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Phantom Nation

Peter J. Hoffmeister Mr.
CUNY Hunter College

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Phantom Nation

by

Peter J. Hoffmeister

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Date

Constance DeJong

Signature

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Date

Nari Ward

Signature of Second Reader

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PREFACE

As an artist, I occupy a social space within a network of other individuals. This space at its most basic is a territory for developing and sharing free speech, in this case art, communicated in any format or medium, and which has the potential for reception and processing by any other individual in the network. Given this context, a painting or sculptural object—including many other items also, like a song, novel, or film—is considered free speech.

There is a palpable sense of anxiety in the United States that something is not quite right, and has not been for a while. Is it that money does not buy as much as it used to? Or that wages are stagnant? Perhaps it is that everyone, including myself, seems to have an incurable addiction to their smartphones, transfixed by persistently glowing screens. If I were to ask a sizable cross section of the population, I am sure a long, varied list of responses would result.

The anxiety I have personally felt, for years, originates from an uneasy suspicion that a malevolent force, decades in the making, is sunk deep into the heart of this country. The following details an attempt to give this anxiety form.

INFESTATION.

Secrets are characteristically silent and unyielding. If disclosed, a secret is pulled from its hiding place into the light, and, like a wriggling insect, made available for further scrutiny. Some secrets we know must exist, because we see their container—a locked safe or filing cabinet, for instance. Others are entirely unseen, burrowed deep in a complete, stifling darkness; and their very existence is yet another secret. A secret wrapped in a secret.¹

Whenever secrecy leads to an imbalance of knowledge, whoever controls its bulk enjoys great power to shape and form reality. The United States has long maintained that national security, and by extension the safety of its citizens, is contingent upon state secrecy. The irony is that the United States displays contempt for its citizens by spying on them, while claiming it is for national security. But should you tear the proof from its hiding place, and hold it up for the world to see, you probably will not have it easy—the government of the United States strongly prefers that its secrets be kept.

Referring to “the government” is not being very specific. In part, “the government” is composed of the elected politicians who hypothetically represent our interests, and whose power is checked by the judiciary, in some cases also elected, which ensures no authorities exercised by “the government” are unconstitutional. That is what the public schools teach. But if one pauses, and, is willing to look a little harder, hidden in plain sight are federal agencies and departments—such as the National Security Agency—in which vast archives of classified information are stowed away, and handled by government employees and private contractors compartmental-

¹ Infestations can be particularly difficult to control, depending upon the insect. Bed bugs flatten into cracks avoiding the day, but by night emerge to mine your veins for blood. A colony quickly emerges under your mattress, and the welts along your arm increase along with its population. Some hosts are not allergic to the exploratory bites, and remain unaware of the bed bugs. Adult bed bugs can live for over a year without feeding, and can survive for up to one month in a common household freezer, as if engineered by the devil himself.

ized via security clearance, functioning on a need-to-know basis. Due to Edward Snowden's first leaks in 2013, some of these secrets were pulled out from their hiding places, and U.S. citizens learned of the warrantless collection of millions of their digital communications, which violates the Fourth Amendment of the Constitution.² And yet, our representatives in Congress, who are tasked with oversight of agencies such as the NSA, have done very little about it, even after these leaks revealed then Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, had lied to them about the existence of any warrantless domestic surveillance.³

² Glenn Greenwald, "NSA Collecting Phone Records of Millions of Verizon Customers Daily," *The Guardian*, June 6, 2013, accessed March 19, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/interactive/2013/jun/06/verizon-telephone-data-court-order>.

³ Spencer Ackerman, "Clapper: I Gave 'Erroneous' Answer Because I Forgot About Patriot Act," *The Guardian*, July 2, 2013, accessed February 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/02/james-clapper-senate-erroneous>.

BLACK.

Looking at the façade of the NSA's headquarters in Fort Meade, Maryland reveals very little, the immense parking lot for its thousands of employees reflected in its dark windows. I have never had the opportunity to stand outside this building, but I assume it is like looking at your reflection in the sunglasses of a police officer, in which your image is ensnared like prey. The officer has temporarily discarded an individual identity for the privilege of becoming an appendage of law enforcement, trimmed by a crisp uniform. And just like police officers, NSA employees wake daily—eat breakfast and say good-bye to their families if they have them—and some drive to this particular parking lot, displaying their security clearance badges; each a cog in the security state.

