

Negative Dialectics in the Google Era: An Interview with Trevor Paglen

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In the last seven years, in a series of performances, publications, exhibitions and installations, Trevor Paglen has explored the world of hidden military projects and infrastructure. One of his best-known series is entitled 'Limit Telephotography', in which Paglen took lenses designed for astronomical photography and turned them to the very long-range photography of secret military bases in the US. It is the 'limit' that lies at the heart of Paglen's project: the limits of democracy, secrecy, visibility and what can be known. Paglen is one of many artists who have evolved new and various ways of engaging with the military and the secret state in the years following the declaration of the 'war on terror'. Their work remains as apposite as ever, as the US and its allies continue to kill suspected enemies and anyone in the vicinity with bombing strikes, and runs black sites, secret gulags in which people are held (and often tortured) beyond the reach of law. Paglen has made works that raise fundamental questions about what can be known and seen, while simultaneously writing investigative exposes of the shadow state. This interview explores some of the relations and tensions between the two.

JS: Artists making photographs now have to send their work out into a world that is replete with networked cameras, in which publishing a picture online can be done with a few presses of a touchscreen. Tourists at any reasonably well-known spot can be sure that they will find dozens or hundreds of decent photographic records of the place online, so taking their own pictures has become a performative token act. How do artists working in the medium place themselves in and/ or against this remarkable proliferation of public images?

TP: This is a great question and it's something I spend a lot of time thinking about. There have been a number of discussions about the "future of photography" and that sort of thing among fine-art people, and I think that whole conversation has to do with the question you're posing here. It seems to me that photography is at a bit of a crossroads. I think that there's still a place for "fine-art-gallery" work because when you make a nice print and put it on a wall, you're creating a space for people to pay a certain kind of attention to the image or work. Viewing a photograph in an institution is a much slower process than looking at a flickr page or a facebook attachment. I think that the space for paying slow attention is becoming more relevant and significant as our forms everyday communications, imaging, and viewing increasingly speed up. As a corollary to this, I've been thinking about photographic materials in a much more "sculptural" way recently – thinking about how different imaging and print processes can help form the critical "text" of a photograph. What I mean by this is taking the materiality of photography seriously – thinking about different processes, the lifetimes of various media, as well as different photo processes as they relate to socio-historical processes. I've been working recently with everything from albumen prints to the satellite video-feeds of American Predator drones. The point, for me, is developing forms of post-representationalist photography and imaging, wherein both the

materiality and what I sometimes think of as “relations of photography” that form a given work are intrinsic to what the work is. In other words, photography that doesn’t just point to something, but actually is that something.

The other part of my answer has everything to do with what you called the “performative” act of photography. I’m sure we both agree that the twenty-first century so far has been characterized in part by a huge expansion of photographic machines, imaging systems, and the means of networking them. Here I mean things like digital point-and-shoot cameras and flickr accounts; local police vehicles outfitted with cameras designed to take a picture of every single license plate that passes by and “run” the plate in a police database; predator drones over Pakistan flown via video from pilots in Nevada, with intelligence analysts in Virginia and commanders in Florida, all part of the same real-time “network.” There are an incredible number of examples. I think these new “geographies” of seeing-machines are something photographers haven’t dealt with that much, but I think that there’s an incredible amount to critically engage with. Of course, what it means to “do” photography in relation to this larger geography of machine-seeing might look quite different than shooting sheet film with a view camera. In sum, I think there are a lot of opportunities for photographer to take the “relational” aspects of what they do far more seriously. This is what I was alluding to earlier when I mentioned this idea of “sculptural” or “relational” photography.



Michael Wolf

JS: So there’s a self-conscious tension in your answer between valuing the slowness that comes with the display of the fine art print in the gallery, and practices that embrace the flow of imagery through networked imaging systems. The latter reminds me of the controversy

surrounding an ‘Honourable Mention’ given to Michael Wolf in this year’s World Photo Press awards for re-photographing what he called “unfortunate events”—accidents, people collapsing, fires—that happened to be caught on Google Street View cameras. I think the controversy was generated because such acts of appropriation have far less of a history in photojournalism than they do in fine art.

But I wonder about the basic contention that digital images are necessarily consumed rapidly, especially since you now sometimes see HD screen displays showing photographs in galleries. Given the screen technology and the resolution with which digital images are now displayed, there seems no reason why they should not be the subject of sustained attention (and do we know for certain that they are not?). It is true that facebook (and perhaps flickr) encourage shorter attention spans, as do all social media sites that are focused on the flow of images and events. Do we need the physical photographic print and the gallery space to slow viewers down? And if so, why does that work?

