METRO PICTURES

KALEIDOSCOPE

Focusing on art's imaginative qualities, social impact and active relationship to the future, the Center Stage series directs our attention to the question: What does art do? For this issue, Maria Lind speaks with artist Trevor Paglen.

An overarching question for the upcoming Gwangju Biennial, which I'm curating and you're invited to participate in, is, "What does art do?" This is a notoriously difficult question, but one which nevertheless needs to be asked, particularly in times when infrastructural concerns tend to dominate any discussion involving art. I am thinking about the current (understandable) preoccupation with the effects of the commercial art market and populist pro-gramming in mainstream art institutions, as well as the worries among small- and medium-size agents regarding mere institutional survival. Somewhere along the way, art itself seems to have been forgotten. Thinking about your recent exhibition at Metro Pictures in NYC, and particularly your underwater photographs of cables that enable all kinds of communication, including surveillance, I wonder: what would you say these photographs do?

I'm going to push back against the idea of art having to "do" anything at all. If there's any way that art can point towards freedom, it's through the fact that it doesn't have to participate in an economy of use. Having said that, I'm not so naive as to think this is actually possible in any truly radical way, because artworks can only function in particular economies, whether it's an economy of luxury goods, of biennials and urban development or of academia, state-sponsored "community building" and social work.

So with that disclaimer, what I want out of art is very modest. I want things that help us see the historical moment we're living in, and I want things that give us a glimpse into how that historical moment might be different. I think that artworks can serve important functions in a society: they can give people permission to look at something or think about something in new ways.

Point taken, although my interests lay less in a utilitarian understanding of art than in the fact that art "does" something, regardless: even not "doing anything," being seemingly "useless," is a sort of function, one that can be extremely important in times of imposed efficiency. Furthermore, it's often more interesting to look at concrete cases of what art works do—for example, how your aforementioned series of photographs grant a "permission" to look at something particular, parts of the palpably physical infrastructure of the globalizing control systems, in unfamiliar ways. That being said, you have combined some these photographs with a new series of collages based on nautical maps. Here the activity of mapping comes to the fore, materially speaking. Can you talk a bit about your method of mapping and your relationship to cultural geography?

I have a long history with human geography, having earned a PhD in it from UC Berkeley, but these newer "NSA-tapped landing station" works are some of the only pieces I've ever made that reference cartography at all. In fact, for a long time, I've been a big critic of cartography and "mapping" projects, so it feels pretty awkward to be using a cartographic vocabulary in some of these works. These pieces are looking at the relationship between the "dematerialized" metaphors we use to describe the Internet and its corollary, which is mass surveillance. We use words and metaphors like "the cloud" and "cyberspace" that are literally mystifying metaphors.

Each work in the project you're referring to is a diptych in which a photograph is coupled with a collage of found materials on top of a nautical chart. In the photograph, we see a beach or a shoreline where multiple underwater fiber-optic cables come together in what the NSA calls a "choke point." The rules of the photographs are that those cables have to be in the frame, even though they're invisible (because they're underwater or underground in the landscape). Those photographs, which don't provide any visual evidence of the "content" of the photograph (NSA mass surveillance) are paired with collages made from nautical charts, documents from the Snowden archive and many other sources, all of which speak to the activities and infrastructures that are invisibly present in the photograph. In those diptychs, I'm trying to develop highly specific "re-materialized" views of global telecommunications and mass surveillance, while at the same time showing how they're not easily visible in the landscapes around us. They're not meant to be explanatory or didactic at all; you could look at them all day and wouldn't really be able to make sense of them. But I'm not trying to be obfuscating, either. I'm trying to develop a series of metaphors, a vocabulary of mass surveillance based in materiality, as a counterpoint to metaphors like "the cloud." As far as human geography goes, they're not an exercise in human geography, and really don't have much to do with it. They're much more relevant to the landscape tradition.

Indeed, a lot of your work can be described as landscapes. How do you think about this aspect of the work?

I definitely think a lot of my work is in the landscape tradition. I think that whenever we're making art or curating or working with art, we're in a dialogue on multiple axes. On a kind of horizontal axis, we're engaging with the world around us and (hopefully) communicating with our contemporaries. On a vertical axis, we're also communicating with our ancestors and descendants, taking part in a conversation that's been happening for millennia. In the landscape tradition, there's literally nothing you can look at in the world today that other artists haven't been looking at for hundreds or thousands of years. If I'm looking at the night sky and tracking spy satellites in it, I'm participating in a conversation about the night sky that's been going on for most of human history. Seascapes have their own histories, as do clouds and skyscapes. For me, the task is to learn how to see in those landscapes the specificities of the historical moment we find ourselves in.

Autonomy Cube (2014) is an intriguing Minimalist-looking sculpture with a clear use value beyond its sculptural and art historical qualities. I am interested in your understanding of "autonomy" in today's culture and society. Can you speak to that?

