. On this view, Badiou’s overtly idealist model of nonimperial art might appeal to

\textsuperscript{11} See Peter Osborne, “Neo-classic: Alain Badiou’s \textit{Being and Event},” \textit{Radical Philosophy} 142 (March/April 2007): 19–29.

\textsuperscript{12} As cited by Cusset, \textit{French Theory}, xiv.
those who wish to break from the position avowed by Hardt and Negri, with its fusion of post-Marxist and Spinozan materialisms. His unapologetic universalism could appeal to those who wish to contest the conflicted legacies of 1980s multiculturalism or 1990s identity politics, whether from the right or from the left. His advocacy of formalism could push back against ostensibly didactic art, while also proving timely at a moment when abstract painting is enjoying yet another resurgence.

Though it is altogether unclear what sort of cogent critical program such impulses might add up to, if any, they would seem largely incompatible with many of the current debates on critical art, given their persistent disavowal of context. It is hard to imagine what Badiou’s aesthetic positions might contribute to the theorization of social practice, artistic research, or new documentary forms. Of the many contradictions that characterize Badiou’s reception in the American art world, perhaps the strangest is that an unapologetically Maoist philosopher would be celebrated for an aesthetics that conspicuously avoids any encounter with Marx, while skirting nearly all of the issues associated with neo-Marxian criticism.

Given these circumstances, one can imagine numerous reasons why contemporary Middle Eastern artists would want to leave Badiou, or simply disregard him. While many of these concern his specific philosophical positions, a more immediate problem is the array of power relations that his proper name represents, and even enacts. In other words, we first need to recognize that the name Badiou carries a certain force prior to any specific philosophical utterance made by the person Alain Badiou, solely by virtue of its position within certain discursive fields—a considerable irony, given Badiou’s own critique of naming. If this operation exemplifies what Foucault termed the “author function,” its ultimate implications are not hermeneutic but geopolitical, extending well beyond whatever we might be able to extrapolate from the example of Badiou’s American reception.

In order to gauge these effects, we therefore have to account for a third displacement. This Badiou is neither a philosopher working in

---

13 As, for example, in chapter 2 of Badiou’s Metapolitics, trans. Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2005), 26–57. Thanks to Anthony Gardner for this observation.
France, nor a French Theorist celebrated in the US art world, but an avatar of something we might call Global Art Theory. Such a category exhibits contradictions analogous to those that informed the reception patterns outlined above, although the American example is clearly only one model among many. Global Art Theory is relatively recent, emerging in tandem with the exponential growth of the international biennial circuit over the past two decades, as well as with the related reorientations typically described as the “discursive” and “pedagogical turns.” Among many other consequences, this expansion has enabled the formation of a new global public sphere that is highly cosmopolitan, if also unevenly accessible. Following the example of the multidisciplinary Platforms that Okwui Enwezor curated for Documenta 11 in 2002, which drew on influential predecessors like the 1989 Havana Biennial, large-scale international exhibitions now routinely integrate discursive and research-based components. While some of this programming maintains a rigorously decolonial perspective, much of the theory that circulates in such forums nevertheless retains a strong Western bias. This is surely true of Badiou, who draws his primary interlocutors, whether in philosophy or aesthetics, from European canons.

The globalization of contemporary art has been so swift and thorough that it has often outstripped critical analysis of such contradictions. One of the signal achievements of the ACAF project was to contest this disparity, insisting as it did that Badiou qua Global Art Theorist could—and should—be confronted, problematized, and “left,” although the meaning of this last term remained variable. It was essential that such an encounter happen not on the generically cosmopolitan territory of the biennial circuit, but from a local position of marked


17 A similar bias can be said to inflect another currently dominant trend, namely, the reception of autonomist theorists like Paolo Virno and Maurizio Lazzarato. Despite the indisputable timeliness of their work on precarization, discussion of this topic often centers on developments in advanced capitalist economies, thereby ignoring the sharply different standards of precarity that prevail in the Global South.
cultural difference: while not all fifteen of the participating artists were Egyptian, all were from the Arab world.

