

METRO PICTURES

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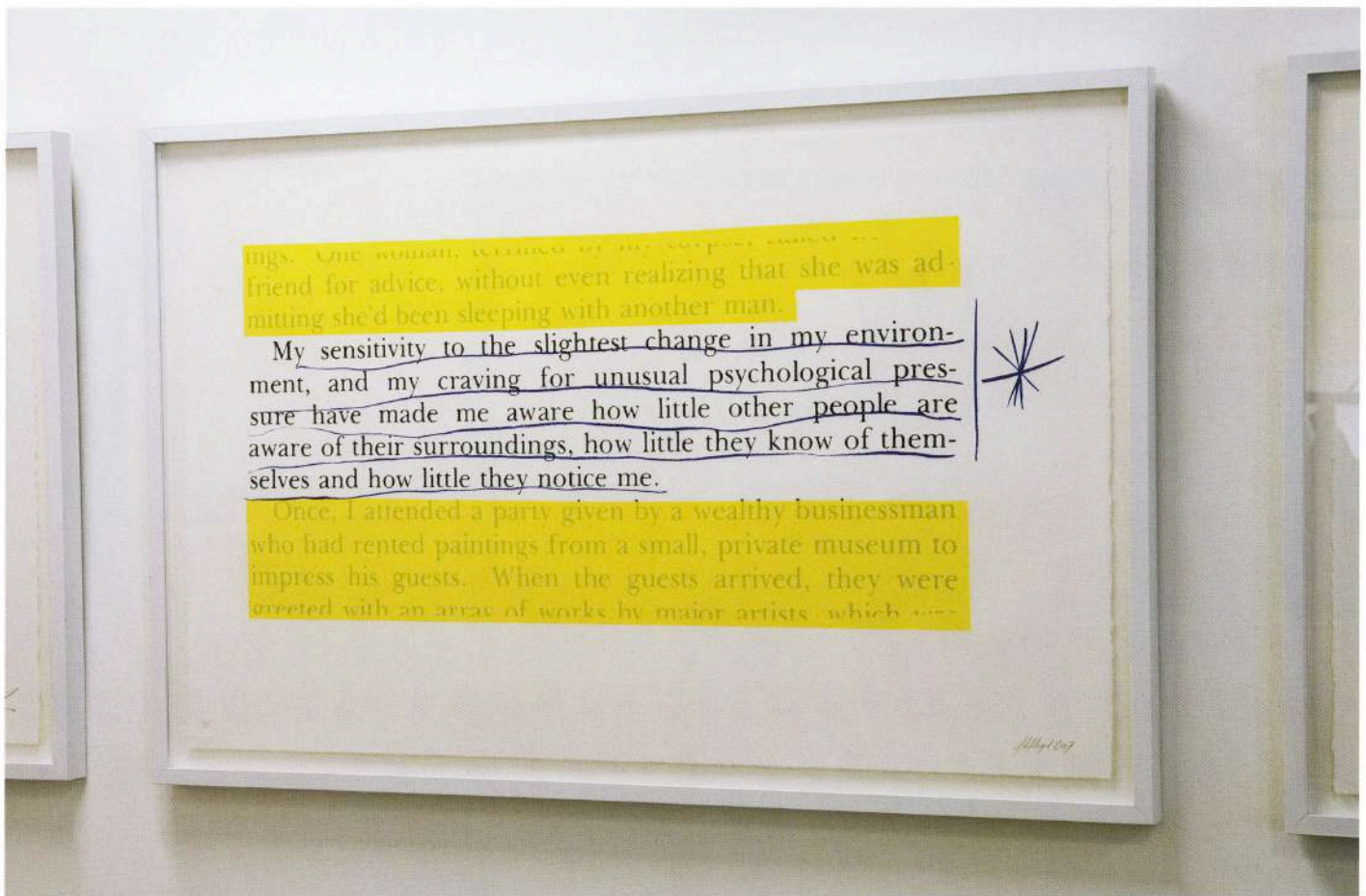


Open Secret

PAMELA M. LEE ON THE WORK OF ART BETWEEN DISCLOSURE AND REDACTION



Trevor Paglen, *Reaper Drone (Indian Springs, NV Distance ~ 2 miles)*, 2010, color photograph, 30 x 36".



Jill Magid, *My Sensitivity*, 2007, four-color silk-screen print, 27 1/2 x 44". From the series "The Kosinski Quotes," 2007.

Below: Dutch intelligence personnel removing Jill Magid's *Becoming Tarden*, 2009, the day after the closing of Magid's exhibition "Authority to Remove," Tate Modern, London, January 4, 2010. Photo: Amy Dickson.

