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## Documenting the Invisible Political Agency in Trevor Paglen's Limit Telephotography

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### Abstract

Taken from up to forty miles away, Trevor Paglen's limit telephotography images of covert military bases in the American Southwest are blurred by dense atmosphere, dust and debris. In effect, his photographs are highly illegible, and thus the military bases escape any sort of revelation. Following this logic, if one cannot see these top secret locations, then these images are in fact not politically effective at disclosing confidential federal information. Rather, Paglen asserts that the political agency of his can be located not in the image, but in the practice of performing limit telephotography—standing on public land and exercising the right to photograph. In turn, Paglen relocates the documentarian potential of his images into an agency formulated by a relational aesthetic, one in which the communal effects of creating the image and interpreting it generate the possibilities of enacting further practices of political resistance.

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# Documenting the Invisible

## Political Agency in Trevor Paglen's Limit Telephotography

Gary Kafer

"There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know.

Donald Rumsfeld<sup>1</sup>

More often than not, there is nothing to see in Trevor Paglen's Limit Telephotography series, photographs which attempt to document the "black sites" of the United States military-

industrial complex. Top secret and highly confidential military bases far removed from populated areas, such black sites are typically buried deep in the extreme recesses of the American southwest, and thus inaccessible and indiscernible to the naked eye and even state-of-the-art cameras. Manipulating technology conventionally used for photographing astrological phenomena, Paglen developed a unique lens system to capture these black sites by mounting his standard-issue Canon digital SLR with telescope lenses ranging in focal length from 1,300 mm to 7,000 mm.<sup>2</sup> Armed with this image-making apparatus, Paglen is able to capture subjects at incredibly long distances, usually up to sixty-five miles away. There is, however, an inverse relationship between distance and clarity: using increasingly powerful equipment to see further and further magnifies and distorts large spans of air, dust, and smog that linger in the humid atmosphere. Such optical interference renders his photographs blurry and nondescript, thus precluding full study of the targeted military bases. Yet, at times Paglen's work is surprisingly detailed; small jets, hangar bays, and reaper drones appear palpably close, as men can be seen dismounting planes holding cell phones to their ears and briefcases to their sides. However, most other photographs are far more unintelligible, merely depicting blurred shapes of architectural structures and vehicles disappearing beneath a haze of atmospheric and desert debris.

In his own writing, Paglen argues that rather than documenting military bases, his artistic practice in fact attempts to document the limitations of using photography for revealing hidden truths in federal and military confidentiality. Insisting on this point, Paglen remarks, "[m]y images are not produced in order to be evidence of some kind, or to reveal any kind of information at all. These are art photos."<sup>3</sup> Here, Paglen expresses a certain anxiety over the limitation of using images to produce knowledge about classified federal information. Instead of claiming that his photographs can in fact operate as evidence in his documentary practice, Paglen seems to suggest that limit-telephotography does not document military sites, but rather epistemic boundaries.

<sup>1</sup> Infamous statement given by the Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in response to a question about the lack of evidence linking the Iraqi government with weapons of mass destruction at the Department of Defense news briefing in February 2002. Donald Rumsfeld, "Department of Defense Briefing," (Press Conference, White House, February 12, 2002), C-SPAN, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?168646-1/defense-department-briefing>.

<sup>2</sup> A typical telephoto lens for this camera model has a focal length of about 300 mm.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Pritchard, "Trevor Paglen Reveals the 'Blank Spots on the Map'," *The Rumpus*, April 7, 2009, <http://therumpus.net/2009/04/trevor-paglen-reveals-the-blank-spots-on-the-map/>.

One might question, then, the possibilities for political agency in Paglen's documentation, and whether or not it is belied by the representational limits of his image-making practice. If one cannot legibly read the spaces that Paglen attempts to document in his work, are these photographs in fact resistive, in the sense that they might expose top-secret military operations? Further, even if one is able to detect such bases and hangar bays in his photographs, are these images revealing any information that might jeopardize such federal activities? And perhaps more generally, is it the case that rather than contributing to his political agenda, Paglen's aesthetic register in fact neutralizes it?

