

ART PAPERS

STRIKING IDEAS + MOVING IMAGES + SMART TEXTS
SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2009 US \$7 CAN \$9 UK £6 EU €8



GEOGRAPHY
OF REAPPEARANCE:
TREVOR PAGLEN

ACTIVISM
AND ITS APPARATI:
SPURSE

REALITY
AND ENDINGS:
GEORGE LAGONZAS

PROJECT
ARWA ABOUON'S
ROUTES SERIES





Trevor Paglen: Semiotics of the Hidden Empire

TEXT / JILL DAWSEY



Agent Plorver

Recently, I met the former mayor of Salt Lake City, Rocky Anderson, perhaps best known, while he was in office, for his efforts to garner support for the impeachment of George W. Bush. In the course of our conversation, he mentioned a book that he had just read: Trevor Paglen and A.C. Thompson's *Torture Taxi: On the Trail of the CIA's Rendition Flights*.¹ The book is right up Anderson's alley, given his newly launched campaign against human rights abuses. Yet he was surprised when I told him that Paglen is also an acclaimed artist who exhibits his work in major international galleries—and, in full disclosure, at the museum where I currently work.

My conversation with Anderson seemed to illustrate something that I'd been mulling over regarding Paglen's identity—or position—as a contemporary artist. At first blush, the photographer-cum-investigative-writer-cum-“experimental geographer”—the artist's own phrase—appears to seamlessly imbricate the disparate disciplines from which he draws. Of course, interdisciplinarity in art and academia is nothing new. Much has long been made of the shift from Walter Benjamin's classic model of “The Author as Producer” to Hal Foster's “The Artist as Ethnographer,” and from there we might call to mind other diluted variations: “the artist as curator,” “the artist as event planner,” and so on. With Paglen, one might be tempted to announce the arrival of “The Artist as Geographer.” But this would not be right. Paglen holds a Ph.D. in geography from UC Berkeley, and has published three books: one is based on his doctoral

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Trevor Paglen, *KEYHOLE/IMPROVED CRYSTAL Optical Reconnaissance Satellite Near Scorpio (USA 129)*, 2007, c-print, 48 x 60 inches; *Nine Reconnaissance Satellites over the Sonora Pass*, 2008, c-print, 60 x 48 inches / OPPOSITE: *Four Geostationary Satellites Above the Sierra Nevada*, 2007, c-print, 48 x 60 inches (all images courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco)





dissertation, and two have ostensibly nothing to do with art. “The Geographer as Artist” won’t work either—because “as” renders the latter term an amateur endeavor, something in which one dabbles. The jackets of Paglen’s books neatly label their genres: “Geography/Political Science/Military History” or “Current Affairs/Military History.” They will not be mistakenly shelved in a bookstore’s “Art Appreciation” section.

The subjects of Paglen’s books—and his artworks—are nothing if not timely: *Torture Taxi* was released well in advance of Jane Mayer’s lauded new book, *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned Into a War on American Ideals*,² which details the excesses of the Bush Administration in the wake of Dick Cheney’s now infamous post-9/11 pronouncement on *Meet the Press*:

We...have to work...the dark side, if you will. We’ve got to spend time in the shadows in the intelligence world. A lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any discussion, using sources and methods that are available to our intelligence agencies.³

This “dark side” and its “shadows” form the basis of much of Paglen’s work, and he has received a remarkable amount of mainstream media attention—that is, beyond the artworld’s own publicity conduits—which is unusual for a young artist. Paglen has been featured on multiple radio spots on NPR, received reviews in the *New York Times*—in and out of the arts section—and even made an appearance on Comedy Central’s *The Colbert Report* on April 7, 2008. “There’s a new book out written by someone who claims to be named Trevor Paglen,” Colbert wryly introduced his guest, “Clearly an anagram for AGENT PLORVER.” I laughed, in part because there is indeed an ambiguity surrounding Paglen’s identity—as an artist, if not as a secret agent—that renders his practice somewhat anomalous.

Radical Metonymy

Turn to the photographs: here, a landscape, a barren desert. In the foreground, dry earth. Above, clear blue sky. A strip of clouds hovers low over the horizon. The picture is fuzzy—out of focus?—or perhaps distorted by heat waves. Is that a pool of water or a mirage? The photograph verges on

the painterly, conjuring Rothko’s early work or the atmospheric effects of Impressionist painting. There are no people, no traces of human presence at all in the photograph: no roads, no vehicles, no buildings. A picture of empty space.