The point was not that this group would somehow speak back to Badiou as Arabs, as if their ethnicity guaranteed solidarity, or as if they needed numbers to do so. Rather, it was to insist on the irreducibility of particularity and historical context, thereby deflating the blithe generality with which Badiou claims that the primary role of art should be to develop “a new sort of universality” for “humanity in general.” In fairness, Badiou’s assertion reflects a sense of the dangers posed by the empty but ubiquitous universals of global capitalism, the greatest of which is of course the universality of capital itself. However, in calling for a new universalism, one founded in the presumed mathematical universality of truth procedures, the philosopher would seem to overlook the possibility that universality might not in fact mean the same thing everywhere, or that it might always be shadowed by its specific conditions of articulation. (In contrast to Badiou, El Baroni has spoken recently of the need to develop forms of universality that diverge from the precedents of European modernism and more recent multiculturalism, beset as they are by latent essentialisms.)

This critical delimitation of the universal resembled the scenario proposed by the second work in Fifteen Ways, Mahmoud Khaled’s Detailed Studies for “Crying Boy,” which was paired with Badiou’s second thesis, calling for art to be “the impersonal production of a truth that is addressed to everyone.” The point of departure for Khaled’s piece was a group of paintings that typically go under the title of Crying Boy, said to be the work of the Italian postwar painter Bragolin. Some sixty-odd versions of this sentimental motif were produced for tourists, many of which were mass-reproduced and distributed worldwide. Khaled’s intervention was to commission new sketches of Crying Boy.

---

19 Such conditions are arguably better explained in the concept of contingent universality, as developed by theorists like Ernesto Laclau and Judith Butler; see their respective contributions to Butler, Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left (London: Verso, 2000).
21 The full version of the thesis is as follows: “Art cannot merely be the expression of a particularity (be it ethnic or personal). Art is the impersonal production of a truth that is addressed to everyone.”
thus making the ambiguous gesture of returning this mechanized image to handcrafted art.

Such a move did not negate the well-established dialectics of Warholian appropriation so much as it reframed them within global circuits of popular taste. On one level, this questioned a core assumption of Badiou’s thesis, implying that high-minded universal art is not as far from kitsch as it might wish. At the same time, Khaled’s piece succeeded in retrieving a moment of unexpected pathos from what might seem an unsalvageable subject. Even as it problematized the global circulation of a false, generically “European” universal, it insisted that people had nevertheless formed real attachments with this image, such that its tears, however insipid, become markers of losses that were at once actual and spectral.

The relation between universal and particular was further problematized by the Lebanese artist-researcher Akram Zaatari, who presented work initiated under the auspices of the Arab Image Foundation, a nonprofit institution he cofounded in 1997. The mission of the AIF has been to archive the myriad uses of photography across the Arab world and its diaspora, making these results available not just to historians but to artists. For his contribution to Fifteen Ways, Zaatari reconstructed parts of the studio of a popular photographer named Hashem El Madani, with displays depicting cameras, negatives, retouching tools, and the paints used to add color highlights, along with postcards of both Western pinups and Arab film stars. This work—titled Twenty-Eight Nights and a Poem, alluding to a famous example of Egyptian mawwal singing—was paired with Badiou’s eighth thesis, which holds that art produces new forms “through the immanent process of its purification.”

The implications of Badiou’s position are complex, emerging as they do from his attempts elsewhere to theorize the dynamics of change through the agency of what he terms the Event. However, for our purposes the crucial issue is Badiou’s frequent reliance on the rhetoric of Western modernist criticism, which strongly recalls the influential work of Clement Greenberg, and later Michael Fried. What is proper to art is “the creation of new forms”; the development of these

---

22 “The real of art is ideal impurity conceived through the immanent process of its purification. In other words, the raw material of art is determined by the contingent inception of a form. Art is the secondary formalization of the advent of a hitherto formless form.”
forms proceeds through “progressive purification”; and so forth.\textsuperscript{23} While these formalisms are far from identical, they share a commitment to universal teleology and an aversion to contingency—an orientation that is diametrically opposite practices like Zaatari’s.

To begin with, photography is structurally incompatible with such formalism, as in Roland Barthes’s assertion that the photograph is “the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency.”\textsuperscript{24} As a social technology that intersects art without being reducible to it, photography is similarly irreconcilable with the formalist doxa of medium specificity, insofar as such a view presumes that art possesses a stable autonomy. Without ever having to say so explicitly, \textit{Twenty-Eight Nights and a Poem} refuted the notion that photographic practices like El Madani’s generated ever-purer forms, or that this somehow then disqualifies them as art. While the work displayed its own layered self-reflexivity—juxtaposing the tools of vernacular photography with the tabular display strategies of photoconceptualism—it did so in order to assert the particularity of photography under the shifting, contested conditions of modern Lebanon. Such an approach also departed from Rosalind Krauss’s recent attempts to recuperate Greenbergian formalism under the rubric of “differential specificity,” insofar as it contested the abstract, empty character of her theorization of discursivity.\textsuperscript{25}

