

SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

THE SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT IS DEDICATING A MAJOR EXHIBITION TO THE FASCINATION OF ESPIONAGE IN CONTEMPORARY ART

WE NEVER SLEEP

SEPTEMBER 24, 2020 – JANUARY 10, 2021

PRESS PREVIEW: SEPTEMBER 23, 2020, 11 A.M.

From September 24, 2020 to January 10, 2021, the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt is dedicating an international group exhibition to the fascination of espionage, highlighting this theme as a current source of artistic inspiration. Although spies are presented as glamorous in popular culture, the information they gather in covert actions can prove to be explosive within society. Spying is about the unauthorized obtaining of secret knowledge or confidential information. Whereas in the past, individuals or states were spied on by national governments, in times of digital communication citizens make state secrets public, and whistleblowers denounce the surveillance of the general population by their own government. Today, the openness and transparency of modern states is countered by new mechanisms of surveillance, manipulation, and espionage. Digital networks and technologies, as well as the willing spread of personal data, open up hitherto unforeseen possibilities for obtaining and disseminating intelligence. Against this backdrop, a renewed interest in the strategies of secrecy is emerging.

The exhibition presents works by 40 international artists, including Simon Denny, Thomas Demand, Stan Douglas, Dora García, Rodney Graham, Gabriel Lester, Jill Magid, Metahaven, Henrike Naumann, Trevor Paglen, Cornelia Schleime, Noam Toran, Suzanne Treister, Nomeda & Gediminas Urbonas, to name just a few. About 70 paintings, photographs, video works, sculptures, and installations explore the topic from a contemporary point of view, with the works touching on aspects of espionage such as surveillance, paranoia, conspiracy, threat, camouflage, cryptography, manipulation, and propaganda. On view are a multitude of artistic strategies dealing with the “golden age” of espionage during the Cold War, while other works probe the current context of media super-exposure. New and already existing projects, as well as a collection of unexpected objects, are immersed in unorthodox ways within a specific environment—exploring the world of espionage between reality and fiction. Historical apparatuses such as the Enigma encryption machine provide insights into the reality of surveillance and secrecy. Also, popular culture has created a glamorous image around the myth of the spy, featuring heroic and shady figures, an image that continues to thrill audiences still today. As early as the nineteenth century, spy novels emerged as a separate narrative genre; and the history of film and cinema has also contributed much to the popularity of the subject. Selected book covers as well as film posters and film extracts will be on show in the exhibition, demonstrating how the entertainment industry has been inspired by the reality of intelligence gathering. Indeed, the title of the exhibition *We Never Sleep* evokes the fact that spies who live undercover, having constantly to change identities, are always on the run and have no time to rest.

The exhibition *We Never Sleep* is supported by the City of Frankfurt am Main, and by the Friends of the Schirn Kunsthalle e. V., including members of the Executive Board and the Board of Trustees of the Friends of the Schirn Kunsthalle e. V., and the Mondriaan Fund.

Philipp Demandt, director of Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt: “The Schirn is dedicating a major contemporary exhibition to espionage. With diverse perspectives from international artists, we offer our visitors the opportunity to engage in a differentiated examination of this topic, which raises new and pressing questions in the face of global crises, digital surveillance, fake news, and conspiracy theories.”

Cristina Ricupero, curator of the exhibition, elaborates: “The aim of the exhibition *We Never Sleep* is to create a space for experimentation where artists make the link between art and the aesthetics of espionage, with challenging works bringing together a multitude of artistic strategies. Rather than to ‘unveil’ or ‘explain,’ the main purpose is to create surprises. Just like in a spy novel that slowly unfolds, the gradually displaying spaces transform viewers into amateur spies, highlighting their own ambiguous-voyeuristic sides. Following this labyrinthine logic, the architecture aims to simultaneously conceal and reveal, always shifting between reality and fiction. Finally, as in the murky world of espionage, the truth may well remain a mystery.”

SELECTED WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

We Never Sleep highlights espionage through the prism of contemporary art and design. Artworks and unexpected objects are presented in Adrien Rovero’s exhibition architecture as an intriguing and comprehensive environment.

The exhibition opens with the expansive sound installation *The Third Degree* (2020) by **Gabriel Lester** (*1972, Amsterdam, Netherlands) in collaboration with Monadnock Architects. Through an immersive labyrinth of paths, dead ends, entrances, and exits, a chorus of haunting voices is audible, prompting questions and picking up on manipulative interrogation techniques. **Lawrence Abu Hamdan** (*1985, Amman, Jordan) also explores sound and surveillance technologies in conjunction with forensic speech analysis. At the heart of his installation *The Whole Truth* (2012) is an audio documentary about software that scans the human voice, utilizing, among other things, a lie detector.

