

The New York Times

Trevor Paglen: "Impossible Objects" That Reveal a Hidden Power

By Sophie Haigney

September 9, 2020



The American artist Trevor Paglen, whose work explores the power and ubiquity of surveillance technology. Credit...Aubrey Trinnaman for The New York Times

Tucked into a small gallery in the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh is a plexiglass cube filled with computer parts. It's about 16 inches on each side, reminiscent of a Donald Judd box, updated for the digital era.

It's also an open Wi-Fi hot spot to which you can link your phone. But before your phone connects to the internet, it routes traffic through the Tor Project's network, which anonymizes your phone, location and activity. Once you connect, you can move through the museum totally untraced. This sculpture, titled "Autonomy Cube," is the kind of object for which Trevor Paglen, 45, has become known, as one of the foremost artists drawing attention to the power and ubiquity of surveillance technology.

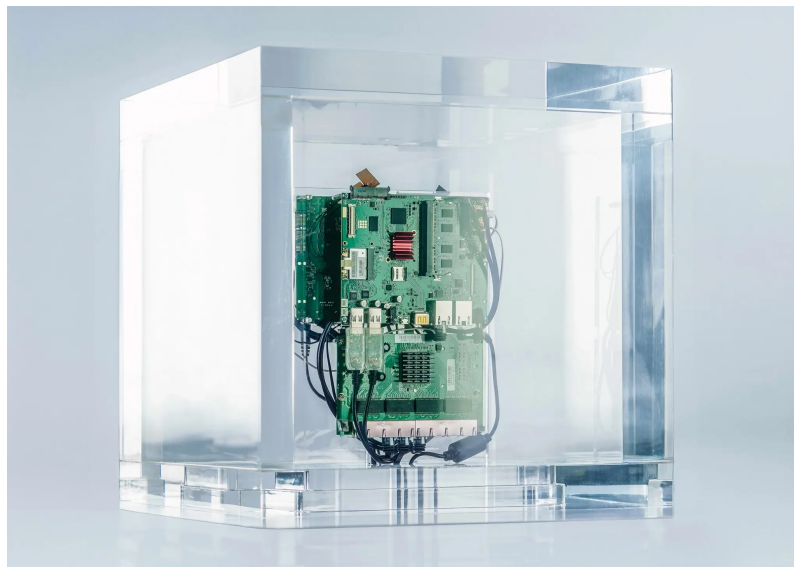
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"It's part of a series that I think about as impossible objects," he said of his latest work in a recent phone interview. He has also launched a satellite sculpture into space that he described as "a giant mirror in the sky, with no commercial or scientific value, one with purely aesthetic value."

He has also sent a time capsule with 100 images from throughout human history into perpetual orbit, micro-etched onto a disc and encased in a gold-plated shell. These objects might be thought of as "impossible" because there is no incentive for their creation in a world where technological development has been commercialized, where surveillance is commonplace and where space remains largely militarized. Is making them, then, an act of optimism?

"I wouldn't use the word 'optimistic', but what you're getting at with that word is there," Mr. Paglen said. "They're very self-contradictory and contradictory of the systems they're in."



Mr. Paglen's "Autonomy Cube" (2015), at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, doubles as a Wi-Fi hot spot. Credit...Trevor Paglen and Metro Pictures, New York

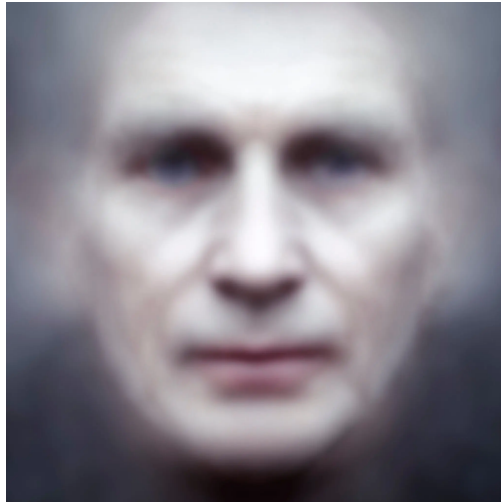
"Autonomy Cube" is installed at the Carnegie Museum in an exhibition of Mr. Paglen's work titled "Opposing Geometries." Organized as part of the 2020 Hillman Photography Initiative, an incubator for innovative thinking about photography, the show will be on view until March 2021.

Like almost all of Mr. Paglen's work, the exhibition takes contemporary technologies as its central subject, but many of the works here look backward too. The show, which features photographs, overwhelmingly demonstrates that even though "surveillance" and "computer vision" and "machine learning" have become today's buzzwords, they have a long history that is bound up with photography.

The exhibition includes images from Mr. Paglen's series "They Took the Faces From the Accused and the Dead ..." which assembled thousands of photos from a National Institute of Standards and Technology database, an archive of mug shots that was used to test early facial recognition software programs without the subjects' consent. In Mr. Paglen's versions, parts of the subjects' faces are blocked out, leaving haunting square-shaped holes that are at once a reference to their stolen identities and also a means of returning them to anonymity.

