Aesthetics of the Secret

Clare Birchall

Essay – October 9, 2015

Clare Birchall attempts to set up an 'aesthetics of the secret' against the background of the revelations of Edward Snowden. She discusses secrets as subject to and the subject of radical politics rather than regulation and looks at the secret not only as it figures in current affairs but also in artworks by Trevor Paglen and Jill Magid. *Aesthetics of the Secret* is part of *Culture of Control* [www.onlineopen.org/culture-of-control], a collaboration with Stroom Den Haag.

Figure 4: Jill Magid, *I Can Burn Your Face*, wall-mounted title piece, 7mm Neon, transformers and wires, Article 12, Stroom, The Hague, 2008. Courtesy the artist.

The Secret itself is much more beautiful than its revelation.
—Jill Magid, epigraph to *Becoming Tarden*, 2009

Since June 2013, the United States National Security Agency's secrets have been spilled on a daily basis. They were revealed in the *Guardian* and other newspapers, on TV, in the blogosphere and on social networking sites; hard to miss, one might say. What would it mean, therefore, to suggest that we have not fully seen or heard those revelations? In reigniting a familiar debate about the balance between state security and individual privacy, the revelations of former NSA contractor Edward Snowden have stalled on matters of regulation and reform, which treat secrecy, securitization and surveillance largely in procedural terms (whether a warrant is needed; the difference between data and metadata; whether US citizens as well as foreign nationals can be spied upon; how long

data can be retained, etc.). Suggested government reform misses the problem (far from curtailing mass surveillance, it might very well be "permanently entrenching it in American law") [1] and a direct look at the politics of secrecy and the value of the secret at a geopolitical level has had an oddly depoliticizing, perhaps even obfuscating, effect.

This article configures secrets as subject to and the subject of radical politics rather than regulation. It is a modest attempt to interrupt the containment strategies of communicative capitalism / democracy evident in the current debate by giving attention less to a *hermeneutics* of the secret, which set up the secret as a problem to be solved through revelation and interpretation, and more to an *aesthetics* of the secret. Its premise is that we might be better able to form a radical political response to the "Snowden event" by situating the secret "itself" within a distributive regime and imagining what collectivities and subjectivities the secret makes available (rather than those that it closes down). [2] As a central element of this speculative argument, I want to look at the secret not only as it figures in current affairs but also in artworks by Trevor Paglen and Jill Magid, an analysis of which will help us shift from a purely hermeneutic consideration of the secret, interested in questions of meaning and interpretive challenges, to an aesthetics concerned with the distributive as well as affective force of the secret. These works place secrecy, rather than the more individualistic notion of privacy, in the foreground. They help us to stay with the secret as secret, instead of moving too quickly toward revelation and reform. They present secrets as processes operating within a particular delimitation of space, time, the visible, the sayable, the audible and political experience – what Jacques Rancière calls the "distribution of the sensible." [3] I suggest that the Snowden event had all the markings of a properly political redistribution of the sensible, but that it has been contained by dominant presentations of the problem.

I argue that in order to mount an enduring political response, we need to consider subjectivities available to us after Snowden. On a collective level, this might entail thinking and identifying horizontally under the banner of the "datatariat." I use this term to indicate a "class" encouraged to make use of and be used as data; a mass connected through data access, production, accumulation and exploitation. For the datatariat, data is the prime currency, vector, commodity, life-blood. It is the means employed by third parties to evaluate the data subject's worth but it can also serve as the basis for a politics that puts first not privacy, but rather a secrecy that interferes with the dominant distribution of the sensible. In the later stages of the article, I will turn to Martiniquan philosopher Édouard Glissant's notion of a "right to opacity." As a way of presenting a subject who does not comply with the demand to be knowable, understood and transparent, Glissant's right to opacity chimes with the willing turn from cognition to aesthetics identified in the art of Paglen and Magid. It is this that will help us to imagine a politics of the secret not bound to policy and legalities.

The Ground: 1. #Patriot or #Traitor

We are now living in the wake of the revelations made by security contractor Edward Snowden about the reach and capacities of the American National Security Agency, the UK 's Government Communications Headquarters and other members of the "Five Eyes." The leaked classified material made it clear that these agencies are able to access the servers of tech giants such as Google, Microsoft and Apple; monitor social media applications in real time; intercept and, for a time, store data and metadata relayed over fibre-optic cables; collect the phone records of American nationals; and work with the telecommunications industry to undermine Internet encryption. It is not only the content of the files that is of note – it is also the scale of the leak. The Pentagon announced in early 2014 that Snowden had committed the biggest theft of US secrets in history: intelligence files numbering as many as 1.7 million. [4]

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed account of the revelations, or of

Snowden's search for a state that would give him safe haven, the role played by journalists such as Glenn Greenwald, Laura Poitras and Barton Gellman, or the presentation of the story by established news outlets and its dissemination on social media. However, as my argument rests on the claim that the revelations were configured as objects of regulation rather than radical politics, I will give a brief account of the discursive ground as it developed in the months following the Snowden revelations in June 2013.

Very quickly the debate polarized. Champions of civil liberties decried governments' warrantless access to private data; their opponents defended the necessity of mass surveillance in a post-9 / 11 security landscape, especially in an era of digital and mobile communication. To the former, Snowden was a patriotic whistleblower in need of protection; to the latter, he was a traitor who should be punished. Civil rights advocacy groups such as Amnesty International, Transparency International and Human Rights Watch have all defended Snowden as a champion of privacy rights, while former US Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton, [5] Australia's foreign minister Julie Bishop, [6] House Speaker John Boehner, [7] and Senator Dianne Feinstein [8] are among those who have presented the Snowden leaks as an act of treason that seriously jeopardized the security of the US. This oppositional framing of the Snowden event has shaped public discourse. Public opinion polls in the weeks after the story broke, for example, asked either / or questions that implied a clear choice between opposing positions. [9] And after airing its exclusive interview with Snowden in May 2014, NBC asked viewers to take a stand: "Do you view former NSA contractor Edward Snowden as a #Patriot or a #Traitor? Post your message on Twitter using the appropriate hashtag." [10]

Moral inflection aside, at the heart of all this is the perennial debate about the trade-off between national security and individual privacy. In the absence of any way of resolving the issue, political discourse has focused on questions of definition, regulation and reform. To take one prominent example, the Obama administration was at great pains to establish a distinction between data and metadata, as though making clear that the NSA was interested only in the latter would appease critics. On 7 June 2013, Obama made the following statement: "Nobody is listening to your telephone calls. That's not what this program's about . … [W]hat the intelligence community is doing is looking at phone numbers and durations of calls. They are not looking at people's names, and they're not looking at content. But by sifting through this so-called metadata, they may identify potential leads with respect to folks who might engage in terrorism." [11] The distinction between data and metadata, and a further distinction between American and non-American targets, have been central in discussion of the legal question as to whether or not a warrant is needed for monitoring and surveillance.

