

Activist Art and the Poetics of Junk Mail

— *K. Silem Mohammad*

If you're like me, and it's a safe bet you are, you're fed up with spam calls and texts. Recent surveys show that nearly half of the 97 percent of Americans who own smartphones receive robocalls or junk text messages every single day, and by the time this article sees print, that number will probably be far higher. Scam phishing operations and the like are a highly lucrative industry with very low operating costs, and they show no sign of going away any time soon. Ironically, one of the keys to their success has been their ability to mimic SMS protocols that were created to protect consumers: many of the texts, for example, identify themselves as coming from legitimate companies such as AT&T or Wells Fargo. Anyone foolish enough to click on the URLs in the bodies of the text is guided through a series of verifications that ask for personal information like Social Security numbers and bank account numbers. The rest of us just ignore the messages, but the nuisance persists.

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"I liked my phone more in 2013," says Ariana Jacob. I am talking with her and her collaborators over Zoom about the Spreading Rumours collective, which she initiated nearly a decade ago with Garrick Imatani, Anna Gray, and Ryan Wilson Paulsen, and which created a range of public interventions with the involvement of around twenty other Portland artists and activists. Back then, she continues:

I almost only used my cell phone for direct contact with people I knew and cared about, so my phone felt more like an intimate object. I experienced it as a site of relationship, and I felt more affectionate towards it because it was basically a portal for nourishing human connection. That association made it easier to imagine cell phone communication as a space for possible, tender curiosity. At that time I didn't use my phone for doomscrolling news or zoning out on the disassociated relationality of social media, so I hadn't begun to build up a sense of addiction combined with disgust that I now feel towards it.

She explains to me how one part of the project came about: thousands of random people were selected to receive a barrage of short, anonymous poems in the form of text messages like the following:

(POEM) marconi tesla
edison jobs one old secret:
send messages to loved
ones regularly informing
them of intention to love
always, txt to learn more

(POEM)state of emergency
or sister city work makes
us giggle or they can't meet
our eyes light displaced by
design or nothing in this
catalog will ever be yours

(POEM) replace all human
FBI personnel with therapy
dogs and then let them
untrain one another as
they wish <http://url2txt.com/1z09Ntj>

The language of these cryptic pieces (composed by Sam Lohman, Morgan Ritter, Brian Mumford, and Adam Rothstein) ranges in its apparent subject matter, but all of it exhibits a similar tone, borrowed from electronic and commercial discourse—i.e., spam. Phrases like “one old secret” and “txt to learn more” are immediately recognizable from the milieu of digital advertising, as is the blue font of the embedded URL. Whether the texts are immediately recognizable as poetry depends on the reader's familiarity with contemporary experimental literature. This may be why they all begin with the orienting word *poem* in all caps, enclosed in parentheses, although it is more likely that the labeling serves as a sort of disclaimer: no coded terrorist threats here, just art.

Around 3,500 texts were sent. Most of the 127 responses were in the form of terse questions: “who sent this?” Two people composed answer poems, Jacob tells me. But most of the messages disappeared into the void. A handful are now suspended in a static cloud-afterlife on the Spreading Rumours website.¹

The text-poems were one of three phases for the project. In another, wads of confetti containing revolutionary calls to action (e.g., “NO FUTURE • UTOPIA NOW”) were shot from Portland rooftops. In the other, placards positioned in the form of “tents” to invoke makeshift homeless shelters were placed on vacant corner lots and front lawns of houses in neighborhoods zoned for upscale development. These signs critiqued the outrageous rise of housing prices and the resultant diaspora of lower-income longtime residents, many of whom were minorities. Predictably, in the few years since the signs went up, most of these sites have been completely transformed. One also assumes that all the confetti has been swept up.

In her artist's statement, Jacob talks about her desire for art to play “a fundamental role in society beyond the professional confines of the discipline.” She aims accordingly “to make work that can be discussed and circulated outside of the art world's paths of distribution and dialogue, yet remain articulate and relevant within art discourse.”

A driving question in this context for the Spreading Rumours project was the relation of art to activism. In particular, Jacob and her collaborators grappled with the problem of the art world's complicity in gentrification: one of the contributing factors to the rampant upscaling of old neighborhoods has been their rebranding as "creative" zones populated by privileged bohemians and their patrons. Was it even possible for artistic activism to have radical potential, or were such interventions always already defused by their containment within establishment parameters of acceptable aesthetic expression? Put another way, if an artistic gesture makes enough of an impact to show the potential for restructuring or dismantling dominant configurations of power (and exclusion from power), this visible subversive potential can be countered in at least two ways, sometimes both at once: it can be framed as a dangerous but marginal anomaly, or it can be rewarded with institutional recognition and thus made safely assimilable—and, of course, utterly hamstrung as an instrument of genuine social change. Finding a way to proceed in the face of this double bind was a major goal for Jacob and her collaborators.

The Spreading Rumours collective don't pretend to have solved the problem. They have managed, however, to open up some useful avenues of investigation. Three takeaways (as they say on the internet) from the Spreading Rumours experiment:

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1

The connection of the project to Portland houseless rights organizations like Right 2 Survive/Right To Dream Too² highlights the way in which institutionally sponsored art activism both benefits from and is limited by familiar social models of protest and resistance. One of the barriers political art faces is a still-prevalent conception of DIY activism as a fringe activity, one that suffers from its inability to compete with corporate propaganda at the level of production and representational gloss. In a vexing double bind, the same elements that give many grassroots anti-capitalist movements an air of authenticity and integrity (e.g. low-tech mechanical reproduction, 1960s-style iconology, etc.) can threaten to make it appear quaintly ineffectual. On the other side of the equation, the code-switching involved in attempts to update visual symbology and rhetorical tone by borrowing from corporate strategies (or contemporary avant-garde practice, which often overlaps with the former) presents its own problems.

