

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

February 19 – April 17, 2016



MIT List Visual Arts Center

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Hayden and Reference Galleries February 19, 2016 – April 17, 2016

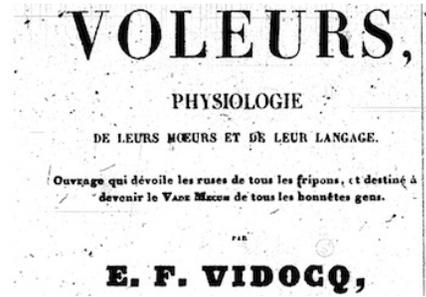
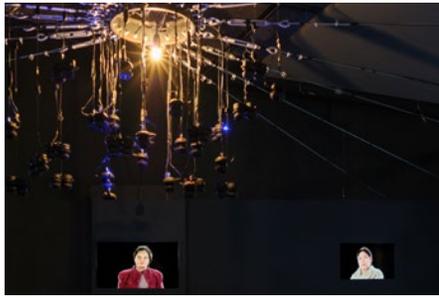
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In this exhibition Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige explore the history of e-mail scamming through film, sculpture, photography, and installation. Giving a face to the ambiguous personae that populate scam e-mails, the artists canvas the narratives, tactics, and belief systems that underpin Internet fraud of the last fifteen years. How do we connect and form a relationship with an individual whom we have never met? What are the parameters of intimacy? How do these plausible connections challenge our notions of trust and belief?

Since 1999, Hadjithomas and Joreige have collected and studied more than 4,000 e-mail scams, and identified several recurring patterns within the correspondence. The messages are generally written as a first-person monologue. The scammers often usurp the identity of an individual in a position of authority: they assume the voice of a politician or their family member(s), or they speak as a notorious and wealthy dictator who urgently needs to transfer money. Referencing recent news and real events, the correspondence is rooted in the plausible and exploits a reader's gullibility and empathy. A substantial amount of money is promised to those who agree to help—a stranger nominated as "the only trustworthy person." The fraud is surprisingly efficient and every year thousands of people are conned. Some scam victims have been financially ruined, and there have been incidents of suicide and murder resulting from Internet fraud.

Probing the structures of belief and storytelling, the artists examine a complex set of relationships marked by intimacy, trust, greed, and desire. The e-mail exchanges reveal a new world map—a chronicle of conflicts, a strange history of our contemporary time, as well as a place of singular encounters and poetic experiences.

*I Must First Apologize...* is a narrative exhibition in which viewers encounter a recurring cast of lead characters and minor ones, scammers, victims, and scambaiters, and a range of scenarios that test one's own sense of trust and belief.



### THE RUMOR OF THE WORLD (2014)

Video installation, thirteen screens, thirty-seven high-definition digital videos, speakers; variable lengths.

*The Rumor of the World* is populated by the faces and voices of non-professional actors reciting selections of scam e-mail correspondence. As a viewer approaches one of the thirteen screens comprising the installation, the cacophony of voices fade and one is confronted by an individual. Whereas the original scam e-mails were dispersed blindly to scores of unknown recipients, here the message is directly relayed to the observer. The monologues initially appear credible, yet at the mention of a monetary exchange, a viewer may begin to suspect that the speech is not entirely sincere. Can such e-mails, often typified by the comical inaccuracies of Google Translate, become a source of serious, literary material? Can we regard them as more than scams, but also as works of fiction in their own right?

### THE JERUSALEM LETTER (2014)

Digital prints on paper.

