

foam

Interview

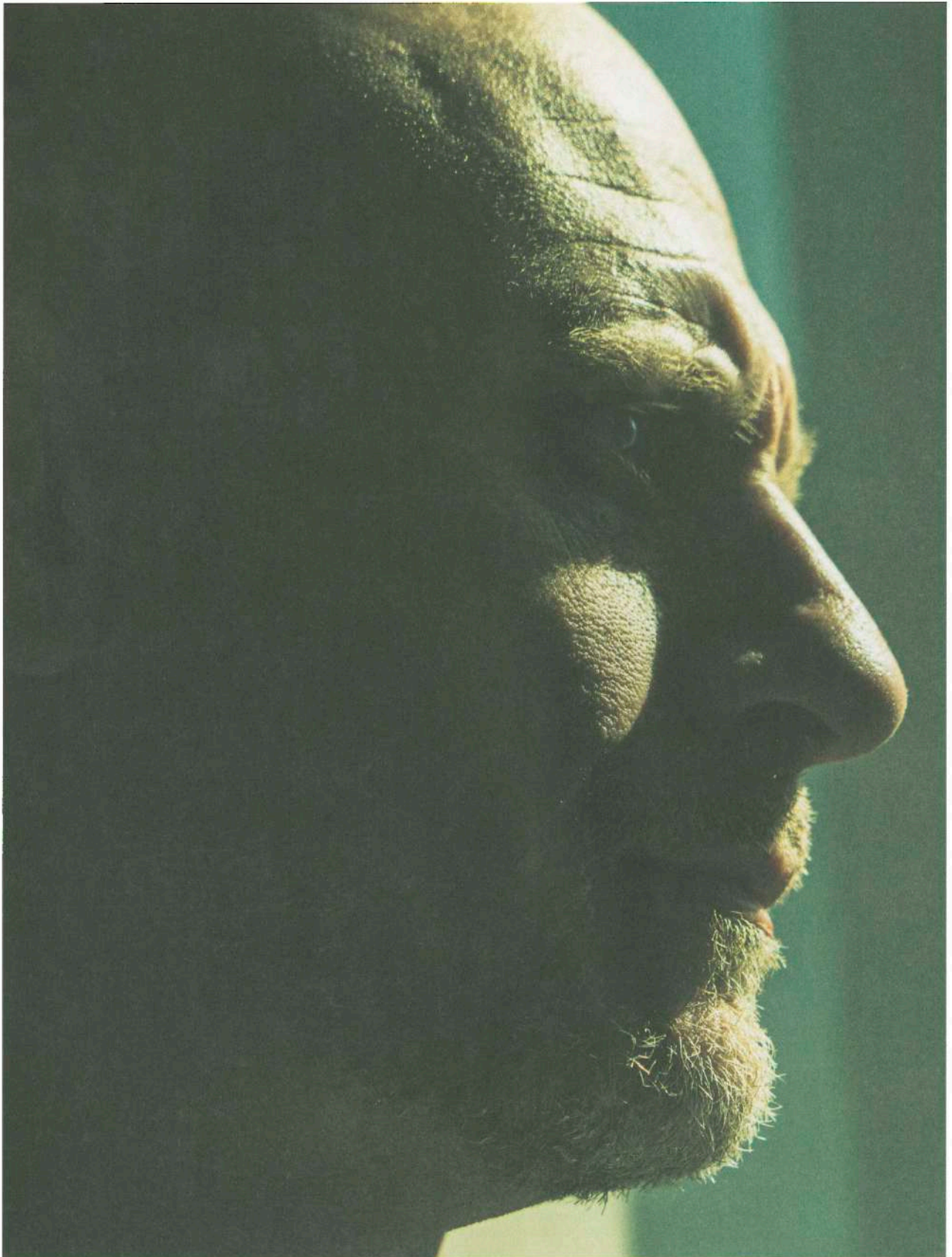
11

What do we talk about

A conversation between
Trevor Paglen and Rahel Aima

when we talk about images?

Images by Christopher Anderson



Trevor Paglen is one of the most intense and poliedric artists of his generation. He and Rahel Aima met on a bright Sunday morning in New York City, slightly avoiding direct sunlight, to talk surveillance, satellites, invisibility and, overall, images.

RA: You currently have a show at the Smithsonian, showing works made across several years. I'm curious if maybe you could talk a little bit about putting it all together and if doing so at this particular moment in time had any influence? Is there anything that you particularly chose to highlight?