These debates treat the Snowden event either in macro conceptual terms (e. g., privacy versus security) or in terms of micro legal and procedural issues (such as the data / metadata distinction). Both approaches involve assumptions that do not lend the Snowden event to radical politics. The opposition between privacy and security, for example, positions the citizen as an individual first and foremost, for whom collectivity is envisaged and imagined by the securitized state (as a "nation-in-need-of-protection"). Just as limiting, the micro legal and procedural questions reduce the problem to one of scope rather than ethics or politics. For example, an Obama administration fact-sheet entitled "Proposal for Ending the Section 215 Bulk Telephony Metadata Program" states that the president is recommending restricting NSA queries regarding metadata to "within two hops of the selection term being used, instead of three." [12] (Two hops, as journalist and activist Trevor Timm points out, still means tens of thousands of people. [13]) There has been much discussion of how intelligence operations should be regulated and reformed, but beyond the concern about privacy, little has been said about the affect of dataveillance on agency and subjectivity and even less regarding ways we might think differently about the geopolitical value currently ascribed to intelligence.

For those interested in configuring secrets as a properly political subject, it is necessary to

sidestep the debate as constructed by mainstream discourse. It is more productive, I would argue, to stay with the secret, interrupt the configuration of the secret as a rhetorical problem subject to legal tweaking, or as an entrenched component of the security industrial complex. It is the secret, prior to any appropriation by the state, which can aid the subjectivization necessary for a radical political response to the state's treatment of its citizens as data objects of only algorithmic import.[14] If secrets are left only to the securitizing state, or passed over in favour of privacy, the Left will have missed an opportunity.

The Ground: 2. Aesthetics

In an attempt to "stay with the secret" and interrupt the dominant discourse surrounding secrecy, I will seek help from certain artworks and an "aesthetics of the secret." Such an endeavour requires a few preliminary remarks about aesthetics and secrets when approached together. Can aesthetic experiences and judgments be brought to bear on that which does not present itself, that which is intended to be neither seen nor heard? What kind of judgement, affective response or sensory contemplation can be elicited by a formless, unrepresentable entity like the secret? Can a secret be an aesthetic object at all?

In some ways, the secret is the ideal aesthetic object for, in being by definition that which is unknown, it resists cognitive judgement. This turn from knowledge arguably opens the way for a purely aesthetic response. The secret, as the epigraph from Magid with which I opened this article suggests, is more "beautiful" – perhaps beautiful *only*; subject to aesthetic judgement and affect *only* – when it is concealed. Once revealed, the secret is translated into knowledge, confession, evidence or statement and becomes subject to cognitive judgement, particularly questions of veracity. As the aesthetic is usually associated with the visible, presentable or audible, the secret tests (*productively*, I will argue) its very limits.

Artworks by Paglen and Magid offer an alternative to traditional framings of the secret. By asking us to "stay with" and "encounter" the secret rather than positioning it as a problem to be solved (through moral discourse, say, or legislation), these works move us from a *hermeneutics* of the secret to an *aesthetics* of the secret. That is, we shift from a concern with meaning to an affective register. When knowledge is lacking and cognition is interrupted, as it must be in the case of a secret (even an "open secret"), an aesthetic response or field opens up. Rancière's work, to which I will explicitly turn in the later stages of this article but which informs the discussion throughout, demonstrates that this aesthetic turn does not have to involve a retreat from political concerns. Rancière uses the term "aesthetics" to refer to "the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience."[15]

If in principle the "sensible" is common to all, available to all, in practice access is distributed or determined by one's social status and occupation. Aesthetics for Rancière is a distributive regime determining what judgement, action, reaction and thought is possible in any given situation. Though not considered by Rancière, secrets seem central to these discussions as in their own way, they operate as regulatory mechanisms that manage *aisthēta*, or, perceptible things, people, histories, data and voices. To borrow from Rancière's lexicon we could say that Paglen's and Magid's art helps us to focus less on a distribution of knowledge and more on a "distribution of the sensible." Crucially for the current article, his understanding of politics as an equitable distribution of the sensible governed by certain conditions of possibility for that which can be perceived, essentially renders politics an *aesthetic* order. For Rancière, aesthetics and politics are conjoined because in every distribution of the sensible equality is either undermined or affirmed.

In the shift from the cognitive toward the aesthetic prompted by certain artworks, and in

Rancière's reading of aesthetics as a political and ethical distribution of the sensible, we are offered a different vantage point from which to consider a contemporary politics of the secret. Reading the artworks and Rancière together, we can see the potential for a proper politicization of the secret. In order to realize this potential, I will have to move one step further in the final stages of this article, somewhat counterintuitively toward the dark (and the concept of the secret in and of itself) rather than light (transparency or revelation). But before this, I want to introduce a schema or map to help with navigation.

The Map

I am aware of the limitations and risks inherent in cartographic and taxonomic endeavours. Despite the obvious pitfalls, however, the table below will help to show how relationships between secrecy, knowledge and aesthetics are configured as well as where particular artworks might fit in. While the aesthetic and the conceptual are traditionally seen as incommensurable in Kantian philosophy, both will be required here if we are to grasp the challenge any move from a distribution of knowledge to a distribution of the sensible poses to the status of the secret.

Distribution of Knowledge

A	B	C	D
Known Known	Unknown Known	Known Unknown	Unknown Unknown
Revelation / Presentation	Lost / Rendered invisible	Open secret / Half secret	Secret
Aesthetics / Anti-Aesthetics	Anaesthesia	Aestheticized	Non-Aesthetic

Distribution of the Sensible

The Coordinates: A

The far left column is the category in which perceivable things reveal themselves to the human senses and so become subject to both cognitive and aesthetic judgement. This is the traditional arena for aesthetics because it is here that objects, people, things, art, music, representations, acts and nature present themselves; once perceptible, they can then be judged according to certain aesthetic criteria and elicit particular feelings and responses. While the aesthetic must resist becoming subject to knowledge, in cognitive terms this category is best indicated as the "known known."[16] This is not an uncontroversial category in either cognitive or aesthetic terms. In what sense the revealed is fully present or known has been a matter of contention for thinkers from Plato to Freud, or Hume to Derrida. Some artworks themselves problematize the idea of the presentable. Conceptual art has instantiated "a dematerialization of the art object" resulting in art that privileges ideas or process over materiality.[17] Jean-François Lyotard has described modern art as that which challenges the sublime "to make visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible," that which "enable[s] us to see only by making it impossible to see."[18] That as much is held back as given forth in artifacts here leads us to see that even this category is always in a relation with the unpresentable and the secret. Nevertheless, even conceptual art and non-figurative art presents *something* – the work of art as process to be witnessed, an idea communicated through medium, an abstraction, a study in form – that engages with particular senses and prompts affect. Even art that challenges certain aesthetic criteria (beauty in particular), or resists an aesthetic experience like the sublime, can be productively placed in this category. This is because even anti-aesthetic art relies heavily on sense perceptions, judgements and criteria against which it reacts.

The Coordinates: B

Moving from left to right, the next column pertains to all things that were at some point perceivable, and therefore subject to cognitive judgement as well as aesthetic criteria and experience, but that are now gone from view. It is important to emphasize that these things are not hidden as such, but rather lost or rendered invisible. Knowledge of these things has been, and may still be available, but the things have perhaps been forgotten or un-known: knowledge and perception have been disabled or deactivated through a drive that retreats from presence to non-presentability. In cognitive terms, they are the "unknown known." The trace of aesthetic affect lingers and absence elicits new feelings about the freshly emptied space.

