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Art : Interview

Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. *Restaged,* 2013, photographic print from *The Lebanese Rocket Society.* Courtesy of Galerie In Situ Fabienne Leclerc, Paris; CRG Gallery, New York; and The Third Line, Dubai.

By Jessica Hong March 17, 2016

Based in Beirut and Paris, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige are filmmakers, visual artists, and avid researchers who employ images they have captured or made to investigate our relation with history. They both came of age in Beirut during the Lebanese Civil War, a period often bracketed as incongruous with the rest of Lebanon's history. But the latent power of images and unheeded effects of violence from the past loom large in the present—and urgently in their work.

Their inspiration often comes from specific, potent interactions with history, resulting in projects like the *Lebanese Rocket Society—a* multifaceted work that explores an actual, all but forgotten Lebanese space program from the mid-1960s, which the artists only stumbled upon after finding an old commemorative stamp. Hadjithomas and Joreige, however, work against the concept of nostalgia by evoking the past constructively, as a way to understand the present and how we position ourselves in a broader historical and temporal context. In *Je Veux Voir* (*I Want to See*), starring film icon Catherine Deneuve, the filmmakers adduce both the history of cinema and the country's socio-political history. Filming near the border between South Lebanon and Israel—a contentious site, normally guarded and closed—they were able to test the potential power of cinema and open a small road just for a moment, demonstrating the possibilities when disparate histories, motivations, and realms (here the political and the filmic) clash with the present.

Our conversation coincided with their exhibition *I must first apologise…*, which was on view at HOME, in Manchester, UK. For that project, the artists began amassing scam emails in 1999, turning them into a multi-component, multi-media installation. The project demonstrates how these present-day, online scams have larger societal and cultural implications.

A still from *Je Veux Voir* (*I Want To See*), 2008. Photo by Patrick Zwirc. Courtesy of Abbout Productions and Mille et Une Productions.

Jessica Hong *I must first apologise…* might seem like a slight departure from the rest of your work, as it's not explicitly about images, or initially doesn't seem that it's explicitly about images or their inherent power, *per se*. It's about how the faux situations scammers create actually have real-life consequences, and more widely, how these email hoaxes are reflective of our current postcolonial world, so to speak. I hope I summed that up correctly.

Khalil Joreige At the same time, it's the continuation of something that's interested us for a long time: how you can believe in a story or a narrative, or even a picture or image. This is something we've been interested in, even with our feature films. If you consider a film like *I Want to See* with Catherine Deneuve, it's about how you can believe in fiction after a catastrophe, a war. So with this project on scams, it was different. We were dealing with how those emails, those fake stories are becoming efficient and more believable. And there's more than a billion dollars transferred every year with these scams. They're really efficient.

JH Absolutely. It's interesting, because with the *Lebanese Rocket Society*, it's almost like the opposite of *I must first apologise*…. The film starts with an actual image of a rocket on a stamp that you found, while with the email hoaxes it's a world that's created around something that's fake. With the *Lebanese Rocket Society,* it's a real object and a real story where the reality of it has collapsed. With the scams, it's almost like the fictiveness has expanded into reality.

Joana Hadjithomas Yes, exactly. The thing is that when we discovered all these scams and began collecting them, we didn't really know what to do with all of it. We would go back and read them, never wanting to put them in the trash like all reasonable people usually do (*laughter*), because we thought it was very interesting material. Interesting, because we're filmmakers and we're very concerned with how you tell a story, how you build a narrative. Here it was very clear that these scams were, in a way, borrowing from ideas we have about what a good and efficient story is. There were a lot of ingredients—political things, crimes, murders, tragic moments—all built in, like a melodrama. Little by little, over the years, we began to understand they are always playing with current events, with what's happening. They want to make us believe that corruption is possible in certain places, deliberately choosing specific locations and ignoring others. They are, in a way, mapping the world—places that are corrupted, or where corruption is possible, and others where it would be hard to believe. And so this is not only a political gesture, but also, like you were saying, a kind of neocolonialism the scammers do against themselves. It's building a new and alternative history of the world. So the idea when we saw the scams, when we began working on them really seriously, was the lack of images. It was something totally virtual—an imaginary without images. Then we thought of giving images to this imaginary by asking some actors to embody the stories.

KJ To give it physicality. We chose 40 scams out of the 4000 we had collected. And we chose 40 non-professional actors from different nationalities and asked them to act out these scams. We did two installations around this—*The Rumors of the World* and *A Letter Can Always Reach Its Destination*.