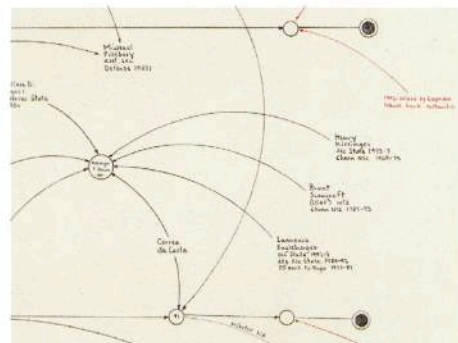
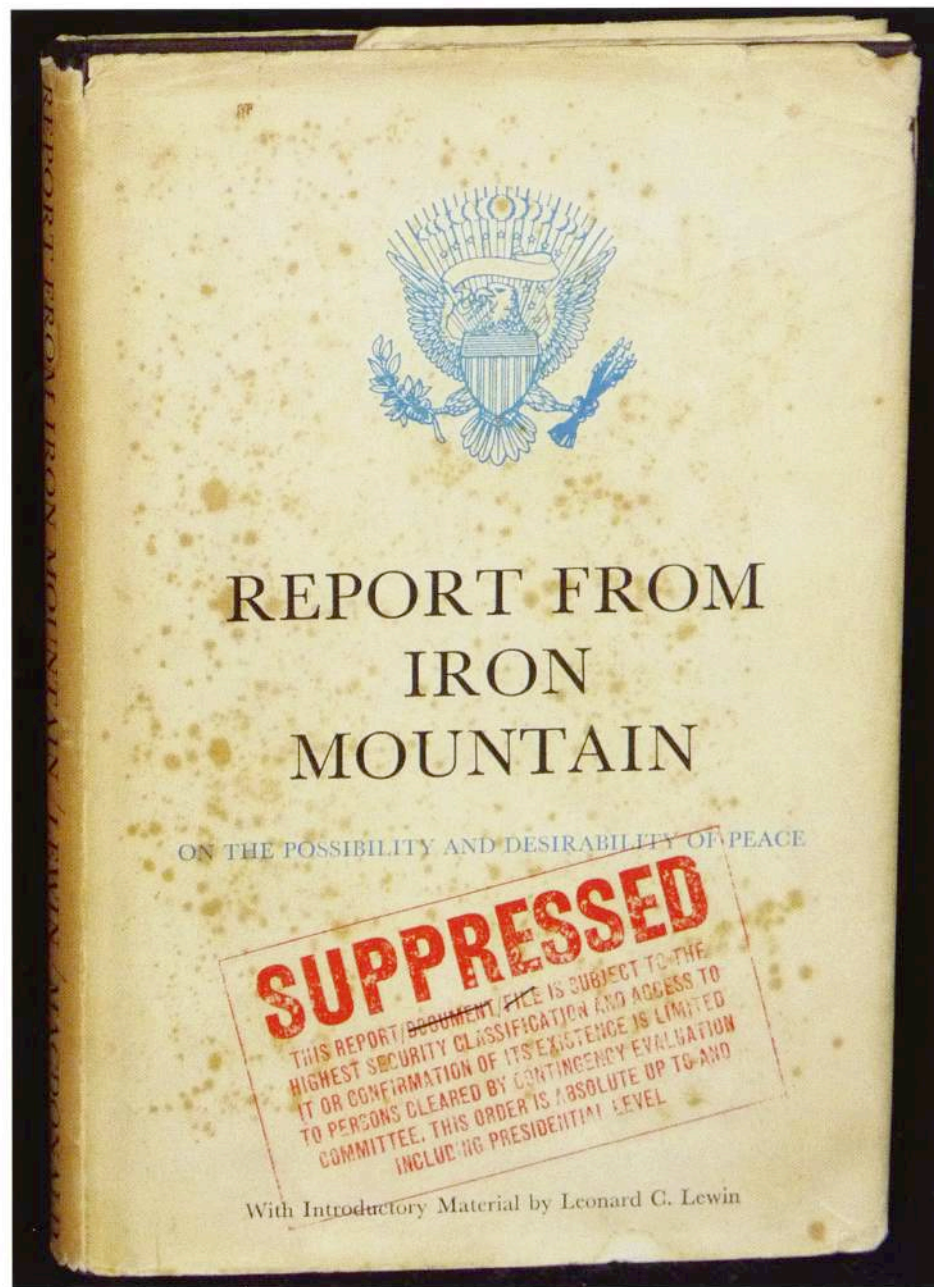
With its blurry photocopied type, its rubber-stamped admonitions—**CLASSIFIED**, it may say, or **SUPPRESSED**—and its thick lines of black marker obliterating everything we really want to know, the redacted document is a paradox, an iconic representation of that which is withheld from view. As such, it embodies what Pamela M. Lee terms the open secret: a visible invisibility, an essentially aesthetic phenomenon that functions less to reveal than to declare the prerogatives of those who conceal. Suggesting that the transparency of the WikiLeaks era is illusory, Lee proposes that it is the open secret that actually governs the politics of information today. Here, she looks at the practices of two artists, Jill Magid and Trevor Paglen, who, in very different ways, explore the workings of the open secret, and locates the roots of their strategies well beyond the pale of art. It is in the cold-war think tank, secrecy's ostensibly impregnable redoubt, Lee argues, that we find the template for Magid's and Paglen's subtlety and stealth, their oscillations between the seen and the unseen, and their tactical elisions of fiction and fact.



**A BRIEF HISTORY
OF THE CONTEMPORARY SECRET**

Daniel Ellsberg may be forgiven for anointing Julian Assange his heir apparent—as he did in December 2010, when he defended Assange against accusations

of treason and terrorism and explicitly compared himself to the WikiLeaks impresario. As the catalyst behind the 1971 release of the Pentagon Papers, the Defense Department's highly classified "secret history" of the Vietnam War, Ellsberg is renowned as a staunch crusader for the freedom of information,



Left: Leonard C. Lewin's *Report from Iron Mountain: On the Possibility and Desirability of Peace* (Dial Press, 1967). Photo: Matthew Budman/Main Line Autographed Books.

Above: Mark Lombardi, *BCCI-ICIC-FAB, 1972-91 (Fourth Version)* (detail), 1996-2000, graphite on paper, 4' 4" x 11' 6".

so it stands to reason that he would view Assange as a kindred spirit, the standard-bearer for a new generation of antiseccrecy advocates. That four decades separate the publication of the Pentagon Papers from Assange's campaign, however, is a fact that bears repeating.

