

Book-keeping

This story was written collectively in the frame of “Counter-Narratives”, the first session of the artistic research Tangible Cloud. It was impelled by TITiPI, and is part of their [Infrables](#) project.

It happened after I gave a lecture, at a university. I went to their accounts department, to check if everything was in order with my fee, as I hadn't been asked for an invoice or anything yet. The accountant asked me for my eID card, and, after it connected successfully to some web application, took out a cardboard folder, from which she retrieved a paper-printed list of names. She eventually found mine and crossed it, using a fluorescent marker. Then, she handed me a paper envelope. “Here you are,” she said “your plane tickets are in your electronic wallet, you have to get a Covid Passenger Form and fill it, and make sure your Vaccination Certificate is up-to-date or that you have a 48 hours negative test you can show at customs and at the airline's desk.” I nodded, and took the envelope. I decided not to argue on the fact that I wouldn't travel by plane but by train, supposing that it was the accountant's usual polite speech, addressed to the long list of speakers she daily had to fill in.

I took my wheelie-case, adjusted my backpack, then walked out the doors of the university. Damned. I still held the envelope in my hand. So I stopped, put down my backpack, and then, for some reason, decided to take a look inside the envelope. I was tired, three days of talks and dinners and social networking had worn me out. I'm not a social person. I don't mean that I don't like people, it's just, well, I don't use online social networks exactly because of that. I don't want to keep long distance connections just for the sake of it, just because I can do it. That is to say, if I had been in a better shape, I would have checked inside the envelope before, in the office, and asked about it right away.

So I opened it.

The square was wept by heavy winds. I held a paper sheet, on which a plastic card was glued. It was labeled Amazon, and bore a QR code. The letter went: “Thank you for contributing to these three days of conferences. *Infrastructural Interactions* is rewarding you by offering you the enclosed Amazon voucher.”

I was so dismayed that the envelope slipped away from my hand, to be soon blown away by the wind. There was no way to get it back.

Holding tightly my voucher letter, I went back to the accounts department.

“Is there something I can do for you?” the accountant said.

“Yes, I was there a couple minutes ago and I have a question about my fee...”

“Oh, did I give you the wrong envelope?”

“No, I don't know, my name is...”

“Can you hand me the envelope over?”

“No, it was carried away by the wind...”

“That would be a problem, because I need the envelope in order to check.”

“The thing is, inside, there was an Amazon voucher...”

The accountant paused, and stared at me.

“Yes”

“Is that...”

“Oh, you are one of those... We’ve been paying researchers with gift vouchers for a year now. I can help you set up an account if you need. I know a lot of scholars don’t have one.”

“But, it’s...”

“Or, if you really *are* reluctant to online-shopping, we do provide, for such rare cases, vouchers to Mark & Spencer retail stores instead. But then, you’ll also need to set up an account on their online store, in order for us to transfer the money on the vouchers. What would you prefer?”

“Honestly, a transfer, a check, cash...”

“That I cannot do.”

The tone of her voice was slowly shifting from polite and gentle to dry and patronizing. I tried:

“I can invoice you, I mean, usually...”

“Could you give me you eID again?”

Time was ticking. I had an hour and half left before my train left, and the station was rather far.

“I can see you’re affiliated with our university. So you’re not an independent researcher right? Let me see what I can do. We sometimes transfer money to PayPal accounts, in case of independent researchers, although I haven’t done it in a while.”

“PayPal?”

“Yeah. You do have a PayPal account, right?”

“...”

“Oh God... Anything we can use? Your Google account maybe?”

“I don’t have one of those.”

“Well, we need to find something I can buy for you, I can... I don’t know. A Netflix voucher? An Apple voucher?”

“No I don’t...”

“Oh God, you’re not making this easy... I guess, you don’t want to simply give it up, right?”

(The voucher was of 400£.)

“Well, it’s very simple to get an account at one of these places you know. Really. I mean, I don’t get you guys. There’s always one or two people like you at lectures... Are you all stuck in year 2000 or something?”

At that point, I realized I would miss my train in addition to losing my money if this kept going on. When she said:

“Oh, I know! What about we get you books? That I could do. Here, I give you my email. Send me a list. You scholars like books right?”