

ARTFORUM

Artforum, April 2013
 Trevor Paglen, Metro Pictures
 By Eva Diaz

The end of the space age: So proclaims the cover of a recent issue of *The Economist*, which Trevor Paglen has photographed and blown up to movie-poster size. If ever there was a moment to reassess the utopian drive to exceed the envelope of Earth, now is that time, for, as Paglen’s exhibition suggests, the era of space exploration as a humanistic program of knowledge acquisition, interspecies communication, and possible intergalactic colonization—in short, the epoch of cosmic optimism—has receded. Instead, embers of dystopian millenarianism, already present during the Cold War period, are once again being fanned, and, more alarmingly, a new vision of outer space as a zone for privatized, touristic exploration and capitalistic exploitation is emerging.

This exhibition presented materials related to Paglen’s latest project, *The Last Pictures*, 2012, for which he micro-etched a gold-plated silicon disk with one hundred images and attached it to a communications satellite launched into Earth’s orbit in November 2012 from the mel-lifluous-sounding Baikonur Cosmodrome in remote Kazakhstan. With these pictures, Paglen attempted to summarize the history and culture of terrestrial life—a task both heuristic and monumental. The artist’s elegiac title contributes to the sense that the images not only define humanity but may in fact outlive it. On view alongside a copy of the pancake-size disk, a video displayed the path of the satellite. Its orbit is eighteen times farther from Earth than that of most human-launched artifacts; this extreme distance from the planet implies that Paglen’s compendium will be preserved in perpetuity.

In a neighboring room, a grid of 182 images Paglen considered but rejected for the satellite-bound disk papered the gallery walls. Many of the photographs in this eclectic assortment were connected by their enigmatic and sometimes frightening depictions of humanity’s augmentation of nature via technology. Several portrayed organic-mechanical hybrids—a beetle with tiny wires strapped to its carapace, for example, was juxtaposed with a soldier wearing a gas mask mounted on a horse—that sometimes approached the monstrous, calling to mind the hubris of Dr. Frankenstein’s endeavors to “improve” nature.

Selected images that did make the cut for the disk were also shown in the exhibition: a postcard of the seventeen-thousand-year-old Lascaux cave paintings; a photograph of the reverse side of Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, 1920, which, thanks to Walter Benjamin’s meditation on the work, has served as a lodestone for debates about the nature of progress; and a retouched close-up of Breughel’s painting *The Tower of Babel*, in which the ant-like workers

constructing the structure have been excised. Less culturally emblematic images were also displayed—a still from the 1956 Japanese film *Warning from Space* depicting actors in goofy starfish-like costumes impersonating a cyclopean race of aliens, and the black-and-white *Demonstration of Eating, Licking, and Drinking*, a photograph originally created for a compendium of pictures attached to the 1977 *Voyager* spacecraft by a team of scientists led by astronomer Carl Sagan.

In addition to the appropriated images that Paglen gathered for the space-bound archive, the exhibition contained the artist’s well-known photographs of secret military sites, surveillance drones, and spy satellites. In Paglen’s characteristic style, the images are near abstractions, with distantly visible black-ops bases or nearly indistinct contrails of unidentified aircraft standing in for the once very public nature of national space programs. The clandestine efforts the artist documents have a counterpoint in what one could call the new space race: the very public solicitations by private firms promising access to the stratosphere—for prices that are themselves stratospheric.



Trevor Paglen, *Singleton/SBW ASS-R1 and Three Unidentified Spacecraft (Space Based Wide Area Surveillance System; USA 32)*, 2012, C-print, 60 x 48".