# OCTOBER

In the last seven years, in a series of performances, publications, exhibitions, and installations, Trevor Paglen has explored the world of hidden military projects and infrastructure. One of his best-known series is Limit Telephotography, for which he trained lenses designed for astronomical photography on secret military bases in the U.S., using their very-long-range photographic capabilities to capture images that would otherwise be hidden to civilian eyes. These are the "limits" that lie at the heart of Paglen's project: the limits of democracy, secrecy, visibility, and the knowable. He is one of many artists who have evolved new and various ways of engaging with the military and the secret state in the years following the declaration of the "War on Terror." The work of these artists remains as apposite as ever, as the U.S. and its allies continue to bomb suspected enemies (and anyone else who gets "too close") and to run "black" sites and secret gulags in which people are held (and tortured) beyond the reach of the law. Paglen has made works that raise fundamental questions about what can be known and seen, while simultaneously writing investigative exposés of the shadow state. This interview explores some of the relations and tensions between the two practices.

**Julian Stallabrass:** Artists making photographs now have to send their work out into a world that is replete with networked cameras, in which publishing a picture online can be done with a few presses of a touchscreen. Tourists at any reasonably well-known spot can be sure that they will find dozens or hundreds of decent photographic records of the place online, so taking their own pictures has become a performative token act. How do artists working in the medium place themselves in and/or against this remarkable proliferation of public images?

**Trevor Paglen:** That is a great question, and it's something I spend a lot of time thinking about. There have been a number of discussions about the "future of photography" among fine-art people, and I think that conversation has to do with the question you're posing here. It seems to me that photography is at a bit of a crossroads. I believe there's still a place for fine-art/gallery work. When you make a nice print and put it on a wall, you're creating a space where people can devote a certain kind of attention to an image or idea. Viewing a photograph in an institution is a much slower process than looking at a Flickr page or a Facebook attachment. The space for paying slow attention is becoming more relevant and significant as our forms of everyday communicating, imaging, and viewing increasingly speed up. As a corollary to this, I've been thinking about photographic materials in a much more "sculptural" way—thinking about how imaging and printing processes can help form the critical "text" of a photo- graph. I've recently been taking materiality of photography much more seri-ously, thinking about different processes, the lifetimes of various media, and different printing processes as they relate to socio-historical processes. I've been working with everything from albumen prints to the satellite feeds of Predator drones. The point, for me, is to propose and develop forms of post- representationalist photography and imaging wherein both the materiality of a work and its "relations of photography" are intrinsic to what that work is. In other words, I want photography that doesn't just point to something; it actually is that something.

The other part of my answer has everything to do with what you called the "performative" act of photography. I'm sure we both agree that the twenty-first century has been characterized by the huge expansion of photographic machines, imaging systems, and the means of networking them. Here I mean things like digital point-and-shoot cameras and Flickr accounts; local police vehicles outfitted with cameras designed to take a picture of every single license plate that passes by and then to "run" the plates in a police database; Predator drones over Pakistan flown via video by pilots in Nevada, with intelligence analysts in Virginia and commanders in Florida, all part of the same real-time "network." There are an incredible number of examples. These new "geographies" of seeing-machines haven't been dealt with that much by photographers yet, but there's a lot to engage with critically. Of course, what it means to "do" photography in relation to this larger geography of machine- seeing might not look like sheet film shot with a view camera. So I think there are a lot of opportunities for photographers to take the "relational" aspects of what they do far more seriously. This is what I was alluding to earlier when I mentioned this idea of "sculptural" or "relational" photography.

**Stallabrass:** There's a self-conscious tension in your answer between valuing the slowness that comes with the display of the fine-art print in the gallery and practices that embrace the flow of imagery through networked imaging systems. The latter reminds me of the controversy surrounding an Honourable Mention given to Michael Wolff in this year's World Photo Press awards for re-photographing what he called "unfortunate events"—accidents, people collapsing, fires—that happened to be caught on Google Street View cameras. I think the controversy was generated because such acts of appropriation have far less of a history in photojournalism than they do in fine art.
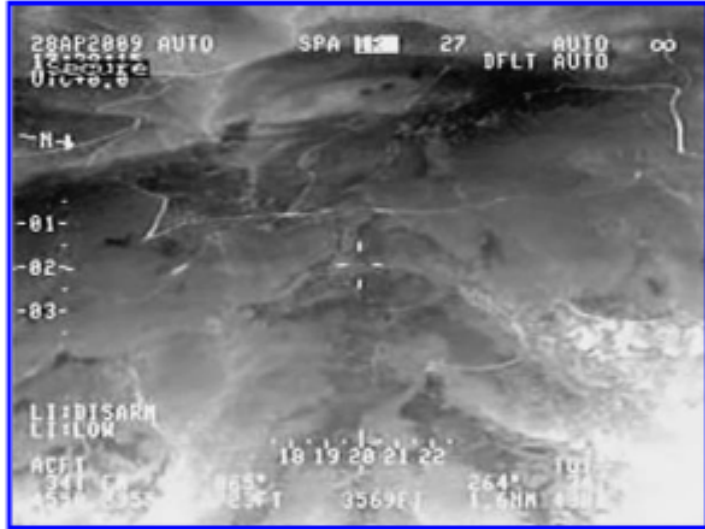