Autonomy Cube is a collaboration between myself and digital civil liberties activist and computer security researcher Jacob Appelbaum. It's a post-Minimalist sculpture that pretty obviously references Haacks's _Condensation Cube_. The sculpture attaches to the host institutions' Internet infrastructure, and does a few things. First, it creates an open wi-fi network called "Autonomy Cube," which allows anyone to connect but routes all the traffic via the data-anonymizing Tor network. What's more, the sculpture becomes a Tor-relay, which allows people all over the world to use the host institutions' Internet connection to anonymize their own traffic. For example, a user in Saudia Arabia could connect to the network in London to mask their location and data from their local ISP and government.

We very much think of the piece as being in the tradition of post-Minimalist art and institutional critique, but it's not really a critical piece so much as a work of "institutional enhancement." We're trying to point out that there are political and ethical relationships embedded within the communications hardware and protocols that institutions use, and we're trying to replace the default ones with different hardware and protocols that we believe are more progressive. Using the word "autonomy" in the title of the work was deliberately meant to poke at art theory a bit. We figured it was obvious that because the piece can only function by being part of a larger volunteer network of Tor relays (of which "Autonomy Cube" is one), we were suggesting a very different notion of autonomy than the classical modernist formulation. There's nothing autonomous at all about the piece—it's utterly dependent on being part of a larger array of people and institutions working together to create volunteer-run, open-source and secure networking protocols and infrastructures. So in that sense, whatever "autonomy" can be conferred on a user by providing them with privacy-enhancing tools and infrastructures is only possible through collective effort. We thought it was obvious that in this case, we were proposing something closer to an anarchist notion of autonomy. All of this is what's happening at the network level in the artwork.
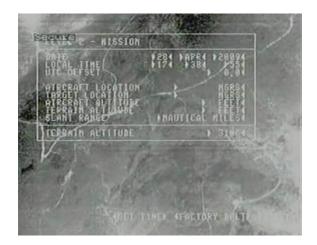
At the same time, we're still playing around with the older notion of autonomy in relation to art, but in the following way: as I write, we're seeing more and more museums installing visitor-tracking and data-collection technologies to develop visitor profiles, to pay attention to what people look at and so forth. This is being done without any real discussion of its implications, because they've become so normalized (in department stores, "smart" cities, law enforcement, etc.) that they're not even controversial. With _Autonomy Cube_, we're proposing that museums should be different; that their communications and information infrastructures should be the opposite of what consumer and law-enforcement institutions want to do. As civic institutions, they should be little islands that are largely free from surveillance and data-collection. Museums should be places, like libraries, whose core missions should involve providing access to ideas that one might not otherwise encounter in everyday life, and doing so in an anonymous way. Libraries aren't just important institutions to democracies because they provide information. Equally important is that fact that the police and/or corporations don't get a record of all the books you've checked out. We think museums should think of themselves in a similar way, and recognize that their civic mission extends to the kinds of communications and data-collection infrastructures they utilize.

One of your latest bodies of work deals with contemporary production and the reception of images. It involves algorithmically produced images, many of which will never be viewed by humans, only by machines. How do you enter this terrain, and what are you expecting in terms of results?

For a number of years now, I've been thinking about the fact that visuality is increasingly becoming post-human. What I mean is that sitting here in 2016, most of the images in the world are made by machines for other machines, with humans rarely in the loop. I'm talking about everything from algorithmic object recognition and facial recognition as conducted by things like Facebook's "Deep Face" software, to more simplistic systems like Vigilant Solutions' mobile license plate reading project. We're seeing human vision and visual culture quickly becoming an anomaly within a much larger landscape of machine vision and machine learning. What's more, the traditional theoretical frameworks we've developed to think about visuality (semiotics, etc.) really are of almost no help in understanding the post-human visual landscape. Finally, much of this post-human visual landscape is invisible to humans—as a matter of efficiency, machine-readable images don't have to translate color, value or edges into human-readable images.

As someone who's concerned about visuality, I'm obviously interested in this. I've been doing some writing about it, and have been trying to work on this visually for a number of years, but it's really hard because it's highly technical and largely invisible to human eyes, so you actually have to build tools that translate machine visuality into forms of seeing that are accessible to the human eye. Some of the fruits of this work are just starting to come out, and I'm happy to be able to start sharing some of it soon.

There is typically a lot of preparation that goes into your work, not only to produce it but also to make the research itself. I think of it as "deep research," as opposed to more random approaches. How do you go about making research?

When I was a young artist, there was a lot of this "artist-as-anthropologist" or "artist-as-economist" or whatever going on, where the idea was that artists would do sort of amateurish takes on social studies and science. I was really attracted to doing work that had a deep engagement with the world (as opposed to an intuitive approach), but I wanted the research I did for my artwork to be at the highest possible level—research that a scholar in any given field would recognize as an actual contribution. So that was one of the things that really motivated me to do a PhD in social studies. As for my methodological approach, it's really pretty anarchic. My main advisor at Berkeley, Allan Pred, was really adamant about methodologies having to arise organically from the materials you're looking at. He was really opposed to the more cookie-cutter methodologies that are usually taught in the social sciences, because they largely determine their own outcomes. He always insisted that you just had to look at your materials from every angle you could find, then look at it some more, and look at it again, and eventually a series of metaphors and methods would begin to make themselves known. So that is the approach I take, but it can be wildly inefficient and time-consuming.