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Art  
The Observer

## Trevor Paglen: art in the age of mass surveillance

The artist tells how his work provides a map of the digital world's hidden landscapes and forbidden places



1 NSA/GCHQ Surveillance Base, Bude, Cornwall, UK, 2014. Paglen uses high-powered optics to capture classified military and surveillance bases. Photograph: Courtesy Trevor Paglen / Metro Pictures, New York

Trevor Paglen describes himself as a landscape artist, but he is no John Constable. The landscapes Paglen frames extend to the bottom of the ocean and beyond the blurred edges of the Earth's atmosphere. For the last two decades, the artist, a cheerful and fervent man of 43, has been on a mission to photograph the unseen political geography of our times. His art tries to capture places that are not on any map - the secret air bases and offshore prisons from which the war on terror has been fought - as well as the networks of data collection and surveillance that now shape our democracies, the cables, spy satellites and artificial intelligences of the digital world.

There is little abstract about this effort. Paglen has spent a good deal of his artistic career camped out in deserts with only suspicious drones for company, his special astro-telescopic lenses trained on the heavens or distant military bases. ("For me, seeing the drone in the 21st century is a little bit like Turner seeing the train in the 19th century.") He trained as a scuba diver to get 100ft beneath the waves in search of the cables carrying all of human knowledge. He recognises few limits to his art. In April, he will launch his own satellite and, with it, the world's first "space sculpture", a manmade star that should be visible from most places on the Earth for a few months, "as bright as one of the stars in the Big Dipper".

I meet Paglen in Berlin, in a prewar studio apartment, which is his current home and the centre of his operations. We sit in a high-ceilinged room among banks of computer screens and bookcases of art monographs. Two of his assistants, Daniel and Eric, are at work on an artificial intelligence project. Paglen is mostly either here directing that and five other projects with them, or "on airplanes trying to figure out how to pay the rent". In the week that we meet, that latter process has become a little easier as he is named one of this year's recipients of the MacArthur "genius grant", with its stipend of \$625,000 (£470,000) over five years.

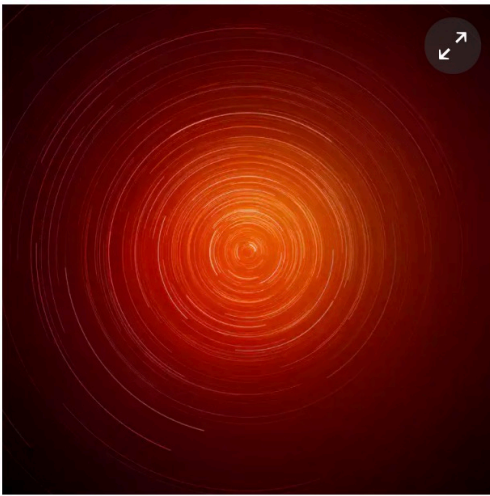
Paglen likes to joke that the airy apartment itself is probably one of the "most surveilled" spaces in western Europe. It was formerly home to the documentary-maker Laura Poitras, Paglen's friend, who was instrumental in helping CIA whistleblower Edward Snowden go public about the staggering level of state-sponsored monitoring. Paglen's footage of National Security Agency bases was included in *Citizenfour*, Poitras's Academy award-winning documentary about Snowden. In some senses, being watched goes with the territory. The apartment is also a couple of hundred yards from the archives of the old East German Stasi: millions of pages of paper records in manila files that until recently would have represented the most comprehensive data collection in human history, before Facebook and Google, the NSA and the rest upped the ante.

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STSS-1 and Two Unidentified Spacecraft over Carson City (Space Tracking and Surveillance System, USA 205), 2010. Part of Trevor Paglen's project *The Other Night Sky*, in which he used long exposures to record the transit of satellites and space debris. Photograph: Courtesy Trevor Paglen/Metro Pictures, New York



Sitting on the edge of his seat, Paglen talks slightly reluctantly about his journey here. He is by turns animated and wary, excited by his projects but careful not to make them seem anything more than they are. “I am not a journalist or an academic,” he says, “I don’t feel it incumbent on me to make sense of everything. What I am saying is, ‘This is an image of something in our world’. You might think you know what it is, but I am going to tell you something different...”

