

## artnet news

Boucher, Brian, "A New NFT and 'Speculative Reality' Puzzle From Artist Trevor Paglen Sends Users on a Dark, Mind Control-Themed Treasure Hunt," *Artnet News*, May 12, 2023

### NFTs

## A New NFT and 'Speculative Reality' Puzzle From Artist Trevor Paglen Sends Users on a Dark, Mind Control-Themed Treasure Hunt

"I was thinking about audience in a different way," the artist said.

**Brian Boucher**, May 12, 2023



Trevor Paglen, *CYCLOPS*, 2023. © Trevor Paglen, courtesy Pace Gallery.

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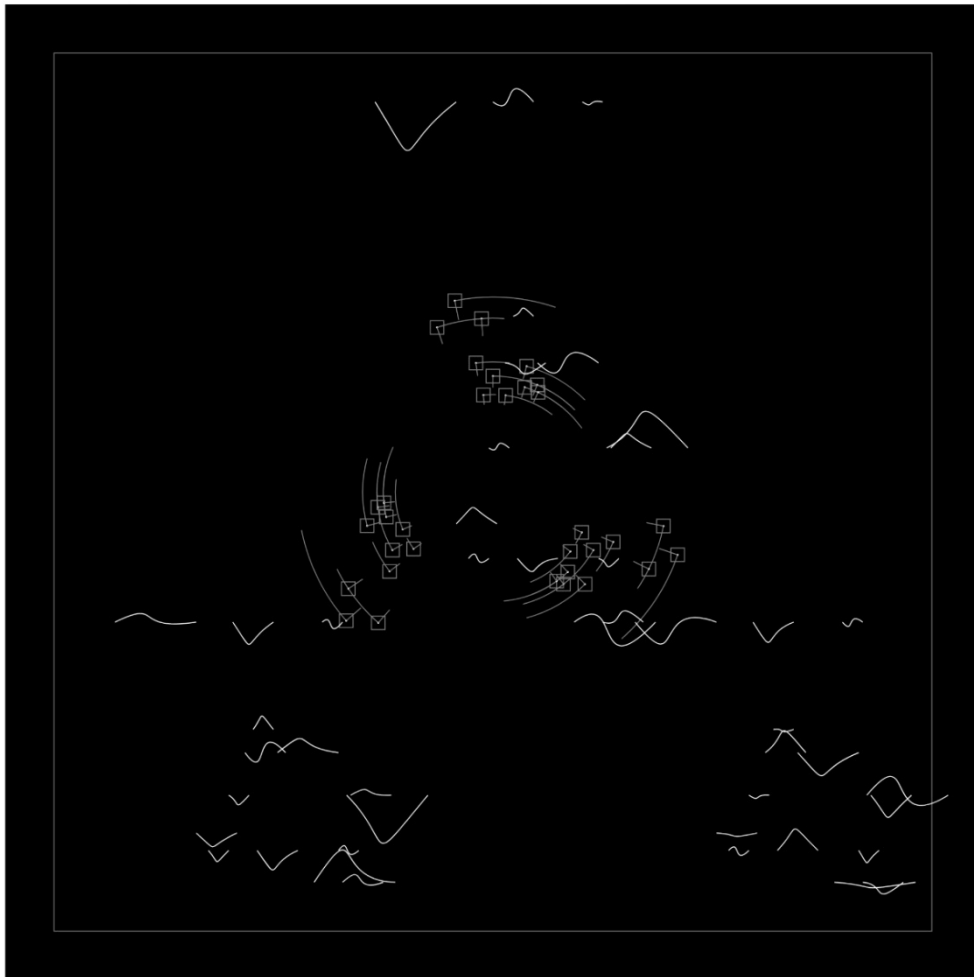
1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

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If you have a ken for puzzles, cryptography, and mystery, two new and interconnected NFT and Web3 projects by artist Trevor Paglen will lead you down some fascinating rabbit holes into the history of mind control experiments, disinformation campaigns, and psychological operations.

The NFT series, titled "PRELUDES," is available on the Art Blocks platform, and combines graphic visual scores with simple compositions, reminiscent at once of algorithmically generated pieces by composers including John Cage and Iannis Xenakis, as well as Haydn and Brahms, who encoded messages into their music.



Trevor Paglen, *Preludes #89*. Courtesy Art Blocks.

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The description of the piece on Art Blocks includes the line, “Pm fvb hyl ylhkpun aopz, fvb ohcl ahrlu fvby mpyza zalw puav h shynly dvysk.” Decoded, the message says, “If you are reading this, you have taken your first step into a larger world.”

“They’re musical puzzles,” Paglen told Artnet News yesterday at Pace Gallery, where he has just debuted a solo show. When you buy the NFT, you then decode the message and enter the code to claim your prize—a vinyl LP—which contains further puzzles. The first track on the record features a computer voice reading a seemingly meaningless sequence of numbers: “65 76 69 82 84 32,” and so on.

(Spoiler alert: With a hint from the artist, who pointed out that there are websites to help puzzlers decode encrypted texts, I was able to turn the message into a string of several words, along the lines of “comet indigo starlight.”)

