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Art in the age of Edward Snowden

Charles Stankievehch brings his conspiracy theory-laden artistic practice to Toronto with *Counterintelligence*, with dizzying results.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.

Richard Mosse, *Colonel Soleil's Boys*, 2010. Mosse uses an infrared film developed by the U.S. military in Vietnam to document the war in Congo.

By: [Murray Whyte](#) Visual arts, Published on Wed Jan 29 2014

The New York Times [reported this week](#) that the National Security Agency has figured out a way to glean data from unsuspecting smartphone users plugged in to apps used every day for playful distraction. Be warned, *Angry Birds* players: You're being watched.

This being only the latest in a string of revelations about the breadth of the U.S. [spy agency's invasive agenda](#) — Edward Snowden may have been the initial leak, but the crack he chipped in the dam has since produced a deluge — makes *Counterintelligence*, an exhaustive survey of the odd intersections between art, aesthetics and militaristic subterfuge timely indeed.

At the [Justina M. Barnicke Gallery](#), where the show is mounted in four distinct, chock-full rooms, revelations abound: For instance, did you know that Peter Paul Rubens, Flemish Renaissance master painter, was also a diplomat and a spy? Me neither. Or that a below-the-radar facility code-named “Chicago” has been the training ground for at least couple of generations of Israeli soldiers rehearsing for ongoing clashes with Palestinians?

If it all has you wondering what this has to do with art, let's consider the source: Namely, Charles Stankievehch, a young dynamo of an artist who's positioned himself at the crossroads of art and military intrigue more or less since the outset of his career. If this sounds less like a central hub of artistic inquiry than a distant outpost, fair enough: Stankievehch, originally from Calgary and recently relocated to Berlin, spent years on the physical margins of mainstream world in Dawson City, Yukon, honing both his craft and unique world view.

There, he devised ways to extract aesthetic purpose from the shadowy terrain of the far north. Specifically, his ongoing fascination with the DEW line – Distant Early Warning, a near-polar system of radar stations designed to alert the United States of a Soviet assault over the top of the planet – has proven fertile ground for a paranoid, conspiracy-theory laden artistic vision.

Stankieveh, who is 35, has been a finalist for the prestigious Sobey Prize at least once before, and if he doesn't win it before he's past the pole at 40, then I give up. His uncanny knack for coaxing elegant, gorgeous works from the intense realm of militaristic half-truths makes him, to my mind, one of the most compelling artists of his generation, here or anywhere.

Here in Toronto, you might recall his project for Nuit Blanche a few months back, installed in the giant foyer of the BMO tower. A film shot in liquid, shimmering black and white tones of silvery grey, it was a hauntingly meditative look inside at the northernmost military installation in the country, on Ellesmere Island. Eerily unpeopled, you could almost feel the weight of time in its gorgeous, inexorable images of alien interiors, a world away. He called it *The Soniferous Aether of the Land Beyond The Land Beyond*, a poetic overlay to an austere, striking experience laced with dread.

Counterintelligence is entirely his doing, and it's equal parts a curatorial project and a view into the psychic archives of his supercharged brain. On a stretch of tables that runs through the largest space – the “reading room,” as he calls it – an array of 40 pamphlets and books lies splayed out on tables of his own design.

Stankieveh begins the room with a telling piece, a manipulated photo of Anthony Blunt, the shamed British art historian and Second World War hero who was exposed in the '50s as a Soviet spy. Visually murky and pieced together, the photo, of Blunt at a desk in what appears to be his study, is a piece by the German artist Fabian Reimann, playing on Blunt's double life and the shadow zone where his true self lurked.

Beside it, Stankieveh projects a transparency of the National Gallery's [Augustus and Cleopatra](#), purchased in 1953 in consultation with Blunt himself, over a photocopied facsimile of the painting's x-rayed hide (a standard procedure in verifying a painting's authenticity, on file in the Gallery's archive). Bought on the auspices that it was by 17th-century French Baroque master Nicolas Poussin, it was later proven to be not so, and its authenticity was revoked.

You get the picture. All is never what it seems, and here, Stankieveh makes a literal link between the murky realm of intelligence gathering and the ambiguities of art, value and authenticity. Blunt serves his purpose, propped up by other examples provided by Stankieveh of art cross-pollinated with military intrigue: Rubens' double-role as artist and political emissary who used his status as painter to curry favour for the state with foreign kings, or the bizarre, entertaining essay by Salvador Dali detailing his ability to design “invisible” camouflage (“I am a believer in magic,” he wrote) in a 1942 issue of *Esquire*.

On the same stretch of tabletop, Stankieveh displays *Peintures: 10 Planches en Couleur* by Yves Klein – blocks of red, blue and green, gamely presaging colourfield abstraction – next to his own grandfather's 1939 Canadian Army basic training manual, where a how-to of basic camouflage displays similar blocks of colour in almost exactly the same way. A set of *Encounter* magazines, a cultural journal popular in 1950s UK, is revealed here for its true self, as a CIA-sponsored project aimed at

combating the growth of Communism. Nearby, a Spanish pamphlet details how Alfonso Laurencic, an architect and French-Spanish double agent during the Spanish Civil War designed a torture chamber using Surrealist and Bauhaus motifs as a means to derange Franco loyalists into confession. Everyone's a critic.

Stankievech departs gamely from the literal, though, and into conceptual strategy with aplomb, freighting highly formal aesthetic language with real-world menace. Abbas Akhavan's *Study for a Blue Shield*, cut out from the gallery wall, references architectural interventions by Gordon Matta-Clark — also represented here, with one of his cut-in-half houses — but with visceral purpose. The [Blue Shield is a universal symbol](#) placed on the roofs of buildings of cultural value — the National Museum of Iraq, for example — to keep them from being bombed. For the purpose of the exhibition, Hart House is similarly protected, the shield positioned on the roof.

Adjacent, a photo mural by Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, of a jagged hole in a concrete wall, serves up Minimalist priorities around material and form along with its uncomfortable reality: It's a photo of an Israeli military training ground set to mimic the occupied territories in Gaza.

Farther down the wall, Richard Mosse's gorgeous fuchsia photograph of Congolese soldiers seems to shimmer with Photoshopped unreality, but it's not so: Mosse uses an infrared film developed by the U.S. military during the Vietnam War to ferret out Viet Cong hiding places. Next to it are An My Le's photos of Vietnam War enthusiasts who recreate famous battles from that loaded conflict, and Le loads it further: She was a refugee of the conflict, brought to the U.S. as a child in 1975.

At its core, *Counterintelligence* is really about that duplicity, and by putting the real and concocted side-by-side, Stankievech blurs the true nature of both. He presents a dizzying array of material, some of it absurd, much of it shocking, and an overarching sense of indignation at the implications of the unknown activities of the so-called free world.

Counterintelligence ranges far afield, its waters deliberately muddy and occasionally sensational — a pair of military video games used for training purposes by the U.S. and Hamas come to mind — but always comes back to the centre of things: A truthfully fuzzy view of the known, and leading speculation about what remains in the shadows. It's the smartest thing I've seen in ages.