

# METRO PICTURES

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Arts and Letters

## They're Watching

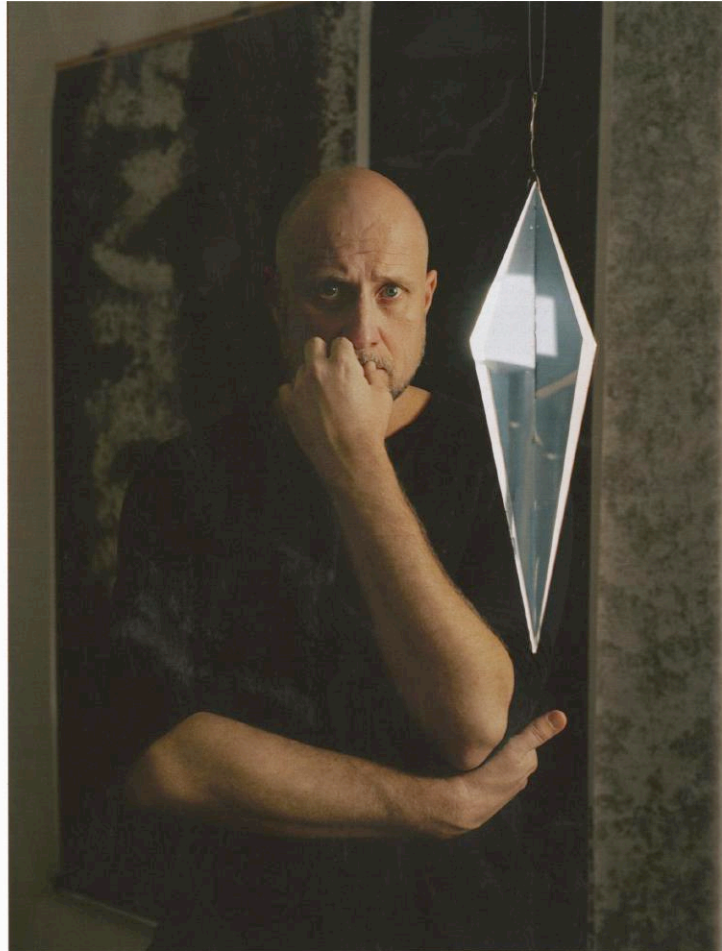
Trevor Paglen's art for a post-surveillance age.

BY MEGAN O'GRADY  
PORTRAIT BY JANINA WICK

"ARE WE BEING WATCHED?" I ask Trevor Paglen at his central Berlin studio. The prewar apartment was once surely the most surveilled place in the city, having formerly belonged to his friend Laura Poitras, the director who helped Edward Snowden go public. "We're always being watched," he replies. The space is filled with computers: Against one wall, an assistant writes code while another researches data used to train artificial intelligence. Opposite is a long credenza filled with art monographs and topped by a slightly sinister collection of *objets*: a Dungeons & Dragons-style dragon trophy with a shield and saber; a toy model of the stealth submarine USS Jimmy Carter; and "Black Ops" military patches, including some Paglen made himself. In one of them, dinosaurs of the future look up in wonder at the derelict satellites left behind by extinct humans.

There's a certain irony in the artist and author being based in the former G.D.R., where citizens were once pressured into spying on one another for the Stasi, which left behind miles of documents when the wall fell in 1989. Fifteen years later, Paglen, who already had an M.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, was working on his doctorate in geography at the University of California, Berkeley, when he saw redacted portions of a map of the Mojave Desert and began photographing classified military installations, outfitting cameras with special lenses used in astrophotography. Ever since, he's been documenting the ways in which humans have transformed the surface of the Earth, and how we, in turn, have been transformed by those changes. (A survey of his career will go on view at the Smithsonian next summer.) The resulting photographs are vertiginous and strange, illuminating the increasingly uneasy space between ourselves and our perceived world: a tiny, is-it-a-seagull-no-it's-a-drone set against a Technicolor sunset; the dystopian white radomes of a surveillance station tucked into an English pastoral; a placid seascape, beneath which lies a key communications choke point. "People like to say that my work is about making the invisible visible, but that's a misunderstanding," Paglen says. "It's about showing what invisibility looks like."

Paglen was already well known for his surveillance pieces when Snowden leaked a trove of NSA documents in 2013, but even he was stunned by the



revelations both their magnitude and their specificity. "I just sat, jaw dropped, for 14 hours straight, reading," says the 42-year-old, who is both affable and ultra-intense, with blue eyes, close-shorn blond hair, motorcycle boots and a kind of native restlessness. His footage of NSA bases was included in "Citizenfour," Poitras's Academy Award-winning documentary about Snowden.