If Ellsberg's gesture reflected a long tradition of journalistic muckraking, Assange's is continuous with the digital protocols of contemporary media. Indeed, whatever Assange's bona fides, and in spite or because of the sensitivity of his revelations, his release of some 251,000 American diplomatic cables is actually in keeping with the modus operandi of a media long habituated to the routines of hyper-exposure. Whether the relentless bleating of the twenty-four-hour news cycle, the nonstop Twitter dispatch, or the blow-by-blow reportage of the Facebook insurrectionist, the mass disclosure of information is the rule, not the exception, within the universe of digital communications. What constitutes a genuine notion of secrecy these days must be measured against a world hallucinating a dream of transparency: an illusion of unencumbered access to meaningful data that stands out against the noise and miscellany of the digital semiosphere. Ironically, it is the existence of the *open* secret—one that paradoxically announces its clandestine quality by virtue of its public appearance—along with the endless search for, and generation of, new content to expose, that propels the fantasy of the free exchange of information. In fact, this communicative dynamic is fundamentally troubled by a public sphere compromised by both the quantity and the quality of its revelations, no less than by the systems of control that govern their exposure.

None of this is to dismiss WikiLeaks so much as it is to stress that the relationship between disclosure

The secret paradoxically possesses something like an *appearance*—an aesthetics, if you like. The past several years have seen the development of a certain kind of practice that visualizes covert relationships of power.

and redaction is not simply a matter of spilling secrets, of unclocking those conspiratorial cover-ups that obscure the innumerable smoking guns of the world. Nor can the contemporary secret be understood to statically inhabit one of two registers: known or unknown, illuminated or obscure. The secret is itself an ideological contrivance; its withholding—its *visible* withholding—is as critical to its power as whatever content we might imagine it conceals.

Thus the secret paradoxically possesses something like an *appearance*—an aesthetics, if you like. The past several years have seen the development of a certain kind of practice, represented by artists such as the late Mark Lombardi (with his diagrams of the systemic and insidious connections that link the protagonists of global power networks) and the Web-based initiative They Rule (with its own cladistic representations of American elites), that visualizes those covert relationships of power that obtain among corporations, government agencies, and private citizens. But the focus of this essay is the work of Jill Magid and Trevor Paglen, whose distinct practices converge around the logic of the open secret. Both artists interrogate and dramatize what could be called the mechanisms of contemporary secrecy. For her part, Magid's practice literally performs the rituals of concealment and exposure. In "Authority to Remove," her 2009–10 exhibition at Tate Modern in London, Magid charted her long involvement with the Dutch secret service, or AIVD (Algemene Inlichtingen—en Veiligheidsdienst), which culminated in a novel based on years of interviews with intelligence agents. Large portions of the novel were then redacted. Paglen's work in experimental geography has produced powerful insights into the photographic calibrations between the visible and the invisible, homing in on the sub rosa installations of the American military both on the ground and in the air. His latest show, at San Francisco's Altman Siegel gallery earlier this year, continued in the vein of what Rebecca Solnit aptly calls "visibility wars" while mining new territory in the history of photography.

Both artists assiduously unpack the secret's organizational and performative logic, its murky procedural

techniques, and the alternations between the open and the hidden that sponsor its occasional emergence into public view. But perhaps what Magid and Paglen ultimately disclose, if in very different ways, is that lies and truth claims occupy surprisingly proximate territory on the spectrum of redaction and disclosure; and that the very notion of evidence as fact undergoes a radical mutation where the blurred interests of transparency and secrecy are concerned—now more than ever, given that the politics of information has taken on a startling urgency.

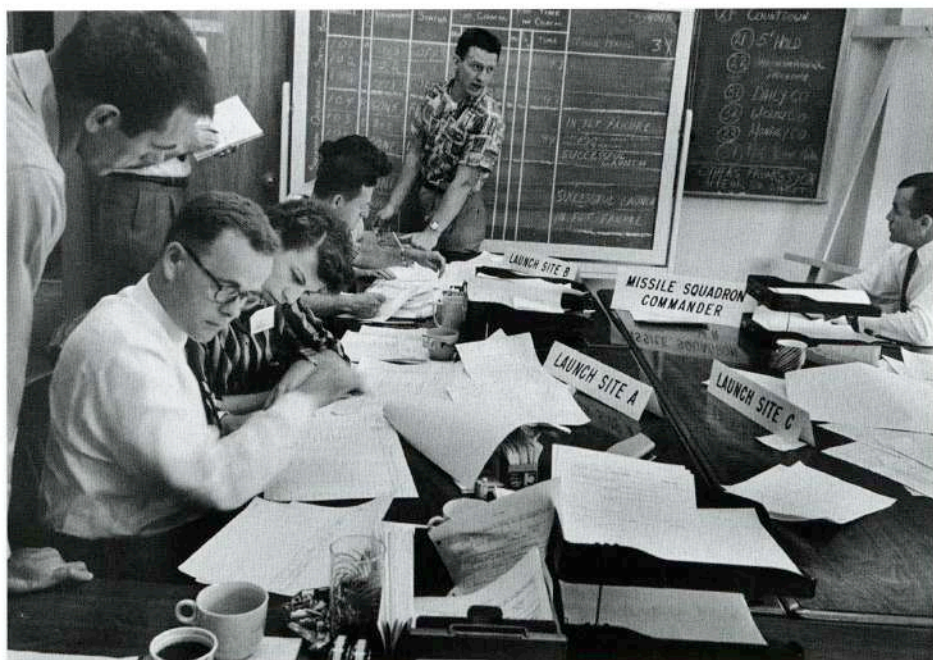
THINK-TANK AESTHETICS

Past is prologue. A prehistory of the open secret in contemporary art must include a consideration of earlier work dealing with the related topic of surveillance and with those forms of domestic "espionage" that have perpetually monitored the quotidian comings and goings of ordinary people. Some twenty years ago, the exploding landscape of CCTVs and the emergence of a new digital tool called spyware seemed to confirm the dark predictions of the disciplinary society put forward by Foucault, on the one hand, and a recently birthed generation of cyberpunk theorists, on the other. Art followed suit, as Lynn Herschman Leeson, Sophie Calle, and Julia Scher, among others, took up their own investigations. Scher's work, in particular, is emblematic of such



Above: Air force officer at the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, 1958. Photo: Leonard McCombe/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images.