He resists autobiographical interpretations of his work, though you can’t help but feel that a psychologist might at least see them as worthy of mention. Paglen was born at Andrews air force base, in Maryland, where his father was an ophthalmologist. As a boy, he lived on bases in Texas and California, before his family settled when he was 12 at the US army airfield in Wiesbaden, Germany, where he stayed with his father until university after his parents separated. His first experience of the ways in which politics can shape geography was in this divided country; he had not long started school here when the Wall came down.

Paglen's academic career, too, looks in retrospect like a perfect primer for his artistic practice. He studied the philosophy of religion, then fine art, then did a Phd in geography ("looking at the ways humans shape the surface of the Earth and how that in turn shapes us"). He also drifted a little, played unhinged bass in a punk band called Noisegate, and was into Californian surf culture.

Paglen first became interested in hidden places while studying at Berkeley with a project he did on the architecture of the American prison system, during the years in which mass incarceration became America's unspoken political philosophy ("a form of revenge against the civil rights movement," he says now). He photographed the enormous prisons out in the Californian desert and came to think of them as places that were both inside and outside American society. After 9/11, when it became clear that the US was setting up [secret prisons around the world](#), the most visible symbol of which was Guantánamo Bay, he started to see a resonance between his project and the war on terror.

That set him thinking about the history of secret places. In 2003, he made the first of many camping trips to the blueprint of all these off-grid locations, Area 51, the highly classified air force base in Nevada, pitching up on snow-topped Tikaboo Peak to see what he could see. That started him on his artistic odyssey into the world of "rendition and drones and extra-judicial spaces".



**i** Prototype for a Nonfunctional Satellite, 2013. Part of a series exploring the idea of launching a decorative sculpture into the night sky. The object would remain in low orbit for several weeks before burning up on re-entry. Photograph: Courtesy Trevor Paglen/Metro Pictures, New York



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“I think a lot of that work was animated by a kind of anger,” he says. “But also equally by curiosity - what did these places look like?” When the Snowden files were released, he homed in on the fact that “nearly all the documents were about infrastructure - and they gave addresses”. He did a lot of work pinpointing the key underground and undersea junctions of cabling, where much of the listening took place, and photographing them. “Just trying to learn how to see the landscape of the internet as it were,” he says.

How often does his quest for this language brings him up against the authorities?

“Well, every time,” he says, with a laugh. “The military is quite predictable in a way though. What I am more wary of in the desert is coming across crazy people doing drugs or whatever. Those encounters are often the most disconcerting.”

In some ways, I suggest, it as if he is engaged on a postmodern “right to roam” protest, making a physical argument against official secrecy. What have been the personal highlights?

“I think the first time I worked out how to predict where a certain surveillance satellite would be and then went out and looked and it showed up,” he says - his ethereal photographs of the sky are traced with tell-tale dots and lines. He also recalls learning to see lethal [Reaper drones](#) in the Nevada desert air. They would watch him watching them. “It was one of those situations where you realise that if this was anywhere else in the world, that would probably be the last thing I would see,” he says.

