

THE CONVERSATION

ROSENBERG-CASE EAVESDROPPING INSPIRES A FEAST FOR THOUGHT AT THE KITCHEN

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For “Transcript,” Jenny Perlin shot the interior of a friend’s Brooklyn apartment building, not the actual West Village apartment where the F.B.I. eavesdropped on two couples in 1953.

Family members often figure in Jenny Perlin’s art and films, but for her latest installation, which opened at The Kitchen last weekend, the relative who inspired “Transcript” happens to be one she never met. He was Marshall Perlin, a lawyer who unsuccessfully sought a stay of execution for Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the Americans accused of supplying the Soviets with atomic-bomb secrets. After their deaths, Perlin tried to prove that the punishment meted the couple didn’t match their crimes. The government never recanted its actions in Perlin’s lifetime, but an ongoing movement to re-open the case persists, and the files he obtained are considered damning evidence of foul play by the F.B.I. and the Justice Department. Known as the Perlin Papers, they’re currently housed at Columbia University’s Law School, where Jenny Perlin first became acquainted with her distant relative’s legacy.

“Transcript” is based on just a few of the 250,000 declassified documents Marshall Perlin amassed in one of the first successful applications of the 1966 Freedom of Information Act. Along with files pertaining specifically to the Rosenbergs, the Perlin Papers archive reveals an alarming, and at times absurd record of domestic-government spying from the 1940s to the 1970s on hundreds of Americans tangentially connected to the couple. Among the items that will be featured in future installments of Jenny Perlin’s eight-part project are the doodles of a man convicted of espionage and details of various women’s banal, everyday activities in New York, from buying stockings to going to the movies.

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