

# The Limits of the Visible: The Politics of Contingency in the Photographic Work of Trevor Paglen

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## Abstract

The present article explores the visual politics in the photographic work of Trevor Paglen in regard to its oscillation between visibility and invisibility. This oscillation is conceptualised as a moment of contingency, that is, as an experience of ambiguity, obscurity and risk which paradigmatically problematises the contemporary political significance of making visible. This article therefore argues that the political efficacy of photographic practices emerges from a productive uncertainty rather than investigative disclosure. Paglen's photographs consequently constitute an aesthetic gesture towards the political limitations of visibility and the concepts of agency and publicity that are still associated with it.

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The belief in the objective, enlightening and revealing capacities that were associated with traditional photojournalism of the 20th century seems no longer adequate to explore the political events and conflicts of the 21st century. This article suggests that today it is no longer the classical iconic photograph encouraging civic identification, asking for humanitarian compassion or promising investigative disclosure, but the emphatic acknowledgement of photography's ambiguous, partial and uncertain nature that attempts most effectively to prompt reflectiveness, decision making, scepticism or even debate. The photographic icons which were so dominant in the 20th century, have been replaced by the pictorial fragments, distortions and ambiguities, the visual presentation of traces, absences and uncertainty, as the politically most relevant photographic practices of the 21st century. It is this ambiguous movement between absence and presence in the photographic image, which Walter Benjamin has called "the tiny spark of contingency"<sup>1</sup>, that ignites the photograph's political potency by emphasising both the allure and unreliability of the photographic truth claim. Consequently, Roland Barthes has described photography as "an uncertain art" that is "only contingency, singularity, risk, ..."<sup>2</sup> The element of risk, so inherent to photography's contingent nature, constitutes its greatest strength - as well as its greatest weakness. Photographs facilitate strong emotional and visceral connections to the world but our responses might be unforeseen, unmanageable or fail to materialise altogether.

Against this backdrop, I show by example of the photographic work of human geographer and photographer Trevor Paglen that it is the 'strategic invisibility' of his photographs that encourages sceptical engagement with the political realities of the 21st century and the vital role (in)visibility plays within it. Rather than providing revelatory information or cognitive insights, many of his pictures evoke in the viewer an indefinable sense of uneasiness and discomfort. Trevor Paglen's blurred photographs of classified military satellites and secret military installations do not offer much information about the arcane world of secretive military operations,

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1 Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: NLB, 1979 [1931]), 243.

2 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 20.

mass surveillance or data gathering but they remind us that there is an invisible world of great political impact and urgency beyond our familiar field of vision. In so doing, Paglen's photographs challenge our traditional concepts of a critical public sphere and political agency under the conditions of the 'information age'. The focus of the present article is on the political potential of photography that arises from the fissures between the visible and the invisible, the actual and the imaginary, the absent and the present. The strength of the photograph as a mode of visual political thinking is to show something that is beyond words, to draw attention to something that cannot easily be described or grasped in a coherent or clear manner. Let us now turn to the photographic projects by Trevor Paglen who investigates in his work "how the political geographies that structure our everyday lives are becoming more and more abstract, and ... how new forms of domination arise in the gap and limits of our everyday perception."<sup>3</sup>

## Revealing without enlightening

Following this agenda, Paglen directs our views to clandestine military projects that operate hidden from the public eye. The secret places and undisclosed activities Paglen attempts to photograph, include remote and secluded military installations in the southwestern United States as well as classified spacecraft in Earth's orbit. Paglen's photographs investigate secretive governmental and military operations that are deliberately withdrawn from public perception and can only be made visible with the help of optical instruments such as astrophotography and high-resolution lenses. His photographic engagement with contingency is presented through distant observations that show the observer secret objects and activities without actually revealing them. The 'disclosure' of secrets in Paglen's work undermines the wider truth claims of photojournalism and the belief in its revelatory and representative capacity. The contingent character of his photographs results from pointing at something barely visible, whilst refusing to provide any reliable or significant information. The viewer's cognitive frustration regarding the photograph's indexical quality is partially compensated by the aesthetic appeal of their iconic appearance. Even though Paglen's blurred images of satellites and military installations do not provide the viewer with any clear information about secret government operations, they make visible a shadow world that exists in the midst of familiar surroundings. The obscurity, indistinctness and uncertainty of his photographs show that there is something out there that the naked eye usually cannot see. The role of contingency in Paglen's photographs is effective both as an experience as well as a mode of operation. The political efficacy of his photographs does not emerge from cognitive disclosure but from affective perturbation, that is, from revealing without enlightening. Paglen's blurred photographs of distant military installations or the light trails of an orbital surveillance satellite do not provide much detail regarding the secret activities and objects that surround us but they indicate that something is out there; that new forms of power and violence have stealthily crept into the fissures between the visible and the invisible.

