

The man in
playing
is
The spider



The band
trumpet

in the web

Jill Magid
c/o Yvon Lambert
550 West 21st Street
New York, NY 10011 USA

Drs. J.C. Goet
Algemene Inlichtingen en Veiligheidsdienst
Postbus 20010
2500 EA Den Haag, The Netherlands

August 26, 2009

Dear Drs. J.C. Goet,

On September 10th my exhibition "Authority To Remove" opens at the Tate Modern in London. In your letter dated July 17, 2008, you suggested that I "present the manuscript as a visual work of art in a one-time-only exhibition, after which it would become the property of the Dutch government and would be stripped of all sensitive information and not be published."

This is that one-time-only exhibition.

I am presenting the book disbound. I sliced the joints along its shoulders and pulled the body from its spine, and laid it under glass.

You may take the body of the book. I will keep the prologue and the epilogue, with the phrases from the former that you censored amended or removed. These parts support the body, before and after my commission, and do not include my sources.

The book, *Becoming Tarden*, is a memoir of our involvement. I had dreams of publishing it as my first novel. You are its only reader. Seize it. Strip it. Hold it in your building and seal it under glass. I comply.

Your Author,



Jill Magid

Attachment: Tate Authority to Remove Item(s) from Site Form

Jill Magid,
*Letter to the Drs. J.C.
Goet, Deputy Director
General of The General
Intelligence and
Security Service
(AIVD), 2009*

Jill Magid: A Preamble to a Postscript

– Mihnea Mircan

Previous spread:
Jill Magid, *I Can
Burn Your Face*,
2008, detail. All
images courtesy
the artist; LABOR,
Mexico City; Until
Then, Paris; and
RaebervonStenglin,
Zürich

As I left Jill Magid's show 'Authority to Remove' at Tate Modern, London, one of its phrases in particular continued to resonate in my mind.¹ The formulation 'the body of the book' occurred twice in an exchange of letters between interlocutors with equal rights, it seemed, in determining the contents of the exhibition. It first appeared in a note sent by Magid to the AIVD (Algemene Inlichtingen en Veiligheidsdienst, or Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service) — a document handwritten to mimic the mechanical rigidity of a typewriter. The note asked permission from the AIVD to present the project, which they had commissioned, and was punctuated by faintly amorous inflections, as if its request overlapped with symbolically mending a painful separation, or recuperating a memory from a shattered relation.

*I am presenting the book disbound.
I sliced the joints along its shoulders and
pulled the body from its spine, and laid
it under glass. You may take the body
of the book.*

Mihnea Mircan traces an amorous and ambivalent form of critique through Jill Magid's complex institutional entanglements.