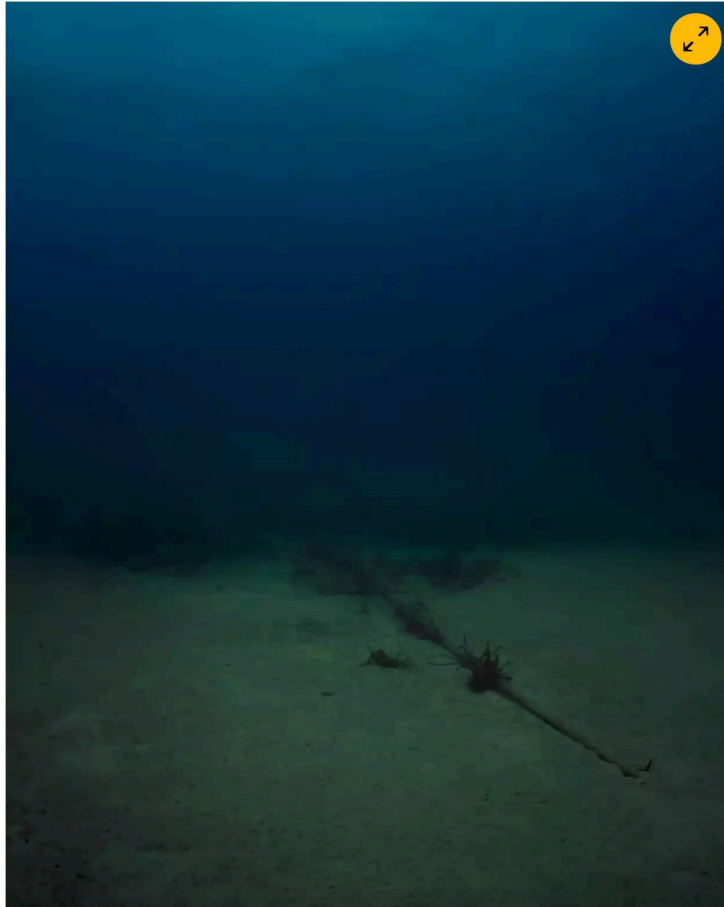
His pictures, often shot at distances of many miles, are snapshots of the known unknowns of our world. As he explains his practice to me over the course of an afternoon, he runs through a dizzying sequence of illustrative images on his desktop computer. It is a slideshow punctuated by my asking: “What’s that?” and him patiently explaining what we can see: a speck of a drone on the face of the sun; the white domes of the largest NSA station outside the US - at Menwith Hill near Harrogate; the beach at Bude in Cornwall under which a cable carrying the world’s data makes landfall.


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 Bahamas Internet Cable System (BICS-1) NSA/GCHQ-Tapped Undersea Cable Atlantic Ocean, 2015. Paglen learned to scuba dive in order to trace the internet cables that carry vast amounts of data across the world's ocean floors. Photograph: Courtesy Trevor Paglen/Metro Pictures, New York



Paglen's most recent work is another departure into that digital landscape, this time into the terra incognita of artificial intelligence. He is developing a program that can take, say, the algorithm that controls a laser-guided missile or a self-driving car and recreate what it "sees" of the world. Or he has deconstructed the Facebook intelligence that seeks to scan our uploaded photos for evidence of what we wear and what we buy (to sell to advertisers) and repurposed it as an intelligence that only looks at photographs in terms of objects important to Freudian psychoanalysis or late-stage capitalism.

He sees this in some ways as a new way of looking, one entirely appropriate to the times. "We live in a political moment where it seems reason has gone out the door," he says. "And at the same time we have these incredibly predatory institutions being created, whether it is white supremacy on one hand or Facebook on the other. It is kind of a surrealist moment. Everything is like Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. Nothing is what it seems."

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In some ways, there is a kinship in Paglen's work to the paranoid surfaces of [Adam Curtis's](#) documentaries, or perhaps Don DeLillo's fiction, but he is also at pains to imagine how an alternative world might look.



 Trevor Paglen: "You might think you know what it is, but I am going to tell you something different." Photograph: Courtesy of Trevor Paglen



A recent installation, *Autonomy Cube*, saw him demonstrate an internet with "the opposite business model", one that would still give you access to all the world's information, but would preserve anonymity and not collect your data. He is also looking at ways in which art might take that utopian principle into space.

In this sense, the forthcoming satellite project, what he calls the Orbital Reflector, is a kind of antidote to all he photographs. It will be followed in June by a major retrospective of Paglen's work at the [Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC](#). The plan, a decade in the making, is to launch the first ever satellite "that has no military value, no scientific value, no commercial value, only aesthetic value". A satellite that is the opposite of what we have come to expect. Not something that observes our every move, but something that we can gaze up at in old-fashioned wonder, a little diamond in the sky.

The project is being sponsored, fittingly, by the Nevada Museum of Art. The sculpture will piggyback off a [Space X](#) rocket before being ejected. Once in low orbit, a simple mechanism is designed to open up an inflatable Mylar structure, about 100ft long and 6ft high, with highly reflective planes, which he insists will be visible to the naked eye as a twinkle in the night sky.

And what does he want people to think when, in April, hopefully, they gaze up at it?

"I just hope people enjoy it," he says. "There is no message behind it. Apart from the idea that maybe there are sometimes different ways of thinking about the world."