Specific examples of artworks that fall into this category were included in two exhibitions from 2012: *Invisible: Art About the Unseen 1957–2012* (London, Hayward Gallery, 12 June – 5 August 2012) and *Gallery of Lost Art* (online exhibition curated by Tate, 2 July 2012 – 2 July 2013). In Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), which appeared in both exhibitions, the scuffed surface leaves tantalizing hints of the de Kooning that Rauschenberg took three months to erase. [19] The title, author and date, inscribed in the border by Jasper Johns, seal the status of the piece as "unknown known": we know what is now unavailable to perception. We are invited to speculate or dream about the drawing that has been usurped by stubborn remnants. Our experience of this artwork is guided by and reliant upon knowledge regarding the artwork's history: it only works if we value what has been lost. Rauschenberg understood this; his early experiments with erasing his own drawings had little of the impact he was after. "It had to begin as art," he explains. It had to be "an important piece." [20] It had to have been present and perceptible as an aesthetic object in order to be able to resonate as a loss.

As well as erased or disappeared art, the Tate's Gallery of Lost Art project gathered stories of artworks that were destroyed (including Tracey Emin's *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995* (1995), which perished in a fire at Charles Saatchi's warehouse), stolen (Lucian Freud's *Portrait of Francis Bacon* (1952) taken while on exhibition in Germany), discarded (paintings by Francis Bacon who carefully controlled his public oeuvre), transient (such as Rachel Whiteread's concrete cast of the interior of a Victorian terraced *House* (1993) intended to be demolished) and of course lost (all record of Frida Kahlo's *The Wounded Table* (1940), lent to the Russian ambassador to Mexico, has vanished).

We might also want to include in category B (or the next, C) suppressed or censored art: art that is not given a legitimate public stage on which to circulate. The status of suppressed or censored art is wholly contingent on a politico-aesthetic regime and is subject to change – enabling an artwork to move from B to category A, becoming present and potentially knowable. There is nothing intrinsically imperceptible or unknowable about these works when given the right climate for reception. These works are rendered secret by authorities, but because of interest accumulated through political resistance, martyrdom or cult status, such works are rarely entirely secret, particularly in an Internet age that enables easy dissemination beyond national borders. Often, the artworks themselves or knowledge of them circulate via underground and / or anonymous viral networks.

I have linked this category with the term "anaesthesia": loss of sensation. In the examples above, sight is the sense most clearly denied or lost. And yet, the loss does not eradicate the sensation altogether because of the nature of imagination and memory. We might experience a real or imagined memory of a lost artwork; mourning or loss might "reconstruct" the artwork until it is all but materialized. In light of this, we could say that Rauschenberg's erasing is haunted by the de Kooning drawing, and that what we experience here is a revenant – a visible ghost. Anaesthesia, then, might entail a loss of sensation but instigate the sensation of loss.

The Coordinates: C

The third category is that of the open secret or, in cognitive terms, the "known unknown." It is in this category that the work of Paglen and Magid most easily sit. Its engagement with and exploration of the open secret can, I argue, assist a move from reading secrets as a distribution of the *cognizable* to seeing them in terms of a distribution of the *sensible*. This has important implications for a politics of the secret.

The work of both Paglen and Magid addresses the material shifts that occur, not through revelation, but concealment "itself." [21] Paglen has claimed that for him, secrecy is not an "abstract idea" but "a series of physical, legal, social, cultural, economic institutions, and as such it is made out of the same stuff as the rest of the world." [22] Secrecy, that is, has a materiality, leaving traces that can consequently become the focus of artistic practice. In different ways, the art of both Paglen and Magid speaks to an aesthetics of the secret by bringing the secret, systems of secrecy, withholding, obfuscation and opacity into the realm of the sensible, finding what Paglen names "indirect" ways of seeing and showing the secret and secrecy in the same way that astronomers have found ways to see and show dark matter. These artworks are not only "in relation" to the unpresentable in the way that all representations are, but take unpresentability in the form of the secret as their explicit subject.

If the principal trajectory of the lost art to be found in B is from presence and revelation toward non-presentability / perceptibility, the material in category C moves in the opposite direction, from non-presentability / perceptibility toward (though stopping way short of full) presence or revelation. Category C thus refers to the open or half secret. There are at least four, not wholly distinct, kinds of open secret. First, an open secret is that which "paradoxically announces its clandestine quality by virtue of its public appearance." [23] We might at some level know that the secret exists, but we do not have access to its content. Second, an open secret could be that which everybody unofficially knows or suspects, but proof (and therefore knowledge) of which remains elusive. The "secret" sexual orientation of certain officially heterosexual Hollywood stars would constitute one example. Another would be the understanding that the US government conducted surveillance on its own people before the Snowden revelations. Snowden simply provided the proof and detail, turning the open secret into a revelation. (This is often cited as the reason why the revelations have failed to exercise some citizens: at some level citizens already understood themselves as surveilled subjects, not least because of the revelations during the Bush administration in 2005 about warrantless wiretapping. [24]) The third kind of open secret is one that has been revealed, but the revelation has had no discernible effects in the world, does not behave or resonate as a revelation. Revelations can be rendered ineffectual for all kinds of reasons: lack of media coverage, media coverage that does not allow for a real response, political whitewashing, dearth of public interest. They can also be muted because the difference between a secret and a revelation can be derailed in psycho-social terms. In other words, when faced with a revelation about political malfeasance, a cognizant public might act *as if* it did not know. This acting *as if* resonates with Slavoj Žižek's reformulation of ideology, which he configures not as a lie taken for truth, but as a lie we readily accommodate. In his well-known formulation he writes, "The emperor is naked and the media trumpet forth the fact, yet no one seems really to mind – that is, people continue to act as if the emperor were not naked." [25] Lastly, and this open secret is in fact an extension of the third, we can think of Michael Taussig's constitutive "public secret," referring to "that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated." [26]

All forms of the open secret challenge standard assumptions about the cognitive process and template: an open secret requires us to know and not know at the same time. This chink in the chain of cognition, this acknowledgement of knowledge's fallibility and accommodation of its lack leaves space that can be filled by the aesthetic. This is

important because it offers ground from which to view and experience the politics of secrecy different from that on which the debate has taken place thus far.

Certain artworks and artists can instigate or negotiate this turn by moving us from a hermeneutic concern with the meaning or content of a secret to an affective response to form. My first example is the work of Paglen. Paglen focuses on what theorist Pamela M. Lee archly describes as the "military-aesthetic- complex" [27] and as such, his art is very much engaged with the open secret, particularly but not exclusively the first type described above: known form, the content of which is classified. From his work on extraordinary rendition, *Torture Taxi* (2006), to his collection of military patches "for programs, units, and activities that are officially secret," [28] Paglen repeatedly invites us to encounter the limits of visibility and experience secrecy's form, rather than find meaning or content through total revelation.

The lettering on one of the military patches collected by Paglen gave him the title of the print version of the project: I could tell you but then you would have to be destroyed by me – a passive phrasing of an intelligence cliché used in many popular cultural representations of clandestine work. Emblazoned with the Latin version, *Si Ego Certiorem Faciam Mihi Tu Delenous Eris*, the patch (fig. 1) invites interpretation only to exclude the linguistically initiated on translation. The meaning, in other words, leads us nowhere. There are no visual clues; the patch is unusual, in fact, for its lack of figurative imagery. A black background seems to absorb the possibility of representation (and interpretation) bar the red Latin text, the meaning of which prohibits further knowing. The patch, Paglen informs readers in accompanying text, "was designed as a generic insignia for 'black' projects conducted by the Navy's Air Test and Evaluation Squadron Four (VX-4) based at Point Mugu, California." [29] We can *look* at the patch, feel the exclusion, witness secretion from the dark side, but we cannot know the nature of these black projects.