Below: Briefing at the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, 1958. Photo: Leonard McCombe/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images.



In contemporary aesthetic practice, there lies a confusion between the terms of reality and fiction that corresponds to the cold-war think tank.

interests. Her well-known “security” systems—i.e., her security-guard “company,” which used older women to police museum spaces—speak to the intrusion of surveillance techniques as they progressively colonize whatever remains of the private sphere, implicating art and gender in the equation.

For the art that concerns us, however, an earlier precedent—the 1967 book *Report from Iron Mountain: On the Possibility and Desirability of Peace*—is perhaps more germane. Written in that gripping literary style known as bureaucratese, the titular report was produced by a murky commission of defense strategists, policy wonks, and academics convened by an unspecified federal agency. Between 1963 and 1966, the team, dubbed the Special Study Group, met in a variety of locations, including the pseudonymous town of Iron Mountain, New York. The group’s task was to offer a systematic analysis of the implications of war and peace for American economics and society, and its conclusion was counter-intuitive, to say the least: namely, that war was preferable to peace on economic, social, and political grounds. Having been leaked to journalist Leonard C. Lewin by one conscience-stricken John Doe, the document was published by the venerable Dial Press and quickly became a sensation and a scandal.

Though the report is not a work of art in any conventional sense, the rancorous debates attending its debut nevertheless begin to make the case that there is something *artful* about the mechanisms of contemporary secrecy—principally, by establishing what might be thought of as an aesthetics of the think tank, that sine qua non of cold-war secrecy. The term *think tank* entered common parlance in the 1950s as a means of denoting those obscure, mostly private institutions devoted to the advancement of public policy in the realms of defense, politics, economics, society, and culture (and has lately resurfaced in public consciousness thanks largely to the pernicious influence of the libertarian Cato Institute, cofounded by billionaire Charles Koch). These secretive cabals were part and parcel of the cloak-and-dagger ethos historically (and stereotypically) associated with the cold war. Think tanks were hothouses for that cold-war species-being called the defense intellectual—logicians, computer scientists, engineers, systems and

game theorists, behavioral scientists, and anthropologists, whose combined authority was meant to address the most pressing questions of national security from a range of disciplinary perspectives. Although the collective ambition behind think tanks was ostensibly to serve the greater good, their shadowy constitutions and top secret research initiatives communicated something far more sinister to the public. To wit, the nuclear strategist Herman Kahn, who was a pivotal figure at the RAND Corporation (arguably the ur-think tank of the era, and Ellsberg’s employer at the time of the Pentagon Papers’ release), was reportedly one of the inspirations behind Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove*.

As the closest thing to a tell-all to have emerged from the depths of such institutions, *Report from Iron Mountain* scandalized an America already skeptical of the RAND Corporation, as evidenced, for example, by protests staged by artists in the late 1960s. The report’s disturbing support for permanent war was both fatalistic (“lasting peace, while not theoretically impossible, is probably unattainable”) and cynical (“even if [peace] could be achieved it would almost certainly not be in the best interests of a stable society to achieve it”). Should the militarization of contemporary life be eliminated with the end of armed conflict, wrote the authors, the results would be globally catastrophic. The proposed solutions were equally dystopian: Only an equally radical social phenomenon, such as indentured servitude, could make up for the economic losses associated with perpetual peace.

Such sentiments were particularly incendiary, of course, at the height of the Vietnam era. The book drew massive media attention, with an article appearing on the cover of the Sunday edition of the *New York Times* in November 1967. Reviewed not once but twice by the newspaper of record, it landed on the best-seller list in the general-interest category, sandwiched between John Kenneth Galbraith’s *The New Industrial State* and Dwight Eisenhower’s *At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friends*. Reactions ranged from mortification—it was deemed “an enormous roaring scandal”—to flat-out rage. The Orwellian tenor of the report’s analysis prompted many to question the motivations of think tanks generally; others felt the whole thing was simply too bizarre to be true. But if this was a hoax or a satire, it hewed a little too closely to both the methods and the interests of cold-war think tanks: According to a spokesman for the State Department Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, for instance, “whoever did it obviously has an appreciable grasp of the disciplines involved.” A fellow at a Washington, DC, think tank called the Institute for Policy Studies was surprised to see “one of his privately circulated reports” mentioned in the book

and suggested that perhaps someone in the CIA had had a role in the leak. Kahn repeatedly denied that he was involved, calling the whole affair “sinister.” Perhaps the bluntest appraisal of them all was issued by an individual whose stock-in-trade was state secrets. “Whoever wrote it is an idiot,” Henry Kissinger reportedly said. Though the statement now reads as funny, or at least absurd, the very fact of Kissinger’s remark underscores the impact of the book’s publication.

As it turned out, *Report from Iron Mountain* was indeed an elaborate hoax: The culprit, Lewin, would finally cop to his subterfuge in 1972. Still, the artifice behind the “leak” raised the specter of the secrets concealed in those institutions after which the Special Study Group was modeled. As Lewin noted, “government spokesmen were oddly cautious in phrasing their denials” of the book, or their role in its making, as if they weren’t even sure what the truth was—their secrets were secret even to them. Another think-tanker said that, though he disagreed with its general drift, the report was nevertheless “the best case I’ve ever read on the other side. It gives me very tough arguments to answer.” That analysts were compelled to make such statements, let alone take the report’s outrageous claims at face value, says a great deal about the nature of the information think tanks redacted or concealed and about the disturbing similarities between what constitutes truth and fiction in this context. Galbraith, the storied Harvard economist who some suggested was behind the book, remarked that the report was so outlandish as to foreclose even the possibility of critique or interpretation. “Some things are so far removed from reality,” he noted, “that they can’t be commented on.” In fact, it is not the distance these secrets maintain from reality but their *proximity* to it that seems very much the point of Lewin’s gambit.

