



Metahaven. *Black Transparency. The Right to Know in the Age of Mass Surveillance*.
Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015. Portada / Cover.

IMAGINARIES OF TRANSPARENCY

Metahaven

Ámsterdam, Holanda

Entrevistado por / *Interviewed by*
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Although transparency appears to be the starting point for every public discussion nowadays, it seems we have not realized the fact that when everything is transparent there's actually nothing to see. Skeptical about these processes – and of how they have been unfolded by new technologies and social media – Metahaven has developed the idea of 'black transparency,' which deeply reflects on these imaginaries and its ultimate implications both at the political and geopolitical level.

KEYWORDS · book, design, activism, hackers, WikiLeaks

We e-mailed WikiLeaks in June 2010, proposing to work on their visual identity. The response did not take long to arrive. It read:

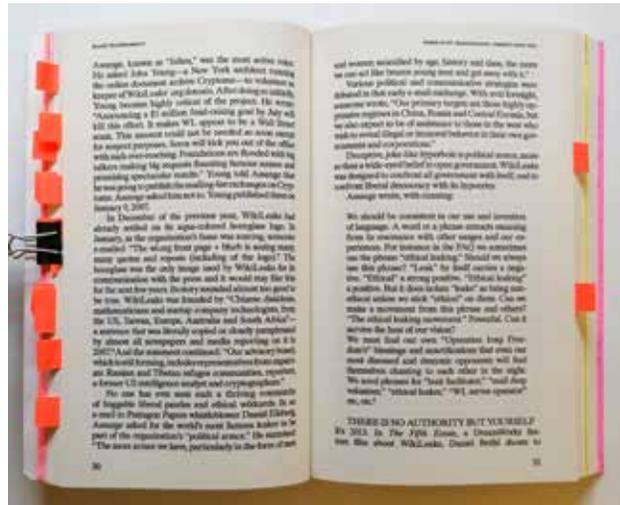
Absolutely. Go for it! We have a shortage of such things...

J.A.

Designing the visual identity for an organization that only exists in the Internet and whose operations – due to their very nature – have to be developed under full secrecy seems a paradox. Why would an organization like this one need a visual identity? It's likely to think they wouldn't. Then, why would a design studio volunteer for such a task knowing it would probably mean nothing but troubles?

Black Transparency: The Right to Know in the Age of Mass Surveillance (Sternberg Press, 2015), the book published by the Dutch design studio Metahaven, offers the answers to these questions by opening their research and reflections on the subject to a larger public.

Founded in 2004 by Vinca Kruk and Daniel van der Velden, Metahaven must be regarded as more than a design studio: they can also be considered a think-tank, a collective, political activists, or even cultural game-changers. *Black Transparency* – their third book, which follows *Uncorporate Identity* (Lars Müller, 2010) and the e-book *Can Jokes Bring Down Governments* (Strelka Press, 2013) – explores and goes deep in the ways in which communication hides more than what it shows, and the role of design within those processes. The answer to the questions posed above appears here: the offer to WikiLeaks was not a commission but rather a way to exercise



Metahaven. *Black Transparency. The Right to Know in the Age of Mass Surveillance*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015, 30-31.

the “right to know” the role of design within an extreme case of media such as a whistleblower website, whose geopolitical implications reach a global extent and whose very nature changes the imaginaries we have about the actual freedom we can find on the Internet.

