

# TREVOR PAGLEN AND PROTOCINEMA IN ISTANBUL

by Mari Spirito

Out of an extraordinary month of brutality and resistance, an exhibition emerges to playfully tackle militarisation and surveillance

I started visiting Istanbul from New York in 2007. At that time I was following my intuition towards what would eventually lead to the formation of Protocinema, making transnational, nomadic art exhibitions since 2011, in Istanbul and New York. I wanted my work to be nimble, responsive and in sync with my life—instead of my life being in sync with my work. As we know, communication technology has developed in a way that supports a mobile life in many fields and the art field is certainly an area that has been responding to these shifts—in how art is created, exhibited, acquired and understood. I wanted the name of my organisation to have motion embedded in it. The name Protocinema refers to *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010), a 3D documentary film by Werner Herzog. As Brent Lambert writes, “In an interview with the Guardian, Herzog talks about the enormous leap in cultural growth that these paintings of animals represent. In several cases, the artist appears to be capturing a sense of movement, an almost “proto-cinema” style of representation where a beast is drawn with 8 legs instead of four—not unlike the futurist paintings of the early 20th century whereby a figure was captured moving through space and time.”

Over the past month in Istanbul, most of June 2013, we have witnessed and participated in peaceful protests at Gezi Park/Taksim Square that started in defence of a public park, and was then was met with extreme police brutality as it rapidly grew to be a mass demand for basic freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom to gather, freedom to participate in the governing process. I saw so many different kinds of people at Gezi Park who want their voices to be heard—students, teachers, mothers, football fans, women, Muslims against capitalism, plumbers, Alevis, activists, communists, young, old, an all-encompassing demographic. These people were joined by citizens in over 237 cities in Turkey who have something to say, who for many years have felt that their voices have not been heard.

What does it mean for me to be an American participating in what has now become a global expression of sovereignty in a country that is not my own? What are my responsibilities? What are the responsibilities of art and art organisations in these circumstances? How does one adapt to the shifting situation here and elsewhere?

Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan has expressed concern about what he understands to be the influence of foreign interventions in Turkey's uprisings. He is concerned that the slogans, images and flags in Brazil and elsewhere are the same as those in his country, confirming for him that there must be a single foreign influence in control. What Erdoğan is unable to grasp is that now, with the extensive, widespread use of communication technology, individuals across the globe in many nations are speaking to each other and sharing experiences, knowledge and empathy, and are organically mobilising out of their own inspiration. It is no longer possible to manipulate the masses with antiquated methods, it is no longer possible for the voices of individuals to be pushed down by media blackouts and capitalist corporate coercions, which have so blatantly exposed themselves in Turkey this past month.

Longstanding personal concerns with issues related to behaviour modification, perception and belief systems have led me to work

with artists whose work also investigates these areas. In September, Protocinema will present new work by Trevor Paglen. We have been speaking quite a bit during these events, updates on what has been going on, and we plan to exhibit two new works. The first is *Prototype for a Nonfunctional Satellite (Design 4; Build 3)*, 2013, which is a sculpture of a satellite. In Trevor's words, “These are spacecraft that have no commercial or military ‘function’—they are meant to be purely aesthetic objects. The idea behind them is to do something akin to ‘art for art’s sake’ but instead of it being ‘art for art’s sake’, it’s ‘aerospace engineering for aerospace engineering’s sake’. This idea, applied to aerospace engineering, is quite strange. It’s the exact opposite of what the field is all about. The project asks: ‘What would aerospace engineering look like if it were decoupled from the corporate and military interests that underlie every aspect of the field?’ Paglen’s ‘nonfunctional spacecraft’ are objects are propositions—they ask whether we might imagine (and take tentative steps towards realizing) a world in which aesthetics or science or engineering might be de-linked from the corporate or military interests.”

The second work in our exhibition is a single-channel video, *Drone Vision* (2010). It consists of edited footage intercepted from a communication satellite. “The source material for this video was intercepted by an amateur ‘satellite hacker’ from an open channel on a commercial communication satellite over the western hemisphere. A large number of American surveillance aircraft and drones around the world are remotely piloted via communications satellites by ground-based operators in the United States. The control and video links between aircraft and pilot are often left unencrypted to reduce the latency inherent in the system. The vast majority of the source video is of a drone scanning roads below, surveying the ground from above. This video has been edited to preserve the very few moments where the drone is looping “up” or looking around at the sky surrounding it, or looking at a wider view of the landscape. As such, the drone is doing the opposite of what it’s supposed to do. Instead of looking down, it’s looking sideways or looking up. It’s as if the drone was lost.” Both of these works address how information is or is not dispersed, the means by which it is or is not disseminated, as well as the function of art, and how art communicates, if at all. Our intention is to make a Trevor Paglen exhibition in a context that emphasises his concerns and voice, expanding on his existing work, which is responsive and sensitive to Istanbul, while opening up dialogue to the possibility of universal meanings.

For almost the entire month of June time escaped us. For the people in Istanbul time evaporated. We were preoccupied with each other's safety, with where to gather when, where to move to when it became unsafe, with what the prime minister was saying or not saying, with “where is the media?”, with getting the word out, with supporting each other. We lost a month and gained a voice. Clearly this dissatisfaction has been coming for some time and will take a long time to resolve. Out of horrible police brutality in Turkey came vast amounts of expression, camaraderie and empowerment. I am eager to see where this motion takes us.

[www.protocinema.org](http://www.protocinema.org)



ABOVE: Trevor Paglen, *Prototype for a Nonfunctional Satellite (Design 4; Build 3)*, 2013 installation view, Courtesy of Protocinema, Istanbul; Metro Pictures, New York; Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco; Galerie Thomas Zander, Cologne

BELOW: Stills from Trevor Paglen, *Drone Vision*, 2010, single-channel video