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This Parody of NSA's PRISM Was So Good Police Almost Shut It Down

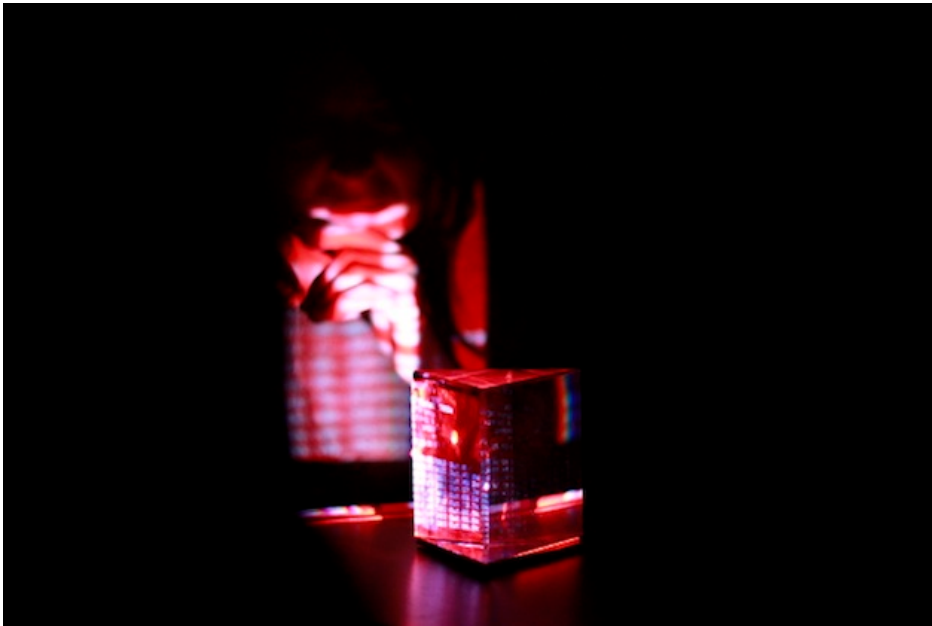
By DJ Pangburn (/author/DJPangburn)

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For Art Hack Day's 'Going Dark' hackathon, held late 2013, art hackers Julian Oliver and Danja Vasiliev created *PRISM: The Beacon Frame*, a rotating prism that shows visitors' smartphone data. All too well it seems. For when the installation made its appearance at this past weekend's Transmediale "Afterglow" festival (<http://www.transmediale.de/>) in Berlin, it was promptly shut down because it was, well, data mining.

As a video (<https://vimeo.com/79578734>) posted by Vasiliev on Vimeo notes, PRISM works by "intercepting protocol messages, data such as username, hostname, IP address are publicly displayed." Exhibit observers who then gaze into the rotating prism can read the disclosed personal information about the people around them.

As Art Hack Day's Olof Mathé told me, Transmediale's technical contractors took it down in a "pseudo-citizen's arrest," contrary to the wishes of Oliver and Vasiliev. Both the artists and Mathé put out statements in response. "Most at the (huge) opening received our text," said Oliver in a tweet (<https://twitter.com/julianoliver>). "A few complained, leading to sudden takedown and threat."

The threat came from the technical contractors hired by Transmediale, who said they would call the German Federal Police if the artists refused to remove a crucial component of the Beacon. Despite the best efforts of Art Hack Day and Transmediale, Oliver and Vasiliev ultimately relented and shut down PRISM. "It was our intention to provide an opportunity for public to critically engage precisely the same methods of cellular communications interception used by certain governments against their own people and people in sovereign states," said Oliver and Vasiliev in a statement (<http://pastebin.com/dVsJQr1x>). "It was not, in any way, our intention to harm anyone and nor did we."

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ABOUT DJ PANGBURN

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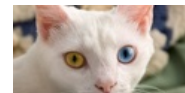
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[PRISM, The Beacon Frame \(http://vimeo.com/79578734\)](http://vimeo.com/79578734) from [Dania Vasiliev \(http://vimeo.com/daniavasilev\)](http://vimeo.com/daniavasilev).

Oliver and Vasilev said that it is "vital that technology-based art remain a frame with which we can develop critical discourses about the world we live in, from the engineered to the cultural and political." They added that this sometimes "requires that we are not limited by exaggerated fears and legal definition, but that we act proportionally and with conscience in our efforts to understand the power struggles and tensions in our (technically mediated) environment."

Mathé wrote that the threat and shutdown brought back unpleasant memories of the "absurdly draconian penalties" for computer-related crime laws used to prosecute both Jeremy Hammond and Aaron Swartz. "*PRISM: The Beacon Frame*" is as visually stunning as it is technically audacious," said Mathé in his [statement of support \(http://pastebin.com/xuV9a6zV\)](http://pastebin.com/xuV9a6zV). "It uses wireless interception to project device information through a prism onto the surrounding walls resulting in an impressive and ominous lightshow."

"People close to the installation receive eerie yet playful text messages," said Mathé. "It raises questions around our exploitative relationship to critical infrastructure. As such, it was universally acclaimed by visitors to the exhibition." The acclaim also raises an interesting dilemma about consent to data mining and invasion of privacy. The installation was already well-known before its exhibit at Transmediale's "Afterglow," and it was advertised on both the Art Hack Day and Transmediale websites. Then, of course, the exhibition's visitors knew what they were getting into in the first place.

"In a certain light, it's ironic that a component of the installation be taken down since it merely re-articulates some of the core questions raised by the piece," said Mathé. "Who controls our infrastructure? Why is certain technology the prerogative of those in power? How can we foster public debate around the ramifications of technological choices?"

One would hope that the satire wasn't lost on the few upset visitors and technical contractors, though this seems to not be the case. But, in another sense, it's somewhat encouraging that people are finally taking the issues of surveillance, data mining, and privacy seriously.

By [DJ Pangburn \(/author/DJPangburn\)](#) | 5 days ago

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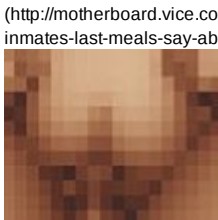


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