Paglen, who has lived in Berlin since 2015, travels frequently to give talks about the many ways in which secrecy "nourishes the worst excesses of power," as he wrote in one of his six books. He is one of art's more unusual figures, a kind of adventurer-philosopher whose work is often conceptual and highly technical, but can also be delightfully gonzo: He learned to scuba dive in order to photograph fiber-optic internet cables snaking across the ocean floor. After being questioned in Germany for shooting classified sites, he held a contest for the best photos of "landscapes of surveillance" in that country. He made a cube-shaped sculpture from irradiated glass sourced from Fukushima. He sent a time capsule into deep space of images etched on a silicon disc chronicling human history — from the Lascaux cave paintings to political protests. For a series he's including in his show opening this month at Metro Pictures gallery in New York, Paglen is examining the automation of vision itself, and the way in which the kinds of technologies used in facial recognition software, self-driving cars and social media are creating an entirely new landscape of pictures we never see, whose judgments we can't

challenge. “I don’t have fantasy projects,” he tells me, “because I’m stupid enough to think that you can actually do this stuff.”

PAGLEN IS CURRENTLY at work on his most radical project yet. This spring, he plans to send a satellite — a reflective, faceted Mylar inflatable — into low orbit, where it will be visible at night from Earth for eight weeks or so, literally twinkling like a diamond in the sky before it disintegrates in the atmosphere. If all goes according to plan, it will be the world’s first space sculpture, unprecedented in contemporary art.

The Orbital Reflector, as Paglen calls it, seems at first glance almost romantic, even deliberately naive. It has no scientific purpose; it doesn’t even carry a camera. But under closer scrutiny, it can be seen as an elaboration of the artist’s ongoing thesis about art, technology and the impossibility of separating either from a specific moment in time. “It began as a thought experiment in which we imagined that spaceflight was the opposite of what it actually is,” he explains over lunch at Soho House, at a table overlooking the Berlin TV tower, with its iconic dome evoking Sputnik, Earth’s first satellite. In the American mind, space is a frontier: “We imagine going to the moon and planting a flag, going to an asteroid and mining, going to Mars and setting up a colony,” he says. “And I think that expansionist mentality is very self-destructive, especially given the kind of precarious relationship we now have to the ecosystem here on Earth, because it allows us to imagine that Earth is disposable.” Billionaire entrepreneurs may dream of colonizing Mars, but in fact, space is not going to save us. Aliens are not going to grant us absolution. “People expect this kind of profound cosmic altruism, which is very religious in a way. Space is completely wrapped up with this kind of stuff, which is what makes it interesting.”

The Orbital Reflector draws a clear parallel between contemporary art and space exploration: the ideal of a purely visionary gesture, and the less starry reality. While the satellite — a small, five-kilogram box called a CubeSat, from which a 100-foot-long inflatable structure will deploy — has no commercial or military purpose, its success depends on the very systems of power Paglen has spent more than a decade critiquing. Built by an aerospace contractor called Global Western, it, likely along with a governmental reconnaissance satellite, will launch from California’s Vandenberg Air Force base on a Space X rocket into low orbit. The project illustrates how unfeasible it would be to execute any other way: For all the talk of civilian spaceflight, it remains a thoroughly militarized domain.

Managing the project is Zia Oboodiyat, a retired engineer who ran large communications satellite programs for the San Francisco-based Space Systems/Loral. He first met Paglen in 2011 while the artist was working on the time capsule; Oboodiyat oversaw the construction of the satellite the disc was attached to and advocated for the project. When Paglen approached him about the Orbital Reflector, Oboodiyat immediately recognized its potential lyricism. “You don’t have to be rich to see it; you don’t have to be tall to see it,” he says. “You don’t have to be American. Anybody anywhere on Earth has equal opportunity to see something that gives humanity hope.”