Indeed, their curiosity about the new aspects of communication through the Internet, as well as their citric sense of humor – which operates as a Trojan horse for some very hard critiques on the current status of design – led them to realize the extent to which such a weak organization can not only make governments to stagger but also how its weakness reveals that in today’s world idealism has clear boundaries and freedom no longer means what we thought it meant. With the tools of design, Metahaven seems to have been tracking this process closely and with a cautious skepticism. Not by chance, two years after their offer to volunteer for WikiLeaks, Julian Assange asked for asylum in the Ecuador embassy in London – a place where he still is. Aware of these logics, and witnessing how an organization was frayed to the level of individuals, Metahaven continues their practice in Amsterdam to tell us that:

WikiLeaks has lost much of its political armor, even as it has regained a capacity to receive and publish documents. It continues to unravel the circuitry of modern state power: where does this end, and does it have an end? Probably not. This is the rupture: what is an organization in the afterlife of imperial intervention? A masthead on a website. A logo drawn by an Australian student. A name known to the public – yet not the Transparency International of the big What. The NO-NGO. After WikiLeaks began wheeling and dealing with power – real power being the catalyst of the cascade, a totalitarian superbrand, or the stranded remains of a pirate galleon that once sailed the oceans – there was no more organization. There was only you. (Metahaven, 2015:53)

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In this interview, based on the questions posed by their book *Black Transparency*, we ask them about the imaginaries associated with transparency, the chances of creating counter-imaginaries, some other current political developments, and even the ethical grounds of activist practices within the Internet.

FRANCISCO DÍAZ: Let's assume that there's an imaginary associated to transparency, which works in both the political (ethical) and the aesthetic fields, and that these codes are somehow similar (visibility, accountability, sincerity, and so on). So, when you propose the idea of 'black transparency,' I think you unfold a whole new imaginary about this concept, one which precisely goes against the forces that have turned transparency into something desirable. Therefore, I wonder, how did you arrive to this idea? Were you aware of this sort of *détournement* you were doing over the assumed imaginary of transparency?

METAHAVEN: *Black Transparency* emerged to a large extent out of our work around, and sometimes for or with, WikiLeaks. The phrase 'black transparency' appeared before we understood what it could mean as an expression, so we had to discover it. Some people seemed to mean by transparency some sort of accountability. It struck us that that was not what was going on. What happened was that there were geopolitical effects that were triggered by information releases, supercharged by the Internet both in their scale and scope; but of course it were not purely the information cascades themselves but the way in which these worked in tune with deeper cultural and political shifts in the post-1989 and post-War on Terror world. One of these shifts is that a world turning toward digital tools, social media, technological stacks, interfaces, and incessant self-communication can't be presumed a place where liberal causes and Western agendas prevail simply because the initial forays into the technology were Western.

In our technological halo, myth and fantasy abound on the backbone of increasingly evenly distributed computational

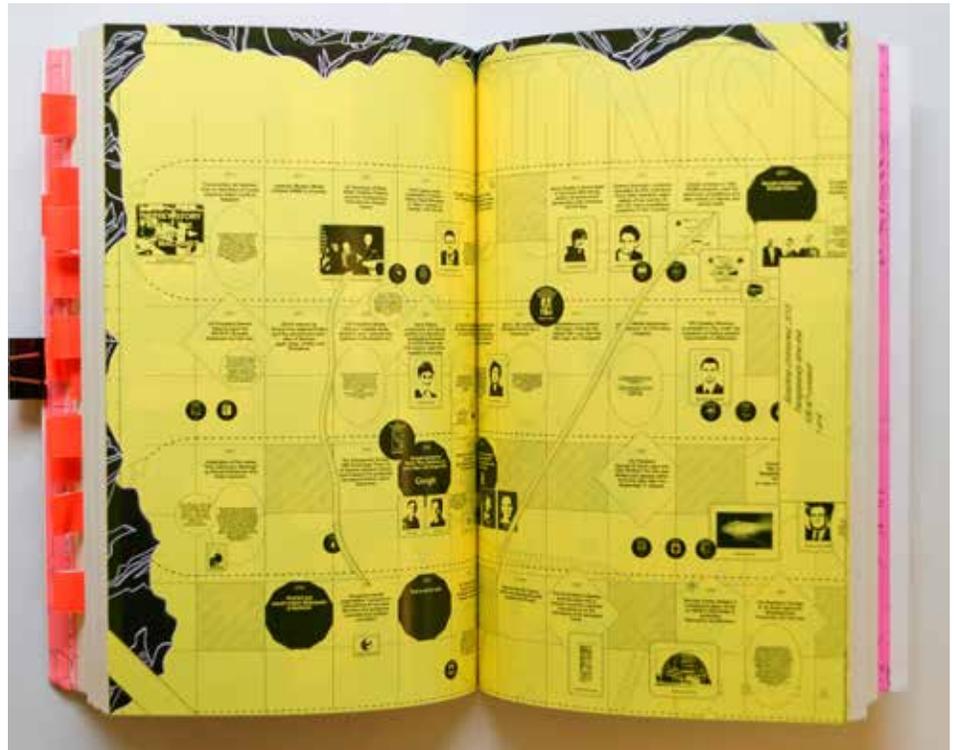
“(...) when something like a ‘new Cold War’ emerges we have to remember that it works completely differently, through the common ground of platforms, with opposite sides sharing the same infrastructures and being hosted side by side, almost cozily, in u.s. datacenters.”