According to the NSA, in 2012 the agency employed more than 30,000 individuals.⁴ The majority of these employees are on federal payroll, but the government also has contracts with private companies for additional labor. That is how Edward Snowden found himself with access to the documents he later leaked, first as an NSA sub-contractor working as an employee for Dell, and later for Booz Allen Hamilton, both at an NSA facility in Hawaii. Using his security clearance, he was able to access and copy a vast trove of classified documents, providing irrefutable evidence that the NSA was spying on U.S. citizens and foreign leaders, anyone who communicated digitally. He passed these documents on to journalists Laura Poitras, Glenn Greenwald, and Barton Gellman, avoiding an indiscriminate data dump and allowing them to determine what to publish.

⁴ National Security Agency, *60 Years of Defending Our Nation*, (2012), 3, accessed March 3, 2017, <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/726599/nsa-60th-anniversary.pdf>.

Shortly after the first leaks were published, the government of the United States charged Edward Snowden with the theft of government property, and violating the Espionage Act of 1917.⁵ Not expecting a fair trial, Snowden is hesitant about returning to the land of the free and home of the brave. As of this writing, he remains in exile in Moscow.

⁵ Glenn Greenwald, "On the Espionage Act Charges Against Edward Snowden," *The Guardian*, June 22, 2013, accessed May 1, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jun/22/snowden-espionage-charges>.

INTO THE OPEN.

The National Security Agency was founded in 1952, the Central Intelligence Agency in 1947, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1908; first as the Bureau of Investigation, but eventually becoming the FBI in 1935. The abuse of powers, powers entrusted to the government by voters and their elected representatives, has been mounting for decades,⁶ and Edward Snowden is among several who have blown the whistle, including: Daniel Ellsberg, Thomas Drake, William Binney, and Chelsea Manning. Most government documents that are accessible to the public are not the result of unauthorized leaks by heroic whistleblowers, however, and many have been declassified, some through Freedom of Information Act requests, or because, as stipulated by law, enough time has passed for the information to be declassified.⁷ It is not uncommon for documents released in this fashion to be heavily marked with redactions, though: thick black lines and rectangles, obscuring secrets that would otherwise be pulled into the light, and transformed into public knowledge.

Within this context, I have been exploring online databases including the FOIA libraries of the CIA and FBI, as well as the National Archives, downloading PDF files of dozens upon dozens of declassified documents, some hundreds of pages long. As for unauthorized leaks including those of Edward Snowden, I have found the online publication *The Intercept* useful—

⁶ I remember my education regarding U.S. and world history, in the New York State public schools, as subpar at best. The tests were filled with multiple-choice questions, to make sure the students could get by on the bare minimum, and so they did not have any difficulty regurgitating truncated facts pulled into the orbit of American Exceptionalism. When students are taught the United States can do no wrong, and eventually become adults, chances are they might not be as worried by oppressive regimes of power camouflaged by the lofty promises of democracy and self-righteous freedom.

⁷ Barack Obama, Executive Order 13526, “Classified National Security Information Memorandum,” *Federal Register* 75, (January 5, 2010), 705-731, accessed April 6, 2017, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2010/01/05/E9-31418/classified-national-security-information>. Classification procedures have been changed over the years through Presidential Executive Orders. Current classification procedures are outlined by E.O. 13526, which replaced E.O. 12958 and E.O. 13292.

Glenn Greenwald is one of its editors. Reading the content of documents that have been declassified, and at times heavily redacted, has led me to wonder what remains locked away.

This led me to file a FOIA request, to find out if the CIA or FBI held any files regarding myself. I filled out the proper forms, mailed them, and waited. I have done some activist work, handing newspapers out in public, and was briefly associated with some radical individuals, so I was curious. After a few weeks, I received two letters from each stating they in fact had located no files concerning a “Peter Jonathan Hoffmeister,” after conducting basic searches of their respective databases. The running joke is, of course: ask the FBI or CIA if they have a file on you, and they will start one, even if they had nothing on you before. Did I just voluntarily create a file on myself? One can only speculate...it is a secret wrapped in a secret.

