JOANA HADJITHOMAS & KHALIL JOREIGE, *The Trophy Room*, 2014, displays, concrete, glass and photographs, alminated photo prints on rolls, cylinders, dimensions variable. Installation view of "I Must First Apologize…" at MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2016. Photo by Peter Harris. Courtesy MIT List Visual Arts Center.

I Must First Apologize … Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige

By HG Masters

One person's spam is another person's literature—or so you might say about Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's 16-year-long project investigating scam emails, which culminated in "I Must First Apologize…" at the MIT List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The artists assert that spam in fact belongs to a robust tradition of confidence games that stretches back to the late-16th-century "Spanish Prisoner" trick or "Jerusalem Letter" scam of the 18th century, and thus constitutes a literary genre in itself. The exhibition goes a long way in proving this, as the Beirut- and Paris-based artist-filmmaking duo elevate their initial fascination with these mass emails from a collection of more than 4,000 texts into their own videos, an immersive

installation and sculptures, while uncovering an anti-spammer subculture that relishes conning the con-artists.

As storytellers, Hadjithomas and Joreige seem to have been drawn to the first-person narratives of desperation, which however generic—as alluded to in the exhibition title, referencing a common opening line of many scam emails—are also emblematic masks for actual sorrows. Whether stories or histories, narratives reflect reality, just with greater or lesser verisimilitude. As Hadjithomas and Joreige have explored in their films about the legacy of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90), fiction is often a better representation of the ways things are than official history or documentary, strictly defined; and fiction, the real, and the actual are constantly interwoven in any story. In that way, as a literary (or textual) genre, spam derives from, and corresponds to, new realities: not only in terms of digital technology and the infrastructure of the internet, but to real-world events, such as wars across Africa, in Libya and Sudan, as well as in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. Furthermore, Lebanon itself appears as a physical locus of the largely invisible global scourge, as the tales of lives on the run resonate in a country where many have sought refuge in recent years and decades.

JOANA HADJITHOMAS & KHALIL JOREIGE, *The Rumor of the World*, 2014, video installation, 23 screens, 100 loudspeakers, 38 HD films, variable lengths. Photo by Peter Harris. Courtesy MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge.

The dramatic apex of Hadjithomas and Joreige's project is the 13-screen, 100-speaker installation *The Rumor of the World* (2014), for which the artists hired nonprofessional actors to embody the fictitious characters behind the scam emails. In the darkened gallery, a babble of voices evokes the constant flow of the pleas sent out through servers across the globe (ten percent of all email traffic is spam). In the middle of the room the

voices intermingle and become like an almost unlistenable collage except for occasionally emerging phrases such as: "I give it to you," "my father," "before the war started," "the money," "help," "this transaction," "I have faith," "yours truly." On smaller screens are the actors themselves, who, to greater and lesser degrees, succeed in fictionalizing the spammer's plea. Strangely, some of the most convincing are the ones that are not well read or are the least perfectly acted, like the "wife" of Senator Pell (of the Pell Grants) who stops, starts, stumbles and doubles back at times, often avoiding eye contact. The "brother" of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), is quite funny, while St. William Brooks, of US army in Kabul has a somewhat convincing story about a looted stash of gold. Many others, also just as appropriately—whether from Russia, Palestine, Libya, Algeria, or Angola—have the pathos of humanitarian NGO hotlines or used-car salesmen. Scammers know that different narratives are likely to strike different chords in each of us.

The exhibition's second half becomes more analytical and reveals many of the source material and side stories that the artists developed over the course of the project. This over-elaborative tendency of the artists, while sometimes interesting, isn't always so complementary to their larger projects—as when they give lecture-performances, such as *Aida, Save Me* (2009/2016), an hour-long interpretation and elaboration about their own 26-minute film from 2003, *Ashes*, as they did at the Harvard Film Archive in February. As they follow many of the threads from the film's shooting into real life and then weave them again into a narrative, fact and fiction are flattened into over-explication. In "I Must First Apologize. . . ," this tendency is materialized in the

video *Fidel* (2014), a 12-minute interview with one of the actors from *The Rumor of the World*, who himself was a scammer in Nigeria before moving to Lebanon. In the video, "Fidel" describes the process of email scamming, which is as banal in reality as any scam that preys on people's own ignorance, desperation and greed—and all of which was already embodied and more richly experienced in *The Rumor of the World* itself.

