



trevor paglen interview: space sculptures and covert images

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trevor paglen, prototype for a nonfunctional satellite (design 4; build 3), 2013
image courtesy protocinema, istanbul/new york; artpace, san antonio, TX; metro pictures, new york; altman siegel gallery, san francisco; galerie thomas zander, cologne

the multifaceted [trevor paglen](http://www.paglen.com/) (<http://www.paglen.com/>) is an artist, author, geographer, and researcher whose fascination in covert military operations, celestial mechanics, and the relationship between science and aesthetics has led to artistic investigations of the themes. a collaborative synthesis of photography, engineering, sculpture and science has underscored projects like 'the last pictures' in which a gold-plated, micro-etched disc containing one hundred photographs of significant historical events was launched into space and the 'non-functional satellite' series, which reimagines orbital structures as visible but ephemeral art objects.



trevor paglen, prototype for a nonfunctional satellite (design 4; build 3), 2013

image courtesy protocinema, istanbul/new york; artpace, san antonio, TX; metro pictures, new york; altman siegel gallery, san francisco; galerie thomas zander, cologne

from september 12th through october 25, 2013, [protocinema \(http://www.protocinema.org/\)](http://www.protocinema.org/), istanbul will present paglen's 'prototype for a nonfunctional satellite (design 4; build 3)'. the 4-meter tall mirror-like sphere is a model for an orbital spacecraft designed to be placed into low-earth orbit and reflect sunlight from space down to the earth's surface. in this work, paglen questions the archetypical notions of aerospace engineering, instead envisioning what its methods would be if severed from the corporate and military interests that currently underline them.



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DB: what interests you the most about military and surveillance activity and how does this reflect in your work?

TP: I've spent many years researching, writing, and making art works about secret military and intelligence programs and institutions. I've looked at everything from secret airbases in nevada to "black" prisons in afghanistan. my main interest with this topic has to do with the politics and aesthetics of these institutions —

what does an institution that is meant to be invisible look like? I mean that question very literally. moreover, what sorts of effects do secret institutions have on society at large?



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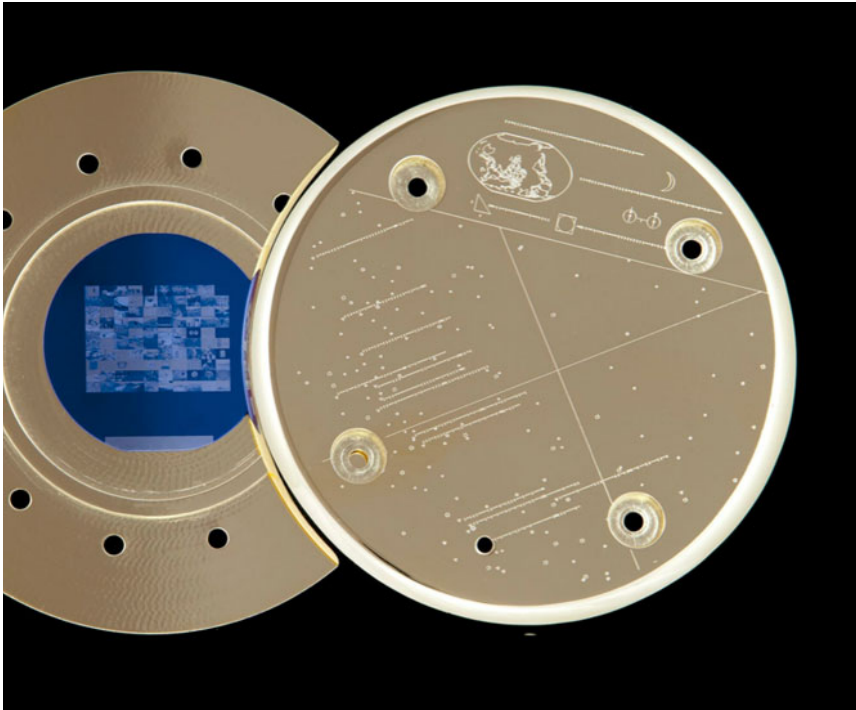
prototype for a nonfunctional satellite (design 1, build 1: 'the kite')
image courtesy of trevor paglen