My episodic search has been for the purposes of not only reading the documents, but also of assembling excerpts from these documents to create a sculptural compendium. Before I describe the details of the sculptures, though, I will go over some of the documents that are used in the work. I am particularly interested in the period beginning with President Truman’s signing of the National Security Act of 1947, and continuing through to the present.⁸ The 1947 act is key. Among other things, it created the CIA, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and reorganized the military into the Department of Defense, and set the groundwork for what President Eisenhower presciently warned the American people of in his 1961 Farewell Address: the “military-industrial complex.”

The first declassified government document that caught my attention, years ago, is a memo known as *Operation Northwoods*. Written in 1962 by L.L. Lemnitzer, President Kennedy’s Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and sent to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara,

⁸ National Security Act, Public Law 543, 80th Congress, 1st session (July 26, 1947), accessed March 21, 2017, <https://research.archives.gov/id/299856>.

the memo proposed new strategies for fomenting war with Cuba after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. All of the suggestions amounted to false flag attacks, meaning the United States would attack itself, but it would look as though Cuba was the attacker. For instance: “We could blow up a ship in Guantanamo Bay and blame Cuba,” “We could develop a Communist Cuban terror campaign in the Miami area, in other Florida cities, and even Washington,” “We could sink a boatload of Cubans enroute to Florida (real or simulated).”⁹ The list of twisted possibilities goes on—those are just a taste—and luckily these proposals were never implemented. It is hard to believe this document was ever made public, but it was, in January 2001. The unbelievable nature of *Operation Northwoods* is what led to my interest in government documents generally, as primary sources. No matter how insane they may sound, they speak for themselves in a chilling, honest way.

Other documents included in the project are: various FBI files of well-known U.S. citizens, including Helen Keller, Walt Disney, and Ernest Hemmingway; a top-secret memo from President Truman establishing the NSA; a letter from Penthouse Magazine asking President Carter’s CIA director for an interview; and MK-Ultra, the CIA’s mind control program that involved testing hallucinogenic drugs on unwitting subjects. I show an imbalance of power between individual and state by including the details of broader agency programs, while also including the FBI files kept on specific individuals. Other documents, like the letter from Penthouse Magazine, offer a bit of comic relief.

⁹ L.L. Lemnitzer, “Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense: Justification for US Military Intervention in Cuba (TS),” March, 13, 1962, accessed February 21, 2017, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/news/20010430/index.html>.

THE DOCUMENT-OBJECTS.

The document-objects I create are solid boxes, made from laminated plywood and stained with black ink.¹⁰ Each measures 10.25" x 13.25" (the ratio of an enlarged letter-sized page), with variable heights, which are shown on black tables with black Plexiglas tops. After selecting a page from a document, I laser engrave this page onto the top of a laminated plywood block; a slight relief is created, whereby any black pixels from the digital file are carved into the wood by the laser. This means that not only is the text set into the block; but so are the redactions from government censors, and artifacts from low-quality Xerox copying.

As one approaches the objects, they are at first simple hunks of a dark, unidentified material, but which slowly reveal more. Moving closer, the text emerges, followed by the grain of the plywood. The black Plexiglass tabletops hold the static reflection of the objects, presenting their unsettling, crystalline double, and lend the works an uncanny quality. Everything here is black on black—black text, on black objects, on black tables. This is my strategy for drawing in the viewer. By making the document-objects that much more difficult to read, I hope to increase the viewer's desire to read them.

I chose plywood for its idiosyncratic relationship to the content of the declassified documents. Historically, governments, empires, and other centralized powers have preferred materials like granite, marble, or bronze—which last thousands of years and transcend time—to enshrine their majesty for the ages. The banal quality of plywood is, in this context, just the opposite, as it is normally used in the construction of homes for average citizens. Nonetheless, the

¹⁰ Plywood is made by: (1) Taking a log and shaving the bark off; (2) Trimming the log to just over eight feet in length; (3) Placing said log in a specially designed lathe, that, as it turns, (4) unfurls the log like a bolt of fabric into sheets, which are trimmed to four foot widths; (5) and finally, depending upon the desired thickness, these sheets are glued together to create plywood. The banality of the material certainly does not match the process by which it is produced.

grain patterns have a transformative power, which subtly influence the engraved document.

And, the unpredictable hollows usually found in lower grade plywood (those little gaps between the compressed layers that are exposed when a board is cut) allows me to suggest an interiority of the document-objects, by virtue of the material used. Once many boards are laminated into one thick block, and set upon a table, a pile of papers is then evoked.