2

Poetry is especially tricky as an element of any activist strategy, since no one can agree on its political efficacy, or even what it is, really. As I write this, the editor of a small press poetry publication is trending on Twitter for having been forced into resigning after posting a tweet in which she ventured the incendiary opinion that poetry is irrelevant to the masses. The small stakes to big noise dynamic of stories like these is all too familiar to anyone who has spent any time in the poetic community. Still, articles with some variation on the title “Is Poetry Dead?” continue to get published, and people keep responding as though there is something important involved. This must mean that at some level, poetry pushes buttons for people. The question is what these buttons actually connect to, and what they do.

3

The SMS poems appear to spring from two (possibly conflicting) theoretical platforms. The first, going back to Jacob’s comments about her relationship with her own phone at the time the project started, is founded on a notion of “nourishing human connection”; the texts were meant, it seems, to be received as earnest communications from human beings to other human beings. Their inscrutability served mainly as a gentle attention-getting device. The second is almost the opposite: by borrowing much of their form from the degraded context of e-commerce and e-fraud, the poems challenge traditional notions of value, beauty, meaning, and even what constitutes an act of true communication. They depend in part on being perceived as spam, and therefore as functionally inhuman.

I can’t help but wonder how the project might differ if tackled today. Now that unsolicited texts have ballooned into a global blight, the playing field is transformed. Any notion that the messages might trigger

a measurable current of productive dialogue, person-to-person connection, etc. must seem naïve.

It may be useful to look at some of the operating principles behind actual spam: a recent *Business Insider* article by Walt Hickey addresses the question many recipients of junk calls and texts ask: how does anyone make any money from it when it is so obviously a scam?

The economics of phone spam are incredibly favorable. For perspective, 125,000 min-

utes of robocalls from Message Communications, Inc — which sustained a \$25,000 penalty in 2015 for what the FTC described as “willful, repeated” violations — has sold for a mere \$875. Assuming a consumer listens to the call for an average of three seconds, that \$875 would translate into

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2.5 million calls, with one cent getting a buyer twenty-eight spam calls. Even if just one out of every 10,000 calls turns into a qualified lead, at a going rate of \$7 per lead, an hour of robocalls will pull in \$1,750 in revenue, neatly doubling their investment. It's an engine that turns phone calls into money with a byproduct of distributed annoyance.³

The strategy is effective because, instead of predicating itself on values such as clarity, sincerity, transparency, trust, etc., it starts from the assumption that if you throw enough rocks in all directions, you will eventually hit something.

The question for anyone wanting to translate this into a model for activist art is: what is it one hopes to hit? In the case of real spam, the answer is obviously money. For artists, it generally isn't, at least not via such a direct arc. But what if it were? Spam operations, as the article I've quoted makes clear, are cheap and easy to launch. They make back their investments quickly and expand them into huge profits. If it's so easy to get people to part with their money, why haven't we looked into it more? I'm not recommending defrauding people into surrendering their Social Security numbers, but (legitimate and legal) embedded calls for donation might be one tactic. I'm also interested in that "byproduct of distributed annoyance," which is immaterial to the fraudsters, but might be quite productive from an aesthetic standpoint.

The poems by Lohman, Ritter, Mumford, and Rothstein that were circulated in the Portland area are enigmatic, engaging, socially charged—but they are also very amiable. Each one announces itself as what it is ("POEM") before making its polite if nonlinear overture, and the language is often suffused with a warm ethos of fellow feeling ("intention to love always," "work makes us giggle"). They are easy to like and easy to ignore, like neighbors' children. They are most provocative when they threaten to evoke crisis or acts of political disruption ("state of emergency," "replace all human FBI personnel"), or when they open up the possibility of luring the reader into an unidentified commitment ("txt to learn more"). Perhaps most confrontational is that little taunt, "nothing in this catalog will ever be yours." This is the opposite of a sales pitch, and there is a faint sting to it. Consumers generally don't like to be informed that there is a commodity they can't attain.

Imagine this irritation factor magnified and concentrated. Imagine the power poetry could wield when converted into an instrument of mass annoyance, shrill and unapologetic. Instagram poets like

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Rupi Kaur⁴ have demonstrated in the past few years that poetry can reach a mass audience and reap substantial financial rewards by taking advantage of the distributive clout of social media. In Kaur's case, the hook is accessible emotional directness (while her detractors might say simplistic triteness and sentimentality). Projects like those undertaken by Ariana Jacob, Garrick Imatani, Anna Gray, and Ryan Wilson Paulsen point the way to an alternative hook: the gloves-off sucker punch of scattershot guerilla marketing. Maybe the activist poetry of the future will learn to be as exploitative and cutthroat as the cynical power structures it aims to challenge.

1 <https://rumourcontent.tumblr.com>

2 <https://www.rightsurvive.org/projects>; <https://rightdreamtoo.blogspot.com/>

3 <https://www.businessinsider.com/why-so-many-spam-robocalls-how-to-stop-them-2021-3>

4 <https://www.rupikaur.com/>; https://www.instagram.com/rupikaur_/?hl=en

K. Silem Mohammad is the author of several books of poetry, including *Deer Head Nation*, *Breathalyzer*, and *The Front*. His work appears in numerous magazines and anthologies, including *Poetry*, *The Nation*, and *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*. He is a professor at Southern Oregon University in Ashland.