The text of *The Jerusalem Letter* is extracted from Eugène-François Vidocq's 1836 book, *Les voleurs* (The Thieves). The text describes a range of criminal strategies, among them a hoax originating in France at the end of the eighteenth century and perpetuated by con artists who were eventually imprisoned in a jailhouse located along "rue de Jerusalem," just outside of Paris. This ruse comprises letters describing the desperate situation of Lords and their servants. These victims of circumstance were forced to abandon their valuable belongings in the wake of the French Revolution and are now seeking the "only remaining trustworthy person" to retrieve their riches. The letters site the ruse in recent events and exploit a mark's nostalgia for the *ancien régime*. Thus, contemporary scam e-mails exist within a literary tradition dating back hundreds of years. While the dissemination of such fictions has taken various forms, ranging from word-of-mouth and postal letters to printed, faxed, and e-mailed narratives, contemporary scams are part of a long history of confidence tricks.

### FIDEL (2014)

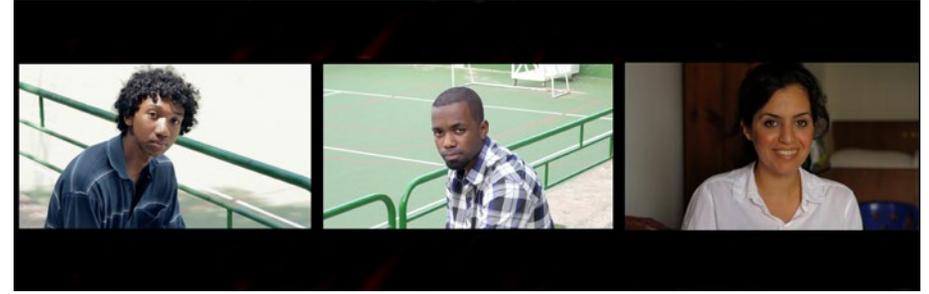
High-definition digital video; 11:48 min.

*Fidel* features an amateur actor who appears in *The Rumor of the World*. Evidently familiar with the scam e-mail process, Fidel discloses that before arriving in Lebanon he was a scammer in Nigeria. In the short film, Fidel explains how scammers build a false sense of trust and intimacy between themselves and their targets. The con artists share precisely staged details, and particular attention is paid to patterns of speech, articles of clothing (a judiciously placed Rolex watch or a pair of Armani shoes), and geographic location. Like a film, scams present a cinematic narrative slowly unfolding over time.

### GEOMETRY OF SPACE (2014)

Stretched oxidized steel, books, pencil drawings.

*Geometry of Space* corresponds to two years of prolific Internet scamming, 2005 and 2010. The sculptures and wall drawings visualize the geographic circulation of over two hundred scam e-mails sent over the course of each year. Two corresponding "scam atlases" present the selected e-mails in a bound format, suggesting the narrative and literary conventions on which the exchanges are built. In an attempt to make scams convincing, scammers use information and facts from recent political, religious, and economic events. They typically choose countries where corruption seems plausible, often focusing on Africa, Asia, Russia, or the Arabic world. As a result, scams draw a map of contemporary conflicts and revolutions, that both reflects the state of the world and suggests an alternative way of writing a country's or region's history.



### (DE)SYNCHRONICITY (2014)

Four synchronized high-definition digital videos; 2:30 min.

Internet cafés form a constantly changing network where anyone, shielded behind their computer, can lead a fictional life. In this installation, four synchronized shots depict four such locations in Lebanon. People played by sixteen of the recurring actors (including Fidel) go back and forth between them. They encounter each other physically and virtually, moving from one scam to the next. Some appear and vanish quickly, while others perform a strange choreography, walking from one screen to the next, and then disappear. The characters entering a cyber café become prisoners of sorts, trapped in the screens, while the larger Internet café network continues to evolve, redefining ideas of here and there, mobility and immobility.

### THE TROPHY ROOM (2014)

Concrete, glass, photographic prints on paper.