When I select a page from any given document to reproduce as a document-object, I try to find the page that is the best summation of the document, in a way producing an abstract of the document. By setting the resulting document-objects next to each other, new relationships are formed from old information: a page from *Operation Northwoods* may find itself next to a page from a document detailing the Bush Administration's torture program, or details on how to make invisible ink may end up next to a heavily-redacted page from Malcolm X's FBI file. Through proximity, I am pulling together disparate corners of U.S. history, creating a continuum of former secrets, secrets that have become available for public knowledge, but are still largely unaddressed in mainstream historical narratives.

The documents' arrangement on the tables is altered over the course of any exhibition in which they are shown, and in fact, some document-objects disappear for long periods of time. Some are not visible at all, even though they are included in the exhibition, and the apparent heights of given document-objects will change. This is because whenever I have the chance, I shuffle the documents around the tables, sometimes daily, while *Phantom Nation* is on view. I also stack and un-stack the document-objects, revealing some by hiding others, a strategy that allows me to become a metaphorical page-turner for the viewer. Consequently, the entirety of the work is never in full view at any given time, a constantly shifting, non-linear compendium.

TEXT AS IMAGE AND IMAGE AS TEXT.

I am not the first artist to work with declassified documents. While Jenny Holzer has created paintings using declassified documents, with the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars as her main focus, and Steve McQueen recently had a video and sound installation at the Whitney Museum using the FBI file of political activist and performer Paul Robeson, the documents used by Holzer and McQueen remained flat on the surface of the canvas or projection screen and favored the wall. That said, McQueen did emphasize the time based nature of absorbing textual information by having recordings of individuals reading the documents, occupying acoustic space, as the documents scrolled down in the video projection. For me, though, the gravity of my selection of documents is communicated by reproducing them as objects, to occupy actual space, just as the individuals and events referenced in these documents exist or did exist in the physical world. As these documents were downloaded digitally my gesture delivers them to the physical realm as discrete entities, confronting the viewer through their physical presence.¹¹

It is important to acknowledge that, for me, the document-objects are both image and text. As a group and individually, they become an image of authority and secrecy, which is supported by the text upon reading. Text is a time-based experience, and it is unavoidable that viewers will absorb the documents in a fragmented way: partly due to my selection of particular documents, and partly due to the patience of each viewer as they move among the documents, in what order they decide to read them, and how much of each document they read.

¹¹ Many of the declassified documents I use were originally printed on paper, and only later scanned and uploaded to digital archives available for public download. Some documents began their lives digitally, however, like most of the Snowden leaks. As newer documents are either leaked or declassified, this will become more and more frequent, and I will be lending a physicality to that which, until my intervening, was digital.

In terms of pacing the work so as to not fatigue the viewer, document-objects without much textual information serve as occasional pauses. Some are simply institutional cover letters or routing sheets, mostly blank, or are redacted pages consisting of a few large rectangles placed over information, still secret, considered too sensitive by the government for public accessibility. Some documents-objects are close to becoming an abstract image particularly when heavy redactions are present, creating a tension between legibility and illegibility, as well as the visible and invisible. The redactions themselves are images of secrecy, and further articulate an unbridled power, free to maintain an admittedly hidden knowledge through omission.

FUTURE.

As a sculptural archive, my project *Phantom Nation* is not concerned with being complete, in so far as active maintenance of an archive is an on-going project, transforming and adapting like a living organism as new material is added. Besides routine declassifications by the government, there are also unpredictable document leaks, made possible by a rare minority among those aforementioned government employees and contractors. To this point, Wikileaks has just released *Vault 7*, a cache of thousands of new classified CIA documents, detailing the CIA's global covert hacking program. According to Wikileaks, this is the first of a multi-part series of CIA leaks, and is promising more will follow. Considering how many pages of documents are classified each year—not surprisingly, that exact number is classified, but it is estimated to be hundreds of millions—I have enough material to wade through for innumerable lifetimes.

Where there are governments, there are secrets. The tension between an American public who wants to know more, and a government that seems to become more obstinate with each passing day creates a tension within which *Phantom Nation* is suspended, and paradoxically nourished. And, by virtue of its unresolved nature, the project does find a greater completeness, expanding outward past specific documents to become a larger gesture, as an archive of public knowledge.

