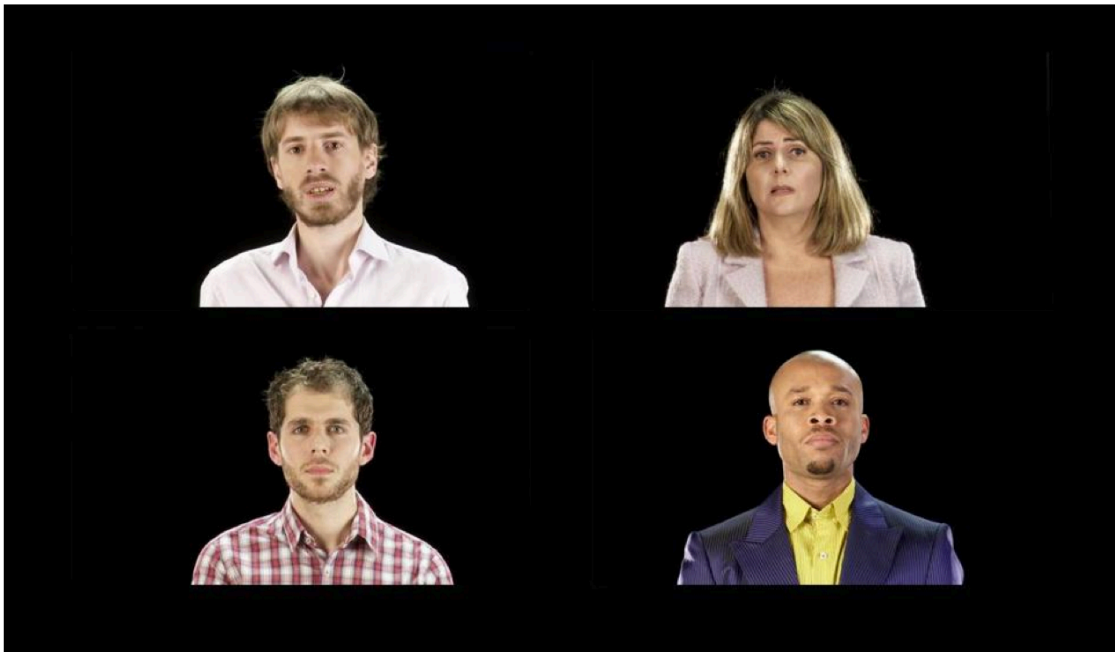


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ART REVIEW

Hadjithomas and Joreige explore e-mail scams at MIT



JOANA HADJITHOMAS AND KHALIL JOREIGE AND IN SITU/FABIENNE LECLERC (PARIS), CRG GALLERY (NEW YORK), THE THIRD LINE (DUBAI)

Image from the multi-channel video installation "The Rumor of the World."

By Cate McQuaid | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 07, 2016

Falling for a con is a lot like falling in love with the wrong person: At some point, your heart, or your dreams of the future, push you past all the red flags, and you're in deep. In the con, as in love, physical distance and Internet communication only add to the rosy glow of possibility.

Consider the heartfelt message from Mrs. Viviane Salem, who lives in Baghdad. She is the wife of a lovely husband and the mother of three, she tells us in the multi-channel video installation "The Rumor of the World," the initial segment of "Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige: I Must First Apologize. . ." at MIT List Visual Arts Center.

"Everything passed away, a year ago," she says, "in a moment when the Americans hit everything, just destroyed my entire family." The poor woman!

The text is from an Iraq War-era e-mail scam. In the video, Mrs. Viviane Salem, portrayed by a non-actor, tells us that her husband left her \$29.5 million. All she needs is a partner to help her transfer the funds.

In “The Rumor of the World,” more than a dozen screens circle a darkened room. Talking heads read the kind of scam e-mails that probably land in your spam folder every day. When you first enter the installation, it’s cacophonous and hard to get your bearings, but position yourself in front of a single monitor, and the others turn into murmuring background noise.

Here’s Sergeant William Brooks, first infantry division in Kabul. He and his buddies found cash after evacuating a terrorist cell. Journalists gave him your name, assuring him you are trustworthy. Or, here’s the son of the ex-president of the Republic of Niger. Guess what he needs help with?

If “The Rumor of the World” conveys the proliferation and scope of e-mail scams, “I Must First Apologize. . .” digs deep into the art of the con and a global economy that has fostered a prosperous niche for scammers. In a catalog essay, scholar, theorist, and curator Laura U. Marks writes that in 2013, victims worldwide were robbed of \$13 billion by advance-fee frauds.

The advance-fee scam, in which the mark is promised a percentage if he or she will help move a huge sum of money, has been around since the late 18th century. It started in post-Revolution France, with letters supposedly sent from imprisoned nobles or their servants who needed help with their stashed riches.

Hadjithomas and Joreige, artist-filmmakers based in Lebanon, focus on the unseen and unexplored. E-mail scams fit the bill: If you’re like me, you delete them without even opening them. The artists have been collecting them since the late 1990s, and have now archived and deconstructed more than 4,000.

Many of these scams originate in areas riven with violence and poverty, which in part results from shady dealings of corrupt governments and giant banks, an ugly echo of colonialism. The Internet has turned advance-fee fraud into a burgeoning enterprise, a shadow of the international financial system.

The artists’ “Geometry of Space” installation starts with a fat book of e-mail scams. A pencil gesture on each page traces the e-mail’s geographic path; these are replicated on the wall, and again in oxidized steel rods that arc and cluster to create the sense of a network moving around a globe.

In the shocking and funny installation “The Trophy Room,” Hadjithomas and Joreige document the efforts of scam baiters, who write back, agreeing to send money, provided the scammers jump through a few hoops first.

One baiter sent the swindler a photo of himself, requesting a hand-carved wooden bust. When the con artist followed through, the baiter wrote back claiming a squirrel had gotten into the package and destroyed part of the bust. The scammer never got a penny. This could be the stuff of a Hollywood comedy.

Not surprisingly, Hadjithomas and Joreige’s videos are their most compelling works. Fidel, one of the non-actors hired to read the scam e-mails, turned out to be a reformed con man. We learn in “Fidel” that he was a big game hunter, sporting a Rolex and Armani shoes, working with a team, paying off government officials. Speaking directly to the camera, he compares the art of the con to the art of moviemaking.

“People when they are watching it they will feel: Oh, this is real, don’t tell me this is a movie,” he says. “So every move will have to keep the victim in suspense.”

If the victim is to succumb to his or her dreams of wealth, and sometimes altruism (what a heady cocktail!), the lure must be made up of fiction and suspense. Dreams and fiction have similar bloodlines, not kin to reason, but they can be direct funnels to faith.

In “It’s All Real,” a video that anchors the show, the artists film several of their non-actors in Lebanon telling their own stories. Tamara, an Iraqi doctor and refugee who portrays Mrs. Viviane Salem, now practices healing through prayer. Omar and Younes are illegal immigrants, the teenage sons of African fathers and Asian mothers. All of them are somehow trapped.

The stories are sad, and less pulpy than those in your spam folder, but in many ways, they draw the same picture — of a world in which people are disposable, and money is not.

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige: I Must First Apologize. . .

At MIT List Visual Arts Center, 20 Ames St., Cambridge, through April 17. 617-253-4680, listart.mit.edu

Cate McQuaid can be reached at catemcquaid@gmail.com. Follow her on Twitter [@cmcq](https://twitter.com/cmcq).