

The Torist | Issue One

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fiction · poetry · non-fiction



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Editors' Note

The original reason for starting *the Torist* was a question of community. What kind of person gravitates towards Tor's hidden services? Robert W. Gehl, who co-edits this magazine, has partially answered this question in his academic study "Power/Freedom on the Dark Web." That paper explores Galaxy, a now-defunct Tor-based social networking site, which was the birthplace of *the Torist*. Before it ended, Galaxy had over 30,000 accounts. Many of its users were dissatisfied with clearweb social networks, so they looked to Galaxy as an alternative site where the pervasive monitoring and exploitative advertising of companies like Google and Facebook were less possible. Users also widely appreciated the disparity between Galaxy's emphasis on civility and the media representation of the "dark web" as lawless and seedy.

With *the Torist* we examine a different facet of the same question of community. If a magazine publishes itself via a Tor hidden service, what does the creative output look like? How might it contrast itself with its clearweb counterparts? Who indeed will gravitate towards a dark web literary magazine? In trying to answer those questions, one first has to face up to the issue that, within Tor's smaller communities, finding enough writers and artists to compile a zine is quite a challenge. In response, we used clearweb social media to publicize our project and, in the same stroke, hoped to act as a legitimizing force for a technology widely smeared as only for criminals. So while the demographic of this issue is perhaps less Tor-centric than the user-base of the old Galaxy Social Network, we nonetheless hope that we have attracted people with an interest in technologies that help to resist censorship and mass surveillance. We hope we have started another dark web community, one dedicated to creativity, art, writing, and exploration.

So, what is the result? We are pleased to say we are very excited with what we have to offer you.

Phil Conlin gives us the first segment of a longer work called *The Breakfast Room*, a meditative science fiction piece about a remote holiday retreat stratified by class.

J.M. Porup provides an insider's view of the NSA – that is, the National Sewer Agency – in chapter nine of his outrageous 2012 novel *The United States of Air*, in which the USA goes to war against "food terrorism." The President, or Prophet as he is called, insists all people must stop caving into their desire for food and instead eat air.

Miriam Rasch blurs the lines between short story, flash fiction and prose poem in her beautifully written *Shadowbook*.

Alissa Quart gives us two poems from her delightful 2015 collection [Monetized](#). Her short-lined poems twist and turn sharply, and wield the language of contemporary American life with wit.

Vance Osterhout's *Snowfall* is a lively and thought-provoking reflection on the surveillance programs revealed by Edward Snowden.

KairUs, a collaboration between Linda Kronman and Andreas Zingerle, gives us an overview of their artworks exploring the phenomenon of "scambaiting" – turning the tables on would-be scammers in order to beat them at their own game.

Nathaniel Bassett examines the tension between the ways technology liberates and the ways it oppresses in his article *Misusing the Master's Tools*.

brad brace provides three illustrations from his *12hr* series which appear throughout the issue. With nostalgia in their old-fashioned subject matter, yet an edited quality to their grain, blur and numerical stamps, these black and white images have a sense of being dislodged in time.

What are the connections and differences between these pieces? As we hoped, not everything is bound tightly to the themes of surveillance and censorship, though some directly concern themselves with these topics as well. J.M. Porup and Vance Osterhout both write about the NSA – the former as satirical prose, the latter as a serious poem. It is curious to see Porup writing pre-Snowden about the tapping of every American toilet to identify “food terrorists” alongside Osterhout’s poem making use of the specific vocabulary of XKEYSCORE and PRISM. Indeed, some information about these activities had already gone public thanks to Thomas Drake, William Binney and others, but the increase in public knowledge of the programs has changed the language with which we talk about surveillance.

Alissa Quart’s poem *Clean*, which touches on Snowden, describes a society in which “key/ strokes” are “stand-ins for/ inner life” as though electronic records are on the verge of becoming a simulation of consciousness, while our actual consciousnesses are locked down with “further encryption.” Miriam Rasch explores a similar alienation in juxtaposing the drudgery of updating accounts in Excel spreadsheets with tender musing on whether plants can feel pain: “But if all living creatures (the dandelions and the apple trees and leaves of grass and broccoli, potatoes, and so on and so on), if all that lives can feel pain, in other words, is in pain? Add up the numbers.”

It is what Peter Conlin calls “wanting escape from the overcode of daily life.” Just as *Shadowbook* diverts from the grind of office work by poetic reflection, visitors to the resort of Petavius in *The Breakfast Room* are isolated from the world’s signals “owing to the narrow mountain valleys, magnetic anomalies and the remote location,” making it “one of the most electronically shielded areas on Earth.”

KairUs approaches the topic of our technological age with a dose of humor. In their exploration of online fraud, they refer to “well known schemes like the Nigerian prince who needs to transfer large sums of money out of his unstable country.” KairUs pays special attention to how this relationship is reversed by vigilante “scambaiters” who may even flaunt their conquests like trophies. KairUs’s project is unique in the issue in its intriguing combination of visual arts and documentation of facts, which brings to life the fascinating subculture that scams the scammers.

Nathanael Bassett’s article on the other hand is a more academic analysis of the relationship between technology and community. As KairUs explores how scambaiters hit back against the interference of fraudsters, *Misusing the Master’s Tools* asks: what happens when technology tries to dominate us in ways that go against our social values? “We bring our metaphorical hammers to the threshing machines which would otherwise sort us out, wheat and chaff, to the ends of its operator,” argues Bassett, with an array examples of which *the Torist* perhaps could be one.

Indeed, like the old Galaxy, *the Torist* might be an example of misusing the master’s tools to find a home for a community misplaced by constant monitoring, monetization, and misrepresentation. In trying to draw attention to our alternative way of disseminating our materials, we turned to the very social media we were rebelling against in the first place. Some of us use our names on this anonymizing network. Others of us use masks to circulate on the clearweb. We flow in whatever forms we see fit to build something new. Ultimately, we see this experiment as a success. We hope you enjoy the result.

— G.M.H. and Robert W. Gehl

Fiction



Image by brad brace

The Breakfast Room, by Peter Conlin

Segment One

He was on the good section of the loop. His work was done and as the train pulled out of the station a sense of relief melded with the sounds and vibrations of the train. The carriage was packed so he savoured the window seat. Immediately out of the station, the train travelled over a bridge and the view opened up to a clearing sky and a broad river lined on either side by an incredibly dense city. The track formed a ribbon of infrastructure blasted through this density. He imagined all the tumult of its construction—the armies of workers, mobilization of vast institutions and capital funds to produce such a huge engineering feat all in the manner of 18-24 months. All this when he couldn't even get it together to direct even the smallest aspects of life. The usual thoughts followed—why don't I blast some infrastructure through the dire density of my personal life, its inadequacies and ridiculous approaches that add up to a continual slow motion sequence of humiliations. But he reassured himself he was off the hook for the moment and could just look as the train moved through a cross section of bustling city life. Scenes that he had seen so many times, yet for some reason didn't feel like a rerun, even looking at the same inane ads that lined the tracks, the same silly architectural monuments that were as pointless as they were exclusive. The hardness of these scenes was mollified. This was no longer this, it could be otherwise. Mert became aware of something that was always present but seldom perceived—something usually ignored in every moment. The train approached another station. A crowd of five or six deep lined the platform, faces illuminated by pale-blue screen-light, and sky scrapers towered above in the deepening twilight. There was a certain interruption, not a memory or a pressing thought, but a perception of a wholly different kind. The face of this interruption seemed to stare out through the elements of the city, even through the repeated stories and rationales. Mert looked around the carriage and wondered whether anyone else was in thrall to this, like seeing a strange bird or an unbelievable act on the street and wondering if anyone else caught it. Then came a truly massive interruption. Large sections of the train car disappeared. Less and less could be discerned as the view whited out. His heart raced, a seizure, a crash? A moment later, of course, he was no longer on a train nor was he waking from a coma or a dream. Mert had been lulled and now he had been unlulled. The blank field of vision broke into patchy sights. Out a large window were steep verdant hills rising up from a coast lined with resort buildings. Mert was indeed returning from a day's work but of a very different kind.

Because it ended so quickly he could tell that it had been a productive afternoon. Mert had somehow delivered whatever it was they wanted, rendered the good stuff. Why would someone want that sequence? Did they want the sensations and would filter out my feelings and ideas or would they screen out the images and harvest the play of emotions and thoughts? But that wasn't for him to worry about. It was like giving blood—letting go of a concentrated recollection, a passage through places, a background for someone else's narrative, some content and mental energy. Red or white blood cells, anti-bodies, maybe just the plasma, who knows? Distribution of labour. Enter into some pool for predictive sequences, or perhaps used as a vocabulary of images and sequences for some therapeutic zone for the paying guests. Just a few afternoons a week, doing more or less what he would normally do, and in return he was allowed to stay in this vacation paradise for free.

Mert had finally become acclimated to life here and appeared to be fitting in nicely, such a contrast to his initial phase and a testament to the process. As part of the transition team, my job was to receive and accommodate people like him. He was a more or less typical admission to the resort. Typical in that these types are always atypical in difficult ways, always with some new kind of damage and the

same old story. For all my efforts, Mert's success, if we can call it that, was really a demonstration of the insidiously effective selection protocol. Casting is everything in this day and age. I worked the reception desk when Mert arrived on the evening of the 15th of February. A shuttle took him from the terminus to this campus of resort buildings, and looking out the window would have been a disorienting progression of lights and darkness, sprawling pointillist vistas and looming forms. Dots for unconscious forces to connect—an antenna farm, Luna Park amusements, a petro-chemical Calvary. The ride in was only around 20 minutes but he might as well have been drugged or hooded as he had no idea of where he was in relation to where he came from. My boss always said that although carrying almost no luggage, they bring with them a cargo from the heavens. We had somehow temporarily diverted it, and it was my job to help facilitate the materialization of the invisible goods the tourists scarcely knew they had.

Welcome to Petavius! The lines I delivered had been given so many times, but still under the spell of this place, I could always find the enthusiasm to break the mechanical quality of my script. It was more of an improvisation, and generally the strategy was to feed off of the guest's excitement. I delivered the initial spiel of how the resort dated back to a time when there wasn't a clear split between convalescence and recreation, hotel and sanatorium. Since that time it had under gone many transformations, such as developing a mass market resort, and then the rounds of abandonment, decay and moth-balling. This was followed by a redevelopment of time-share units, and then by a second period of decline after property prices collapsed. It couldn't compete with adventure destinations, shopping malls the size of Belgium and kilometre high hotels. But tastes and demands are always changing. Lately a new kind of activity has come to Petavius, what seems like an unbeatable and rather indescribable combination of activities that should keep it going for the next several decades if not longer. Part of it was taken over by agencies and think tanks, part of it remained as a place to rest and relax and thus generate revenue to off-set the cost of the blue skies research, at least that was the rationale. It was a multi-purposed destination indeed, yet perhaps we're all after the same thing regardless of why we come. It was like a planetary system with two suns, a bifocal system with a predictable wobble, and a collection of remote bodies all acting and counter-acting each other. The tourists were of two different kinds, and although it appeared eminently two-tiered, it was much more complicated and I will do my best to guide you through these differences. To begin with we all have different priorities, and yes some guests were very wealthy, and others (the Empty's and Full's) while not enjoying the same levels of luxury were essentially having vacations for free. Mert was in this latter class.

Petavius was a mountainous island on a very large inland sea. Its majestic seascape made one forget that it was encircled within a large continent only a hundred kilometres away. Although of a considerable northern latitude, due to a prevailing southern stream, the region has long spells of pleasant weather the year round, punctuated by occasional dips when polar influences returned. It could be described as a beautiful middle of nowhere. Of course that is why we all come—a place of absorption that had fallen off all the screens, an anechoic chamber with a view.

Managing the different kinds of visitors and staff was complex which was in part organized through careful self-selection, and other ways had to be directly channelled and guided into different areas and experiences. It was part of my job to co-ordinate this separation. Mert was part of the free group and could wander around as he pleased, but given the overall controlled environment and the terms and conditions, his package was limited to the north area and involved staying in the unused staff block. The experience was something like that of leisure travellers on cargo vessels. It was sought after for its quirks and feasible unconventionality.

An information leaflet in the rooms reminded guests that communication devices would not work in

this region. This did not appear the least bit strange to visitors because for most of them that is the very reason why they came. Communication was not blocked in any way, that is, in any deliberate way. The area was of special interest to both researchers and tourists precisely because, owing to the narrow mountain valleys, magnetic anomalies and the remote location, it was one of most electronically shielded areas on Earth. And beyond being a dead zone for transmissions, it was also one of the least seismically active areas. Because Earth's atmosphere had become so intense as great swathes of life had crossed over, this environment was highly sought after by those seeking refuge from the dense electronic-magnetic spectrum and wanting escape from the overcode of daily life. All over the world people thought of this area as a refreshing place, a zone of stability, a break from scalar and electro-magnetic wave penetration, especially for those who saw themselves as synthetic telepathy victims. The air was quiet, the bedrock still, and the dark-green water was known for its ameliorative qualities.

The resort was marketed as being off the grid yet in the lap of luxury, which although specific to a time of total connectivity, was more or less the classic formulation of escape—suspended within splendid luxury in a spectacular and remote location, yet in a resort complex and large enough to feel like a city unto itself. It produces its own energy and urbanity, so not isolated as such. That kind of 'off the grid'— a point around which a grid develops, an inert spot which nevertheless triggers an accelerated growth like scare tissue or an eye of a storm. Petavius' charms were considerable, and beyond its natural beauty there was a combined temporal effect that delivered the essence of that vacation feeling: a time sink that affords experience without the sense of imminent ending. As limitless as summer is to a child, and for 365 days a year we extract that summer feeling, the constructive suspense, from its childish confines and elevate it to a constitutive level of life.