This is related to an interesting discussion at a recent conference on conflict and photography at University College Dublin at which David Campbell asked why there had been so few deep, textured, complex online works tying together words and images in sophisticated data structures, of the type that had been held out as models in the age of hypertext.¹ It occurred to me that one reason might be that engagement with digital and social media is largely about capturing attention with an ongoing current of material (Twitter is the obvious example of this), in a manner that does not seem compatible with the very laborious construction of multiply branching data structures that the hypertext model once promised. So my question is: can you square that circle?

TP: Well, to be honest I haven’t thought about the question of viewing as much as you have. It definitely seems to me that the “space” of the museum or gallery or what-have-you has more to do with the kind of attention we pay to art works than the medium itself. I don’t think we necessarily need the “print” if we want to ask people to slow down, but I think we do need some sort of space (gallery, museum, etc...) that asks us to pay closer attention to what we’re looking at than we might otherwise do (online, for example).

¹ ‘Medium and Message: Conflict Photography in the Digital Era’, University College Dublin Clinton Institute, May 2011.



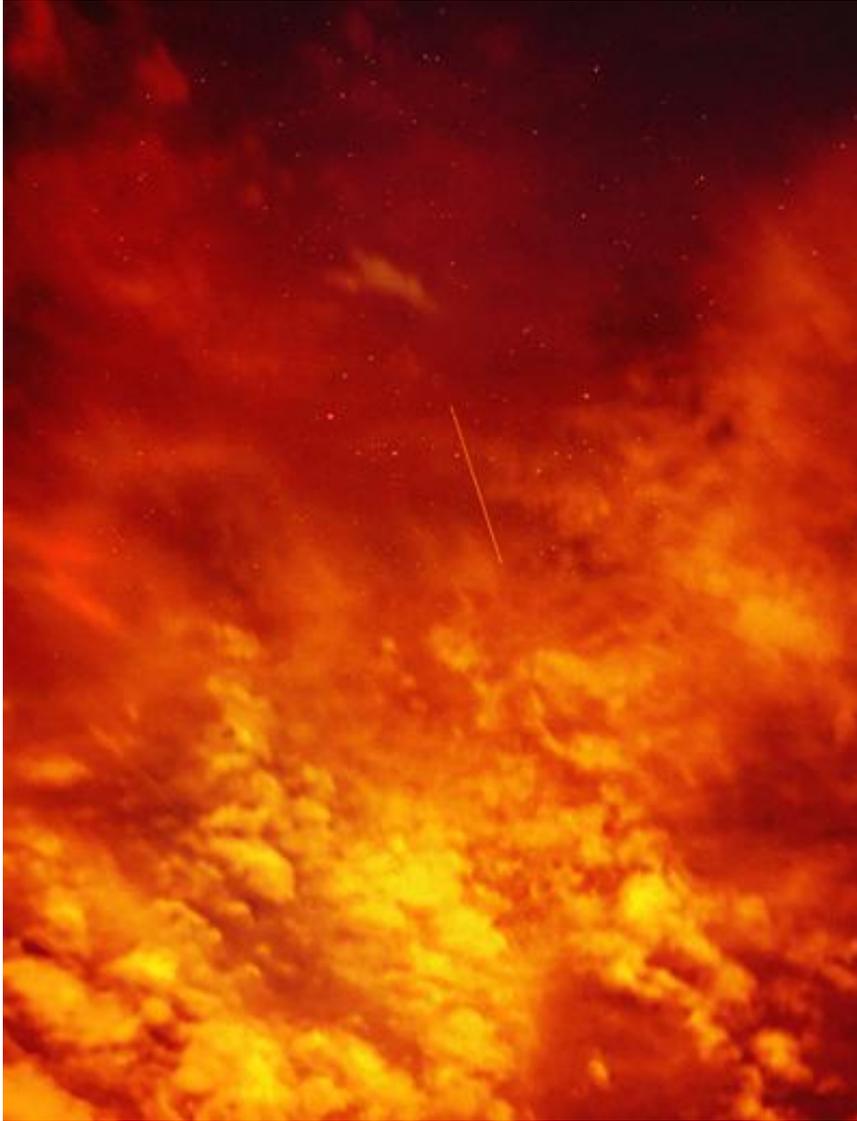
But the overall question of the cultural politics of “viewing” art is something I just haven’t spent that much time working out. I have a sense of what works for my own art, but don’t really have a meta-theory of it. As opposed to the conditions of “consuming” art, I’m much more interested in the cultural politics of producing art. I have long understood art works as congealed social political and cultural relations. I’m much more interested in exploring that aspect of cultural production than I am in the question of viewing. *If I have anything to contribute to how we understand cultural production, it probably comes more from a ‘geographic’ perspective rather than a more traditional cultural studies perspective.* In a lot of my works, I try to set up various relations of seeing from which the artwork emerges. If I go out in the desert and spend a week photographing covert military operations, for example, it’s quite likely that I’ll ultimately end up with something quite formal or abstract looking. But the means by which I got to that particular abstraction are crucial to the work - implying a politics of seeing, relations of seeing, and so forth. I think that there are tremendous and largely unexplored critical possibilities in this approach.

