



Trevor Paglen, Prototype for a Nonfunctional Satellite (Design 4; Build 3), 2013, sculpture in progress.

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The exhibition space in Dolapdere.



# Things unseen

Artist Trevor Paglen is watching the people (and machines) who are watching us. Jennifer Hattam tracks down his latest project

Just off Dolapdere Caddesi, on a dusty side street in an industrial corner of Istanbul, sits a row of small auto shops outwardly indistinguishable from any other. But lifting up the corrugated-metal door of what appears to be an abandoned storage depot will soon transport the intrepid art-lover into a different world.

Past some rusty machinery lining the wall and bits of wood and metal strewn on the concrete floor, the glow from a dusty old monitor will lead the visitor to the back of the dimly

lit room, where a hitherto-unseen staircase beckons to the building's upper level.

There, on a raised platform, artist Trevor Paglen is constructing a four-meter-high sculpture, a massive balloon-like Mylar sphere mounted on an aluminum frame that nearly scrapes the walls.

The whole space has the feeling of an isolated garage

somewhere in the American West, where an eccentric genius tinkers away in secret on a homemade spacecraft

– fittingly so, because Paglen's sculpture is one in a series of what he calls "nonfunctional satellites."

"These are all designs that are, on the one hand, individual experiments. One the other hand, they're all in the service of a larger idea, which has to do with [eventually]

working with aerospace engineers to design, build and launch a spacecraft that has no military, commercial or scientific function whatsoever," the New York-based artist explains.

An internationally recognized and exhibited artist, Paglen is well-known for works that blur the line between science, art and journalism, with a particular focus on drones, satellites, surveillance and classified military sites. For the 11<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial in 2009, he collaborated with astronomers

at Istanbul University to photograph spy satellites from many countries orbiting over the city.

"Trevor's work is about things that regular people can't see and how they affect our daily life," says Mari Spirito, the founding director of Protocinema, the Istanbul/New York-based nonprofit arts organization that is bringing Paglen's latest project to town as a parallel event of the 13<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial.

Protocinema specializes in presenting what Spirito calls "site-aware" exhibitions (which are responsive, if not exclusive to their surroundings) in temporary or disused spaces. Previous shows in Istanbul have included the exhibition in an unused ground-level shop in Tophane of a seven-meter-long boat molded out of cement and based on the shape of an abandoned 1960s fishing boat

acquired near the Yenikapı port.

"When an artist does a show in a gallery, they can feel pressure to do something commercial, to show what they're best known for. This way, they're more free," Spirito says. She scouted the Dolapdere location while consulting remotely with Paglen about what kind of space he wanted to work in. When he saw her photographs of the empty depot, he said he didn't want it to be cleaned up at all for the show.

"[Having viewers] going to this regular neighborhood and finding this thing that doesn't fit, that shouldn't actually exist at all, may prompt more dialogue than if [the satellite] was shown in some clean, well-lit, gallery-type space," Spirito says. In addition to "Prototype for a Nonfunctional Satellite (Design 4; Build 3)," Paglen

also plans to present structural drawings of his orbital spacecraft, video from the 1960s showing NASA tests of similar inflatable structures, and a photograph of a secret American "space plane" called the X-37B.

"It's a small, unmanned, plane-like vehicle that the American military won't talk about [but that appears] designed to spy on other countries, and serve as a test-bed for space-based technologies of warfare," Paglen says. "In a sense, it's the opposite of the spacecraft I've built. Mine has no military or commercial function and is designed to be seen. The X-37B is designed to spy and conduct warfare operations, and is designed to do that in secret – to be unseen."

Though much of Paglen's previous work has been openly critical of surveillance and secret government power,

especially in the United States, he says he's taking a different approach with his nonfunctional satellites.

"Instead of being critical of the world as-it-is, I'm trying to take the same engineering skills used that are used to make machines of warfare and surveillance, and to use them to make something that cannot be used for either [purpose]," he says, before admitting these new works may be just as critical in their own way. "In that sense, perhaps, the piece is a critique of the status quo because it is a lonely example of something that's opposite to the status quo."

**Trevor Paglen's** work can be seen at Dolapdere Caddesi, Küçük Akarca Sokak 11 from **Sep 12 to Oct 25**. For more information, visit [www.paglen.com](http://www.paglen.com) and [www.protocinema.org](http://www.protocinema.org).