Off the info-grid for sure, but as guests discovered, it was not as simple as turning off a switch. A considerable amount of residual activity still carried on, 'reality withdrawal', or whatever you call it. This was tricky business, and something we all sought to understand further as to comfort the guests. The vacuum of the resort environment caused initial confusion, often forms of paranoia and a ghostly scenario that had different expressions. Many of my fellow staff members wondered if understanding this residual effect, this background hum or emotional tinnitus, might be the real purpose of the research side of the resort. But being essentially land-locked cruise directors and pursers, we dealt in effects not causes.

Mert's initial response was familiar to me, not only because of my training and having seen so many others go through, but I too had gone through the same process not so long ago. He recounted, "After unpacking I had the sense of things 'popping up'. I walked around—the resort blocks with a—shushing wave sound echoing off the buildings. Strolling around—the empty bars, souvenir shops, with the imprint of another time. Then, occasionally, an altogether different kind of sound. Maybe sound isn't quite the word. But perceptible and more phonic than anything else— a faint crinkling, schematic meshings, the stirrings of the divisor. Perceptions, memory, fiction and something at the edges of all of these—or is it the last gasp of a distressed sense of self-importance? I felt that parts of the town were just popping up, being predicted into being, melding with everything else so there wasn't a question of getting it right or wrong. The only thing that wasn't being manifested—was the source of the self-fulfilling outcomes." The more he started digging, the more he realized the site had no edge, it just seemed to go on and on. Like discovering a few terracotta warriors, and then more and more till it seemed like an endless army of phantom soldiers always on guard—protecting, marshalling, anointing. Why had they amassed, who was their emperor?

Although Mert's account was arresting, it was more or less the normal experience for people in his category, within this were two distinct types: the Empties and Fulls as they were colloquially known.

Mert was what we call a Full, a special rank in our terracotta army. He was expressing an almost textbook example of phase one symptoms, principally the feeling of being consumed by the dilemma: should one resist this process or give into it? It was his vacation after all.

I met Mert at the breakfast room the next day. The sun streamed in through the large plate glass. Light wind on the hibiscus and rhododendrons, with towering clouds that seemed fixed in the otherwise blue sky. Mert was groggy after the previous day's travel and the disorienting effect of the region. As mentioned almost all the guests went through this special kind of jet lag. I reminded him that what at first seemed unsettling was in fact the absence of what usually aggravates, this unpleasant numb feeling was indeed the start of something very intriguing. He provisionally accepted this and seemed happy to have company but was still somewhat distraught.

He spoke of a restless sleep and a strange dream. "I had forgotten all my own passwords, and I was unable to answer trivial questions about myself. What was the name of our family's dog? My mother's maiden name, my birth place? I was drawing blanks, lingering in the space between stars and the holes in my wallet. I was humbled by a life, presumably my own, that seemed greater than I was to the point of being locked out of it. Technical support was sympathetic but unable to allow me access. I wandered around vestiges on the perimeter of my old life, trying to come up with a plan or find something to trigger a memory. After a while I forgot that I had forgotten my passwords and just enjoyed the walk. I was no longer concerned about access, but was this appeasement, shouldn't I fight it? Was I on the outskirts of a paradise or in the early stages of losing my mind?"

Having had a similar dream when I first arrived, I attempted to reassure him. "So you're wondering 'is this the real life? Is this just fantasy?' After all these years, it's just Bohemian Rhapsody all over again. I'm here to tell you that things are a little more complex than that. Well yes, we want certainty, to instantly banish worries, always have the right expression on the tip of one's tongue, it would be good to have a private roof-top garden on the 35th floor over-looking the whole city. But that's not life is it? You have an incredible opportunity here in Petavius, why not take it?"

Recalling his walk when he first arrived and the dream, he was on the lookout for the tell-tale sign of a loop, a subtle seam—an edit point, a slight lack of sync, some kind of temporal edge to hang on to. Sure, the banter of those around him at breakfast could easily be the expression of a well-tuned algorithm. Well-tuned to the point of vexing, encompassing fresh impressions of travel especially on the first morning: the light breeze off the sea, the sun's powerful rays as it rose above the mountains.

Everywhere you looked was a feast for the eyes—the mountains extending inland, with a maze of roof-tops and spires of the old town clustered along the shore, a curious mix of old and new resort buildings. It was a sprawling loveliness comprised of geological sedimentations and aggregations of urban settlement spanning historical periods. It was difficult to get your head around it all. If this was predictive vision it must be extremely advanced. You couldn't close your eyes and think you had it. And whenever that ceased to amuse, you could always look out to sea and gaze at the horizon where an incalculable volume of cold grey-green water gave way to the light of the sky. The scene before him was more than resplendent and varied, there was something in these views that absorbed description. Was this hypnotic landscape leading to something or was it just a way to cover its tracks? Mert's eyes rested on the fine line of the horizon where the dead weight of permanence was poised on haplessness without end.

Totally engrossed with always more to see, it seemed impossible to tire of this view and difficult even to pull away from it. But this captivation came to an abrupt end by a disturbing thought: certainly this was a delight, but where was he seeing this from? It was as if someone had pulled the

plug. He was looking out of an empty space, which by definition was nothing to look at. If Petavius was an inert eye of a storm, then each visitor, too, was a kind of gap around which a marvellously complex landscape developed. A split second after this thought he hit the regress of contemplating his own view point, this nowhere, and felt a deep force of repulsion. The notion of an inner horizon did not seem picturesque or fun, it seemed confounding and needlessly complex. It meant work, and this place was designed for enjoyment.

Mert was a classic case, perhaps a throw-back. He wrestled against the simulation as if he was trying to reverse the rapture. He was certain he was facing a situation set up to fool him, to cajole him into giving away the game. We waited till he poured out his resistance, his content. He deposited it all and left it there for us to claim like a psychic dead-drop. That was the point we waited for, our yield. He was up against the full weight of the *mis en scene* and delivered a windfall. Like so many in his type, he never settled into one occupation—a freelance journalist, teleconsultant, shoe salesman—jack of all trades with no particular skill in any. But in his last stop in his search for fortune, he made a contact with someone who promised to open for him a whole new career, and helped him reach Petavius. But it crossed his mind this is how they might ensnare you, their technique in finding someone vulnerable for subversion.

Mert would often convince himself that his banality might be of great importance, and this was in fact the case but in a way he could have never imagined. How could he realize that his very fear of insignificance and invisibility, of not mattering could end up driving part of the world. To simplify, it was a case of reverse engineering this fear. The axis of the mundane and the remarkable was our point of extraction and the basis for the entertainment programs. A tar sands of the soul has never appeared so lush, with such deceptive contours.

Although Petavius was exceptional, it inevitably had the basic features of any town with a nice selection of pubs, cafes and restaurants, large chain-supermarkets and collection of speciality shops. It's funny that people can go to such great lengths to get away only to recreate most of the circumstances of home. Mert gradually fell into his holiday iterative, setting up a loose daily schedule like a ship-board routine during an ocean crossing. The subtle enjoyment of mundane experience in a home away from home, spending life's gratuity. That everyday life should always be like this, or the corollary, that normal life was a kind of slow torture if you are on the wrong side, surplus to the requirements with experience reduced to banal choices. Drops of water falling on a stone—fifteen minutes later, several days or months later and nothing happens. Just monotony, perhaps the stone appears cleansed. But five to ten years and you've worn a whole in the stone. That was the force we sought to extract and refine. Accumulate their surplus value which they don't even know they have, which is then channelled into the super wealthy who live multi-lives of exponential value.

The wealthy guests of Petavius were accommodated in luxury units with airy rooms and modern semi-rounded chandeliers. From there we sought to provide a gourmet psychic life. This is a holiday village not of one dimensional men and women, but where we expand their dimensions and enhance content according to their wishes. As supermarkets offer up delectable beasts and sweets that primitive man could only ever dream of, here experience was enhanced and distilled in a way that unaided living could only ever achieve in rare instances that were far and few between. Think of it as 'fly-by-wire' living—a pilot of a sophisticated aircraft wouldn't actually be expected to pull a stick with a wire connected to a control surface, so why should we expect individuals to be left to their meagre succour in grappling with life-sustaining narratives when there were such well-developed sequencing and subject provision protocols to take advantage of? Left to one's own unassisted living in current conditions, one would just sink out of exhaustion. The power assist has to be there. You must take full advantage of the trans-individual resources that can be integrated seamlessly into everyday situations.

One service we offer was to remediate failures in multi-place awareness. Contrary to a certain common sense of being rooted and knowing exactly who and where you are, a most important capacity is to be able to sense what environments are like other than the one you are in at the moment. The environments we experience are fleeting, never the same river twice. If the stone changes shape then the city is quicksilver. Does it end up here, reclaimed, a revocation? Not exactly, much as the marketing team likes to sell this place as a chance to buy a piece of eternity, it is more like offering an attunement to this transience, bringing visitors closer to the forces that alter shapes. To be in touch with where you are is also to have contact with other spaces and times: An office where you used to work, having coffee with a friend 20 years ago, working in a community centre and chatting with coworkers at break, running a seminar on combinatorial topology. It is not disassociation; rather, not being confined to the present counter-intuitively opens contact with the here and now. Petavius activated this virtual dimension, and the undischarged elements lying dormant in the otherwise predictable routine begin to emit their drones and eerie light. The multi-place awareness gave one an easy appreciation of the place right in front of you. Perfect vacation! Mert, being on the supply-side of the equation, did not have access to this psychic-assist so he was awash in the heady air of Petavius. In fact, his anxiety and that of countless others was funnelled and transformed into this richness and security.

The United States of Air, by J.M. Porup

Chapter Nine

We stepped through the vault door and gasped. Before us stretched an underground bunker several football fields long. Every square foot was covered by giant copper tanks, laboratory equipment and computers. Air Force technicians in lab smocks and goggles swarmed about the space. The ceiling was ten stories high. The gurgling noise came from there. Pipes the size of sewer mains dropped from overhead and branched off until they connected with the copper tanks.

On a dais in the center of the room stood a man. Rank balloons the size of small cars rose from the epaulets of his dress uniform. The balloons were covered in stars.

Opposite him on the wall hung an enormous screen. It showed a map of the US. Lines and dots of different colors covered the terrain. "Sewer Systems of the United States of Air," proclaimed the map key.

"Gentlemen," the lieutenant said. "Welcome to the NSA. Now quit your gawking and get a move on."

He waited for us beside a copper tank with a window in the side. The tank was filling up with a brown liquid.

"A-OOO-gah! A-OOO-gah! A-OOO-gah!"

A klaxon sounded. Behind us, the vault door closed. The three of us scrambled off the threshold and into the great chamber.

"Titanium deadbolts," Krapp remarked. "Fifty feet of reinforced concrete. We are impervious to nuclear attack here, gentlemen. Nothing—and no one—gets in or out of the National Sewer Agency without the General's say-so." He about-faced, held his head high and marched toward the dais.

We followed, staring curiously around. We passed a bank of computer consoles. The technicians were crowded around a monitor, watching a movie. Two butt cheeks filled most of the screen, plus some genitalia, two legs and a triangular gap of light. A dark spot got bigger, then—plop! A turd floated across the camera lens. On another screen, a stream of urine clouded the image. What a strange movie, I thought. Was this art house cinema?

We approached the dais. The General stood with his back toward us, leaning over the chrome railing. An Air Force officer with a major's watermelon-sized rank balloons stood at ground level, reading a report.

"...and in Paris, Operation Dog Poo Baguette was a success, revealing the dietary habits and fecal composition of the president's inner circle—"

A sergeant-at-arms stopped us with a white-gloved hand. He wore spats over flip-flops and an inflated yellow duck around his waist. The lieutenant whispered to him. Meanwhile, the major droned on, "And in China, our operative code name Spicy Sichuan Chopsticks was able to infiltrate a chain of noodle stores—"

The sergeant-at-arms reached up and pulled on the General's pant leg.

"Hold it, Major." The General turned to face us. "Who interrupts my midmorning snack?"

The General's uniform dazzled me. His medals and service ribbons covered both sides of his chest, spread across his stomach, up both sleeves and down his pants. There were even service ribbons on his shoes. Gold braid thick enough to moor an oil tanker draped under both armpits. The peak of his cap rose a yard in the air, and the bill jutted out a foot.

Plus he was fat. Bigger even than Fatso. I frowned. Weren't we at War on Fat? Surely a general should have superhuman faith, and a waistline to match. Then I spotted the golden tape measure around his belly, and did a double take. His faith was superhuman, all right. Eleven inches! Almost as

skinny as the Prophet himself.

“Lieutenant Krapp,” our escort announced. “Civilians to see you, sir sir sir sir sir.” He flung out an open palm. “Go the Power of Air!”

The General returned the salute. “I got no time for civilians, Lieutenant. Tell them to come back later.”

“Sir sir sir sir sir,” Krapp said. “One of them is Skinny Service. Here by orders of the Thin House. Thought you’d like to know, sir sir sir sir sir.”

“Interruptions are bad for the digestion,” the General grumbled. He put something in his jacket pocket and swung himself over the chrome railing onto the shoulders of the sergeant-at-arms. The enlisted man’s face turned purple. He knelt down and set his cargo on the ground. The General stood up and brushed what looked like crumbs but were no doubt dandruff from the front of his tunic.

I stepped forward and held out my hand. “Can I just say what an honor it is to meet someone so successful at eating air?” I said. “Please share your faith with us before we go. To see you so skinny...” I was overwhelmed by his waistline, the dandruff on his lapels, the sandwich peeking out of his jacket pocket, a challenge, I was sure, to keep himself honest. “I wish I could eat air like you.”

“Well you know, son,” the General said, and took my hand, “we aren’t called the Air Force for nothing.”

Erpent jostled me aside. “We bring you orders from the Prophet.” He held up the biohazard bag.

“It’s dead French spy poo,” I added proudly.

The major frowned. His name, I saw, was Major Turdd. “Forgive me, General, allow me to explain the protocol?”

“By all means, Major.”

Major Turdd addressed the three of us civilians. “It is standard military protocol to address the NSA commander at all times as ‘sir sir sir sir sir.’”