In his "critical geography of orbital space" Trevor Paglen tries to visualise secret military programs and satellite operations through what he calls "minoritarian

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3 Trevor Paglen, "What Greg Roberts saw: Visuality, Intelligibility, and Sovereignty - 36,000Km over the Equator," *The Visual Cultures Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 2013), 207.

empiricism".<sup>4</sup> The term 'minoritarian empiricism' refers in particular to Paglen's methodology in *The Other Night Sky*, an ongoing project that aims at tracking and photographing classified satellites and other spacecrafts in Earth orbit. [fig. 1] The blurry, almost abstract photograph stands paradigmatically for Paglen's visual research and is described as follows: "This image depicts an array of spacecraft in geostationary orbit at 34.5 degrees east, a position over central Kenya. In the lower right of the image is a cluster of four spacecraft. The second from the left is known as PAN."<sup>5</sup> Paglen states that PAN is a classified American satellite launched from Cape Canaveral in September 2009 but it has never been officially claimed by any intelligence or military agency. There are rumours amongst space analysts that these satellites are used by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and act as a communications relay for armed CIA Predator and Reaper drones operating in Pakistan and Afghanistan. All this, however, remains speculation.



**Fig. 1: Trevor Paglen: PAN (Unknown: USA-207), 2010-11, C-Print (152 x 122 cm) © Trevor Paglen; Metro Pictures, New York; Altman Siegel, San Francisco**

## The closer we get the less we see

For his research, Paglen relies on an international network of hobby astronomers who provide relevant data regarding the trajectory, location and timing of the targeted secret objects.<sup>6</sup> These astronomers, who are scattered around the world, collect data and try to detect military aircraft that are not officially acknowledged but that appear in various publicly accessible documents such as military budget reports or as flickering lights in the night sky. The tracking of secret spacecraft, such as reconnaissance, military, meteorological or eavesdropping satellites, constitutes the main field of interest for the research network of a group of amateur astronomers. Paglen provides a detailed account of the workings, equipment and strategies of these hobbyist satellite watchers in his article "What Greg Roberts saw".<sup>7</sup> It is hobby astronomers like Greg Roberts who provide Paglen with the information so essential for the preparation of his photographic work. The group of

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> For detailed information about his work see Trevor Paglen's homepage: <http://www.paglen.com/?l=work&s=othernightsky>. Accessed: 28/06/2015.

<sup>6</sup> Trevor Paglen, *Invisible: Covert Operations and Classified Landscapes* (New York: Aperture, 2010), 85.

<sup>7</sup> Paglen, "What Greg Roberts saw".

amateurs Paglen collaborates with is only equipped with ordinary binoculars and telescopes but, over the years, has managed to accumulate a comprehensive amount of data that is now catalogued and shared online. Based on these information, Paglen calculates the likely time and position of the objects he wants to photograph. The political efficacy of this project results from its aesthetics as well as its methodology - both, of course, are inextricably intertwined. The photographer as heroic, creative individual is put in perspective by locating him within a broader community of hobby astronomers. The photographic project of 'looking back' at the authorities behind the secretive objects that surround us is simply too vast and complex to be organised and executed by one individual alone. In that sense the photographs of *The Other Night Sky* themselves have a crucial yet invisible dimension. They are the product of an international multitude<sup>8</sup> whose combined efforts are capable of creating these pictures and of bringing them to democratic and artistic fruition. The important aspect here is not so much what can be seen on a particular photograph but that the photograph exists at all. The photograph is just as much a document of the secretive satellites as of the empirical observations, astronomical curiosity and the shared civic uneasiness of a group of people.