And it is Lewin’s notion that brings us to contemporary aesthetic practice, where we detect a certain confusion between the terms of reality and fiction that corresponds to the cold-war think tank. Indeed, the term *think tank* may well seem a perfect analogue to the open secret in recent art: It suggests an ominous image of cognition—of clarity and enlightenment—locked away and obscured in a sealed box, the word *tank* modifying a precarious relationship between inside and outside, what is hidden and what is revealed, reason and irrationality. Arguably, the defense intellectuals associated with such institutions were the last arbiters of rationality—if at the very historical moment in which reason had all but fled the scene. Without recourse to this specific narrative, artists nevertheless have taken up its lessons as they parse the mechanisms of secrecy in the present.

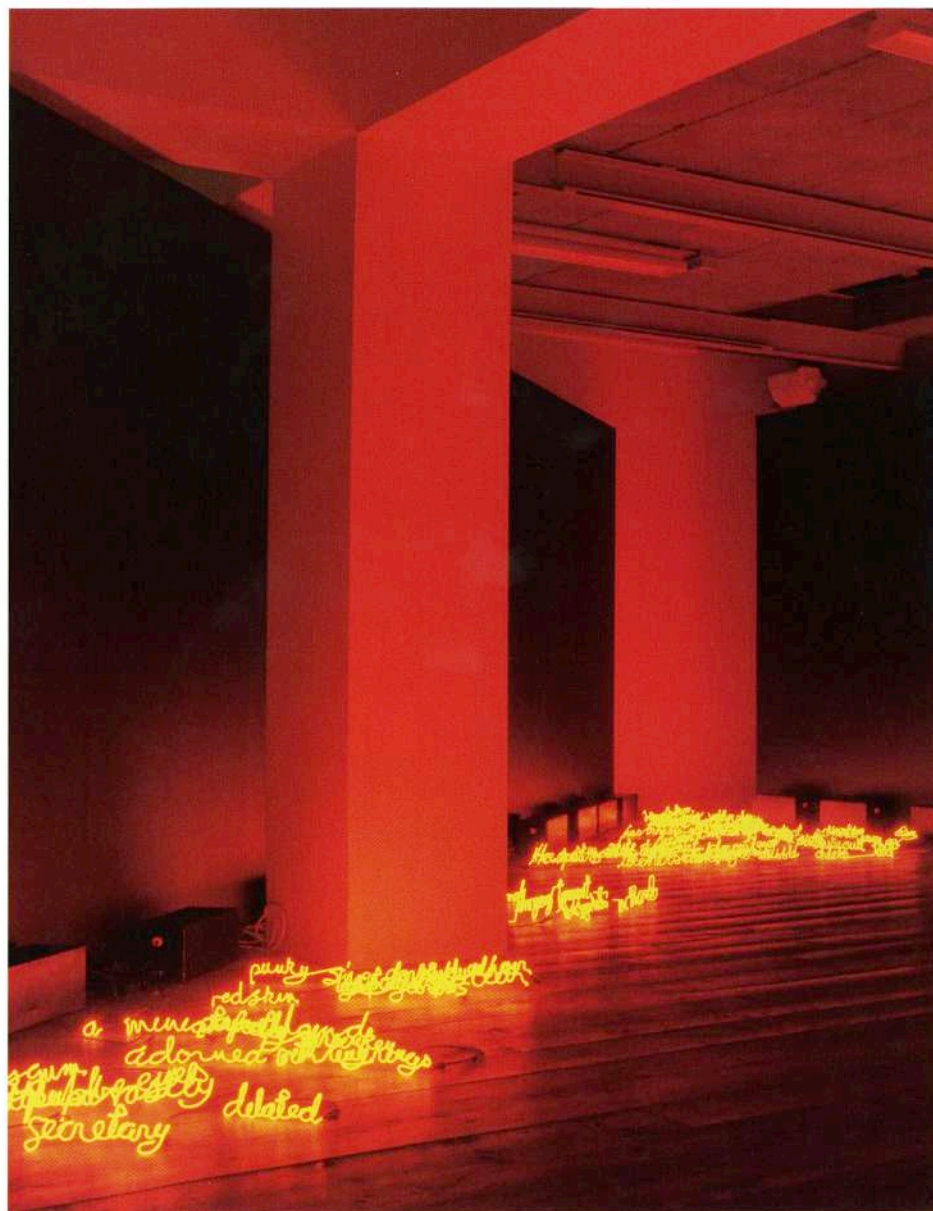
SECRET AGENCY

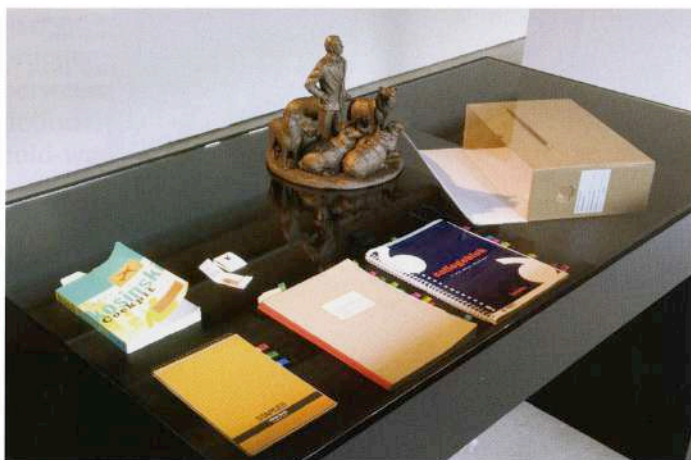
Report from Iron Mountain prefigures many of Magid's and Paglen's concerns; it is a parable of a culture increasingly devoted to the production, management, and organization of secrets. Effectively straining the limits of the imagination, of what can and cannot be thought or visualized relative to issues of security, it is a piece of fiction that gives the lie to what too often passes for fact. In her work with the Dutch secret service—a three-year engagement that became a sort of accidental collaboration—Magid pressed the same issues to similarly disturbing effect, confronting the equivalence between redaction and censorship and the correlative tensions between secrecy and agency. The relationship between Magid and the AIVD started reasonably enough in 2005, when the New York-based artist was hired to produce art for the agency's new headquarters in The Hague. This arrangement is not as unorthodox as it sounds: The construction budget of each publicly funded building in the Netherlands allows a small percentage to go toward the commissioning of new art. In this case, Magid's brief was to make work that addressed the AIVD's "mission . . . [of] investigating threats to 'democratic order'" and to "find the human face of the organization," per the press materials for "Authority to Remove." Magid seized on article 12 of the "Kingdom of the Netherlands Bulletin of Acts, Orders and Degrees"—a clause that enjoins the government from keeping track of the religion, health status, or sex lives of its employees—as the basis for her work. Tracing the peculiar dynamics between the private lives of agents and the covert activities in which they were engaged, her multimedia project would build from long interviews with such personnel in which topics of an intimate nature would inevitably surface. That information would then be issued as a report-cum-novel, while other works generated in the course of the project would be displayed on-site in the new building, as well as in The Hague's Stroom Den Haag gallery. The AIVD green-lighted Magid's proposal, with the proviso, of course, that the artist keep the identities of her interviewees concealed and that she neither photograph nor record them.

To some, this work might sound like standard-issue institutional critique, one among many increasingly mannered and ready-to-hand projects, descendants of 1960s Conceptual art, in which organizations commission an artist to undertake what amounts to outsourced self-reflection. The artist plays the role of participant-observer in interviewing the employees of a given institution, and said institution, in its turn, gets to exhibit the results of those exchanges, as if to showcase its willingness to entertain criticism and, by extension, its openness and beneficence. But

when the institution under scrutiny is an intelligence agency, the very notion of this openness is fundamentally tested, if not flagrantly compromised—especially for an organization devoted to protecting "democratic order." Magid's project is implicated in this dynamic. To be sure, the details of its unfolding inadvertently ironize the agency's ostensible desire for Magid to "find the human face of the organization."