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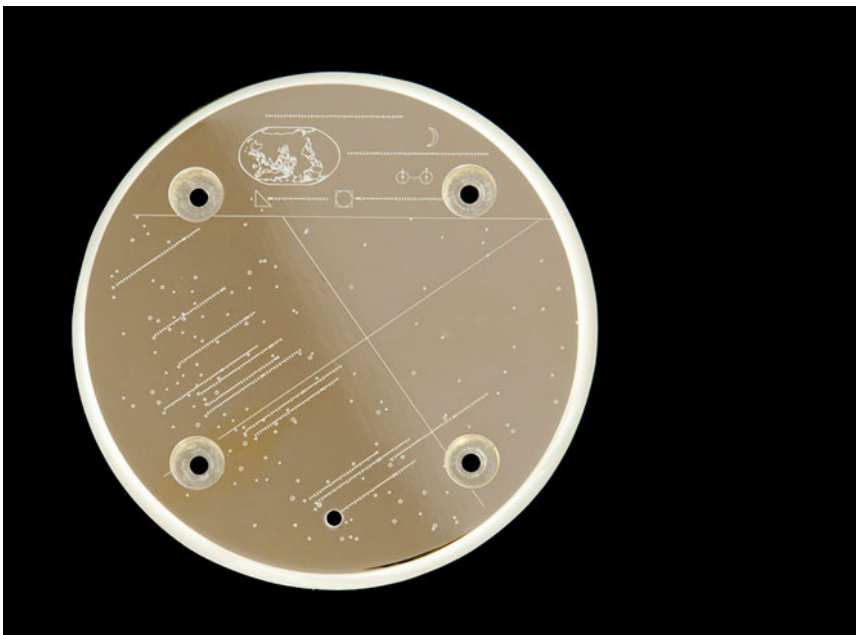
DB: where did you get the idea for the non-functional satellite series?

TP: one of my projects having to do with military secrecy is a project called the 'other night sky,' which involves tracking and photographing all of the classified spacecraft in earth orbit — hundreds of satellites that are officially 'not there.' for that project, I had to learn quite a lot about how satellite orbits and celestial mechanics work, so I started to think about how different objects behave in space, and started to ask myself 'what would the opposite of a secret satellite be' — maybe it would be a satellite that was designed to be seen, rather than be invisible, and designed to do nothing at all other than be seen. so I began working with aerospace engineers to design a 'useless' or 'non-functional' satellite, and am very happy to have the support of protocinema to debut some of this work in istanbul.



the last pictures artifact
image courtesy of creative time/ trevor paglen

working with materials scientists at massachusetts institute of technology, paglen developed an artifact designed to last billions of years: an archival disc, micro-etched with one hundred photographs and encased in a gold-plated shell. in 2012, the communications satellite echostar XVI launched into orbit with the disc mounted to its anti-earth deck. 'the last pictures' will remain in outer space slowly circling the earth.



the last pictures artifact
image courtesy of trevor paglen/creative time



DB: how have your projects evolved throughout the years?

TP: over the years, I've become more interested not only in making work that is critical of the way things are, but works that also try to imagine how things might be different. that's the impulse that the 'nonfunctional satellites' works come out of. these are very technically challenging works to make, and involve a lot of collaboration with people from a lot of different fields.

paglen's project 'the other night sky' tracks and photographs classified american satellites in earth orbit, a total of 189 covert spacecraft.



STSS-1 and two unidentified spacecraft over carson city (space tracking and surveillance system; USA 205)

C-Print, 48 x 48 inches, 2010

image courtesy of trevor paglen

DB: how do you think the government would respond to your most recent work?

TP: the most recent work is a photograph of the national security agency, shot at night from a helicopter over their headquarters at fort meade. they were very annoyed, but couldn't really do anything about it.



they watch the moon
C-print, 36 x 48 inches, 2010
image courtesy of trevor paglen

'they watch the moon' is a long exposure photograph depicting a classified 'listening station' deep in the forests of west virginia. the station is located at the center of the 'national radio quiet zone', where cell phones, wi-fi, and radios are completely banned. the center is believed to be an N.S.A. eavesdropping complex.