Other ACAF commissions mobilized a similar resistance to the will to universality that pervades Badiou’s “Theses.” In the graphic- and text-based piece \textit{Colors, Lines, Symbols, and a Text}, Iman Issa responded to Badiou’s claim that nonimperial art necessarily “abstracts itself from all particularity.”\textsuperscript{26} In a short essayistic text Issa detailed her divergent responses to two specific images: the Egyptian flag and an activist group’s appropriation of a traffic sign, produced during the Tahrir Square uprising in 2011. While the first of these appeared to her as a generic, relatively meaningless marker, the latter recalled “something particular, specific, and unique”—a feeling Issa associates with the group’s injunction not to turn back. Where we might expect a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{23} Badiou, “Fifteen Theses,” 15.
\item \textsuperscript{25} See Rosalind Krauss, \textit{“A Voyage on the North Sea”: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition} (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999).
\item \textsuperscript{26} “Non-imperial art is necessarily abstract art, in this sense: it abstracts itself from all particularity, and formalizes this gesture of abstraction.” Badiou, “Fifteen Theses,” 9.
\end{itemize}
declaration of revolutionary solidarity, the piece instead offers something quite distinct: the visual decomposition of these signs into their components, accompanied by Issa’s claim not to understand their differential effects. The end result is a paradoxically rigorous ambiguity, one quite at odds with the militant self-certainty of vanguardism.

In a textual montage titled On the Plurality of Consciousnesses, Doa Aly revealed that similar tendencies are at work even in seemingly opposed moments of the “Fifteen Theses.” The title directly refers to the fourth thesis, which holds that the arts are necessarily plural, and thus can’t be assimilated into the totality associated with the Gesamtkunstwerk. Mixing unattributed quotations from nine sources, which ranged from early anthropology and psychology to French fiction and Russian folklore, Aly produced a compound text whose narrative instability seemed at times to mimic the symptoms of the female hysterics described within. If this gesture highlighted the near-total absence of gender within Badiou’s aesthetics, it further suggested the consequences of the philosopher’s general indifference to questions of subjectivity.

This line of questioning was pursued further by Hassan Khan in The Knot, which consisted solely of a reprinted diagram of a knot, used by the radical psychiatrist R. D. Laing to describe intersubjective relationality. In the accompanying text, Khan argues persuasively that Badiou’s opposition to expressionistic models of art fails to account for the highly ambivalent processes by which viewers recognize, respond to, and interpret artworks. Art both does and does not need us, and something like the reverse is true as well, at least insofar as art objects are always also objects in the psychoanalytic sense. As an image of such entanglement, Khan’s knot suggested that art’s vocation is necessarily more conflicted than Badiou’s twelfth thesis suggests. Art does not dazzle a classroom, rout the enemy, or twinkle like a star. Rather, it is in some key way intransigent; it is where antitheses are not sublated dialectically, but stay stubbornly stuck together.

Taken together, such artworks forcefully rebutted several chronic misconceptions regarding art and philosophy, beginning with the notion that these fields are somehow incompatible. If they showed that art can

27 “There is necessarily a plurality of arts, and however we may imagine the ways in which the arts might intersect there is no imaginable way of totalizing this plurality.” Ibid., 8.
engage philosophy without compromising its aesthetic appeal, they also disputed the notion that art somehow needs philosophy in order to be critical. Perhaps their most radical contribution was to explore the distinct ways in which art thinks, questions, and argues. While these operations are of course analogous to ours, they also have their own curious autonomy, even as they retain the potential to alter our own processes of perception and cognition. In its most effective moments, *Fifteen Ways to Leave Badiou* realizes such a possibility by giving artworks the space to enact critique on the sensate level.

The implications of this approach were amplified by the timing of the ACAF project, which coincided with the fall of the Mubarak regime, as well as with the popular uprisings of the Arab Spring more generally. (The commissioned artworks were produced between April and October 2011.) It is beyond doubt that these revolutionary developments will have a profound impact on the infrastructure of Middle Eastern art, even if the nature of such changes is still unclear, determined as they are by economic and political factors that themselves remain in flux. For progressive artists in the region the prospects are mixed, to say the least. In the countries where regimes have changed, the promise of new liberties is offset by the very real possibility of theocratic repression. The international art market, ever hungry for the new “now,” quickly shifted its focus in 2011, such that the events of the spring were soon followed by Tahrir-themed gallery shows. While such demand surely created much-needed commercial opportunities, it also exposed artists to a new risk: that of creating superficially contemporary work that would soon be outdated.