Jill Magid, sculptures from the series "I Can Burn Your Face," 2008, neon, transformers, wires. Installation view, Stroom Den Haag, The Hague. Photo: Rob Kollaard.





Left: Jill Magid, *Archive #2485536/01, 2005–2008*, Dutch-intelligence archive box with Magid's vetting number; notebooks; copy of Jerzy Kosinski's novel *Cockpit*. On Vitrine: *The Shepherds*, 2008, resin figurine from one of two editions (18 resin, 5 bronze). Photo: Rob Kollaard.

Below: Jill Magid, *Becoming Tarden*, 2009, novel (in two pieces) and document (letter from the artist to the deputy director of Dutch intelligence).



The actual appearance of that “face” may well be beside the point—a classic red herring. For it’s a face that resists direct or figurative representation, a notion consistent with the aniconic tendencies of Magid’s practice more generally. Take the process by which Magid extracted the information about the intelligence agents: After gaining security clearance (she herself requested the vetting) and circulating a call for volunteers on the AIVD’s intranet, Magid had a third party arrange meetings with the intelligence agents, who met with the artist in a variety of nondescript settings, from cafés to hotel lobbies to airport lounges. The performative dimension of these encounters placed Magid in a role that at once mimed and transitioned into that of her sub-

jects, for whom role-playing is far more than an occupational hazard: For them, quite literally, such subterfuge is a matter of life and death. In a manner of speaking, Magid’s agency as an artist, now subjected to the protocols of Dutch intelligence, has been rendered a type of *secret* agency, the pun pointing toward the bleed between an individual’s partial autonomy and the institutional demands necessitated by covert operation.

So it’s fitting that the objects resulting from such interactions are both exceedingly plainspoken and frustratingly elliptical. A 2008 series of glowing red neon sculptures, titled “I Can Burn Your Face” (which means “to threaten to expose a spy’s identity”), reproduces, in Magid’s own cursive, brief

descriptions of the agents that she jotted down during her interviews. Sitting directly on the floor, the sculptures collectively amount to a nonfigurative portrait gallery, betraying just enough information about each agent to be suggestive, if not enough to reveal their identities. **LOUD SQUEAKY VOICE** and **DARK PUFFY BOB**, for example, are two of the descriptions that serve as surrogates for “the human face of the organization.” Here Magid’s aesthetic channels Bradley Manning by way of Bruce Nauman: Actual data on these agents was effectively “leaked” but communicated through a self-consciously oblique medium.

When Magid first showed this work in her exhibition “Article 12” at the Stroom gallery in 2008, alongside prints and small figurines, officers from the AIVD visited prior to the opening to vet the materials on view and to ensure that the artist had not taken untoward liberties regarding the identities of their operatives. One imagines that if they’d had any second thoughts as to the prudence of consenting to Magid’s proposal, their uneasiness could only have been heightened by these glowing red descriptors. Indeed, the copious notes the artist used as the basis of her sculpture were likewise being submitted to a different kind of transformation. The status of this information as so much raw data would itself effectively “go undercover” in novelistic form: Magid was in the process of creating a fictionalized account of her interactions with the agents for a book to be called *Becoming Tarden*, in reference to the former intelligence operative at the center of Jerzy Kosinski’s 1975 novel *Cockpit*. Considered in light of the controversy erupting around *Report from Iron Mountain*, Magid’s reverse transformation of her work from “fact” to fiction is critical to the logic of the open secret: The secret in fact depends on such border crossings in order to maintain its cryptic power.

