Art for Spooks*

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Art for Spooks (2014-ongoing) is an augmented reality book that poetically conceives electronic surveillance by appropriating texts and images from leaked documents from the National Security Agency (NSA) and Government Communication Headquarters (GCHQ, the UK equivalent to the NSA). This combinatory prose draws on the NSA's internal advice column posts in *Ask Zelda*, similar to the popular syndicated advice column in the United States, *Dear Abby*. Alongside the book's text are images found in leaked NSA and GCHQ presentations dealing with surveillance and psychological operations programs, such as attempts to understand human behavior for purposes of infiltration and discrediting.

Surprisingly these documents evince mundane concerns of NSA and GCHQ employees: from grooming etiquette and gossip to surveillance issues at the workplace, the development of encryption and psychological profiling tools modeled on alleged historical links between magicians and the military, and a delirious imaginary steeped in the world of modern folklore, populated as is with UFOs, popular media archetypes of evil and good. Strangely other topics have apparently included the taste of buffalo meat, high art, and orientalist and gendered themes.
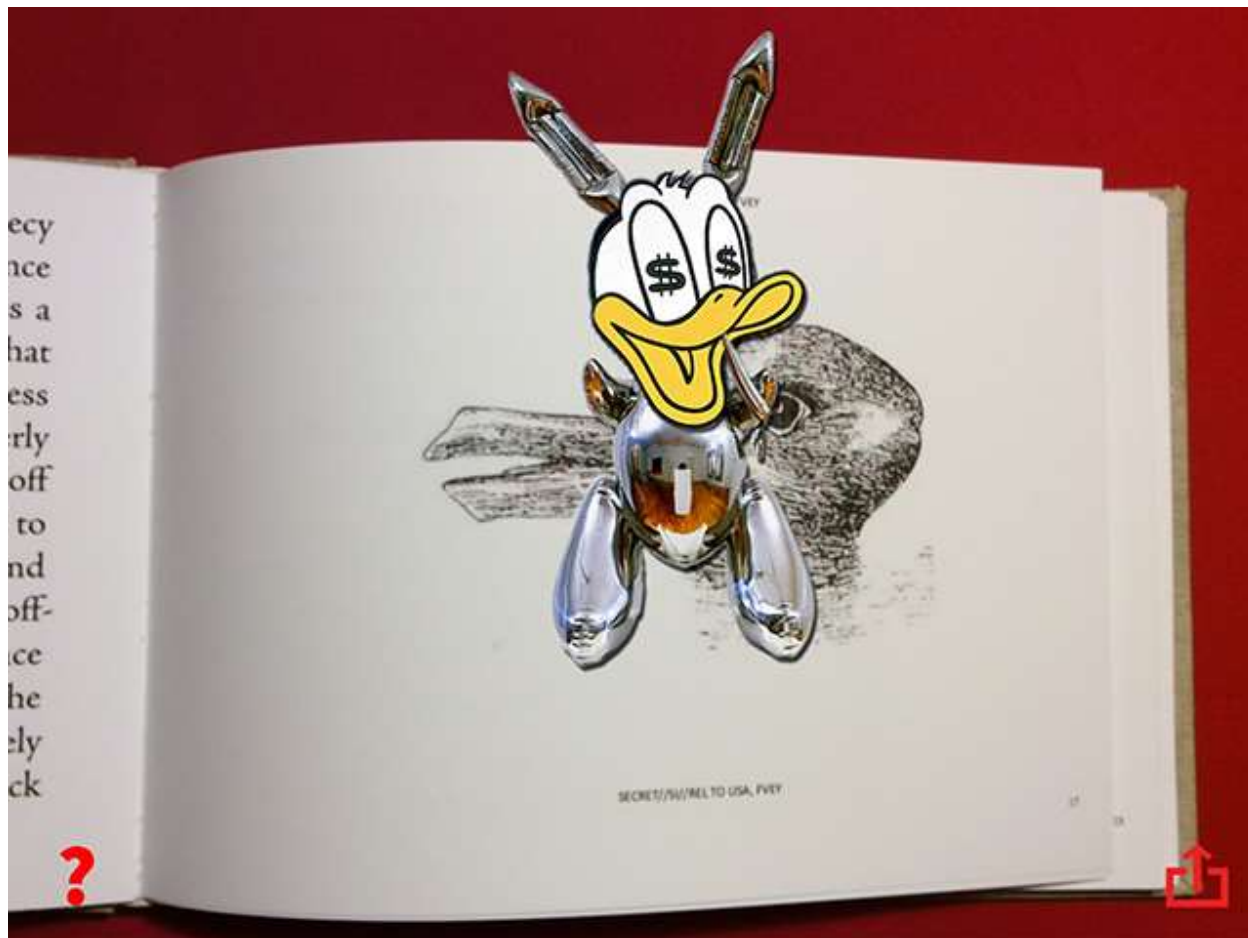