power. In the cloud, we are even more alienated from the technology and storage itself, and lose track of ownership over our own data and digital lives, providing it to a few very large platform corporations that guarantee us the benefits of audience and preferential attachment. This may seem a little neo-medieval (or net-medieval), but this does not mean that there is no agency for the users. There is, clearly, but all agency is wound up in the asymmetrical, incongruent, the accident, the paradox. Even when something like a ‘new Cold War’ emerges we have to remember that it works completely differently, through the common ground of platforms, with opposite sides sharing the same infrastructures and being hosted side by side, almost cozily, in u.s. datacenters.

I understand the idea of ‘black transparency’ in relation to the black market – that is, as a sphere that operates in parallel to the official one, doing exactly what the official one was supposed to do but in such a way that makes accessible something a certain part of the population was deprived of. In other words, what the black market does with goods black transparency does with information. Nowadays, we are supposed to have more access to more goods and information than any other generation in history – yet, the ‘black’ versions show us that the level of deprivation is high enough to make these necessary. In that context, would you say the imaginaries of both transparency and the market have been tailored in favor of certain interests?

In ‘black transparency’ what works is the fact that the information is out there and gets repackaged to influence media cycles and people’s thoughts and opinions. Of course, there is the investigative journalism side of things, but when journalism is understood as a human filtering process, the scale and volume of revelations is just so unprecedented that it is rarely for everyone to know exactly about the content of every leak. People who are really interested in the content can be moved to pay for it; the Danish government recently gave the anonymous source of the Panama Papers an amount of about one million euros for information on Danish users of tax evasion schemes. Also, around 2010 or so transpar-

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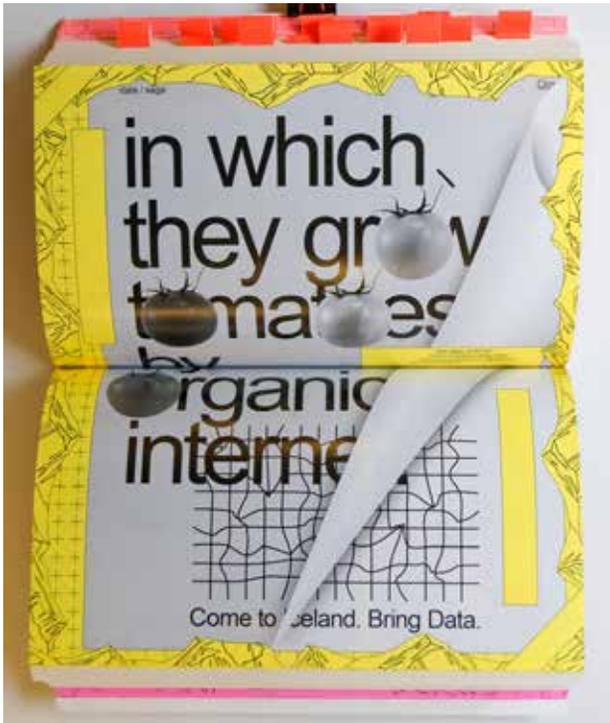
ency still meant whistleblowing (as it did with Snowden), but at the moment it is about hacking; the Panama Papers were the result of a hack (exploiting, among others, an unfixed bug in an old version of WordPress which Mossack Fonseca used).