JS: That’s something that intrigues me about your work, the apparent disjunction between process and visual result. When you photograph secret military installations or black sites from very long distances, using extreme telephoto lenses, in one sense you seem to be spying for citizens against unaccountable power; yet, softened and distorted by heat haze, the results evoke painting or pictorialist art photography in quite a range of ‘styles’ from Edward Hopper to color field painting. How do the apparent art historical references and the process

of producing the work come together, and do such art-historical references work towards bringing out the politics and relations of seeing that you talk about?



TP: You're bringing up two really important aspects of my work. On one hand, we have what we might call the politics of production. By this I mean what sorts of relational practices are behind the work and go into its making. On the other hand, we have the politics of viewing or spectatorship – here we find more of the questions about spectatorship, art history, and so forth. Taking both sides of this seriously is fundamental to what I do. If we're talking about the politics of production, there are a lot of things going on. On one hand, I might be camping out on a mountaintop taking photos of a secret military base, or determining the location of CIA “black sites” so I can go photograph them. Maybe researching front-companies used in covert operations, or working with amateur astronomers to track classified spacecraft in Earth orbit. These are all relational practices and they all have various sorts of politics to them. Photographing a secret military base means insisting on the right to do it, and enacting that right. Thus, we have a sort of political performance. Finding CIA black sites means, well, finding secret black sites. Working with amateur astronomers has a whole politics of collaboration as well as what I call “minoritarian empiricism,” which has to do with experimenting with the radical possibilities of classical empiricism. All this happens long before I even think about making a piece of ‘art’ and put it in front of other people to see.



When we get into the question of what the image actually looks like, I use a lot of art-historical references as a way to suggest how contemporary forms of seeing (or not seeing) rhyme with other historical circumstances artists have responded to. I look at a lot of abstract painting as a response to its historical moment. In someone like Turner, we find a vision of what the nineteenth-century “annihilation of space with time” looked like; in Dada or in some of the smarter abstract expressionists, we can find a response to some of the twentieth century’s greatest horrors and an artistic response suggesting the utter failure of representation in relation to the Bomb or the Holocaust, for example. There was something radical and profound – at those historical moments – in the kinds of abstractions some of those artists came up with. We’ve moved way beyond that, however, and some contemporary artists who’ve retreated into a sort of pseudo-Greenbergian abstraction I think are being really disingenuous.

All in all, I think we’re at a historical moment where we’re rightly very suspicious of representationalism (and by this I *mean the belief in an ontological separation between representations*

*and the things representations purport to represent; although a lot of 20th century critical theorists have taken issue with it, this view is very much a part of our collective 'common sense' – it's particularly bad among photographers; there are all sorts of corollaries to this – the notion of a representation of something else, for example, which can often lead to equating Google Earth and Google image search with political transparency, for example). Abstraction can be a response to that, even a critical response (the refusal to “speak” sensibly seems completely legitimate to me), but I think that abstraction for its own sake (I sometimes think of this as New York “Chelsea abstraction”, which once had a *real stake in the past but comes across as kitschy now*) just isn't interesting. The refusal to speak can be a radical gesture, but it can also be – and usually is - a form of reactionary fetishism. The difference between the two has something to do with the politics of production I mentioned earlier.*

JS: I have a couple of questions that come out of your very interesting reply. So the radical aspect of your work lies precisely in the disjunction between the gallery print (say, of a spy satellite trail in a starry night sky, which yields information only to the small minority with specialist knowledge) and the social and technical process that goes into making it. I find it interesting that the models you mention for the way the work looks, and for getting at a critique of or a refusal of representation, are avant-gardist. Each also deals with the consequences of waves of technological change that had profound consequences for the experience of the everyday—whether it was steam power, mechanised warfare and its transformation of commercial road and air travel, or technologically advanced genocide and the Bomb. All arguably established a relation to the technological sublime—an awe in the face of vastly complex systems and their uncontrollable consequences (though in Dada, this was taken parodically). Obviously, the postmodern period often thought of itself as a time of exhaustion and perhaps decadence, in which the passive consumption of reproductive technologies (above all, television) appeared to dominate over the romance and fears attached to innovative productive ones. Is your reference back to these older forms a way of saying that we no longer live in such times?