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His "Beckett,"(from the 2017 series "Even the Dead Are Not Safe"), a portrait of Samuel Beckett generated by mixing images that facial recognition programs tagged as him.Credit...Trevor Paglen and Metro Pictures, New York

"The show is looking at historical forms of photography and the relationship between those forms of photography and different kinds of police power or state power," Mr. Paglen said. "What is that relationship between photography and power?"

The multiplicity of meanings in Mr. Paglen's work are part of their appeal to technologists and thinkers. "There's lots of rhetoric about how A.I. is going to change the world, and people don't realize how much technology has already changed the world and then when they do come to realize it, they often have the reaction of being scared or otherwise feeling powerless," said David Danks, a philosophy professor at Carnegie Mellon University whose work focuses on ethics and technology, and who is on the creative team of the Hillman Photography Initiative. "I think a really important aspect of Trevor's work is that it doesn't just elicit a reaction, it doesn't just educate. I think Trevor's very good about indirectly giving people clues about how to be empowered."



An image from Mr. Paglen's "They Took the Faces From the Accused and the Dead...)," 2019, a series that assembled photos from the American National Standards Institutes database, an archive of mug shots that was used to test early facial recognition software programs without the subjects' consent.Credit...Trevor Paglen and Pace Gallery, New York

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Many of the works in this show are extensions of Mr. Paglen's longtime interest in the relationship between photography and artificial intelligence — including his ImageNet Roulette, a digital art project and app that went viral last fall and allowed users to upload their faces to see how A.I. might label them. Often the results were racist, sexist and otherwise stereotypical — a shock to users, which prompted ImageNet, a leading image database to remove half a million images.

In "Opposing Geometries," though, Mr. Paglen — who has a Ph.D. in geography and an M.F.A. — is thinking about the history of images as well as the future. "If you look at these histories of technical image-making, they're always, if not part of a military project, adjacent to one and nurtured by it, so in some ways we have these very contiguous histories," he said.



"The Black Canyon Deep Semantic Image Segments," 2020, dye sublimation print. Credit...Trevor Paglen and Altman Siegel, San Francisco

Among these intertwined histories are that of photography and the settlement of the American West. While indelible images of places like Yosemite taken in the 1860s have long been ingrained in American mythmaking, Mr. Paglen is interested in them as early assertions of military control. The War Department (now known as Defense) funded several reconnaissance missions into the West in the 1860s and 1870s and sent photographers as part of a push to capture the new territory. Yet these sublime photos, Mr. Paglen said, were like "the eyes of the state on a new territory," a theme he explores in his Carnegie Museum exhibition.

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Some of Mr. Paglen's photographs do look uncannily like Carleton Watkins's early photographs of Yosemite, and were in fact created using a historical printing process called albumen. But he also ran the photographs through computer vision algorithms, which struggle to identify objects in their natural environment, generating instead lines and shapes on the images' surface. The resulting photos are once hyper-modern and antiquarian, tying the past and present through technology.



Karnak, Montezuma Range Haar; Hough Transform; Hough Circles; Watershed, 2018, a triptych of gelatin silver prints that are part of Mr. Paglen's ongoing exploration of the history of photography and the American West. Credit...Trevor Paglen and Metro Pictures, New York

"There are more pictures today made by machines for machines to interpret than all the pictures that have existed for humankind," said Dan Leers, the curator of "Opposing Geometries." "But rather than throwing his hands up, Trevor is going back through the history of photography, and in some cases specifically reusing existing images, and in other cases, acknowledging historical processes in his making of these pictures."

This is the first new exhibition that will open at the Carnegie Museum post-lockdown, and its themes have particular resonance after months when our lives moved mostly online. Mr. Paglen, whose main studio is in Berlin, and who normally travels frequently, spent the lockdown in Brooklyn, where he has a secondary studio.

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"I'd never used Zoom before this," he said. "So what is this layer of technology that has become so much a part of the ways in which we interact with each other? Especially when these forms of technology are also surveillance platforms, and are highly invasive tools."

During that time in New York, he made a series of new works that responded to the natural world in full-blown spring but also to the ways the pandemic was reshaping life and death. An exhibition of these works, titled "Bloom," went on display at Pace Gallery in London on Sept. 10.



"The show is looking at historical forms of photography and the relationship between those forms of photography and different kinds of police power or state power," Mr. Paglen says of his current exhibition at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. Credit...Aubrey Trinnaman for The New York Times

In Pittsburgh, even the physical layout of the exhibition highlights the ubiquity and insidiousness of certain aspects of virtual life. The works are placed in three main spaces around the museum, and the intent is to mimic.

"For us that was really important because it gives an idea of infiltration," Mr. Leers, the curator, said. "The surveillance that happens through algorithms and photography is quite hidden, and requires digging and sleuthing to find out how it's working."

Someone wandering through the museum might stumble serendipitously on Mr. Paglen's work, getting a glimpse of how the systems of surveillance are built seamlessly into the fabric of our everyday lives.

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