Magid gave the officers a draft of the manuscript for their review, which set off a round of missives replete with not-so-veiled recriminations and references to obscure Dutch penal codes. After her return to New York, the artist was accused of risking state secrets by potentially compromising the identities of the agents. She was forbidden to publish the book; some of her work from “18 Spies,” a series of prints featuring blocks of text that describe the agents’ faces, was confiscated. In August 2008, a representative from the Dutch embassy paid her Brooklyn home a visit in a black sedan. He delivered the manuscript in a discreet brown envelope. Forty percent of the text had been redacted, large swaths rendered provocatively silent.

While redacting nearly half of *Becoming Tarden* might seem warranted in light of the sensitivity of the information involved, the ethical status of the gesture

While redacting nearly half of Magid's novel might seem warranted in light of the sensitivity of the information involved, the ethical status of the Dutch intelligence agency's gesture is not so clear-cut.

Trevor Paglen, *They Watch the Moon*, 2010, color photograph, 36 x 48".

is not so clear-cut. Redaction is inextricable from artistic censorship in this instance, as are the oscillations Magid stages between data and fiction, artist and agent, visibility and invisibility. Such imbrications became all the more evident in the project's next phase. As Magid and the AIVD continued their discussions about the manuscript, an invitation from Tate Modern assistant curator Amy Dickson offered a larger stage on which to exhibit work that would seem, by definition, resistant to exhibition. Ultimately, Magid and the AIVD reached an agreement that would enable her to show the book at the museum, the terms of the deal neatly dramatizing the project's performative dimensions: In a dark gallery, the uncensored manuscript was displayed in a vitrine, physically withheld from the spectator and immune to examination. The manuscript had been bound, but the pages had been torn from the binding; the sundered volume was placed so that only two pages—the nearly blank title page and a page from the epilogue—could be seen. One day after the exhibition closed, the AIVD effectively completed their performance. Visiting the Tate, they removed the book, which then became the property of the Dutch secret service.

THE COVERT SUBLIME

With all the twists and reversals of a good spy story (or, perhaps more aptly, a conspiracy theory), Magid's project culminates with an open secret. A manuscript is displayed at Tate Modern, a museum emblematic of public spectacle, but the contents of that manuscript are rendered as opaque as the work's overall appearance would seem transparent. In the case of the work of Magid's colleague Trevor Paglen, however, this visual logic might not seem as operative. Basic descriptions of his art suggest a reckoning with less evasive subjects: the obdurate materiality of the land, the blunt apparatuses of



the military, astronomical instruments such as drones and satellites. In his exhibition at Altman Siegel, Paglen continued his ongoing exploration of the "black sites" of covert landscapes and the flight paths of "classified spacecraft" (a designation for the wide array of top secret flying objects, from satellites to spy planes, that stealthily fill our skies). In calling the show "Unhuman," he flagged the mechanization of vision enabled by such technologies while pressing the question of agency relative to the constitution of these images.

By exposing the dark corners of the military landscape to wider spectatorship, Paglen's work might seem like an unalloyed gesture of visual disclosure, its aims contiguous with what used to be called the politics of representation. And there's no denying that his art draws its power in no small measure from its ferocious commitment to parsing these dark worlds—a commitment demonstrated by the artist's arduous and exacting research of the declassified record, as well as by his undertaking of physically and logistically difficult processes. But this is only part of the equation—the most graspable part. In point of fact, the work's conflicted visual economy troubles the self-evidence and immediacy of appearances, taking on the ideology of communicational transparency through steady recourse to the genealogies and aesthetics of photographic media. Together,

this complex of interests bears a recursive relationship to the visual mechanisms of the open secret.

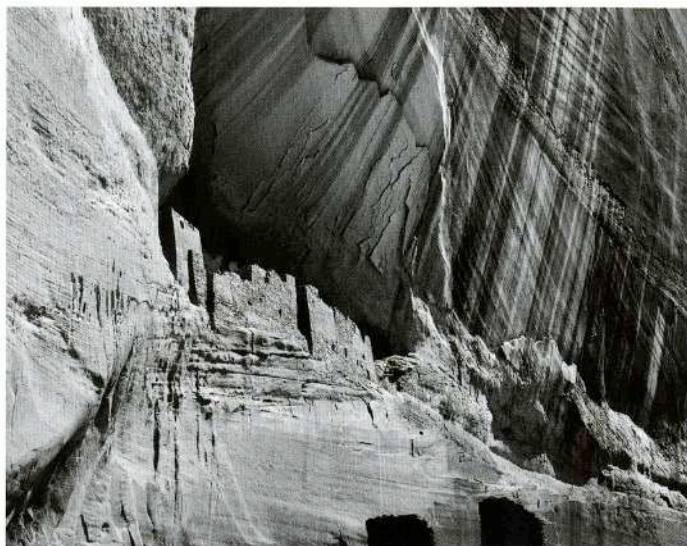
Consider the fundamentals of the artist's process and the web of relations they establish beyond the face of the image. The sociologist Niklas Luhmann might call what Paglen does "second-order observation"—observing the act of observation and necessarily interrupting the seamlessness of that process even as he reproduces its mechanisms. Paglen's series "Limit Telephotography," 2005–2007, for example, looks at classified military installations in the southwestern United States. The inaccessibility of these sites required the use of high-powered binoculars and telescopic lenses to capture their distant representations, which are strikingly hazy and provide little in the way of evidence as to the internal workings of each facility. Any number of images of airplane hangars, proving grounds, and flight test centers, some shot from as far away as twenty-six miles, are more connotative than denotative, more evocative than instructive. Paglen's work does not merely disclose information in this regard—this is far from reportage in any journalistic sense. But neither could you call the series the latest installment in the chronicles of contemporary surveillance art, the narratives of which often reduce to simplistic, monolithic analyses of power and the rhetoric of "the gaze" that underwrite its politics.