For the actual shoots Paglen uses high-resolution and telescope cameras with long exposure times to capture the elusive objects, which eventually appear in the photograph as bright dots, gleaming trails or light swirls against the dark night sky. For other projects, such as *Limit Telephotography*, Paglen uses professional telephoto lenses in order to photograph secret military installations from great distances. [fig. 2] In so doing, he pursues his interest in the black sites and white spots on



**Fig. 2: Trevor Paglen:** *Open Hangar, Cactus Flats/NV, Distance ~ 18 miles, 10:04 a.m., 2007, C-Print (76 x 91 cm) © Trevor Paglen; Metro Pictures, New York; Altman Siegel, San Francisco*

the global map of contemporary military operations by looking at remote objects, vertically as well as horizontally. The pictures of military test ranges, chemical and biological proving grounds, surveillance sites, etc. are photographed from distances as far as 42 miles in order to comply with the strict military access restrictions of these areas. The pictures thus created are fuzzy and blurred, bearing more resemblance with abstract colour field painting than with conventional landscape portraits.

Having said this, Trevor Paglen's photographic work sits rather awkwardly between the categories of either landscape photography, documentary or photojournalism. The latter two categories have in common that

<sup>8</sup> For the notion of the multitude in contemporary photography see Steve Edwards, "Commons and Crowds: Figuring Photography from Above and Below," *Third Text* 23, (2009) 4: 447-464.

they are associated with a liberal politics determined to reveal uncomfortable truths or structural injustices.<sup>9</sup> A self-conception that roughly started in the 1930s and experienced its cultural heyday in highly circulated publications such as *Life*, *Time Magazine* or *Paris Match*.

In contrast, Trevor Paglen's work, which is mainly displayed in exhibition spaces and art galleries, is perhaps better described with what Julian Stallabrass calls "fine art photojournalism", a type of documentary photography that is better known "in the world of fine art than in the mass media"<sup>10</sup>. Julian Stallabrass has introduced this term to describe the work of Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado but it is equally applicable to the aesthetically appealing photographs by Trevor Paglen. The attribute of 'fine art' has two crucial benefits here: First, it liberates the pictures from any preconceived purpose of revelation, documentation or enlightening. Second, the artistic dimension of Paglen's work emphasises an element of self-reflexivity that allows for broader and more abstract investigations into the relationship between vision and knowledge; an exploration that goes far beyond the immediate subject matter of individual pictures.

This difficulty to label Paglen's work, or to put it in neat categories, further emphasises its contingent and ambiguous qualities. The aesthetic fuzziness and obscure content of Paglen's photographs convey an experience of contingency that stimulates affective moods and cognitive associations rather than providing any self-evident information. Consequently, the paradoxical effect is that the closer we get the less we see, and the secrecy of the objects in Paglen's photographs ultimately remains. This effect, however, is not only used to present the contradictions and contingencies of political and epistemological visibility, but is also subject to the contingencies of the technological and physical conditions that enable them. As Paglen himself emphasises, the aesthetics of his images in terms of colour, composition or angle are predetermined by the topographic and meteorological conditions he works in, leaving him little leeway regarding his choices of colour, focus or exposure.<sup>11</sup> These conditions create unique images that differ significantly from conventional documentary photography.

The use of telescope photography folds an important material dimension into the process of photographic image-making that always reflects its own conditions of possibility and the broader discourses of publicity, disclosure and knowledge in which it is embedded. Individual observations of military activities in geo-stationary orbit contribute to a politics of appearance that renders visible the clandestine activities of governmental institutions and make something visible that usually goes (and is supposed to go) unnoticed. Jonah Weiner writes accordingly: "Paglen welcomes distortion in his images because his aim is not to expose and edify so much as to confound and unsettle. He said that his photographs are 'useless as evidence, for the most part, but at the same time they're a way of organizing your attention.'"<sup>12</sup> Here

9 For a critical discussion of this argument see Martha Rosler, "In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)," *3 Works* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2006 [1981]), 61-93.