Figure 1: Trevor Paglen, *I Could Tell You But Then You Would Have to be Destroyed by Me*, patch, 2006. Courtesy the artist, Altman Siegel, Metro Pictures and Galerie Thomas Zander.

The patch is a holding space for a secret that cannot be told – a visual marker of clandestine activity that wants to be commended and commemorated without being known. These patches are signifiers that bar access to the signified: an exemplary performance of a secret that can announce form but not content. Interpretation and cognition are stalled by the open secret.

Figure 2: Trevor Paglen, *NOYFB*, patch, 2006. Courtesy the artist, Altman Siegel, Metro Pictures and Galerie Thomas Zander.

There is a similar logic at work in *NOYFB* (fig. 2), an insignia from the 22nd Military Airlift Squadron, "which flew c-5 cargo aircraft out of Travis Air Force Base in Northern California." [30] Rubbing against the warning, NOYFB (an acronym obviously for "none of your fucking business"), the punctuation in the centre posits the secret operation as a mystery. While the question mark invites us to approach the patch as a hermeneutic problem, the patch as a whole points to the limits of interpretation.

The crescent moon, an inverted version of the image which appears on many Islamic flags, is suggestive of an operation that takes place in the darkness of night rather than in daylight. If, as former Associate Justice of the US Supreme Court Louis Brandeis wrote, "sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants," the moon is a poor substitute – only able to weakly reflect rather than produce light. [31] The moon provides only enough light for us to know that there is something here we cannot know – to understand that we are in the presence of an open secret. Updating Althusserian interpellation, Rancière writes that it is no longer a case of the subject of ideology being hailed into being by a "Hey, you there!" but that we are now told, "Move along! There's nothing to see here." [32] It is *none of our fucking business*. What this patch communicates is the subtext of Rancière's formulation: "Move along! There is something to see here, but only by those with security clearance." As visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff puts it in his study of visuality and authority, "there is [something to see], and we know it and so do they." [33] In other words, it is, after all, precisely *our fucking business*.

In terms of the open secret, these military patches seem exemplary. In a visual culture, the act of marking classified military operations presents a paradox. The patches capitulate to the temptation to recognize, belong, commemorate, take pride in, even while confidentiality is written into the code of practice and entire logic of clandestine work. They speak to a desire for the secret to be known as secret, to be an open secret: no real knowledge at all. We can say, therefore, that no knowledge and, consequently, no catharsis is on offer here. The patch "NOYFB" is a question that cannot be uttered – "Don't ask!" it tells us. We are requested, or rather instructed, not to ask or interpret. In a poignant mirroring of the animating logic here, Paglen's representation of these patches itself transforms a refusal of knowledge into an aesthetic object.

Paglen's work here is curatorial. He carefully yet "artlessly" or blankly presents us with

both images of original patches and images scanned from reproductions. In this act of assemblage, Paglen makes the images resonate in their official muteness. They become interesting, collectively, for how they don't communicate rather than for what they do. They might demand our attention as a hermeneutic problem, but refuse to cooperate under such an approach. The onlooker is excluded from knowledge and knowing, left with the affective intensity of a refusal.

Limit Telephotography (2005–2007) also presents us with an open secret and, therefore, a cognitive fissure that opens the way for aesthetic and affective concerns. This set of photographs of secret military bases shows us Paglen asking himself how he can make visible that which institutionally and physically resists technologies of representation. This is both a technological-practical, as well as an aesthetic question.

Figure 3: Trevor Paglen, *Open Hangar, Cactus Flats, NV, Distance 18 miles, 10:04 am* , C-Print, 2007. Courtesy the artist, Altman Siegel, Metro Pictures and Galerie Thomas Zander.

The spaces Paglen is interested in are classified bases so remote that they cannot be seen by the unassisted human eye. He tackles the technical difficulty of photographing matter across miles of thick atmosphere by repurposing lenses intended for astrophotography. Film historian Henrik Gustafsson describes them as "images of the limits of what we are capable of seeing, of a place where seeing ends, where the law is blind." [34] They are also, as art historian John Beck writes, "images of absent content." [35] The results are suggestive and abstract rather than evidential. They appear less like fixed images and more like processes; the interference of dust and heat makes them seem as though they are coming in or out of focus and leave the onlooker in a suspended state of curiosity and expectation teetering on the edge of fear, disappointment or frustration.

Lee writes, "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." [36] Lee's subtle invocation of the language of the sublime hints at the ironic resonance between these landscapes and the photography of Ansel Adams (which Paglen himself cites as a source of inspiration). [37] The landscapes of both photographers invoke the pleasure of pain that results from being unable to present the absolute, [38] but by using very different registers of representation (Adams's high resolution images and Paglen's

abstraction), and in reference to different ideas of the absolute (Adams's nature / God as opposed to Paglen's all powerful state and the secret as such). Unlike Adams's iconic photographs of America's national parks, Paglen's pictures point to non-public space, a clandestine national park – a covert state within a state. The spaces that Paglen photographs belong to the state, but not to the collection of people known as "the nation." The landscapes were "purloined," as Beck puts it, for military-industrial interests. "The appropriation of millions of acres of Western land for military purposes after the attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 (under the principle of eminent domain, whereby the federal or state government is able to claim private land for its own use), removed huge areas of one of the most photographed landscapes in the world from public scrutiny."[39]

Paglen's images unsettle and dismantle the national pride and identity that Adams's photographs are often said to instill. Bridging this gap between state and nation requires trust: black operations and sites are justified as being for the good of the nation. But images such as *Open Hangar, Cactus Flats, NV* (fig. 3) register Paglen's unwillingness to leave the secret state untouched, to trust it to operate out of view. As a civilian, Paglen has no rights or access to the secret, but as an artist he can bring the secret (halfway) to himself and to us. In aestheticizing the secret, rendering it as a visual, if abstract, phenomenon, the photographs of *Limit Telephotography* both resist a purely hermeneutic approach to secrets and register distrust in the state's monopoly over the organization, presentation and uses of the secret and secrecy.

Magid's work is a more performative response to the question of how to visualize, curate or exhibit the open secret in a way that does not limit the viewer's experience to hermeneutic concerns of interpreting content and revealing meaning. Magid declares that much of her work is "an experiential investigation of secrecy and government institutions."[40] Her most recent project *Woman with Sombrero* (2013) departs from earlier themes of surveillance and secrecy to explore copyright law, but what it shares with previous projects is a desire to tease and tease out the relationship – formal, bureaucratic and affective – between institutions and individuals. In one project, Magid embedded herself within the Dutch secret service (the AIVD). In a somewhat comic dance, which goes beyond standard institutional critique to speak to the wider contradictions of open but securitized liberal democracies, Magid's commission by the AIVD was characterized by an oscillation between intervals of granted and refused access. That is, she was invited in (or more precisely, she applied to be invited in, was interviewed, and then won the commission), only to be pushed back when she touched upon the limit point of the AIVD's visibility and secrecy.

