

Frieze

Miller, Nicole, "Trevor Paglen's 'Orbital Reflector' Asks Who Gets to Exercise Power Over our Planetary Commons," *Frieze*, 24 January 2019.

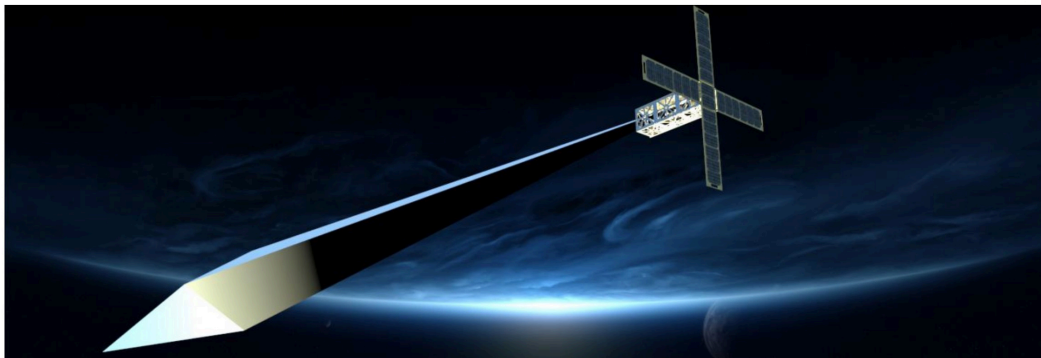
Opinion /



BY NICOLE MILLER
24 JAN 2019

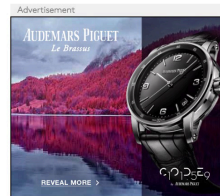
Trevor Paglen's 'Orbital Reflector' Asks Who Gets to Exercise Power Over our Planetary Commons

Outer space is not an open field for experimentation and development but a medium for the circulation of information





US photographer Trevor Paglen, best known for his striking images of telecommunications and national security infrastructure, studies 'ungraspable architecture': radio wave transmissions, secret missile ranges, N.S.A. choke points, surveillance and combat drones that alter the very conditions of visibility. His geographic research and photography suggest the fine calibrations of concealing and revealing that constitute state power. His latest work, a nonfunctional satellite named *Orbital Reflector* (2018), was due to enter low-earth orbit last December after its launch from a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket (the artwork's release from the satellite is currently delayed due to the US government shutdown). The 30-metre sculpture, made of lightweight, reflective material and faceted like a diamond, is meant to shimmer like an apocrypha for the space age: a revolving mirror, shining with the light of the sun and visible on a clear night from earth.

'*Orbital Reflector* was designed as a provocation,' [Paglen wrote last year](#). 'It's a project about public space, and a project about who gets to exercise power over our planetary commons, and on what terms.' In Nevada, Paglen has photographed the vast tracts of land restricted for military use, including the black site known as Area 51, where classified aircraft and weapons are tested. *Orbital Reflector* is co-produced and presented by the Nevada Museum of Art and sponsored by the museum's new neighbour, Blockchains, LLC. It's not surprising that Blockchains's founder and CEO, Jeffrey Berns, is invested in Paglen's project. The blockchain – the underlying computational system for nearly all forms of cryptocurrency – is seen as a disruptive, anti-authoritarian technology, much like *Orbital Reflector*.



MORE LIKE THIS

-  **Milan's New ICA Opens its Doors With a Tribute to Marc Bloch and the 'Historian's Craft'**
-  **What Memory Stirred Up Has Settled: The Writing of Janet Malcolm**

