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Curator : Eric Mangion

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Synopsis

Since 1999, we have collected, archived, studied and traced back more than four thousand email message scams, that come in the form of junk e-mails and spams. These type of scams base itself on a plausible reality, rooted in news, or real events, referring to present-time conflicts and manipulate people's gullibility so as to better abuse them. Written in the first person and structured like monologues, they often usurp famous individuals' identities, posing as the children or wives of politicians, or of notorious dictators and claiming to possess a large sum of money that he/she needs to transfer urgently. A substantial percentage of this money is promised to the one who accepts to help with this task, a stranger designated as the only trustworthy person around.

Also known as the Nigerian scam, as they have often originated from that country, these frauds have been surprisingly efficient to the extend that thousands of people still get conned each year, and hundreds of millions of currencies are robbed, sometimes leading to murder and suicide.

At first we started to collect these scams without really knowing why. Progressively, we questioned ourselves on what representations and methods of knowledge production they contain. Can one build a story with these emails, give a shape to these imaginaries?

When they are read carefully, the compilation of emails map a history of the past few years : the conflicts, wars uprisings, geopolitical shifts, global economy developments, financial value fluctuations, raw materials, religious extremism, political turmoil, and even ecological disaster... These virtual archives outline a cartography of conflicts, a symptom of the state of the world

illustrating complex and often still colonial relationships, an imaginary of corruption but also a space for singular individual encounters and poetic experiences.

For us, the matter of these scam messages which is usually re-directed to one's trash folder on computers, unravels a space for transformation, exploring narrative and artistic forms produced by the Internet and the relationship to contemporary history, to art and different systems of representation. Collectively, this work explores the odd faith that leads us to believe in the power of images and stories.

The exhibition acts like a narrative itinerary, a film that unfolds in the shape of installations, sounds, videos, sculptures and drawings, deconstructing this data and transforming it to produce images. One will encounter recurring lead characters, and minor ones, scammers, victims, scambeaters, who are eager to scam the scammers, parallel edits, original sets, essential props, scenarios and virtual fictions. that establish multiple correspondences among one another.

A remake
1. The Jerusalem Letter

Digital prints 115 x 200 cm, 130 x 200 cm
Photo prints on archive paper 24 x 30 cm, 2014

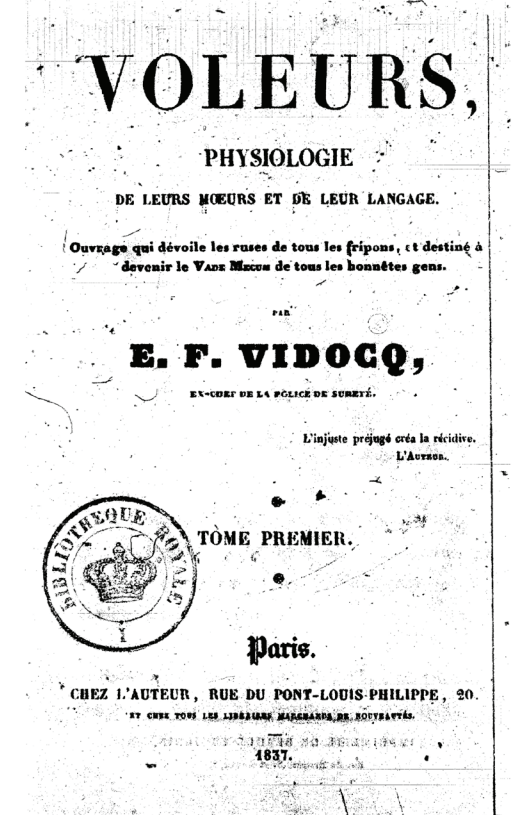
The narratives produced by the scams are part of a literary tradition, an old genre, known as the Jerusalem Letter, also previously called the Spanish Prisoner. The Jerusalem Letters were a hoax that originated in France at the end of the 18th century, that told stories of lords and their servants fleeing the events of the French Revolution and looking to retrieve a treasure with the help of the recipient, seemingly the "only remaining trustworthy person."

In his book, *The Thieves (Les voleurs, 1836)*, subtitled: "A study that reveals all of the ruses used by thieves, and destined to become the vade mecum of all honest man", Eugène-François Vidocq strips down the mechanisms by which the ruses operated. According to him, the letters waxed on the nostalgia of the Ancient Regime, a sentiment felt by some after the French Revolution. The name originates from the fact that most of the con artists were imprisoned near Paris, in the Bicêtre jailhouse, partially located in rue de Jerusalem.

