

ALTMAN SIEGEL

GALLERY S/F

49 GEARY ST, STE. 416 [4th floor] SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94108  
tel: 415.576.9300 fax: 415.373.4471 // // // // // ALTMAN SIEGEL.COM

# aperture

191 SUMMER 2008



# DISAPPEARANCES

## THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF TREVOR PAGLEN



*by Thomas Keenan*

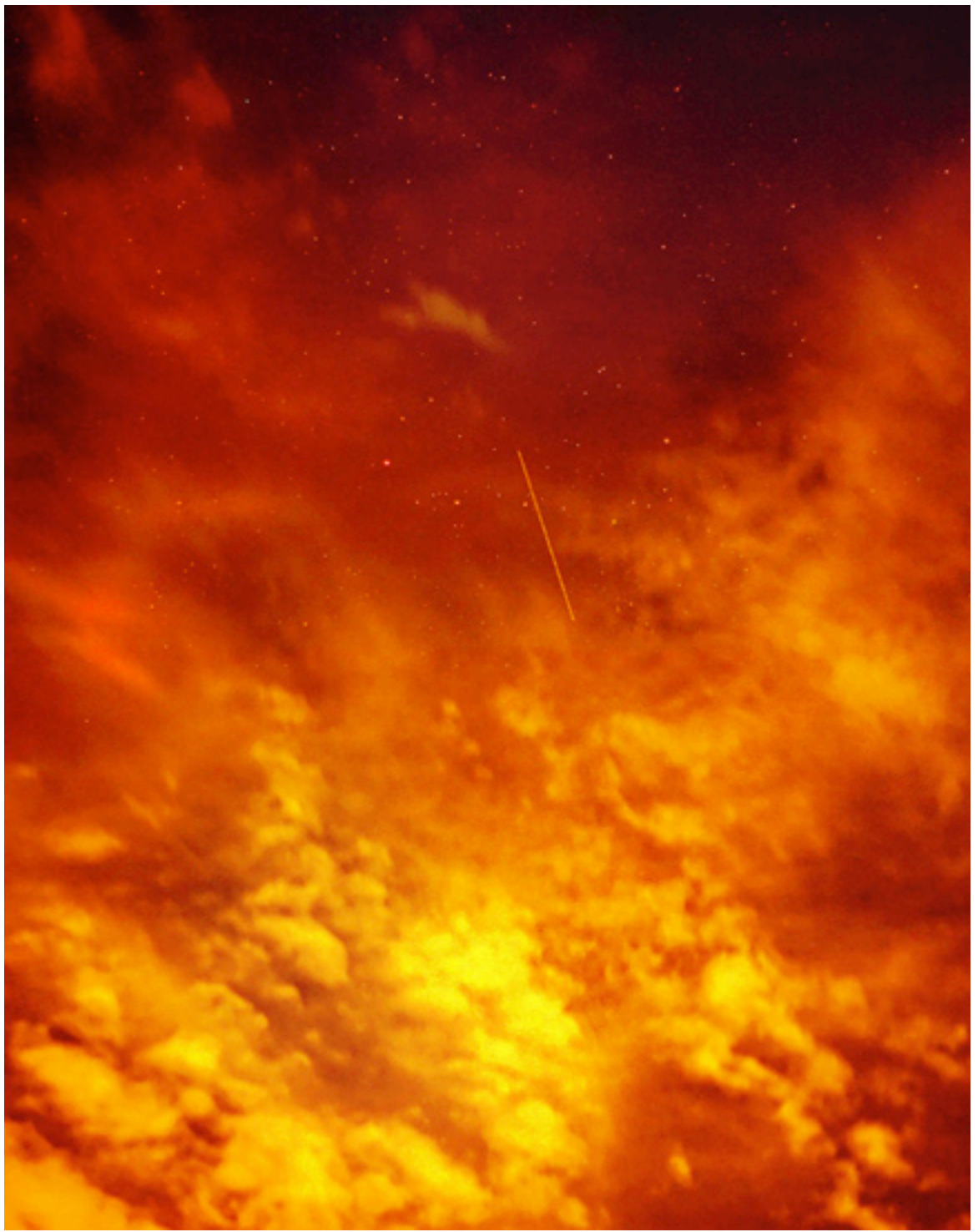
The geographer and artist Trevor Paglen has made it his project of late to take pictures of things that are very hard to see, whether because they are very far away, or because they are hidden in secrecy or beyond the pale of recognition, or because they do not officially exist. In a series of projects, he has tracked the flight paths of the CIA's clandestine fleet of private jets, photographed U.S. military and intelligence installations in Afghanistan, captured the orbits of American spy satellites, and reproduced the signatures of the fictitious people behind some of this country's intelligence apparatus.

In Paglen's work, photography confronts a shadow world. There are "ghost detainees" in American detention camps, who have sometimes been deposited there by aircraft owned by "ghost" companies. "You find nonexistent people here who are somehow designed to disappear others," he told me in a 2006 conversa-

tion (published in the journal *Bidoun*). Paglen is interested in how people have been made to disappear, and in what can be done to make them appear. His project, though, is less one of restoration or recovery than of identifying the mechanisms and the visual texture of disappearance itself.