*Trevor Paglen.* Drone Vision. *2010.*

But I wonder about the basic contention that digital images are necessarily consumed rapidly, especially since at galleries now you sometimes see HD- screen displays of photographs. Given the screen technology and the resolution with which digital images are now displayed, there seems no reason why they should not be the subject of sustained attention (and do we know for certain that they are not?). It is true that Facebook (and perhaps Flickr) encourages shorter attention spans, as do all social-media sites that are focused on the flow of images and events. Do we need the physical photographic print and gallery space to slow viewers down? And if so, why does that work?

This is related to an interesting discussion at a recent conference on conflict and photography at University College Dublin at which David Campbell asked why there had been so few deep, textured, complex online works tying together words and images in sophisticated data structures of the type that had been held out as models in the age of hypertext (1).  One answer, it seems to me, is that engagement with digital and social media concerns the capturing of both attention and an ongoing current of material (Twitter is the obvious example of this). Such a process does not seem compatible with the very laborious construction of multiple branching data structures that the hyper- text model once promised. So my question is: can you square that circle?

**Paglen:** Well, to be honest, I haven't thought about the question of viewing as much as you have. It definitely seems to me that the "space" of the museum or gallery or what-have-you has more to do with the kind of attention we pay to artworks than the medium itself. We don't necessarily need the "print" if we want to ask people to slow down, but we do need some sort of space (gallery, museum, etc.) that asks us to pay closer attention to what we're looking at than we might otherwise do (online, for example).

But the overall question of the cultural politics of "viewing" art is some- thing I just haven't spent that much time working out. I have a sense of what works for my own art, but don't really have a meta-theory of it. I'm much more interested in the cultural politics of producing art than the conditions of "consuming" it. I have long understood artworks as congealed social, political, and cultural relations, and that is what I'm interested in exploring. If I have anything to contribute to how we understand cultural production, it probably comes more from a "geographic" perspective than a traditional cultural-studies perspective. In a lot of my works, I try to set up various relations of seeing from which the artwork emerges. If I go out in the desert and spend a week photographing covert military operations, for example, it's quite likely that I'll ultimately end up with something quite formal or abstract looking. But the means by which I got to that particular abstraction are crucial to the work. They imply a politics of seeing and of relations of seeing and so forth. I think that there are tremendous and largely unexplored critical possibilities in this approach.  There was something radical and profound—at those historical moments— in the kinds of abstractions some of those artists came up with. We've moved way beyond that, however. Some contemporary artists have retreated into a sort of pseudo-Greenbergian abstraction, and I find that really disingenuous.

*Paglen.* Black Site: Kabul, Afghanistan. 2006.

**Stallabrass:** That's something that intrigues me about your work, the apparent disjunction between process and visual result. When you photograph secret military installations or black sites from very long distances, using extreme telephoto lenses, in one sense you seem to be spying for citizens against unaccountable power; yet, softened and distorted by heat haze, the results evoke painting or pictorialist art photography in a range of "styles," from Edward Hopper to color-field painting. How do the apparent arthistorical references and the process of producing the work come together, and do such art-historical references work towards bringing out the politics and relations of seeing that you talk about?