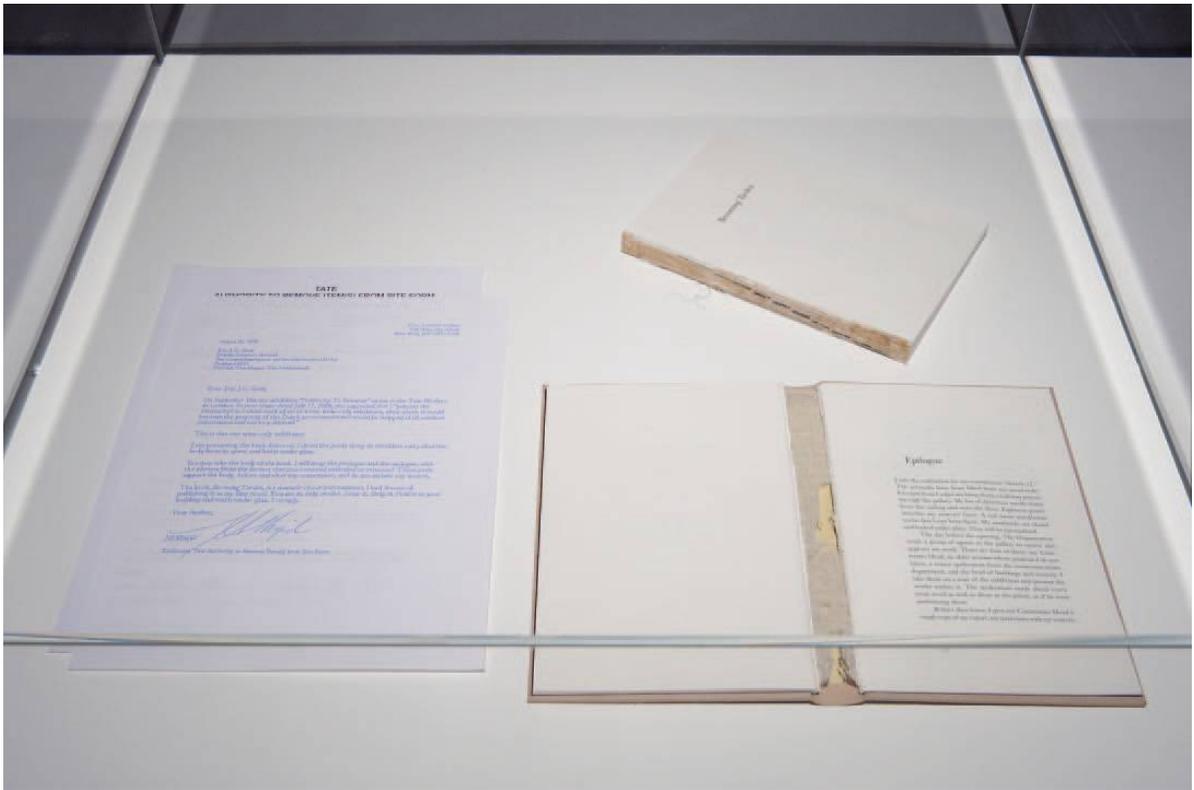
The deputy director general of the AIVD reciprocated in an official missive, also displayed at Tate, mandating a colleague to collect 'the body of the book' at the end of the presentation. Either allowing that odd phrase to ricochet or oblivious to this institutional Freudian slip, the commissioner's response continued the very process of writing it announced it would halt. The curious formulation

recurred a third time in one of the exhibition's ancillary documents, the museum's 'Authority to Remove Items from Site' form, which both lent the project its title and certified the agency's right to confiscate the manuscript.

Invited in 2005 by the AIVD to make an artistic work for its new headquarters in The Hague, to 'improve its public persona by providing the organisation with a human face', Magid conducted interviews with eighteen secret agents who agreed to take part in the project, titled *Article 12/The Spy Series* (2005–10). Article 12 of the Kingdom of The Netherlands Bulletin of Acts, Orders and Decrees is a clause that enjoins government from keeping track of the religion, health status or sex lives of its employees, and these details provided the points of departure for Magid's conversations with the secret agents. Her notes document encounters that circumvented, flirted with or came close to breaching professional jargon, fleshing out both its linguistic constitution and the limits of what it is designed or allowed to utter. They make tangible the points at which conversation can falter in collision with professional standards of secrecy. A first iteration of the resulting project, at Stroom Den Haag in 2008, rendered quotes from the exchanges with agents as bright-red neon text pieces, where, for instance, the sentence 'I can burn your face', designating the exposure of an agent, was almost obliterated — or censored — by the intensity of the light fixtures' glow.² Furthermore, the idiosyncratic style of Magid's series of drawings *The Directives* (2008–09) laid out a new syntax for words and phrases from those same conversations, fusing modes of address that evoked both the intricacies of safeguarding sensitive information and

1 'Jill Magid: Authority to Remove', Tate Modern, London, 10 September 2009 — 3 January 2010, curated by Amy Dickson.