TP: It's a pretty comprehensive show. It looks at things like deep time, anthropogenic interventions, into the climate and the landscape, through things like surveillance and military systems such as computer vision and artificial intelligence systems, and some kind of speculative objects that are trying to imagine other infrastructures.

There's certain kinds of projects that I do where I'll look at a infrastructure and say, 'Well what can we imagine the opposite of that infrastructure being?' And then that can be a piece of art. For example, I have a piece called *Autonomy Cube*, which is trying to imagine an internet whose business model is not mass surveillance. It's trying to imagine an internet that could not track you even if it wanted to.

Another project included in the show is called *Orbital Reflector*, which focuses on a satellite that is designed to have no military, commercial or scientific purpose. In doing so, I'm trying to figure out if we could imagine space flight being decoupled from nuclear war, from the planetary state and corporate infrastructures? Is that possible? This satellite will launch next month [October 2019, NDR], ironically enough from Vandenberg Air Force Base. Which is a military base in California where they mostly launch spy satellites from.

RA: How long do you expect that to be up?

TP: It has a life span of six to eight weeks. It's not geostationary, it will orbit the earth every 93 minutes. To us it will look like a slowly moving star. It'll go up, it'll inflate a big mirror, and then that'll start falling to earth in between six and eight weeks. It just burns up in the atmosphere.

RA: At the core of your artistic activity, there is a deep connection with technology and science. I'm curious about the technical side of your process and its relationship to, let's say, astrophotography.

TP: There are many different projects, and I have to invent a process for each new genre in a way, or each new body of work. The most recent question I've been trying to ask is, what does it mean where we've arrived at a moment in time where most of the looking at of pictures is being done by computer vision systems and artificial intelligence systems? What are the mechanics of that? What is a particular computer vision system seeing when it's looking at an image, and what is the range of interpretations that a computer vision system makes, and how it's different to how humans see images?

For example, let's say I want to take a picture of a cloud. What does an algorithm see when it's looking at a cloud, or how does it interpret that cloud? Then I can make an image that shows you what that vision system sees when it's looking at the cloud. Developing the technical capacity is very typical of much of the work I do. I have to figure out how to develop a set of tools and a workflow that allows you to see something if, in fact, there's anything to see.

Then you think about what story you want to tell with this, maybe you want to tell a story about portraiture. How do facial recognition systems see faces? You can ask another question about landscape. How does a guided missile see a landscape? Then you probably want another historical layer thinking about, how does this fit into larger histories of vision? So with computer vision, for example, I'll do portraiture but through facial recognition software or I'll do landscape but then I'll think about histories of survey photography, and relating that to newer technologies that one could think about as being extensions of that.

RA: And how do they differ or relate? Are these algorithms based on those same histories or ways of looking?

TP: If you look at 19th century survey photographers like Eadward Muybridge or Timothy O'Sullivan, you can look at the history of making proto-reconnaissance images of the west. These images would be sent back to Washington and act as images of the territory that the US acquired in the aftermath of the Mexican-American war. There's a structural and political aspect to making images of these places, almost like cataloguing them. You can think about it as a prototype of spy satellites — these are military cameras in space conducting surveys.

You can connect spy satellites to a computer vision system built for warfare or built for surveying people's faces. You can think about these historical arcs and the ways in which different kinds of power, whether that's state power or economic power, come together to produce certain visions of the world, or certain ways of looking.

RA: Do you see these different technologies, strategies or power systems as literally re-envisioning the landscape through the act of looking? For example, I grew up in Dubai which is very much a city made to be looked at from above. Things are built to be seen by space. Buildings are built for sticking out of fog in an aerial view.

TP: Dubai is a fantastic example. There's many, many layers of seeing in that city. The whole city is like an automated vision machine in a certain way. I think you're spot on in thinking about how the apparatuses that we build or the cultural associations that we have primed ourselves to see the landscape in a certain way. This then affects the way we treat that landscape and our relationship to it. For example, if you look at desert landscapes and think of them as being 'Badlands' and remote, there's an implicit understanding that helps create an attitude where it becomes an acceptable landscape in which to build nuclear bombs because you are conceiving of it as a wasteland in the first place.