**Paglen:** You're bringing up two really important aspects of my work. On the one hand, we have what we might call the politics of production. By this I mean the kinds of relational practices that are behind the work and go into its making. On the other hand, we have things like the visual rhetoric and aesthetics of an image: here we find more of the questions about spectatorship, art history, and so forth. Taking both sides of this seriously is fundamental to what I do. If we're talking about the politics of production, there are a lot of things going on. On the one hand, I might be camping out on a mountain-top taking photos of a secret military base, determining the location of CIA "black sites" so I can go photograph them, researching front companies used in covert operations, or working with amateur astronomers to track classified spacecraft in Earth orbit.  These are all relational practices and they all have various sorts of politics to them. Photographing a secret military base means insisting on the right to do it, and enacting that right. Thus, we have a sort of political performance. Finding CIA black sites means, well, finding secret black sites. Working with amateur astronomers has a politics of collaboration to it, as well as something I think of as "minoritarian empiricism," which has to do with experimenting with radical possibilities of classical empiricism. All this happens long before I even think about making a piece of "art" and putting it in front of other people to see.
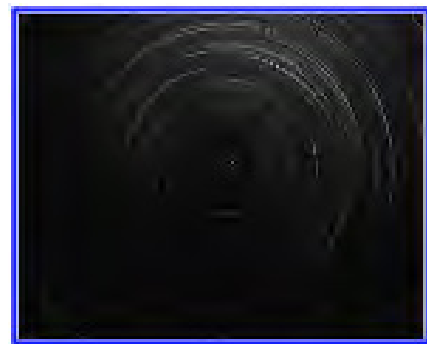When we get into the question of what the image actually looks like, I use a lot of art-historical references as a way to suggest how contemporary forms of seeing (and not seeing) rhyme with other historical circumstances that artists have responded to. I look at a lot of abstract painting as a response to its historical moment. In someone like Turner, we find a vision of what the nineteenth century's "annihilation of space with time" looked like; in Dada or in some of the smarter Abstract Expressionists, we can find responses to some of the twentieth century's greatest horrors suggesting the utter failure of representation in relation to the bomb or the Holocaust, for example.

All in all, I think we're right to be suspicious of representation right now. The days of believing that there's something out there in the word that can be transparently represented by a photograph or image are over. Certainly that notion has been over in philosophy pretty much from the start, but it has taken popular culture and vernacular forms of seeing a long time to catch up. Artists and photographers have always "manipulated" images—there's no way to make a photograph or image without manipulating it, partly because there's no "it" prior to the image. This poses a useful challenge to cultural producers: how to work with images or visual material in a critical way, given a lack of faith in representation. Some folks are talking about affect and nonrepresentational theory (Nigel Thrift, for example, in human geography) as one way of moving beyond representation, and others are taking up different flavors of "speculative realism" and ontology. I've certainly learned a lot from these thinkers, but I often find my thought drifting towards contemporary variations on old-fashioned Frankfurt School critical theory.

I'm obviously interested in, and simultaneously very suspicious of, abstraction. On one hand, I do see the value of abstraction as a critical refusal to speak sensibly. This refusal can be a radical gesture, but it's far more common to encounter abstraction-for-its-own-sake, which is usually a kind of reactionary fetishism or decoration. For me, the difference between the two has something to do with the politics of production I mentioned earlier, namely the means through which a particular abstraction is produced.
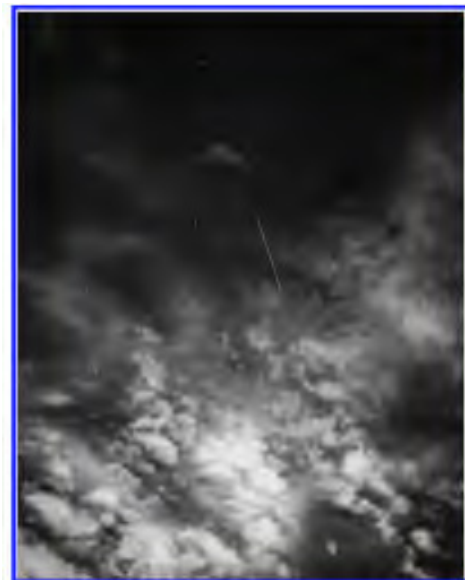


*Paglen.* Large Hangars and Fuel Storage; Tonopah Test Range, NV Distance ~ 18 miles, 10:44 a.m. *2005.*



*Paglen.* Nine Reconnaissance Satellites over the Sonora Pass. *2008.*



*Paglen.* Keyhole 12-3/Improved Crystal Optical Reconnaissance Satellite Near Scorpio (USA-129). *2007.*

**Stallabrass:** So it seems that the radical aspect of your work lies in the disjunction between the gallery print (say, of a spy- satellite trail in a starry night sky, which yields information only to the small minority of people with specialist knowledge) and the social and technical process that goes into making it. I find it interesting that the models you mention for the way the work looks, and for getting at a critique or a refusal of representation, are avant gardist. Each also deals with waves of technological change and the profound consequences they've had for the experience of the everyday— whether it be steam power, mechanized warfare and its transformation of commercial road and air travel, or technologically advanced genocide and the bomb. It could be argued that all established a relation to the technological sublime—an awe in the face of vastly complex systems and their uncontrollable consequences (though in Dada, this was taken parodically). Obviously, the postmodern period often thought of itself as a time of exhaustion and perhaps decadence in which the passive consumption of reproductive technologies (above all, television) appeared to dominate over the romance and fears

attached to innovative productive ones. So this is my first question: is your reference back to these older forms a way of saying that we no longer live in such times?