2 'Jill Magid: Article 12', Stroom den Haag, The Hague, 20 April — 15 June 2008, curated by Huib Haye van der Werf.



the imperatives, desires and anxieties of art-making, all equalised via a tone of intimate urgency. Seemingly without addressee, ‘directives’ such as ‘Highlight me in yellow then cover me in white’, ‘Invent something from nothing’ or ‘Consume my information’ appeared to quote either fragments of a poetics or of institutional lingo, conjugating the pathos of artistic practice and bureaucratic trappings in sensuous complicity.

The book *Becoming Tarden* (2009) is the summa of Magid’s experiences with the AIVD. It narrates what can be almost said and what must be passed over in eloquent silence; its ‘revelations’ and lacunae are made of code and trivia, gestures of oblique courtship or withdrawal and inconsequential information. The text is driven by the twofold aspiration to let ‘The Organisation’ hear itself speak (‘I want to see what my system looks like through you,’ the chief agent had told Magid³) and to invent an interlocution and a readership in relation to an institution without a public footprint. Magid aimed to wrest a story from a lattice of prohibitions, animating the interstice between the AIVD’s rituals of opacity and its public

projection of beneficence and serviceability. For the book to be shown – closed and sealed under glass – an armistice was reached by the commissioner, artist and museum. The obfuscated ‘body of the book’ was surrounded by its approximations – by artistic renditions of the reasons why the object could not be inspected – offered to hazardous public scrutiny.

Around the vitrine containing the book and letters, an elusive ‘biography’ was sketched through the neon quotes, the drawings in the series *The Directives* and other works, their enunciation equally indebted to procedures of concealment and tropes of self-expression. In its final, non-public act, the Level 2 Gallery at Tate Modern became a forensic scene, captured in a photograph: secret agents – faces Photoshopped to a blur – ascertained the integrity of the manuscript and retrieved it for another archive of things that can be neither divulged nor destroyed.

Licit or not, that photograph of a moment when one legality is restored against another accompanies the many general press reports on the exhibition

Installation view, ‘Jill Magid: Authority to Remove’, Tate Modern, London, 2009–10. Pedestal containing *Becoming Tarden* (2009) and *Letter to the Drs. J.C. Goet, Deputy Director General of The General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD)* (2009). Photograph: Amy Dickson. © Tate, London 2015

3 ‘Atlas of Intimacy’ (Jill Magid in conversation with Jarrett Earnest), *The Brooklyn Rail*, 3 October 2013, available at <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2013/10/art/atlas-of-intimacyjill-magid-with-jarrett-earnest> (last accessed on January 2015).



The Dutch Government confiscating the body of the book *Becoming Tarden* (2009) from the Tate Modern, London, 2010. Photograph: Amy Dickson. © Tate, London 2015

and sits in an ambiguous position *vis-à-vis* the works that constitute *Article 12*; it is in and out of the project, concluding it to the same extent as prompting further speculative ramifications. After consulting with lawyers, who persuaded her that because a confidentiality agreement with the AIVD had never been signed the agency's barrage of intimidations had no judicial grounds, Magid published *Becoming Tarden* in 2010.⁴ For a work

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that had caused such uproar and tense negotiations, the text is disconcertingly innocuous. Magid acquiesced to the redactions, which amounted to forty per cent of the text and mostly eliminated markers of place, time or personal data. These edits add a *nouveau roman*-style flow to her vivid prose, but more

importantly create officious, glaring blanks in the text, to be filled in by readers with fictional conjunctive tissue. As Magid has noted, 'I realised that the more boundaries and new rules [the agency] imposed upon me, the more it exposed itself.'⁵

In fact, the book mystifies more than it clarifies. The disproportion between the theatricality of consent and admonishment in the negotiations and confiscation compared to the inoffensive content of the text itself can be understood in two ways: either as a false alarm rung to establish the institution's pre-eminence over the artist, or as indication of a fault line between measurement systems — professional and lay — for the effectiveness of camouflage, for how 'something' can show through 'nothing', for how highlighted text can seep through white correction fluid (to revert to the terms of Magid's *Directives*). Perhaps this enigma echoes another paradox, that the robustness of institutional space is the product of a fluid constitution, a continuous invention of 'new rules' by which to gauge and neutralise threat:

4 'Free', group exhibition at the New Museum, New York, 20 October 2010—23 January 2011, curated by Lauren Cornell.