Your analogy though is very tempting to use: black markets and black transparency do what their official versions were supposed to do but then without the deprivation and inequality. Probably, though, on a black market the transaction is still straightforward and covers the intent and mutual benefit of buyer and seller. In black transparency, on the face of it maybe it is more tricky; the ethical motive behind a release can easily be faked. We know in the case of Edward Snowden that it was real; but the “John Doe manifesto,” which the Panama Papers whistleblower wrote, and which seems closely modeled after Snowden, raises more questions than it answers. Transparency is very much not straightforward.

Following that idea, and also considering the work you have developed within Metahaven, how can we prompt counter-imaginaries? What is the role of design in the creation of these other imaginaries?

We cannot speak for others or be prescriptive (as in, answering a ‘how can we’ question). In design and art it is different for everyone and, luckily, there are no general ‘how to’ paths anymore that lead to a certain guaranteed outcome.

But we believe that every political project or dissidence will probably strike a balance, in its expressions, between planning and contingency. In recent years, on the left, planning became



Data Saga, *Come to Iceland. Bring Data.* 2012-2013. Metahaven. *Black Transparency. The Right to Know in the Age of Mass Surveillance.* Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015.

“The ethical high ground of transparency was lost with hacking, and it now comes down to an objective technological condition, unevenly distributed, to which ‘ethical’ purposes can be retrofitted and even used as masks for objectives that remain unstated.”

suspect; things had to emerge out of the contingency and in a way that’s what they did as there was no planned or strategized leftist message available anymore; every prior message of the left had become a friendlier copy of a center-right-liberal original, where the function of leftist politics becomes that of a cushion to soften the blows of the ‘inevitable,’ undisputed truths of free market agendas. Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams have written a very instructive and necessary book, *Inventing the Future* (2015), in one part of which they study how neoliberalism was once a fringe ideology that was built into virtually a planetary political climate by design. Their work assesses the importance of long-term strategy together with situational agility; and those are two things that design is good at.

It’s true that asking ‘how to’ leads to a prescriptive answer – I also disagree with prescriptions or recipes. What I meant was that, if we understand imaginaries as possibilities which can be launched and incepted into society, then perhaps design can do something about it. But agreeing with you that the left has usually focused on softening what seems inevitable, I still think that there’s another possibility. Instead of being the “friendlier copy of a center-right-liberal original” these strategies could be used with different aims. I’m thinking, for instance, on how ‘memes’ use the strategies of marketing and advertising to laugh about power, or how you have used the strategies of fashion and photography for “Transparent Camouflage.” So, rephrasing the question, can an existing strategy be rethought and repurposed to create counter-imaginaries?

It can. But the result almost always comes in the form of an accident. The repurposing of the Guy Fawkes mask to become the ‘face’ of Anonymous is one example of such an accident. *V for Vendetta* never planned to be about hacktivism. That said, we can and should definitely try to get a more strategic grasp on counter-imaginaries, but there is no other way of getting there than by testing them.



«Black Transparency. Exhibition view at Future Gallery» (Berlin, 2014). Metahaven. *Black Transparency. The Right to Know in the Age of Mass Surveillance*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015.