Rather, in Paglen's work, the coming-into-view of the appearance of secrecy is registered by the images' atmospheric sensibility. To call them strikingly hazy is to identify their animating contradiction: Paglen's efforts are as occult and abstract as they are revelatory and as beautiful as they are terrifying. A disquieting affinity emerges between what the images disclose as military information and what they suggest as legatees to a particular aesthetic tradition, parts of a history in which issues of photographic visibility are entangled in the mechanical processes of the apparatus. It's this knife-edge

relationship to the objects under observation that cues the precarious nature of Paglen's enterprise. An untitled 2010 C-print of a Reaper drone (the "hunter-killer" much used in the United States' recent military adventures), for example, is a luxurious study in blossoming red, an effect that has been likened to Color-Field painting. Elsewhere, as in his ongoing series of classified spacecraft "The Other Night Sky" (pictured in these pages in March 2009), a field of geostationary satellites scintillates, the arc of their paths competing with the dead light emanating from stars.

Hence the work trades in a kind of cold, glacial visibility that, as one critic recently noted, might evoke the word *sublime*. The term immediately conjures extravagances of nature, not to mention Romantic landscape painting—both of which Paglen's work references. But more to the point, the sublime here corresponds to the *elusiveness* of his subject matter, to what the photographs can't quite capture even as they lay claim to actual phenomena in the world. This, then, is a question of what the open secret licenses relative to what can or can't be thought—because of what can or cannot be represented. If the



Opposite page: Trevor Paglen, *Untitled (Reaper Drone)*, 2010, color photograph, 48 x 60".

Above: Trevor Paglen, *Artifacts (Anasazi Cliff Dwellings, Canyon de Chelly; Spacecraft in Perpetual Geosynchronous Orbit, 35,786 km Above Equator)*, 2010, diptych, two black-and-white photographs, each 40 x 50".



Paglen's art proffers a visibility that can only be partial, because it is organized around the requirements of secrecy, on the one hand, and generated from information too terrifying to assimilate, on the other.

philosophical traditions around the sublime, from Longinus to Kant to Lyotard to Jean-Luc Nancy, speak to the failures of representation, the limits of ontology, and the failure of the imagination to close the gap between reason and sense, Paglen tracks these issues as a function of what might be called the military-aesthetic complex. His art proffers a visibility that can only be partial, because it is organized around the requirements of secrecy, on the one hand, and generated from information too terrifying to assimilate, on the other.

In a 2010 diptych called *Artifacts (Anasazi Cliff Dwellings, Canyon de Chelly; Spacecraft in Perpetual Geosynchronous Orbit, 35,786 km Above Equator)*, this dynamic finds a genealogical touchstone. On the left is a black-and-white image of an Anasazi cliff dwelling at Canyon de Chelly in Arizona. Referencing

the inaugural moment of photography in the nineteenth century, it calls on the ghost of Timothy O'Sullivan, whose canonical images of the Southwest supported photography's progressive claims to the status of art. The picture on the right—a depiction of classified spacecraft in “perpetual geosynchronous orbit”—solicits more contemporary associations. The long exposure time required to track these instruments results in a field of black laced with luminous white streaks, inverting the formal characteristics as well as the topological interests of the image on the left. The geologic striations at Canyon de Chelly, dark against light, find a figure/ground reversal in the photograph of the night sky; likewise, the earthbound image reflects its binocular complement in the extraterrestrial representation.

The intertwining does not stop there, however, as the diptych also invokes both the histories and the temporalities that structure the emergence of these images. O'Sullivan's work, after all, was sponsored by the US Geological Survey, that colossal effort to rationalize hitherto “unknown” territory in the interests of western expansion. By now, though, the aesthetic dimensions of such images have largely outstripped their associations with manifest destiny; they have virtually congealed into an image as seemingly self-evident as the monumental rock face of Canyon de Chelly. The picture on the right reproduces this process of surveying and surveillance in the present. The streaks in Paglen's image index the passage of time no less insistently than a blurred face or body in an old long-exposure albumen print, albeit with new technological mediations. An image of astronomical duration, it follows the trail of the

earlier history, if literally elevating it to a celestial register, and cedes the task of the photographer to instruments without human agency.

Paglen's work doesn't traffic in the performative scenarios that Magid's project does, but it betrays a particular attitude to photographic evidence and its truth claims, which, for Paglen, themselves constitute a kind of fiction. In recent years, art criticism, inspired in part by the philosophy of Jacques Rancière, has dwelled on the fictive dimension of contemporary art and politics: In such readings, aesthetics is a means of delimiting what can and cannot be perceived or thought and thus, for all intents and purposes, of creating reality; and history is a function of the fictionalizing impulse that Rancière sees as central to modern cognition. My argument falls to the side of such accounts, which tend to sponsor work addressing progressive politics and their potential for collective imaginaries. But as *Report from Iron Mountain* demonstrated—and as both Magid's and Paglen's work does in the present—the open secret is indivisible from such fictions even while it impacts material reality. The open secret, in a manner of speaking, is the dark underbelly of Rancière's prospective enlightenment. Indeed, while we cannot fail to acknowledge the secret's existence in the guise of its familiar media codes—the “leak,” the “whistle-blower,” the Internet meme that gains traction even while it hurtles through the ether—we can only fail to assimilate its message, given the partial character of its appearance. Hovering within and outside visibility, it commands its power by means of a revelation we can never fully know. □

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