In an article of May 13, 2004, the *New York Times* quoted a "former intelligence official" going public about "disappearance":

After the Sept. 11 attacks, the [Central Intelligence] agency began to search for remote sites in friendly countries around the world where Qaeda operatives could be kept quietly and securely. "There was a debate after 9/11 about how to make people disappear," a former intelligence official said. The result was a series of secret agreements allowing the C.I.A. to use sites overseas without outside scrutiny.





But when that former official tells the reporter about making people disappear, and when the newspaper publishes his words, what becomes of that disappearance? The bodies have not been produced (no *habeas corpus* yet), and many of the prisoners in question still have not been presented to the public; still, the facts of their disappearance—and of what is being done to them in detention—are by now well known. Thanks to such officials, “disappearances”—along with “water-boarding” and “rendition,” among other phenomena—have become open secrets. Something important has transpired, and the secrets are no longer simply secret. But challenging these practices by merely exposing them, bringing them into the light of public scrutiny, seems to be insufficient. So what is the status of this information? What shall we do with it?

In the introduction to his 2005 *Torture and Truth: Human Rights after 9/11*, Mark Danner draws our attention to what he calls the “peculiarity” of the Abu Ghraib incident: “It is not about revelation or disclosure but about the failure, once wrongdoing is disclosed, of politicians, officials, the press, and ultimately citizens, to act. The scandal is not about uncovering what is hidden, it is about seeing what is already there—and acting on it. It is not about information: it is about politics.” This is true, and important, but the line between information and politics, sight and action, may not be as clear as Danner suggests. If it were, then the issue would be purely and simply political, a matter only of force and persuasion, and it is not. The Abu Ghraib images, and the publicity they received, were part of the politics. Danner rightly indicates that the problem is not that we don’t know enough, or that we are in need of further enlightenment before anything might happen. We can, in fact, see (almost) everything. But images, even if they are graphic, are not self-evident. They do not lead irrevocably to particular or obvious conclusions. If, today, actions in the political realm are rarely unaccompanied by images, the force and import—the gravity—of those images cannot simply be taken for granted. That is the enigma.

When we look at what is *already there*, even if it has only just emerged into the realm of visibility, what do we see? Paglen has been investigating the landscapes of disappearance, and especially the enigma of the open secret, in a number of ways over the last few years, with compelling results. He suggests that the outcome is, in more ways than one, blurry.

The English word “blur” seems to come from the same root as “blear.” It signifies that something has happened to our vision: we

see, but as if through tears. With blurs, the basic question is one of resolution—which is, on one hand, a matter of determination, fixing, and deciding, and on the other a matter of the reduction of something complex to its constituent parts, into simpler elements. But when speaking about blurs, we are also talking about images and their quality, about clarity and hence about light. There are blurs of motion and blurs of focus, but they share the trait of indistinctness. The blurry image is difficult to resolve, make out, reduce: it is not clear but dim, not sharp but dull. The blur challenges our habits of looking. We blink or squint, try again to see something that is somehow out of alignment with itself. We always look twice, more than twice, when things get blurry.

In many of Paglen’s images, blurring is not something that befalls an otherwise crisp image. It is not something secondary or accidental, not the sign of a failure to capture what is there to be seen clearly. The image begins and persists in a haze. If it is blurry, that is because it has to be. It would not be the same were clarity to be achieved.

Thus Paglen’s photographs of secret military installations and equipment, taken at very great distances with very long lenses, are dominated by the haze of all that air between the camera and the object, by the sheer fact of remoteness. The distance bends and warps a faraway air-traffic-control tower, and the faces of the workers leaving their plane are blobs. An enormous interval separates camera and hangar, and although the camera’s sensors are capable of traversing that space, to some extent

they also respect and acknowledge it visually. In the blurry image, the distance itself is evident—perhaps more evident than the subject. The places Paglen photographs are meant, somehow, not to be seen: they are designed for secret missions, for operations that take place in the dark; in rendering them visible Paglen’s images take care to preserve that element of the covert.

Faced with something obscure—something essentially dark—it is radically insufficient merely to shine the light of publicity. It misses the point: to turn on the lights tells us nothing about the dark itself. Paglen is in search of something as he takes these pictures. Confronted with something unknown, or barely known, but still accessible to the senses, he employs his instruments of remote discovery to learn about it. He attaches telescopes, some with focal lengths of up to 7000mm, to a digital SLR camera, and (as he puts it in a project description) takes pictures across “upwards of forty miles of thick atmosphere between an





observer and the sites depicted." (He also shoots on 35mm and 4-by-5 film.)