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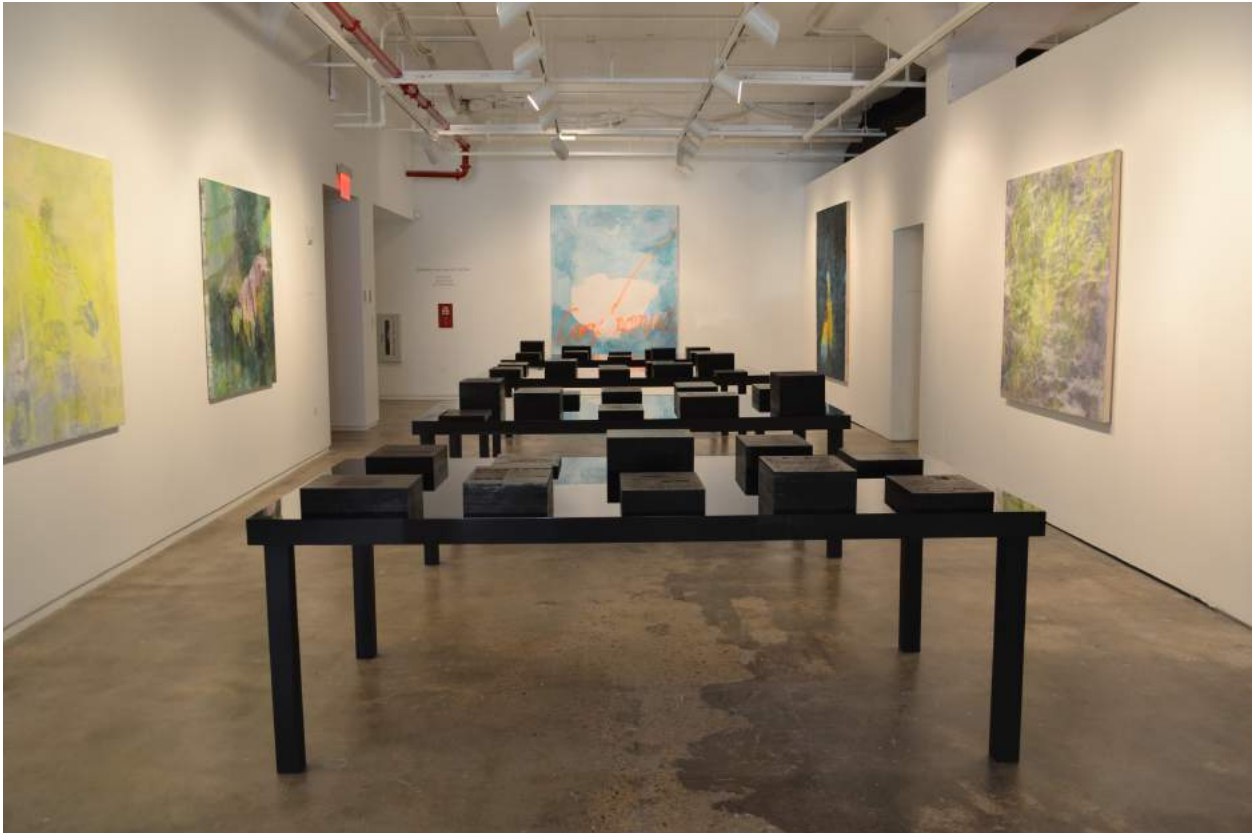
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1. *Phantom Nation*, 2017, plywood, glue, ink, MDF, Plexiglas, paint, dimensions variable.



2. *Phantom Nation*, table 1 of 4.