As Magid tests the rigidity of the security "distribution," she repeatedly encounters (and asks the onlooker to encounter) this tension between concealment and revelation, access and denial. For example, after interviewing and compiling notebooks on the agents she met, Magid's knowledge of their faces (though not their names or methods) was declared "dangerous." Magid was told by an agent that she was in a position to "burn their face" – a phrase the agents used to refer to the act of disclosing the identity of a source. Magid improvises on the phrase for one of the installations (fig. 4 and 5) in her exhibition *Article 12* at Stroom in The Hague in 2008 (shown again at Yvonne Lambert in 2009). It resonates ironically with the AIVD's stated intention for commissioning the artwork in the first place: "to provide the AIVD with a human face."[41]

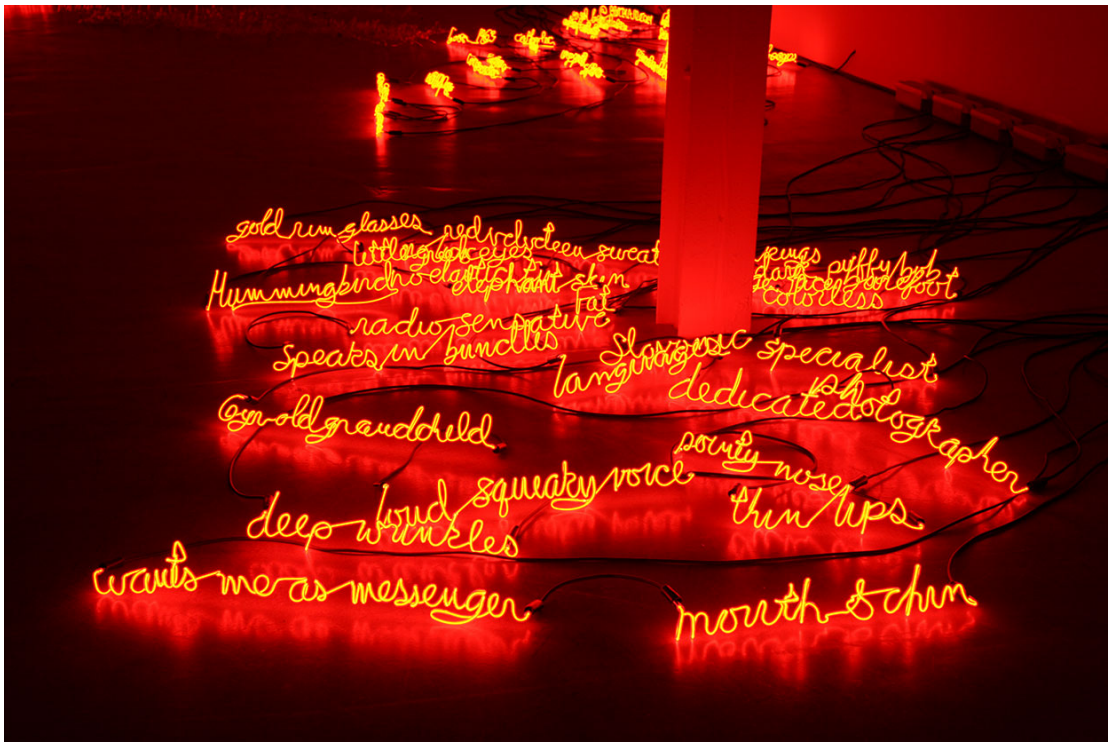

Figure 5: Jill Magid, detail of *Miranda III*, Yvon Lambert Paris, 2009. Courtesy the artist.

The agents, Magid claims, liked being interviewed. [42] They enjoyed talking about and revealing themselves. But the agency found it difficult to accommodate this accumulation of information on Magid's part. The artist and her work came to represent a security risk, although it would be more accurate to describe the agents' desire to be a part of the work as the security risk. In the detail of *Miranda III* (fig. 5) (all the female agents were known to Magid as Miranda, and all the male agents were Vincent), we can see some of the suggestive descriptions of the agents, taken from Magid's notebooks. Magid's observations are transcribed in neon, lighting up or scorching the darkened gallery: "deep wrinkles," "pointy nose," "dedicated photographer," "loud squeaky voice." It is possible that these fragments could be used to identify an agent among, say, ten other people, but it is difficult to imagine how they could be used to pick out an agent in a large population. We see here not only the limits of the AIVD and the secret identities of its agents – the limits of the secret – but the limited capacity of language to be commensurate with identity. Magid was given knowledge, granted access, only to be warned that such knowledge could not become part of the artwork. In order to be included, her knowledge had to be transformed into aesthetic material. Frustrated by the hermeneutic dead ends offered by the work, the onlooker's response follows this aesthetic cue.

Another example of this animating imperative can be seen in the fact that Magid was commissioned to make art, and yet large portions of that art – the novel *Becoming Tarden* (2009) – had to be redacted. In deciding to exhibit the book complete with its absences, Magid forces the viewer to face the aesthetics of concealment. Redaction as the subject of art has precursors, of course, notably Jenny Holzer's *Redaction Painting Series* (2006). [43] In Magid's novel, the redactions (which efface forty percent of the text) are in white rather than the iconic black blocks we have come to know from the US system and which Holzer reproduces in her silkscreens. In a further play on the limits of visibility, the hand of the active agent "sanitizing" the text is difficult to detect. It is as if the text were erasing itself, disappearing into the page at inopportune moments. Censorship itself wears a mask; agency is whitewashed. Redaction forces us to look and feel rather than to know.

In a further instance of the transformation of knowledge into aesthetics, the AIVD granted permission to Magid to exhibit the novel at Tate Modern in 2009 (*Authority to Remove*), but, as agreed, confiscated it at the exhibition's close. [44] The planned removal gave the

exhibition its title and has to be considered very much a part of the artwork. Bureaucratic attempts to control the circulation of knowledge add new layers to Magid's performative engagement and provide the context in which the art operates and works. Because art – even art such as Magid's notebooks and the resulting novel, the production of which mirrors the act of intelligence gathering – always exceeds (and falls short of) definitions of information and knowledge, it resonates beyond the content that activated the AIVD's concern. Equally, Magid's operation shows that intelligence work itself is never only the transmission of neutral information or data: it always draws on imagination, aesthetics and art.

Because Magid places herself at the centre of this drama of concealment and revelation, it becomes in her hands a story about the limits of *agency* as much as the reach of secret *agencies*. She is interested in how the individual – here the artist herself, but also by implication the onlooker – is positioned in relation to and by the secret (whether as system or master signifier). Within this distribution of bodies, institutions and capacities, Magid explores the affective register of the secret: its seductive draw, and the structure of desire it operates within. She is the one who asks to be subjected to a full vetting procedure. At one point, she considers becoming an agent herself. [45] Such confessions playfully evoke the link between knowledge and power. Yet, despite the detail amassed about individual agents and the workings of the AIVD, Magid's agency, like Paglen's, is largely aesthetic. Magid sets herself the task of drawing out the "beauty" of the secret. What we see at work here is the power to bring aesthetics to bear upon the secret rather than the power to expose or reveal secrets and give us knowledge in an uncomplicated manner. The politicality of these works is to be found in their aesthetic process and choices rather than at the evidentiary level. That is to say, they reveal more about the act of looking at, our response to, and the limits of open secrets than they do about individual intelligence operations. For Gustafsson, writing about Paglen's images, "the politics of producing the photographs outweighs the significance of whatever information they contain." [46] The same is true of Magid's performative process. Though Gustafsson is referring to a politics of access, his statement can also help us to focus on the form rather than content of secrets as aesthetic objects.