My second question is this: conventionally, critics have looked at documentary photography and film and bemoaned its inadequacy to describe its subject. One consequence of the ubiquity of photo and video recording would seem to be that sometimes we get documents that are as adequate as one could reasonably want: the Wikileaks video of murders by Apache helicopter of Iraqi civilians [J: please spell this out in a phrase or sentence] would be a case in point, since they give context, dialogue and direct evidence of the slaughter, all of which allows the viewer to see, not just the fact of the killings, but the operation of the military mechanism which brought them about, and the enjoyment of the crew in the exercise of their deadly power.² What relation does your suspicion of representation have to that kind of ‘documentary’ image?

TP: The short answer to your first question is “yes.” I think most people agree that any sort of classic avant-gardism is over, but I think there's an underlying impulse in the avant-garde that I find especially relevant today. What I'm interested in isn't really even the critical impulse so much as the productive impulse animating much avant-gardist practice. But

² The video may be found in many places online, including:
<http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1978017,00.html> Accessed 13 June 2011.

again, I'm interesting in looking at that paradigm of cultural production from a contemporary post-post-modern perspective.

Throughout my life, I've found much of canonical postmodern art to be very cynical, an artistic echo of Thatcher's "there is no alternative." On the other hand, I'm profoundly influenced by artists like Gregg Bordowitz, Gran Fury, Group Material, Paper Tiger, and other "postmodern" cultural producers whose work didn't abandon itself to a complacent version of unlimited semiosis, but sought instead to develop forms of radical humanism from postmodernism's critical insights. All in all, I'm not interested in a return to modernism, but I find some of modernism's underlying impulses to be particularly relevant today, a historical moment where it's hard to imagine, let alone find examples of how society might be different. In terms of art-making, I sympathize with a revised form of negative dialectics as a response to an image-saturated society.



On your second question, I definitely agree with you that the Wikileaks gunship footage is as good as we could reasonably want. But if there were a wrongful death lawsuit with that video as the prime piece of evidence, I wonder whether it would hold up in a courtroom. I'm thinking here of the Rodney King footage – when you repeatedly scrutinize any kind of documentarian media, you can capitalize on the fact that representations don't transparently represent reality-as-it-is. This also applies to the Abu Ghraib photos, which Donald Rumsfeld could plausibly dismiss as the work of a "few bad apples." We all know this. And yet some forms of documentary constitute, as you say, the best kind of images we could ask for but there's no *magic image or documentation that exists outside or beyond the limits of representation*. Documentary media can still become social facts, regardless of how faithfully it reproduces reality. I take all of this as a starting point. In terms of my own aesthetic vocabulary, I tend

towards images that manifest this dialectic. Images that 1) make a truth claim (“here’s X secret satellite moving through X constellation, for example); 2) immediately and obviously contradict that truth claim (“you believing that this white streak against a starry backdrop is actually a secret satellite instead of a scratch on the film negative is a matter of belief”); 3) suggest a form of practice that could give rise to such an image (“if it’s true that this is a secret satellite, then there’s a whole lot more going on behind this image”); 4) suggest all of the above as an allegory for something about twenty-first century images, knowledge, practice, aesthetics, and politics. Not all of the work I produce fits all of this – it’s just a loose way I use to think about what it is I’m doing.

JS: That’s a fascinating answer, and picks up on many of the issues that came to mind as I look at your work. I notice that you write in your Aperture monograph of a dialectical opposition between images’ claim to represent and the undermining of that claim, and it’s good that you specify that further here.³ It’s easy to see that Adorno’s concentration on the specificity of the object, and the instrumental and contradictory social forces that bring about its misdescription, have an affinity with your work. Beyond that, I wonder: is there something about the military (and the most secretive aspects of the military) that have a further affinity with negative dialectics? Is this part of the point of your listing of hundreds of code names of secret projects?

This may be a point less in the spirit of Adorno for whom the immersion in the specificity of the object through immanent critique engages the dialectic, but these days artistic focus on the full detail of the object often leads in the direction of the sublime. We see this in a lot of large-scale museum photography, in which the viewer is overwhelmed by a mass of data which they lack the conceptual tools to make sense of: the ‘data sublime’, we may call it. Your work plays with this feeling brought to another level, because of course much of the point is that we are denied the information to make sense of it. You evoke both the mathematical and the dynamic sublime in your satellite imagery, particularly in images of the night sky and of trails over pristine landscapes that evoke nineteenth-century landscape photographs of the American West. The sublime is often used for conservative purposes: to frame or manage a common social fear (of the masses, quite often, but also more recently of data overload and offer it up for consumption. How do the sublime and negative dialectics come together in your work?