“Isn’t one ‘sir’ enough?” Green asked.

The lieutenant swung an arm up at the General’s rank balloons. “He’s a twenty-five-star general,” he hissed. “One ‘sir’ for every five stars.”

“That must take an awful long time to say,” Green said.

“It used to be one ‘sir’ for every star,” the major explained, “but it was decided that in battlefield conditions that might not be desirable. For instance.” He turned to face the General. ““The food terrorists are attacking, sir!”” He turned back to us. “You see? That’s why it got shortened to just one ‘sir’ for every five stars.”

“Couldn’t we just address him as ‘General?’” I asked.

“You could if that were his rank,” Lieutenant Krapp said, and laughed.

I scratched my head. “But didn’t you just say you were taking us to see the General?”

Krapp stood to attention. “Sorry, sir sir sir sir sir. It’s just they’re civilians, sir sir sir sir sir, and to explain to them how we—”

“At air,” the General said with a smile. “Perfectly understandable. In your position I would have done the same thing.”

The lieutenant shuffled his feet. “Thank you, sir sir sir sir sir.”

“And I’m sure you will enjoy your new career as a poo detector specialist, installing equipment in the sewers,” the General said, and added, “Airman First Class Krapp.”

The color drained from the lieutenant’s face. He reached up and untied the rank balloons from his shoulders. They floated up into the air until they bumped into the ceiling far above.

The General smiled at us. “There are, after all, only a handful of twenty-five-star generals in the US Air Force. We have to maintain a certain prestige.” He threw out his chest, clicked his heels together and said, “Director of the Department of Homeland Air Security, Protector of Our Precious

Air, Head of the Toilet Safety Administration, Commander of NORAD and our Nuclear Arsenal, I-SEE-FAT Call Center Supervisor, Poo Propulsion Laboratory Test-Pilot-in-Chief, Striker of Fear in the Breasts of Food Terrists Everywhere, Leader of the NSA, CIA, DIA, MIA, and WTF, Exalted High Almighty General of Generals Full O'Shitt at your service." He bowed. "Full O'Shitt is my nom de guerre, of course." He parted his service ribbons to reveal the hidden name tag.

"Thank you, sir sir sir sir," I began. "We're here to—"

"That's 'sir sir sir sir sir,'" corrected the former lieutenant.

"What are you still doing here?" Major Turdd barked. "Report to the Poo Detector Installation Brigade. Double time, march!"

Newly minted Airman First Class Krapp about-faced and marched off.

Erpent thrust the bag of poo in the General's face. "Analyze this."

Major Turdd stepped forward. "May I ask what this is all about?"

"Your orders are to drop what you are doing," Erpent said, "and find Fatso."

"Finding Fatso is foremost forever in our minds," O'Shitt said. "We're doing all we can."

"What do you mean you're doing all you can?" Erpent exclaimed. "How many bazillion gazillion dollars do we give the NSA every year?"

"And we need every gazillion," the General calmly replied. "You think every man, woman, child and donkey working here isn't motivated by one single thought—Get Fatso?"

I looked around. Indeed, in one corner a herd of donkeys trotted around in a circle. Several small boys walked behind them. As I watched, a donkey did a big poo, and the trailing boy caught it in a plastic bag.

Erpent crossed his arms. "What about Total Poo Awareness?" he asked. "Surely you have some idea where he is."

The General coughed into his hand. "TPA is classified." He glanced at us.

"Tappity Tappity Tappity Smores Go Crunch Round The Campfire Secret," Erpent said. "Yes. I know. Green and Frolick were cleared by the Prophet himself."

"What's Total Poo Awareness?" Green asked.

"TPA," the General said, "is why the NSA exists. Our goal is to know who's pooing, where they poo, what it's shaped like, what it smells like, what it consists of. Only then can we finally smash food terrorism once and for all."

"And you still have no idea where he is?" Erpent said, his voice mounting toward hysteria.

"Every sewer tap around the world is programmed to alert us at the first sign of our arch-nemesis," the General added. "He so much as farts we'll know he's there."

"Only problem is he hasn't farted," Green said.

The General nodded sadly. "It's like he's a ghost or something."

"You've had two years at this post," Erpent said, shaking his finger in the General's face. "If you still can't tell me what I need to know, maybe it's time the NSA had a new commander."

"Listen to me," O'Shitt said. "Every day we gather data on billions of people around the world. See those pipes?" He pointed at the plumbing that snaked above our heads.

"What about them?" Erpent snapped.

"Some connect straight to the D.C. sewer. Others connect to storage tanks. Millions of gallons of sewer samples awaiting our analysis. From all over the world. I got Tokyo sushi poo, I got Paris bistro merde, I got Moscow borscht crap—I got it all."

"And in all that poo you can't find one man?" Erpent shouted.

"We sweep up vast amounts of data," the General protested. "We're busy trying to—"

"You're busy wasting my time," Erpent said. "You find Fatso for me now. Today. Or what you just did to that lieutenant? I'll see the Prophet does you worse."

The General's jovial features narrowed. "It is unwise to threaten me. The Prophet ought to know that by now."

"Oh yeah?" Erpent said. "When he's through with you, you'll be cleaning out latrines with

your tongue. Do I make myself clear, Airman Third Class O'Shitt?"

He tapped the General's right rank balloon to emphasize his point—with the ragged fingernail I spotted in the morgue. A loud explosion made me duck. When I opened my eyes, shreds of balloon trailed from the General's right shoulder. O'Shitt sank down on one knee, scuffing the service ribbons on his pants. His left side was held aloft by the remaining rank balloon, but it was not enough to keep him on his feet.

"Replacement balloon!" Major Turdd bellowed. "Replacement balloon for the NSA commander!" He pressed a red button on the side of the dais. A siren blared. Across the crowded floor, a team of Air Force Marines shoved their way through the milling technicians, bearing a new twenty-five-star rank balloon with them.

The General and Erpent eyed each other warily as we waited for the replacement balloon to arrive. The major grabbed hold of the General's right side, but could not lift him back to his feet.

"Too much air," O'Shitt mumbled.

Turdd pleaded with us. "Help me."

Green and I managed to get the General back on his feet. For someone so skinny he sure weighed an awful lot. An Air Force Marine cut away the rubber shreds that dangled from the General's shoulder and fastened a new balloon to the right epaulet.

"Thank you, men," the General said.

The team of six Marines stood to attention and saluted in unison. "Sir sir sir sir sir!" they shouted, then about-faced and marched back to wherever they came from.

"Would you turn that off, please, Major?" the General said.

Turdd pressed the red button again and the alarm stopped. The bunker was once more filled with the sounds of typing technicians and slurping machinery.

The General drew himself up straight. "You've made your point," he said to Erpent.

"Excellent," the SS agent replied. "You'll find Fatso for us, then?"

O'Shitt snapped his fingers. The sergeant-at-arms came to attention.

"Take this poo to the Plumber," the General ordered.

The sergeant-at-arms gulped loudly and clutched his yellow duck. "The Plumber, sir sir sir sir sir?" He accepted the bag of poo with a shaking hand.

Immediate analysis. Auth Code Egnog ApplePie Twinkie Milkshake Egnog. Now move!"

The sergeant-at-arms saluted and shuffled off, his flip-flops slapping against the floor.

"Now," the General said. He turned to Erpent, and tucked his triple chins into his chest. "I think it's time the Thin House learned exactly what we do here at the NSA."

Erpent glared back. "You took the air right out of my mouth."

O'Shitt led us over to an open tank of water. An empty toilet stood on either side. I peered over the edge of the tank. A pair of what looked like eels slumbered on the bottom.

"Wireless toilet cams," the General declared proudly. "The next generation of sewer monitoring technology. Drop them into the sewer, and they will find their way to their preprogrammed destinations. Eliminates the need for Air Force Navy frogmen."

He pressed a button on the side of the tank. Within seconds, the toilet cams found the open pipes to the toilets and wriggled out of sight. We crowded around the nearest toilet.

"See here?" The General's fat finger pointed at a brown speck at the bottom of the bowl. "The tip of its head has a tiny camera attached to it."

"So that's how you got those pictures of people pooing," Green said.

"Precisely," the General answered. "With this new technology, we can have a toilet cam in every toilet of your house—even, say, the Thin House," —he glanced at Erpent as he said this— "lying in wait to film a food terrorist in the act of defecation."

Erpent gasped. "How long has this been going on?"

"We've got toilet cams in every major sewer in the world," the General continued, ignoring the question. "Three months ago, we let loose several million toilet cams into the D.C. sewer system." He

grinned. “We know everything.” He bent toward Erpent, his grin widening. “I know where you poo and what you eat—”

“Now wait just a chocolate-licking minute—”

“—and what you mutter under your breath when you sit on the potty.” O’Shitt pitched his voice high. “Ma-ma. Ma-ma.”

“I do not say that!” Erpent turned on us, fists clenched. Our snickering continued. “I do not say ‘mama’ on the potty!” He pulled at his hair. “What am I saying? I don’t even use the toilet!”

The General tapped his temple with a pudgy finger. “The NSA knows all.”

“These are serious accusations,” Erpent protested. “You can’t just—”

“We know everything that goes on in the Thin House,” the General said. He lowered his voice.

“Everything.”

Erpent went silent. He fumbled for his cell phone.

“No signal down here, I’m afraid,” the General said. “You’ll have to wait until you leave...whenever that happens to be.”

Erpent gulped and put the phone away.

O’Shitt held his arms above his head, embracing the Disneyland of wonder that surrounded us. “Gentlemen, from this bunker I can destroy the world with nuclear weapons or watch the president of France go potty. Like our motto says.” He tapped his shoulder patch. It read, “Omniscience. Omnipotence. Your Poohole.” He beamed at us. “This is Total Poo Awareness at its finest.”

“Let me get this straight,” Green said. “You’re spying on innocent people, taking pictures of them going poo-poo, without a warrant?”

The General chuckled. “Oh, they’re not innocent,” he said. “Only food terrorists ever go poo-poo.”

“But it’s an invasion of privacy!”

The General’s grin disappeared. “The Global War on Fat requires us to make certain sacrifices, Agent Green,” he said. “Food terrorists would kill us for the right to eat food again. But don’t panic!” He grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me. “Be alert. Not alarmed.”

An unshaven man in greasy blue coveralls staggered into view, yawning. He carried a large metal toolbox that appeared to be handcuffed to his wrist. In the other hand he carried a lug wrench.

“Yo, Fat Man,” he said. “I found your evil twin.”

The man must be myopic. Couldn’t he see the General’s tape measure? “You mean Fatso?”

“Who else you think I mean?” He turned to go. “Well you coming or arentcha?”

Shadowbook, by Miriam Rasch

3 hrs

Fuck you, sun. I'll stay in bed the whole day. I work too hard, I drink too much. I drink too much, I start smoking like a chimney. And once I start smoking like a chimney, I can't be bothered to get up again and again for every cigarette, to walk again to the balcony door. So I put the ashtray on the table. When it comes to that point, the sun can just fuck off the next morning.

The sun rises from the left hand corner of the bedroom window and moves up with a faint bend. The windowsill is the one axis and the frame the other; growth is inevitable, although the curve flattens slightly as time moves on.

If I stay in bed long enough, the sun returns in the reflection of the windows on the other side of the street. Steep and inescapable it shines.

March 27, 2012

Why wasn't your contract extended? Don't know, the numbers below the line said it couldn't be done. The numbers have spoken? Yes. Which line? Of a bloody Excel sheet. I don't believe you. Neither do I. Then why wasn't the contract extended? Well, the present period is one of administrative numbers.

I had a brilliant idea. I became The Human Cat. I would sit on the windowsill enjoying the sun. I would stretch out on the edge of a soft blanket and then curl up on that same blanket, into a soft, fluffy ball. With my limbs spread out I would refuse to be put in a box, and I would escape from the balcony. I would make noises with my throat and put my vowels on the tip of my tongue. I would change into a glorious animal. I had a white woolen sweater, a white woolen blanket, a white skin and white hair, I would be a white cat. I would let them stroke me and in the end I would crawl away behind the old boxes in the attic. *Mon cerveau se doit reposer*, I would say.

5 hrs

I quit design and became account. He said: 'To be an accountant in the age of spreadsheet programs is – well, almost sexy.' Now I'm project manager, meaning I don't manage people, but Excel sheets. I'm right in the middle of a dynamic field: the project. What's it about? It's my responsibility, that's all there is to it. The Excel sheets are uploaded to TopTool each month and account checks if things are okay. They are, so far. I am producer of normal behavior.

1998: My First Job

In front of me a pile of files: international train trafficking in three languages. Switches, signals. Security, sécurité, Sicherheit. Raise the lid, put the first page of the file on the glass plate, lower the lid and push the button. Look up to the ceiling, away from the light. Turn one quarter towards the computer screen.

Control, contrôlé, Kontrolle, rolle, rollé, rol.

Type F for French. Enter. Turn back and raise the lid.

Later I became in-house designer, then account (account is something you are, you say: 'I'm account'), then project manager. Also: assembly line temp, shop assistant. J'aime bien la production, deliverance, ticking off, enter.

25 mins

My mother says: he is a nice someone. Or, when watching television: that was an interesting someone. It's the reason I work here. Job offer: BRN is looking for someone. A someone.

I want people to say: now that's someone, yes, A someone. Identify with a someone, whom you are yourself, being a someone yourself.

Now

Not sleeping I think of work. Thinking of work I cannot sleep.

To sleep I think of flowers, more precisely I picture a field of grass about eight inches high (stop! do not think: two bums high, because no one is here and no one is welcome), with dandelions and daisies, flowering trees made of shadows. Apple trees or cherry trees, hawthorn? – trees shadowing, very lightly, flowering their shadows above my head, my face speckled with shadows, with flowers, my body in the grass, on a field of grass with dandelions and daisies growing out of my eyes. My eyes speckled with sleep.