This type of scam seems to appear at specific historical moments and contexts that allow certain forms to arise and prosper, as if their existence mechanism depended on imagination.

Their dissemination took various forms, first circulating orally, then in a letter, and in the present day, in the form of a printed or photocopied fax. Finally, with the Internet, their development undertakes a remarkable evolution, establishing a contemporary version of the scam, like a remake, two centuries later.

In the exhibition, the work carrying the same



title, comes from a Jerusalem Letter that dates back to 1793, extracted from Vidocq's book and has been reworked through a specific pixelating device integrating different means of reproduction and diffusion in time and creating a spatial perspective that manipulates distances within the exhibition space.

2. The Rumor of the World

Video installation, 23 screens, 100 loudspeakers,
38 HD films, variable lengths, 2014



People of various ages and origins, non-professional actors, filmed in close-up, stare at us, speak to us, incarnating a scam, a story. These faces and voices are spread out onto twenty-three screens and one hundred loudspeakers, weaving a network, a visual and virtual meshwork that chors an invasive rumor.

This rumor starts to fade only when the spectator approaches the screen, so as to create a shot-counter shot. Only at this distance does the story, incarnated by a singular individual, reveal itself. If the spectator steps back, a multitude of voices interfere with the sound and echo within the space.

By the presence of these thirty-eight non-professional actors, the scams, sent out usually in a blind and collective manner, become individually directed, between a subject and another.

Can these emails, drafted in a specific style, marked with the grammatical and syntactic maladroitness of automatic translation applications, oscillating between the comical and poetic, transform into literary material? Can we regard them as micro-narratives, instances of

3. Geometry of space

Sculptures, stretched oxidised steel
diameter 80 cm, 2014
Scams Atlas, 3 publications, 2014
Murals, chronologic drawings of 2005, 2008 & 2010

In an attempt to make their scams convincing and believable to the victims, the scammers use information and facts from recent political, economic, religious, environmental, and financial events. They choose various countries to locate their story, usually in destinations where corruption seems plausible for them. They focus on Africa, Asia, Russia or the Arabic world (for instance war in Iraq, recent revolutions or the fall of dictators have been used as new material).

As such, these scams draw a map of contemporary conflicts, wars and revolutions, a symptom of the state of the world and in a certain way, suggest an alternative manner of writing a country or a region's history.

This alternative historiography can be traced progressively, alongside a post colonial geography, in the tenor of a fiction based on corruption, and dynamics between North and South, economic divisions and perceptions of one or the other. In the exhibition, this imagined mapping of corruption is shown through a series of sculptures and drawings that seek to track the circulation, and geographic itineraries of emails.

The locations and countries that appear in a selection of over two hundred emails per year were used to identify these itineraries, whose coordinates (latitude and longitude) coincide with different events around the world. They are materialized with steel bands that give shape to



a globe and physical reality to the virtual network as well as to the chronicle of events tabulated over a year of scams.

Three sculptures are presented in the consecutive exhibition spaces, corresponding with three prolific years in Internet advance-fee fraud production: 2005, 2008, and 2010. In each room, the dated and localized trajectories around the globe are drawn separately on the walls of the spaces, chronologically. Three "scams atlases" are also presented, gathering all the selected emails for those three specific years.

Characters: the scammers
4. Fidel

Video HD, 11 mins 48 sec, 2014

Amongst the non-professional actors who were cast for filming of *The Rumor of the World*, Fidel, a man living in Lebanon, appeared to know perfectly well the scam that he was asked to memorize. Fidel explained that he had been a scammer in Nigeria in the past, before coming to Lebanon. In a short video, he accepted to speak about the different steps scammers undertake to bait their victim. From the manner of speech to accessories (a Rolex watch or Armani shoes for example), and the choice of location, everything is staged, almost like a film in the making. "Scams are another kind of movie that you cannot really explain. It's a never-ending story. In these scams, you have to convince someone you've



not seen, someone you don't know, someone that you might not even see, but will pay you a lot of money. It's a magical movie", Fidel tells us.

