

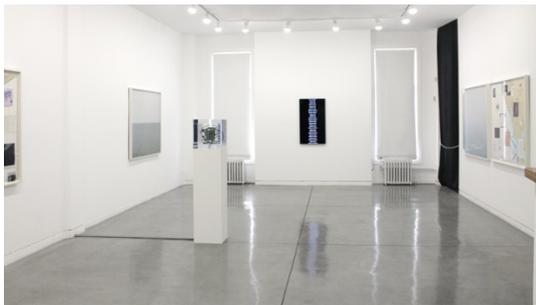
the guardian

Trevor Paglen review: turning the NSA's data combing into high-concept art

By Glen Helfand

March 13, 2015

The insidious enormity of the information age, our data-driven, privacy-compromised culture, is perhaps the most difficult of subjects for art. It requires an uncommon combination of tech-savviness, aesthetic sophistication and humanistic activism – attributes that, thankfully, exist in the work of the American artist Trevor Paglen. He combines a potent range of approaches – he's a conceptualist, a trained geographer and a photographer – and is aware that art's role is to make ideas, even dire, politically suspect ones, resonate poetically.



A view of the installation. Photograph: Altman Siegel gallery.

Paglen's work gives visual geography to hidden forces, in particular something he calls a landscape of mass surveillance. He is interested in the metaphors for telecommunications and the invisible ways in which they mark our lives. In past work, Paglen has created surprisingly beautiful images of surveillance satellites in the night sky, images that have a National Geographic nature-photo crispness and awe, while revealing the static evidence of ominous human intervention and the tools that alter geopolitical situations – is that a missile site? – as well as more benign uses, like tracking weather and traffic patterns.

His more recent work has a more ominous gravity, rooted on the ground, in a landscape made up of our own information. In a compact, potent show at San Francisco's Altman Siegel gallery, Paglen presents photograph, video and sculpture that give grounded image to flows of data, specifically the internet cables that deliver our messages to friends and family but also to the National Security Agency, which has set up data-

sifting facilities that exist in surprisingly bucolic locations, on bluffs overlooking where those suboceanic cables hit land.

In hauntingly beautiful colour prints, he reveals coastal landscapes, warm-hued beach scenes and rippling oceans that appear calm. Sunbathers rest on towels, blissfully unaware of the massive data traffic coursing just below them and the NSA staff busily working nearby. The visual tone of these photographs is warm, golden – and in the case of a night shot of the NSA/GCHQ surveillance base in Bude, UK, illuminated satellite dishes appear to be burning orbs. He contributed similar footage to Laura Poitras's Oscar-winning documentary *Citizenfour*, which follows Edward Snowden's whistleblowing evidence of NSA information tapping.



NSA-Tapped Fiber Optic Cable Landing Site, Mastic Beach, New York, United States, 2014.

It's difficult to see these appealingly calm landscapes as ominous, politically charged sites – like a James Bond villain's headquarters concealed in a seemingly peaceful island. In two cases, he pairs these photos (one of a site on Long Island, New York, another in northern California) with large research collages – maps of the locations, which he augments with NSA materials, historical depictions of the sites, legal documents and prosaic snapshots that might include signage that reveals the collusion of cellphone carriers. Each version presents a filter of seeing the same location: one suggests a romanticism, the other is a more informational representation.

All of which is to say, places are never exactly what appear to be – they are informed by use.

In a recent talk at the Battery, San Francisco's swanky tech clubhouse, Paglen described himself as an artist who creates things that help us see the historical moment. How do we give an image to the powerful movements of information, of the internet? In his presentation, he showed a wacky meme photo of a chubby kid and veils of ones and zeros, an illustration of "the cloud" as three-dimensional letters with

ALTMAN SIEGEL

49 GEARY ST, *ste.* 416 SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94108

tel: 415.576.9300 / *fax:* 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com

computers plugged into it – each of which were greeted with nervous laughter from a crowd composed of computer mavens, app developers, activists and artists.

They were similarly tickled by images from a video work titled *Code Names of the Surveillance State*, 2014, which resembles a teleprompter scrolling the curious, often whimsical government-given names of sources and sites of tapped information – Turkey Farm, Turtle Ale, Crimson Orb, Crispy Squid and Crunchy Frog, to name a few – that reveals the nerdy creative impulses of NSA officials.



Circles by Trevor Paglen, an aerial view of GCHQ in the UK.

The exhibition also features a haunting video work titled *Circles*, for which Paglen created aerial footage of GCHQ near Gloucester, revealing the circular compound that is the locus of information gathering in the UK. He shadows and zooms in on the surveillance center, a panopticon-like structure that also resembles the Apple headquarters under construction in Silicon Valley.

That sense of science-fiction sleekness is also echoed in the show's one work of sculpture. *Autonomy Cube*, made in collaboration with computer security researcher Jacob Appelbaum, is a thick, transparent Plexiglas casing for hardware that creates a Wi-Fi hotspot, albeit one in which data is refracted through networks and essentially encrypted. In a physical form that echoes minimalist art, Paglen offers a sense of refuge, turning the gallery into a functionally politicised space – and one that is strangely hopeful in its form of spatially elegant resistance.

As with much of his work, Paglen demonstrates that there is the capacity for beauty in a complex, contentious landscape.



Trevor Paglen and Jacob Appelbaum: *Autonomy Cube*, 2014.

Last accessed 3/27/15:

<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/mar/13/trevor-paglen-art-review-nsa-surveillance-systems>