Because the art I have discussed is clearly situated within the contemporary tension between secrecy and transparency (and the contradictions and compromises embedded within liberal democracies that stems from this tension), its ability to point toward a different way of thinking about the relationship between politics and art (or rather aesthetics), its place within a "meta-politics," [47] always risks being overlooked. Pushing secrets at least halfway into the light, the work risks being subsumed and fixed by the discursive production of the political issues as they are commonly understood. It always risks, to put it a different way, remaining within a hermeneutics rather than an aesthetics of the secret. Many commentators are indeed quick to align this art with an overtly political position, claiming it as art that challenges the reach of the national security state. Indeed, the artists themselves, particularly Paglen, are often outspoken critics of surveillance, secrecy and securitization. The politicality of the art in this category is therefore in danger of being decided in advance. Inasmuch as these works present ideas – secrecy is detrimental to democracy, for example – and inasmuch as they lean toward secretion as revelation, perhaps they are not so very different from art to be found in category A, in which we placed dematerialized conceptual art.

We have to recognize, then, that the explicit and contextual politics of this art puts it at risk of being contained by existing debates. And yet, though it may begin from and signify within the same ground as familiar political debate – the kind that has arguably delimited our reception and analysis of the Snowden revelations – this work can also trouble its parameters and unsettle procedural responses. Work such as Paglen's and Magid's resists treating the secret as a blockage preventing the truth from coming out – whether in terms of a decision regarding the politics of secrecy or of the implementation of bureaucratic

mechanisms to process secrets.

The proximity of these works to the next category in our schema, D, means that they are also being drawn in the other direction, away from knowability, revelation, reduction, containment, and the sensible. The hold of the secret as secret, an "unconditional secret" as Jacques Derrida would have it, [48] is never quite quashed in these artworks by the hermeneutic drive or routine political debate, so that it remains possible for them to resonate beyond the empty circulation of content characteristic of communicative capitalism. [49] In their liminal state between revelation and concealment, the artworks certainly pose questions concerning regimes of looking, the rights and responsibilities that accompany visibility and invisibility, and the circulation of sensible matter and knowable knowledge. But rather than bringing us to knowledge, these concerns, I want to suggest, fit with a view of secrets as part of a distributive regime.

This returns us to Rancière's positioning of aesthetics as, in the words of his translator:

> *An implicit law governing the sensible order that parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world by first establishing the modes of perception within which these are inscribed. The distribution of the sensible thus produces a system of self-evident facts of perception based on the set horizons and modalities of what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made or done.* [50]

With Rancière's ideas in mind, we should perhaps concern ourselves less with an aesthetics of the secret and more with an aesthetics that enacts itself through the limits of the secret. We could, then, rephrase Rancièrean aesthetics as a system of distribution and organization of that which is and is not secret, those who are and are not secret. For Rancière, the key question is whether or not the world defined by any distribution of the sensible is compatible with equality (with equality, here, understood not as "a value to which one appeals," but "a universal that must be supposed, verified, and demonstrated in each case"). [51] On the basis of this "primary aesthetics," individual artistic practices ("'ways of doing and making' that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility") [52] can then be considered.

The art of Paglen and Magid indicates that the contemporary distribution shaped in part by the securitized state is not compatible with equality: it tells us that there are plenty of people who play no part in establishing "the perceptual coordinates of the community." [53] Paglen's presentation of military black sites as well as Magid's neon allusions to certain secret agents constitute playful, testing, and teasing articulations of, and interventions in, a certain distributive regime that reveals "who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed." [54] Moreover, it forces us to encounter the intensities of the relationships (between animate and inanimate entities) within that distribution.

Inspired by Rancière, the Snowden event, too, could be considered less a bestowing of knowledge (though it was certainly that), and more a reminder that, "Politics… is an intervention in the visible and the sayable," [55] that it "revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time." [56] Hegemonic structures and discourses, akin to the "symbolic constitution of the social" [57] that Rancière early on names "policy," [58] and later "police," [59] determine scopic possibilities, limit who is able to take part in what is common, and prevent the formation of effective political subjectivities. But when a (re) distribution is compatible with equality, an instantiation of Rancièrean "politics" occurs. In reorganizing the realm of the perceivable to disrupt limits on who or what can be heard or seen, and therefore on what is thinkable and possible, "real" politics affirms equality.

Circumventing classification and confidentiality protocols, effectively evading the "policing" of the sensible and the secret, Snowden revealed details of the NSA's mass surveillance programmes. In doing so, he not only shifted the horizon of perception with regards to intelligence operations, but showed the US state's surveillance capability to be more extensive, and classified data more vulnerable than previously thought. The horizon of visibility was itself made visible. The systemic inequality of access to information and data (and to knowledge about that access) was challenged by Snowden's act – for a moment, we all had a share in the secret, able to "take part" – government secrets became a shared or common element of the community.

I want to suggest that when viewed this way, the Snowden event might serve as an occasion to posit a political subjectivity – what we could name "the datatariat" – that is general enough to allow equal access, in a process that Rancière calls "subjectivization."[60] That is, because Snowden reminded us of our status as data subjects in the eyes of the security state, we can begin to think about the collective identities data makes possible when imagined outside of the parameters set by "police." For Rancière, political subjectivization "is the enactment of equality – or the handling of a wrong – by people who are together to the extent that they are between. It is a crossing of identities, relying on a crossing of names: names that link the name of a group or class to the name of no group or no class, a being to a nonbeing or a not-yet-being."[61]

"Proletariat" is Rancière's prime example because it was the name given to those who are "between several names, statuses, and identities; between humanity and inhumanity, citizenship and its denial; between the status of a man of tools and the status of a speaking and thinking being."[62] The datatariat, too, can be thought of as between "humanity and inhumanity, citizenship and its denial," and, we can add, secrecy and transparency, the material and immaterial, the quantifiable and the unquantifiable. "Datatariat" might enact equality not only in the generality of its name, but also – concerns over the digital divide aside given that we are dealing with people who produce digital data – in the fact that the datatariat all have access to horizontal forms of data exchange and obfuscation (of which more below).

Rancière is interested in "impossible identifications" that can raise individuals above the identities bequeathed to them by "police." And so, subjectivization is never just the assertion of an identity, but the refutation of a given identity – given by the ruling order.[63] The datatariat would, then, be an identity that refutes two given identities. First, the citizen as the subject of and subject to dataveillance. Second, the neoliberal citizen asked to interact with data only when this contributes to the entrepreneurial economy ("come and join our datapalooza!") or responsibilized individualism ("look at our pollution data by area code and make a *choice* as to where you want to live"). The identity of the surveilled data object / neoliberal data subject is not one that is allowed to interact with data in the creation or exploration of radical collective politics. In contrast, in an endeavour to find names or identities-in-relation that can allow those without part to "take part"[64] in an equitable distribution of the visible and sayable, datatariat might very well "create political subjects and redraw the sensible parameters."[65] It might constitute a collectivity of subjects that are "together inasmuch as they are between,"[66] capable of putting forth the demand that data accumulation serve horizontal and community-forming transparency rather than its hierarchical manifestation.