In Paglen's project on the CIA's "extraordinary rendition" program, documented in his 2006 book *Torture Taxi: On the Trail of the CIA's Rendition Flights*, he tracks the CIA's fleet of private planes, discovers their registration numbers, maps their flight paths, and records the names of many of the passengers on them. Over great distances, Paglen resolves things, analyzes and synthesizes the constituent parts of the structure into a coherent pattern. There is a quest for knowledge in his work, and a method that aims at the greatest possible reduction of uncertainty.

Of his work with those extremely long lenses, Paglen says: "Limit-telephotography involves photographing landscapes that cannot be seen with the unaided eye." The idea is at least as old as Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in which he wrote: "The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject. . . . Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye—if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man."

So we look, with the aid of the usual instruments—and some unusual ones—and what do we see? Something entirely new, something to which we would ordinarily have no access. And strangely, things are not bleak but bright, once seen in this other light. The images constitute a provocation, a question for us . . . or, actually, a question about us. Our ability to read and interpret what we see with their assistance is put into question. The announcement that the image makes, before any reading starts, is that the reading will be difficult, somehow beyond our control—but still we have to do it.

Exploring this new unseen space of blurs is an effort that takes us in at least two directions: our loss of orientation is simultaneously the overcoming of limiting boundaries and the disappearance of the markers of certainty. Both erasures and stains, blurs take us apart, put us in motion. The experience, if it is one, is by definition illegible, at least in part. And the effects of our own actions and encounters remain obscure: Did we make something happen? And if the effects are blurry, what

about the causes? Blurs put us, our agency, and our resolution into question.

Looking toward political theorists like Jacques Rancière and Hannah Arendt, Paglen wonders how we might extend their "notions of political speech into the realm of images. Certainly images 'do things,' but they are without guarantees." Is this work evidence? Yes, of a sort, Paglen told me recently. Or perhaps it is more like evidence of evidence, an effort simply to establish the possibility that some of these things might exist in the public realm. He notes that lawyers for Guantánamo detainee Majid Khan used Paglen's images of CIA "black sites" (secret prisons) as evidence in their filings, but in an unexpected way: "Their



**PAGE 36:** *Keyhole/Improved Crystal Optical Reconnaissance Satellite Near Scorpio (USA 129)*, 2007; **PAGE 37:** *Lacrosse/Onyx V Radar Imaging Reconnaissance Satellite Crossing the Disk of the Moon (USA 182)*, 2007; **OPPOSITE:** "James Thomas Harbison" (CIA Officer Wanted in Connection with the Abduction of Abu Omar from Milan), silkscreen on canvas, 2007; **THIS PAGE, TOP:** *Workers, Gold Coast Terminal, Las Vegas, Nevada, Distance: 1 mile, 8:58 A.M.*, 2007; **BOTTOM:** *Chemical and Biological Weapons Proving Ground, Dugway, Utah, Distance: 42 miles, 11:17 A.M.*, 2006.



**ABOVE:** *Control Tower (Area 52), Tonopah Test Range, Nevada, Distance: 20 miles, 11:55 A.M., 2006;*  
**BELOW:** *Illuminated Hangars, Tonopah Test Range, Nevada, Distance: 18 miles, 9:08 P.M., 2006.*





*Illuminated Work Space (National Reconnaissance Office), Chantilly, Virginia, 2007.*



argument," he said, "had to do with trying to establish that there was enough unclassified 'evidence' in public to construct a 'grammar' for courtroom proceedings." The evidence was not about what was exposed in the images, but about the mere existence of such images. The advocates, Paglen says, were "simply trying to establish that something *could* be spoken about 'politically.'"

In this sense, he continues, "Photography—and this is especially true after September 11—is a performance." Not fundamentally a statement, a document, or a record of how things are, but an activity, an event. And so, he says, we need to face up to the fact that today, for some of us at least, "to photograph is to exercise the right to photograph. Nowadays, people get locked up for photographing the Brooklyn Bridge."

Paglen's work does not simply expose what is hidden, or render the invisible visible, or establish certainties. It does those things, and marks their insufficiency. It announces that cameras, lenses, maps, data and databases, publicity, and even beauty are not enough. Why make photographs, then? In the name of what? These questions are all left open. Perhaps the knowledge is produced for something like its own sake: because we ought to know, in general. Perhaps the work takes the responsibility of calling us to our responsibilities: we cannot say, now, that we didn't know. Perhaps the knowledge is instrumental as a pathway, however unreliable, toward action.

Or perhaps not. Paglen seems careful to be modest—or blurry. As he told Rene Gabri in a 2006 interview for the 16beavergroup blog: "It's a fact, in my opinion, that we have access to more and better information than ever before. [But] . . . the dynamics that shape public opinion, the dynamics of an 'informed public,' and the dynamics of change are extremely messy."

The mess, like the blur, is not going away. We stand a slightly better chance of getting oriented in it, though, thanks to these pictures. ●

***Lacrosse/Onyx II Radar Imaging Reconnaissance Satellite Passing Through Draco (USA 69), 2007.***

All images courtesy the artist, Behrweiser Gallery, New York.