We are accustomed to thinking of space as empty, an inert container to be filled. Yet as the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre once explained—and as Paglen’s photographs testify—space is in fact a socially constructed system, a system *produced* by human beings through our social and economic relations.⁴ Paglen’s landscape may be blurred by heat waves, but it is also blurred by distance: he photographed the scene from over forty miles away. This is because he aimed his camera at a restricted military site that he was prohibited from approaching—a chemical and biological weapons proving ground in Dugway, Utah, as his clinical title informs us: *Chemical and Biological Weapons Proving Ground; Dugway, UT; Distance ~ 42 miles; 11:17 a.m., 2006*. Thus, the seemingly pristine, untouched land is in fact far from empty; and however obscured by the surrounding land, it bears traces of exploitation, history, and violence.

For the past several years, Paglen has been photographing desert landscapes—as far away as Afghanistan, but more often closer to home in the American Southwest. Many of his photographs resonate with the long tradition of landscape photography, but landscape, in and of itself, is never really the point. It would be more accurate to say that he is interested in the *uses* and *abuses* of land. Paglen seeks out what is hidden in these vast, seemingly uninhabited spaces, staking out sites that are not officially supposed to exist. Miles and miles of restricted land obscure these classified military sites—so-called “black sites”—which are intended to be invisible to the naked eye. To take his pictures, Paglen employs “limit-telephotography,” a technique combining telephoto lenses and equipment designed for photographing outer space.

The photographs themselves are often fuzzy or shrouded in darkness. *Detachment 3, Air Force Flight Test Center #2; Groom Lake, NV; Distance ~ 26 Miles, 2008*, describes a strip of lights nestled in a dark, mountainous landscape. “Detachment 3” is the Air Force’s name for the site, which is better known as “Area 51,” a term that conjures up conspiracy theories and UFO

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Trevor Paglen, *Detachment 3, Air Force Flight Test Center #2; Groom Lake, NV; Distance ~ 26 Miles, 2008*, c-print, 40 x 50 inches; *Chemical and Biological Weapons Proving Ground, Dugway, UT Distance ~ 42 miles 11:17 a.m., 2006*, c-print, 40 x 40 inches / OPPOSITE, TOP: *Morning Commute [Gold Coast Terminal], Las Vegas, NV Distance ~ 1 mile 6:26 a.m., 2006*, c-print, 30 x 36 inches; OPPOSITE, BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT: *Control Tower; Cactus Flat, NV; 11:55 a.m.; Distance ~ 20 miles, 2006*, c-print, 30 x 36 inches; *Illuminated Hangars, Tonopah Test Range, NV; Distance ~ 18 miles; 9:08 p.m., 2006*, c-print, 30 x 36 inches





cover-ups. What we can see of this most secret of military sites is actually pretty banal: a series of nondescript buildings, airplane hangars, some vehicles—nothing approaching the extraordinary or extraterrestrial.

Recently, Paglen has turned his camera to the night sky above Yosemite National Park, using software designed with the assistance of amateur satellite observers, to detect and capture on film the orbit of U.S. reconnaissance satellites. The resulting landscape photographs are far more sublime than the earlier work. *Four Geostationary Satellites Above the Sierra Nevada*, 2007, depicts a jagged, snow-covered mountain range; overhead, a dramatic streak of light passes through the sky. But this is no meteorological phenomenon—no comet, no shooting star—rather, it is the trace of American reconnaissance satellites' orbits. In Paglen's photography, a landscape is not merely a landscape, nor is a shooting star merely a shooting star. These images are visualizations of a vast world of secret operations, of which they provide evidential fragments. As artist Martha Rosler once observed about a series of her own photographs, "The photos here are radical metonymy, with a setting implying the condition itself."⁵ In Paglen's case, the condition itself is an empire of clandestine military operations, a multi-billion dollar Defense Department budget, and a global infrastructure of which most of us know nothing.

"Something happened in the desert."