5 'Permission is a Material. An Interview with Jill Magid', *Artpulse*, vol.4, no.15, 2013, available at <http://artpulsemagazine.com/permission-is-a-material-an-interview-with-jill-magid> (last accessed on January 2015).



Jill Magid, *Trust*, 2004, video, colour, sound, 17min, still

the expansion, testing and reconfiguration of the boundaries between what is acceptable and what is not. That discrepancy intimates another ‘body’ of operations which naturalise and suppress, fabricate, frame and avert danger, determining the terrain over which the institution can adjudicate, and beyond whose confines lie the deviant and the monstrous.

Becoming Tarden is intent on neither provoking nor disclosing. Rather, its position is thematised reflexively, as a space shared with individuals who have – like Tarden, the protagonist of Jerzy Kosinski’s 1975 novel *Cockpit* – re-encrypted or shed, chameleon-like, layers of their personality. It is about coexistence, with each other and with a secret that is to remain a secret, to the same extent that it documents five years of adapting the narrative, its debts and analogies to a permanently reorganised matrix of restrictions and permissions. Sheltered under glass at Tate Modern, publicly overstating its mystery and foregone removal, the ‘body of the book’ conjoined three distinct jurisdictions: the fragile girders in cultural and political discourse that sustain artistic freedom; the changing rules, discriminating between openness and disguise, of the Secret Service; and Tate Modern’s capacity to

mediate that controversy and to capture, albeit provisionally, its traces. The title of the exhibition indicated that the duration of the show was both the result of museological convention and the time for which the vanishing of the work could be halted or decelerated – the push and pull between an ‘authority to exhibit’ and an ‘authority to remove’.

Article 12/The Spy Series pursues and emphasises threads that underpin Magid’s earlier work. An interest in surveillance runs through projects such as *Evidence Locker* (2004), a collaboration with the Liverpool police in which CCTV cameras record the artist meandering through the city in a red trench coat, and *Lincoln Victor Ocean Eddy* (2007), which documents a series of late-night meetings with a New York City Transit officer who is lured into this unlikely collaboration when the artist volunteers to be searched for possession of dangerous items. In more recent works, the ‘institution’ features as an indistinct entity whose judicial tentacles struggle to extract meaning from an inexplicable gesture (*Failed States*, 2011) or as a palimpsest of the forms of ownership, copyright and obscurity that may dent the posterity of an architect (*The Barragán Archives*, 2013–ongoing).



Jill Magid, *Auto Portrait Pending*, 2005, ring setting

But perhaps the significance of *Article 12* lies in emphasising the narrative infrastructure of Magid's forays into the recesses of secrecy (into secrets both visible and inscrutable): the ways in which a close reading of the interdiction generates new spaces for writing and new figures — semblances of relationships — carved or cast out of consent, the particular material Magid identifies as her medium. Advancing towards the point where the public performance of the secret borders on what it renders impenetrable, her projects do not so much unfold into that inevitability but anticipate its occurrence via detours, elegant arcs and plural correspondences that are momentary reprieves from its grip. They turn interruptions into narrative joints, orchestrating a play of perspectives and segues between what the prohibition covers and what it divulges. Rather than surmount or resist the injunction, or fail faux heroically in its invincible proximity, Magid's practice works as a particular kind of prolepsis, as saying as much as can be said in advance of a closure, enlarging and complicating the territory of artistic action.

From the vantage points thus established, the 'conclusions' that can be extracted from her 'premises' are deferred beyond the moment when the examined system closes upon itself, recoils from her

grasp, so that the 'denouement' does not coincide with an unsurpassable obstacle. These oxymorons of affirmation and negation compose a practice whose success is not to be measured by the vigour with which it apprehends an object, but by the polyphony it obtains from different distances and relations to it. There is, in Magid's work, the sense of a pulsating totality — not grasped in its wholeness, but which resonates through its gaps and prefigurations, its time lapses and interstices of silence.

