

METRO PICTURES

Sohn, Tim. "Trevor Paglen Plumbs the Internet," *NewYorker.com* (September 22, 2015).

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The late senator Ted Stevens, of Alaska, took flak for calling the Internet “a series of tubes,” but his phrase, however analog, hits on a truth that we frequently forget: there is a physical infrastructure undergirding our seemingly ethereal global network. The most important component of this plumbing is a cat’s cradle of undersea cables. In the decades since the first transatlantic fibre-optic telephone line was laid, in 1988, such cables have multiplied and spread as bandwidth demands have grown. There are currently three hundred and forty-three of them already active or under construction, and they run more than half a million miles, traversing every ocean and connecting every continent except Antarctica, running up and down the coasts of Africa, through the Hawaiian Islands, and up into Alaska and Greenland. It can be hard to imagine—the Internet itself passing just below the waves of that surf break in California, through the rocks of a craggy coastline in England, over the aquamarine-tinged reefs of southern Florida, under your towel at a beach on Long Island. What is even harder to reckon with is the fact that this growing and critical network, as Edward Snowden proved, is perhaps the most powerful surveillance tool in the world.

The artist Trevor Paglen’s latest exhibition, which opened recently at Metro Pictures Gallery, in Chelsea, is designed to help you in the reckoning. Paglen has long focussed on what the show’s description calls “the geography and aesthetics” of the American surveillance state. His book “Blank Spots on the Map,” from 2009, catalogues crucial sites in the country’s global spying network, and his video footage of some of them was included in “Citizenfour,” the Oscar-winning documentary on Snowden. When Paglen turned his attention to the undersea-cable system, he was surprised by its simplicity. “The cables come ashore on the east coast of the U.S. in just a few main places—around New York, on Long Island and in New Jersey, and in Florida, around Miami,” he explained when we first spoke, via Skype. (Paglen was in Berlin and I was in New York; the irony of our cable dependency was not lost on either of us.) This structure has historical underpinnings. Many of the new cables follow similar paths to the old telegraph and telephone lines, and many of the landing sites and switching stations are holdovers, too. This creates choke points in the system, with many strands meeting in one place—easier for the companies that operate the cables to monitor, and easier for the N.S.A. to tap.

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The Metro Pictures show, which spans three rooms in the gallery's garagelike space, begins with a nod to this history: included in one of Paglen's collages is a cartoon called "The Laying of the Cable," which commemorates the completion of the first transatlantic telegraph line, in 1858. The exhibition proceeds from there, each image or object imbued with some suggestion of the breadth of surveillance. There is a leaked N.S.A. document that has been redacted to the point of being two large black rectangles; a two-foot-long model of the U.S.S. Jimmy Carter, a nuclear submarine that is reputed to have the ability to tap cables sitting on the ocean floor; a photo of the starry night sky with a spy satellite's light trail barely visible at its center; and an endlessly scrolling list of hundreds of top-secret code names for N.S.A. operations (Electron Sword, Quantum Mush, Elegant Chaos, Ferret Cannon, Tiger Donut, Koala Punch).

The cables themselves are on view in a series of four photos taken underwater, offshore from landing sites near Miami. "The diving project came out of looking at these choke points, looking at the images, the charts, the maps, and saying, 'Well, can you just go in there and find them?'" Paglen said. He did not know how to scuba dive, so he learned. Although the locations of cables near shore can be roughly guessed at using nautical charts and G.P.S., their exact location is something of a mystery; Paglen and his team had to mark out a search grid to find and photograph them. The resulting images are beautiful, suffused with a sinister deep-blue inkiness, each with an unnaturally straight black line running over the sand and detritus on the seafloor—the cable itself, just sitting there.

The centerpiece of the show, in the final room, is a remarkable two-channel video installation made up of cast-off shots from the ninety hours of footage that Paglen shot for "Citizenfour." Each of the wide-screen landscape panoramas is in some way intruded on by the apparatus of the surveillance state. In one early shot, in Cornwall, England, a pastoral scene of green hills and hay bales is broken up by a dystopian array of white radomes. Another shot of the same site—known as Bude by the U.K.'s Government Communications Headquarters, and alleged to house one of the largest N.S.A. facilities outside the United States—features grazing sheep, a farmer on a tractor in the background, and seagulls flying and squawking in the foreground. "It's this rural, idyllic scene with these giant, like, alien balls that have dropped from space and landed there," Paglen told me. "And they are actually talking to space—communicating with satellites—so it's kind of appropriate." Often shot from a great distance, the images in the video installation pulse and shimmer with heat distortions, the surreality heightened by Frank Kruse's sound design. Paglen is spying on the spies, and you are spying with him.

A similar cultivation of complicity is at play elsewhere in the show, with Paglen's sculpture "Autonomy Cube," a collaboration with the digital-rights activist Jacob Appelbaum. Atop a pedestal sits an imposingly futuristic cube made of inch-thick Lucite, enclosing several computer circuit boards. It is designed to latch onto the gallery's Internet connection and create a secure Wi-Fi hot spot, anonymizing all traffic over the Tor Network while simultaneously turning the gallery itself into a Tor relay point, to aid others across the globe in anonymizing their connections. Even if your involvement is as low-impact as selecting the "Autonomy Cube" network when it comes up on your smartphone, you become a small part of the fight for Internet privacy.

At the show's opening reception, on a steamy and drizzly Manhattan evening that coincided with the first night of New York Fashion Week, it was clear that the glamorous art-seeking class had returned from their summer peregrinations and were bouncing from gallery to gallery through the West Twenties. The crowd at Metro Pictures skewed nerdy but drew in plenty of these wanderers. Those who lingered were drawn to the video installation's lush images and pulsing soundscape, although many glanced away periodically at their phones, texting and e-mailing and posting photos, as though they hadn't quite got the message.