

CULTURED

"In a World of A.I. Slop, Trevor Paglen Is Confident in Digital Art's Capacity to Be 'Nutritious'"

By Sarah Cascone

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Trevor Paglen and Eli Scheinman. Photography by Caroline Tompkins. Image courtesy of Art Basel.

Zero10, Art Basel's new initiative for digital art, made a splashy debut at last year's Art Basel Miami Beach, where Beeple unleashed a flock of robot dogs with the eerily lifelike faces of Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, Pablo Picasso, Andy Warhol, and the artist himself.

Crowds couldn't look away. But one could argue this fascination was more akin to watching a car crash than being genuinely captivated by the art. (The dogs were also "pooping" photographs.)

The fair has tapped Trevor Paglen to co-curate Zero10's inaugural edition in Basel next week, titled "The Condition." The artist, the rare figure to straddle the worlds of art and tech and be equally respected in both, joins digital art strategist Eli Scheinman, who organized the ABMB iteration, in bringing together a selection of 15 presentations from galleries around the world.

Paglen, who recently published a book of essays, *How to See Like a Machine: Images After AI*, will bring a different approach to the table, one less rooted in spectacle and more inspired by the

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digital-first realities of art and life in 2026. He wants the fine art world to recognize the serious art being made by digital artists like 0xDEAFBEEF—and to demonstrate a kinship with historical digital works, such as a presentation by the late Vera Molnár, who was making art with algorithms in the 1950s.

"If you're a digitally native, post-NFT collector, you're certainly going to know some of the artists," Paglen tells *CULTURED*. "As a traditional Swiss collector, there's also certainly going to be artists there that you'll recognize, and maybe that will be the beginning point for your journey. We've tried to be very ecumenical and make something for as many people as possible."

We spoke with Paglen about what to expect from Zero10's Basel debut next week.



DEAFBEEF, *Glitchbox* (detail shot), 2021–25. Image courtesy of the artist and Asprey Studio.

What was your first impression of Zero10?

I've obviously been involved in the digital art world for my whole career, and I was really excited to see that being taken seriously. What was left in the aftermath of the NFT boom of 2021 is much more interesting and much more serious. There is a huge amount of enthusiasm in that space to do things and to try stuff out. Noah [Horowitz] and Art Basel recognize that. The Basel [fairs] are at the center of what we might call the institutionalized art world, so it's really exciting to see them branch out.

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The theme, "The Condition," focuses on how our world has become increasingly digital. What does that mean for art?

The vast majority of art has been digital art for quite a long time. Every painter I know mocks up their paintings in Photoshop. Every photographer I know has a digital part of their process. Every sculptor I know is mocking their stuff up in 3-D models. And this has been going on for a very long time. Most of the art that's made now is natively digital, and is sometimes translated into an analog form.

We live in a world that is thoroughly digital, through and through. There are way more digital cameras than there are human eyeballs. There are thousands of times as many transistors as there are insects. We live in a hybrid physical-digital world, and have for a long time. Obviously, the art made in an environment like that is going to be a part of that. Having an artificial distinction between digital and analog art makes no sense. And that's the thesis of the exhibition.



Leander Herzog, *Infinite Garden* (2025-26). Image courtesy of the artist and Nguyen Wahed.

So, you will have physical works, but also works on the blockchain, like Leander Herzog's *Infinite Garden* where collectors can mint new generative flower artworks to create a living digital garden.

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That's an example of a work that is staying in a natively digital space. It can only be digital, because it cannot be translated into a print or a linear video installation. It is using mechanics that only the blockchain environment can provide.

That's in contrast to something like Andreas Gursky's ocean prints. Those are digital art, in the sense that it's a Photoshop file. He's obviously also a master printer. Andreas Gursky is not somebody that you would necessarily think of as a digital artist—but when you think about it again, you're like, "Oh, obviously."

Part of our curatorial strategy was to show how a lot of the newer kind of digital works actually are part of very long traditions. And many of the artists who we think very highly of and don't think about necessarily as being "digital artists," are in fact very much also a part of those traditions.



Andreas Gursky, *Ocean V* (2010). Image courtesy of Sprüth Magers, Berlin.

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One of the things that I found most mind-blowing in your book was a section explaining how technology is literally being used to read our minds—and it seems that one of the pieces in *Zero10*, by Hito Steyerl, is doing just that. What can you tell us about her project with plant life and A.I.-generated imagery?

It's using biofeedback from plants to kind of evolve the installation. It's very much in that lineage of cybernetics and thinking about feedback loops between organic and inorganic systems or between life forms and technology forms. This kind of thing has been going on for a very long time, going back to at least the 1950s.

If I'm understanding this correctly, the experimenter will show you something and then they see what neurons light up in your brain in response. So when you see those neurons activate later, they can tell you're thinking about the same thing.

