

# frieze

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## Horror Vacui

### Trevor Paglen and the final frontier

By George Pendle



William Anders, *Earthrise*, 1968, included in Trevor Paglen, *The Last Pictures*, 2012

Nature abhors a vacuum. On 14 October 2012, at the very same time that the fifth and final space shuttle, *Endeavour*, was being transported to its last resting place at the California Science Center in Los Angeles, human eyes were once again fixed on the edge of space, as the Austrian daredevil, Felix Baumgartner, stepped out of a helium balloon 24 miles in the air and plummeted to the ground.

The space shuttle that had once gracefully orbited Earth at more than 17,000 mph, was now averaging two mph as it was torturously manoeuvred through the streets of LA, squeezing around lamp posts and forcing more than 400 roadside trees to be chopped down to clear its path. Meanwhile, Baumgartner (whose name – which translates as tree gardener – seemed to chide *Endeavour*'s earthbound ungainliness) was replacing it as the symbol of human achievement *in extremis*, becoming the first person to break the speed of sound with his own body. It was all a bit topsy-turvy.

These days, space needs all the help it can get. The political urgency of its exploration has vanished, the religious promise of its mysteries – spouted by such UFO-based religions as Scientology and the Nation of Islam – have become passé, and even the remarkable sight of a remote-controlled robot on Mars has become something of a regular occurrence. Space today seems fit only for tourism and spectacular stunts. Space was the place.

A salutary example of our current relationship with the void can be seen in Trevor Paglen's recent work, *The Last Pictures* (2012). In a project commissioned by Creative Time, Paglen painstakingly chose 100 photographs to be micro-etched onto an archival silicon disc and affixed to the exterior of a communications satellite. When the rocket carrying the satellite was launched, the pictures and their host were dropped into the Clarke Belt, a geostationary orbit bristling with thousands of other communication satellites. There they will remain, possibly for billions of years, becoming in Paglen's words, 'the longest-lasting material remnant of contemporary civilisation'.

This is not the first time a message has been blasted into space. The *Voyager* probes, launched in the space-crazed 1970s, carried a 12-inch gold-plated copper disc replete with sounds and images selected to portray the diversity of life and culture on Earth. There were the sounds of surf and wind, the music of Bach and Chuck Berry, spoken greetings in every language from Akkadian to Wu, and more than 100 pictures of human bodies, buildings and sunsets. Carl Sagan, who chaired the committee that came up with the disc's contents, declared that: 'The launching of this bottle into the cosmic ocean says something very hopeful about life on this planet.' Interestingly, no pictures of art were included on the disc.

Paglen's work goes some way towards remedying both the lack of art on the *Voyager* probes and countering the optimistic nature that infused that project. Among the 100 pictures he includes are the Lascaux cavepaintings, *The Great Wave Off Kanagawa* (1830–33) by Katsushika Hokusai and Ai Weiwei's *Study of Perspective – Eiffel Tower* (1995–2003). These sit amidst a collection of pictures of protests, deformed children, battery hens, dust clouds and Leon Trotsky's brain. As opposed to the *Voyager* disc, *The Last Pictures* is both confrontational and pessimistic, and since these images were sent into space without any captions or attempts at further explanation, the project is nigh on unfathomable to aliens (or humans) who haven't read the catalogue. In fact, it is less reminiscent of the *Voyager* discs than of Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel's *Evidence* (1977), which collected photos from scientific institutions and stripped them of their original context so that they became ominously surreal.

Paglen's project is less about actual communication than about the solipsistic curse that plagues all attempts at communication with the unknowable. 'The message could only be a failure,' states Paglen. 'The question was whether it could be an *interesting* failure. The probability of the artefact having an audience was almost nil, but the probability of people on Earth thinking about it here and now was guaranteed.' So, it seems, space has fallen to such a level that it is not even fit for dreams of extra-terrestrial exchange anymore. Rather than an actual communique, *The Last Pictures* is intended as an eternal tombstone to Earth's technology-fuelled doom, a distant mirror to our dire straits.

Or is it? Notable in Paglen's statement is the 'almost' before the 'nil'. And although he consistently speaks of the futility of using any signs and signals in his project at all, Paglen did insist on his pictures being visible to the human eye. He also stated that he wanted it to look valuable, at least according to human mores, hence it being embedded in a gold casing. And when it came to the design of the disc's cover, he changed his mind from wanting it to be a nonsensical drawing to being a fully plotted star map, one that an astronomically inclined human could deduce. It is clear from Paglen's 'almost' that hope fatally infected his project. At the very last moment, he seems to have backed away from the conceptual, almost nihilistic, triumph of an incomprehensible, imperceptible shrine dedicated to a suicidal race, and grabbed at the vaguest possibility of contact. Human nature, it seems, abhors a vacuum.

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