The performative logic of forewords or preambles — as anticipatory devices or prefigurative agreements — is an important strand of Magid's work. *Auto Portrait Pending* (2005) centres on a contract between Magid and LifeGem Corporation stipulating that the artist's cremated remains will be turned into a one-carat diamond. The work also includes a beneficiary contract and a ring to accommodate the diamond. Through its undefined duration, this work undoes that which is tacit in the agreement between artist and collector: the quasi-simultaneity of, and equivalence between, the object's possession and financial compensation. Here, ownership hinges between, on the one hand, the life and work of the artist and, on the other, the post-mortem crystallisation of her body and retrospective

valuation of her practice. The event that *Auto Portrait Pending* foretells is a separation between two regimes — held in spectral, unsettling symmetry — in which an identity can be maintained and negotiated.

As with *Article 12*, the work subtly unpicks the relation of ‘artistic subjectivity’ to symbolic transfers, and implies an equally ambivalent afterlife. The diamond-to-come, the moment when a hazy but pregnant abstraction is expelled from body or identity and inoculates the stone, is proffered and withheld: converted into a currency unit that quantifies a perfectly legal but impossible exchange. The collecting voluptuousness it might incite, rephrased in a letter to LifeGem in which Magid sensually anticipates her metamorphosis into translucent carbon, is thwarted by the realisation that the collected object can only come into existence as loss. The vacant setting is occupied by two forms — the concomitance of non-body and non-diamond, wherein the time that remains can be both lived and measured — a scenography for the ‘unique apparition of a temporal distance’, to recall Walter Benjamin; for an aura awaiting materialisation and transaction.

The wordless protagonist of *Failed States* is reconstructed — and willed into language — by similarly contradictory manoeuvres. He disappears in a whirlpool of analogies triggered by his name; at the same time, he is recuperated from the political and journalistic narratives that seek to instil purpose and peril in his actions. The work departs from a 2010 incident that Magid happened to witness: 24-year-old Fausto Cardenas exited the Texas State Capitol after attempting to speak with a senator’s aide, and fired six shots into the air from a small handgun while he stood on the steps of the building. As an eyewitness, Magid was interviewed by all the news channels that covered the event; she then attended all the public events of Cardenas’s prosecution. Charged with terrorism, Cardenas has obstinately exercised his right to silence and his motivations remain unknown.

In *Failed States*, Magid draws connections between Fausto Cardenas’s futile and tragic act and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s nineteenth-century epic poem *Faust*, between the former’s loud and impregnable proclamation and the latter’s ‘closet drama’, originally intended

to be read as an interior monologue rather than a theatrical declamation. Cardenas is a sui generis Faust, as well as a ‘shooter’; Magid is his witness, recording how these avatars morph into one another, producing and trying to domesticate the irregularities of both category and individual case. The work’s other speechless interlocutor is a school shooter: also in 2010, Colton Tooley, a mathematics major at the University of Texas at Austin, walked through the campus firing shots into the air and ground; he ended his route by taking his own life in the comparative literature and poetry section of the university’s main library. Tooley ‘corresponded’ to the role he enacted, yet did so, calculatedly, without the indiscriminate violence expected of a school shooting, harming no one other than himself. In *Failed States*, media, politics, freedom, the right to representation, the right to bear arms, State Capitol staff, Tooley’s fellow students and Magid herself enter a vortex

Magid’s repurposed letter creates a terrain for the two halves of the archive to interlock: it weaves between them a form of intimacy.

of analogies, diffractions and incomplete overlaps, occurring between a variety of positions from which one can be witness to an unfolding that is not aligned with an elucidation. Cardenas, subject to a system of jurisprudence that proved lost for words, transitions between the puzzling reality of his gesture, its political or judicial equivalents and the metaphorical correlates those incomplete equivalents generate in Magid’s work.