Complicating matters further, Badiou’s own position has changed as the philosopher positioned himself as an advocate of the Arab Spring, first in a series of articles for the French press, then in a public dispute with Jean-Luc Nancy over Western intervention in Libya. Most recently, Badiou has published a new book, *The Rebirth of History*, in
which he compares the events of 2011 to the revolutions that swept Europe in 1848. Some critics have rebuked Badiou for the high-handedness with which he has donned this mantle, as well as for his idealistic assertion that the uprisings represent the realization of the truth of communism.\footnote{See, for example, Jasper Bernes and Joshua Clover, “History and the Sphinx: Of Riots and Uprisings,” \textit{Los Angeles Review of Books} (September 2012), accessed November 13, 2012, http://lareviewofbooks.org/article.php?id=949&fulltext=1.}

Several of the works in the ACAF project pursued a parallel course, taking issue not so much with the content of Badiou’s pronouncements as with the structural contradictions of his position as a public intellectual. This role was deftly satirized in Oraib Toukan’s droll photomontage \textit{TV Dinner Marxism}, which juxtaposed the wood veneer of a 1970s-era living room with images of politically engaged art and philosophy: the title card from a 1971 revolutionary agitprop film, allusions to Brecht and Ai Weiwei, and a still from a televised debate on the role of philosophy. Within such a constellation, the \textit{philosophe engagé} becomes just another example of pop Marxism, a consumable product whose argument is wholly subsumed by his image.

The most trenchant criticism of Badiou’s account of the Arab Spring came from Mohamed Allam in \textit{We Should Become the Pitiless Censors of Ourselves}, which drew its title from the fourteenth thesis. Allam’s piece consisted of a fictional correspondence on Facebook between Badiou and himself, in which the two trade responses to Allam’s citation of the thesis on his home page. At the risk of ruining a good joke, Badiou expresses doubt about his formulation, given how “things have changed,” and proceeds to retract aspects of his argument. The humor in this conceit lies not just in the prospect of a humbled Badiou, but also in the contrast between this farcical encounter and the grandiose claim, so common in the Western mainstream media, that the Arab uprisings constituted a “Facebook revolution.”

This ideologeme has attracted any number of objections: it ignores the pivotal role of labor unions and other organizations in the uprisings; it is technologically determinist; it remaps Tahrir onto the familiar coordinates of Silicon Valley, which is to say Western neoliberalism. A less common criticism, but one worth considering, is that this view overlooks other media platforms that were no less instrumental in consolidating dissensus, ranging from graffiti, postering, and hip-hop to
Mohamed Allam

We Should Become the Pitiless Censors of Ourselves, 2011.

Graphics and text. Image courtesy of the artist.
activist projects like Radio Ta7rir and Tahrir Cinema. If such forms received little attention from Western journalists, neither have they been recognized within art institutions, whether in Egypt or outside. This was also true of ACAF—the Badiou project basically failed to incorporate art that aimed to intervene more directly outside the realm of art, containing few if any examples of (or even references to) activist art, site-specific public art, or other more openly heteronomous modes.

While this oversight might be traced back to El Baroni’s decision to curate the project in the form of a book, that would only beg the question of why other, more accommodating platforms were not also integrated. However, before raising such objections we would do well to consider that the opposition between autonomy and heteronomy—which extends at least as far back as German romanticism, and continues to inform much current thinking on critical art—does not automatically translate to contemporary Egypt. Given that the existence of a largely secular aesthetic sphere could be threatened, one can imagine why El Baroni may have wished to make a qualified case for autonomy, if that was indeed his intention.

All the same, readers of Fifteen Ways to Leave Badiou might be left wondering how this commendable book might have nevertheless advanced its argument further. It is not that we need more ways to leave Badiou, however we might define this, or more reasons to be skeptical of his appeal—the book supplies these in abundance, even as it allows that some modified version of a Badiouian aesthetics might still deserve our fidelity. What we need instead is a sustained, rigorous exploration of the ways in which art’s singular intransigence might yet be knotted together with its capacities for theoretical speculation, critical immanence, and decisive action.

---