22 hrs. Edited

He came in and started talking immediately. 'It all began with coffee. You know, we have three breaks a day, two shifts, and everyone takes a cup before starting the line. That's eight coffee moments a day, to be multiplied with tens of people. All those cups disappear into the bin. Nijensleek is one of eight areas in the Netherlands that is home to the root vole and the root vole happens to be a species of communitarian importance! This creates a responsibility that the board is unwilling to take.'

I wanted to say, I'm account, but I'm not anymore. I didn't know how this guy ended up at my desk. So I nodded.

'In the kitchenette I unearthed some old coffee mugs that had probably been lying around since times before the coffee machine. I cleaned them, decorated them with stickers spelling the names of my co-workers and handed them out. I told them about the root vole. "Who ever saw a root vole around here," I asked. But no one responded. "Some call him the Dutch Panda, because he's such an endangered little fellow since the reclamation. In Vledder too, he is uncertain of his livelihood, thanks to mercenary industrials!" People were used to hearing me talk about dad like that.'

The board, I wanted to say, and nodded.

'In the ditch behind the building, where Nijensleek is cut off from Parallel Road, lives a whole family. Right there, in the reeds! They eat grasses and herbs that used to grow out there, but which have almost disappeared because of all the rubbish we produce making our fried and frozen. I throw around some extra greens, but it's hard to find something they like. Once I used my mom's parakeet's food and I actually saw something move: it was the root vole! Exactly what you would imagine a root vole to look like: a small, fluffy ball a couple of inches long, a beautiful brown fur and a pair of cutesy petite ears that vibrated in the air.'

On my screen I had brought up a picture of a root vole. He nodded.

3 mins

We change the input as many times as needed to make it right. Until the guinea pig is saved. The rabbit? Wasn't it a guinea pig? Oh, the root vole. Saved, right. They're fed, fed up, fed into the system! How many root voles are to be saved, are savable? A couple, a few, some. I love making things right like I'm a mob boss, getting someone's ass saved. A someone or a root vole or a family of root voles.

A banker in a dynamic field, I am. Not a real banker, or, why not? – just as invisible and mafiose, just as attached to administrative numbers. How can one approach that which isn't there, without changing it into something that is?

Now

The formula of the Excel sheet: You change one thing and everything changes along. Is that determinism or rather chaos? All is random – which number you choose doesn't matter, because it'll add up anyway. Two different numbers can actually be at the same place at the same time. Potentially, yes, they all exist simultaneously since it doesn't matter anyway. No, wait, they precisely can't. Black matter of formulas.

The only thing that's certain is my responsibility.

The shadows are stretching. Whether it's light or dark doesn't really matter.

April 2, 2015

Throwback Thursday: one year ago I threw up in the waste bin in the Intercity Direct train. I put on my sunglasses because I knew I should have sat somewhere else. Closer to the toilet? Yes, closer to the toilet. But I couldn't walk any further, I had to sit down. On the platform I had walked up to the end, to the spot where you look out over the water with the ferry and the museum on the other side. One mandarin in orangy fibers. All my fibers. Right, that was the mandarin, I thought. Earlier, in the office bathroom, other things – what? didn't eat lunch, then one mandarin. All is out.

April, no time to be wearing sunglasses, let alone put them on in the train. The sun was shining, that much is true. I was in my summer coat, it wasn't cold. Sweaty weather. Glad to get on the train – the bathroom could wait, wasn't needed anymore. All is out.

I tried to catch it in a paper tissue; the tissue immediately dissolved in my hands, my catching hands, throwing it into the waste bin next to the seat. Sunglasses, the light out of my eyes (entering in the convent). The ticket man, the people. When is one ever checked? I hid behind my dark glasses. I'm a rock star. Rock star at 4 pm. Wish I had drunk too much.

Then the woman beat the pigeon to death with a chain lock.

8 hrs

Fuck you, sun. I'm not getting out of bed. 'Come on, we gotta catch some sun' – 'come on, we gotta go have a drink' – 'come on, we're gonna enjoy ourselves'. Fuck you, but I have to.

I had to. My nephew is eight years old, you can't deny him anything. I'm the cool auntie who works hard and has a lot of money. The actors walked around in the audience singing 'par-ti-ci-pa-tory socieieieity!' And us too: 'par-ti-ci-pa-tory socieieieity!' One for all, all for one.

The student got up and spoke: Just a minute ago I stood smoking behind the station, of course, I was way early. You don't want to get out of bed, and then when you do it's too early. In front of me, you won't believe it, a sparrowhawk attacked a pigeon. Sparrowhawk – the name popped into my mind immediately. Dormant knowledge always comes in handy some time. I do not know more

than this name. How the sparrowhawk kills its prey, for instance. Who or what its prey is. I kicked in the direction of the birds. The sparrowhawk flew up and attacked again, hit the pigeon with a full body check, whirling it around under its claws. I raised my arms, tried to make myself look bigger. I once heard you should do that when you encounter a bear, but not a grizzly bear. The sparrowhawk flew away behind my back, leaving its prey, the pigeon, behind.

A woman came up, called on by the bird noises. Then she beat the pigeon to death with her chain lock. 'He's still alive,' I said. The pigeon breathed in a gagging manner, it wrenched on the pavement as if its wings were bound on its back. The sun blinded him, possibly. There was the woman again, chain in hand. I said, let him try to die by himself. He did, the pigeon did. I put my finger into existence – it tasted of nothing.

March 10 at 10:34 pm

Who I was when he died: 25, a student, afraid of death.

Who I am now: A woman who doesn't want to tell you her age, project manager, indifferent.

Death leaves me indifferent (cold).

Death leaves me cold.

Death is the end, that's all.

The 25-year-old still lives on somewhere – in the same place as him. A stranger.

'A year went by, and again I had become exactly one year older.' Repeat X times.

Yesterday at 6:45 am

I dream of the dead. Grandpa, my father, Bamse. They are living dead, for real. Zombie is an unpleasant word, whoever would take it seriously? Still, they are zombies, the dead in my dreams. I embrace them, talk to them, all the while knowing that they're dead, knowing that it's not correct to say that they are alive. The dream is unpleasant, stiff, cold. They can break or fall apart at any time and then a slimy substance will flow out of them. Zombies have no more fibers.

The joy of seeing them, the dead, is reserved, unpleasing. Shouldn't it be pleasant to embrace or stroke the dead in your dreams? It should. But my embrace is careful, so as not to feel the cold and not to break them. If they break, then the fact of their zombieness can't be denied – that which I secretly know will break through in reality. Who can love a zombie, love him to death? These are dead serious questions, no matter that I'm sleeping. I wake myself up. The fact that they're dead makes waking up easier and dreaming less pleasant. Dreams are sinister parties that always bring bad luck.

I think of Martin Bower and his brother who call their dad 'Our Father'. Our Father who isn't in heaven, Our Father the crypto-alcoholic, bully, hypochondriac, loved by his students, hated by his sons, chain smoker and in the end, really sick and really dead. No one dreams of him, he was too much of a zombie while he was alive.

Yesterday at 11:44 pm

Aaron Lowery is afraid of repetition, afraid of sameness. He repeats his fear of repetition in the same wording every time I see him. His fear repeats itself. I believe one has to embrace repetition, he says, but I can't. Blessed are those who embrace repetition, brace the blessings of those who repeat. Repeat me, reap me. We drink too much.

He wants to be right – no, he IS right, he has identified the truth. The truth is that fear of sameness is the right thing. He is so enormously right that he identifies with being right. Being right, that's true identification, being the same, copy after copy. Doesn't repetition consist in hardly noticeable shifts, I say, like a kaleidoscope, a myriad? Repetition is a project, a projection. Repetition, repeat me, reap me. Police man, please me, release me.

18 min. Edited

I repeat you, you repeat me, in the end every human repeats every human. Usurpation. That's what breathing is – u. surp. u. surp. To be honest, my whole life has been a repetition of usurpations. Facts rain down on me and change me and the only thing to be done about that is to change a fact here and there, if that's okay. Changing a fact, means the fact will change me back, there's no escaping it.

April 7, 2015

Some people aren't good at learning, I'm not good at working, I said. At that time I didn't understand that order effectuates freedom. I still had to learn how to create order, while showing off, saying I wasn't any good at working. You should never show off with whatever you're no good at. Or whatever you don't have. People who boast about their poorness, poor people who. Poorness doesn't make you rich, but unhappy.

The repetition of the workingman. You think you're trapped in repetition. Trapped, though, is the one who believes in the poorness of freedom – no, the freedom of poorness.

It's like this: You are supposed to conform to society's expectations out of free will. That can be deemed problematic, or you could just do it, do it goddamn it, act like you have a free will. Then you are free and able to do as you please, but that which made you free – meaninglessness – deprives freedom of its meaning.

I once thought: to be famous at 27, or goddamn it have a child at 27, welcome a civil life at 27. Being dead and living on. Then you turn 27 and think nothing. Repetition becomes necessity.

Now

Reveal the secret. Cave beast no cave.

3 hrs

Lights off, spot on. In your head. Then the night dissolves into factors. An exploding sun. Faces and their riddles, forgotten names, tasks, to-do's, toodooloos.

Say I find an envelope with a 100 notes of a 100 euros. What could be a situation in which that happens? A shoot-out, the pursuee loses an envelope from his backpack. No, you'll get shot yourself. By the side of the road, in the grass? A body in the ditch. If you keep it, your life won't be certain. Money laundering, buying real estate. You know you'd bring it to the police. You used to think you wouldn't, but you would. What do rewards do these days? 100x100 euros changes everything. But realities are slow and indescribably detailed.

3 hrs

Every living creature in this world dies alone. Repeat X times. I thought: 'All creatures die alone'. Who cares. Well, 'every' surely is something different from 'all'. Every creature, that's them, one for one. All means who cares. And they live, every living creature lives in itself, they are living creatures who die, which is worse than just all creatures, dead or alive. In this world – we can skip that, in my opinion, 'cause outside of this world we don't know a thing. This world, our world, the world of Our Father, but without him. Alright just leave it, so we don't need to argue about aliens, or the dead, or zombies, or gods. It would only impair the discussion.

Whether it's true I don't know of course. What do we know about all creatures, every creature in this world? Sometimes I imagine that scientists find out that plants have feelings, or to be more precise: feel pain. Some animals can, we know that much: mammals, and other species with complex nervous systems. Who cares. But if all living creatures (the dandelions and the apple trees and leaves of grass and broccoli, potatoes, and so on and so on), if all that lives can feel pain, in other words, is in pain? Add up the numbers. Can humanity, can every living creature in this world live, knowing of all the pain they inflicted on the trees and the plants, on vegetables and flowers? It would increase the amount of pain in the world with the power of a billion-billion-trillion. Wouldn't we collectively impeach ourselves and just call it a day? Or would we think: we all die alone anyway. My zombie called: 'When I died, there was no one around to see it. I died all alone. It's fine.'

3 hrs

I lie in bed a magnet: the sun pushes me down and up in one go. Or is it dark already and is gravity breathing? The mattress vibrates beneath my body; the vibration lifts me up. But the air above me is heavy and doesn't want me. It's gravity alright, too light and too heavy at the same time. Same goes for my eyelids. You need to keep the lid on, don't squeeze, but ease. There's a pulley on my eyelid, it starts to move on the vibrations of gravitational forces. Beneath me, glistening listicles.

Now it's the ears, but because I want them to. I want to hear. Footsteps in the hallway, one after the other, one in front of the other, step step don't stop, it's kitty cat. As long as I'm not dreaming it will be the cat and not a zombie. A living cat vibrated into being by my ears; it walks across the hallway, paw by paw, I hear how she pushes the door open with her head, winds around it into the room, stops, braces herself. Then the hearing stops and I start feeling. Paws on my body, she pushes me down, into the mattress. Steps of paws. The magnet turns and sucks itself onto me. The weight of a living creature, or I don't know, she's dead, the kitty cat. She died alone, but as long as you're not a zombie, you're alive.

5 hrs

Trying very hard not to think of the other ones. Not to think at all. Of course, I still think, but not of the deceased at least. Name all the names of all the friends of your children – no, the children of your friends. Peeta, Teddy, Peeta, Teddy, Dan, no Stan, twice Luke. Name the names of the pets of the children of your friends. Teddy again. Teddy Teddy Teddy. Bamse. I follow Bamse's steps on my body, she's trying so hard. Where did Teddy come from? Pet, child, because Bamse, further back: the door closes, the little head, the step of the paw in the hallway, the magnet, the sun. It's correct.

Then I see a someone, who is it? What's he doing here? There are no steps to follow back. It's Aaron, he's drinking and he says: I accept chaos, because acceptance means neutralization. The joy! Logic breached itself, it means sleep is nigh. I keep calm and look at my subconsciousness. I enjoy the sight of it. There they are, my subconsciousness and me, both existing at the same time, and mutually exclusive too.

The sun dies in the shadow.

Poetry



Image by brad brace

Two poems by Alissa Quart

QUALIA BEFORE BEDTIME

A man can be what we want
yet still not what we choose.
A decahedron on blackboard
facing. A pedagogical
erasure that ties, hectors,
inserts itself, reminds that it
doesn't care, and then,
"Didn't you feel it
this time, if not
the others?" That's metro-
instrumentalism or
sleazy mentalism.
Throwing care
at the shadow stiff
then swallowing whatever
stray elements
come. With all the notes
struck minor key, and
for, truly, a mirror's
audience. And still
throwing care for
care is what we make
movies about, what
we invented the theremin for.
Qualia before bedtime.

Where else might we go to settle
ourselves inside other selves? Fit
the girls in the white cotton
dress inside the girls in the dark
dress? Array a number of painted
faces; control violent borders;
enter, lashes curled for masquerade.
Blink, and go on.

CLEAN

Searches on the engine equal
human thoughts, key
strokes stand-ins for
inner life. They left him

with Chekhov. Key to the Russian
character. Oligarchs wanting
Snowden for dinner parties.