Art for Spooks, 2014, Nicholas A. Knouf and Claudia C. Pederson, hand bound case-bound book, iPad, found images and text, custom software. CC BY-SA 2.0.

Within *Art for Spooks*, we propose to illuminate for the reader that electronic surveillance can be best understood along the lines of the critical paranoiac method of the surrealist painter Salvador Dali in the 1930s. [1] An extension of the Surrealists' overall interest in the unconscious, this method melds Dali's interests in psychology and art by way of exploring associative process typical of the paranoia. Schizophrenia is clinically described as a cognitive disease that develops from a mental state of superposition that psychologists call "ambivalence."[2] Works created by Dali following this method, including paintings, sculptures, and installations, closely resemble said definition. Dali's signature style of life-like compositions created by juxtaposing anthropomorphized objects, objectified bodies and body parts, optical illusions, and even biological and innate elements, mimic the paranoiac's ability

to combine disparate and otherwise unrelated materials through an illogical (that is, non-rational or Cartesian) associative process based on resemblance. Similarly, in his discussion of schizophrenia, the psychologist Mark Garrison's argues that when treating schizophrenics, psychologists should keep in mind the many points of correlation between the thought processes employed in this pathology and those that function in poetically inflected language and art. [3]

Contrary to Garrison's pathologizing of schizophrenia as a mental disorder arising from the schizophrenic's inability to resolve ambiguity of interpretation (which he opposes to 'normal' people's ability to do so), Dali celebrated it as a catalyst to challenge the valorization of rationality and rational methods. According to Dali, exposure to paranoiac-critical images and works would induce this same state in viewers, as the equivocality of such works would challenge rationalist (linear) interpretations of reality, themselves premised on the separation between the "subjective and objective" (he called this "conflicts of interpretation"). Thus, Dali's works, sardonic parodies of the truth-claim or evidentiary status of photographs based on the belief that they capture reality, showed that 'reality' and 'being' can be best thought as associative, ambiguous, fragmentary, and fluid, much like representations of the self and the world. By extension, he inverted the idea that normative rationalist (empirical) conceptions of reality are 'normal', arguing that consensus reality is a paranoiac delusion of the worst kind, given its ubiquitous stultifying effects. [4]
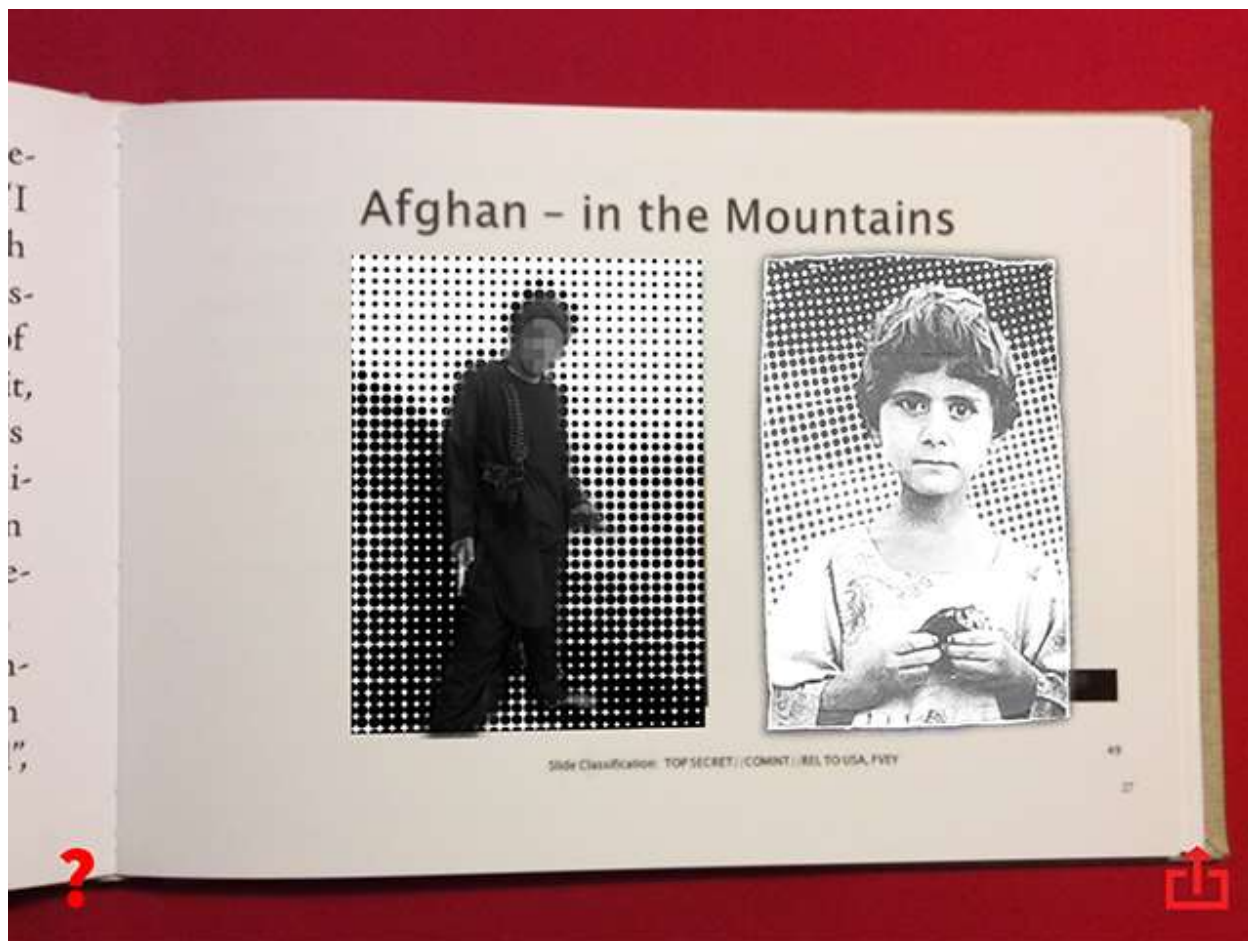