However, such questions narrow the agential possibilities in Paglen's work by reinforcing the binary between aesthetics and evidence in the documentary tradition—namely, that highly aestheticized objects have difficulty serving as forms of evidence. Rather, Paglen remarks that it is his *practice* of limit-telephotography that constitutes a form of resistance: "I have always conceived of this photography in terms of performance. The act of taking a photograph of a black site is just as important, if not more, than the photograph itself. To take a photograph is to insist on the right to photograph."<sup>4</sup> Paglen thus not only locates the political agency of his limit-telephotography in the images, but also in their production. Here, the process of creating his work, from collaborating with amateur astronomers to turning his camera on classified terrain, becomes inflected with a political intonation. By emphasizing the practice of limit-telephotography, it may be possible to conceive of a model of resistance that operates through a visual aesthetic, as well as a relational one.

In order to advance this claim, I will consider the potential for limit-telephotography to mobilize resistive agency through conversations around the politics of relational art practices between Nicolas Bourriaud and Jacques Rancière. At the intersection of the two, attention will be given to the ways in which the dialectics of political demonstration can be understood as a spatial discourse, which for Paglen registers his work as an "experimental geography."<sup>5</sup> Such a practice rearticulates the documentation of material space along alternative perceptual systems, while also gesturing to a spatial understanding of knowledge production. In this way, Paglen's *Limit Telephotography* series attempts to understand how political effects can be located at the site of production, rather than purely in the image. At the same time, as a relational aesthetic, limit-telephotography reconsiders how documentation can contribute to political agency at the site of encounter with the image. Understanding how collaborative art practice can function as a form of documentation relieves the image from political responsibility, and gestures outwards to the ways in which limit-telephotography can mobilize different processes of civic engagement against the black world.

### **The Black World: Democracy, Visibility, and Secrecy**

Targeting confidential military facilities, Paglen's limit-telephotography emerges within a set of concerted discourses crystallized upon the power and violence of secrecy in the federal system. In her introductory essay to Paglen's photographic monograph *Invisible: Covert Operations and Classified Landscapes*, Rebecca Solnit observes how Paglen

<sup>4</sup> Trevor Paglen, "The Expeditions: Landscape as Performance," *TDR: The Drama Review* 55, no. 2 (2011): 3.

<sup>5</sup> Trevor Paglen, "Experimental Geography: From Cultural Production to the Production of Space," *Experimental Geography: Radical Approaches to Landscape, Cartography, and Urbanism*, ed. Nato Thompson and Independent Curators International (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Publishing, 2008), 31.

interrogates the precarious necessity for invisibility within democratic regimes, particularly as a defense mechanism, or “shield,” for military procedures.<sup>6</sup> Not only does invisibility prevent outsider access to top-secret information, thus rendering foreign organizations unable to predict actions and plan counterattacks, but it also protects such classified knowledge, placing it beyond the scope of popular criticism and dissent. Invisibility and secrecy then, as Solnit concludes, are not only a “strategy or a mode of operation for the military and the CIA for the past six decades; they have been its essence.”<sup>7</sup>



**Figure 1**

Trevor Paglen, *Reaper Drone (Indian Springs, NV, Distance ~ 2 miles)*, from the *Limit Telephotography* series, 2010. C-print, 30 x 36 in. Copyright Trevor Paglen, courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York; Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Solnit, “The Invisibility Wars,” in *Invisible: Covert Operations and Classified Landscapes*, ed. Trevor Paglen (New York: Aperture, 2010), 10. *Invisible* not only explores Paglen’s limit telephotography, but also his work tracking top secret satellites (*The Other Night Sky* series), manipulating the passports and aliases of CIA operatives, and collecting uniform patches affiliated with classified military programs and intelligence-industry activities (*Symbolology* series).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Ironically, the military can be said to violate the very fundamental values of democratic discourse and rhetoric—freedom, transparency, and security—that it claims to protect. Such a hypocrisy has only been magnified in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, wherein new policies in surveillance, military technologies, and intelligence programs have opened up space for what it known as the ‘safety state,’ an agenda of public policy and cultural production centered upon information and communication management. Within this context, the development of post-9/11 military and intelligence operations resolves to maintain standard levels of public security while at the same time protecting classified federal interests. Whereas civilians are becoming increasingly transparent under state surveillance and military espionage, the executive branch of government has extended its claims to power with top secret programs and agencies, many of which are not subject to democratic regulation.<sup>8</sup>