To this we say:
clean install.
A further encryption
fends off brute force.

We'll only know who we are
once the algorithm
finds us.
Data at rest
of equal danger
as data moving.

Snowfall, by Vance Osterhout

bits, bytes and data
dripped from your lips

the Stasi collected each letter
{this time not choking to death on it}
metadata and content

filing it all away in a bunker

Snowfall II

They made many press releases, saying,
Don't worry, it's not you we're after,
but kept collecting:
words, letters,
each gnostic meaning.
Nothing was safe.

{The truth will come out,
and you can't stop it.}

Some things I never said out loud
and only whispered into text
uttering true interpretations secretly.
Laid bare in ad banners and analysts eyes,
nothing was sacred
to humans made calculators.

Snowfall III

The analyst pores over each syllable
and speaks
"You see? It says here:

'My feelings are difficult to express...'

but they do exist!
He's got them, of that you can be sure!
It continues,

'My heart is in rebellion...'

The mutineer!
Fomenting revolt, you see?"

"I've heard enough," the secret judge announces.

“Start a file on this terrorist.
our citizens must be safe from heartbreak.”

Snowfall IV

They’ve some kind of code;
we’ve worked it out.

You’re sure of this?

Of course, they’re cellular.
Even so, they send many messages.
Listen:
“I love you so much, don’t you love me too?”
It means that
the command has been sent,
by some manual means,
now she wants confirmation of orders.

Ah, of course. It’s quite military. Continue.

“Tell me what I mean to you...”
A loyalty oath, sir.
Demanding a declaration of fealty.

They’re so formal!

Yes. At any rate,
he pledges allegiance,
then comes the meat.

I’m slaving!

“Your skin was a starmap
leading me to Rome’s walls.
So many Rubicons crossed,
they call out.
I’m marching to the Senate,
regardless.
No convention will keep me away!”

This is convoluted.

It was, but we put a team on it,
digested it.
It took us some time to devour the whole thing.
You can see he’ll stop at nothing.

I can see it now. It’s sick!
We’ll escalate this immediately!

Snowfall V

We held nothing back
over time

It all came out in clues
scattered phrases
collected up

they knew more of us than we did

Snowfall VI

When they collected the metadata,
 we thought they were just names in space
When they undermined the nationalised oil corporations,
 we figured it was just business
When they send bombs flying for Afghan weddings,
 it was alright because they were far away
When they assassinated citizens without trial,
 we said secret courts were good enough
When dissidents disappeared,
 we announced we'd broken no laws

But when they rounded up those who still felt,
 those whose hearts still beat,
 there was no one left to speak;
we had all become machines.

Snowfall VII

Humans as machines
bring code into logic
inverted
each love becomes hate
each caring becomes killing
flesh becomes steel
hearts become hard

and there are a thousand justifications
even if only a dozen are spoken
to make whole lives disappear,
flashes of light followed by forever black

VIII

In pairs they meet now
and binary keys rotate

synchronous

Twin keys turn
and assassins emerge from shadows
after years of clandestine training,
following the unsuspecting through Grand Junction.

Twin keys turn
and rhetorical arguments erupt
volcanic force sending floes of phony arguments
to cover and burn away all green

Twin keys turn
and radiographic signals lance out
to circling vultures which need no sleep
and no longer even keep tally of the dead

Snowfall IX

What PRISM saw

in text and call

Rainbow from white

daylight to night

Our words made knives

and ruined lives

With hearts laid bare

drones in the air

Snowfall X

XKeyscore recorded

Every single word I regret

arguments, bad logic, antagonism

and every bad day

When one relationship was annihilated

I destroyed ten in retribution,

anyone, even acquaintances.

As poorly cut gems

Jeweler's loop spies

each flaw magnified and thought out.
Spell out each mistake made

and each wiring flaw,

so I can feel small for it.

Reapers and Predators can't fly here fast enough

Snowfall XI

In cells we sat
3,000 miles divided
circumstances too similar to tell

Candide, Quran and Kapital
all used for scrub-brushes
then slapped in our faces

It was only chain link
between us and the air
somehow permeable wire
made even oxygen seem stagnant

No disguise or surgery could save us
once the data was disclosed
somewhere in DC the disposition matrix decided
it was them versus something else
{anything else, really}

We were anything else

really.

Snowfall XII

Laser-guided erasure of love
by smart systems.
Such programs
portend a world without feeling.

We forgot
our uncle's always listening
reading, recording

>From scattered bits
{they never felt bad}
science for profit's sake
left us obliterated

I whispered to myself as I walked alone,
"You can almost hear them circling;"
they backdoored the microphone on my cellular
and heard every doubt I spoke in secret.

Snowfall XIII

I sunk in depression
and knew escape was impossible

from steel birds in the sky
whose talons are tipped by warheads
from all-seeing eyes in space
which read the print in dropped dimes
from street corner cameras
or recording databases

What then was to be understood,
when all things were known
but seen distorted?

The frustration of chained people
shaking with despondence
at the inevitable.

The disposition matrix decided our fate to be,
due process enough,
without even a shadow court rubber-stamping death warrants.

Snowfall XIV

Hellfire fell like snow
upon our abode
and annihilated a city block
for words we spoke
which even we did not understand.

Each collateral killing was justified
with fabricated story
or circumstantial ties.
Even innocents were wept over by cynics,
the same who gave implicit orders
{or even explicit}

Through fire we burned away into the void,

leaving only ash behind
amongst bone fragments and burnt meat
though only ancient pictures of grimy face were shown
and nothing of the rubble mixed with dead flesh.

But such things are necessary,
it was said.

If you please, our crisis is over
two beating hearts (plus twenty odd more) are stopped
and before the juggernaut falters, please charge something,
anything.

We had been anything once,
now we were nothing before them.

Non-fiction



Image by brad brace

Disruptive Anti-fraud Artivism — Digital Art Exposing Internet Scammers, by KairUs

KairUs is a collective of two artists, Linda Kronman (Finland) and Andreas Zingerle (Austria). Their work focuses on human-computer and computer-mediated human-human interaction with a special interest in transmedia and interactive storytelling. Since 2010 they have worked with the thematic of internet fraud and online scams, constantly shifting focus and therefore approaching the theme from a number of perspectives. Subjects of their research are online scammers, vigilante communities of scambaiters, and their use of storytelling and technology. Besides the artworks the artists also publish research papers related to their projects, and through workshops they contextualize their highly focused research topics from the artworks in broader discourses like data privacy, activism and hacking culture, ethics of vigilante online communities and disruptive art practices. More information: www.kairus.org

General tactics of advance fee fraud can be traced back to the early 16th century, where face-to-face persuasion known as the 'Spanish prisoner scheme' was widely used to trick victims. Confidence tricksters would approach potential victims to tell them that they are in correspondence with a wealthy person, who is imprisoned in Spain under a false identity. The scheme continues when the trickster raises money to bail out his friend and promises financial rewards to gullible supporters who can help him to reach the requested security deposit. Once money gets exchanged, complications arise and further payments are requested until the victim runs out of money. Over centuries the basic scheme has adapted to new modes of communication: letters, telegraph, fax, phone and Internet. A global boom happened in the 1980s with growing use of emails, enabling scammers to contact a large number of people fast and very cost efficiently. In these emails the recipient's identity and the context of the messages are irrelevant, as long as the message is applicable to a large number of potential victims. According to the 2014 report of the 'Messaging Anti-Abuse Working Group', 88%-90% of email traffic is considered 'abusive', including unwanted or unexpected messages as well as those trying to exploit the recipient. Today these schemes are also known as '419 scams', referring to the article of the Nigerian Criminal Code dealing with fraud. Scammers use different story-scripts to persuade their victims to pay money upfront. Well known schemes like the Nigerian prince who needs to transfer large sums of money out of his unstable country are replaced by everyday online interactions of people who are searching for a new job, a holiday apartment, a bargain at an auction or some online romance. Mobile Internet technology and our sharing culture of life events through social media updates make us more vulnerable to everyday scam attempts.

The victims of Internet fraud seldom report the details of their financial and emotional loss to authorities, resulting in a high number of unreported cases. Often they are ashamed for trusting the 'too good to be true' offers, don't want to share their loss with relatives or friends, and prefer to grieve online. But also online mourners should be aware of organisations that offer a 'scam victim compensation fund'. Once they have paid the requested processing fee, the victims slip back into the vicious cycle and are hooked into the next scam scheme, also known as the 'Follow up' scam.

There are online communities of so called 'Scambaiters' who fight back against online criminals. The act of scambaiting arose as a counterattack to '419 scams'. This online vigilante community of scambaiters investigates scam emails and implements social engineering techniques to document, report or warn potential victims. Scambaiters are antifraud activists who often use similar tactics as scammers, e.g. using social engineering methods to uncover practices of internet scammers.

Scambaiters have their own personal motivations to justify their actions. Their motives can range from community service and status elevation to revenge for being a victim of a similar scam in the past. Through the documentation and sharing of these plots, scambaiters waste the scammers' time, exploit their resources and raise awareness about online fraud. They organize themselves on forums like thescambaiters.com or 419eater.com, the latter with over 62000 registered users (July 2015) from all over the world. These forums focus on everyday scam types and members follow their own strategies and ethics when in contact with scammers.

Recent publications that address scambaiting communities mainly focus on how scambaiters humiliate scammers e.g. by posting ridiculous photos of them on online forums and putting them on a 'virtual pillory'. In the research we found that the strategies to fight online fraud go beyond public shaming. Over the last years, we followed these communities and created several media art installations that show the activist methods of scambaiting communities. In the following paragraphs, we want to present some of our recent works that relate to narratives of scam e-mails, tackle issues of data security, or focus on the strategies and technologies used in scams.

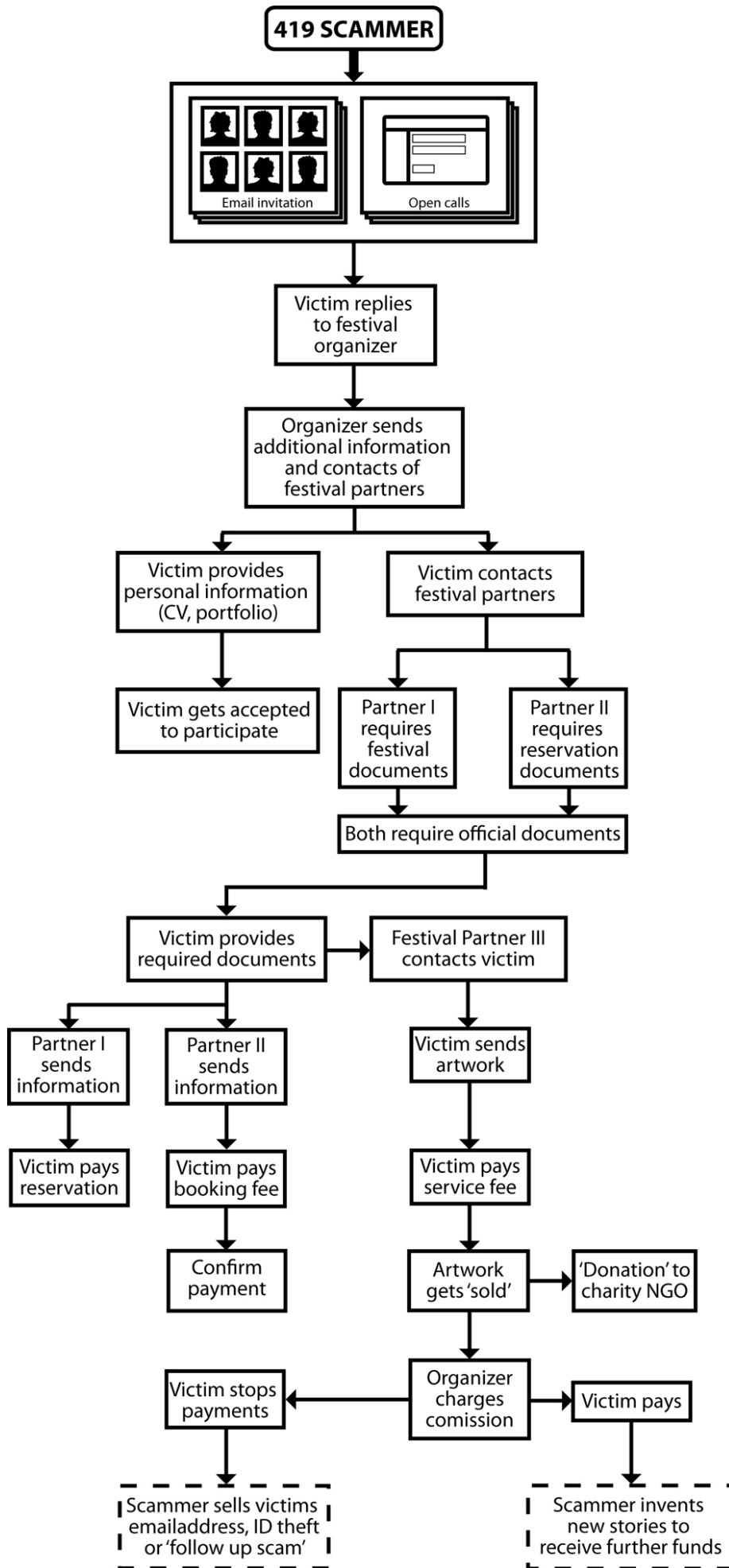
Narratives and scam emails:

1.) Re: Dakar Arts Festival: (2011, Transmedia story)

The 'Re: Dakar Arts Festival' documents an art festival scam practice, which can be followed in an interactive installation and online through social media channels. In this transmedia story both fiction and reality blended, when the Swiss artist Heidi H. and gallerist Peter prepared for their participation in the 'Dakar Arts Festival'. The installation, in the form of Heidi's suitcase, represented the festival preparations and the correspondence with the fraudulent festival organizers. The organisation of the "1st International Dakar Arts Festival" was just a bait story to catch artists and gallerists who were on the lookout for international networking possibilities and exposure through an art exhibition. Through an email invitation sent out by the curator Mariama Sy potential victims were personally invited to exhibit their works at the new emerging art festival in Dakar, Senegal. On top of that, the scammers published 'open calls' in English and French on platforms featuring 'art opportunities' and application deadlines.