10 See Julian Stallabrass, "Sebastião Salgado and Fine Art Photojournalism," *New Left Review* 223, no.1 (1997): 133.

11 See Paglen, *Invisible*, 145.

12 Jonah Weiner, "Prying Eyes: Trevor Paglen makes Art out of Government Secrets," in *The New Yorker*, October 22, 2012, 56.

again, the bigger picture created by critical artistic practice is not a comprehensive account of clandestine military activities but a “productive uncertainty” consisting of empirical observation, social imagination and aesthetic presentation.<sup>13</sup>

### “I am interested in the limits of the visible world”



**Fig. 3: Trevor Paglen:** *They Watch the Moon*, 2010, C-Print (91 x 122 cm) © Trevor Paglen; Metro Pictures, New York; Altman Siegel, San Francisco

Take as an example, Paglen’s photograph *They Watch the Moon* (2010) that shows a classified military listening station deep inside the remote forests of West Virginia. [fig. 3] The station is located at the heart of a so called ‘National Radio Quiet Zone’ where no radio waves including telephone signals, wireless internet or even remote controls are permitted. The listening station is designed to capture radio waves and telemetry signals from around the world that are reflected by the moon’s surface and sent back towards Earth, a phenomenon known as ‘moonbounce’ or ‘Earth-Moon-Earth communication’.<sup>14</sup> The photograph shows a dusky green

landscape of rolling hills covered with seemingly pristine forest that features in its distant centre a cluster of tawny glowing dish aerials and parabolic antennas that appear like phosphorescent eggs in a giant nest. In its obscure luminosity and surreal surroundings the image looks more like a scene of science fiction than the site of a science facility. The ‘science fictional’ character of Paglen’s photographs partly emanates from their detachment from an obvious semiotic index and the speculative nature of their subject matter. The science fictional character could be further described by what Roger Luckhurst calls the “technological sublime”<sup>15</sup>, an overpowering feeling of inadequacy or defeat before vistas of nature “fully captured, mediated, or enframed by technology”.<sup>16</sup> Luckhurst attributes a critical dimension to the science fictional and the technological sublime for both are accompanied by modernist sentiments of estrangement and discomfort. According to Luckhurst “the discourse of the sublime allows competing sentiments regarding technological modernity to traverse the frame of the image, allowing us not only to be overwhelmed by the delightful terrors of the sublime affect, but also to begin the work of critique.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>14</sup> For a brief technical overview see David Schneider, “Moonbounce,” *American Scientist* 89 (2001) 4: 314-315.

<sup>15</sup> See Roger Luckhurst, “Contemporary Photography and the Technological Sublime, or, can there be a Science Fiction Photography?” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 19, no.2 (2008): 182.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 184

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 185

In the case of Paglen though, this work of critique is multilayered and subtle. The ‘delightful terrors’ of the deadly infrastructures shown in his photographs remain mute and their haunting presence seems beyond representation. Instead of limiting the ‘critique’ in his photographs to the investigative disclosure of secret military installations or to the revelation of the hidden technological mechanisms of contemporary Western societies, Paglen challenges our very assumptions regarding the relationship between vision and knowledge. The undeniable complicity between the technologies Paglen shows in his pictures and the ones that facilitate his own image-making, additionally subvert any ideas of a distanced critical perspective. Ultimately, the aesthetic appeal of his photographs attract and disturb us at the

same time, since “the technological sublime, the sublime affect is re-doubled by uncertainty about the indexical or indeed very ontological status of what it is we are looking at.” (193) Despite the fact that we can see the geographical location of a classified military installation, the actual objects and its inner workings remain secretive and invisible. Paglen examines the limits of the visible in order to direct the viewer’s attention without providing factual information. For Paglen invisibility is not simply the result of topographic, technological and legal restrictions but just as much an aesthetic or even ethical choice in order to express political concerns and scepticism regarding the revelatory use of (journalistic) images and the suggestive relation between seeing and knowing. Paglen’s images simultaneously reveal and obfuscate the secretive practices he investigates. He writes:

In all my work, I am interested in the limits of the visible world, in the nature of evidence, and the fuzzy and contradictory relationships between vision, imaging, knowing, belief and truth. I embrace the epistemological and visual contradictions in my work and am most compelled by images that both make claims to represent, and at the same time dialectically undermine, the very claims they seem to put forth.<sup>18</sup>