Similarly, a technology like facial recognition is a very particular way of looking at a face and a particular way of trying to figure out, 'What is your identity?'. It's a very narrow conception of identity. It's just like trying to attach a face to a name, to a social security number, driver's license or a mugshot. That's a really different way of thinking about portraiture. Facial recognition is a way of seeing but it's part of a centralised political structure categorising people and tracking them. That's what I mean by that relationship between ways of seeing having certain forms of power embedded within them.

RA: I'm also interested in the idea of an intercepted image like in some of your earlier drone images, almost like pirate radio or pirate TV.

TP: It is very similar to that. In the early days of the drone infrastructure when they started flying drones in the 1990s, nobody had really thought ahead to the idea that these could be really important instruments of warfare. There was this whole period in time where a lot of infrastructure was not encrypted, so you could get images off the satellites. I think about it in terms of looking at contradictions in architecture. For me, it's very similar to a fence around a secret place. Because things have to exist in the world, they become embodied in different ways.

RA: There's often a sense that what you're photographing often is not really a subject so much as vision itself, an act of seeing.

TP: That's what I think about all my images: they're photographs of landscapes or portraits, but I think of them all as photographs of particular forms of seeing. And that

is perhaps a trite thing to say because in some ways all photography is that, but I want to really consciously bring that to the fore. You know, I look a lot at photography but also all kinds of art. Sculpture and things like that. I think for me, the art that is most attractive to me, is art that is showing you ways of seeing and whether that is abstract painting or whether that its structuralist photography, there's forms of seeing that is different media or different approaches toward image-making suggest. And that is something I'm pretty obsessed with and that is what unifies a lot of the work.

RA: What about the contemporaneity of perspective, for want of a better way of putting it. Like now we have that aerial drone's eye view and also this GoPro first-person perspective. Because it feels like you're also in conversation if not with history, with archiving the present — sometimes you've literally made time capsules, for example.

TP: In terms of histories of points-of-view, that is something I think about a lot and the overwhelming majority of images use that point-of-view of a person standing someplace. So there's been a few aerial images that I've done for things like that, but to me I really do like that point-of-view of a person standing somewhere.

RA: Do you think that it makes it more legible to have a human scale?

TP: I don't know. I mean to me there's something attractive about inserting that point-of-view in the image. Empowering is the wrong word, but something that confers agency onto a human. In other words to take a picture of something from that perspective is to insist on one's right to make an image from that perspective, as to like emphasise that relationship of a subject and an object and that feels more vital to me than using satellite images and things like that.

RA: And what about using found images, which is an old strategy but also one that's increasingly more common with the internet, with Google Street View and so on.

TP: A lot of projects that are more in the AI world, computer vision, have probably used a lot of found images. I'm really obsessed with training images, which are made to teach computers how to recognise different kinds of objects or faces or gestures. What does it mean that there's genres of photography and video where the audience is computer vision systems, they're not really meant for humans?

RA: I'm so curious about those stock videos of repetitive gestures, and the effect that has on a body. Like carpal tunnel is a new manifestation of technology in the body. Do these employees, when off duty, sit down at the dinner table and have a pervasive twitch?

TP: All those are training libraries, I had a bunch of them in my last show and I have a couple of shows next year that are just looking at them. And that's exactly what they are. They're just like hundreds of

people pouring a drink. It's meant to teach a computer vision system what it looks like when someone's pouring a drink so that if there's a video of you pouring a drink on Facebook, then Facebook's AI can recognise that you're pouring a drink and they'll even know what kind of drink you're pouring. The name of the game with that stuff is volume.

I'm interested in how the different systems work to what are the cultural and political implications of them? From the image to the infrastructure. So I'm thinking about artificial intelligence as a series of algorithms, but it's also a series of data collection practices, it's a series of infrastructures that surround the entire planet that are made out of cables and server farms and the internet itself and communication systems.

RA: How do you see your own kind of images? Are they productive in different ways? Do they presumably also reproduce landscapes or the sites in a different way? Or, what does it mean to make them visible?

TP: The way I think about it is not so much trying to make something visible as trying to question the possibility of vision. To point to these very murky relationships between seeing and knowing. For me the bigger question always is, what is it exactly that we're looking at when we're looking at an image? And then, how do we understand the moment in history that we are living in by looking at the same kinds of landscapes that other artists have been looking at for tens of thousands of years and trying to notice the particularities of that landscape now?

