

METRO PICTURES

Sokol, Zach. "Trevor Paglen on the Origins of His Groundbreaking (and Shutdown-stymied) Space Sculpture," *Playboy.com* (January 25, 2019).

PLAYBOY



"There's no such thing as a civilian space program, and there never will be," Trevor Paglen says with a resigned laugh. It's early October, and we're talking in an office at New York University's AI Now Institute, where the 44-year-old is an Artist Fellow. But lately he's been spending time in Nevada, working on one of humankind's first works of fine art to be displayed in the infinite gallery of space.

Space is having a moment, in ways Paglen finds both troubling and inspiring: Elon Musk has launched a SpaceX Falcon Heavy rocket equipped with a Tesla; more than 600 customers have paid upward of \$200,000 each for a seat on Virgin Galactic's commercial spaceflight; President Trump has announced his so-called Space Force (designed to ensure "American dominance in space"). Just as it was in the 20th century, modern space exploration is a springboard for nationalistic myth-making. But Paglen—a 2017 MacArthur Fellow and geography Ph.D. known for "showing what invisibility looks like" by documenting classified reconnaissance satellites, National Security Agency listening stations, weapons test sites and other clandestine structures—sees space exploration through a different lens: Space is entirely a "weaponized" place as far as we earthlings are concerned, and all recent advancements in the industry are outgrowths of the Cold War.

"When we're looking at spaceflight," he says, "it has everything to do with military and other attempts to exert power over the planet from that high ground, whether that's surveillance, targeting or delivering weapons."

Take Sputnik. As much as it was a testament to human ingenuity, it was also a demonstration of the Soviet Union's ability to shuttle a nuclear weapon to the other side of the planet. The same arguably goes for SpaceX today: That intergalactic Tesla was essentially "an advertisement" aimed at the military, implicitly marketing the Falcon Heavy rocket as a cargo carrier that can lug much more than an electric car—a payload filled with surveillance satellites, for example. In fact, it was widely reported that SpaceX's Falcon 9 launched a government-owned payload into an undisclosed orbit on a January 2018 trip.



Paglen stands beneath a predecessor of *Orbital Reflector* at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C.

“The market that drives the creation of launch vehicles is a military market,” Paglen says, one that “SpaceX is very actively trying to break into, and *has* broken into.” The artist adds, “It’s telling a different story than [competitor] Lockheed,” but it’s gunning for the same contracts.

Call it Orbital Realism: Space travel is inextricable from the military-industrial complex. So how can an artist hold up a mirror to such a vast and shadowy milieu? If you’re Trevor Paglen, you do just that: You design a giant reflective sculpture, and you shoot it into space.

Paglen’s extraterrestrial artwork is named *Orbital Reflector*. The diamond-shape, 100-foot-long inflatable object launched last December, with the goal of ripping through the night skies in low orbit for about six to eight weeks. It looks just like a slow-moving star in the Big Dipper and will complete a revolution around the world about every 90 minutes. Ultimately, it will burn to nothing in Earth’s atmosphere.

The project highlights the extent of the military’s reach through an inherent contradiction: *Orbital Reflector*, built by aerospace contractor Global Western, will be sent toward the stars inside a CubeSat satellite on a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket. More likely than not, the freight will also include at least one spy satellite. But the venture also serves as a nice foil to themes present throughout the artist’s oeuvre: On top of depicting what invisibility and government secrecy look like, *Orbital Reflector* may prompt us to see the cosmos anew.

“I think it’s provocative to say, ‘I’m going to make something and put it in the sky and it will be visible from Earth,’” Paglen explains. “You’re provoking a conversation about what the legitimate uses of space are. You’re provoking a conversation about who should have the rights to do what in a space—pardon my pun—that we instinctually think of as a shared resource, which it is.”

“Trevor is not advocating that artists begin shooting satellites into orbit,” says David Walker, executive director and CEO of the Nevada Museum of Art, which partnered with Paglen on the project. “What he’s doing is asking us to reconsider the preciousness of Earth.” And of course *Orbital Reflector*’s location gives it a simple, striking characteristic: “More people will see it and know about it than just about any artwork that’s ever been created,” Walker says.

Early in our conversation, Paglen tells me about Nikolai Fedorov, a 19th century Russian philosopher who wrote about space as a mystical tool that could reincarnate everyone who had ever lived. Space, he believed, would help humanity achieve something akin to the Kingdom of Heaven. The proto-transhumanist would go on to influence the architects of the early Russian space program.

“That seems unthinkable,” Paglen says of cosmism theories, “and to me, that’s what art aspires to: not only to challenge you to think in a different way but to see in a different way.”

Later, he reiterates his interest in the philosopher and the value of challenging our sense of reality through otherworldly ideas. “If you can imagine that, then maybe you can imagine having more social justice or having more equitable health care policies or what have you,” Paglen says. He laughs again, with less resignation this time.