In another register, your work has a definite performative and subversive side: the reproduction of secret code names is presumably illegal; some of your ‘Limit Telephotography’ series offer not just evocative images of the operations of secret bases but data—for example, the tail numbers on aircraft. The same could be said of the remarkable mission patches and challenge coins, referring to secret units and operations, which you have collected and photographed. Rebecca Solnit points out that invisibility is a type of shield, while democracy is founded upon visibility:⁴ your work does something to peer under the rock, and surely there are conservatives in the US who would accuse you of treason. Do the sublime and negative dialectics protect you from arrest? How do you decide how much information to offer the viewer, and how much to hold them in awed suspense before the spectacle of military apparatus?

³ Trevor Paglen, *Invisible: Covert Operations and Classified Landscapes*, Aperture, New York 2010, p. 151.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.10.



Lastly, Adorno held out a faint hope that negative dialectics contained a transformative and utopian vision of society no longer divided by conflict and domination. Is there an element of your work that contains such a seed?

TP: I think there are definite ways that negative dialectics resonates with military and intelligence activities. I've looked at a lot of things that are secret, but which have profound effects on culture and politics. Most of the time, I don't exactly know what I'm looking at, photographing, or researching. So I quickly end up in situations where the question is "how do I point to, engage with, and represent something that I don't quite understand?": the answer often has to do with trying to represent that epistemological/political gap or in-between space, or that moment of incomprehension. The Code Names piece (a list of classified military operations and organisations) is, in my opinion, an example of that. I hope that a lot of my work is. Incidentally, this isn't just particular to the military. Some projects I'm working on now have very little to do with the military, but are still centrally concerned with this question. The political/ epistemological 'gap' I'm talking about here relates to Jean-Luc Nancy's definition of the sublime, which I can't quote off the top of my head, but has to do with the "sensibility of the fading of the sensible."

As for how the sublime and negative dialectics come together, well, I think I'm sorry to have to say here that I'm not quite sure. I'm not sure I'm the person who can really theorize this – I'm extremely influenced by both concepts, but as the risk of sounding like a stereotypical artist, it's really something I "feel" more than something I can articulate in a cogent philosophical manner.

Do the sublime and negative dialectics shield me from arrest!? Hahaha... not at all! I'm quite careful about how I go about doing work. When dealing with authority, I'm polite but firm. But I've gotten plenty of death threats along with angry military and intelligence officers. That's just the nature of the work, I suppose. In terms of deciding how much to offer the viewer, it's a strange thing. I really think that the materials I research and explore actually tell me how they want to be represented. I know that's an odd thing to say, but it's really been my experience. When I was doing my PhD in geography, I went into my advisor's office one day – a really wonderful and incredibly smart man named Allan Pred, who really liked that I was also an artist – I was complaining about the fact that I hadn't taken any classes on methodology and didn't have a clue as to what I was doing in that regard. He told me that cookie-cutter methodologies were nonsense and that I should just keep doing my research until my materials told me how to study them. At the time, I probably thought he was a crazy old man, but I think he was absolutely right. Having said that, I've written a couple of books about some of the same things that my art work is about, and they're pretty standard non-fiction in terms of style and argumentation.⁵ Art can show the world in a particular way – that's what's powerful about it – and the same is true for prose. But they're incommensurable forms, so with my visual work, I try to focus on what visuality does well.

The utopian aspect is the not-so-secret secret of negative dialectics, as I understand it. I think it points in the direction of unfulfilled forms of freedom and justice, but only indirectly and obscurely. I think this is related to what we were talking about when the subject of avant-gardism came up in our conversation. I really do want to believe in a more just world. I often think of Fanon, who insisted on a "new humanism" without ever really articulating what that might look like. I'm not sure even what it might mean to articulate that as a meta-theory. Perhaps that's the whole point of it, which leaves us again in the space of negative dialectics, no? For me, this is what art can do – orient our seeing and suggest practices in ways that suggest (even negatively) more liberatory forms of being—but it's really hard to say what those forms might be.

⁵ Trevor Paglen and A.C. Thompson, *Torture Taxi: On the Trail of the CIA's Rendition Flights*, Melville House Publishing, New York 2006; Paglen, *Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon's Secret World*, Dutton, New York 2009.