Consequently, contemporary procedures of state security ironically generate forms of *insecurity*, which David Lyon notes is “an insecurity felt keenly by the very people that security measures are supposed to protect.”<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that the public has grown increasingly wary of domestic surveillance programs, it is precisely these feelings of insecurity that justify the classified status of military and federal operations. For Rancière, in the post-9/11 era, maintaining a community of feeling constellated around fear generates productive modes of civic participation in the state of advanced plutocratic consensus. “Insecurity is not a set of facts,” as he claims, but rather “it is a mode of management of collective life; and one that is likely to persist even if our polities and institutions end up agreeing on an acceptable mode of life-in-common.”<sup>10</sup> Importantly, insecurity is an imagined horizon of affects that the military-industrial complex mobilizes in order to determine the qualities of civic experience. Reversing the message proclaimed by media outlets and official federal sources concerning the ostensive weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in 2003, Rancière contends that “imagined feelings of insecurity did not necessitate the war; instead the war was necessary to impose feelings of insecurity.”<sup>11</sup>

Former Vice President Dick Cheney gestured to such a paradox in his remarks on post-9/11 federal activities during an interview with NBC’s Tim Russert on September 16, 2001:

We also have to work, though, sort of the dark side, if you will. We’ve got to spend time in the shadows in the intelligence world. A lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any discussion, using sources and methods that are available to our intelligence agencies, if we’re going to be successful. That’s the world these folks operate in, and so it’s going to be vital for us to use any means at our disposal, basically, to achieve our objective.<sup>12</sup>

Here, invisibility in the “dark side” is not only a method for democratic policy, but rather it is an essential component to the legal and economic dimensions of the federal infrastructure,

<sup>8</sup> Ina Zwerger and Armin Medosch, “Goodbye Privacy! Hello Publicity?,” in *Ars Electronica 2007: Goodbye Privacy*, ed. Gerfried Stocker and Christine Schöpf, trans. Mel Greenwald (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2007), 19-20.

<sup>9</sup> David Lyon and Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Surveillance: A Conversation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 101.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2010), 108.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>12</sup> “Meet the Press with Tim Russert: Dick Cheney,” *Meet the Press*, NBC, Washington D.C.: NBC News Productions, September 16, 2001; emphasis added.

as the standard level of national security. And because this dark side—which includes anything funded by Congress’ “black budget,”<sup>13</sup> such as planes, space, shuttles, satellites, and drones, as well as radioactive, biological, and chemical technologies—lies beyond the limits of common knowledge, it is largely unacknowledged and uncontested by the public, despite the obvious issue that such measures of invisibility contradict what many would declare to be democratic values. The feelings of insecurity produced by such classified activities thus override and make possible any feelings of threat that might be produced were this dark side not in place.<sup>14</sup> As Solnit observes: “On purely theoretical grounds, you can argue that invisibility is . . . undemocratic; practically, it is ferociously so, again and again.”<sup>15</sup>

In his *Limit Telephotography* series, Paglen attempts to render visible geographic locations associated with the dark side of federal activity, terrain and facilities known as the “black world” or “black sites” of classified defense activity. These facilities are dedicated to anything from Special Force and CIA combat training centers to testing grounds for missiles, manned aircraft, drones, and electronic warfare systems. Certainly such black sites are present as actual locations, yet they are simultaneously absent from official forms of documentation and public discourse, thus forming what Paglen terms in the title of his 2009 book “blank spots on the map.”<sup>16</sup> It is Paglen’s project to make visible precisely these locations that resist visibility and in fact require invisibility to maintain standard operating procedures. Through his limit-telephotography, Paglen not only gestures to the limits of trying to make these sites visible, but also to the limits of translating their presence into forms of knowledge which can then circulate in public discourse.

