

Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative
But a Storm Is Blowing from Paradise:
Hadjithomas and Joreige on Forgotten Histories

JOANA HADJITHOMAS

We were always against definition, from the first ever installations that we made in our lives. After *Latent Images*, we thought a lot about what representation we wanted to make now. You always have to think about the images you are producing, and the images you are showing. And so we did several projects after that. One of them is called *Lebanese Rocket Society*. From 1960 to 1967 in Lebanon, there was a very serious space project that began in a small Armenian university, with a professor of mathematics called Manoug Manougian and his students. And they launched rockets for space exploration. And then they had to stop in 1967, and the project disappeared.

KHALIL JOREIGE

Nobody remembered it at all. So it was really, like, a . . .

JOANA HADJITHOMAS

. . . a withdrawal of our memory.

KHALIL JOREIGE

Yeah. People were even imagining that it was impossible to have had a scientific project at that time. So for us, it was a real question. And it led us to several elements of this project—a long feature documentary that had a theatrical release in several countries, but also different artist's work, from the album of the president to a carpet that is linked to the history of the US, because it's also about the gratitude that these Armenians had to philanthropists who helped them at the beginning of the twentieth century. So it has several elements that intervene in the project of the film, and they are all linked by how we can reactivate this story of the past in the present, in this difficult time.

JOANA HADJITHOMAS

Written history didn't really keep this story of the rockets—a very positive story—because the project was not a military one, it was a scientific one. So asking this question led us to really reconsider the place of dreaming, and projection, in our societies, and what aspirations we could have. It's a project that led us to re-question images. Because of course, when you think about a rocket today, in Lebanon, you think about a missile.

KHALIL JOREIGE

We used, again, a performative aspect in this project, where we decided to rebuild one of the rockets, the Cedar-4, that was on the stamp, and to put it on a truck, but in a very obvious way, to bring it back from the factory where it was launched in the sixties, and to offer it to the university where it started. And to make something like this is really . . . you have to deal with a lot of difficulties, because there can be a misunderstanding of what it is. And we are saying that this is a sculpture, as a tribute to those dreamers, not a missile.

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Then we worked on scams and Internet spam for several years. We were collecting a very specific spam that is called a scam. We began collecting these scams in 1999, without really knowing what we would do with them. Scams are those e-mails that you receive, and then you usually delete or put in your trash automatically, where people take the identify of others—they are the son of Gaddafi, or the wife of an African dictator, and they have in their possession a lot of money—thirty million, or seventy million—and you are the only one that can help them. And of course you will receive a percentage of this money. And many, many people answer to that—like there are thousands of people that answer them . . .

KHALIL JOREIGE

There is, every year, \$1.2 billion that is transferred. So this narrative was a question about thinking about the condition of believing—why people believe in those small narratives, because they are efficient.

JOANA HADJITHOMAS

We collected and archived more than four thousand of them. And little by little, we read them. And for all those years, from 1999 to 2012, we thought about the fact that, in a way, it was a kind of alternative chronicle, an alternative historiography. So they would take places where there are conflicts, economic crises, or ecological disasters. And they choose to locate their scam in places where corruption seems plausible for them, and for you. So in a way, they are mapping a kind of construction of an imaginary of corruption.

KHALIL JOREIGE

If I tell you that I have \$20 million in cash in Iraq or in Lebanon or in Syria today, you will think that it's more plausible than if I tell you that I have it in France or in Canada.

JOANA HADJITHOMAS

Taking those scams from the trash and doing something else with them—for example, giving them to actors to be read, or making sculpture with them—was another way to really question the relationship that we have to all those small stories. What is the relationship that we have with belief? Why do we trust people that we never see? What is the relationship that we have with the Internet—maybe a way to be connected to “the other,” you know? To have these possibilities, to create a link.