For example if I'm looking at stars in the sky, I know that people have been looking at that for tens of thousands of years: there's prehistoric art that's looking at the sky. So what does it mean now to be looking at the sky in 2018 and recognise that — oh, here's a reconnaissance satellite and here's a spy satellite, and here's some space junk or what have you. How does noticing that in the sky inform the way that we think about ourselves now? This changes the way you look at things.

RA: And what do you think that does? Let's say people were more aware of the presence of these objects and devices. The same knowledge that allows you to recognise a plane from a star — because it moves. What do you think that kind of awareness, discerning power, would do? If anything...

TP: It would change nothing. I mean I think for me it contributes to a vocabulary that we use to orient ourselves,

that we use to try and make sense of the world around us in an attempt to teach ourselves how to pay attention to things. For me, at least. These are probably the limits of the work that I do and perhaps the limits in general. Art is not the same thing as political organising. It's a different tool, it can do different stuff and it can do it well. It can do a lot of things that political organising can't do. However, political organising can do many things that art can't do.

RA: What are these differences, or what can art do that organising can't necessarily?

TP: Well, art can bring attention to something. Art can suggest a way of seeing something; it can show you how to see the world around you differently. Within that rubric, you can suggest that there are places we should be paying particular attention to, whether that it satellites in the sky or artificial intelligence algorithms looking at your pictures. I think art can do that. Obviously, this is very different than trying to develop a political constituency or articulating and proposing legislation or thinking about how one can try to transform a particular thing. That's just a different project. Which again is in turn also very different than writing an essay about that same issue or make a reason, like a logical argument about why one should be for or against that something. They're just really different mediums in different forms and we need all of them.

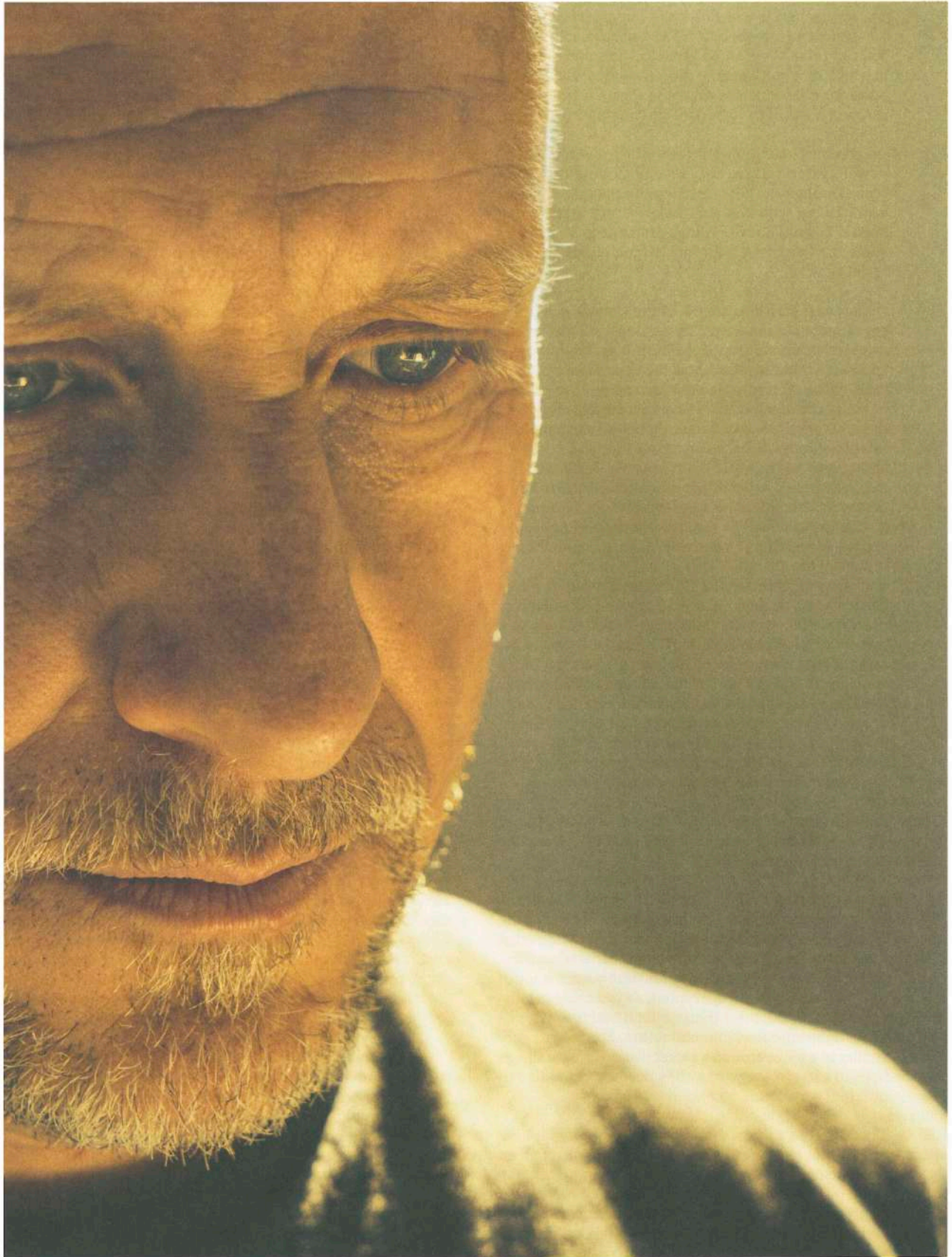
RA: Thinking about language too, the titles of your works have such prosaic names

