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BOOK REVIEW

Black transparency: the right to know in the age of mass surveillance, by
Metahaven, Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2015, €22 / £18.50, 288 pp., ISBN: 978-3-95679-
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Metahaven's work tends to divide fellow graphic designers into two camps: those who cannot get past the self-indulgent noise of such alienating and anti-modernist graphics and those who whole-heartedly embrace imitating its tropes and ticks (see also David Carson). However, if you are able to overcome the initial stylistic shock and awe and engage with the thinking behind Metahaven's designs, you will find a clear-eyed vision deserving wider imitation in a field in need of more critically engaged voices. 'Part essay, part zine' *Black Transparency* collects the visual and critical works resulting from Metahaven's interactions with Wikileaks between 2010 and 2014. Founded by Daniël van der Velden and Vinca Kruk in 2007, the 'design think tank' has built a reputation for applying graphic design to areas far beyond its typical commercial and cultural remit. Their previous publication 'Uncorporate Identities', examined the geopolitical through the lens of branding. More recently, they have been exploring the impact of surveillance on our personal lives through their work with composer and musician Holly Herndon for her 2015 album *Platform*. As with these other works, *Black Transparency* is not easy, happy or even likeable, but that is not the point. This is work that demands a lot from its audience, but rewards them with a vision bolder and sharper than more conventional graphic design could produce in its wildest dreams.

The book's starting point is the black transparency of the title: forced transparency as practiced by WikiLeaks. It then spirals out through an examination of the visual rhetoric of WikiLeaks, a genealogy of transparency, post-modern Russian propaganda, and the political implications of cloud computing. Both written and visual essays trace the ways that actors such a governments, corporations and activists deploy information, images and narratives to seize power. The graphic work presented in the book renders a post-Internet media landscape where '[f]antasy and reality, fiction and fact are made equivalent. They exist as one surface – a single, shareable veneer' (p. 164) in print form. High production fashion images, video stills, official documents (fake and authentic), infographics, and design proposals sit side by side, all framed by RGB bright colours, random vector junk and distorted type. Infographics are cropped across pages or disappear into the binding, denying your desire to grasp the totality. Instead, you get glimpses through leaks, slippages, and die-cuts. The result is a fever dream of internet aesthetics and anti-design tropes right down to the choice of high gloss paper stock, rather the near ubiquitous current vogue for aggressively matte uncoated. Rather than lapsing into nostalgia for the tactility of a pre-digital world, Metahaven forces us to confront the mediated reality we inhabit in the here and now.

The result of the analysis is bleak at times, revealing the powerlessness of both governments and individuals in the face of chaotic technocracy, but there is hope too. We are pointed to the need for '[n]ew polities, new technologies and new imaginations'. This is found realized in Iceland's ability to wield law and technology to serve its citizens and in 'NullifyNSA', an effort to mobilize communities to cut off power and water to the surveillance state's data centres. But most of all, hope is found in the ability of dreams and fantasy to truly reveal the secrets of the powerful. WikiLeaks can only reveal information, but Pussy Riot tell an anti-fairy tale that 'thrives not on

releasing information about the powerful, but on hijacking their deepest fantasies, triggering responses that are themselves disclosures.' (p. 169)

Black Transparency is not a book about graphic design, but it is undoubtedly a book that is written through the lens of graphic design. Metahaven's rejection of conventional design values could lead to comparison to earlier post-modern graphic design movements. However, where an earlier group of graphic rebels in the US and UK largely ignored the political ramifications of their work, the relationship between the formal and the political is the entire point for Metahaven. They are better placed in the critical graphic design tradition of Jan van Toorn's 'dialogic' graphic design, but reconfigured by the networked age. As explored in their earlier publication *Can Jokes Bring Down Governments?* in the face of a complex media ecosystem coupled with increasing economic precarity, graphic design can no longer be complacent in its role as a mediator between private interest and a broader public. And yet *Black Transparency* is itself a strong argument for the need for critical graphic literacies so that we might navigate these shifting political and media landscapes.

Notes on contributor

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