

# artnet news

Dafoe, Taylor, "Artist Trevor Paglen Sounds the Alarm on Our New Era of 'Psy-Ops Capitalism' in a Reality-Testing Show at Pace Gallery," *Artnet News*, May 23, 2023

## On View

### Artist Trevor Paglen Sounds the Alarm on Our New Era of 'Psy-Ops Capitalism' in a Reality-Testing Show at Pace Gallery

We're moving from "surveillance capitalism" to an even more manipulative era, the artist said.

Taylor Dafoe, May 23, 2023



Trevor Paglen, *Because Physical Wounds Heal...* (2022). © Trevor Paglen. Courtesy of Pace Gallery.

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Remember “the dress” from 2015? For a few weeks that year, a low-res image of a random frock fomented a seemingly inescapable internet debate over whether its colors were blue and black or white and gold.

It all seemed like a bit of fun. Taylor Swift weighed in; so did every uncle with a Facebook account. Studies and peer-reviewed papers eventually got to the bottom of the science behind the split in interpretations, but by that point, most people were tired of talking about it. In the end, we were left with a simple fact: people can look at the same object and see different things.

But what if this basic physiological phenomenon could be weaponized against us in the name of spycraft or commerce? (The dress debate proved to be good business for social media platforms and media outlets—Buzzfeed even based its editorial strategy around it.)

For Trevor Paglen, an artist who has made a career of looking at the sly ways in which technology has shaped our view of the world around us, this is a question of when, not if.

“In the extremely near future,” the artist said, “you and I will watch what is ostensibly the same show on Netflix, but we will each see a different movie.” The streaming platform, he explained, “will be generating a different movie for us based on, one, the things we want to see; and two, what it thinks will be the most effective way to extract some kind of value from us.”

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Trevor Paglen, *UNKNOWN #85237 (Unclassified object near The Eastern Veil)*  
(2023). © Trevor Paglen. Courtesy of Pace Gallery.

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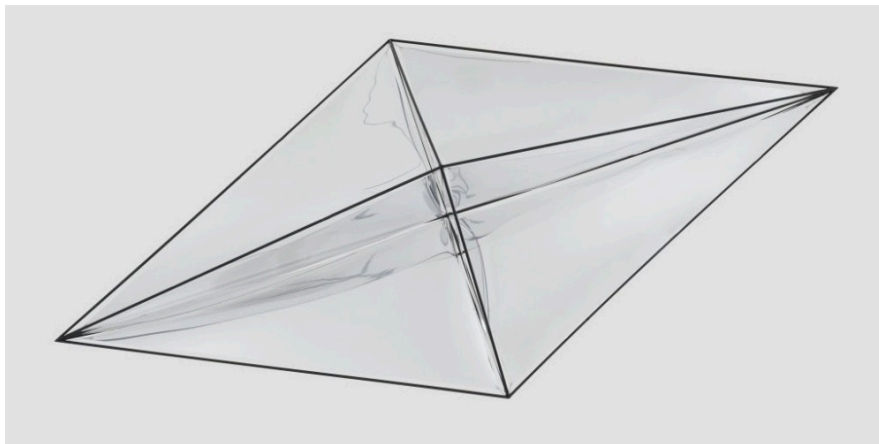
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The dress anecdote may seem like an odd place to start an article about Paglen's [new show at Pace Gallery](#), which has nothing to do with clothes or Netflix and is instead about a wide range of heady political topics like electronic warfare and the effects of military influence operations on American culture. But we begin here because, if there's one central theme that ties this otherwise disparate exhibition together, it is, in Paglen's words, that "perception is malleable."

"[You've Just Been F\\*cked by PSYOPS](#)" is the name of the show. Its title is taken from a phrase frequently found on challenge coins, which are small tokens made to commemorate special military and police units who use unconventional tactics of persuasion to achieve a particular objective—also known as psychological operations, or psy-ops. (Taking the form of currency, these mementos also make eerie metaphors for the military-industrial complex writ large.)

If you've heard about psy-ops, chances are it was in the context of science fiction or conspiracy theory. But the phrase is about to become much more common in our collective lexicon, Paglen said. If the last decade was defined by "surveillance capitalism"—a term coined by scholar Shoshana Zuboff to connote the practice of corporations harvesting and selling our personal data—then we're about to enter what Paglen calls the era of "psy-ops capitalism."



Trevor Paglen, (*PALLADIUM Variation #4*) 2023. © Trevor Paglen. Courtesy of Pace Gallery.

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Sure enough, a scary character features prominently in Paglen's own version of a challenge coin, which is a centerpiece of the show. The sculpture, which is roughly 50 times the size of a coin, is made from steel, bullets, and resin; in the middle is a menacing skull with glowing red features. (Real challenge coins are inscribed with their units' insignia—typically symbols of patriotism or violence. Skeletons and dragons are popular choices, Paglen pointed out.)

Elsewhere in the show are several large-scale photographs of “unids,” or unidentified objects floating in orbit around the earth, which the artist imaged using infrared telescopes in remote locations. It can be hard to spot these unids, though. Paglen's prints are also packed with stellar remnants, stars, and gaseous clouds. So much so, in fact, that the pictures could just as easily be read as musings on the vast mysteries of outer space.

To Paglen, they kind of are. “I think that space itself as a concept is kind of a psy-op,” he said, only half joking. Because of its radical unknowability, space becomes a backdrop onto which we project our fantasies, he said.

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Trevor Paglen, *UNKNOWN #90007 (Classified object near Dreyer's Nebula)*  
(2023). © Trevor Paglen. Courtesy of Pace Gallery.

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Think about this idea in the gallery and you'll begin to wonder: Can I trust anything on view, or is the artist employing the same techniques that he's exploring? Am I seeing deception or am I being deceived?

This question gets even knottier with the one video piece, *Doty* (2023). The 66-minute film features interviews with Richard Doty, a former member of the Air Force Office of Special Investigations, who discusses his work recruiting spies, running surveillance operations, and spreading false information within UFO communities to cover up secret work conducted at New Mexico's Kirtland Air Force base, where he was stationed.

Whether or not Doty is a reliable narrator is never quite clear; nor is his agenda. For every moment when it feels like he's whispering state secrets into our ears, there are others that feel like he's spinning yarns that are just a little too neat to be true—a magician's assistant distracting from the trick.



Trevor Paglen, *Doty* (2023). © Trevor Paglen. Courtesy of Pace Gallery.

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Suspended above the gallery is the artist's other sculpture in the show, the kite-like *PALLADIUM Variation #4* (2023). It's based on satellites designed by military and intelligence agencies to confuse enemy radars, but unlike those objects, which are ultra-sophisticated pieces of deception technology, Paglen's imitation is primitive—just steel and foil. More than a weapon, it invokes the work of the mid-century minimalists, say, or Light and Space artists like Larry Bell.

The sculpture's inutility leaves its meaning unclear. That's the case with many of the artworks on view in the exhibition. Straightforward and spare—a printed photograph, a single-channel video—they exude none of the complexities of the systems they invoke. How they all fit together remains a mystery. The whole thing is fraught with ambiguity.

This, according to the artist, is intentional. The show asks viewers: "What is this ambiguity? How are we susceptible to being taken advantage of in these moments?"

"Our impulse is to try to resolve that ambiguity, to make sense of it," he went on. But for Paglen, the show is meant to remind us that our "inability to live with ambiguity might be a means by which we can be manipulated."

*"Trevor Paglen: You've Just Been F\*cked by PSYOPS" is on view now through July 22 at Pace in New York.*