In a similar case, reading through two massive tomes of the artists' collected emails is interesting—what a brilliant and crazy idea to index all your spam beginning in 1999, just when email was first becoming ubiquitous—and the book format subtly enforces Hadjithomas and Joreige's elevation of spam to a literary genre, much more than *The Jerusalem Letter* (2014), a blurry, two-meter-tall print featuring an excerpt from a 1836 handbook on criminal hoaxes, displayed on a nearby wall. Also failing to illicit much impact are two

JOANA HADJITHOMAS & KHALIL JOREIGE, *The Geometry of Space*, 2014, sculptures, stretched oxidised steel, d: 80 cm. Photo by Peter Harris. Courtesy MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge.

globe-shaped metal-rod sculptures, *The Geometry of Space* (2014), with corresponding pencil markings on the wall, meant to abstractly map the physical location of spamming episodes, but in reality offering little more than illustrations of global spam traffic. Though intended to bring the artifice of "making" back to reality, the inclusion of the wooden cubes used to fabricate these sculptures later in the show is even more gratuitous.

But two projects from the latter half of the show do offer genuine moments of interest. *(De)Synchronicity* (2014) is a set of four screens, each showing different internet cafes in various parts of Lebanon. We watch "Fidel" make his way across the four screens through these real-life locations—divided by who knows how much actual distance and time. The filmmaker's visual sleight-of-hand neatly elides the ease with which a real-life spammer crosses the digital divide and enters the physical spaces where people are reading (and possibly even replying to) their attempted acts of deception.

The exhibition's second major component, *The Trophy Room* (2014), is a "virtual museum" comprising a set of vertical glass plinths with images and texts, and two walls covered in vertical scrolls of correspondence, that collectively describe the 419eater.com community of anti-spammer pranksters, who go to great lengths to get spammers to prove that the stories and identities they are peddling are real. The trophies, displayed on the vertical glass pieces are the objects that the internet vigilantes have extracted as "proof" from the conmen—from a collection of carved wooden animals to paintings by the scammers, vulgar tattoos, and even documentation of a restaging of a Monty Python sketch. You quickly come to feel that is how desperate some scammers are, that they themselves submit to such obvious pranks and harassment.

For all of the collisions between real-life tragedy and virtual chicanery in "I Must First Apologize. . . ," a small screen at the back of the exhibition space brings it back together into a very sober current reality. In *It's All Real* (2014), Hadjithomas and Joreige interview some of the actors from *The Rumor of the World* about their own struggles. We hear from Omar and Younès, friends both born in Lebanon to African fathers and Asian mothers; their real stories are so complicated and unfortunate as to far surpass the complexities outlined in any email scam, leading us back to those truisms about reality being stranger than fiction, or authors not even being able to make up stories like this. The same goes for Tamara, an Iraqi-Christian doctor who fled after a 2010 suicide attack and bombing on her Baghdad church, and who, while waiting for the proper paperwork, is struggling to find legitimate work in Lebanon. Their desperation hasn't forced them into scamming people, except on screen in *The Rumor of the World*. Their resignation and struggles help answer one of the initial questions of the exhibition, which Hadjithomas and Joreige articulate as, "How do people believe in these stories?" and which is also, curiously, any filmmaker's own essential anxiety about their works. The essence of spam, it turns out, approaches that of all stories, whether fictional or otherwise.

Installation view of **JOANA HADJITHOMAS** & **KHALIL JOREIGE**'s "I Must First Apologize…" at MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2016. (Left) *Geometry of Space*, 2014, and (right) *(De)Synchronicity*, 2014. Photo by Peter Harris. Courtesy MIT List Visual Arts Center.

"I Must First Apologize . . ." is on view at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts, until April 17, 2016.

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