### An Image with Limits

This translation performed by Paglen’s camera is mired by noise from the surrounding atmosphere, as the high degree of magnification on Paglen’s unique camera lens stretches the limitations of the photographic index to a point of abstraction. His practice of limit-telephotography thus turns the representational potential of his images, as well as their appeals as documentary evidence, into nonfigurative fields of color, form, and line. Associations between Paglen’s work and the visual register of Abstract Expressionism are no doubt apparent. Yet, certainly while Paglen’s images are abstract, one might question if they are intentionally expressive in the same manner as the layered drips of Joan Mitchell’s landscapes or Mark Rothko’s meditative color fields. When encountering surveillance images, blurriness, pixilation, low resolution, scan lines, and glitches are often inflected as markers of a realist aesthetic. Specifically in Paglen’s work, the hazy veneer that obscures and obliterates representational forms into grainy pastel swaths denotes a particular distance, geography, and climate, which Paglen typically articulates in the precise, almost clinical, titles reading with the exactitude expected of scientific inquiry and archival research—such as *Chemical and Biological Proving Ground #2* (2006) and *Detachment 3, Air Force Flight Test Center* (2008). Such titles insist on the veracity of the photographs and their fidelity to

<sup>13</sup> Paglen, “The Expeditions,” 3.

<sup>14</sup> Solnit notes: “We do not debate the development of new systems of killing, the militarization of space, or the cost of our military budget, and most of us know nothing about the programs in question,” 10.

<sup>15</sup> Solnit, “The Invisibility Wars,” 12.

<sup>16</sup> Trevor Paglen, *Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon’s Secret World* (New York: Dutton, 2009).

the surrounding environment and photographic conditions, despite the fact that such a degree of veracity is belied by the representational limits of limit-telephotography.



### Figure 2

Trevor Paglen, *Chemical and Biological Weapons Proving Ground/Dugway; UT*/Distance approx. 42 miles; 11:17 a.m., from the *Limit Telephotography* series, 2006. C-print, 40 x 40 in. Copyright Trevor Paglen, courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York; Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

Perhaps then the visual abstraction emergent from Paglen's image-making practice is less expressive than it is indexical. In this sense, it is possible to reconsider the aesthetic of Paglen's limit-telephotography as necessarily indexing the very *practice* of photographing black sites from extreme distances. Here, the visual register of these images do not preclude documentation, but rather makes it possible, thus constituting his images as forms of evidence of the process of limit-telephotography itself. The "limit" in Paglen's photography is negotiated through the unavoidable visual abstraction, which sets boundaries and restrictions on how his practice is able to perform a documentarian function under the guise of a surveillance aesthetic.

With abstraction invited into his images, Paglen's practice of limit-telephotography crystallizes a paradox of using photography to reveal certain types of truth about the government's dark side; he constructs a dual signification of what precisely is 'limited' in these images. On the one hand, Paglen's interests lie in making visible those spaces that are

invisible to the naked eye, thus exposing the black sites that are just beyond perceptual limits at extreme distances. As Paglen remarks, "these photographs capture not only images of hidden places but images of what it looks like when the physical properties of vision are pushed to their limit, and light itself collapses into a jumbled mess."<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, Paglen is also confronting the limitations of our epistemic frameworks within the documentary genre. The tension between the unintelligibility of the photograph and the image's claims to indexicality reinforces the inherent paradox of documentation, one in which aesthetic modes of representation are expected to convey and analyze material realities without distortion or alteration. For Paglen, this paradox articulates "a negative dialectic"<sup>18</sup> in the ways in which his limit-telephotography can function as both representation and documentation of the black world, such that his images "both make claims to represent, and at the same time dialectically undermine, the very claims they seem to put forth."<sup>19</sup> In conversation with Julian Stallabrass regarding his aesthetic vocabulary, Paglen maintains a certain fidelity to the documentary potential of his limit-telephotography ("here's X secret satellite moving through X constellation") at the same time that he reflexively foregrounds their limitations as representational works ("your 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").<sup>20</sup> The dialectic nature of this aesthetic system is not one that inevitably produces truth claims, but rather one that internally challenges, destabilizes, and contradicts its own appeals to knowledge production. Paglen's apparent failure of visualizing these sites due to certain abstractions via environmental mediation then simultaneously gestures to the impossibility of acquiring unequivocal truth from documentary practices, as well as the material and immaterial barriers that prevent access to information about the black world.