Coming back to “Transparent Camouflage,” you have translated a graphic resource – a black rectangle drawn over a text that shows what we are not allowed to read – into a piece of clothing – a scarf that shows that we are not allowed to see a face. And then, more recently, we have witnessed this polemic about the use of the burka in France in what is presented as a clash between two imaginaries: secular-freedom/liberal-democracy (France and the West) and religious-lack-of-freedom/authoritarian-totalitarianism (the Muslim world). **What’s your view on this debate? Were you aware of the link between “Transparent Camouflage” and the burka?**

The burka ban is ridiculous as a grand-scale gesture to defend secular Europe. It is not a debate about transparency but about the freedom, for women, to choose what to wear – even if that freedom means having a right to partially cover oneself. The burkini arrests are really a self-parody, but politicians should think about the feelings they are sowing through these gestures.

Powerless against networks of militant extremists, the decision is to target the burka instead; it is a really clear sign of the way in which decision makers are completely clueless.

Finally, transparency is thought to work both ways: you can see and be seen. Yet ‘black transparency’ unleashes another image: a one-directional transparency of the mirror-like black windows of an interrogation room. You have mentioned the



Transparent Camouflage, 2011. Metahaven. *Black Transparency. The Right to Know in the Age of Mass Surveillance*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015.



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notion of “glass candy” as an irony about the ways in which both the materials and discourses of transparency are precisely used to prevent it (we can see what’s inside a bank but we can’t see its transactions). So I wonder, what’s left for transparency when it’s actually one-directional? Is it just a panoptic? Or is it the naive, ‘literal transparency’ proposed by Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky (1963) the only option we have left?

To be honest, with the passage from whistleblowing to hacking, the once-credible ethical high ground of black transparency has been ravaged – leveled with the technological condition that was always at its base: planetary-scale computational networks and the technical ability to break into them and retrieve information from them.

This is about an unevenly distributed set of skills and resources. Nation-states are privileged actors here, because they can afford to systematically fund such activities. If an actor is able to retrieve files from any system, either through zero day exploits, Trojans, or spear phishing attacks, the ethical imperative to release the information can be retrofitted to what was found. So, instead of having transparency from the inside, the whistleblower gets taken out of the process.

What we would need is a much stronger examination, analysis, and work around the planetary-scale design implications of the hack, actually, really beyond any discussion of a phenomenon like Anonymous. In particular, we need to reassess beliefs that hackers represent an extra-systemic correction on behalf of the people, against powerful states and corpora-



French police make woman remove clothing on Nice beach following burkini ban
Fuente / Source: *The Guardian*. Londres: 24 de agosto de 2016. Disponible en:
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/24/french-police-make-woman-remove-burkini-on-nice-beach>

tions; it is exactly this rhetoric that you find everywhere where hackers “speak out,” whether that’s the so-called Guccifer 2.0, who is behind the Democratic National Committee’s leaks, a self-proclaimed Romanian who others believe is Russian, or the so-called John Doe who leaked the Panama Papers. With varying degrees of success, they portray themselves as these extra-systemic black knights, but it kind of sounds too good to be true. In particular, John Doe goes to painful ends to sound like Edward Snowden, but the differences are really evident.

The ethical high ground of transparency was lost with hacking, and it now comes down to an objective technological condition, unevenly distributed, to which ‘ethical’ purposes can be retrofitted and even used as masks for objectives that remain unstated. **ARQ**

METAHAVEN

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Design studio founded by Vinca Kruk and Daniel van der Velden in 2007. Vinca Kruk studied at the Willem de Kooning Academie in Rotterdam (2003), and Daniel van der Velden holds a BA in graphic design from the Willem de Kooning Academie (1996), and a MFA in design from the Jan van Eyck Academie (1998). Their work has been exhibited at the Architectural Association in London (2007), the CAPC musée d’art contemporain in Bordeaux (2008), the Künstlerhaus Stuttgart (2009), the Gwangju Design Biennale in Korea (2011), the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (2011), the Kunsthalle Baden-Baden (2013), and the MoMA PS1 in New York (2013). Their books include *Uncorporate Identity* (2010), *Can Jokes Bring Down Governments? Memes, Design and Politics* (2013), and *Black Transparency: The Right to Know in the Age of Mass Surveillance* (2015).

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