



..... JOANA HADJITHOMAS & KHALIL JOREIGE





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JOANA HADJITHOMAS & KHALIL JOREIGE

A LETTER CAN ALWAYS REACH ITS DESTINATION

VIDEO INSTALLATION

For over a decade Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige have been collecting SPAM and SCAM emails instead of relegating them automatically to the trash, as most of us do. These unsolicited emails pry on our empathy for donations of money, or promise us easy-made riches. Originating often in countries where corruption is rife, these emails are stories and documents rooted within specific historical and geo-political moments. As such these narratives of swindle can be read as imageless representations of our time, told by characters which constitute a fictive presence, but ultimately have a real person on the sending end. Hadjithomas & Joreige have articulated an imaginary embodiment of those emails that clutter our inboxes on a daily basis. They have transformed the textual source material of selected SPAM and SCAM into visual narratives, image representations that becomes pieces of fiction by themselves, and beg the viewer's suspension of disbelief. Working with non-professional actors, the emails have been transformed into scenarios for monologues; stories which become captivating, or even moving because they are told by what seems to be a "real" person. Nevertheless, the absent presence and complex layering of technological communication is echoed in the display where one projection is ephem-

erally super-imposed on the other, creating a ghostlike sensibility where the virtual and physical meet.

JOANA HADJITHOMAS & KHALIL JOREIGE (B. 1969, LEBANON)

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige are artists and filmmakers. For the last 15 years they have focused on the images, representations and history of their home country, Lebanon. Together, they have directed documentaries such as *Khiam 2000–2007* and *El Film el Mafkoud (The Lost Film)* and feature films such as *Al Bayt el Zaher* (1999) and *A Perfect Day* (2005). Their last feature film, *Je Veux Voir (I Want to See)*, starring Catherine Deneuve and Rabih Mroue, premiered at the Cannes film festival in 2008. There, the French critics chose it as *Film Singulier 2008*. Their films have been enthusiastically received, won many awards in international festivals and enjoyed releases in many countries. They have created numerous photographic installations, among them *Faces, Lasting Images, Distracted Bullets, The Circle of Confusion, Don't Walk, War Trophies, Landscape of Khiam, A Faraway Souvenir* and the multifaceted project *Wonder Beirut*. Their artworks have been shown in museums, biennials and art centers around the world and are part of important public and private collections, such as Musee d'art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; FNAC France; the Guggenheim, New York; the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France; and the Sharjah Art Foundation, UAE. They presented *Lebanese Rocket Society, Elements for a Monument* (2011) at the Sharjah Biennial and Biennale de Lyon. *A Letter Can Always Reach Its Destination* has been exhibited at Intense Proximity, La Triennale, Paris. They are the authors of numerous publications and university lecturers in Lebanon and France, members of the board of Metropolis Cinema, and cofounders of About Productions with Georges Schoucair. Hadjithomas is also a board member of the Ashkal Alwan Academy, Home Workspace. They are represented by CRG Gallery, New York; In Situ Fabienne Leclerc, Paris; and The Third Line, Dubai. They live between Beirut and Paris.



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Nat Muller: Your work has always had firm roots in the Lebanese context. With *A Letter Can Always Reach Its Destination*, you venture out of this context into the world of spam and scam email, very much a global phenomenon. Did this result in a different way of working, or does it still follow your previous conceptual methodology?

Joana Hadjithomas: *A Letter Can Always Reach Its Destination* is not that far removed from our usual interests. For the last 15 years, we've been working on several issues involving the relationship to images and the production of meaning in a specific context, which is that of the Arab world. Our work can be seen as a reflection on narrative, whether through our cinema productions – documentary or fiction – or our artwork. What are the stories that can be written about our region today? Our artistic research has always centered on the question of history and, within that context, what is at stake in the image and the document. Through the 4,000 scams we collected in the past 12 years, we can understand and retrace the political upheavals, wars, murders, and economic flows of that particular period. The stories reflect the world's evolution, population displacements and circulations, the relations to economy, religion, politics and even terrorism. This creates a sort of map and

topography of contemporary conflicts, a chronicle of events. The contents of these emails are symptomatic of the state of the world. For us, it is another singular way of writing the history of certain countries and, somehow, that of the Arab world.

