

San Francisco magazine

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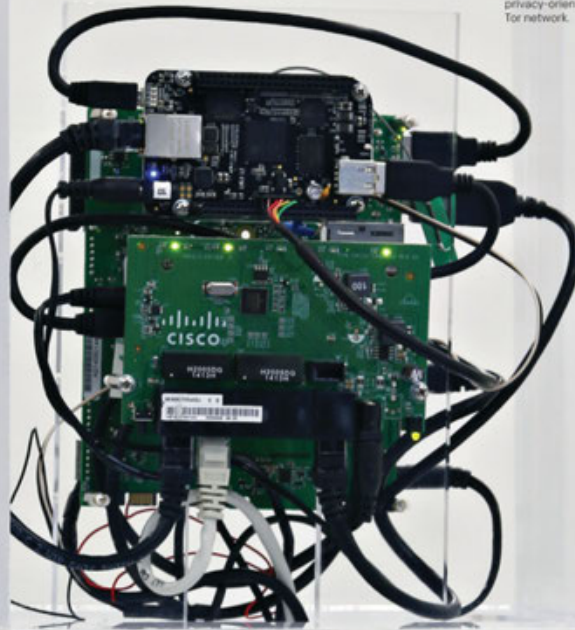
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THE LOOKER PROCESS



For Trevor Paglen's show, the boxes and debris at a former shipbuilding factory will be replaced by a projection-mapping display and a performance by the Kronos Quartet.

Within San Francisco's Historic Pier 70—just a few blocks from bustling Third Street, yet seemingly a world away—is the expansive industrial shell of a structure with a dirt floor, rusted-out metal supports, and the occasional graffiti-laden panel. It appears an odd venue for an event headlined by a famed artist and a string quartet. But later this month, the former shipbuilding factory will be briefly transformed into a multimedia performance space, hosting *Sight Machine*—an evening that brings together the artistic vision of Trevor Paglen and the sounds of the Kronos Quartet. Suddenly, the outside-the-box site makes a little more sense.

"This is a big one-off," says Alison Gass, associate director for collections, exhibitions, and curatorial affairs at Stanford's Cantor Arts Center. "I think of it as a one-night exhibition." (While admission will be free, tickets, obtained through Cantor, are required.) Gass played a major role in making the singular show happen, first inviting Paglen to be the inaugural Cantor artist in residence, a six-month appointment that kicked off in late December; then securing as its locale Historic Pier 70, which will eventually be the headquarters for the digital-arts studio *Obscura Digital*; and, finally, reaching out to her university contacts to land the Kronos Quartet. (It didn't take much convincing to get them on board.)

For Paglen, who has been working on artificial-intelligence-related projects in his Berlin studio for years, *Sight Machine* marks "the major introduction to that body of work for a lot of people," says the artist, who is particularly interested in machines' and humans' disparate views of the world. "I was looking at a lot of different human activities that when seen through machines really encapsulate that contradiction, and I found that music is one of the most compelling things. When you hear music, it goes



Where Art and Artificial Intelligence Converge

Artist Trevor Paglen's one-night exhibition provides a glimpse of the world, as seen by computers. By Anh-Minh Le

ALTMAN SIEGEL

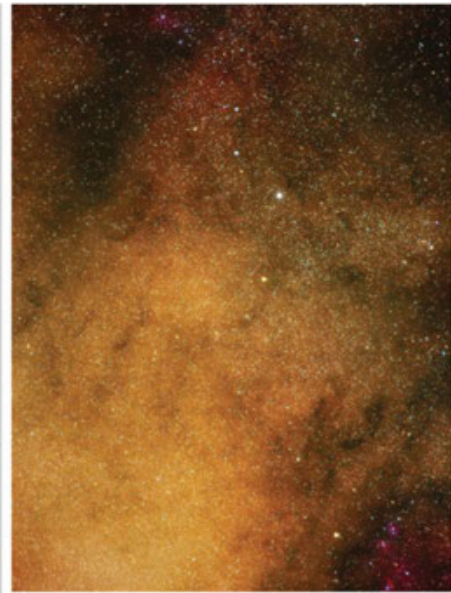
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Above: Working with aerospace engineers, Paglen created *Nonfunctional Satellites*, composed of Mylar spheres meant to appear as slow-moving, flickering stars.
Right: For NSA/GCHQ Surveillance Base, Paglen used telescopes to capture top-secret military sites that are unseeable to the rest of the world.



Above: Paglen tracked and photographed classified satellites for works such as *MILSTAR 3* in Sagittarius. **Left:** *Autonomy Cube* is Wi-Fi hotspot as high art. It allows anyone nearby to connect to the Tor network—a privacy-oriented, volunteer-run Internet infrastructure.



right to an emotional level. When a computer tries to interpret someone playing music, it doesn't get it."

Paglen devised a program that combines the human and machine experiences. The Kronos Quartet's 12-song set will be filmed in front of a live audience. "Those videos," he explains, "will be fed to a suite of computers that will analyze them in lots of different ways—facial recognition, edge detection, object detection—and you'll see that projected." Attendees will be able to watch and listen to the ensemble and simultaneously observe how various computer algorithms parse the performance.

As an artist in residence at Cantor, Paglen plans to continue focusing on machines—taking advantage of access to Stanford's computer science department, its artificial intelligence laboratory, and even the law school to explore technical and ethical issues. "I spend a lot of time trying to understand what the implications of technology are for human societ-

ies, politics, the surface of the earth, the environment," he says. His recent projects have shared a fascination with online privacy and government surveillance: He learned to scuba dive so he could photograph undersea Internet cables that may or may not have been tapped by the NSA. And *Autonomy Cube*—which he created with Jacob Appelbaum and exhibited at last year's Fog Design+Art fair—is an approximately one-foot acrylic block that contains a custom-fabricated Wi-Fi router. The sculpture acts as a Tor relay, which anonymizes any connected device.

"What I want out of art is things that help us to see the world that we live in," Paglen says. While it may seem like a simple enough task, modern-day advances can complicate matters. "The world is constantly changing, and often the ways in which the world is structured are not always immediately visible to us." ■

JAN. 14, 8 P.M., HISTORIC PIER 70 (NEAR 20TH ST.), MUSEUM.STANFORD.EDU