Here, Paglen extends such skepticism about his limit-telephotography within the documentary genre to certain discourses that have shaped contemporary U.S. involvement in militarized espionage, drone bombing, and war crimes. Concerning the infamous video of the Apache helicopter airstrike on Iraqi civilians that Chelsea Manning shared with WikiLeaks on July 6, 2010, Paglen states in his interview with Stallabrass: "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."<sup>21</sup> Further referencing the video recording used in the Rodney King trial, which failed to testify as a form of evidence, and the photographs from Abu Ghraib, which Donald Rumsfeld dismissed as unrepresentative of the larger military-prison system, Paglen's suspicion of representation informs his approach to the documentary image. As he claims: "Documentary media can still become social facts, regardless of how faithfully it reproduces reality [but] there's no *magic image or documentation that exists outside or beyond the limits of representation*."<sup>22</sup> In this sense, it is not the case that Paglen

<sup>17</sup> Trevor Paglen, "Sources and Methods," *Invisible: Covert Operations and Classified Landscapes*, ed. Trevor Paglen (New York: Aperture, 2010), 146.

<sup>18</sup> Paglen, "Sources and Methods," 151.

<sup>19</sup> In conversation with Stallabrass, Paglen contends: "In terms of art-making, I sympathize with a revised form of negative dialectics as a response to an image-saturated society." Julian Stallabrass, "Negative Dialectics in the Google Era: An Interview with Trevor Paglen," *October* 138 (Fall 2011): 9.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*; italics in the original.



doubts the fidelity of such declassified materials or their unique possibilities to intercept and mobilize political action. Rather, Paglen asserts that the horizons of knowledge that emerge from any such encounter with the black world is rife with questions of representation, particularly how to represent what federal powers render unrepresentable—what Stallabrass refers to as “the limits of democracy, secrecy, visibility and what can be known.”<sup>23</sup>

Yet, for Paglen, attempting to photograph these black sites is not merely an artistic gesture, but also a form of resistance. His project has political concern at the same time that it invests in a particular aesthetic relationship to the black world. In conversation with the dark side of the federal infrastructure, such resistance often takes the form of visualizing the invisibility of the black world. One way that this form of political agency has historically taken shape is through revealing secret activities and disclosing classified documents—what is commonly regarded as whistleblowing, but constitutionally regarded as treason. In many of these cases, sharing top-secret intelligence constitutes a political opposition to federal power, thus resulting in violent state measures. In 1953, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were executed for passing on atomic weapons secrets to the Soviet Union.<sup>24</sup> In 1971, Daniel Ellsberg was tried under the 1917 Espionage Act for disclosing the United States Department of Defense history of the nation’s involvement in Vietnam from 1945 to 1967, known as the Pentagon Papers. Such allegations of treason have likewise continued in response to individuals who have shared top secret information related to the increase of post-9/11 political-military activity; both whistleblowers Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden were tried under the Espionage Act as well for disclosing classified federal documents to the public.

Snowden’s case, due to its engagement with issues of surveillance, is particularly interesting in relation to Paglen’s work, as it emphasizes the paradoxical relationship of visibility and invisibility within the democratic discourse on secrecy. Among the many top secret activities that Snowden disclosed in the leak of National Security Agency (NSA) documents in June 2013 is PRISM, a program which allows the NSA to gain direct access to the servers of the world’s top telecommunications companies, including Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Yahoo!, Apple, and Skype, among others. Despite federal concern for public security, the type of surveillance observed in PRISM was made possible by the precise laws implemented in the wake of 9/11 that were designed to protect national security under the guise of democratic ideology, specifically the Patriot Act of 2001. According to journalist Glenn Greenwald, who collaborated with Snowden and documentarian Laura Poitras on the NSA leak, the underlying insidious nature of surveillance impinges on the right to privacy, which he claims is the “core condition of being a free person.”<sup>25</sup> In this context, Greenwald argues that Snowden’s resistance should demonstrate the need to reverse the federal power structure: since the government consists of public servants working in the public sector, federal officials should be subject to complete visibility, while invisibility should be reserved for the private law-abiding individual.<sup>26</sup> However, such a position is often contested by more conservative factions. As indicated in Cheney’s remarks on the dark side of federal activities,

