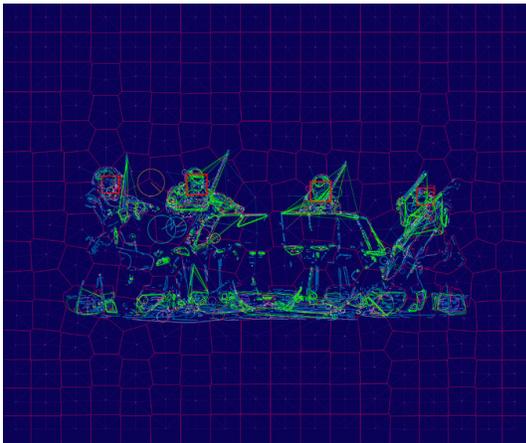


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Baumgardner, Julie, "A String Quartet Concert, With an A.I. Assist," *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, January 13, 2017

"I really don't think art is good at answering questions — it's much better at posing questions, and even better at simply asking people to open their eyes," says the artist Trevor Paglen. With a rigorous practice involving investigation, technology and image-making, Paglen has spent his career crossing boundaries, both disciplinary and physical — "which, for me, is kind of the point of art," he says.



A rendering of "Sight Machine," the artist Trevor Paglen's upcoming multimedia piece that visualizes a performance by the Kronos Quartet in real time using A.I. technology.

To date, Paglen is best known for his work on government surveillance and data collection, in particular an investigation into the C.I.A.'s "extraordinary rendition" program. (His practice has led to far-flung places, including space: he launched a collection of 100 images, titled "The Last Pictures," into space on the EchoStar XVI satellite in 2012 for aliens to find.) As of Jan. 1, he's also the artist-in-residence at Stanford University's Cantor Arts Center; and this Saturday, he's staging his first multimedia performance on Pier 70 in San Francisco's Dogpatch district. "He just thinks so big," says Paglen's longtime gallerist, Claudia

Altman Siegel, who was offered the location by Alison Gass, chief curator of the Cantor. "I brought it to Trevor, like, 'Here's this construction site, what do you want to do?' And the next day, he comes up with a performance with the Kronos Quartet."

The performance, titled "Sight Machine," combines image-making and artificial-intelligence technology: On Saturday, the avant-garde string quartet will play a concert while Paglen's own A.I. mapping system projects machine-generated images of the musicians behind them in real time. Paglen programmed code, akin to surveillance A.I. algorithms, which processes a live video feed of the performance to create "images of what a particular algorithm is 'seeing,'" he says, which in this case is the musicians' movements. "I wanted to make an artwork that really underlined the contradiction between how machines see and how humans see," Paglen explains. "Because music is so affective and is just as corporeal as it is cerebral, I thought coupling a music performance with machine vision adds up to something that work on an emotional, aesthetic and intellectual level."



An alternative rendering of "Sight Machine."

However, Paglen's piece is no awe-struck homage to the capabilities of technology. "There's a profound shift happening in visual culture, which has to do with the fact that most images nowadays are primarily made by machines for other machines. I think that as the audience experiences the overall

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piece, they'll get the sense that the machine-vision and A.I. systems that are 'watching' the same performance are experiencing something entirely different than the humans are," he says. "By pointing out that discrepancy, I want to plant some doubts about the exuberance I see around me over an increasingly automated society."



Trevor Paglen.

While A.I. may be associated with flashy futurism, Paglen wants to remind us that one thriving branch of the technology — machine-to-machine image-making — is very much part of day-to-day society. How can people breeze through toll lanes every morning? Images generated by a machine are sent to another machine, with no human ever intervening. These "invisible images," as Paglen calls them, warrant our attention. "Image-making, along with storytelling and music, is the stuff that culture is made out of," he says. "We're now handing over the ability to tell those stories to artificial intelligence networks and machine-vision systems," which in turn "strongly influence our social and political relationships." Every new technology, whether the wheel, a superconductor or an iPhone, is designed with intention, and often not with its abuses in mind. Paglen's work on machine vision, he says, "has to do with learning how to ask the right questions about the new relationships between images and power that we see developing throughout society."

Later this year, Paglen will use the same title, "Sight Machine," for a series of work he'll develop at the Cantor, immersing himself into the university's A.I.

and machine-learning labs to bolster his technical capabilities in understanding software architecture. "In the very near future, I guarantee that the pictures you post on social media will affect your credit rating, health and auto insurance policies, and much more. It will all happen automatically. In a very real way, our rights and freedoms will be modulated by our metadata signatures," he says. "What's at stake, obviously, is the future of the human race! I'm actually serious here."