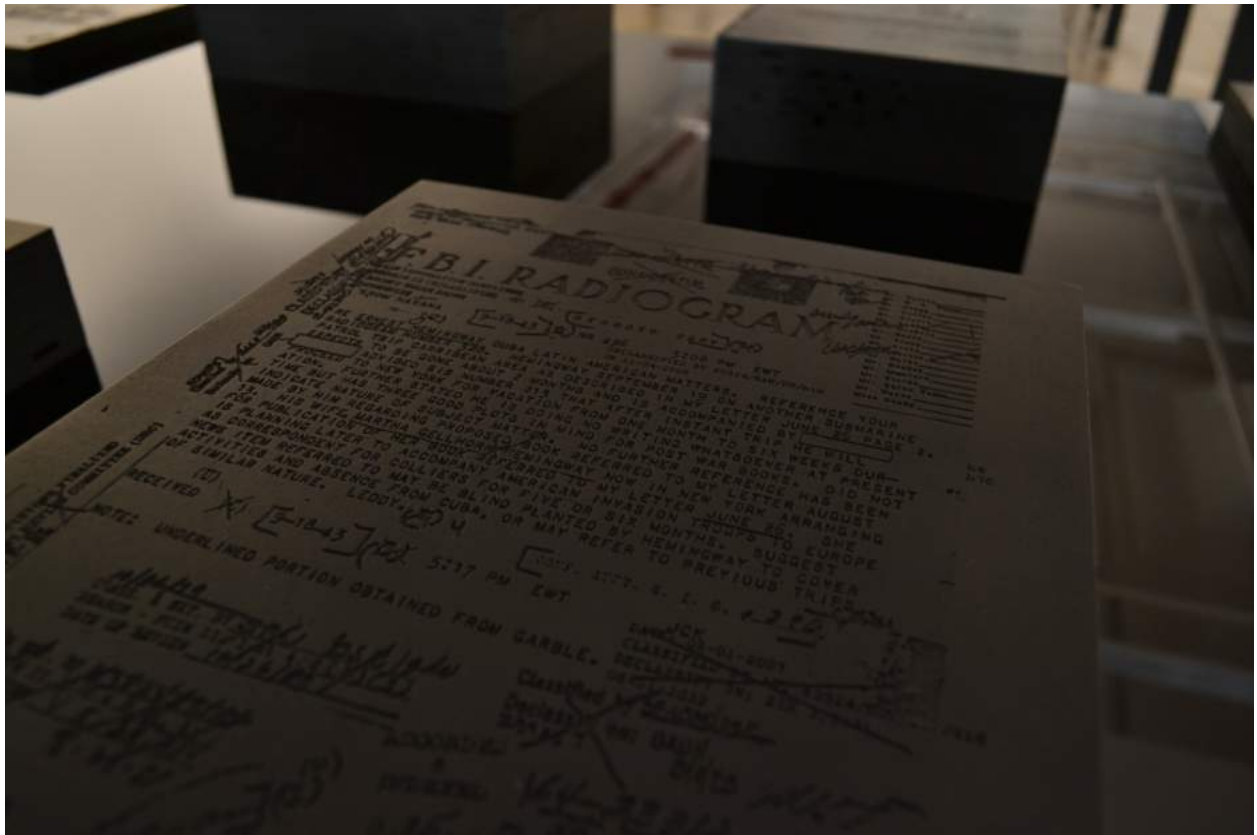
3. *Phantom Nation*, table 2 of 4.



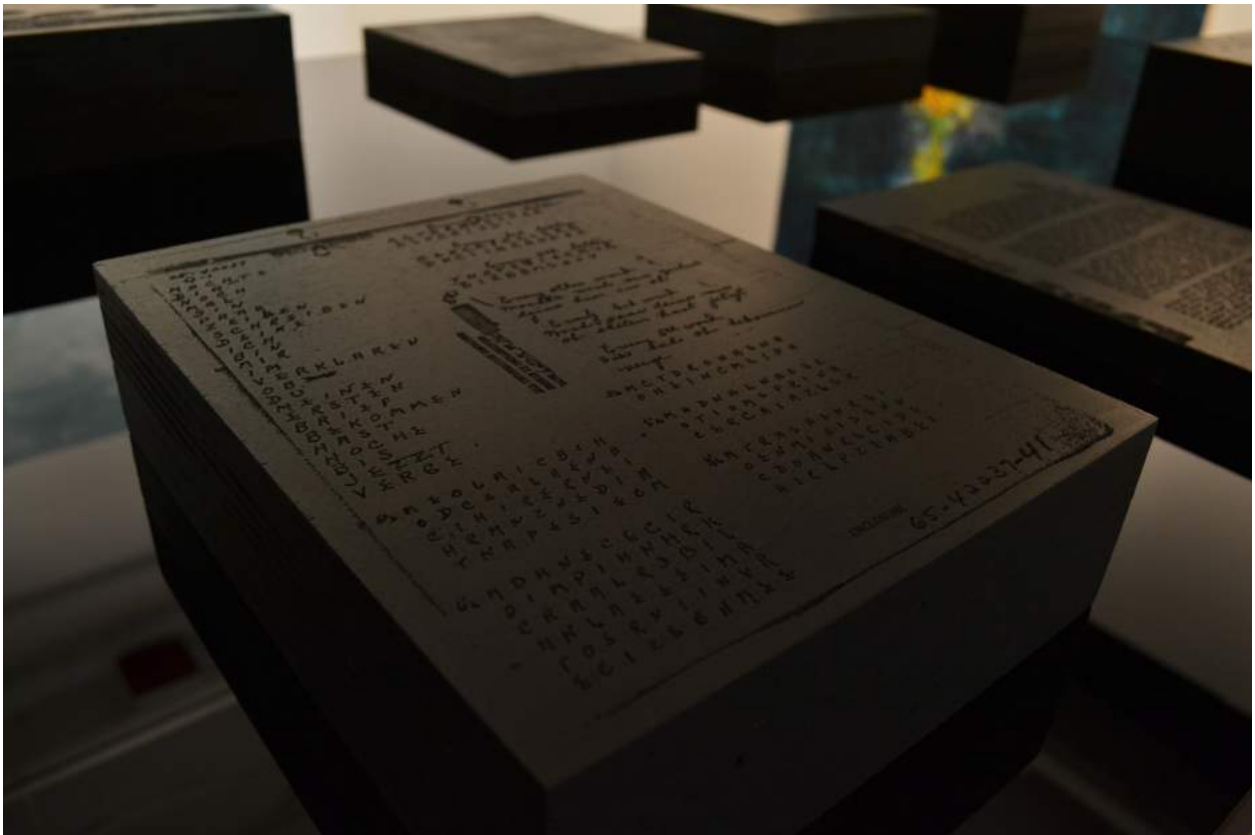
4. *Phantom Nation*, table 3 of 4.