<sup>23</sup> Stallabrass, “Negative Dialectics,” 3.

<sup>24</sup> Section 2 of the Espionage Act of 1917, 50 U.S. Code 32 (now 18 U.S. Code 794), prohibits transmitting or attempting to transmit to foreign governments information “relating to the national defense.”

<sup>25</sup> Glenn Greenwald, *No Place to Hide: Edward Snowden, the NSA, and the U.S. Surveillance State* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014), 172.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

such forms of invisibility, which justified the passing of the Patriot Act, are necessary for the economic and legal architecture of post-9/11 national security.

Like Snowden, Paglen invests himself through his limit-telephotography in a kind of resistance based on seeking out and exposing information embedded deep within the network of federal invisibility. For Solnit, Paglen situates his work as a form of resistance by locating his practice within a critical discourse that maintains the camera as a technology for revealing hidden realities. Drawing upon a rich history of photographic journalism, such as Robert Frank's *The Americans* and Richard Misrach's photographs of remote and classified military sites in the 1980s and 1990s, she underscores the camera as an agent for illuminating unknown phenomena, making familiar those things that are otherwise "unseen in plain view."<sup>27</sup> While photojournalism does not *de facto* constitute a form of resistance, within the context of the dark side of federal and military activity, Paglen's artistic practice articulates a potential to expose certain forms of knowledge that are otherwise invisible to the public eye. For Solnit, Paglen's work underscores the inherent paradox of the surveillance paradigm: "To see and to make visible is itself often a protracted process of education, research, investigation, and often trespassing and lawbreaking, a counter-spying on the intelligence complex."<sup>28</sup>

At close distances, Paglen does indeed capture certain kinds of information. Yet as a negative dialectic, this kind of resistance upends itself. Rather than actually revealing hidden realities, Paglen instead metaphorizes the veils of secrecy surrounding the black world by pushing the visual index to its abstracted limits. At extreme lengths, Paglen's images mirror the discourse of federal invisibility; through the index of surveillance aesthetics, information is not disclosed, but made more obscure. As Jonah Weiner of *The New Yorker* writes, "Paglen welcomes distortion in his images because his aim is not to expose and edify so much as to confound and unsettle."<sup>29</sup>

In this regard, Paglen understands the truth-telling function of the camera merely as a pretense for examining the double-edged sword of counter-intelligence production, one in which surveillance can be used against itself in order to reconfigure the perceptual horizons of federal invisibility. By using advanced lens technologies to capture classified territory from miles away, Paglen introduces a diametric practice of enacting surveillance on precisely those black sites which themselves exercise espionage under a veil of invisibility, thus engaging in his own form of surveillance to observe sites of military espionage. His limit-telephotography thus turns military technologies of surveillance against themselves, exposing surveillance at the same time that it reproduces it. And as surveillance images, Paglen's work enacts a critique of surveillance by way of its own rhetoric. In this sense, the telescope lens, as Niels Van Tomme observes, "becomes a device embedded within the very violence it seeks to investigate, as such tools of vision are inextricably entwined with the history of, as well as ongoing standard developments within, the military industrial complex."<sup>30</sup> Arguably then, Paglen interrogates discourses of power in military operations of surveillance, thus prompting a reconsideration of the perceived objectivity of lens-based media within the context of

<sup>27</sup> Solnit, "The Invisibility Wars," 10.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Jonah Weiner, "Prying Eyes," *The New Yorker*. October 22, 2012.  
<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/10/22/prying-eyes>.