While Paglen's work is not really about "landscape," it is impossible to ignore his connection to the long lineage of artists who were drawn, early on, to the apparent "blank slate" of the deserts of the American West. Photographers like Carleton Watkins and Timothy O'Sullivan sought to capture the topographical nuances of "unexplored" American territory, often in the service of military interests—such as mapping and keeping tabs on American Indians—and to provide folks back home a taste of the West's "untouched" sublimity. Later, modernist painters from Georgia O'Keeffe to Agnes Martin found inspiration in the severity and solitude of desert life.

In addition to nineteenth-century frontier and explorer photographers, a crucial historical reference for Paglen's work reaches back to the 1960s and 1970s, when a good number of artists virtually abandoned city life, seeking a radical otherness that they hoped to find in the desert. They were in search of what art historian Julian Myers has called the "no-place."⁶ Earthworks artists set out for a mythical outside, desiring and imagining some other means by which to experience and organize space. The spatial turn in art was by then in full swing, famously articulated by Rosalind Krauss in her landmark 1979 essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," in

which she observed that an increasing number of artists had more or less dispensed with the logic of medium, in order to inhabit an expanding field of sculpture—for sculpture remained Krauss's primary concern.⁷ Artists began to understand space itself as a medium, a thing that could be engaged and produced.

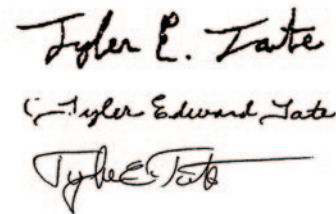
But if the desert could once be made to represent a no-place "off the grid," artists eventually had to come to terms with the fact that this otherness was a fiction: the land was already shot through with new modes for systematizing and rationalizing space, such as the control of natural resources, surveying and surveillance, bureaucratic land management, and not least, the increasing insinuation of state power into land control.⁸

This brief discussion of earthworks is not meant to cast Paglen as a latter-day land artist—far from it. But it strikes me that some of the lessons learned in the waning days of earthworks may constitute the ambivalent inheritance of Paglen and others in his field—from the curatorial projects of Nato Thompson to Matthew Coolidge and the Center for Land Use Interpretation, among others. Since the 1960s, the field of geography has been transformed, offering geographers, art historians, and urban theorists alike new tools for making sense of how humans create space, and how, reciprocally, space creates us. Pioneering Marxist geographers like David Harvey and Manuel Castells loom large as influences here, as does Rosalyn Deutsche—perhaps the first art historian to foreground spatial politics in art production.

All of these thinkers are indebted to Henri Lefebvre, whose radical analysis proposed that space itself is not natural, but social through and through. Space is organized and produced by humans—not unlike the production of commodities that surround us, however magical and detached from human labor they may appear. An eccentric Marxist, Lefebvre was influenced by—and in turn exerted his own influence on—the contemporary artistic movements he encountered, including Surrealism and, more significantly, the Situationist International and its leader, Guy Debord. Lefebvre published what is perhaps his most important book, *The Production of Space*, in 1974, but it wasn't translated into English until the early 1990s, when it revolutionized the field of critical geography. I would venture to say that Paglen's "experimental geography"—the term he has coined for his idiosyncratic set of geographical practices and interests—would be unthinkable without Lefebvre's example.

"Something happened in the desert." So begins the prologue to Paglen's book *Torture Taxi*. He isn't speaking of earthworks artists carving out monuments in the desert, or anything else explicitly related to art production. He refers to the mysterious airplanes that land in desert airports, like the

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: *Rodeo Gal*, reproduced in *I Could Tell You But Then You Would Have to be Destroyed By Me: Emblems from the Pentagon's Dark World*; detail of *Symbology Vol. 2*, 2008, 15.25 x 120 inches; detail of *Five Classified Aircraft*, 2007, 5 fabric patches, framed: 15.25 x 32.75 x 2.25 inches



Las Vegas Gold Coast Terminal, before proceeding on to black sites as part of the government's extraordinary rendition program that secretly disappears prisoners of war, transporting them to prisons around the world—and outside of U.S. jurisdiction. Paglen has spent hours tracking these unmarked planes—nondescript but for a stripe of red—sometimes peering at them through binoculars from an upper-story hotel room near the Las Vegas airport. It turns out that the CIA uses fleets of these airplanes—referred to as “Janets”—that are owned by front companies whose boards of directors comprise fictional people. Paglen created an artwork, *Missing Persons*, 2006, culling their signatures from various business records and aircraft registrations. The signatures are never consistent—meaning, they are forged.