Khalil Joreige: Most of the stories in the scams take place in countries in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. For those who write the scams, these geographic frameworks are more prone to corruption and make their stories more credible. Moreover, the recent developments in the Arab world – the latest revolutions, the fall of Arab dictators and the discovery of their widespread corruption – represent new material for scam authors. However, the fact that these countries are chosen as credible places for corruption reveals a way of thinking and, even more, an imagination inherited from colonial history. The scams tell us how we're perceived, or how people want to perceive us. By working with the subject, we attempt to interrogate this imagination tainted by colonialism and to try to displace our gaze. In our work, we try to underline an ambiguity to images, so that the image cannot be easily categorized in restrictive schemas. For example, in our film *Je Veux Voir* (2008) and the project on the Lebanese Rocket Society (2011–), we work with this idea of being confronted with a dominant imaginary and how we can produce images that do not fit this dominant imaginary, that we understand as a constellation of beliefs, knowledges, semantic frameworks, and images. These emails interrogate our relationship to our context, the relationship to a history, and to orientalism.



JH: We are also filmmakers; therefore, one of our main focuses is narration. When we read these emails, we noticed that they're like small scripts: you have the characters, the place, what happened, the drama, the secondary characters. The emails are all using the same structure, the same plot to invite your compassion as a reader; they pull readers' emotions, like some films do. These emails come from different countries, but mostly from Nigeria, and follow the same plot. For example, someone pretends to possess a large sum of money and needs an existing account to transfer the money to. In order to convince the victim, each email involves a scenario, a biography of the money's owner, how he obtained it and why he needs help. From these short stories, a few narratives evolve, and narrative models are shared, even if each person tells their story differently, in a different country, often resorting to a dramatic if not fantastic story to explain how the money got there and why our help is required. In fact, these stories, just like TV or cinema, try to base the fiction in a plausible reality, which explains why there is often a link with an event confirming the story with other Internet sites – YouTube, CNN, or with existing names, and current events.

KJ: In *A Letter Can Always Reach Its Destination*, we use materials that are not very noble. Spam and scams are digital garbage that usually you would usually send automatically to the trash. To use this material is interesting. What

would happen if we were to save these words? Should we listen to them? Can we even listen to them? In our projects we work a lot with the notion of anecdotes, where “anecdotes” – in the original etymological sense – mean “secret stories.” The spam and scam emails are a compilation of anecdotes. These stories interest us because they somehow escape official, dominant history and reveal another reality. You can read all these events as symptoms of history unfolding. But at the same time, the anecdotes also reveal a certain consideration and conception of history.

NM: So much of your previous work is about disappearance, presence and different issues of representation. With *A Letter Can Always Reach Its Destination*, it's almost as if you start with an absence – the virtual immaterial communication of the emails – and then embody it.

JH: We've always been interested in tropes such as latency and evocation in our artistic and cinematic work, making the invisible visible. We're also very interested in the contrast that can be created between a virtual world – that of scams sent by email – and the embodiment of those stories by the actors, their bodies and their voices reciting the scams like monologues. It's a way of giving shape to what has none, of giving visibility to that what is bound to disappear in the recycle bins of our computers. I wouldn't say that the work is about disappearance; rather, it's fighting to make traces visible. The present installation reflects upon our relationship to the image, how to believe in it, what power it has. The monologues and the way we present them challenge



our belief and the way these imaginary worlds may become, for a short time, persons and beings who we may believe.

KJ: The stories appearing in the scams reveal many imaginary worlds. The work stages and maps an imaginary world, but without images. As visual artists and filmmakers, we're interested in the representation underlying this type of mail. We consider that these scams represent attempts to escape the latency of images, the difficulty of becoming visible. Our work here consists of embodying these emails, virtual and immaterial by nature, by giving them a consistency, a physical presence, to question the stories in their form and content and their political and colonial issues.

NM: There's also a different circulation of communication in this work than in previous works. The spam is sent in bulk but addresses the recipient in a very individual way. Don't the perception of credibility and level of trust change once you embody the characters? Reading an email is situated on a completely imaginary level, but when a visual presence speaks to you directly, the experience is very different.