I have a second question. Conventionally, critics have looked at documentary photography and film and bemoaned their inadequacy as means of describing their subjects. But one consequence of the ubiquity of photo and video recording would seem to be that sometimes we get documents that are as adequate as one could reasonably want: the WikiLeaks video of the Apache helicopter murdering Iraqi civilians is a case in point. The document gives context, dialogue, and direct evidence of the slaughter, all of which allow the viewer to see not just the fact of the killings but the operation of the military mechanism that brought them about and the enjoyment of the crew in the exercise of their deadly power (2). What relation does your suspicion of representation have to that kind of "documentary" image?

**Paglen:** The short answer to your first question is "yes." I think most people agree that any sort of classic avant-gardism is over, but I think there's an underlying impulse in the avant-garde that I find especially relevant today. What I'm interested in isn't really even the critical impulse so much as the productive impulse animating much avant-gardist practice. But again, I want to look at that paradigm of cultural production from a contemporary, post- post-modern perspective.

Throughout my life, I've found much of canonical postmodern art to be very cynical, an artistic echo of Thatcher's "there is no alternative." On the other hand, I'm profoundly influenced by artists such as Gregg Bordowitz, Gran Fury, Group Material, Paper Tiger, and other "postmodern" cultural producers whose work didn't abandon itself to a complacent version of unlimited semiosis, but sought instead to develop forms of radical humanism from postmodernism's critical insights. All in all, I'm not interested in a return to modernism, but I find some of modernism's underlying impulses to be particularly relevant today, which is a historical moment where it's hard to imagine, let alone find, examples of how society might be different. In terms of art making, I sympathize with a revised form of negative dialectics as a response to an imagesaturated society.

On your second question, I definitely agree with you that the WikiLeaks gunship footage is as good as we could reason- ably want. But if there were a wrongful-death lawsuit with that video as a primary piece of evidence, I wonder whether it would hold up in a courtroom. I'm thinking here of the Rodney King footage—when you repeatedly scrutinize any kind of documentarian media, you can capitalize on the fact that representations don't transparently represent reality-as-it-is. We've seen something broadly similar to the Rodney King footage in the Abu Ghraib photos.

Those photos undeniably showed horrible abuse, but the logic of photography is such that the photos couldn't show systemic torture and abuse as political policy. Thus, Donald Rumsfeld could plausibly dismiss what was in the photos as the work of a "few bad apples." We all know this. And yet some forms of documentary constitute, as you say, the best kind of images we could ask for, but the best we can ask for has clear limits to what it can show. Nonetheless, "documentary" images can still become social facts regardless of their ability or inability to reproduce reality. I take all of this as a starting point. In terms of my own aesthetic vocabulary, I tend towards images that manifest this dialectic. Images that 1) make a truth claim ("here's X secret satellite moving through X constellation," for example); 2) immediately and obviously contradict that truth claim ("your believing that this white streak against a starry backdrop is actually a secret satellite instead of a scratch on the film negative is a matter of belief"); 3) suggest a



Paglen. Workers Gold Coast Terminal Las Vegas, NV Distance – 1 mile. 2007.

form of practice that could give rise to such an image ("if it's true that this is a secret satellite, then there's a whole lot more going on behind this image"); 4) suggest all of the above as an allegory for something about twenty-first-century images, knowledge, practice, aesthetics, and politics. Not all of the work I produce fits all of this—it's just a loose way I use to think about what it is I'm doing.

