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"Trevor Paglen: When the Cloud Looks Back: Images of a Surveilled World"

By Walter Seidl

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Trevor Paglen is known for using photography as a medium to approach numerous subjects in an almost scientific manner, including geography, military operations, government surveillance, new ways of seeing, artificial intelligence, UFOs, and outer space. This conversation took place on the occasion of his current exhibition at the Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco, which offers a retrospective of the past 20 years of Paglen's artistic work. [1]

WS As you scan the exhibition, one of the oldest works is the video "*The Workers; Las Vegas, NV; Distance ~1 mile*" from 2006. So perhaps we should start right here: Where were you at that time, and how has your work evolved since then?

TP This work, as you quite rightly point out, was created in 2006, but the exhibition also includes another photograph from the same year: a picture of a secret military base in Nevada, taken with a telescope. At the time, I was very involved with the global War on Terror, a generally largely secretive war waged by special forces, which also introduced carefully concealed prisons, the so-called black sites, into the world. In short, I was completely occupied at that time flying around the world, tracking down secret prisons, and monitoring aircraft to find out where the people abducted by the CIA were actually being taken. As a result, my interest became entirely focused on these vast areas of secrecy. And two of my photographic works from this period relate directly to this: firstly, the aforementioned photograph of one of these military bases in Nevada, taken from a great distance; On the other hand, there's a work titled **The Workers** , which aims to offer a somewhat subtle glimpse into the working conditions at a secret US Air Force base located in the middle of the desert. It's possible that the workers there actually live in Las Vegas and have to be flown in to these bases every day. * *The Workers** was also created using a telescope, specifically from the roof of a hotel that offers a good overview of the location to which the workers are flown back. The video is intended as an homage to Harun Farocki and his 1995 film * *Workers Leaving the Factory** . In that film, however, the workers aren't leaving a factory, but rather one of the aircraft that serve as shuttles to the secret air force bases. Regarding the development of my work, I'd like to say, in general terms, that it has evolved in line with technological innovations and now also incorporates artificial intelligence techniques.

WS What began as a secret war on terror has now become official practice.

TP Absolutely right. Take, for example, the cases of people who suddenly fall victim to kidnapping in American cities and are subsequently transferred to high-security prisons in El Salvador, all using private charter planes. Extensive mass surveillance and data collection measures, which play a crucial role in all of this, have also been further optimized with the help of artificial intelligence.

WS You own a collection of military symbols, including the *NOYFB* (None Of Your Fucking Business) badge, which also dates back to 2006. How did that come about?

TP I suspect that to date I have amassed one of the most extensive collections of military memorabilia related to classified projects. Since my dissertation focused on military secrecy, I came into contact with many people involved in such projects while writing it. Virtually all of them had set aside a room in their homes to keep mementos related to these secret programs. This likely inspired me to begin collecting similar objects, which eventually led to my own publication in the 2000s. ❷ As a result, other people have approached me to provide even more of this kind of material.

WS The exhibition proves to be quite heterogeneous in terms of the media employed. Alongside a recent video, for example, are photographic works that appear highly abstract yet possess an almost romantic quality. Due to their painterly appearance, they are often compared to works by William Turner, as they do indeed resemble paintings, at least when viewed from a distance. These works include, among others, *Untitled (Reaper Drones)* , *The Watzmann (Scale Invariant Feature Transform; Oriented FAST and Rotated BRIEF)* , and *CLOUD #395 Maximally Stable Extremal*

Regions; Hough Circle Transform. While they may all appear abstract, they are based on entirely different concepts, aren't they?

TP The photograph of the Reaper drone was taken at a time when the War on Terror was undergoing a transformation following Obama's inauguration. The strategy previously favored by George W. Bush primarily involved kidnappings and secret detention facilities. During my research, which included interviews with former inmates of such facilities, I was haunted by the question of why the CIA was investing such a large infrastructure when it would have been so easy to rely on targeted killings instead. And it was precisely this shift in direction that Obama implemented, pursuing a policy of targeted attacks using unmanned aerial vehicles. The work *Untitled (Reaper Drones)* thus emerged at this very moment of transition, at this moment of a general change in policy. The visual language employed is deliberately inspired by the tradition of Romantic painting and historical depictions of monsters or angels in the sky. The work *"The Watzmann,"* for example, explicitly references the famous painting by C.D. Friedrich from 1825. As an Austrian, you immediately notice this reference, while in California, for instance, it's unlikely anyone would see it. In this context, the question arose for me as to how the perception of landscape has actually changed over the last two centuries. Because today's viewers look at such landscapes, so to speak, through a filter imposed on them either analogously by their romanticized image of the Alps or digitally by data-based technologies. The series of works on clouds ultimately deals with the question of how machine vision recognizes something like clouds—that is, phenomena that prove to be extremely amorphous. We humans tend to discover things like faces or animals in them, that is, to project something onto them that isn't actually there. And in a very similar way, algorithmic systems generate their pattern recognitions, which are based on purely statistical models; a process that the data cloud, in turn, symbolizes in a truly outstanding way.