Responding to the deluge of e-mail scams, individuals who refer to themselves as “scambaiters” (or “scambeaters”) and who are predominantly based in the United States, reverse the role of scammer and scammed. *The Trophy Room* is filled with documentation—“trophies”—of their activities that were first shared on the Internet and are here displayed on glass panels and hanging paper scrolls. With duplicitous intentions, scambaiters respond to e-mails and aim to waste the time and money of the scammers by prolonging the exchange, sometimes for months. They request that e-mail scammers establish proof of their intentions by answering a “good faith” questionnaire, sending photographs of themselves in costume (dressed as a medieval knight, clown, rock star, Jesus Christ), or completing specific tasks (painting a portrait of a dog, sculpting a wooden computer keyboard, remaking a Monty Python sketch, getting their arm tattooed). The actions are bizarre and often humiliating, yet they also reveal a persistent will-to-believe. Replete with unexpected twists, anticipation, and doubt, these e-mail exchanges narrate the ebb and flow of trust, abuse, manipulation, and power.

### IT'S ALL REAL (2014)

This video installation features the non-professional actors from *The Rumor of the World* and their personal stories of displacement and hardship. Most of them are immigrants, often undocumented, who arrived in Lebanon in search of refuge from political, religious, and economic strife. They struggle to obtain residency and work permits. Others were born in Lebanon to undocumented immigrants and confront both precarious legal status and a fraught sense of cultural belonging. Some get by as manual or domestic laborers; some receive social benefits while others do not. With the exception of Fidel, none of them are scammers, yet their personal accounts reflect the tales of economic woe and exile that also populate scam e-mails.

#### Omar and Younes

Two synchronized high-definition digital projections; 14:50 min.

Teenagers Omar and Younes are friends who were born in Lebanon to illegal immigrants. Their fathers are from Africa and their mothers are from Asia. Part of a generation questioning the disparities of citizenship, cultural identity and belonging, they long to see the world outside of Lebanon. However, their insecure financial and political situation restricts their mobility, a condition visualized by the split-screen installation. Instead, the basketball court serves as their home territory and the location from which they narrate their past, insecure present, and uncertain future; as well as their faith and belief in things to come.

#### Tamara

Two high-definition digital projections; Tamara, 8:47 min.; Monastery of Saint Charbel, 2:19 min.

An Iraqi doctor of Christian faith, Tamara was forced to flee Baghdad and arrived in Lebanon as a refugee. She now works with drug addicts in a “Christotherapy” center, encouraging them to become sober with the help of prayer and religion. Tamara maintains a steady smile and frequently repeats that she is happy, refusing to be considered a victim. She is isolated in her religious community and has replaced scientific inquiry with an identity founded in religion and faith. Considering her fictitious role as an e-mail scammer alongside her real life in Lebanon, she reflects on the differences between acting for film and acting in real life.



### Fidel

High-definition digital projections; 3:38 min.

A former e-mail scammer, Fidel explains the personal hardships that first led him into the world of Internet fraud. Filled with remorse for his deceptions, he left his life as a scammer in Nigeria and moved to Lebanon. He now works as a sports coach and an occasional stripper.

### Adib

High-definition digital projections; 0:50 min.

Adib is a Syrian refugee recently arrived in Lebanon. Like the millions of Syrians who have fled their homes since the outbreak of civil war in March 2011, his circumstances are precarious. He feels as though his voice is drowned out by the turmoil of political divisions and power plays. Unable to be heard, he instead stares at the camera in silence, replacing ineffectual speech with the face of an individual seeking asylum.

### Sasha

Two synchronized high-definition digital projections; 4:23 min.

The daughter of a Russian mother and a Nigerian father, Sasha lives in Lebanon and articulates her struggles with cultural identity and displacement through interpretative dance. Her expressive choreography captures a cycle of collapse and renewal as she moves toward and away from the camera, and continuously falls and regains her footing. Sasha visualizes her liminal condition through agitated movement. The video's split-screen format, fluctuating film speed, and blurring and distorting effects underscore her uncertain circumstances.



### ...ABOUT LOVE (2014)

Ghost.