The work of Trevor Paglen revolves around an engagement with the limitations of our vision, perception and knowledge addressing questions regarding what can be known and seen. Accordingly, Paglen describes his own work as “post-representational photography”,<sup>19</sup> meaning photography that is concerned with the material presence of the picture rather than its indexical potential, emphasising that “there is no ‘it’ prior to the image.”<sup>20</sup> Paglen deals with secretive sites and phenomena



**Fig. 4: Trevor Paglen, *Untitled (Reaper Drone)*, 2010, C-Print (122 x 152 cm). © Trevor Paglen; Metro Pictures, New York; Altman Siegel, San Francisco**

<sup>18</sup> Paglen, *Invisible*, 151.

<sup>19</sup> Julian Stallabrass, “Negative Dialectics in the Google Era: A Conversation with Trevor Paglen,” *October* 138, Fall (2011): 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

that are functionally at the political and administrative centres of contemporary Western societies, yet perceptively and spatially remain at their very peripheries. The political dimension that the pictures of these sites unfold, emerges not only from a reactivation of sedimented practices of seeing but from showing something that is not supposed to be seen, such as remote military installations, reconnaissance ground stations, classified American satellites, surveillance drones, etc. The moment of contingency in Paglen's work reveals itself in a dialectical relationship between the photographic truth claim and the simultaneous indication of its limitations. In other words, the acknowledgement of the obscurity and ambiguity of the photograph is an integral part of Paglen's distant observations. We see that there is something out there, but we do not know exactly what it is. In the series *Untitled (Drones)* (2010), for instance, Paglen presents pictures of seemingly empty skies that bear captions such as 'Reaper Drone' or 'Predator Drone'. Instead of any 'unmanned aerial vehicle' though, all one sees are beautiful sky panoramas that resemble in their colour palette the classic landscape paintings of a W. J. T. Turner and Nicolas Poussin or the modernist abstract colour field arrangements of Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman or Ronnie Landfield. Yet, the actual object of the photographs remains mostly invisible (apart from the occasional ghostly trace of a condensation trail) or only appears as a tiny black dot. [fig. 4]

It should be emphasised, however, that the political implications of Paglen's photographs cannot emerge from visual indeterminacy and openness alone. The *Untitled (Drones)* series in particular, contrasts and restricts the extreme contingency and blurriness of the photographs with the precise information of the captions. The visual contingency of the photograph can only be perceived as epistemological paradox between seeing and knowing through the enclosure of text. The capture thus deliberately limits the potentially limitless meaning of the picture. Without the capture and the information of the text, Paglen's photographs of drones would lose their political meaning and dissolve into an expression of pure aesthetic abstraction. It is therefore not the visual experience of contingency alone that creates the photograph's 'productive uncertainty' but the interplay between openness and specificity, image and text. The specific information regarding time and space of the shot stresses the intended documentary character of the photographs and provides the viewer with a cognitive framework against which the affective intensities, speculative associations or imaginary referents, activated through the process of visual perception, can be pitched. The limitations of vision and knowledge reflected in the photographic image can thus only become fully discernible through the interplay of multiple media. Furthermore, the aspects of the limitations of vision and visibility becomes prominent since even though the pictures show that there is something to be seen, they deny the onlooker any certainties regarding the exact identity or location of what we see. Jonah Weiner writes: "Paglen said that blurriness serves both an aesthetic and an 'allegorical' function. It makes his images more arresting while providing a metaphor for the difficulty of uncovering the truth in an era when so much government activity is covert."<sup>21</sup>

I would suggest however, that Paglen's pictures indicate even more. Rather than 'a metaphor for the difficulty of uncovering the truth', as Weiner writes, the fuzziness and vagueness of Paglen's photographs show that the very categories of the secret and the public have partially collapsed into each other and the difficulty of

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21 Weiner, "Prying Eyes", 56f.



‘uncovering’ the truth is not a matter of the fact that “so much government activity is covert” but that so much information is revealed, leaked and exposed on a daily basis. What does ‘uncovering the truth’ mean in a context where truth claims and secrecy, concealment and revelation are inextricably intertwined where both categories coexist in a symbiotic relation in order to conjure the democratic ideal of a critical ‘public sphere’?