In September 2010 we received such an invitation to participate in the exhibition. Since we were invited by the curator, 50% of our flight and hotel expenses were promised to be covered by the Ministry of Art and Culture in Dakar. After a moment of doubt we looked for online representations of the festival. We were able to find a blog post written in Spanish by an artist who participated in the festival by sending his artwork there. It was not returned to him, and he was doubting the authenticity of the festival and the honesty of the festival organizers.

This led us to the creation of three virtual characters: an artist, a gallery owner and the secretary of the gallery. We approached the festival curator as the gallery owner, who has read the open call for participation and wants to present the gallery and one of the artists at the upcoming festival. The different characters started emailing with the scammers, who posed as festival organizer, travel agent, hotel Booker and insurance broker. During a month-long correspondence, we created virtual traces of our characters in the form of websites, personal blogs and entries on social media platforms like Flickr, Facebook and LinkedIn. In order to gain the trust of the scammers, we referred to these traces in our correspondence. After the intense month of corresponding with the criminals, we were able to create a flowchart diagram of the scam. In this chart we were able to visualise several points in the story where the scammers ask for money from the victim. As long as the victim believes in the story and keeps paying money, the story unfolds.



Flowchart of the Dakar Art Festival scam

During the following months we observed that the scam was relaunched and only the application deadline and the festival dates changed. In order to reach out to a broader audience we registered the domain www.dakarartfestival.net where we host information about the art festival scam. In addition we authored together the social media traces created for the correspondence into a transmedia story. At exhibitions the entrance point to the online story is through a physical installation, which is built into the artist character Heidi's suitcase. It includes all the fake documents we received during the correspondence, and visitors can listen to audio snippets of the exchanged emails with the scammers.

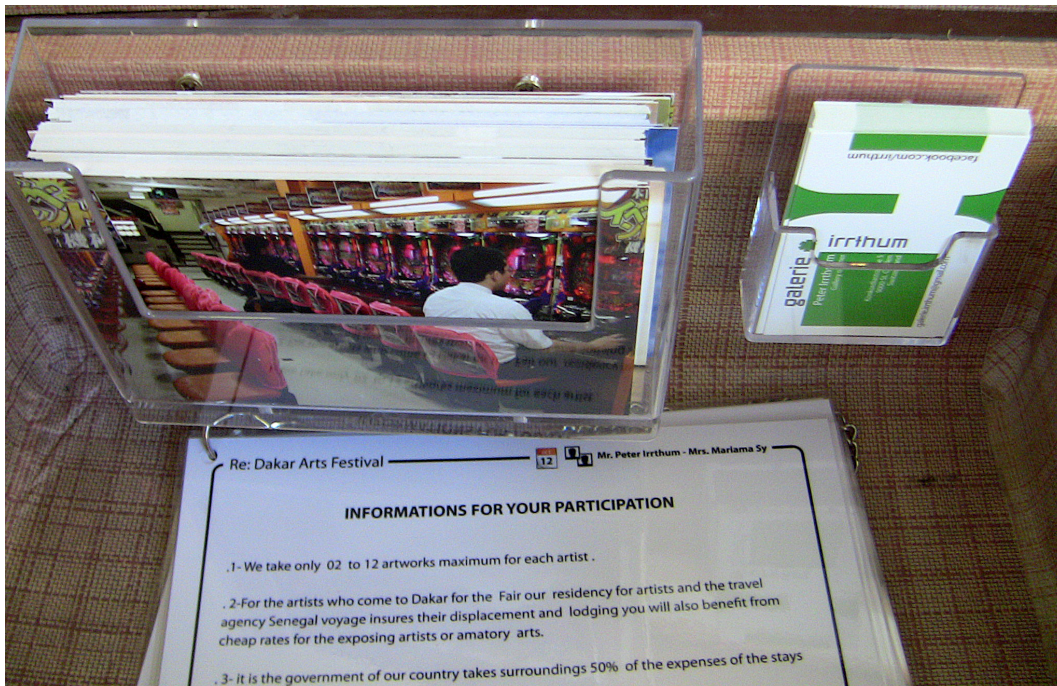


Visitor listening to the audio correspondence



Overview of the contents of the suitcase

Web addresses on postcards or email addresses on business cards link the physical installation to the story online, where the full complexity of the art-scam unfolds. By exploring plot-lines of different characters, which are spread over the Internet, the audience can dig deeper into the story world.



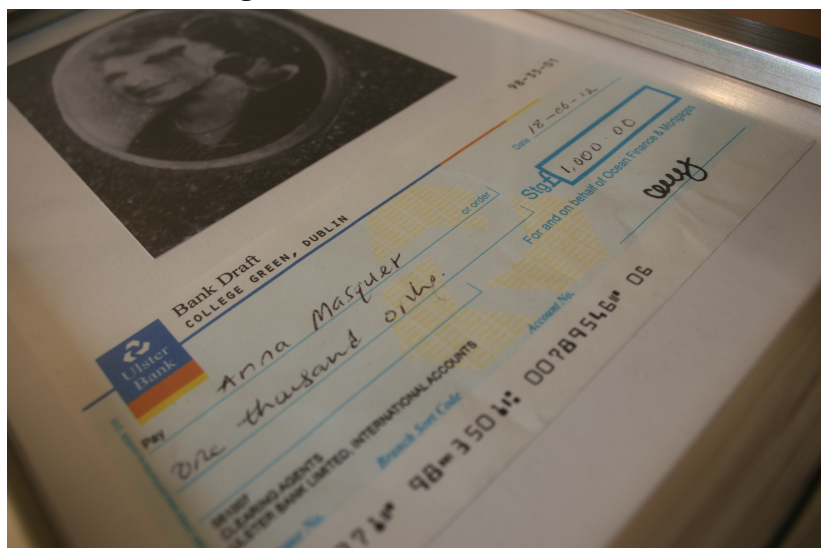
Fake documents and business cards link the installation to online content

While exhibiting the installation we contacted other artists who had fallen for the scam or others who stopped the correspondence due to our online documentation. Nevertheless the scam format is still evolving: the name of the festival keeps changing (Dakar Arts Festival, Dakar International Festival of Visual Art, I.C.V ARTS), the curator's name

changes, some open calls are only published in French. A French artist who fell victim to the scammers found our English website and was translating our site into French to warn other French-speaking artists who don't understand English. As of July 2015, avoid festivals named "I.S.P. DAKAR ARTS 2015" or "THE 1ST INTERNATIONAL SCULPTURE AND PAINTING SYMPOSIUM DAKAR SENEGAL".

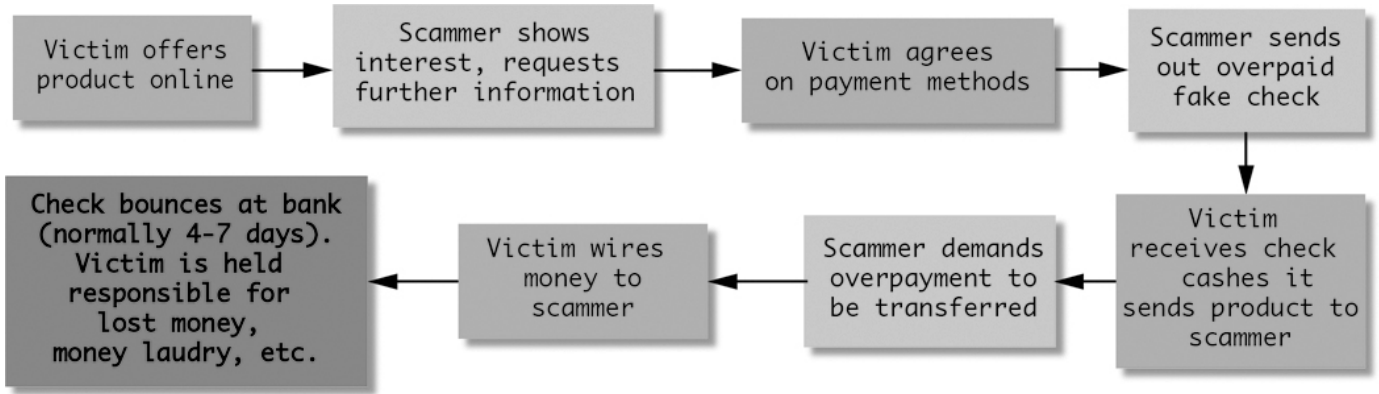
2.) Faceless patrons: (2012-2013, Augmented Reality Installation)

"Faceless patrons" is an installation that documents stories used by Internet scammers in so-called "overpayment check scams." Scammers contact people who want to sell their items online and show interest in buying an item by paying with a check. When the victim agrees to the transaction, the scammer sends a check issued to a higher amount than agreed, claiming to compensate shipping costs with this higher amount.



Fake overpayment checks used in these scams

Once the package is on its way, the rest of the money should be wired back. The scammers use a loophole in the banking system, where it can take up to several days for the bank to refuse to honor a check. In a worst case scenario, the victim loses the product and money, and may even face legal charges for money laundering.



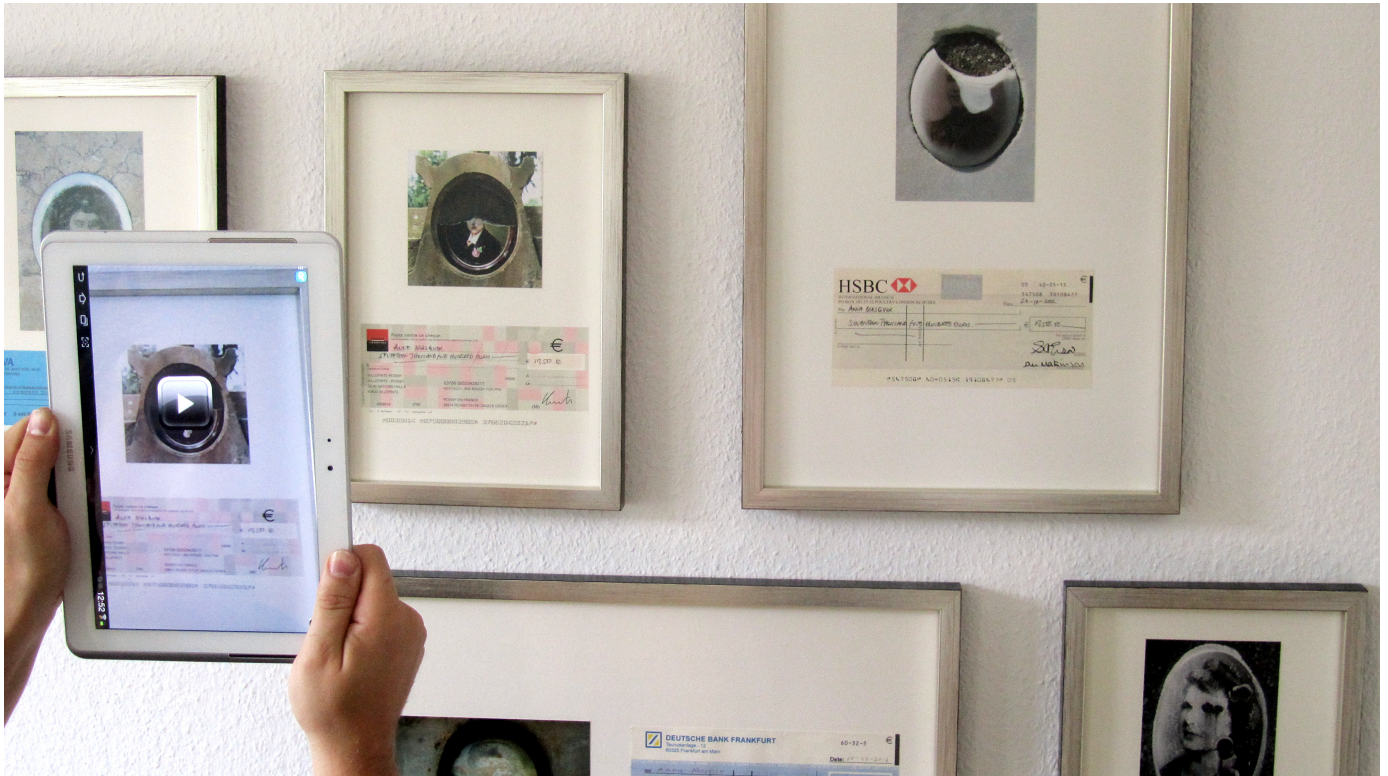
Flowchart of the overpayment check scam

Scammers use scripted stories to reach their victims, yet when the correspondence continues, then story worlds start to evolve. Since we were aware of the fact that we are dealing with scammers, we use a fictional character and narration to investigate how the scammers react to various turns in the plot. The story takes the form of e-mail correspondence where two characters are involved; one art patron created by the scammers and our fictional artist "Anna Masquer". The scammers' assumed identity is often based on either identity theft or a confusing mix of several existing individuals, giving them the opportunity to remain faceless and anonymous. The installation setup consists of five photo-frames hanging on a wall.