The video work *Believe It or Not* (2018) by the brothers **Park Chan-Kyong** and **Park Chan-Wook** (*1965 and *1963, Seoul, South Korea), an artist duo active under the moniker PARKing CHANce, features spies, double agents, and defectors who change sides in the power-political conflict between North and South Korea. Inspired by true events and the stories of actual people, the artists explore the notion of identity and integrity amidst fear and paranoia. The theme of the double agent is further examined by the Lithuanian artist duo **Nomeda** and **Gediminas Urbonas** (*1968, Kaunas, Lithuania, and *1966, Vilnius, Lithuania) with a new version of the installation *TRANSmutation* (2018). Using fragments of Soviet cult movies, they develop an associative, visual narrative that delves into the psyche and mindset of a double agent, from the pseudoscientific efforts of mind control to the programming of the planet. **Dora Longo Bahia** (*1961, São Paulo, Brazil), in her new collage series developed especially for this context, *Spy Woman* (2020), focuses on famous women in the history of espionage, including Greta Garbo, Sonja Wigert, Coco Chanel, and Alice Marble. They appeared primarily as public figures, yet at the same time they also operated in political contexts or became active as agents. **Stan Douglas** (*1960, Vancouver, Canada) adapts film genres and literary classics for his photographs, films, and installations in order to reexamine historical events. In his video installation *The Secret Agent* (2015), which plays with the qualities of the Cold War spy thriller, the artist relocates the plot of Joseph Conrad’s novel of the same name from England to Portugal in 1975, when political unrest dominated the country soon after the Carnation Revolution and the fall of the dictatorship of the so-called Estado Novo.

The artist duo **Dias & Riedweg** (*1964, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and *1955, Kriens, Switzerland) explores the ways in which manipulation by state systems actually penetrates society and its collective memory. The video installation *Cold Stories* (2010) traces the iconography of the political and commercial propaganda of the Cold War and combines excerpts from advertising, TV series, music, and journalism of the 1960s and 1970s, while Che Guevara, Mao Tse-tung, John F. Kennedy, and Nikita Khrushchev as marionettes deliver fragments of their most notable speeches. The work *Glimpses of the USA* (1959) by **Charles** and **Ray Eames** (1907–1978, St. Louis,

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Missouri, USA, and 1912–1988, Sacramento, California, USA) dates from this period.

Commissioned by the United States Information Agency, they portrayed American society in more than 2,200 photographs and moving images. This material was shown in 1959 at the *American National Exhibition* in Moscow, Sokolniki Park, as part of the first cultural exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union; it was intended to convey both economic prosperity and humanity to the Soviet public. **Suzanne Treister** (*1958 London, UK) is showing a large body of artworks dealing with government and military research programs, social engineering and ideas of the control society, conspiracy theories, cybernetics, scientific projections of the future, and counterculture. **Henrike Naumann** (*1984, Zwickau, Germany) will present a new adaptation of a work called *Tag X*, which was initially conceived for the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The spatial installation depicts a series of networks that became known in 2018 for seeking to enact violent, systematic change in Germany in connection with the police, the German Federal Armed Forces, and the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution. Tensions between East and West Germany and espionage take center stage here. The installation confronts the viewer with a highly dystopian scenario of right-wing fantasies of upheaval, where design classics become weapons that can be used by everyone to fight on Day X in Germany.

The performance *The Romeos* (2018) by **Dora García** (*1965, Valladolid, Spain) restages an espionage tactic used by the GDR Ministry for State Security during the Cold War. Agents were known to deliberately establish personal and sometimes intimate relationships with secretaries of West German politicians in order to obtain confidential information. García, following in the footsteps of these *Romeos*, commissioned performers to infiltrate the exhibition. By announcing the performance to take place at certain times an atmosphere of suspicion and uncertainty will be created within the exhibition. Surveillance and censorship during the Cold War are central to the works by **Cornelia Schleime** (*1953, East Berlin, GDR). In addition to the photographic self-portraits from her body action *Ich halte doch nicht die Luft an* (1982), she will also present her series *Auf weitere gute Zusammenarbeit* (1993), where the artist, with irony, uses self-portraits to counter the Ministry of State Security's file on her. **Thomas Demand** (*1964, Munich, Germany) directs his artistic strategy at the construction of reality through the media. His photographs show true-to-detail reproductions made from paper and cardboard of political and social scenes that have inscribed themselves in the collective visual memory through their dissemination in the media. *Badezimmer* (1997) mentions the well-known press image of the CDU politician Uwe Barschel, who was found dead in 1987 in the bathtub of a hotel room. The concomitance of crime scene and reconstruction in Demand's work results in an unsettling layering of different claims to reality.