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Our augmented reality app appropriates Dali's theory. On top of an image about the FOXACID program we overlay an animation of one of the Angry Birds falling into a vat of acid, referencing how the NSA uses metadata in mobile games like *Angry Birds* to try and track purported terrorists. A clip from the film *Hackers* (1995) draws upon the popular perception of hackers as magicians, thus referencing the desire by some in the cyber-intelligence community to similarly build "Cyber *Magicians* [sic]". In another instance, q seemingly random photo of Egyptians protesting during the Arab Spring is paired with a clip of the Egyptian comedian Bassem Youssef to highlight the role of humor in challenging power, eventually leading to Youssef's arrest and exile. In another, a blurred photo of an "Afghan — in the mountains" is replaced by that of an anonymous young Pakistani girl whose family was killed by a drone strike and who became the subject of a project by the French artist JR and others. Further in the book, we take an image of the duck-rabbit illusion and create a cyborg Jeff-Koons/Roy Lichtenstein hopping duck-rabbit. Our poetic-serious-humorous approach draws from Pere Ubu, whose appearance as the Joker in the Surrealist "Jeu de Marseille" is reprised as tumbling playing cards coming out of an image of standard playing cards that was found in the Snowden documents.

In sum, we use the paranoiac-critical method to draw out latent, submerged interpretations of these images, thus forestalling any clear analysis that would attempt to divine the real "meaning" of the images. Since we cannot have access to the thought processes of the analysts who chose the images for these presentations, we are left to following our own peripatetic thoughts.

Additionally, the very act of reading via the app generates randomized data in the forms of new images and texts that are concurrently uploaded to various social media platforms, including Twitter and Flickr. The traces of these data refracted through algorithmic

manipulation allow visitors to *Art for Spooks* to share images of their augmentations, while other information—texts about surveillance, alternative GPS coordinates, and text generated from NSA/GCHQ materials—can be found in the metadata of these images. [5] Image metadata often includes information such as where a photo was taken or annotations like captions and titles, information that is rather easy to change and manipulate. So for instance, on close inspection, it becomes apparent that the GPS coordinates specifying the upload location of the images are systematically changed to documented locations of United States drone strikes, such as in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan (see Figure 5). [6] One can click on these locations to see more images on Flickr from these defined locations. Because of this aggregation, the images from *Art for Spooks* appear alongside photos upload by people in the area. As a result, the viewer is treated to a shifting tapestry of NSA appropriated images alongside local photos including those of babies, school children, teenagers, and local people looking into the camera, as well as landscapes, animals, jewelry, mosques, everyday life scenes, market shots, improvised memorials, and documentation of rituals, and even a postcard with a quote from the president of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, addressed to a Taliban leader stating that the "killing of innocent children is contrary to Islam". [7]