*Paglen. Code Names. c. 2001–.*

**Stallabrass:**  That's a fascinating answer, and picks up on many of the issues that came to mind as I look at your work. I notice that you write in your Aperture monograph of a dialectical opposition between an image's claim to represent and the undermining of that claim. It's good you specify that further here (3).  It's easy to see that Adorno's concentration on the specificity of the object, and the instrumental and contradictory social forces that bring about its misdescription, has an affinity with your work. Beyond that, I wonder: is there something about the military (and the most secretive aspects of the military) that has a further affinity with negative dialectics? Is this part of the point of your listing of hundreds of code names of secret projects? To make a point that may be less in the spirit of Adorno—for whom immersion in the specificity of an object through immanent critique engages the dialectic—these days artistic focus on the full detail of the object often leads in the direction of the sublime. We see this in a lot of large-scale museum photographs, in which the viewer is overwhelmed by a mass of data that they lack the conceptual tools to make sense of: the "data sublime," we might call it. Your work plays with this feeling brought to another level, because of course much of the point is that we are denied the information to make sense of it. You evoke both the mathematical and the dynamic sublime in your satellite imagery, particularly in images of the night sky and of trails over pristine landscapes that evoke nineteenth-century landscape photographs of the American West. The sublime is often used for conservative purposes: to frame or manage a common social fear (of the masses, quite often, but also more recently of data itself) and offer it up for consumption. How do the sublime and negative

dialectics come together in your work?

In another register, your work has a definite performative and subversive side: the reproduction of secret code names is presumably illegal; your Limit Telephotography series offers not just evocative images of the operations of secret bases but data—for example, the tail numbers on aircraft. The same could be said of the remarkable mission patches and challenge coins, refer- ring to secret units and operations, that you have collected and photographed. Rebecca Solnit points out that invisibility is a type of shield, while democracy is founded upon visibility (4)—and your work does something to peer under the rock. Surely there are conservatives in the U.S. who would accuse you of treason. Do the sublime and negative dialectics protect you from arrest? How do you decide how much information to offer the viewer, and how much to hold them in awed suspense before the spectacle of the military apparatus?

Lastly, Adorno held out a faint hope that negative dialectics contained a transformative and utopian vision of society no longer divided by conflict and domination. Is there an element of your work that contains such a seed?

**Paglen:** I think there are definite ways that negative dialectics resonates with military and intelligence activities. I've looked at a lot of things that are secret but that have profound effects on culture and politics. Most of the time, I don't exactly know what I'm looking at, photographing, or researching. So I quickly end up in situations where the question is, How do I point to, engage with, and represent something that I don't quite understand? The answer often has to do with trying to represent that epistemological-political gap or inbetween space, or that moment of incomprehension. The Code Names piece (a list of classified military operations and organizations) is an example of that. Incidentally, this isn't just particular to the military. Some projects I'm working on now have very little to do with the military, but are still centrally concerned with this question. The epistemological-political "gap" I'm talking about here relates to Jean-Luc Nancy's definition of the sublime as the "sensibility of the fading of the sensible."

As for how the sublime and negative dialectics come together, well, I'm sorry but I have to say I'm not quite sure. I'm not sure I'm the person who can really theorize this—I'm extremely influenced by both concepts, but at the risk of sounding like a stereotypical artist, it's really something I "feel" more than something I can articulate in a cogent philosophical manner. Do the sublime and negative dialectics shield me from arrest!? Ha-ha . . . not at all! I'm quite careful about how I go about my work. When dealing with authority, I'm polite but firm. But I've gotten plenty of death threats along with angry military and intelligence officers. That's just the nature of the work, I suppose. In terms of deciding how much to offer the viewer, it's a strange thing. I really think that the materials I research and explore actually tell me how they want to be represented. I know that's an odd thing to say, but it's really been my experience. When I was doing my Ph.D. in geography, I went into the office of my adviser, a really wonderful and incredibly smart man named Allan Pred, who really liked that I was also an artist. I was complaining that I hadn't taken any classes on methodology and didn't have a clue as to what I was doing in that regard. He told me that cookie-cutter methodologies were nonsense and that I should just keep doing my research until my materials told me how to study them. At the time, I probably thought he was a crazy old man, but I think he was absolutely right. Having said that, I've written a couple of books about some of the same things that my artwork is about, and they're pretty standard nonfiction in terms of style and argumentation (5). Art can show the world in a particular way—that's what's powerful about it—and the same is true for prose. But they're incommensurate. With my visual work, I try to focus on what visuality does well.

The utopian aspect is the not-so-secret secret of negative dialectics, as I understand it. I think it points in the direction of unfulfilled forms of freedom and justice, but only indirectly and obscurely. This is related to what we were talking about when the subject of avant-gardism came up in our conversation. I really do want to believe in a more just world. I often think of Fanon, who insist- ed on a "new humanism" without ever really articulating what that might look like. I'm not sure even what it might mean to articulate that as a meta-theory. Perhaps that's the whole point of it—which leaves us again in the space of negative dialectics, no? For me, this is what art can do—orient our seeing and suggest practices in ways that suggest (even negatively) liberatory forms of being— but it's really hard to say what those forms might be.