TP: So in terms of the title to work, very often a strategy that I use is have very technical titles. Like really, really dry. Just really trying to precisely describe something in the image. And at the same time very rarely is there any evidence of the thing that I'm titling in the image itself. In other words, the images tend to be very abstract and blurry or just dots and lines.

RA: What's an example of this? Like where you have distance in the title?

TP: Yeah, or something like the astronomy pictures or other photos of spy satellites, but they just look like dots and dashes and they're very abstract-looking in a way. Or even some of the beach scenes where I'm trying to describe why this beach but there's no evidence: if you just looked at the image you wouldn't think, 'Oh this is a surveillance piece,' or if you looked at images of the skies, you wouldn't say like, "Oh, that's the satellite," or something like that. So setting up that

'Art can bring attention to something. Art can suggest a way of seeing something; it can show you how to see the world around you differently.'



juxtaposition between trying to specifically name something and the photograph that actually doesn't name it. I like that tension. Because to me it amounts to a broader series of questions about knowledge, really. How do we know things? And how do we change our conception of what we're looking at by framing it particular ways?

RA: Do you feel any responsibility in that way? I mean the fact that people would look at the title and suddenly understand, 'Oh, that's what this is.' I think really hinges entirely on their perception of you.

TP: Exactly. I do feel an enormous responsibility for that. I do try to be accurate in a way. I want the underlying architecture to be as correct as I can make it. And partly that is for that sense of trust. On the other hand, I also feel like when you try to do that work, to actually find specifically this satellite or go to this specific place and you are sure you do it accurately, you are always going to see something or notice something that you would not have been able to invent for yourself. The world is more complicated, it will surprise you more than you can surprise yourself.

All images © Christopher Anderson / Magnum Photos, 2018

TREVOR PAGLEN (b. 1974, US) is an artist who seeks to investigate the undisclosed and hidden world of surveillance and data. Paglen has an MFA from the Art Institute of Chicago and obtained a Ph.D. in Geography from U.C. Berkley. Regularly, Paglen writes on topics in conjunction with his practice, writing for various articles and is an author of five books. He has won many prestigious awards including the Electronic Frontier Foundation's Pioneer Award and the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize (2016). Trevor is also the recipient of the 2018 Nam June Paik Center Prize.

RAHEL AIMA (b. 1988, India) is a freelance writer and editor. She mostly writes about art, tech, and politics, and is a special projects editor at *The New Inquiry* and a correspondent at *Art Review Asia*. She has contributed writings to *Artforum*, *Artnet*, *Frieze*, *艺术界-LEAP*, *Vogue Arabia*, and *World Policy Journal*, amongst other titles. In 2010, She graduated with a degree in Anthropology from Columbia University in 2010 and currently lives and works in New York City.

CHRISTOPHER ANDERSON (b. 1970, CA) was New York Magazine's first ever photographer-in-residence. He has published five photobooks including *Son* (2013) and *Approximate Joy* (2018). In 2018, he exhibited at Danziger Gallery, NYC; Ravestijn Gallery, Amsterdam and Paris Photo. The series *STUMP* has been published by editorial RM, Barcelona. He is a previous recipient of both Robert Capa Gold Medal (2000). He is also a member of Magnum Photo, and lives and works in Barcelona.