The “Janets” appear in a couple of Paglen's photographs. He takes care to document the time at which the photographs are taken: at 10:44 p.m. the aircraft crew is returning home from their classified jobs. In *Morning Commute (Gold Coast Terminal), Las Vegas, NV; Distance ~ 1 mile; 6:26 a.m.*, 2005, a number of personnel board the plane. Somehow, the image calls to mind Allan Sekula's *Untitled Slide Sequence* of 1972, in which workers file out of the General Dynamics Convair Division aerospace factory at the end of the day. It is significant that Paglen references workers, the multitudes who labor in this vast military industrial complex—and who must keep silent about it. In his book *I Could Tell You But Then You Would Have To Be Destroyed By Me: Emblems from the Pentagon's Black World*, 2008, Paglen presents his collection of often bizarre shoulder patches worn by secret squadrons.⁹ While the patches often suggest a culture of juvenile “bromance” (my personal favorite: “Rodeo Gal,” in which a naked woman rides a killer whale, shooting lightning bolts from her fingers), they are evidence of humans who sell their labor to their government. Paglen explains that the “Rodeo Gal” patch contains a logic beyond its quirky misogyny: “This patch was worn by DC-130 flight crews responsible for testing the TSSAM cruise missile (also known as the Killer Whale).” In the end, the “black sites,” the satellites, the unmarked airplanes, the patches all add up to something—to an experience that feels like walking into a dark room, allowing our eyes to slowly adjust to the darkness.

Paglen's geography is not the kind we might expect from grade school lessons; he's not much concerned with traditional cartography or topography. He doesn't set out to map the land, with the masterful, God's-eye view that such an endeavor implies; instead he traces the contours of obscured, amorphous spaces. Neither is he a traditional photographer, if photography has historically been taken to provide concrete evidence, documentation of the reality. Paglen's photographs give us little to go on: so many

blurry images of empty landscapes, nondescript architecture, unmarked airplanes, signatures of fictional people, streaks of light that might double as natural phenomena. His work, though, is indexical—but not in the way that a photograph is indexical, the physical trace of the light striking film. Rather, his work is gestural, like the act of pointing to something in the distance. “...Geography theory tells us that it really isn't possible to make things disappear, to render things nonexistent,” Paglen writes.¹⁰ His project is not so much to make things reappear, but to point to the fact that they exist, in spite of invisibility.

NOTES

1. Trevor Paglen and A. C. Thompson, *Torture Taxi: On the Trail of the CIA's Rendition Flights*, New York: Melville House, 2006.
2. Jane Mayer, *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned Into a War on American Ideals*, New York: Doubleday, 2008.
3. <http://www.fromthewilderness.com/timeline/2001/meetthepress091601.html>, accessed August 15, 2009.
4. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Donald Nicholson-Smith, tr., Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1991.
5. “In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)” in *Martha Rosler: 3 Works*, Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2006, 87.
6. Julian Myers, *No-places: Earthworks and Urbanism Circa 1970*, Doctoral dissertation, UC Berkeley, 2006.
7. Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October* 8 (Spring, 1979): 30-44.
8. Perhaps Michael Heizer is the last of the earthworks artists still clinging to the myth of desert otherness. Nellis Air Force Base increasingly encroaches on his Nevada compound, and in (maybe—or maybe not?) paranoid fashion, he complained to Michael Kimmelman, “I wouldn't be surprised if they sent out a hit squad to kill me!” Michael Kimmelman, “Art's Last, Lonely Cowboy,” *New York Times Magazine*, February 6, 2005, 33. Also quoted in Myers, *No-Places*.
9. Trevor Paglen, *I Could Tell You But Then You Would Have To Be Destroyed By Me: Emblems from the Pentagon's Black World*, New York: Melville House, 2008.
10. Trevor Paglen, *Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon's Secret World*, New York: Dutton, 2009, 16.

Jill Dawsey is Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts in Salt Lake City. She was Assistant Curator in Painting and Sculpture at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art from 2003 to 2006. Dawsey's current research focuses on the relationship between feminist art of the 1970s and the public sphere. Her profile of Mathilde ter Heijne was published in the May/June 2007 issue of ART PAPERS.