Characters: the scambeaters
5. The Trophy Room

Concrete, glass and photographs
Photo prints on rolls, variable dimensions, 2014

In response to these scammers, a group of individuals who call themselves scambeiters or scambeaters, originating mainly in the United States, have decided to fight against these scams. Their strategy assumes a role-play, that aims to scam the scammers. They answer the emails, and play along in order to deceive them more easily. These exchanges can last for months sometimes, their primary objective being to waste the scammers' time. Due to the severe punitive measures of Law 419 in Nigeria, the scammers operate from internet cafes. So a waste time is also a waste money. The stratagems also include tricking them to

execute various actions, at times bizarre and dreadful. This game can be very cruel, blurring the lines of credulity, abuse, power and capital, developing a strange link that shifts every role in the story.

The scambeaters ask the scammers for proof of "good faith" or motivation, a more or less scripted routine that starts usually with a questionnaire that the scammer has to fill out, then a dressing up costume (a knight costume, clown, rock star, Jesus Christ,...) followed by a specific demand to produce an object: for example, the scammer must paint the portrait of a dog,

sculpt a wooden computer keyboard, remake a Monty Python sketch or get his arm tattooed. It is unclear whether the scammer accepts this humiliation or physical abuse upon himself or hires someone in exchange for money. Regardless of the level of knowledge or information concerning these practices, strangely, the will to believe always remains.

The different collected material (videos, photographs, paintings, sculptures, performances,...) are called trophies by the scambateers, and are exhibited in a “trophy room” (on the 419eater forum, for example) evoking a strange virtual museum. Shown along their side, the correspondence

6. (DE)SYNCHRONICITY

Video installation, 4 continuous synchronized screens, 2 mins 30 sec, Full HD, 2014



Four sequence shots, each representing a different internet café, in four different locations in Lebanon. From one café to the other, from one scam to the next, people encounter one another physically and virtually. Sixteen actors in total, including Fidel, the repentant scammer, come and go, in an orchestrated synchronization among the pedestrians and the cars captured live. Some disappear quickly. Others pass each other in a strange synchronization, walking through a screen to another and another again before disappearing entirely.

An audio composition accentuates the spatial rupture over temporal continuity, in favor of the virtual links that emerge from these cafés, between scammers, scambateers, and victims. All those who enter the internet cafes become

7. A Letter Can Always Reach its Destination

Video installation
2 synchronized HD videos, 122 mins
Hologram screen, 2012

The video title is in reference to Jacques Lacan's seminar around Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter*, with comments by Slavoj Žižek who claims that when one receives a letter, one instantly feels as the recipient of this letter. Even if one were not, one becomes it. Thus, a letter always reaches its destination.

This installation echoes *The Rumor of the World*, featuring the same thirty-eight non-professional actors, this time filmed entirely differently, in full length, interpreting these emails, embodying them, making them tangible, audible and visible. Standing up side by side, the characters rotate on a screen at the back of the room. Progressively, one of them steps out from the lot. A face emerges from the group and an individual tells a story, shifting from one reality to the other. Stepping out of the line-up, the character transparently appears on a second screen, in front of another like a hologram.

The superimposed screens generate spectral presences, uncertain and virtual. *A Letter Can*



Always Reach its Destination resonates with our artistic and cinematographic research around disappearance, presence, latency, and evocation. Its starting point is an absence – a virtual communication through emails – and then through the actors' presence and performance, attempts to impulse life into an abstract fantasy.

It's all Real

During the filming of *A Letter Can Always Reach its Destination* and *The Rumor of the World*, and meeting the various actors, all non-professional, we met individuals with incredible fates. They are predominantly immigrants, from all over the world, who have no choice but to leave their country, in a temporary exile sometimes, seeking refuge in Lebanon or a job, aspiring for a better life. Some are often laborers or domestic workers, some receive social insurance, others don't. Some are the children of these workers. Born 'undocumented' in Lebanon, they struggle nonetheless to obtain legal papers and move around freely. With the exception of Fidel, none of them were scammers. Yet their stories encounter the scammers' invented narratives complete with twists,

conflicts, economic crises, jostling migratory flows. In their own way, they embody the feeling of displacement triggered by the scams and endure the constant shifts between cultures, religions, or temporalities. They are captive to an extraterritorial dimension that echoes the virtual world, globalized through the Internet.

The series of video installations titled *It's all Real* are spread out within the exhibition and are made up of a number of encounters with some of these people in their daily life, giving a voice to these barely noticeable silhouettes.