WS You've also started a series where each title begins with *"Near..."* and ends with the name of a place. These are always locations of alleged UFO sightings. But how do you actually find these places?

TP Over the past 25 years, I've amassed a huge collection of what I'd call my UFO photographs. This genre, incidentally something of a favorite of mine, has always fascinated me, not least because this type of photography captures the very essence of what photography is all about. The photos are always taken during my travels and can be divided into two categories. First, there are the photos of objects whose identity I knew, but which I managed to make appear UFOs through various photographic techniques. For example, if I saw a bird flying by, I would speculate that with a longer exposure time and a certain amount of motion blur, it would eventually take on the shape of a UFO. Then, on the other hand, there are the photographs of phenomena whose exact nature is truly unknown to me, such as those I took in the Utah desert near test drones. Initially, I was convinced that all these photos were purely for my personal enjoyment. However, with the advent of generative AI, the very status of photographic images as reality was fundamentally called into question, so I decided to exhibit these works publicly.

WS In addition, there is the series *Unknown* , which focuses on the Earth's orbit or the sky in general, in order to locate satellites or objects that cannot be clearly identified...

TP These images are captured using highly sensitive, and in some cases even modified, infrared telescopes. However, the sky looks completely different in this infrared spectrum than we are used to. Therefore, neither human perception in the traditional sense nor machine vision alone is at play here. Rather, I am investigating how perception can be expanded and augmented with the

help of technical systems. Primarily, however, I am searching for objects in Earth's orbit—we estimate there are approximately 350 of them—whose identity is currently unknown. My aim was to locate these objects and make predictions about where in the sky they would appear. Their movement becomes visible in the image as soon as we access the corresponding data. In my estimation, these phenomena are generally either natural objects or fragments of satellites that broke apart in the 1960s, when satellite orbits were not yet systematically mapped. In reality, some of them may be top-secret military installations disguised as civilian satellites.

WS Your exhibition also includes a more recent video titled *Faces of ImageNet* (2022). How is this work structured?

TP This is an interactive installation where you stand in front of an object to be photographed and then classified by an AI trained on one of the most widely used object recognition datasets. Numerous AI systems operate on the principle of pointing a camera at objects in a room to identify them. However, access to a corresponding dataset is essential for such a process—that is, a gigantic collection of images of all the things that are ultimately to be distinguished. Training an AI model therefore requires having thousands of images of each of a glass, a chair, and so on. The most widely used dataset of this kind is called ImageNet and was created between 2009 and 2011. The project's goal was to build a database of virtually every object in the world. And one of the central questions at the time was, of course: How can you actually create a list of all existing things? The surprisingly simple answer: You use a dictionary and define all the nouns in it as categories for the AI model. However, it was overlooked that such a dictionary can also contain quite problematic terms. The actual creation of the database was then the task of the "crowdworkers" of Amazon Mechanical Turk, who set about scouring the entire internet and classifying every image within it. For my work, I ultimately extracted all the person categories from this dataset and trained an AI model to show participants/recipients which type of person they would be assigned to.

WS Then there is another fascinating work titled *Bloom (#957c7e)* from 2021, which shows flowering trees or shrubs. What is the background to this work?

TP This work belongs to a group of pieces related to machine vision. Specifically, it is a photograph of spring blossoms, originally taken in black and white. I then fed it into an AI classifier, which assigned arbitrary colors to different parts of the image. In this way, I attempt to recreate how an AI would "see" this image, albeit on a preliminary level of abstraction. The colors used bear no relation to the natural colors of the vegetation. Nevertheless, this is not an algorithmic colorization of a black-and-white photograph in the conventional sense, but rather a significantly more mechanical process.

WS At the center of the exhibition is also a skull into which various character traits and behavioral patterns have been entered, the work *The Model (Personality)* from 2020.

TP Formally, this work is based on those infamous 19th-century skull models used to try to determine personality types based on brain regions. However, the characteristics recorded on my skull are taken from the highly topical IBM personality model, which is used in digital data analysis to assign individuals to certain personality profiles based on their online behavior.

WS There are a full 20 years between the earliest and most recent works in the exhibition. Where does this specific selection come from?

TP This is my first exhibition in a new gallery, which is why it was so important to us to present the full breadth of my artistic practice to a new audience. In this context, we also wanted to explore whether and to what extent my earlier works had lost any urgency, or how their perception would change in today's context. After all, my entire artistic practice aims to reflect on our modes of perception: How do we perceive AI systems? How does state violence manifest itself? And how can we become aware of those forces that so profoundly shape our everyday lives—forces that are not always immediately visible to us? *(Translation: Peter Kunitzky)*