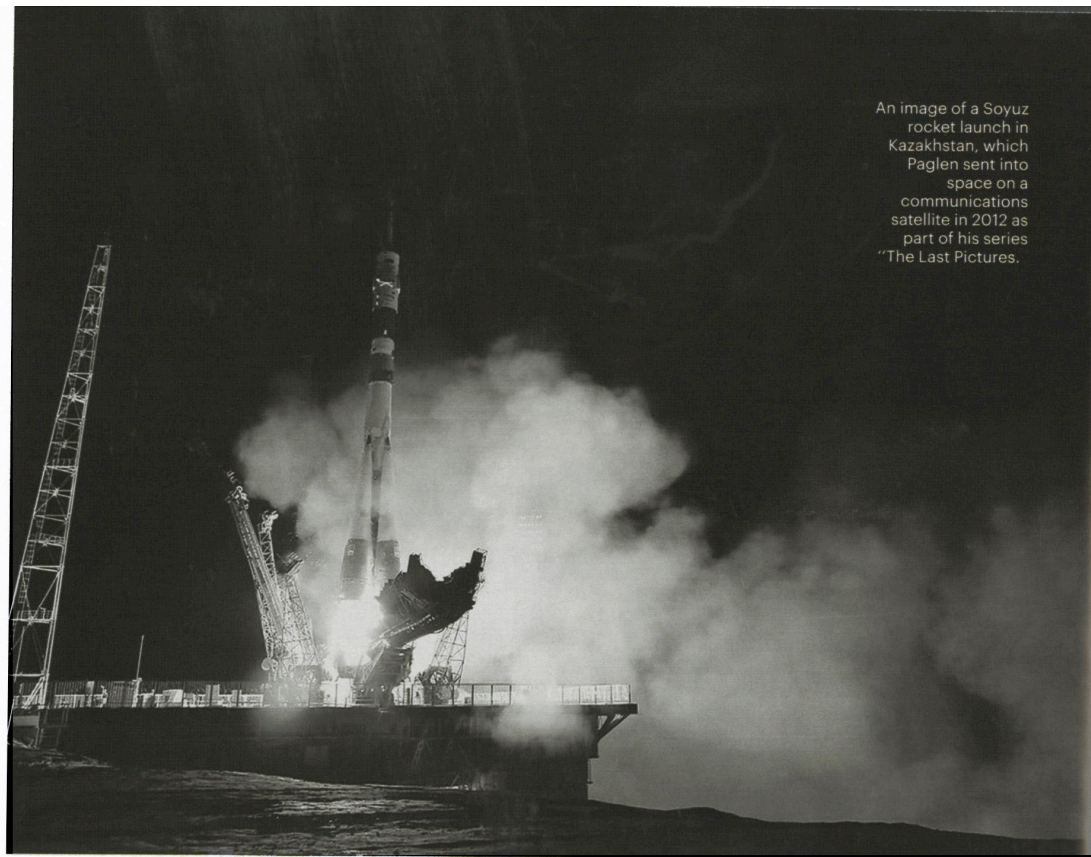
Paglen’s partner in the project, the

Previous page: Paglen, photographed in Berlin with a 3D model of his Orbital Reflector satellite. This page: a selection of Paglen’s works. The artist uses various techniques to capture the surveillance state, including long-range astronomical photography to look at objects in the earth’s orbit such as drones and spacecrafts. He employs so-called limit-tephotography to capture classified military bases from great distances and has learned to scuba dive to photograph internet cables on the ocean floor (bottom row, far left).



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: TREVOR PAGLEN, "UNTITLED (READER DRONE)," 2010, C-PRINT, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND METRO PICTURES, NEW YORK; TREVOR PAGLEN, "DEAD MILITARY NAVIGATION SATELLITE (COSMOS 988) NEAR THE DISK OF THE MOON," 2012, C-PRINT, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND METRO PICTURES, NEW YORK; TREVOR PAGLEN, "SINGLETON/SEW ASS R1 AND THREE UNIDENTIFIED SPACECRAFT (SPACE BASED WIDE AREA SURVEILLANCE SYSTEM USA 32), 2011, C-PRINT, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND METRO PICTURES, NEW YORK; TREVOR PAGLEN, "BAHAMAS INTERNET CABLE SYSTEM (BICS-1), NSA/GCHQ TAPPED UNDERSEA CABLE," ATLANTIC OCEAN, 2015, C-PRINT, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND METRO PICTURES, NEW YORK; TREVOR PAGLEN, "LAGROSSE/JOHNS IMPASSING THROUGH DRACO (RADAR IMAGING RECONNAISSANCE SATELLITE), USA 69," 2007, C-PRINT, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND METRO PICTURES, NEW YORK; TREVOR PAGLEN, "NSA/GCHQ SURVEILLANCE BASE, BUDE, CORNWALL, UK," 2014, PIGMENT PRINT, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND METRO PICTURES, NEW YORK

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An image of a Soyuz rocket launch in Kazakhstan, which Paglen sent into space on a communications satellite in 2012 as part of his series "The Last Pictures."

