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Trevor Paglen's art includes secure Wi-Fi for viewers

By Kenneth Clark

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“Autonomy Cube” (2014), mixed media by Trevor Paglen and Jacob Appelbaum, creates a Wi-Fi hotspot to access Tor.

Trevor Paglen has just won the 2015 Award for Courage and Creativity in Art and Technology given by Eyebeam, a Brooklyn nonprofit dedicated to promoting artists' inventiveness in new media. (Paglen shares the award with Ayah Bdeir, founder of littleBits, maker of

components that enable non-geeks to participate in electronics innovation.)

Altman Siegel's show of recent work by Paglen allows gallery visitors not already familiar with his work to see why it frequently garners acclaim. Paglen's work fascinates because it sometimes strains credulity and partly because it challenges viewers' tolerance for the notion that sharpness in social or political critique can qualify otherwise unprepossessing stuff as “art.”

The most radical departure from what Paglen has shown here before — and the most confrontational — is “Autonomy Cube” (2014), a collaboration with Jacob Appelbaum. Inside a thick cube of clear acrylic, an ironic reference to minimal sculpture's boast of intellectual transparency, Paglen and Appelbaum have placed custom electronics that create a Wi-Fi hotspot through which gallery visitors can log on to the Tor network that encrypts Web searches and other communications.

This work takes Paglen's critical activism to a new level, enlisting visitors in intervening in the surveillance nexus that he deplors.

The title “Autonomy Cube” plays on the outmoded idea of the artwork as a special sort of thing disengaged from the hugger-mugger of material culture and society at large. The work raises the stakes of so-called participatory art. It asks, almost dares, willing gallery visitors to trust the security of a network they may never have used or heard of before. And it treats the vaunted idea of an artwork as a vehicle of communication more literally and demonstrably than anything else in the art realm that I can think of.

Other works in the show include the video “Code Names of the Surveillance State” (2014), which purports to present as a continuous vertical scroll a list in uniform white-on-black letters of the official slang of spycraft.

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“Code Names of the Surveillance State” (2014), video by Trevor Paglen, professes to list the official slang of spycraft.

Plausibility wanes as the terms pile up in their hundreds. Perhaps we can believe “Goldfinger” or “Mysterio,” but do people with high security clearances really refer to “Google Turds,” “Gourmet Trough,” “Mysterious Jerboa” and such with straight faces?

Suppose that only half, or merely a tenth, of the code names Paglen has compiled are genuine; that would still bespeak a labyrinthine apparatus of secrecy protecting — whom, from what? That we are not entitled to know is Paglen’s point, though he does leave us feeling entitled to think that it all may be about protecting power elites from *us*.

Another video, “Circles” (2015), this one projected, Paglen shot from a helicopter spiraling above Britain’s counterpart to the National Security Agency, GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters). The huge circular building and its surroundings, bearing an unnerving resemblance to British starchitect Norman Foster’s proposal for Apple’s new campus, imply a massive workforce engaged in, well, activities of which state security keeps almost everyone in ignorance, for reasons of — never mind.

Had Paglen shot the video, which now and then zooms in on people stationed or passing within or outside the building, without warning, his helicopter almost surely would have provoked an aerial escort to a secure landing area, or worse. But GCHQ apparently viewed Paglen’s project as vouching for its civic probity. A viewer, after some minutes of the soundtrack — a muffled, modified drone of the rotor blades — comes away with a different impression.

Several of Paglen’s other works here consist of photographs of innocent-looking shoreline spots that happen to be where undersea networks of fiber optic cables, connecting American and other national surveillance networks, make subterranean landfall. One such picture has a pendant work: a collage of images, maps and formerly top-secret technical details made public by Edward Snowden.

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<http://www.sfgate.com/art/article/Trevor-Paglen-s-art-includes-secure-Wi-Fi-for-6148016.php>