KJ: It's working with narration. The language of these texts can be considered a script, and the person who is supposedly writing the scam the character in a film. All these characters stand next to each other on the back screen; then, one of them literally comes out of the screen to another screen placed in front. It is as if the character comes out of a

chorus, and this anonymous fictitious figure becomes an individual, saying his/her lines, his/her monologue. The characters move from one reality to another reality. When you go to the theater, there is a convention. You accept a kind of protocol. You know it's not true, but an actor will embody something and you will believe it. It's not the reality of the fiction but the reality of the performance. We believe in what these characters say, until they talk about money and want to rip you off – then the belief is broken. For example, the son of former Egyptian president Mubarak, the daughter of Ivorian military and rebel leader Ibrahim Coulibaly, the sister of former Tunisian first lady Leila Trabelsi, and Yasser Arafat's wife, Suha Arafat, manage to draw us into their stories until a certain moment. It is precisely this balance between reality and fiction, belief and disbelief or rupture of belief that is at the heart of this installation.

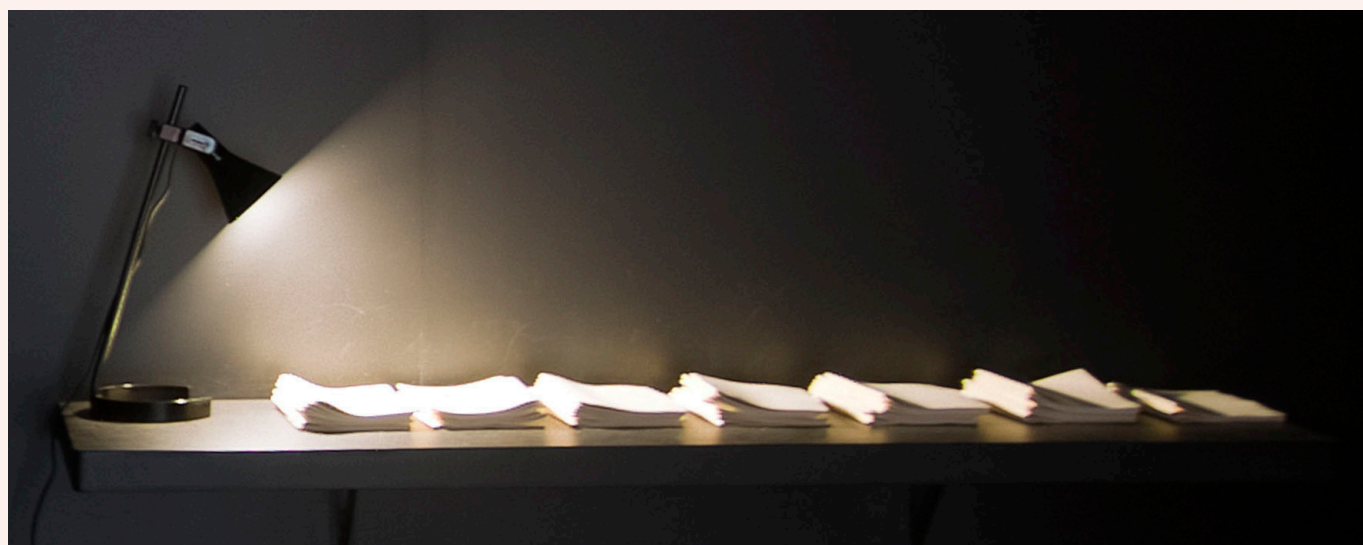
NM: How did you weed through the enormous volume of emails and make a selection? Which methods did you use?

