

# ARTFORUM

## “CounterIntelligence”

JUSTINA M. BARNICKE GALLERY

Hart House, University of Toronto, 7 Hart House Circle

January 24–March 16

One of the largest works in this group exhibition, Abbas Akhavan’s *Study for Blue Shield*, 2011, is only visible by aerial surveillance. A piece of the gallery’s drywall has been cut out and painted in a pattern of blue and white diamonds. Located on the roof of the gallery, the shield, which replicates a crest designed by UNESCO to identify and protect sites of cultural heritage during armed conflict, is invisible to viewers but is on display for passing helicopters or drones.

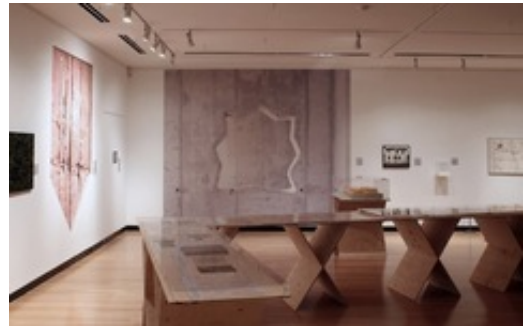
Akhavan’s gesture—an incisive commentary on the threats posed by, and to, art in a surveillance state—is a fitting introduction to this show, organized by artist Charles

Stankieveh, which brings together nearly one hundred objects

that examine the confluence of artistic and military intelligences: from Vorticist Edward Wadsworth’s invention of “Razzle Dazzle” camouflage for World War I warships in *A Ship Being Painted with Dazzle Camouflage*, 1918; to Fluxus artist Tamás St. Turba’s fake-brick “radio” (used by Czech residents as a symbol of protest against Soviet censorship), *Czechoslovakian Radio 1968*, 1968–2014; to Sang Mun’s *ZXX Typeface*, 2012, a “disruptive” font that is unreadable by text-scanning software, which Stankieveh cunningly adopts for his didactic panels. While many of these projects are direct responses to government protocols, other works—such as Bill Burns’s *Guard Tower Plans, Prison Cell Plans and the Songs of Guantanamo Bay*, 2010, which includes a limited-edition vinyl record of songs used for torture—use appropriation to demonstrate how readily innocuous objects, such as a copy of the *Sesame Street* theme song, can be transformed into tools of state violence.

Though the premise of the exhibition sounds like it could devolve into an episode of the 1960s television show *Get Smart*, Stankieveh’s careful archival research prevents it from succumbing to comedic shtick. Instead, the exhibition encourages viewers to wander among the competing visual codes as they try to discern which are products of insidious government surveillance and which are merely artworks. Confusing the two has provocative implications, suggesting both the complicity of artists in acts of state deception and the possibility they are double agents, performing political subterfuge from within.

— Gabrielle Moser



View of “CounterIntelligence,” 2014.

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