Yet, the risk of containment outlined above, the risk of a *redistribution* being reduced to a mere *reshuffling* of the sensible (a risk that I am arguing has been realized in the case of the Snowden event) is never far away. Emancipatory potential, the chance of politics taking place instead of policing, is only potential. If interventions into the sayable and visible through the open secret or the possibility of communities coalescing around the collective identity of the datatariat become readily contained, perhaps the secret as secret might offer itself as an unexpected resource. Both Paglen and Magid put secrecy rather than privacy in the foreground. In doing so, they move us away from the perennial debate

between privacy and security, which tends to emphasize individualism rather than collectivity (and which arises whenever the surveillance powers of the state are revealed), and force us to consider the secret on its own terms. It may be that the most radical response to the Snowden event, one which any successful datatariat might need to entertain as one strategy to adopt on its way to a more equitable distribution, would be a secrecy to rival that of the state.

The Coordinates: D

Phenomena in this category take the secret seriously in its own right rather than as a temporary state that precedes revelation. It is the category of the absolute, unconditional secret: that which cannot and does not present itself. This secret is "an experience that does not make itself available to information." [67] We do not know this secret; moreover, we do not know that we do not know. Given that it is not waiting in the wings to be revealed, it may not pertain to the category of knowledge at all. We do not know what genre, mode or form of phenomenon it is that we do not know. In the context of literature, for Derrida the unconditional secret stages an encounter with the Other. Such an encounter makes possible (and impossible) a responsibility of reading. [68] With regard to politics, or more precisely democracy, Derrida reads the secret as a singularity that must (and at the same time, cannot) be tolerated if totalitarianism is to be avoided. [69] Rather than material remnants left in the visible spectrum, like the secrets Paglen and Magid work with, this kind of secret "is" nothing and therefore leaves nothing but the aporia it puts in play (for Derrida, the (im) possibility of democracy and the (im)possibility of responsible reading). This secret is resistant to being thought of as an aesthetic object, or addressed through aesthetic judgement, attitude, encounter or value.

We must be careful not to conflate the unconditional secret that Derrida writes about with a strategic position, but the former can certainly inspire the latter. In order to explore my earlier proposal of a radical response to the Snowden event, I want to turn to the late Glissant for help in recalibrating the politics of the secret and seeking an alternative to the emphasis on privacy made by many disgruntled citizens and activists. In his writing, Glissant is concerned with a "right to opacity" as a way of resisting being reduced and essentialised by the demand to be understood and for universal truths to be applied to all. [70] While the idea of "difference" has facilitated recognition of minorities, it too "can still contrive to reduce things to the Transparent." [71] Glissant regards the emphasis on understanding as the basis of progressive politics to be a Western demand for transparency. Literary theorist Celia Britton explains that, "understanding constructs the Other as an *object* of knowledge." [72] Glissant advocates instead a model of relationality that does not rest on the false promise of total understanding and absolute truths. "The opaque is not the obscure … It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence." [73] Glissant's secret interrupts an identity politics that appears open and progressive but that in fact determines possible social identities, discursive parameters and modes of relationality. The imperative to be known leaves the object of knowledge unable to be other. Whereas calls for "privacy" focus on the rights of individuals and seem antithetical or irrelevant to collective politics, Glissant's "right to opacity" allows for relationality not based on sanctioned identities and ways of understanding. In this relation, we would be able to conceive of the opacity of the other for us, without reproach for our opacity to the other. [74] As cultural studies theorist Jack Bratich writes in a different context, "A right to secrecy would change the tenor of freedom from privacy's passive, individualized zone to an interactive exteriority of relations." [75] Opacity might allow for identifications and subjectivities that circumvent or even refuse visible and knowable spectrums and their ideologies.

Except for very different ideas about the in / visibility of subjectivization, Glissant here is not so far from Rancière's recognition that processes of disidentification and

declassification are essential to real politics.[76] Rancière's equitable political name has to "take part" in a way that will reshape the politico-aesthetic configuration, whereas Glissant's opaque subject is one that is in retreat from strategies of visibility. The refusal to acquiesce to knowability and transparency suggests a commitment to opacity that is permanent: to an unconditional "unknown unknown" rather than an everyday secret.

Instead of acts of publicity such as legal marches or online petitions, the datatariat might need to meet the pervasive protocols of inequitable dataveillance employed by the securitized state with opacity. A right to opacity in this context would mean the demand not to be reduced to and understood as data as defined by the state. Though we have to acknowledge the attendant risks of non-progressive and criminal activity made possible by the "dark" web, it is nevertheless here that the right to opacity might be asserted. In the first instance, this might involve communication technologies such as encrypted e-mail and instant messaging, software enabling online anonymity like Tor, search engines that do not aggregate and store terms like Startpage or DuckDuckGo, decentralized servers and clouds such as the personal server from FreedomBox or the cooperative storage cloud offered by Symform and anonymous forums (like 4Chan). Though previous commentators have promoted such forms in the name of privacy, the datatariat can employ them to enact a right to opacity.

Art such as that made by Paglen and Magid constitutes an exploration of, and a provocation to, the distribution of the sensible. As such, it can help us to hold on to the redistributive qualities and potential of the Snowden revelations: to configure secrets as a properly political subject. But this only gets us so far. Because I have viewed these artworks as belonging to one category in a schema mapping the relationship between secrecy and aesthetics, we are reminded of other forms of opacity. Artworks that address the play of contextual, open secrets sit close to the unconditional secret, the "unknown unknown," or undepletable opacity of the Other. This is an opacity that falls beyond traditional aesthetic concerns and which cannot be redistributed to become part of the sensible. It is as resistant to aesthetics as it is to knowledge: only a distribution in an internal sense, drawing on the Latin origin of "secret" – *secretus*: "separate, set apart." That is to say, the unconditional secret distributes only "itself," destined to be other than or apart from itself, never self-present and locatable, always a moving target.

In the course of this article, I have explored a turn toward and, latterly, away from aesthetics (but not back toward knowledge). I have done so in order to reconceptualize a politics and aesthetics of the secret in the wake of the Snowden event. Contrary to popular thought, a move toward the secret does not have to be regressive, totalitarian or statist; this is not a classic "defence" of secrecy or the secret to the detriment of personal liberties. Rather, it is a way of thinking the secret and liberty otherwise as well as recalibrating the political values attached to visibility and opacity. An equitable distribution of the sensible, as Rancière writes, may be necessary for politics to occur, but in order to prevent the hegemonic, securitized, data-driven distribution from re-solidifying and containing re-distributive attempts, we need to imagine and enact subjectivization and relationality through a right to opacity.

Clare Birchall is a Senior Lecturer at King's College London. She is the author of *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip* (Berg, 2006) and co-editor of *New Cultural Studies: Adventures in Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007). She has also edited special issues of the journals *Theory, Culture and Society* and *Cultural Studies*. Her most recent research is concerned with the relationship between secrecy and transparency in the digital age and she is part of an ESRC grant to fund a series of research seminars on such issues entitled "DATA – PSST! Debating and Assessing Transparency Arrangements – Privacy, Security, Surveillance, Trust." Alongside more traditional scholarship, Birchall is involved with a number of digital projects. She is one of the editors for the online journal *Culture Machine*; an editorial board member and series co-editor for the Open Humanities Press; and part of the team behind the JISC-funded Living Books About Life series.