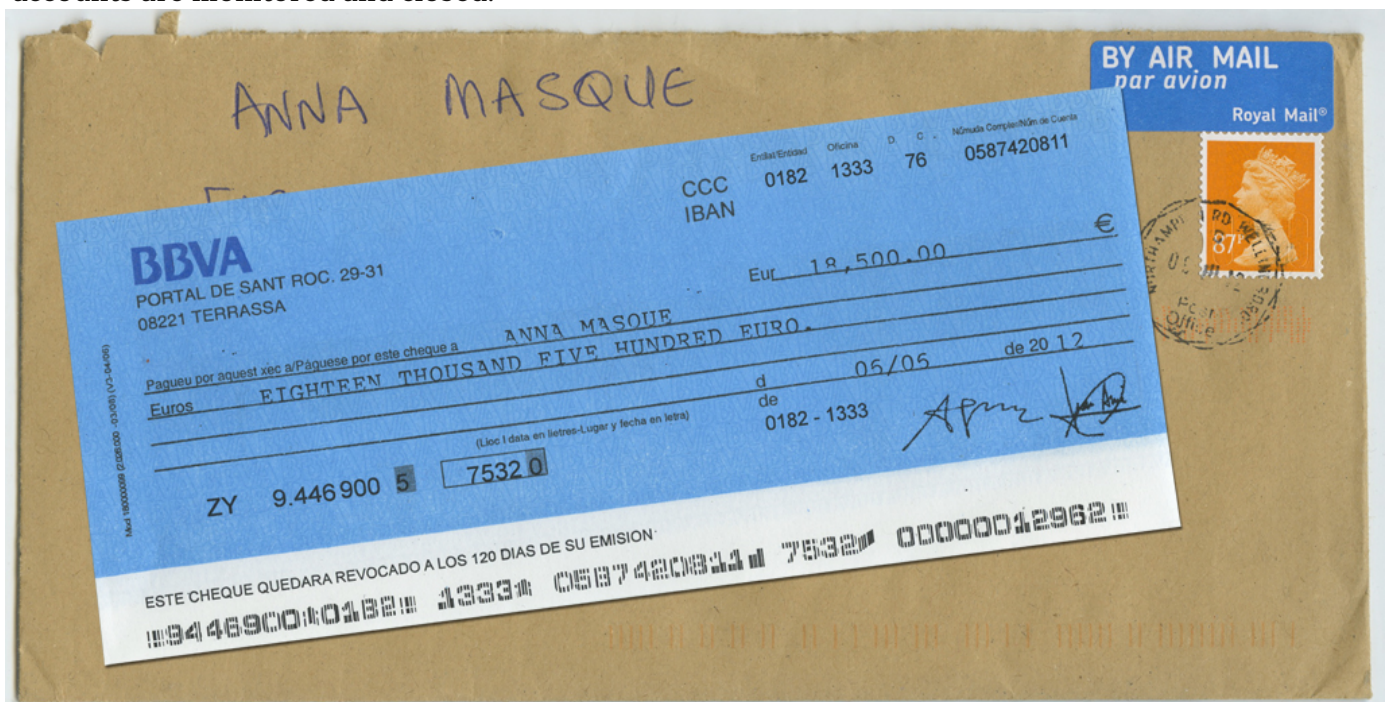
Faceless patrons installation view

Each frame connects to a correspondence with a scammer and holds a photograph and a fake check that was received as an advance payment for "Anna Masquer's" photos. By using a smartphone or a tablet the visitor can scan each photograph via a third party Augmented Reality (AR) Browser. Each physical photograph is then overlaid with an AR layer containing a video compilation of images. These images are the result of an online search in an attempt to confirm or invalidate the authenticity of the scammer's character and his online representations. This search result tries to give a face to the faceless scammer, yet fails while the posed art buyer can be anyone or none of the persons found within the search.



Augmented Reality layer unveiling the scammer's storyline

Members of the vigilante scambaiting community use scripted storylines and social engineering to collect these checks and related account information. These vigilante 'Bank agents' focus on reporting bank accounts used for criminal transactions to the banking institutions, where these accounts are monitored and closed.



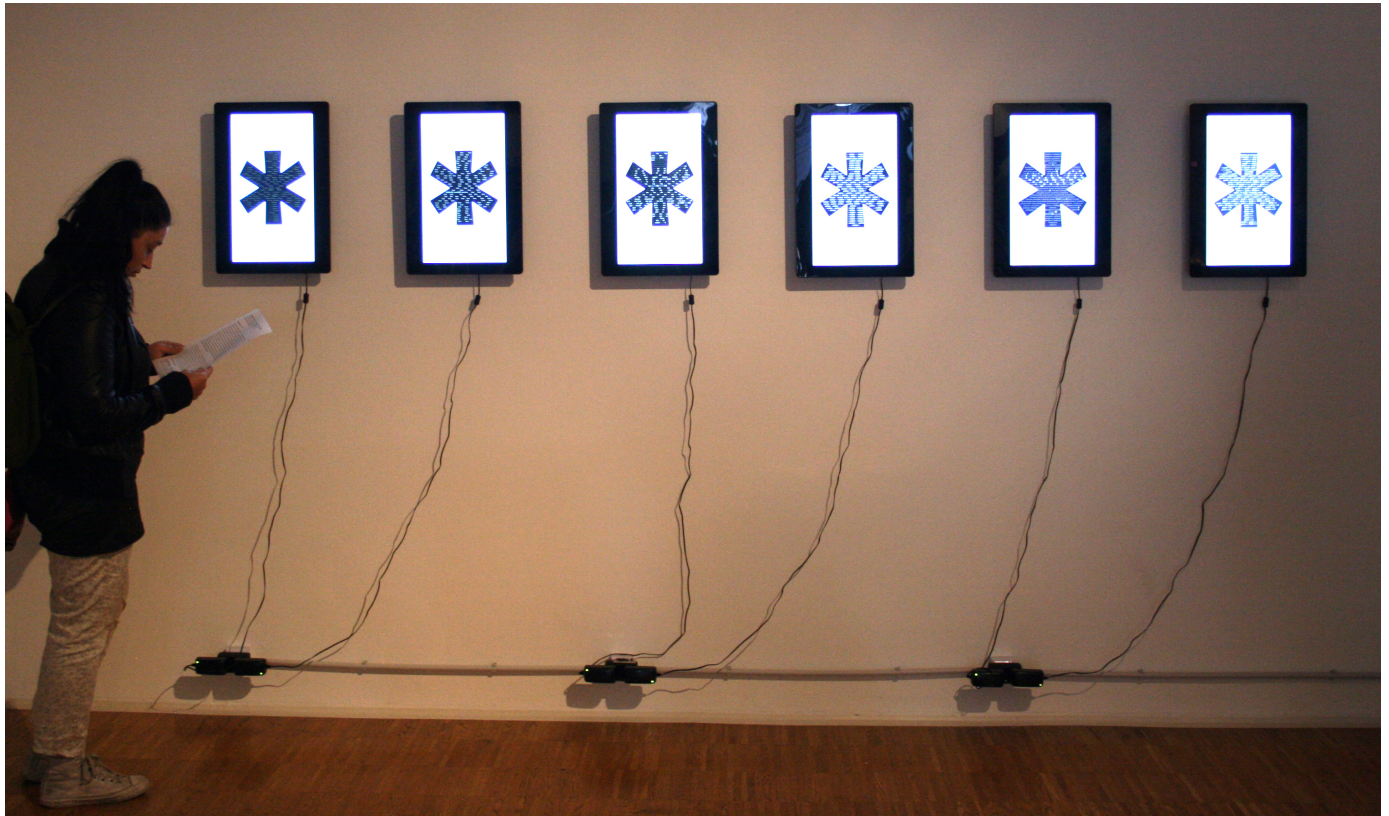
A fake check issued for €18.500.- to the virtual artist Anna Masquer

Perspective of Data Security:

Password:***** (2014, 6-channel video Installation)

The 6-channel video Installation 'Password:*****' reveals popular email-passwords used by Internet scammers. The passwords are arranged typographically in six stars, each star containing one of the most used words in the passphrases: "good", "love", "money", "mother", "jesus", "bless".

Email services like Gmail, Yahoo Mail or Outlook are used by scammers to create fake identities and, in combination with fictional narratives, to contact potential victims to lure them into advance fee payments. "Inbox divers", a subgroup of the vigilante scambaiting community, tries to jam the scammers' working practices by using storytelling and social engineering techniques as psychological manipulation to gain the trust of the scammer. By collecting and combining apparently non-relevant information, they try to obtain sensitive data to be able to gain access to the scammers' email passwords. Once access to a scammers' email account is established, the hijacked account is searched for victims, forged documents, credit card numbers, gang communication or other sensitive information. The passwords in the artwork are collected from an anti-scam community database.

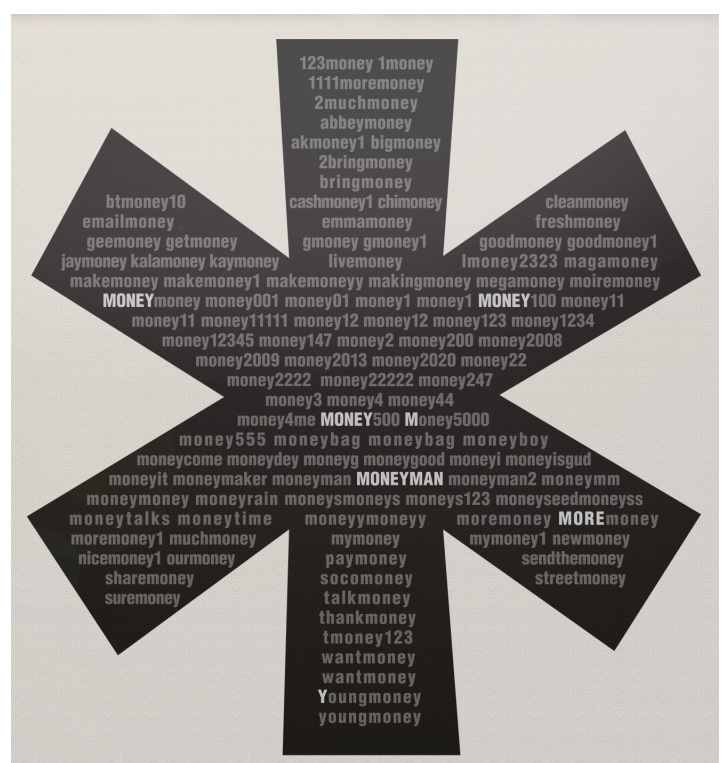


Above: Password: ***** installation view

Below: Detail view of one star

To visualize the passwords, we use six video screens, each showing an animated loop of one star. They are hung next to each other and form a six letter password combination. Once visitors approach the artwork they see small typographic password combinations within each star. The subtle animation of changing the contrast of the letters emphasizes capitalized letters, numbers or popular words, demonstrating how little effort we put into creating secure passwords in general.

During an artist-in-residence program in 2014 in Ghana, we noticed that religious-themed stickers constitute a large majority amongst car decorations, among others "God is good", "I love Jesus", "Praise the Lord", "Blessing", "God is Great", "No money - No women", "Trust God". Also many small shops have



similar word combinations as part of their company names that feature the popular password combinations, making them omnipresent in public space. These phrases are reflected in popular words used in passwords, since a large number of scammers in the database originate from West African countries.



Passwords seen in urban environment in Ghana 2014

Scams and Technologies:

Let's talk business (2015, Interactive multi-channel audio Installation)

'Let's talk business' is a multi-channel audio installation that enables the visitor to listen to Internet

scammers who try to lure potential victims into advance fee payments. Their phone numbers were extracted from a Scam Email database, analyzed by country, and categorized by scam scheme. Once potential victims called them, the scammers had the chance to tell their persuasive stories. Using SPAM-cans as listening devices the visitor can browse through the scam stories of once-in-a-lifetime business opportunities, distant relatives' beneficiaries, big lottery fortunes or helping people in need. A SPAM-can with two buttons allows the visitor to be connected with random scammers and put their persuasive abilities to the test. According to Merriam-Websters dictionary, the naming of unwanted mass advertisement as 'Spam' originates from 'the British television series Monty Python's Flying Circus in which chanting of the word Spam overrides the other dialogue'. The sketch premiered in 1970, but it took until the 1990s for mass emails, junk phone calls or text messages sent out by telemarketers to be called 'spam'. While most of the scam emails tend to end up in the SPAM folder, we chose to mediate these stories through physical SPAM-cans.



Let's talk business installation view

In many of today's fraud schemes phone numbers play an important role. With a phone number, fake businesses or personas can appear more legitimate, and the phone numbers enable a faster, more personal contact to the victims. When scammers setup a fake email address at free webmail services like Gmail or Outlook, popular VoIP services like Google talk or Skype are included and can be used for free. These tools enable the scammers to hide their identities with fake names and bogus business websites. With the analysis of a sample probe of 374 emails we wanted to see which business proposals are commonly used and how believable their proposals sound once we contacted them by phone. In the following paragraphs we want to describe three representative scam emails and their use of phone numbers to make direct contact with the scammer.

The 'Follow-up' Scam

The follow-up scam addresses former scam victims who have fallen for an unsolicited offer and paid money to a fraudster. An organization like the Nigerian EFCC, the US FBI, the UN or World Bank

claims to compensate a number of scam victims. The victims just have to provide evidence that they lost money and can then get some amount of money refunded:

“This is to bring to your notice that we are delegated from the UNITED NATIONS in Central Bank to pay 50 victims from your country who has being Victims of Internet scam .The United Nations has decided to pay you \$8,500,000 USD (Eight Million Five Hundred Thousand Dollars) each. You are listed and approved for this payment as one of the scammed victims to be paid this amount [...]

“This email is to all the people that have been scammed or extorted money from [...] We found your email in our list and that is why we are contacting you [...] Contact Pastor Johnson Morris immediately for your Cashier Cheque.”

The ‘Next-of-Kin’ Scam

The victim is contacted by a bank representative, barrister or lawyer seeking someone to stand in as next-of-kin, in order to inherit a sum of money from a deceased person:

“However, it's just my urgent need for foreign partner that made me to contact you for this transaction; I got your contact from the professional data base found in the Internet Yahoo tourist search when I was searching for a foreign reliable partner. [...] I have the opportunity of transferring the left over sum of (\$10.5 Million Dollars) that belongs to late Mr Rudi Harmanto, from Indonesia who died along with his entire family in the Asia Earth Quake (TSUNAMI, DISASTER IN INDONESIA / INDIA. 2004, and since then the fund has been in a suspense account. [...] according to the laws and constitution guiding this banking institution, stated that after the expiration of (10) years, if no body or person comes for the claim as the next of kin, the fund will be channel into national treasury as unclaimed fund. Because of the static of this transaction I want you to stand as the next of kin so that our bank will accord you their recognition and have the fund transfer to your bank account. Hence, I am inviting you for a business deal where this money can be shared between us in the ratio of 50/50. [...]