## Publicity has become the exception to the norm of secrecy

Drawing attention to secretive governmental activities does not equal the production of socially momentous ‘information’ and Paglen’s photographs challenge any assumptions regarding the photographic relation between seeing and knowing. Behind the abstract beauty of their surface, Paglen’s pictures harbour a deep scepticism not only against the revealing capacity of images but of the Enlightenment principles of publicity, visibility and political agency in the so called ‘information age’ more generally. The understanding of photography and democracy in Paglen’s work is thus almost diametrically opposed to the rather liberal account of Hariman and Lucaites, who argue for the importance of photojournalism regarding the construction of a visual public sphere. They write: “At some point democracy is a way of seeing, and democratic self-reflection will be incomplete until ordinary citizens are able to discuss whether their habitual technologies and habits for viewing the world are helping them to sustain themselves as a public.”<sup>22</sup> But, as Paglen powerfully demonstrates, our ‘habitual technologies and habits for viewing’ will inevitably fail us, since they always create invisibilities and blind spots that indicate the utopian character of a fully actualised, all encompassing public. For that reason, we have to look closer at the relation between the public and the secret and its conceptual implications for democratic thinking.

The relationship between publicity and secrecy in contemporary political theory has been extensively explored by Jodi Dean, who, drawing on the work of Bentham, Habermas and Koselleck, argues that “democratic politics has been formatted through a dynamic of concealment and disclosure, through the primary opposition between what is hidden and what is revealed.”<sup>23</sup> As a result of this binary matrix, disclosure and publicity in contemporary democracy are closely linked to normative concepts such as openness, inclusivity, equality, visibility, etc. and have turned into the dominant ideology of what Dean calls “technoculture” - the interplay of entertainment and communication networks that constitute “communicative capitalism.”<sup>24</sup> According to Dean, in communicative capitalism, the public sphere is a vital ideological promise because it “provides democratic theory with the reassuring fantasy of a unitary site and a subject of democratic governance.”<sup>25</sup> Dean argues further that the ideal of a “unified public of everyone” displaces antagonism

22 Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 289.

23 Jodi Dean, *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy* (Ithaca/NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 16. Subsequent references are made in the text.

24 *Ibid.*, 1

25 *Ibid.*, 25

from politics.<sup>26</sup> She writes: “The antagonism reappears, however, in the form of the secret. Protecting the fantasy of a unitary public, a political ‘all’, from its own impossibility, the secret renders as a contingent gap what is really the fact of the fundamental split, antagonism, and rapture of politics.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, for Dean the concept of a unified public, or even of a public sphere, is an ideological fallacy that seeks to erase the antagonism necessary for politics. The secret is thus publicity’s constitutive outside that legitimises its existence, yet indicates the impossibility of a wholly accomplished public sphere. “Publicity requires the secret”<sup>28</sup> but at the same time, the secret indicates the impurity of the public, that which has to be revealed in order to fully actualise its normative promises of visibility, accessibility, equality, accountability, etc.

Ten years later, however, Paglen’s work gives Dean’s argument a new twist. When Dean characterises “the secret as the exception to the norm of publicity” (11), Paglen’s photographs revert her claim by showing that in contemporary democracy publicity has become the exception to the norm of secrecy. The blurred traces of classified surveillance satellites and the abstract colour fields of secret military installations show that Paglen’s visual ‘disclosures’ of governmental secrets no longer indicate “the fact of the fundamental split, antagonism, and rapture of politics”, as Dean argues, but rather that the secret has turned into its own aesthetic appearance. Pamela Lee points out that the contemporary secret, or the open secret, is essential for our ‘dream of transparency’ regarding the public access to meaningful information and the free flow of knowledge. She writes: “The secret is itself an ideological contrivance; its withholding - its visible withholding - is as critical to its power as whatever content we might imagine it conceals. Thus the secret paradoxically possesses something like an appearance - an aesthetics, if you like.”<sup>29</sup>

