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Why Trevor Paglen Thinks About Who's Watching Us

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Trevor Paglen documents what hidden structures of data collection and mass surveillance look like — making sure we see what those in power might not want us to. Next he sends a satellite into space.

Transcript

RACHEL MARTIN, HOST:

We are all constantly being watched. That's what MacArthur Award-winning artist Trevor Paglen says, anyway. Surveillance inspires his art, from photographing secret defense sites to the collecting and exhibiting of declassified documents. Later this month, Paglen is scheduled to launch a satellite into orbit, a kind of space sculpture that can be seen from Earth. It's supposed to remind us of what's up there keeping tabs on us. But as NPR's Andrew Limbong reports, it might teach us how to do the watching.

ANDREW LIMBONG, BYLINE: Trevor Paglen isn't a technophobe. He's got a smartphone. He's on Facebook and Twitter. He just knows what he's in for.

TREVOR PAGLEN: When I'm walking through everyday life, I'm questioning things. Like, if a store asks me for my phone number, I'm thinking, like, well, why do you want my phone number and what do you want to do with it? (Laughter) You know? And, what, are you going to sell my location data to somebody?

LIMBONG: Which concerns him. Paglen's been thinking about being watched for decades. His original interest as an artist and academic was the growth of the private prison system. He was getting his Ph.D. in geography at UC Berkeley, and he was spending a lot of time studying aerial survey maps of the U.S., thinking about how prisons used to be big, visible structures inside cities and how they were becoming hidden, built in remote areas. And while he was looking at these maps, he kept finding spots that were blank, edited out of the original negative.

PAGLEN: When I was doing my dissertation research, it was really the middle of the emergent, like, war on terror. It was a moment in time where it was very clear that the United States had set up a kind of secret architecture for warfare. Well, I wanted to understand, if you were a state, how do you create places, or programs or even people that, quote-unquote, "don't exist?"

LIMBONG: So he'd go to those places where the map said there was nothing, or as close as he could get, and there'd be something.

PAGLEN: So I was spending time in places like Las Vegas, you know, photographing airplanes that would bring people to and from work at, you know, secret military installations out in the desert. Spent a lot of time climbing mountains and ridges with telescopes, trying to see what some of these places look like.

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LIMBONG: He's a little coy about exactly what kinds of risks he took.

Have you ever done something, gone on a trip like a photo trip, and came back and thought, yeah, that was dumb?

(LAUGHTER)

LIMBONG: Shouldn't have done that one?

(LAUGHTER)

PAGLEN: I have, but we are not going to talk about those.

LIMBONG: That said, Trevor Paglen is having a very extended moment in the public spotlight. There was that MacArthur Award he won last year. He's been touring a performance around the world with the Kronos Quartet.

(SOUNDBITE OF KRONOS QUARTET SONG)

LIMBONG: It's about computer vision and artificial intelligence. And this past summer, the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., opened a retrospective of Paglen's art, called, "Sights Unseen." It collects his grainy pictures of secret government buildings, printouts of redacted emails, military patches with symbols we don't know the meanings of. It's mundane stuff, maybe even boring, until you know what you're looking at.

PAGLEN: We continually have to relearn how to see the environments around us because the environments around us are in constant flux.

LIMBONG: For example, one set of photographs are just pictures of Internet cables that run underwater. But they've got titles, like, "NSA-tapped Undersea Cables North Pacific Ocean," or "NSA-tapped Fiber Optic Cable Landing Site" or "NSA GCHQ" - that's British intelligence - "Tapped Undersea Cable Atlantic Ocean." You get the point.

KIRSTEN JOHNSON: It's not as if Trevor has any answers to what we should do upon learning this information.

LIMBONG: That's Kirsten Johnson. She is a documentary filmmaker and a friend of Paglen's. They both worked as cinematographers for "Citizenfour," the documentary about NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden.

JOHNSON: One of the animating principles of Trevor's work is that there's an edge between what we can see and what is actively being hidden from us often by governments or military forces. And that edge is where we as citizens can try to investigate what governments want to hide from us.

LIMBONG: Michael O'Hanlon is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. He specializes in national security policy and was on an external advisory board for the CIA. He's not super familiar with Paglen's work, but I wanted to get a sense of what someone from his world thinks of a guy like Paglen.

MICHAEL O'HANLON: For the most part, what he's doing is pretty interesting within the First Amendment, and even putting on my national security cap, I had a hard time seeing how major damage could result.

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LIMBONG: Paglen says he isn't out to cause damage or break the law. He just wants to help people see the world a little differently, which is where we get to his newest project, one that's going to live in space.

PAGLEN: It's about a hundred feet long and about 5 feet tall.

LIMBONG: It's a satellite called Orbital Reflector. It's essentially a giant, inflatable mirror that'll reflect sunlight back down to Earth.

PAGLEN: You'll be able to see this new star slowly moving across the sky about as bright as one of the stars in the Big Dipper.

LIMBONG: Satellites do all sorts of things - follow climate patterns, field phone calls, track military targets and collect data. Orbital Reflector does none of those things. Instead, it asks, what if we looked up and didn't have to worry about what was looking down?

PAGLEN: For me it's a project that tries to generate a tiny glimpse of what a different kind of world might look like.

LIMBONG: Krystal Wilson works at the Secure World Foundation, a private group that promotes space sustainability. She appreciates that Paglen is trying to get us interested in what people are doing in space.

KRYSTAL WILSON: Whether this is the most effective way to do that or not, you know, that's a question.

LIMBONG: Wilson says there have been other experiments like this, and you can already see the International Space Station with the naked eye. Plus, anybody who's interested in surveillance and secret satellites, they're probably already paying attention.

WILSON: Experts kind of know where they are. It's hard to hide a satellite at the end of the day. But...

LIMBONG: Is it? It seems pretty easy, though.

WILSON: Well...

LIMBONG: You just...

WILSON: You have to know where to look for it. But, essentially, anyone can look up. Like, there's no, like, magic cloak.

LIMBONG: Paglen says he knows his art won't change how we use these technologies.

PAGLEN: What I can do is just literally ask people to look at the sky.

JAY RESPLER: You're in the park now?

LIMBONG: Yeah. I'm in the middle of the park.

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Paglen's work asks us to care about surveillance, but that's not easy, especially if it's coming from space. Sure, there's no magic cloak, but it's still a tiny thing miles and miles away. Thankfully, I've got amateur satellite tracker Jay Ressler on the phone with me.

RESPLER: Facing west, the satellite will be coming from the south.

LIMBONG: There are about 1,800 satellites in space, and Respler is helping me catch a glimpse of just one from a park near my apartment.

RESPLER: It'll be directly overhead.

LIMBONG: Paglen often talks about how people's behavior changes when they know they're being watched.

RESPLER: It should be there about now.

LIMBONG: I think I saw something. I don't know if that was wishful thinking on my eyes. But, you know.

RESPLER: It starts to happen sometimes. Yes, I know that.

LIMBONG: I'm pretty sure it was wishful seeing on my part. I couldn't find a satellite that night, but some satellite knew exactly where I was. Andrew Limbong, NPR News.

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