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / *fax:* 415.373.4471

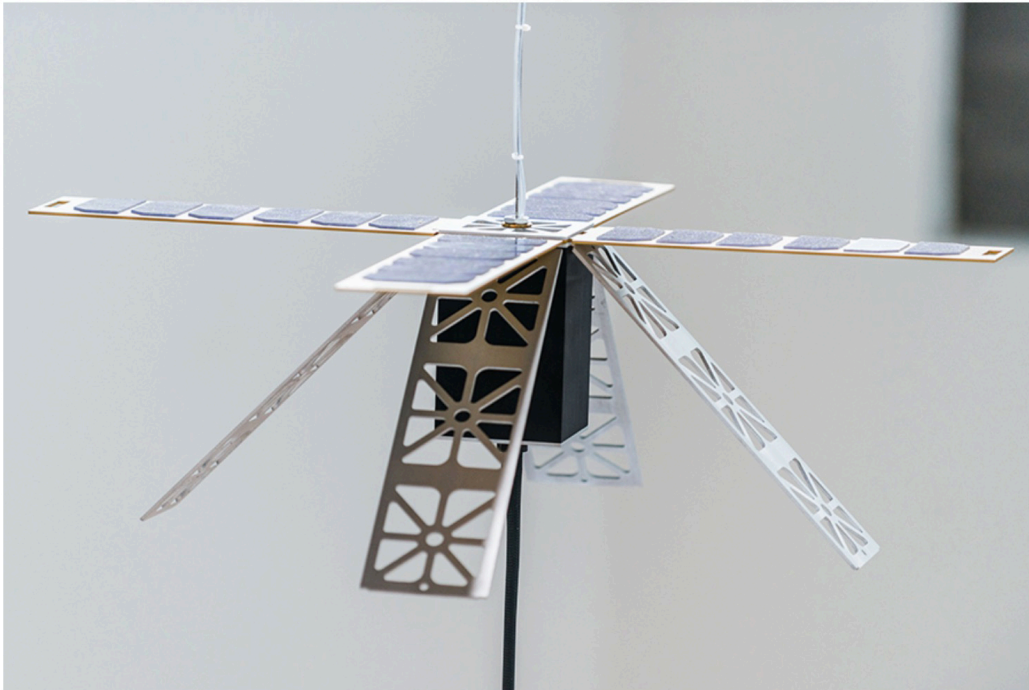
www.altmansiegel.com

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com



Trevor Paglen, *Prototype for a Nonfunctional Satellite (Design 4; Build 4)*, 2013, mixed media. Courtesy: Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco and Metro Pictures

A public ledger of transactions that ensures both privacy and consensus among its members, blockchain technology offers the promise of decentralized governance. 'Blockchain will empower humanity,' according to Berns. 'Imagine a world where anybody anywhere can collaborate, establish the rules of that collaboration, enforce those rules, exchange value and do it all on the blockchain. No government, no bank, no corporation, just trusting in math. I believe it's the first time in humanity's history that we have this potential.' Though the blockchain community hopes the technology will enable more open and egalitarian kinds of cooperation, how it will accomplish this remains a matter of speculation; the political subject is a hazy concept in the blockchain design space, where its supposed applications range from secure voting systems to automated weapons. While Paglen's body of work addresses a shrinking public space and narrowing future – finitude and foreclosure – Berns's new venture in the Nevada desert, funded by cryptocurrency speculation and Nevada tax breaks, conjures a future that is hopeful, expansive, driven by the idea of youth and the promise of self-sovereignty – the logic, in other words, of imperialism.

In an arid basin outside Reno, where wild horses still roam, Berns is building a 270 square kilometre city. 'It's not so much a city as a series of different projects to highlight the power of the public blockchain,' Berns told developers in a Devcon keynote speech in Prague this fall. Wearing a grey blazer and T-shirt bearing the gnostic glyph of the Blockchains logo, Berns debuted the showroom model of Innovation Park, as the Nevada governor has dubbed it. Renderings by Ehrlich Yanai Rhee Chaney Architects and Tom Wiscombe Architecture depict low-lying buildings that perhaps allude to the block-fault formations of the Basin and Range or to supersized points of data streaming along the information highway. The site – the floor of a former ocean; now the avatar of cyberspace – will include Blockchains's four square kilometre company headquarters, devoted to developing blockchain applications, 3D printing, nanotechnology, and AI, along with a residential community, an e-gaming arena, and an 'immersive content creation studio'.