Through his artistic practice, **Jonas Staal** (*1981, Zwolle, Netherlands) explores the relationship between art, democracy, and political propaganda. In his project *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective* (2018), Staal examines the long-standing work of the former advisor to US President Donald Trump. Through the deconstruction of central visual motifs and conspiracy narratives, the artist makes visible the ideological breeding ground of Trumpism. The design duo **Metahaven**, founded in 2007 by Vinca Kruk and Daniel van der Velden, advocates freedom of information in the post-factual age. In their film *The Sprawl (Propaganda About Propaganda)* (2015), they critically examine the massive proliferation of state-organized propaganda and disinformation campaigns in social networks as a counter-reaction to its use by Arab Spring activists. The investigative conceptual artist, author, and filmmaker **Jill Magid** (*1973, Bridgeport, Connecticut, USA) examines current methods of state secrecy. Magid will be presenting parts of *The Spy Project* (2005–10), including the neon-light installation *Miranda IV* and the texts *18 Spies*. The project was commissioned by the Dutch Secret Service (AVID), later partially censored and confiscated, and thus entangled the artist herself in the concealment strategies of the organization. The multidisciplinary research group **Forensic Architecture** investigates hidden cases of human rights violations, state violence, and disinformation worldwide. In their

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interdisciplinary approach of forensic architecture, they collate a multitude of sources of evidence such as video and image material, witness statements, and material analyses to reconstruct the circumstances of an incident. The work shown in the exhibition, *The Killing of Óscar Pérez* (2018), focuses on the assassination of the Venezuelan rebel leader and his followers by state security forces in January 2018.

Central to **Simon Denny's** artistic practice (*1982, Auckland, New Zealand) are the links between design, technology, and language in how secret services communicate. His installation *Modded Server-Rack Display with David Darchicourt Commissioned Map of Aotearoa New Zealand* (2015) was first seen at the Venice Biennale 2015 as part of the project *Secret Powers*. It is based on collaboration with David Darchicourt, who worked as a graphic designer for the National Security Agency (NSA) and later the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). On display is a map of the world designed by Darchicourt, with New Zealand at the center and with data flowing from there to the United States and Australia. **Trevor Paglen** (*1974, Camp Springs, Maryland, USA), who is a visual artist, geographer, and author, explores the infrastructures of global mass surveillance and data collection. Known for investigating the invisible through the visible, Paglen uses highly developed technology to take photographs of secret military bases from several kilometers away, in remote or restricted areas. He will present a series of photographic works, including *Limit Telephotography* and the monumental installation *Code Names* (2009), composed of a list of words, phrases, and terms that designate classified secret military programs.

The exhibition was initiated and conceived by Cristina Ricupero and Alexandra Midal.

LIST OF THE ARTISTS OF THE EXHIBITION

Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Maja Bajevic, Jean-Luc Blanc, Nina Childress, Guy de Cointet, Thomas Demand, Simon Denny, Mauricio Dias & Walter Riedweg, Stan Douglas, Charles and Ray Eames, Forensic Architecture, Dora García, Mathis Gasser, Rodney Graham, Eva Grubinger, Humans since 1982, Alfredo Jaar, Kiluanji Kia Henda, Gabriel Lester, Lim Minouk, Dora Longo Bahia, Jill Magid, Fabian Marti, Josephine Meckseper, Mieko Meguro, Metahaven, Aleksandra Mir, Henrike Naumann, Trevor Paglen, Park Chan-Kyong and Park Chan-Wook, Cornelia Schleime, Jim Shaw, Taryn Simon, Jonas Staal, Noam Toran, Suzanne Treister, Nomedas & Gediminas Urbonas, Jane and Louise Wilson, Liam Young, and Tamir Zadok.

PUBLICATION *WE NEVER SLEEP*, ed. by Cristina Ricupero, Alexandra Midal and Katharina Dohm (Schirn). With a foreword by Philipp Demandt. Essays by Jörg Heiser, Jelena Martinovic, Marina Otero Verzier, Cristina Ricupero, Noam Toran, and Wladimir Velminski as well as facsimiles of previously published texts by Ulrike Knöfel, Metahaven, Joanna Moorhead and Jonas Staal. English/German edition, 184 pages, approx. 100 illustrations, 20 x 27 cm (portrait format), Snoeck, ISBN 978-3-86442-318-5, € 25 (Schirn), € 34 (bookstores).

VENUE SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, 60311 Frankfurt **DURATION**

September 24, 2020 – January, 10 2021 **INFORMATION** www.schirn.de **E-MAIL**

welcome@schirn.de **PHONE** +49.69.29 98 82-0 **FAX** +49.69. 29 98 82-240 **ADMISSION** € 10, reduced 8 €; free admission for children under the age of 8 years **PROTECTIVE AND HYGIENE**

MEASURES In order to ensure a safe exhibition visit during the corona pandemic, comprehensive protective and hygiene measures were developed in cooperation with the responsible authorities. Further information is available at www.schirn.de/en/visit **CULTURAL PARTNER HR2 CURATED**

BY Cristina Ricupero in collaboration with Katharina Dohm (Schirn) **SUPPORTED BY** City of Frankfurt am Main and the Friends of the Schirn Kunsthalle e. V., including members of the Executive Board and the Board of Trustees of the Friends of the Schirn Kunsthalle e. V., and the

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