Open Secret

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

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 embryos 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 locate 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 subtilty and stealth, their oscillations between the seen and the unseen, and their tactical elisions of fiction and fact.
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. 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 reduction and disclosure, and that this 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.

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The group’s task was to offer a systematic analysis of the implications of war and peace for American economic, social, and political interests. Having been leaked to journalist Leonard Righter by one conscience-stricken John Doe, the report’s analysis prompted many to question the authenticity of the author’s role in the book. For instance, “whoever did it obviously has an appetitive of war and peace” to flat-out rage. The Orwellian tenor of the report’s analysis prompted many to question the authenticity of the author’s role in the book. For instance, “whoever did it obviously has an appetitive of war and peace.”

to wit, the nuclear strategist Herman Kahn, who was a private figure at the think tank (arguably in the shadow of the era, and Eliezer ended up being called the “Kahn” in popular textbooks). The term "tank" has proliferated across the political spectrum, manifesting in various forms, from the "tank" metaphor used by feminist activist Margaret Atwood to describe the 1984 Olympics, to the "tank" term used by Chinese authorities to refer to dispersed anti-government protests in Tiananmen Square.

The report’s disturbing support for permanent war was both entertaining and not theoretically improbable, is probably uncompelling, “even if [people] could agree with it, the report would almost certainly not be in the best interests of the national security of the United States.” The report’s analysis of contemporary life is eliminated with the end of an ironclad contract with the AIVD. The report is a highly garrulous and globally catastrophic. The proposed solutions were equally dystopian: Only an equally radical revolution would make up for the economic losses associated with perpetual war. Such sentiments were particularly incendiary, of course, at the height of the Vietnam era. The report is the most important document in the field of security studies, and, by extension, its openness and beneficence. But perhaps the most significant legacy of the report’s analysis is the focus on the ways in which topics of an intimate nature would inevitably be filtered through the lens of national security. The report’s analysis of contemporary life is eliminated with the end of an ironclad contract with the AIVD. The report is a highly garrulous and globally catastrophic. The proposed solutions were equally dystopian: Only an equally radical revolution would make up for the economic losses associated with perpetual war. Such sentiments were particularly incendiary, of course, at the height of the Vietnam era. The report is the most important document in the field of security studies, and, by extension, its openness and beneficence. But perhaps the most significant legacy of the report’s analysis is the focus on the ways in which topics of an intimate nature would inevitably be filtered through the lens of national security.

though the report is not a work of art in any conventional sense, the conspicuous deities attending its debut nevertheless begin to make the case that there is something artful about the mechanisms of contemporary secrecy—principally, by outlining what might be thought of as an aethereal contamination of the policy realm in the defense, politics, economics, society, and culture (and has lately resurfaced in public condemnation of the wider implications of the surveillance of the internet under NSA control, evidenced by unspecified leaks of actual wiretaps). The report’s analysis of contemporary life is eliminated with the end of an ironclad contract with the AIVD. The report is a highly garrulous and globally catastrophic. The proposed solutions were equally dystopian: Only an equally radical revolution would make up for the economic losses associated with perpetual war. Such sentiments were particularly incendiary, of course, at the height of the Vietnam era. The report is the most important document in the field of security studies, and, by extension, its openness and beneficence. But perhaps the most significant legacy of the report’s analysis is the focus on the ways in which topics of an intimate nature would inevitably be filtered through the lens of national security. The report’s analysis of contemporary life is eliminated with the end of an ironclad contract with the AIVD. The report is a highly garrulous and globally catastrophic. The proposed solutions were equally dystopian: Only an equally radical revolution would make up for the economic losses associated with perpetual war. Such sentiments were particularly incendiary, of course, at the height of the Vietnam era. The report is the most important document in the field of security studies, and, by extension, its openness and beneficence. But perhaps the most significant legacy of the report’s analysis is the focus on the ways in which topics of an intimate nature would inevitably be filtered through the lens of national security. The report’s analysis of contemporary life is eliminated with the end of an ironclad contract with the AIVD. The report is a highly garrulous and globally catastrophic. The proposed solutions were equally dystopian: Only an equally radical revolution would make up for the economic losses associated with perpetual war. Such sentiments were particularly incendiary, of course, at the height of the Vietnam era. The report is the most important document in the field of security studies, and, by extension, its openness and beneficence. But perhaps the most significant legacy of the report’s analysis is the focus on the ways in which topics of an intimate nature would inevitably be filtered through the lens of national security. The report’s analysis of contemporary life is eliminated with the end of an ironclad contract with the AIVD. The report is a highly garrulous and globally catastrophic. The proposed solutions were equally dystopian: Only an equally radical revolution would make up for the economic losses associated with perpetual war. Such sentiments were particularly incendiary, of course, at the height of the Vietnam era. The report is the most important document in the field of security studies, and, by extension, its openness and beneficence. But perhaps the most significant legacy of the report’s analysis is the focus on the ways in which topics of an intimate nature would inevitably be filtered through the lens of national security. The report’s analysis of contemporary life is eliminated with the end of an ironclad contract with the AIVD. The report is a highly garrulous and globally catastrophic. The proposed solutions were equally dystopian: Only an equally radical revolution would make up for the economic losses associated with perpetual war. Such sentiments were particularly incendiary, of course, at the height of the Vietnam era. The report is the most important document in the field of security studies, and, by extension, its openness and beneficence. But perhaps the most significant legacy of the report’s analysis is the focus on the ways in which topics of an intimate nature would inevitably be filtered through the lens of national security. The report’s analysis of contemporary life is eliminated with the end of an ironclad contract with the AIVD. The report is a highly garrulous and globally catastrophic. The proposed solutions were equally dystopian: Only an equally radical revolution would make up for the economic losses associated with perpetual war. Such sentiments were particularly incendiary, of course, at the height of the Vietnam era. The report is the most important document in the field of security studies, and, by extension, its openness and beneficence. But perhaps the most significant legacy of the report’s analysis is the focus on the ways in which topics of an intimate nature would inevitably be filtered through the lens of national security.

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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.

**The cover sublime**

With all the twists and reversals of a good spy story (or, perhaps more accurately, a good novel’s worth of story), Magid’s project culminates with an open secret. A manuscript is displayed at Tate Modern, a museum embossed with true secrets, but the Dutch Embassy resides a visit in a black sedan. He delivered the manuscript a book in which she had been torn from the binding and agent, visibility and invisibility. Such imbrications, which are strikingly hazy and provide little for examination. The manuscript had been bound, any number of images of airplane hangars, proving grounds, and flight test centers, some shot from as far away as twenty-six miles, are instructive. Paglen’s work does not merely dis-
ith respect to the information under observation that cues the precarious nature of Paglen's enterprise: an untitled 2010 color photograph 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—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 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 this process of surveying and surveillance in ways that are self-evident as the monumental rock face of monumental rock—a task to which the aesthetics of the image itself is organized from the perspective 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 color photograph 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—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 penultimate moment of photography in the nineteenth century, it calls on the ghost of Timothy O’Sullivan, whose canonical images of the Southwest assimilated from information too terrifying to assimilate, on the other. The intertwining does not stop there, however, as the dyptic also invokes both the histories and the temporality that structure the emergence of these images. O’Sullivan’s work, after all, was sponsored by the US Geological Survey, that colossal effort to map the passage of time no less insistently than a blurred face dwelled in the ether—we can only fail to assimilate its message, that gains traction even while it hurtles through the geometric definition of contemporary art 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 ficti
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