Trevor Paglen, design concept rendering for Trevor Paglen: *Orbital Reflector*, co-produced and presented by the Nevada Museum of Art, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Nevada Museum of Art, Courtesy: Nevada Museum of Art, Nevada

To store and protect the digital assets of consumers, Berns has purchased a hollowed-out vault ('it's not a vault it's like a fortress,' he's said) in the Swiss Alps and bunkers in Georgia, Wyoming and Sweden. To think that the future of e-gaming relies on caverns of granite built by the architects of the Cold War – the stratigraphy of a world-ending game of Risk – is strange indeed. Here is the ungraspable architecture of networked space: not an infrastructure of ones and zeroes but massive parcels of land, water rights, fossil fuels that power cryptocurrency mining rigs chugging around the clock and across the globe.

In Blockchains's promotional videos, the muse of the future is a 12-year-old girl standing in the desert like a woke-gen Neo from *The Matrix* (1999). 'Remember when you were young? You thought you could change the world.' You missed your chance, she tells us, plunging a trowel into the earth. You sold out to the corporations and the 'rule makers,' and now, she says, the future belongs to her and to those who will buck the status quo. As a vision of sandbox architecture – collaborative world-building, from the ground up – Blockchains's marketing revives the old myth of space exploration. But Paglen's work, as it visualizes the hidden flow of information, reveals that outer space (like the Nevada desert) is not an open field for experimentation and development but a medium for the circulation of information.

Advertisement

FRIEZE
LOS ANGELES

Our new international art fair
February 15-17
Buy tickets now

Taking the flow of information as subject and method, Paglen's work might look like something from the conceptual playbook of the 1960s, recalling, for instance, Robert Barry's interest in radio carrier waves and inert gases – 'things that are invisible to the naked eye but real.' But Paglen marries conceptualism with post-structuralist insights about the power embedded in our mediums of communication. Tracking the power that accrues to government or corporate entities as they release, withhold, or deploy information, Paglen moves beyond the formal play of modernism – the claim, sometimes repeated in the press, that *Orbital Reflector* is 'useless'; an aerospace instance of art for art's sake – into the terrain of avant-garde disruption, hammering at the border between politics and art.

ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

tel: 415.576.9300 / fax: 415.373.4471

www.altmansiegel.com



Trevor Paglen, *Orbital Reflector*,
2019, installation view.
Courtesy: Nevada Museum of
Art, Nevada

As a spacecraft with no colonizing or extractive mission, *Orbital Reflector* tacks between power and powerlessness, between material and immaterial systems of commerce, navigation, and conquest. While blockchain industry leaders and developers exude an 18th century zeal for revolution and a 19th century belief in progress, Paglen's vision of our techno-present is more troubled – not the French Revolution but the Situationists by way of Dada. *Orbital Reflector* is a radical act of détournement: a satellite destined for low-earth orbit, joining our cell phone network systems and the optical and radar-imaging reconnaissance satellites used by the US military. An artifact of our surveillance state plucked from black space, the work reveals the dimensions of militarized space and the infrastructure of neoliberal democracy.

Orbital Reflector is therefore also a quorum on the agency of art itself – its status or effectualness in the 'over-administered world', as Adorno puts it. Maybe this is what Paglen means when he calls the work a provocation – like poking the bear, a gesture charged with the uneven distribution of power and flickering with doom.

Main image: Trevor Paglen, design concept rendering for Trevor Paglen: Orbital Reflector, co-produced and presented by the Nevada Museum of Art, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Nevada Museum of Art, Courtesy: Nevada Museum of Art, Nevada

NICOLE MILLER

Nicole Miller is a writer based in New York. She is a regular columnist for *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Guernica* and *Hyperallergic*.