Exhibition view of *The Rumors of the World* at the Villa Arson, 2014. Installation with 38 videos on 23 screens and 100 speakers. Photo by Jean Brasile. Courtesy Galerie In Situ Fabienne Leclerc , Paris; CRG Gallery, New York; and The Third Line, Dubai.

KJ Not just to make the scam emails present, but also to try to give form—to invent forms—to think about how a form also can represent something you can't see. A good part of our work is about giving materiality to things that aren't visible.

JH Or even giving materiality to things that have almost already an ontological materiality, because in an odd way the distance that the Internet creates, as you say, creates a space for boundless imagination. So when these recipients get these emails, yes, it sounds like a dire situation out there, but it's their imagination that the scammer instigates. The recipient completes this imaginary that brings power to the hoax.

KJ The scammer is continuing the kind of ping-pong between them, because he's editing the scenario. By doing this, he's part of the tango. It's very important, like in a chess game. But instead of playing against one person, there's actually a whole group behind it, and they're always in advance of your expectations. It's a question of desire and what you're expecting in terms of representation. You have this situation from a kind of fiction or moment of truth in someone's imaginary. But what's fascinating is this desire to believe that is present in our relation to stories, theatre, cinema—but also in those scams. Why do people believe? It's not only being naïve, it's something else that is really essential.

JH Also nostalgia plays an interesting part, because I know it's something you try to work against in your projects, like in *Wonder Beirut* for example. But the partial success of these scams is the nostalgia of the recipient. I'm thinking about the Jerusalem Letter in particular, one of the installations of the exhibition, a swindle from the eighteenth century, which Eugène François-Vidocq wrote about in *The Thieves* (*Les voleurs*, 1836). He argues that these scammers take advantage of the remaining nostalgia for France's political and social system before their revolution in 1789—the *Ancien Régime*.

KJ The scams come from an old tradition called the "Spanish Prisoner," but also the "Jerusalem Letter," an old swindle built exactly—in its narrative, form, structure, strategies—as scams are today. Today, you have scams written supposedly by the son of Kadafi, Moubarak, or Coulibaly, while the Jerusalem Letter was staging a valet of a marquis or a comte that was killed by the revolutionaries and now has possession of money and jewelry, searching for someone to help him. People who would answer were usually nostalgic of the Ancien Régime. Vidocq says those swindles appear at a specific moment and under certain historical and economical conditions.

The launching of Cedar III in 1962, from *The Lebanese Rocket Society*, 2013.

JH It's actually almost a testament to your argument against nostalgia and how dangerous nostalgia can be. Can you talk about that a bit further—and how you think nostalgia plays into this work, or just in general?

JH Maybe it's not exactly nostalgia. There are different sorts of nostalgia. Usually the problem is its claim that "before it was better." So, you long for a time that doesn't exist anymore, or a time that was supposedly "better." We never wanted this to be part of our work's message. Even when we were working in the archives for the *Lebanese Rocket Society*, we weren't interested in the past just to celebrate the past. We're interested in the way you can invoke the past in the present, and inject and reactivate the present *in* the past and see what happens. For example, with the *Lebanese Rocket Society*, we built a sculpture of one of the rockets, the Cedar IV, the most elaborate of this space project, and placed it on a truck, circulating it in Beirut's streets to demonstrate what would happen if people would see that this is not a weapon but a rocket for science and space exploration. It can question the construction of imaginaries, and this is at the core of our experiments. And with the Jerusalem Letter hoax, when Vidocq says people were nostalgic for another regime, they think the regime can happen again—that rioting, for example, could happen again. Or maybe when people actually answer all those emails, they think they're in a position to help the African people sending them. I don't think it's just about nostalgia, because they don't just want to help, they want to benefit financially from it.

JH And I find it really intriguing that you've spoken about seeing time as a territory. This is certainly relevant to the happenings of the day, what with the political discussions around the globe of closing borders and whatnot. It's just interesting because time—the way that we conceive of it and how it functions—is a very specific system. In some areas we turn back time, then forward again (like with Daylight Savings Time), so it's manmade just as borders are manmade frameworks of the world. Can you discuss this idea of temporality?

KJ Actually it's sort of a continuation of the discussion we were having about the sensation of a border. For example, I feel maybe closer to you than what I can feel for my neighbor, even though you're in Cambridge right now, because we share the same experience, interests, issues, and concerns. And this is the word *contemporary*—it's sharing the same time: *con-temporary*. And it's not just the same time, it can be also the same rhythm. This is what Roland Barthes was saying about the condition of living together—sharing the same rhythm, being the rhythm. For example, in a previous work, the rhythm of mourning in a film like *A Perfect Day,* or the rhythm of being together is the same kind of project. This is why, for me, art and cinema are maybe the places to experiment with this feeling.