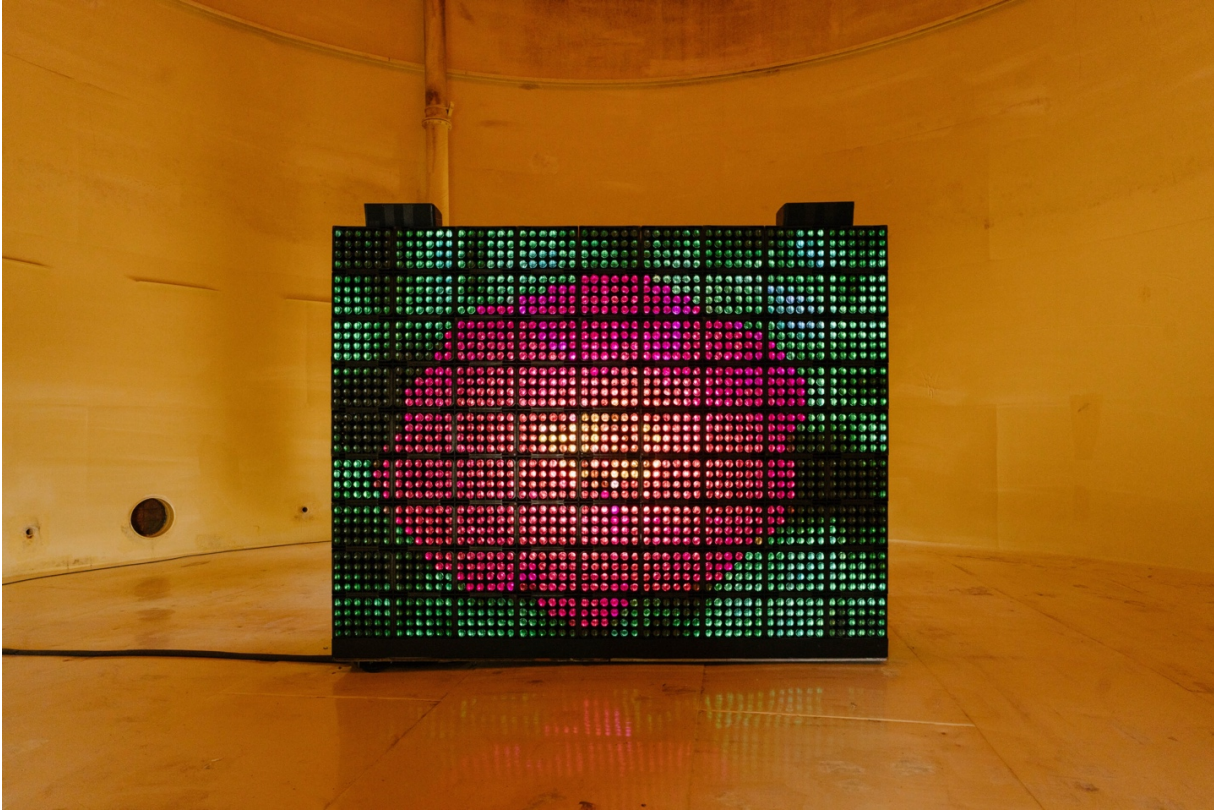
A lot of the experiments that are going on in labs are people doing demonstrations, extracting words from your brain—putting you in an fMRI machine and you can tell yourself a story and you'll see it like being read out on a machine outside. It's a little bit tricky, exactly what can be done right now versus what's speculative. But it's gone a lot further than I think even a lot of people in those fields thought it was going to go.

And you've personally done these kinds of experiments on yourself! How do you feel about it?

Very uncomfortable.

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Hito Steyerl, *Green Screen*, 2023. Exhibition view at Kunstfestival Begehungen, Chemnitz, 2025. Photography by Johannes Richter. Image courtesy of the artist, Kunstfestival Begehungen, Andrew Kreps Gallery and Esther Schipper. © VG Bild-Kunst.

There is rightfully a lot of contempt for A.I. slop and fear of how that is infiltrating the ways we encounter art in our every day life. What kind of A.I. art can we expect in Zero10?

The artists we're working with are not pressing a button in Midjourney and making an image. A lot of artists are using A.I., but they're working with it on the coding level. They are using it to build their own tools to make work in their own way.

There are obviously people who are good prompt engineers and can get A.I.s to do things that are pretty close to what they want it to do. But I'm much more interested in artists who are building tools or processes to make their work. The idea that you're gonna make a prompt and then get an image back, for me, that's probably not going to be very interesting.

Your book touches on the debate around people sharing A.I. generated imagery as if it were real, but then arguing that the point behind the image still stands when the image is proven fake? Do you believe that A.I. generated imagery can still hold emotional truth, and does that have any value?

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Obviously, A.I. generated images can evoke emotions in you. When I see, you know, [Donald] Trump putting a synthetic image of himself as Jesus online, it provokes outrage in me. But when we're looking at images online, we're probably looking at them in the context of some kind of feed or algorithmic curation that is specifically designed to try to capture our attention and press various emotional triggers in order to engage us. That definitely works, but that's certainly a very different context than what we're trying to do with Zero10. I would like to think that we're trying to create more nutritious forms of culture.



Eli Scheinman and Trevor Paglen. Photography by Caroline Tompkins. Image courtesy of Art Basel.

You have often worked with surveillance, and at Zero10 you'll be showing Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's new work *Black Hole*, which his gallery describes as having "a panopticon camera and embedded algorithms that extract facial features in real time"? How have your feelings about surveillance evolved over the years?

Rafael has been doing this at a very high level since the 1990s. He's always had an interest in surveillance and the dangers of creating very powerful technologies that are in the hands of small groups of people or parts of the state that are in the business of coercion. That is something he's always had a lot of anxiety about.

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The landscape of surveillance has changed a lot obviously since the 1990s. We do have things like Clearview A.I. now. Facial recognition is ubiquitous. We also have things like biometric sensors that we put on our wrists in order to track how we are working out and going to sleep. So that economy of surveillance is much larger than just the idea of whether or not the police are looking at you. It's a very relevant topic to be exploring!

As an artist who works technology, do you have advice for how artists can be accepted in spaces both in fine arts and technology?

Be open-minded. Be willing to look at things that are unfamiliar to you and be generous towards them. If there's one thing that I've learned from looking at older artists who are happy, versus ones who are unhappy, the happy ones tend to be the more curious.

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