8. It's all Real: Omar and Younes

2 synchronized HD videos, 14mins 50 sec, 2014

Two teenagers, Omar and Younes, are illegal immigrants born in Lebanon to African fathers and Asian mothers, dreaming of elsewhere. They are part of a generation that questions its filiation, transmission, origins, identity, and position. Through a split-screen, two parallel screens like an interval, the installation reflects their frozen



9. It's all Real: Fidel

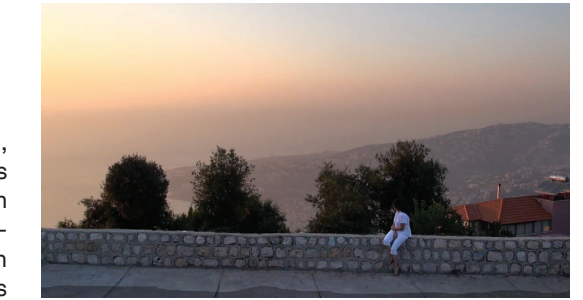
HD video 3 mins 38 sec, 2014

A former scammer, Fidel explains his trajectory and how, filled with remorse, he ceased this activity, moving from Nigeria to Lebanon where he works as a sports coach and occasionally as a stripper.

10. It's all Real: Tamara

HD video, 8 mins 47 sec, 2014
Monastery of Saint Charbel, HD video
2 mins 19 sec, 2014

Tamara, a young Iraqi doctor of Christian faith, was forced to flee Baghdad lives in Lebanon as a refugee, increasingly closed in on her faith and community. She now works in a “christo-therapy” center, curing drug addicts through prayer and the invocation of Christ. Her smile is unsettling as she constantly repeats that she is happy, refusing to acknowledge her victim status and hanging onto her beliefs, she presents her faith as a new identity in opposition with the scientific approach she defended not long ago.



She establishes a link between her fictitious presence in the exhibition and her real one, claiming that life is like a movie, acting is living, having lived, and suffered, acting isn't acting.

11. It's all Real: Adib

Continuous HD video, loop, 2014

Adib, a Syrian who recently fled his country and arrived in Lebanon like more than a million and a half of his fellow countrymen, doesn't act, he cannot speak. He looks at the camera, mute, staring helplessly. His gaze becomes a language, his only way of speaking.



12. It's all Real: Sasha

Video installation, 2 synchronized HD projections, 4 mins 23 sec, 2014



Sasha also chooses not to speak. Born to a Russian mother and Nigerian father, Sasha lives in Lebanon and is torn between her dual origins. As a dancer, she expresses these pulls in a strange choreography. Two cameras filmed her in an attempt to capture her movements in two different tempos. The video is projected onto two screens. The spectator penetrates the projected space of this split body falling from one screen

to the other. She seems dislocated, dismembered, all in an agitated movement that seems to attempt recomposing the body back, finding a rhythm. Like the cycle of life which is made of collapses and revivals, she falls, gets back up, disperses herself then finds the strength to re-assemble again.

The victim 13. ... about Love

Ghost, 2014

Off-camera, once more, the victim. Impossible to ignore, difficult to represent. Usually, the victim remains anonymous and hidden. Here is the true ghost that haunts this exhibition. The victim is one of the thousands of people scammed by these emails and who has lost a lot of money. One could wonder how it is still possible to fall for it. And yet, these victims are a lot closer to us than one can imagine.

14. 2008, A Matrix

Wood sculpture, 200 strips of wood, 1,10 × 1,10 × 1,10 m, soundtrack, 2014

The matrix is a wooden mass from which the steel sculptures from *Geometry of Space* were made. A matrix. It evokes Earth, conserving markings for all the points that trace the scam trajectories. A voice is heard enumerating all the countries, precise locations where these scams and encounters happen. Beyond the scams, the victims, the scammers, scambateers and actors are linked together, involuntarily, tracing a network, a virtual constellation, like a projection screens for various histories both political and artistic.



In entirely unexpected coincidence, we learned of a victim falling prey to the scams in our close entourage, a victim who firmly chooses to refuse advice, repeating relentlessly: “No, my situation is different, it's not the same”. Just like some love stories or some addiction... for this person, it's not the same. Just like a number of scam victims believe they were elected, chosen specifically by the stranger who is writing them from far away because “they are the only remaining trustworthy person”.

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Open every day except Tuesday
from 2 PM to 7 PM in July and August,
from 2 PM to 6 PM in September and October.
Open July 14 and August 15
English guided tour on request.