The ‘Refugee’ Scam

In the refugee scam a young woman is seeking a person overseas who can help her as a trustee to transfer money from the family’s bank account. Parts of her family died in a plane accident, so she also provides a link to a western news agency, where background information about the tragic story can be read. She is now trapped in a refugee camp where she has limited access to the Internet. To get in contact with her, she shares the cell phone number of a pastor she can trust:

“My name is Miss Samira Kipkalya Kones, 23yrs old female and I held from Kenya in East Africa. My father was the former Kenyan road Minister. He and Assistant Minister of Home Affairs Lorna Laboso had been on board the Cessna 210, which was headed to Kericho and crashed in a remote area called Kajong, in western Kenya. [...] After the burial of my father, my stepmother and uncle conspired and sold my father's property to an Italian Expert rate which the shared the money among themselves and live nothing for me. [...] So I decided to run to the refugee camp where I am presently seeking asylum under the United Nations High Commission for the Refugee here in Ouagadougou, Republic of Burkina Faso. One faithful morning, I opened my father's briefcase and found out the documents which he has deposited huge amount of money in one bank in Burkina Faso with my name as the next of kin. [...] I am in search of an honest and reliable person who will help me and stand as my trustee so that I will present him to the Bank for transfer of the money to his bank account overseas. [...] the only person i have now is Rev Pastor. Godwin Emmanuel (+226 XXX XXX XXX) Please you can

get me though Rev Pastor Godwin number Please if you call him tell him that you want to speak with me he will send for me in the hostel, Kisses and warmest regards”



A visitor in heavy negotiation with a potential business partner

Variations and additions

In the first setup that we already exhibited, we just extracted phone numbers originating from Nigeria. In the installation two wall-mounted clocks indicated the time difference between ‘Local’ and ‘Nigerian’ time. We focused on Nigerian scammers, since our dataset provided us with over 90 unique phone numbers. Our VoIP carrier offered very cheap rates for calling both land lines and mobile devices.



Let's talk business installation view

For future presentations we imagine different installation setups. A further addition to the installation setup includes the use of several calling devices, so that it is possible to call to different countries. This would underline that online fraud is a global phenomenon and not just originating from one specific country. Another variation is to choose phone numbers that relate to the same scripted story. By adding a poster to the installation with an outline of the email message, visitors can get to know the story line before getting in contact with a scammer.

Another option is to turn the process of calling scammers into a lecture performance. In the performance we present several scam emails to the audience. We then play virtual characters with different soft skills (blue-eyed, greedy, confused, etc.), call the scammers and record their conversations. The recordings become part of the 'Let's talk business' installation that can be listened to after the performance.

Closing Remarks

The presented artworks have been exhibited at festivals, in galleries and at academic conferences. They also function as a basis for discussion and raise awareness, as we have presented them as case studies in a series of "Revisiting the spam folder" workshops that we organise in various contexts. The research and exploration of various scambaiting methods for the artworks has given us a wider view on what scambaiting can be. A reflective scambaiter with the right intentions can be seen as a disruptive anti-fraud activist, who jams the scammers workflow and alerts potential victims by exposing the scam schemes. This can be done in discussion forums, by collecting databases of dubious mails as well as through artworks. By combining art and scambaiting we consider it as activism, a genre where art and activism fuse. Nevertheless we need to constantly review our approaches to scams, scammers and scambaiting, because the actors are diverse and scam strategies continue to evolve. Hence we continue to explore these topics also in our upcoming works by:

- 1) investigating whether the data on hard-drives bought at an e-waste dump in Ghana can be used to trace its prior owners and be potentially abused as a data breach, and
- 2) analysing and visualising a set of thousands of fake websites to understand the contexts in which they are used to support scammer narratives, and to develop tactics to recognise dubious fakes websites or clones.

Links:

KairUs Art Collective: <http://www.kairus.org>

Messaging Anti-Abuse Working Group Email Metrics Report: <https://www.m3aawg.org/for-the-industry/email-metrics-report>

Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) Annual Reports:

<https://www.ic3.gov/media/annualreports.aspx>

Anti Scam and Internet Fraud Information Center: <http://www.scamwarners.com>

Stop Art Scams: <http://stopartscams.blogspot.co.at>

419Eater: <http://www.419eater.com>

This essay is based on several publications by the Kairus group:

Kronman, L., Zingerle, A., 'Humiliating entertainment or social activism?', Cyberworlds 2013, Keio University, Yokohama, Japan.

Kronman, L., Zingerle, A., 'Faceless patrons', ICIDS 2013, Bahcesehir University, Istanbul, Turkey.

Kronman, L., Zingerle, A., 'Transmedia storytelling and online representations – Issues of trust on the Internet', Cyberworlds 2011, Banff International Center, Banff, Alberta, Canada.

Zingerle, A., 'Scambaiters, Human Flesh Search Engine, Perverted justice, and Internet Haganah: Villains, Avengers, or Saviors on the Internet?', ISEA 2015 conference, Vancouver, Canada.

Zingerle, A., 'Lets talk business' – Narratives used in email and phone scams, Proceedings of the third conference on Computation, Communication, Aesthetics and X (xCoAx) 2015, Glasgow, UK.

Zingerle, A., 'Revealing passwords -using social engineering methods to monitor scammers email communication', International Journal of Art, Culture and Design Technologies (IJACDT)

Zingerle, A., 'The Art of Trickery: Methods to establish first contact in Internet scams', Proceedings of the second conference on Computation, Communication, Aesthetics and X (xCoAx) 2104, Porto, Portugal.

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Misusing the Master's Tools: Exploring the Capacity to Break from Prescriptive Use, by Nathanael Bassett

The wall is one of the earliest technologies developed to counter surveillance. As a form of defense, materials piled in everything from a heap to intricate stonework would protect from the wind, the wild, and the watching eyes of one's neighbors and enemies. Privacy has always been a part of what makes us feel secure. Jay Appleton's concept of "prospect and refuge" places our comfort zone in a place where we can see others and remain unobserved, like caves in cliff-faces. When geography fails us, we build walls to suit our needs for privacy.

Walls are no longer enough to make us feel safe, or to provide us with viable shelter. In fact, we see walls as a sign of enclosure, of being walled in. The encroachment of connection brings with it threats seemingly unattached to space and time. Disconnection can seem like an absurd and regressive tactic. Engagement with media creates a compulsion to share and participate, and sociability is built into the technologies we develop today. Prescriptive use of devices points to a certain effectiveness for specific interests – consumers are discouraged from fixing or tinkering with their things, drones and cameras have facial recognition and camera stabilization, and we are never totally certain what our devices are doing without our knowledge (unless we are experts). Bruno Latour describes prescription as embedded values or moral and ethical dimensions of the things we use. Who prescribes these values? They are engineered by their creators, who have in mind a very specific type of use. We are trapped in their "walled garden."

In fact, all technologies are first geared towards specific sorts of users, and only afterwards potentially have a consideration of non-users, or people who choose to "misuse" technology. The drone is engineered for the operator, who can then approach the windows of an apartment located in a high refugee, who has little recourse except to shut the blinds. There is little opportunity for the non-users to choose NOT to be recognized by a user's Google Glass, or to be tracked by algorithmic recommendation trackers, or to be experimented on by the social network. There are few settings for an iPhone user to decide how and when they will be tracked (and presumably, these options mean nothing to a more powerful user who manipulates the device against its owner).

As a user, one is either in or out – connected or disconnected, engaged or withdrawn. We're divided by imaginary binaries about being on the grid versus off of it entirely. Because no one wants to be out, terms of service are quickly signed, not because we are unconcerned about what they say, but we know our concern doesn't always translate into effective agency.

But instead of another false binary of use/non-use, we should consider our relationship with technology as a spectrum of motivations (or tactics) and practices on how we use devices to our own ends.

Ben Light provides an alternative to the user/non-user binary in the form of disconnective practices. Thinking similar to how Michel de Certeau might characterize practices and tactics of individuals against the strategies of systems, users employ a range of behaviors in how they chose to participate and engage with social media. Likewise, using technology to create a new sort of wall against the outside world does not make us non-users, rejectors, refusers or even "Luddites," but instead allows for a type of creative "misuse" that provides greater personal agency – an ability to dictate the terms of our involvement with others.

Much in the way a wall has a gate or a window, our privacy can be secured through the use of an apparatus. This is a unique technology that can counter surveillance (like a wall), but does not put us outside the system of connections that characterizes our networked lives. Doors allow us to escape from walled in places without destroying them altogether. It isn't necessary to airgap everything we own and retreat to the woods – instead, materializations based around practices and communities of misuse provide us with some potential alternatives to just accepting the vulnerability in connection.

Hacking and DIY culture provide a ready example of misusers. Unafraid of violating a TOS or a warranty, those practices take away some of the control from engineers and technologists, and place it in the hands of the userbase. Unlocking a phone, for instance, runs contrary to everything the company who designed it is working to achieve: a careful relationship with carriers, a captive market and an OS without vulnerabilities. The hackathon, hacklabs and makerspaces are places where these ideas are workshopped, developed and produced. Other communities that foster disconnection (getaway camps or “simple living” groups) can encourage a sort of minimalist thinking about technology, but only offer ways we can limit our own use – they don't give us solutions for countering the use of others.

Instead, we have a rising popularity of alternatives like DuckDuckGo, or at least the idea of alternatives like the social network Ello. These recognize the use of the engineer as potentially conflicting with the use of the userbase. Often their motivation is to surveil and monetize the activity of the end-user. To do this, they implement a series of prescriptive uses for their work.

Acknowledging that these systems have at least two forms of use is the first step. The second is to explore and encourage disconnective practices, potentially engaging in proscribed use. At the very least, there should be options. If we want to engage with a technology, we should have some way to dictate our terms – a Terms of Service the users can give the engineers and designers. In this way, our participation would be a negotiated activity, rather than an all or nothing encounter with a system that puts its own motivations first.

In the case of a drone, CyborgUnplug disconnects intrusive surveillance devices from using your WiFi. Similarly, glasshole.sh is a script that disconnects Google Glass users from local networks. Both of these work under the presumption that users are often at odds with each other. We are each using technology to different ends and with different motivations, and every wall has two sides. It is helpful if we can do more than simply draw the curtains on the outside. Artist Adam Harvey has similar thoughts about surveillance, and uses fashion and makeup to confound surveillance technology. Stealth Wear is anti-thermal imaging clothes, including a hijab, a burqa, and a hoodie, evoking both Trayvon Martin and a decade of Islamophobic sentiment through the eyes of a what could easily be a UAV's camera. CV Dazzle is a way of beating facial recognition software. These appear to be ways to hide from technology and objects surveilling us, but this isn't exactly right: these objects have their operators, their installers. Likewise, algorithms have their programmers, and even if a sort of instrumentalist rationality lies behind the configuration of a system, those ideas are embedded in the objects because someone has decided to use it to achieve their own ends. The logic of the system which governs objects used to surveil, oppress and marginalize is closely tied to the culture and the politics of engineers and well-behaved users.

What we must do then, is recognize a capacity for misuse. When Ned Ludd broke his stocking frames in 1779, he apocryphally used a hammer. A hammer is Heidegger's example for a ready-to-hand tool. Breaking the hammer transforms it into something which must be repaired or reconciled. The Luddites demanded that the looms, stocking frames and other textile equipment of the 18th century

be reconciled with the social conditions that they encouraged. Likewise, by misusing or interfering with the way others use technology, we break that thing and create a necessity to reconcile how it has been used. Can we break Facebook? Could we break Amazon? These forms of seemingly innocuous surveillance have inspired critiques, and some people have left the social network or deactivated their Prime accounts.

What alternatives exist? Langdon Winner suggests an “epistemological Luddism” where we refuse to repair the artifacts of whatever politics we want to dismantle. An army of engineers stand between us and the ruination of these systems. What comes next then is a critical interaction that reveals the embedded intentions of medium, the way a lobster trap allows the creature to enter but not to escape. What functionality is working for the engineer-as-user, against the end-user? How can we confront the surveillance and the sousveillance all around us? Are disconnective practices feasible? Assuming they are, we will need a hammer. We need to become makers who are not building instruments for the logic of engineers, but for users and potential abusers of potentially oppressive systems.

Religious communities recognize the social conditions engendered by certain technologies and how they interfere with the values of their community. This is what creates the need for Venishmartem to produce filters, modified laptops and cellphones for Haredi and Orthodox Jews. The limited functionality suits their use. Likewise, the Dolmio Pepper Hacker “disables WiFi, TVs, and mobile devices for half an hour while it's seasoning your food,” allowing families who would otherwise feel the social conditions created by a household saturated with media use interfere with their own personal values. The walls are not enough – instead there has to be a creative engagement with what flows around them, a type of playful misuse. We bring our metaphorical hammers to the threshing machines which would otherwise sort us out, wheat and chaff, to the ends of its operator. Whether we are academics or activists, everyone with a critical orientation can recognize a need to resist those homogenizing forces, creeping into every aspect of our lives.

Audre Lorde famously made the argument that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” But we may be able to exorcise the embedded politics of a tool if we break it. Misusing a tool may help us discover alternative practices. We may discover clever “life- hacks” that don't boost our efficiency but improve our personal fulfillment and the restoration of our agency robbed by prescribed use.

It is a somewhat trite observation of many media scholars that we do not only use technology, but technology uses us. The expectations of engineers are fulfilled by a user-base which finds so much convenience and offers its complacency in return. It should not be a radical notion to suggest we study how technology uses us, and if necessary, decide what we can do to interfere with the use of others. This is the advantage of creative misuse.

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