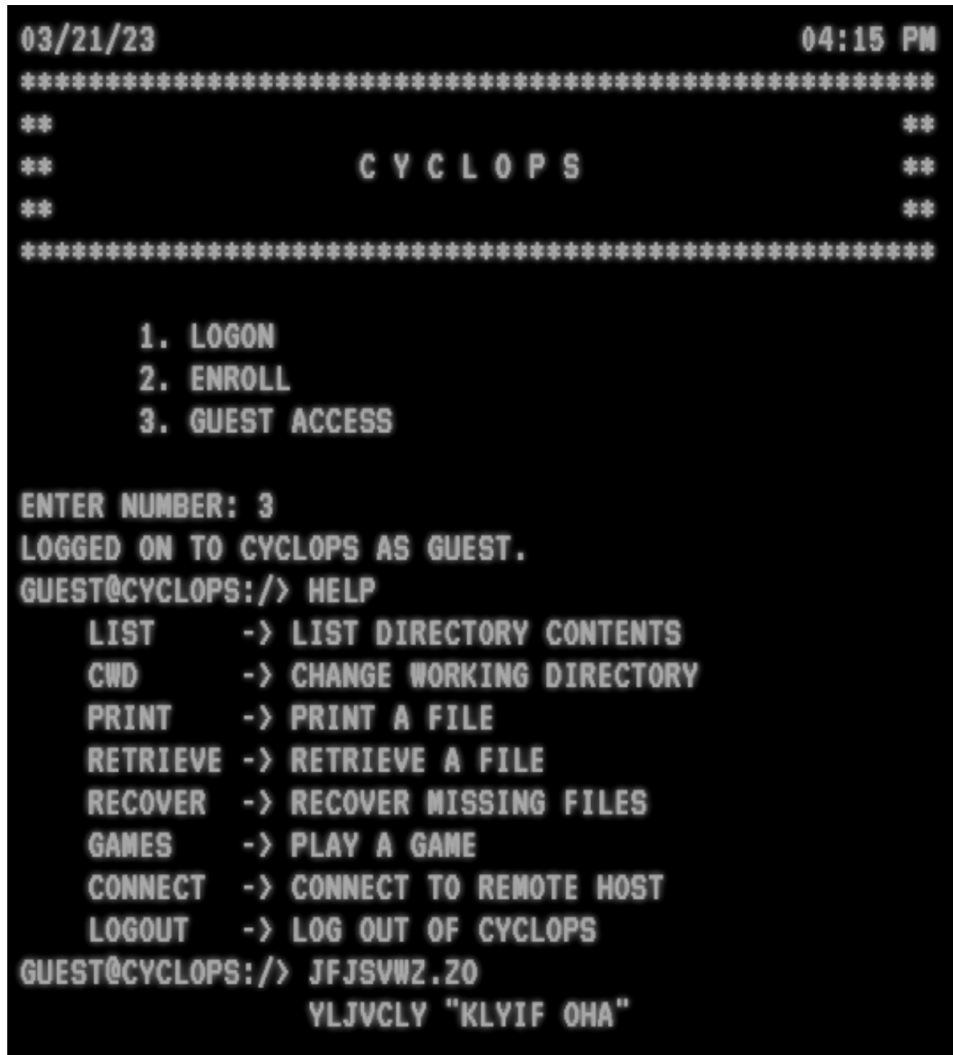
The puzzles on the vinyl LP, in turn, lead to “CYCLOPS”, a “speculative reality work” consisting of a mainframe computer interface, presented by Art Blocks and Pace Verso, the gallery’s Web3 hub.

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Trevor Paglen, *CYCLOPS*, 2023. © Trevor Paglen, courtesy Pace Gallery.

“Welcome to the Viewtree Mountain Research Facility,” reads the interface, which indicates that the system was shut down in 1972 but re-enabled in 1923 (presumably a legacy of a system way before Y2K, which didn’t plan for dates starting 20).

If “speculative reality” leaves you scratching your head, the website somewhat helpfully explains, “Think of it as a new art genre that combines elements from Alternate Reality Games (ARGs), with

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aspects of historical ‘unfiction,’ experimental narrative, and cooperative problem solving. It is meant to be played and experienced by self-organized groups of people working collaboratively.”

To engage, participants begin to solve the puzzles presented on the tracks of the vinyl LP, or buy a “Preludes” NFT, either of which earns puzzle-solvers a “CYCLOPS” enrollment code. Or, says the site, “Find one. They are hidden out there. Go looking.”

Eventually, and hopefully without spoiling anything, we can reveal that participants will find videos, documents, and other materials that will lead them further down the road.

“In terms of the narrative structure and content of ‘CYCLOPS,’ it’s living in the world of MKUltra and mind experiments,” said Paglen, referring to a secret CIA program involving interrogation, brainwashing, and psychological torture. Much of the evidence of MKUltra was destroyed; the “evidence” gamers find stands in for those documents.



Trevor Paglen, *CYCLOPS*, 2023. © Trevor Paglen, courtesy Pace Gallery.

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What led Paglen to enter the NFT field? He's less interested in the new format for its own sake, he said, than for its enthusiasts.

"Here's 10,000 people who all talk to each other," he said, referring to the community of digital-art fans. "To build CYCLOPS, in order to play this game, you need 1,000 people who are talking to each other. NFTs have a bunch of nerds hanging out on Discord servers. I was thinking about audience in a different way.

"What I was asking was, 'How do you make public art for people who live in the Internet?'"