Exhibition detail of *Geometry of Space* at HOME, Manchester, UK, 2008. Stretched oxidized steel sculptures, scam atlases, and murals. Courtesy Galerie In Situ Fabienne Leclerc, Paris; CRG Galerry, New York; and The Third Line, Dubai.

JH We talk, Khalil and I, of the *territories* of film and art, or cinema and art. And it‘s because in the world today, and in this region especially, where we live, you have a lot of nationalism. It’s very strange to see how the world is totally governed by this idea of nationalism, and of identities and particularism. We were raised in a moment, a very special one, with civil wars and a lot of communitarianism. We are, in a way, always fighting against this restriction of our possibilities, the shrinking of our territories. When we talk about temporality, it’s more about what Khalil was saying, about sharing a moment, or sharing a concern, sharing a question together. That can help us not be part of a community or territory that’s specifically geographic or national.

JH Right. And I certainly see art and film as being able to do that, but the digital has also expanded art and film’s ability to share in temporalities.

JH Exactly! So this is why, for example, in *I must first apologise*… we have a work called *(DE)SYNCHRONICITY*, where you have these four screens, and people are going from one screen to another. There are four spaces that are different, four internet cafés. We took them in four different locations. We have actors that go from one screen to another as if they were really sharing not a space, but a time. They go out of a screen and enter directly, in a synchronized way, into another screen as if it was a continuous space, but it’s only continuous time and action. This is the Internet, we’re connected now, but we‘re in totally different places. It’s about de-territorialization.

KJ In the show we also have an interview with a former scammer. It‘s one of the non-professional actors that is dictating scams in *The Rumors of the World* or *A Letter Can Always Reach its Destination*. He was expressing it so well we were surprised. Then we found out that he was a former scammer. It was an incredible coincidence. And he agreed to tell us in a short video how scams function and how scammers operate.

JH Yes, Fidel.

It's All Real: Omar and Younes, 2014, two synchronized HD videos. Courtesy Galerie In Situ Fabienne Leclerc, Paris; CRG Gallery, New York; and The Third Line, Dubai.

JH If you think about it, you receive the email, and if you answer it, you begin a relation. The hoaxes really work. A lot of people are taken by this question and answer, then a lot of people send money and get trapped. But when you answer, you answer to someone, and in a way, with these scams, you can be whoever you want. You can take the identity you want and play all the games. This is very close in a way to the production of films, where you have characters, places, accessories that you can use. This is possible in a kind of network where things are fluid and not fixed, where things can evolve and change. You can be a scammer, then you can be scammed by the scam-beater, who in turn scams the scammers and takes revenge. You can be a victim, but in a way you're greedy, and this is why you take the bait. Or you can play the role of an Iraqi woman asking for a large sum of money, but at the same time you actually *are* Iraqi and have real problems, maybe even going through things more crazy than what you're describing in the scam. So you never know.

KJ One of the important things it does is shift your gaze onto certain realities and assumptions. It shifts your gaze completely.

JH Yeah, absolutely. It even makes a lot of these binaries that we use more complicated. As you mentioned, the scam-beater or the scam-baiters are a really fascinating consequence of these email solicitations. I almost see them as this online virtual militia trying to fight against the injustice of the scams, but they are often really cruel.
It's not only blurring the lines of credulity, but also blurring the lines between victim and perpetrator, or right and wrong even. Some of your works certainly give rise to questions of morality or ethics, even if unintended.

JH In a way, the scammers and scam-beaters are very political things, because a lot of scam-beaters are people that can't accept this idea that in Africa people are scamming others, Europeans or Americans, and it's working.

JH I would say, in a twisted, idealistic way their main urge is economic; they do these things in order to make their lives better. A lot of these scams, as you mentioned, originate from areas where you imagine them to be from, a large portion being from Nigeria. Everyone has gotten an email from someone claiming to be a Nigerian prince in

dire straits. It does seem to come out of areas of desperation, with a sense of urgency—it's a response to an urgent situation.

KJ Yeah, of course. And we can't really be—like you were saying—moralistic about it. It's a way to be part of another and bigger game. These scams are a consequence of the world today and its relation to Neoliberalism and market forces. I'm not sure you can really be more for or against a scammer than any other market-related practices out there with their façade of respectability.

I must first apologise… *is now on view at the MIT List Visual Arts Center through April 17, 2016.*

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