With thanks to: Matt Potolsky, Jeremy Gilbert, Joanna Zylinska and Paul Myerscough for editorial guidance, Trevor Paglen and Jill Magid for permission to include their images, and also Lawrence & Wishart for permission to reprint the article; Source:
This article first appeared in New Formations 83 (2015): 25–46, www.lwbooks.co.uk.

Footnotes

1. See Trevor Timm, "Beware the Surveillance Reform Trojan Horse: What's Not in the New NSA Laws?," *Guardian*, 29 March 2014, www.theguardian.com.
2. For an excellent counter-argument to my position, suggesting that secrets, even the Derridean unconditional secret, is antithetical to a collective politics, see Jeremy Gilbert, "Public Secrets: 'Being-with' in an era of perpetual disclosure," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 1: 22–41.
3. See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).
4. See Chris Strohm and Del Quentin Wilber, "Pentagon Says Snowden Took Most U.S. Secrets Ever: Rogers," *Bloomberg*, 10 January 2014, www.bloomberg.com.
5. See Andre de Nesnera, "Is NSA Leaker Edward Snowden a Traitor?," *Voice of America*, 8 August 2013, www.voanews.com.
6. See Katharine Murphy, "Edward Snowden a traitor but US spy review is welcome, says Julie Bishop," *Guardian*, 23 January 2014, http://www.theguardian.com.
7. See Abby D. Phillip, "House Speaker John Boehner: NSA Leaker a 'Traitor,'" *ABC News*, 11 June 2013, http://abcnews.go.com.
8. See Jeremy Herb and Justin Sink, "Sen. Feinstein calls Snowden's NSA leaks an 'act of treason,'" 6 October 2013, thehill.com.
9. For example see the Rasmussen Report poll from 19 June 2013, www.rasmussenreports.com.
10. See Anon, "Edward Snowden: #traitor or #patriot," *NBC News*, interactive.nbcnews.com.
11. See "Transcript: Obama's Remarks on NSA Controversy," *Wall Street Journal*, 7 June 2013, blogs.wsj.com.
12. See White House Office of the Press Secretary, "FACT SHEET: The Administration's Proposal for Ending the Section 215 Bulk Telephony Metadata Program, March 27, 2014," www.whitehouse.gov.
13. See Timm, "Beware the Surveillance Reform Trojan Horse."
14. See Clare Birchall, "'Data.gov-in-a-box': Delimiting Transparency," *European Journal of Social Theory* 18, no. 2 (2015): 185–202.
15. Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 8.
16. The cognitive terms in the table, of course, refer to remarks made by Donald Rumsfeld in a Defense Department Briefing on 12 February 2002, see www.c-span.org.
17. See Lucy Lippard, *The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1973).
18. Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?," *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* , trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 78.
19. In an added layer to this artwork and its story, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art initiated a project to recompose the erased picture through infrared scanning technology, www.sfmoma.org.
20. See the interview "Robert Rauschenberg – Erased de Kooning," www.youtube.com.
21. Other artists who might on occasion be described as working with an aesthetics of the secret, though with different concerns and in a variety of ways, include Sophie Calle, Simon Menner, Mishka Henner, Rosella Biscotti, Zach Blas, Hasan Elahi, Juliet Furguson, Seth Price, Jenny Holzer, Simon Norfolk and Goldin + Senneby.
22. "Art as Evidence," *Transmediale*, 30 January 2014, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, www.youtube.com.
23. See Pamela M. Lee, "Open Secret: On the Work of Art Between Disclosure and Redaction," *Artforum*, May 2011, artforum.com.
24. See James Risen and Eric Lichtblau, "Bush Lets U. S. Spy on Callers Without Courts," *New York Times*, 16 December 2005, www.nytimes.com.
25. Slavoj Žižek, "The Spectre of ideology," *Mapping Ideology* (London: Verso, 1995), 18.
26. See Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).
27. See Lee, "Open Secret".
28. Trevor Paglen, *I Could Tell You But Then You Would Have To Be Destroyed By Me: Emblems From The Pentagon's Black World*

(Brooklyn: Melville House, 2008), 9.
29. Paglen, *I Could Tell You*, 155.
30. Ibid., 109.
31. See Louis Brandeis, "Other people's money," *Harper's Weekly*, 29 November 1913, louisville.edu.
32. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), 37.
33. Nicholas Mirzeoff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.
34. Henrik Gustafsson, "Foresight, Hindsight and State Secrecy in the American West: The Geopolitical Aesthetics of Trevor Paglen," *Journal of Visual Culture*, 12, no. 1 (2013): 157.
35. See John Beck, "The Purloined Landscape: Photography and Power in the American West," *Tate Papers*, no. 21, 3 April 2014, www.tate.org.uk.
36. See Lee, "Open Secret".
37. See "Artists@Google: Trevor Paglen," 2009, www.youtube.com.
38. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (London: Polity Press, 1991), 126.
39. See Beck, "The Purloined Landscape".
40. Jill Magid, *Becoming Tarden* (London: Tate Modern, 2009), ii.
41. See Magid's description of this work on her website at www.jillmagid.net.
42. See Jill Magid, "Artist Talk," Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, 14 March 2012, www.themodern.org.
43. See Lawson Fletcher, Esther Milne and Jenny Kennedy, "The In / Visibilities of Code and Aesthetics of Redaction," *SCAN: Journal of Media Arts Culture* 10., no. 2 (2013), scan.net.au.
44. Magid's letter to the Deputy Director General of the AIVD can be found at www.becomingtarden.ne.
45. Magid, "Artist Talk."
46. Gustafsson, "Foresight, Hindsight and State Secrecy," 156.
47. Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 56.
48. Jacques Derrida, "Passions: An Oblique Offering," *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, ed. and trans. D. Wood (Oxford, Blackwell, 1992), 5–36.
49. According to Jodi Dean, communicative capitalism is characterized by "the circulation of content in the dense, intensive networks of global communications" that "relieves top-level actors (corporate, institutional and governmental) from the obligation to respond." Jodi Dean, "Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics," *Cultural Politics* 1, no. 1 (2005): 53.
50. Gabriel Rockhill, "Glossary of Technical Terms," in Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 89.
51. Jacques Rancière, "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization," *October* 61 (Summer 1992): 60.
52. Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 8.
53. Gabriel Rockhill, "Jacques Rancière's Politics of Perception," in Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, xiii.
54. Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 8.
55. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), 37.
56. Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 8.
57. Rancière, *Dissensus*, 36.
58. Rancière, "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization," 58–64.
59. See Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy,* trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Press, 1999).
60. Rancière, "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization." I use the term "subjectivization" as Rancière does in this essay, but see Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 100–101 on the different incarnations of this term: "subjectivation" and "subjectification".
61. Ibid., 61.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid., 62.
64. Rancière, "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization," 62.

65. Joseph Tanke, *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction* (London: Continuum, 2011), 68.
66. Rancière, "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization," 61.
67. Derrida, "Passions," 201.
68. Ibid.
69. Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 59.
70. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1997), 189.
71. Ibid.
72. Celia Britton, *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), 19.
73. Glissant, Poetics, 191.
74. Ibid., 193.
75. Jack Bratich, "Popular Secrecy and Occultural Studies," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 1 (2007): 53.
76. Rancière, "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization," 61.

Crosslinks

Culture of Control: www.onlineopen.org/culture-of-control

Tags

Aesthetics, Art Discourse, Control

This text was downloaded on September 11, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
www.onlineopen.org/aesthetics-of-the-secret