Art for Spooks, 2014, Nicholas A. Knouf and Claudia C. Pederson, hand bound case-bound book, iPad, found images and text, custom software. CC BY-SA 2.0.

Art for Spooks demonstrates that the manipulation of data is a relatively trivial undertaking, thereby questioning the veracity of metadata as a component of surveillance targeting. As visual condensations of the battlefield, these composite images—the augmented reality screenshot and its manipulated metadata—foreground the asymmetry between the cryptic abstractions of varying national security comings and goings invisible to the Western media: espionage systems, political assassinations, surveillance, infiltration, and destabilization, and their potential drone targets' perceptions and documentation of their own life on the ground, The eerie tone of these images is amplified as one considers the stakes of metadata in

current surveillance both at home and abroad and its implication in drone wars overseas. Metadata is not only central to domestic wiretapping and other surveillance activities, but according to the former NSA-chief General Michael Hayden, "We kill people based on metadata."[8] Given that the US government considers any military aged male in remote areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan a potential terrorist and thus target of a drone strike, the documentation of the daily lives of these young men on services like Flickr presents a startling tapestry of people whose lives may already have ended. The juxtaposition of these quotidian images as well as those from *Art for Spooks* demonstrates that the manipulation of this data is a relatively trivial undertaking, thereby questioning the veracity of metadata as a component of surveillance targeting.

With this in mind, our project departs from heuristic models of addressing current forms of electronic surveillance such as American photographer Trevor Paglen's *I Could Tell You But Then You Would To Be Destroyed By Me* (2010). Paglen's work, also a book, collects patches allegedly worn by military personnel involved in covert surveillance operations. Some of Paglen's patches are similarly reminiscent of the images and themes documented in *Art for Spooks*: the use of cryptic symbols (lightning bolts, Greek letters, and star and trident shapes), images of a spy holding the planet on his fingertip, and an alien in chains with a Klingon inscription, *Don't Ask*. In his book, Paglen attempts to get to the meaning of these images by way of visual analysis. In contrast, because monitoring and killing based on metadata constitutes a system of surveillance that bypasses evidentiary methods, we suggest that the intense categorization and cataloging of facts, phenomena, and life under current modes of surveillance demands the invention of new critical methods that resist the stultifying effects of this kind of instrumentalization.

Our metadata manipulations enables us to critically expose the NSA's underlying belief that the metadata related to electronic surveillance and drone strikes is 'reality,' an extension of the rationalist/empiricist mode of viewing the world, which Paul N. Edwards describes as a "closed world discourse." [9]

As a holdover of the Cold War, when computers and informational concepts (cybernetics, cognitive psychology, and artificial intelligence) became central to military operations, "closed world discourse" is synonymous with global surveillance and control via high-technology military power. Indeed, one of the most startling comments to come out of the Snowden documents is evidence of the NSA's desire to "collect it all." [10] Edwards typifies the reductionist logic of this system in relation to the computer's use as a metaphor and ideological construct, used to make war appear to be both controllable and rational, "a radically bounded scene of conflict, an inescapably self-referential space where every thought, word, and action is ultimately directed back towards a central struggle. It is a world radically divided against itself. Turned inexorably inward, without frontiers or escape, a closed world threatens to annihilate itself, to implode." [11] White shows through several examples conducted from 1967 to 1972 in Vietnam, including Operation Igloo White, this "closed system." The internal logic is itself impenetrable from the outside, a realm of quantification (body counts) and simulation that serves only as a construct, as an illusion of control on the battlefield. Operation Igloo White is prototypical of present remote surveillance and wars. Designed to create an impenetrable barrier between North and South Vietnam, the operation was directed from Washington DC using data provided in 'real-time' by computers. Electronic sensors on the ground registered the presence of any North Vietnamese troops or vehicles that attempted to cross, and this data would then be represented on computer screens, which would in turn control the release of bombs from patrolling aircraft. The system proved ineffective, as the sensors were easily fooled. Paradoxically, however, the system was hailed as a success, because the criteria for success or failure was dictated by the computer itself: a convoy was registered as destroyed, not because this was verified on the ground in Vietnam, but because the computer would no longer detect it.

