

**21st CENTURY
BLOG** ART IN THE
FIRST DECADE

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Trevor Paglen | *The Fence (Lake Kickapoo, Texas)* 2010 | Type C-print, 50 x 40 inches | Image courtesy: The artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco

THE FENCE by Tom Vanderbilt

In Lisbon, high on one of the city’s hills, towards the rear of the sprawling Miguel Bombarda Hospital complex, there exists a small museum, housed in the former *Pavilhão de Segurança* (Security Pavilion). What makes the obscure museum noteworthy is not only its objects — “art of the insane,” in the insensitive parlance of the time — but its form. The Pavilion is a rare example of an architectural “Panopticon,” that 18th century vision of Jeremy Bentham that promised a “new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind,” through a simple design: An observer would be able to watch subjects (typically prisoners) without himself being seen, thus gaining, as one architect has described it, “the sentiment of an invisible omniscience.”

It was not without a certain irony that I spent an afternoon, not long ago, gazing up the artworks now housed in the very cells where inmates had once dwelled, and painted, under the power of that unseeing eye. Who knows what the actual effect of that gaze was, and how it itself may have shaped, however imperceptibly, the art I was now seeing.

It’s a kind of dynamic that I find myself thinking about often these days: How does being under someone else’s gaze influence our behavior, and how does the act of producing an image shape our behavior? Consider tourist photography. Of the photographs themselves, we know, via several internet projects, that tourist photography is geographically distinct from photography by “locals”; and that hundreds of photographs of landmarks, collected on sites like Flickr, can be rendered in one ghostly mash-up with only minor variation in form. But what does tourist photography do to people? Sociologists like John Urry have identified the identity shaping, identity commodifying potential of the “tourist gaze”; yet, as Alex Gillespie has argued, there is potential for two-way interaction. “The photographee can gaze on the tourist photographer, and this ‘reverse gaze’ can play an important role in constituting the emerging self of the tourist photographer.”

And how does the equation change when one is being watched by a person they can see, versus by a security camera (which may still have a human viewer at the other end)? As the Canadian artist Robert Spence, who implanted in himself a prosthetic camera after losing an eye, remarked, “in Toronto there are 12,000 cameras. But the strange thing I discovered was that people don’t care about the surveillance cameras, they were more concerned about me and my secret camera eye because they feel that is a worse invasion of their privacy.” And even now, cameras in airports and casinos are equipped with algorithmic intelligence — “Non-Obvious Relationship Awareness” — to perform acts of surveillance without the need for human eyes.

Virtually from the invention of the camera, its potential for surveillance has been extolled and decried. As *The American Law Register* observed, in 1869 (in a quote used as wall text in the Tate Modern’s 2010 ‘Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance and the Camera’ exhibition): “When the art of photography is perfected, the streets and alleys of our great cities will be swept by photographic batteries, so located as to take, from many points of view at once, the likenesses of persons engaged in disturbing the peace.” But that view now seems constricted; the production of “likenesses” would come to shape life itself. As Christopher Lasch wrote, in *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1991), a tome written well before reality television or Facebook photo walls, “modern life is so thoroughly mediated by electronic images that we cannot help responding to others as if their actions — and our own — were being recorded and simultaneously transmitted to an unseen audience or stored up for close scrutiny at some later time.”

What can the artist see, and how does the artist’s act of seeing change what he is seeing (a Heisenberg Uncertainty Principal of aesthetics, in a sense)? The question has long troubled artists, particularly photographers. As Geoff Dyer notes in *The Ongoing Moment* (2005), Paul Strand famously favored blind subjects, who would not, the reasoning went, alter their behavior in the face of the lens. But what happens when we’re all blind? This is an interesting question for art in the twenty first century.

I am thinking here of a photograph I saw recently by the artist Trevor Paglen, whose career I have followed with interest. Paglen’s work, essentially, is about exploring the limits of the visible. His early work, for example, an inversion of Robert Capa’s dictum “if your pictures aren’t

good enough, you're not close enough," involved standing on distant ridges, and using long-range astronomy rigs, to take photographs of "black sites," like Area 51, that read as grainy abstractions, at the limit of visual comprehension. Where the photorealist work of Gerhard Richter plays with the fidelity of photography as a medium, Paglen's photographs, because they are pitched at the bounds of what's physically possible — and because so little is known about the subjects he is photographing — leave the viewer struggling to bring the images to the level of photography. In *The Other Night Sky* 2007 Paglen turned his cameras heavenward (assisted by "Keplerian codes" and modeling software) to track and photograph the otherwise invisible network of spy satellites orbiting the Earth. Again, these works troubled visual credulity. "The photo is a little white streak against the sky," Paglen told me. "It would have been much easier to scratch the film with a razor blade."

The image I saw recently, currently on view at Altman Siegel in San Francisco, is called *The Fence (Lake Kickapoo, Texas)* 2010. It resembles, at first glance, something like Mark Rothko's *White over Red* 1957, possessed with that same sense of "atmospheric pressure," as Elaine de Kooning described Rothko's work; or, to quote Rothko himself, an "unknown adventure in an unknown space," a journey into the aesthetic sublime — per Jean-François Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), "making an allusion to the unrepresentable by means of visible presentations." These descriptions are curiously appropriate for Paglen's image, its own form of "abstract sublime," depicting, it turns out, a massive, invisible radar "fence" met to track spacecraft overflying the US, as well as track incoming ballistic missiles. As Paglen described it to me, "because the Fence's microwave frequencies are invisible to human eyes — the Fence is made out of the same electromagnetic waves we call light, but is in frequencies lower than what our eyes can see — the 'light' from the Fence was shifted up into a visible spectrum."

It is an old truism that art helps us to look at things we might not see. There is also power in what's left out. "I really love what you can't see in a photograph," said Diane Arbus. But one of the thrilling and necessary roles for art in this century is in showing us what we *cannot* see, in reminding us that the act of watching, and being watched, is not always visible.

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