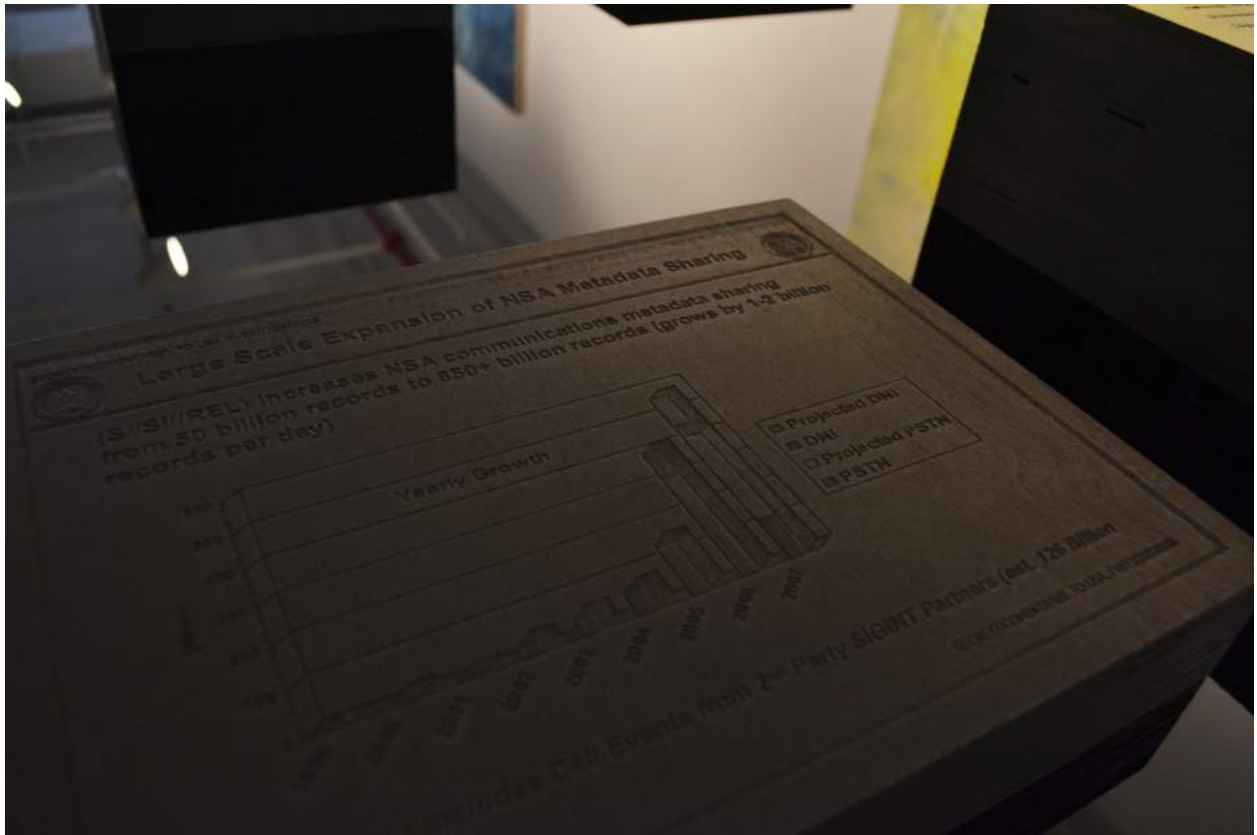
5. *Phantom Nation*, table 4 of 4.