JH: We focused predominantly on spam that incorporated a material or moral swindle, i.e., scams. Then we removed all the scams that weren't related to political events and emails that didn't provide an overview of world events. With Franck Leibovici, a French thinker, performer and artist, we selected 70 emails, which ended up being very diverse but also interrelated. For example, there was a recurrence of certain people, events and evolutions of similar geo-





A Letter Can Always Reach Its Destination. Installation shot of the booklets at *Spectral Imprints*, Abraaj Capital Art Prize 2012 exhibition. Art Dubai, Dubai. March 2012.



political situations. Finally, we chose 45 for the installation. We didn't intervene in them or change them, but kept them as they were written. These emails mapped a chronicle of the world over the past 10 years. In Beirut, the casting procedure for the film was lengthy and difficult. With the help of a Lebanese production company called Ginger Beirut Productions, we had to find people who could embody these emails from all over the world. There are people in Lebanon of many different nationalities who come to Beirut in search of a better life. Some of them are laborers, some not. Some enjoy social rights; others live in very poor social conditions with no rights, no papers. So when we gave the emails to some of them, it opened up links with their own personal stories. It was a very strong moment. This whole trajectory was an incredible experience. Very intense and sometimes very sad,

because we encountered another reality in Lebanon, parallel worlds of communities that normally you would hardly meet.

NM: The project took an interesting technological course: it was initially intended as an interactive augmented reality environment and became a dual-screen video installation. I found the solution you came up with – the two screens, and the actors stepping one by one from one screen to the other – intriguing on a perceptual level. The characters themselves undergo a journey of ghostlike incarnations. This ghostlike presence is a recurrent theme in much of your work. What does it mean in terms of your critical practice?

JH: I would say we work with remnants rather than ghosts. More than 17,000 persons went missing during the Lebanese Civil War. This is the backstory of our film *A Perfect Day* (2005) and other works like *Lasting*



Images, where we work with an undeveloped Super 8 film of Khalil's disappeared uncle. In both cases, we look at what happens when remnants come back. The layering of the screens in *A Letter Can Always Reach Its Destination* really gives you a ghostlike impression. The work underlines the borders between fiction and document, between material and virtual, between narrative tradition and technological innovation. Resorting to such a technology results in working on a kind of ghost, an absent presence, like the virtuality of those emails. We wanted to keep a fragility, something uncertain, about this apparition of a person. The relationship would have to be very immediate and yet immaterial. We thought about the idea of a hologram, but we wanted it to be very simple, not too spectacular – a presence not too imposing but rather something that would facilitate the viewer to listen to the characters' words.

NM: Speaking about the title of the work, if “a letter can always reach its destination,” then what’s the meaning of having an addressee? Since the characters in your work speak to the viewers directly, do the viewers become the addressees? This is a very direct form of communication.

KJ: The title comes from a seminar by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan on “The Purloined Letter” by Edgar Allan Poe. Slavoj Žižek comments on Lacan’s seminar by stating that when we receive a letter, we recognize ourselves as the recipient, as the addressee of the letter, even if we’re not. We become

the letter’s addressee – its destination – the moment we recognize ourselves as its recipient. This is the reason why a letter always reaches its destination. It’s an interesting way to think about these emails that arrive in your mailbox and that you don’t really wish to have there. If you take the time to read these emails, or listen to them in our installation, then these letters have found their addressee, in a way.

NM: Is *A Letter Can Always Reach Its Destination* somehow a freer work for you, in the sense that you don’t have to be as careful as you were in previous, Lebanon-related works?

KJ: We were very careful in the editing process not to give too much weight to one particular country. We were very aware of the construction and production of meaning. It’s not just a critique of how people look at Africa or the Arab world. All these emails say something about the relationship between the North and the South, the economic divisions in the world, and what people think and expect when they send out these emails. We’re talking here about an effective swindle. Each year, hundreds of thousands of people get scammed, and millions of dollars are lost in these transfers – just in the US, more than \$200 million is transferred to Nigeria, one of the main countries where scams originate. Several murders are committed each year. We did a lot of research on scam beaters who hunt down scammers and push them towards terrible actions. Together, they replay the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, the colonialist and



A Letter Can Always Reach Its Destination. Video still.

the colonized. What's played out here is terribly violent. Incorporated in this violence is the urge that people want to free themselves, but they're always caught in this dynamic of colonial dominance. This will probably be part of another work.

NM: *A Letter Can Always Reach Its Destination* is accompanied by a small booklet of the emails used. Why do you want these texts displayed beside the video installation in this particular form?

