EXHIBITION REVIEW

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige: 
I Must First Apologize…
MIT LIST VISUAL ARTS CENTER
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
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When opening a spam email, one is subject to the manipulation of its message. Whether intrigued, repulsed, or disinterested, the narrative that has been formed for our susceptibility is often more complex; a parallel history of scamming informs its modern practice, in which not only geo- and sociopolitical relations but digitization blur the distinction between good and evil intentions. The modern practice of scamming is situated within an imaginary realm, where blind faith facilitates an exchange between sender and receiver.

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige’s I Must First Apologize… at the MIT List Visual Arts Center presented an investigation into nearly four thousand scam emails collected over a seventeen-year period.1 The multimedia exhibition sought to illustrate the complexity of scamming on a global scale. The numerous emails that monopolize our junk folders each present a problem—a sick and dying individual, a person in political conflict—as an opportunity to make massive amounts of money. The premise is simple, yet the inner workings sociologically complex. For the “victim,” there is no return on investment.

I Must First Apologize… made excellent use of the List Visual Arts Center’s space by mapping the artists’ revelatory involvement with the project. The Rumor of the World (2014) envisioned the scam as spectacle, using a cacophony of audiovisual experience to incite synesthesia. The idiosyncratic character of the work encouraged deeper understanding of the sociohistorical advent of the scam, all the while humanizing the scammers. Throughout the exhibition, transient networks materialized through interviews, trophies, maps, scrolls, and letters. The means by which the artists collected the ephemera was reinterpreted to concretize each ploy’s digital endeavors, resulting in a fascinating exhumation of a subversive practice, its effects reaching further and more intimately than originally suspected.

In The Rumor of the World, Hadjithomas and Joreige displayed remote communication through an immersive installation. Thirteen video screens played a rotating series of thirty-seven interviews, each positioned along the outer edge of a blackened gallery space.
Circling through the space permitted a one-on-one encounter with each email read aloud by a diverse cast of amateur actors, who stumbled over their words and paused awkwardly in their speech. A mass of hanging speakers hung in the center of the space and gathered the audio into an unintelligible cacophony. Fictional stories on the local and embodied level, interwoven into a singular commotion, told the rumor of the world.

Approaching one screen, visitors heard the following narrative from a woman with long brown hair and a blue top: “My name is Mrs. Viviane Salem. I live in Baghdad.” She raised her chin and pulled for our attention with her declarative regard: “I’m the wife of a lovely husband named Nassim Salem and the mother of three children.” Her story was an emotional one and involved a family lost in the terror of an American-led bombing on the city. Mrs. Viviane Salem alluded to underlying motives of the Iraqi war: “Just for oil, everything faded . . . ” The emotional force of her narrative was tinged with inarticulate grammatical mistakes. Mention of money threw her story further into doubt. When she requested assistance with the transfer of $29.5 million, any semblance of empathy withered.

Hadjithomas and Joreige, while filming the amateur actors, tried to remain unbiased. Like someone opening a scam email for the first time, reading its solicitation, and judging its plausibility accordingly, the artists subjected themselves to the whims of each narrative. At times the artists played with illusion, impressed by an actor’s ability to effectively deliver an unfamiliar narrative. The artists’ mystification was evidenced through a select group of actors and actresses reconsidered in more personal, subjective interviews. Such was the case with Fidel, a Lebanese actor featured within The Rumor of the World, who reveals his own personal history of scamming. His familiarity with its customs is reason for the believability of his hired act. Hadjithomas and Joreige solicited Fidel for a more intimate video interview.

In Fidel (2014), the actor, seated on a weight bench in a gym, describes the scamming process—how contact is made and sustained. Fidel likens scamming to directing a film; the characters must be proficient at evoking illusion in order to suspend the audience’s disbelief. As Fidel explains, the successful scam requires detailed preparation, patience, and consistent manipulation. Once a recipient of an email submits to communication, a proposition is made in simple and financially attractive terms. The communication may progress to phone calls or face-to-face meetings. A network of trusted correspondents are conscripted into the hoax to assist with variables such as language differences, assurances of wealth and business, and so on. Every effort must be made to perform the fiction until the funds are transferred and communication ceases.

An enlarged reproduction of an eighteenth-century letter hung adjacent to Fidel. Although the text was nearly unreadable due to its pixelation, The Jerusalem Letter (2014) offered historical precedence to the tradition of scamming. The work was a letter originating from the French Revolution, specifically written by a captive imprisoned at the Bicêtre jailhouse along the "rue de Jérusalem." Dating from March 1, 1793, The Jerusalem Letter followed a recognizable structure: written to a vaguely addressed recipient, the intricate narrative replayed a tale of treasure, imprisonment, and much-needed relief. Trust was predicated on the faithful supposition that the recipient of the letter felt him or herself to be the intended beneficiary. Presented in an abstracted, digitally interpreted format, the letter memorialized the persistent tradition of networked greed.

The revitalization of such scams often comes at the occasion of unrest, appearing, as the artists wrote, “at specific historical moments, as their mechanism for existing is dependent on both a particular context of narrative and imagination, [which] allow certain forms to arise and prosper.” Today, imperialist ideologies foster desires to manipulate sentiment through the blame game of knowledge manipulation. Spheres of influence allow organizations to assume political, economic, and social control from outside a region’s borders. Scamming becomes a byproduct. The Nigerian oil boom of the 1970s attracted corporate wealth, poor conditions of living, and an interest in scamming. To assume a geographic singularity in the production of this transitory culture, however, is to ignore the global complexity of scamming’s origins and to discount the human essence of its construction.

It may seem paradoxical to imbue a disembodied digital identity with tangible, human qualities. However, the exhibition provided
The green basketball court behind the young men provided a space of respite, free from manipulation, disguise, and deception, yet full of personal expectation and auspicious faith. I Must First Apologize... paralleled the void of the green basketball court—a blank space on which seemingly opposing teams competed in manipulation and deception, and greed and retribution. While inherently politically, culturally, and geographically subjective, scams carry an imaginative delusion of monetary influence. Their methods may be absurd, but the human qualities of either group are reason for their emotional adherence. In the exhibition catalog, Hadjithomas and Joreige write of a concurrent event in which a friend’s father, having been involved as the victim of an intricate scam, admits to the deceit ingrained within the practice. For him, however, the scam was legitimate. The father states, “No, but with me, it’s completely different... this is a different story, it’s something else.”

What may be regarded as ignorance is rather a misconstrued conviction for integrity.

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corporeality to an invisible network and allowed viewers to “put a name to a face.” The Trophy Room (2014) gave accolades to scambaiters, or scambeaters, who “eat” scammers through often humorous acts of vengeance. The process often involves the scambeater responding to the scammer with a demand for authentication and validation before proceeding with the transaction. For example, scammers are asked to dress up as imaginary superheroes, join the Order of the Knights Templar, or sculpt a wooden bust. The jokes evolve into more outrageous demands, like getting explicit tattoos or reenacting Christ’s crucifixion. In the exhibition space, glass panels emerged from concrete blocks, themselves remnants of their fictitious performances. Omar and Younès, two illegals immigrants of African and Asian descent, live in Lebanon. They are interviewed at their favorite local basketball court and share their stories. Two juxtaposed videos projected onto the same wall tell of a simultaneous story of heritage and identity, of immobility and isolation. The two flip through a selection of family photos, speaking anecdotally while pausing to reflect on their current situation. The green basketball court behind the young men provided a

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