The immaterial ghost that haunts this exhibition represents the anonymous victims of e-mail scams. One of Hadjithomas and Joreige's close friends is a victim of Internet fraud. During his online encounter, he refused to accept advice, consistently insisting that "my situation is different, it's not the same." Suspending reason and logic for empathy, trust, and the desire for singularity, this sentiment is common for many victims who adamantly believe they have been chosen because "they are the only remaining trustworthy person."



### 2008, A MATRIX (2014)

Two wooden sculptures, two hundred strips of wood (each).

*2008, A Matrix* comprises the wooden casts used to mold the steel sculptures of *Geometry of Space*. The two spherical forms and incised lines inside them suggest an infinite number of routes taken by scams traversing around the globe. Together the victims, scammers, scambaiters, and actors weave a narrative that tests the boundaries of trust and belief.

## PUBLIC PROGRAMS

### Public Reception

Thursday, February 18, 6–8 PM

### Family Day

Saturday, March 12, 12–4 PM

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### Film Program

February 12–20

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Harvard Film Archive presents

*Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige: Lost Films and Mediations*

Please note: screenings take place at the Harvard Film Archive, Carpenter Center, Harvard University. For more information and tickets: [hcl.harvard.edu/hfa/](http://hcl.harvard.edu/hfa/)

#### SCREENING SCHEDULE

##### Friday, February 12, 7 PM

*A Perfect Day (Yawmon akhar)*, 2005.  
Lebanon/France/Germany  
35mm, color, 88 min.  
Arabic with English subtitles.

##### Friday, February 12, 9 PM

*Khiam 2000–2007. The Film*, 2008.  
Lebanon  
Digital video, 103 min.  
Arabic with English subtitles.

##### Saturday, February 13, 7 PM

*I Want to See (Je veux voir/Baddi Chouf)*, 2008.  
Lebanon/France  
35mm, color, 75 min.  
French and Arabic with English subtitles.

##### Monday, February 15, 7 PM

*Rounds (Barmeh)*, 2001.  
Lebanon/France  
Digital video, color, 8 min.  
Arabic with English subtitles.

*The Lost Film (El film el mafkoud)*, 2003.  
Lebanon/France  
Digital video, color, 43 min.  
Arabic with English subtitles.

##### Friday, February 19, 7 PM

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige in person.

*Aida, Save Me*, 2016.  
Multimedia performance lecture by the artists, 60 min.

*Ashes (Ramad)*, 2003.  
France/Lebanon  
35mm, color, 26 min.  
Arabic with English subtitles.

##### Saturday February 20 at 7 PM

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige in person.

*The Lebanese Rocket Society*, 2013.  
Lebanon/France  
DCP, color, 92 min.  
Arabic and French with English subtitles.

## ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige (both b. 1969, Beirut, Lebanon) live and work in Beirut and Paris.

*Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige: I Must First Apologize...* is organized in collaboration with Villa Arson, Nice, France; and HOME, Manchester, UK; and is curated by Eric Mangion for Nice, Omar Kholeif and Sarah Perks for Manchester, and Henriette Huldisch for Cambridge, MA.

## SPONSORS

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## SUPPORT

Support for this exhibition has been generously provided by the MIT School of Architecture + Planning, John Makhoul, and the Cultural Service of the French Consulate in Boston, with additional support from the Council for the Arts at MIT, the Office of the Associate Provost at MIT, Terry & Rick Stone, the MIT List Visual Arts Center Advisory Committee, the Massachusetts Cultural Council, and many generous individual donors. Special thanks to CRG Gallery, New York.



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COVER *Geometry of Space*, 2014. Sculptures, stretched oxidized steel; scam atlas. 3 publications; murals, chronologic drawings of 2005, & 2010

ABOVE *2008, A Matrix*, 2014. Two wooden sculptures, two hundred strips of wood (each).

All images courtesy the artist and In Situ/Fabienne Leclerc (Paris), CRG Gallery (New York), The Third Line (Dubai)