While I cannot do justice here to the complexity these relations engender within Magid’s project, I will single out a silkscreen work that seems particularly relevant to this impasse of articulation. *The Deed* (2011) overlays different translations of the same passage from *Faust* — concerning a dispute on the primacy of the Word or the Act — into a thick palimpsest of indiscernible text from which only the conclusion emerges. The work co-opts the Faustian in Magid’s own exercises in the contractual medium, but also conflates ‘act’ and ‘word’ into a single question. Fausto is







Barragán Foundation in Switzerland and the architect's name was trademarked. With the architect's professional and personal selves as amputated halves, producing divergent posterities as these institutions' competing agendas are advanced, Magid's project enters another edifice of restrictions, claims and counterclaims, where its detective work must be rephrased as poetic mediation: 'When I'm fascinated, or trying to understand something, even a book, I can fall in love with it. It is a process of becoming intimate — I need to know it so well that it becomes a part of my body.'⁶

The search for intimacy translates into a textual *échange à trois* when Magid adapts and readdresses to Zanco a letter from Barragán's private archive. It begins: 'Dearest Federica, I thank you infinitely for keeping the promises you made'; it goes on: 'Now I suffer for your absence, and what is even worse, I feel absent from everything around me'; and ends: 'Write a lot and love me. I am wholeheartedly yours.' The letter is signed 'Jill'. In its amorous search for reconciliation, the repurposed letter creates a terrain for the two halves of the archive to interlock: it weaves between them a form

of intimacy, a moment of lawlessness, pitted, if gently, against other regulations. Magid's advances enmesh their object in the ploy of a reversed allegorical procedure, where that which cannot be addressed directly is ensnared and voiced in its own language: made to speak, even if that reluctant enunciation cannot be uncoupled from its allegorical instigation, and the answer remains bound to the question, each echoing the other.

If, in its canonical formulations, Institutional Critique organised a transfer of power from the institution to an enlightened, engaged audience, with the radical artist as conduit in the phantasmal exchange, Magid emphasises the reciprocity between her own operations (her pose as entrepreneur, clandestine investigator, personified organisational id, art historian, journalist, human resources specialist or seductive interloper) and the theatrical residue that bureaucratic rituals conceal in their demonstration of efficacy. Magid's practice alters the dramaturgy of Institutional Critique. Meaning — always formulated provisionally and in the future tense — is Magid's 'institution', and the subject of her 'critique'. It occurs as friction between what the work desires

Jill Magid,
*Six Shots from the
Capitol Steps*, 2011,
digital photographs

6 'Atlas of Intimacy', *Brooklyn Rail*, *op. cit.*



Jill Magid,
Failed States, 2011,
1993 Mercedes Benz
300TE station wagon
armored at B4 level,
detail. Installation
view, Texas State
Capitol, 2011

or prescribes and the protocols of sense-making against which it clashes.

Into these complex grids of signification and power the artist advances, with her deliberate faux pas, her quasi-erotic entendres and quasi-legal declarations. Her 'institution' is neither anthropomorphised nor objectified, neither faceless nor personable. Instead, it assumes the role of a perpetually corrected anomaly: stepping outside its circuit to collect a dangerous manuscript; secreting the ideological glue that can paste Fausto Cardenas onto a larger scheme of facile understanding; voraciously collecting the traces of Barragán to produce the diamond-like clarity of his posterity. Intervening into these vigilant, mutating structures, infecting bureaucratise with unwitting affective charges, taking 'standard procedures' into unfamiliar terrain, Magid makes space for new words and new modes of engagement, for apparent non sequiturs and deflections, feedback and feed-ahead between art and that which could curtail its realisation. As in her contracts — whose object is a maintained balance, the removal of either a surplus or deficit of authority — her practice narrates, by any words necessary, the delicate reciprocity between her position and that of her subjects.