Reno-based Center for Art + Environment at the Nevada Museum of Art, is fund-raising to cover the \$1.3 million cost. The center's collection includes extensive material from the giants of land art, including Walter de Maria and Michael Heizer. The Orbital Reflector places Paglen (for the moment, anyway) in this tradition — an artist defying the laws of nature and practicality in order to create a work larger than himself. "It is a high-risk proposition — rockets do explode; CubeSats sometimes fail to open," says David Walker, the museum's executive director. "But it's exciting, too, because we see outer space as the ultimate mirror for human aspiration." The Orbital Reflector is like the inevitable conclusion to the land art movement; Paglen's work, like Heizer's, may start in the desert, but will eventually leave the Earth entirely.

PAGLEN MOVED TO Berlin partly for financial reasons — "I wanted to hire people, not spend \$10,000 a month on a studio in Sunset Park" — but seems to have found a home amid the city's young expat artists and WikiLeaks types. At a Vietnamese restaurant, he bumps into a hacktivist friend who looks all of 17. "These guys have guts," Paglen notes, after saying hello. "He was way up the butthole of the F.B.I. I probably shouldn't talk about it."

Paglen doesn't describe himself as a dissident — "I'm as American as it gets, a product of these contradictions" — but it's impossible not to connect the themes in his work to a childhood spent on military bases. His father was an Air Force ophthalmologist; his mother, one of the first female Episcopalian priests. In third grade, in the San Francisco Bay Area, Paglen got in trouble for skipping school to sneak into lectures on dinosaurs at Berkeley — the same lecture halls in which he'd later be working toward his doctorate. The family moved to Wiesbaden, Germany, when he was 12, and he spent two years in a German school in a nearby village, where, as a foreign student, he was ostracized. "When you're not the beneficiary of privilege, suddenly you see it for what it is," he says.

An ongoing theme in Paglen's more satiric work is the puerile machismo of military culture's symbology and nomenclature, "the collective unconscious of this world of secrecy and violence," as he puts it. One afternoon, Hanna Mattes, who oversees Paglen's studio and helps manage its external production, is consulting with the artist on one of the sculptures he's making for the fall show: an enormous dragon inspired by the small trophy in his studio. The trophy, Paglen explains, is presented to members of the 315th Network Warfare Squadron upon retirement. Paglen's version will be a 12-foot sculpture inscribed in fetishistic detail, like medieval armor for the cyber age. The best way to

preserve the details, they conclude, will be to 3D-print the mold in four sections, lightly polishing them to remove any marks. Another concern is the weight: The finished dragon, cast in bronze, will weigh two tons. Paglen mentions a crane. Mattes looks at him. "Maybe we should just paint the form for the exhibition."

The dragon will be included in the 2018 Smithsonian exhibit. This year's Metro Pictures exhibit will showcase Paglen's ongoing work with different kinds of artificial intelligence technologies, taking viewers down a rabbit hole of imagery, from the now quaint-seeming pictures first made by humans in the early 1990s to train military facial recognition software, to the kind of "invisible images" computers hallucinate for themselves — say, when we post an image on Facebook in order to make sense of the external world. "This is how an A.I. brain sees a shark," Paglen says back in his studio, looking at a weirdly beautiful Abstract Expressionist-like swath of blues and grays that results from a computer creating a visual amalgam of thousands of images of the animal in water. The exhibit invites critical questions about the extent to which artificial intelligence algorithms, with their potential for programmed-in bias, are governing our reality. It's also aesthetically provocative: "Man," a distillation of figurative imagery, vaguely recalls a Francis Bacon portrait; "Rainbow" — a blend of cosmic-like rainbows — a Dali-esque dreamscape. "It's like I'm relearning art history," Paglen says.

So how does an artist who has devoted his career to empirical scrutiny of those things that will shape our future, from artificial intelligence to the annexation of space, respond rationally to a time in which reason itself — when it comes to political discourse, at least — seems to be increasingly endangered? "Those are foundational questions for me," Paglen says. "Nothing that you make in the world exists in isolation from the social and political and ecological dimensions of it." He hasn't given up on art's ability to spark the imagination — and to make us see the things we might prefer not to. The Orbital Reflector presented an opportunity to "get messy ... to make something that's beautiful, but also self-contradictory, and tries to challenge common sense." It's Carl Sagan meets Dada for a new millennium's inhumanity.

As we talk, the sky darkens in Berlin, and the first blinking glimmerings appear. "For me, there's something very romantic about going and looking at the stars and trying to photograph spy satellites," Paglen says. "Ultimately, what it comes down to is looking at the sky and trying to understand something about one's place in history. People have been doing this for tens of thousands of years. This is kind of a variation on that. What if we could imagine a sky that wasn't out to get us, you know?" ■