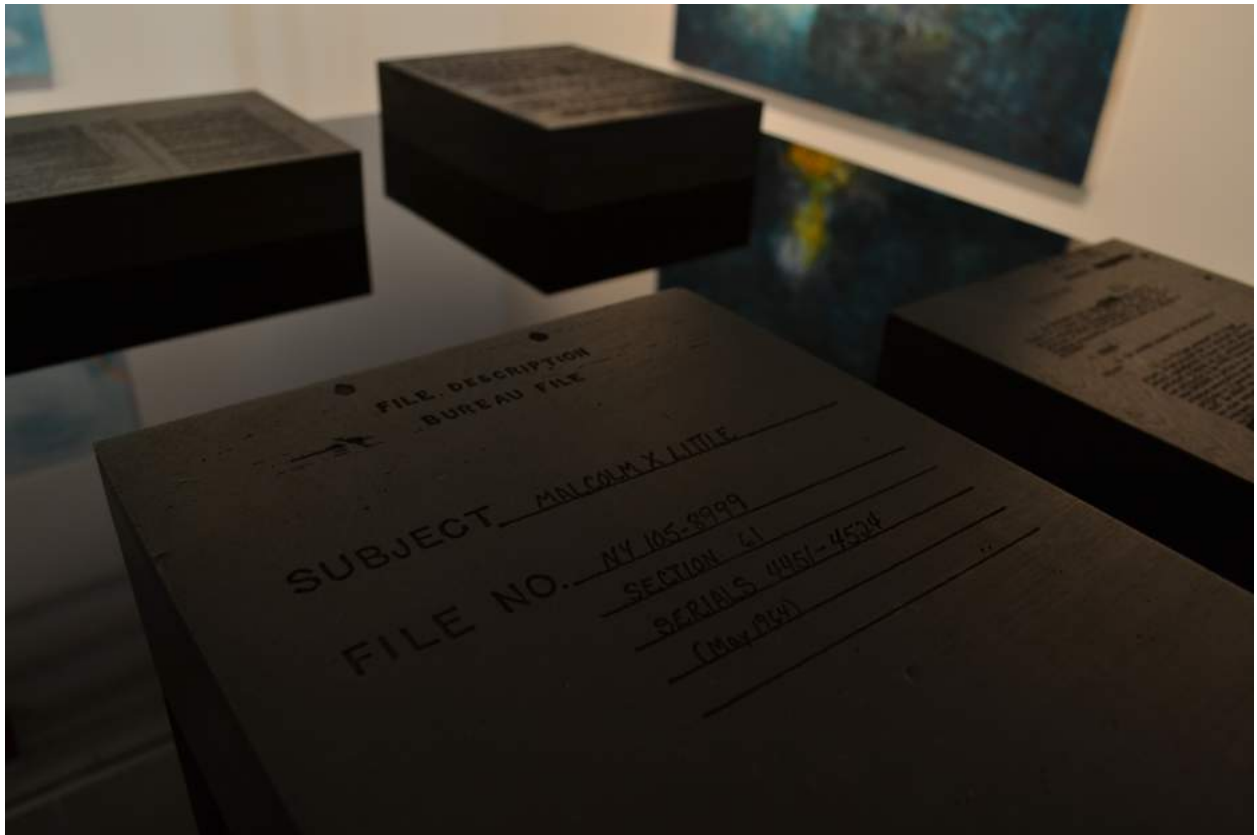
6. Phantom Nation, detail #1.



7. *Phantom Nation*, detail #2.



8. *Phantom Nation*, detail #3.



9. *Phantom Nation*, detail #4.