Just as the tripping of sensors by North Vietnamese troops was designed to be recorded by Pentagon computers, we note that, like the work of Hassan Elahi in *Tracking Transience* (2006-ongoing), our project is directed at a very defined audience: agents in the surveillance apparatus. Alongside disrupting the use of personal information by marketers, *Art for Spooks* is designed to augment the paranoia of NSA employers and those that because of their involvement with surveillance-related activities are legally barred from accessing and reading leaked NSA documents. To date, we know about such an instance, when a visitor to an exhibition showcasing *Art for Spooks* messaged her friend with a link to the project's website, upon which the recipient, who works on developing drone technology, sent a message back admonishing her that "now" he "had to clear his cache" and not to send any information about the project to his phone. The perplexed visitor approached one of us as to inquire why her friend would be so concerned, stating that given his line of work, she thought he would "be very interested in *Art for Spooks*." Nevertheless, if one has taken an oath to protect classified information, one is still prohibited from accessing publicly available information that is still not formally declassified–exactly the situation with the Snowden and Wikileaks releases. Thus this friend's response is understandable. This incident reflects the underlying aim of the project, which, both conceived as an invitation and a provocation, seeks to employ poetics–the ambiguous processes of the paranoiac-critical method–to create conflicts of interpretation ideally leading to seeing the world in a different light.

We see this as part of a continuum of speaking truth to power. Snowden himself has engaged in a very direct form of speaking truth to power that can be compared to Foucauldian *parrhesia*, or "fearless speech." [12] Nevertheless, we cannot presume that all of those in the surveillance apparatus who possess Snowden's conscience have the capability to act in a similar fashion. Instead, artists and activists can engage in "fearless speech" in a variety of ways, from those who barricade access to military bases such as the Upstate New York Coalition to Ground the Drones and End the Wars (http://upstatedroneaction.org/) to our own practices in *Art for Spooks*. Each is a form of *parrhesia* tailored to each individual or group's tolerance for reprisal, and using the means congruent with their philosophical outlook. As artists, we understand *parrhesia* in a poetic sense, a means by which to "speak" with the surveillance state using their language in order to interfere with their own paranoia.

*This project has been previously written about in Media-N, in a different form, by one of authors (Nicholas A. Knouf) in his "Communication in the Wake of Snowden," vol. 10, no. 1, http://median.newmediacaucus.org/art-infrastructures-information/communication-in-the-wake-of-snowden/.

References

1. Dali, Salvador, and David Gascoyne. *Conquest of the Irrational*. New York: Julien Levy, 1935.
2. E. Bleuler and William A. White, "The Theory of Schizophrenic Negativism," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 39, no. 3 (1912): 195–202
3. Mark Garrison, "The poetics of ambivalence," *Spring*, 1982, 213–232.
4. Salvador Dali, "The Object as Revealed in Surrealist Experiment", in *Surrealists On Art*, ed. Lucy R. Lippard (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 90.
5. Metadata is different from content; it is "data about data". In the case of images, it is mostly embedded in the photo's EXIF information, which includes 'hidden' information about camera shutter setting details, the camera's model, as well as location, date and time of capture, etc. For another project that utilizes this kind of metadata, see "I know where your cat lives", http://iknowwhereyourcatlives.com/cat/b459204697.
6. Data on locations of drone strikes is collected by The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-graphs/.
7. The postcard, posted by Flickr user fstop186, is in reference to the Peshawar school massacre on 16 December, 2014, where 145 people, including 132 school children, were killed by fighters linked to the Tehrik-i-Taliban, a Pakistan-based group that is philosophically and operationally distinct from the better-known Afghan Taliban.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2014_Peshawar_school_massacre.

8. http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2014/may/10/we-kill-people-based-metadata/.

9. Paul N. Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).

10. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/no-place-to-hide-by-glenn-greenwald-on-the-nsas-sweeping-efforts-to-know-it-all/2014/05/12/dfa45dee-d628-11e3-8a78-8fe50322a72c_story.html.

11. Paul N. Edwards. *The Closed World*, 12.

12. Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson, Foreign Agents (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001).

Bios:

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