The disclosure of the secret and the hidden is no longer a matter of the production of new and meaningful information that automatically exerts an act of democratic scrutiny. Rather, the disclosure of the secret often teeters on the brink of turning into an aesthetic gesture that expresses a nostalgic sentiment towards the idealised transparency, accessibility and rationality of the public. The open secret is visible in order to remain invisible. In other words, the secret has little antagonistic potential anymore, since it has fully blurred into the logic of the public by becoming an integral part of the daily noise of news alerts, information leakage and whistle-blowing. I would like to argue instead that the contingent character of Paglen’s photographs derives its political power not from an investigative disclosure but from an act of visual civic engagement that addresses the limitations of the visible as well as our phantasies of public transparency, democratic scrutiny and political agency under the auspices of the ‘information age’. Paglen’s images are reflections of a society whose high degree of militarisation and secrecy has reached a level that seems far beyond the reach of the traditional institutional mechanisms of democratic checks

<sup>26</sup> See Jodi Dean, “Secrecy since September 11,” *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 6 (2004) 3: 378.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 9

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 16

<sup>29</sup> Pamela M. Lee, “Open Secret: On the Work of Art between Disclosure and Redaction,” *Artforum* 49 (2011) 9: 223.

and balances.<sup>30</sup> The spatial distance of orbital spacecraft metaphorically points at the vast gap between governmental and public interests; it indicates a logic of militarisation and perpetual warfare that floats just as freely as the satellites that represent it - far above the public field of perception and entirely detached from the gravity of political accountability. In fact, the contemporary role of military secrecy and clandestine surveillance is closely linked to the equally invisible and powerful workings of digital capitalism where the greatest threats to political agency, social participation and democratic accountability are posed by invisible forces that reach from digital data accumulation, governmental eavesdropping, to mathematical algorithm that track and connect consumer preferences or synchronise financial transactions, to name but a few. That is not to say, however, that we should resign ourselves to the passive acceptance of our fate. The visual-aesthetic ambiguity of Paglen's photographs is also the result of collaborative research methods, as described above, the collaboration of a network of astronomers who look carefully at what is supposed to be invisible. Thus the very act of looking back facilitates an effective conflation of political thinking and action that is more important than the disclosure of secrets.

Paglen's photographs are critical displays of the hazy utopia of a transparent and accessible public sphere that simultaneously constitutes the basis for political participation and the scrutinising counterweight to governmental power. Image-making as a paradigmatic journalistic practice with the aim to reveal and make public is questioned by Paglen in the same way as the concept of a singular public sphere as the locus of progressive democratic action. For instance in his ongoing project *The Other Night Sky*, as mentioned above, Paglen's 'minoritarian empiricism' constitutes an agonistic impulse against the "inextricable link of publicity and secrecy" that represents the universal claim of an all encompassing public, as described by Dean. In this project, a small international group of satellite watchers reminds us of the power of a vigilant and watchful citizenship that claims its "right to look". Paglen's photographs thus represent, what Nicholas Mirzoeff would call a 'countervisuality', a mode of resistance against the contemporary 'complex of visibility', resistance against the contemporary visual aesthetic manifestation of authority.<sup>31</sup> Thus the experience of uncertainty and contingency in Paglen's work invites the viewer to ask questions and to see a historical moment in which invisibility has become the core feature of a significant amount of political, military and economic operations. In so doing, the pictures ponder on the citizen's 'right to look' even if the outcome remains uncertain. With his photographs Paglen shows that the close look is not about the disclosure of secrets or the constitution of a universal public sphere but about the concern that the 'information age' with its unremitting torrents of images and information requires ever more civic vigilance and intent observation of the seemingly familiar and inconspicuous appearances of the everyday.

30 In her accompanying essay to Paglen's photographs, Rebecca Solnit emphasises the intrinsic militarisation of US society: "War is a stain that has sunk so deeply into the fabric of our society that it is now its ordinary colouring; we now live in war as a fish lives in water. Ours is a society of war, and a society at war with itself. This is so pervasive and so accepted that it is invisible." Rebecca Solnit, "The Visibility Wars," *Invisible: Covert Operations and Classified Landscapes* by Trevor Paglen (New York: Aperture, 2010), 9.

31 See Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

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