Venice Biennale 2015

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Simon Denny, the artist who did reverse espionage on the NSA

Denny wanted to study NSA graphics, the '21st-century masterpieces' unleashed on the world by Edward Snowden. So he tracked down its former creative director of defence intelligence – and commissioned him for his new show Secret Power

📷 Intelligent art ... Simon Denny with his installation Secret Power at Marco Polo Airport, part of Venice Biennale 2015. Photograph: Paolo Monello

Charlotte Higgins *in Venice*

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The Marciana Library in Venice is one of the world's great repositories of humanist knowledge. Its grand hall is covered in paintings of philosophers, and its ceiling with allegorical images about the acquisition of knowledge. Now, that hall is temporary home to another meditation on the accrual of information: an exhibition about how the National Security Agency (NSA) used images to communicate its methods internally – something that was spectacularly revealed to the world in 2013 via the Edward Snowden leaks.

The show is the work of Simon Denny, the 32-year-old, Berlin-based artist officially representing New Zealand at the Venice Biennale. It examines, he said, "the way the contemporary world is depicted in imagery used by the NSA; and it imagines a possible artistic context for the way that imagery was produced."

📷 'Some of the most important artistic images today' … Denny's Secret Power at Marciana Library, part of the Venice Biennale. Photograph: Nick Ash

In particular, it takes a single figure as a case study: David Darchicourt, who worked for the NSA for 17 years. Now a freelance designer based in Maryland, Darchicourt was, according to his online professional profiles, a graphic designer for the NSA from 1996-2001 and its creative director of defense intelligence from 2001-12.

Denny and his collaborator David Bennewith stumbled on Darchicourt by chance - then commissioned fresh design work from him (an illustrated map of New Zealand, for example) for the show. Denny has also reproduced many of the cartoons, logos and illustrations found in the material Snowden leaked. These images, he argued, "have become retroactively some of the most important artistic images created today".

Darchicourt was not informed of the intended use of the illustrations - a decision Denny said was crucial to his approach, which might be thought of as a piece of reverse espionage, constructing a speculative portrait of Darchicourt through his work, his traces online, and the leaked material.

📷 Clunky and amateurish? … David Darchicourt's NSA designs, on show at Secret Power by Simon Denny. Photograph: Nick Ash

When contacted by the Guardian and informed that he was central to Denny's exhibition, Darchicourt confirmed that he had been a graphic designer for the NSA, but added that a non-disclosure agreement prevented him from going into any detail. While surprised, he was sanguine about the use of his work in the exhibition. "I sell my work and I tend not to keep track of it," he said. He added: "I view myself as an Eskimo. They'd do their drawings on pieces of bone, and leave them in their campsites when they left. That's what I do. I was paid very well to do the work [for Venice] and David Bennewith was great to work with. As long as I have credit for my work I am happy."

Describing his role at the NSA, Darchicourt said that his work had been "solving problems visually" and that he was one of two or three people in the organisation's design department skilled in drawing. "My cartooning is something they found useful from time to time - it could

be a good communication tool, helping express complex information in a very simple way." He was "particularly involved in working on internal security and security awareness," he said.

He said that he had not personally designed any of the Snowden PowerPoint slides per se, but confirmed to the Guardian that he had, for example, designed the logo used internally at the NSA for the programme Poison Nut - which was designed to break through security measures taken by potential targets of surveillance. A document referring to Poison Nut was published by Der Spiegel on 28 December 2014, and its logo - a cartoon squirrel recoiling in horror from a peanut emblazoned with a skull and crossbones - is featured in the show.

"I like to speculate as to why the artist has used certain imagery in certain ways," said Denny. "I think Snowden is an example of one end of a spectrum of resistance, and I think a visual imaging department, which perhaps does not have that much oversight, are given a lot of scope to make images like this which are rather scary - as a form, perhaps, of possible resistance."

📷 Another zone of official information gathering … Simon Denny's installation Secret Power has also infiltrated Marco Polo airport. Photograph: Christian Sinibaldi

The aesthetics of the PowerPoint slides leaked by Snowden became a subject of fascination, and sometimes derision, when they were revealed, their visual style regarded by many as clunky and amateurish. Redesigns of the slides even became something of an internet meme. But in Denny's view, the slides were far from inept. "They are very important cultural documents, and the leak made them into 21st-

century masterpieces. These images contain a lot of cultural information that we just haven't been able to unpack. The attempt with this exhibition is to give people the tools to do that. My skill is as an artist - I'm trying to contextualise this material from my tradition, which is the history of conceptual art."

Visitors arriving in Venice by air will also see part of Denny's show - he has arranged for large reproductions of the interiors of the Marciana library to be displayed on the floors and walls of another zone of official information gathering: Marco Polo international airport. The main show in the Marciana library opens to the public on 9 May as one of the 89 national exhibitions staged by different countries for the 56th Venice Biennale.