JH: The emails are written in a very special way. The English that is used is syntactically faulty, because it's often gone through Google Translate or another translation service. As these emails are the sources we had, we thought it was important for people to have access to them in the form they arrived to us, and read the emails as stories. As you read, you have another impression of the timeline and of the histories that are being built through the emails

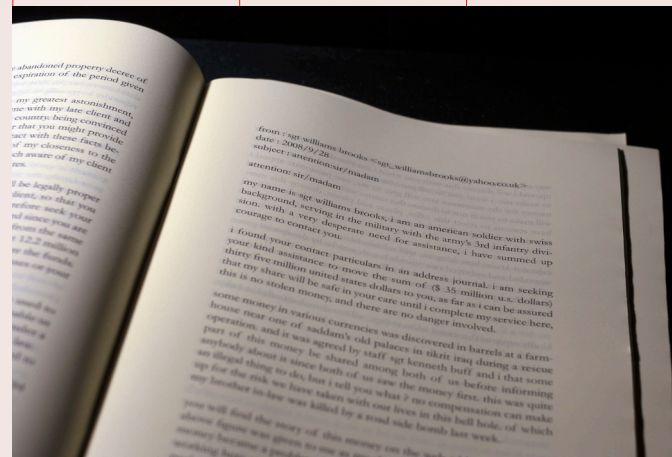
KJ: In addition, the booklet also gives people the opportunity to understand the display of the installation better. The booklet makes a reference to the Jerusalem letters, a 18th-century scam, a swindle mentioned in *Les Voleurs (The Thieves)* published in 1836, the memoir of Eugène François Vidocq, the father of modern criminology. The structure of the Jerusalem letters is very similar to those of the various scams we receive through the Internet. So these scams have a history and a tradition. They always start because of specific events – revolution,

disorder, or tragedy in the classical sense. These events open up possibilities.



JH: This booklet was made with Franck Leibovici, who also collects these scams and, as a writer, is very sensitive to the kind of poetic dimension they could inhabit. So it was interesting to give the viewer the opportunity to read these emails and read them as poetry. Franck proposed printing the booklet on bible paper, so it appears as if the booklet is an excerpt of pages torn out of a very big book, a chapter that you get in your hands from millennia of history.





A Letter Can Always Reach Its Destination. Installation shot of the booklets at *Spectral Imprints*, *Abraaj Capital Art Prize 2012* exhibition. Art Dubai, Dubai. March 2012.



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*A Letter Can Always Reach
Its Destination.* Video stills
from the video installation.
Background image:
installation shot of the
booklets.





ABRAAJ CAPITAL ART PRIZE 2012



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A Letter Can Always Reach Its Destination. Video stills from the video installation.





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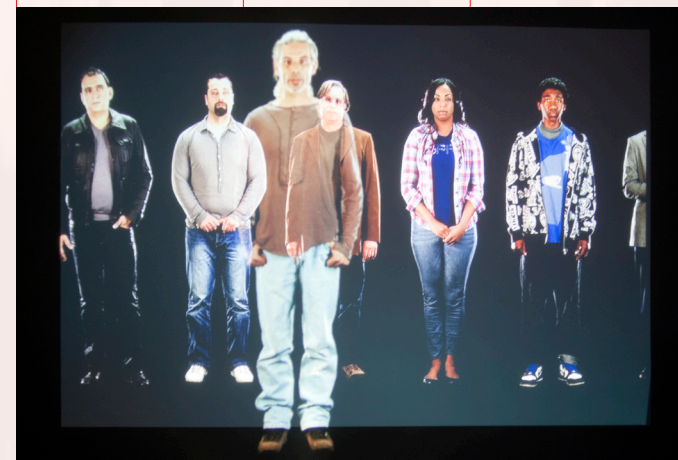




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*A Letter Can Always Reach
Its Destination.* Installation
shots at *Spectral Imprints*,
Abraaj Capital Art Prize 2012
exhibition. Art Dubai, Dubai.
March 2012.







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A Letter Can Always Reach Its Destination. Installation shots
at *Spectral Imprints*, *Abraaj Capital Art Prize 2012* exhibition.
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