<sup>30</sup> Niels Van Tomme, "The Image as Machine" in *Visibility Machines: Harun Farocki and Trevor Paglen*, exh. cat., (Chicago: Gallery 400, 2015), 4.

military operations, as well as the limitations of deploying surveillance to document our environment.

### The Politics of Relational Aesthetics

Yet such a critique of surveillance does not automatically register a *resistance* to surveillance. If limit-telephotography does not disclose declassified information or reveal hidden realities, then the question for Paglen becomes: "How do I situate [a given] project in a productive situation, a political situation, and a discursive situation. Or, more tactically, how can I position [it] closely to a site of instability in power as possible such that [it] has real effects?"<sup>31</sup> As opposed to the type of materials leaked by whistleblowers, it is doubtful as to whether or not Paglen's images could be used as evidence to mobilize political action or legislative response. However, while Paglen makes explicit that his photographs are "useless as evidence," he insists that limit-telephotography maintains a specific "politics of production."<sup>32</sup> He develops this term, emphasizing the various important practices that contribute to the production of his images:

In the vast majority of my artwork, the research, methods, and processes happening "outside the frame" are just as important (and often more) as what ends up being shown in a particular image or installation. All of [my] work . . . is the product of countless hours spent in libraries, sifting through documents, conducting interviews, repeated site visits, careful planning and project management, and personal relations developed over years of dedication to the material.<sup>33</sup>

Here, Paglen suggests that beyond his images there is a politic by which meaning is produced, a meaning which might be generative of alternative modes of engaging with the geopolitics of the black world infrastructure and its epistemic territories.

Paglen expands on this politic in a number of ways. On the one hand, he emphasizes the performance of limit-telephotography as a generative site of resistance—namely, on the right to stand in public land outside of the borders of the black world and turn his camera on the hidden realities of military activities. As Paglen argues, "[p]hotographing a secret military base means insisting on the right to do it, and enacting that right. Thus, we have a sort of political performance."<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, then, Paglen's performance of limit-telephotography conceives of this politic as a particular relation to the black world by reversing the very legal terms promoted by state order. On the other hand, he also speculates on the importance of relationships and networked practices that allow for his work to confront the perceptual limits of the black world. In addition to offering expeditions each year for individuals interested in exercising their right to photograph these bases<sup>35</sup>, he writes:

<sup>31</sup> Emily Eliza Scott, "Invisible-5's' Illumination of Peripheral Geographies," *Art Journal* 69 no.4 (Winter 2010): 44.

<sup>32</sup> Weiner, "Prying Eyes"; Stallabross, "Negative Dialectics," 6.

<sup>33</sup> Paglen, "Sources and Methods," 144.

<sup>34</sup> Stallabross, "Negative Dialectics," 6.

<sup>35</sup> "I led several desert expeditions each year. These expeditions further developed the overall project, engaging participants as witnesses/spectators in an enactment of the right to see and to photograph. Instead of creating two-dimensional landscapes for galleries and museums, I was bringing people to the actual landscapes." Paglen, "The Expeditions," 3.

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.<sup>36</sup>

In his emphasis on the possibilities to inspire and organize geopolitical activism through relational practices, Paglen invokes Nicolas Bourriaud’s description of relational aesthetics: “an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space.”<sup>37</sup> In Bourriaud’s wake, Paglen’s practices can be read as relational in that such performances and relationships relocate the political agency from the image to the production process of limit-telephotography. For Bourriaud, such practices lie in opposition to hegemonic capitalist regimes of commodity exchange, such that the relational artwork—which is less an object and more a form of social relation—essentially rejects subjugation into a market value system. The artist rather catalyzes sites of experience for collective encounters, bringing to bear new meanings and perceptual experiences as the art form. Unlike the passive optic encounter of an object, relational art is able to generate productive human relations, which, for Bourriaud, lays the seeds for political action through its emancipatory effects.

Yet, it is not quite clear that any and all relational practices will lead to political potentials. In Bourriaud’s writing, sites of dialogue register forms of interactivity as democratic microtopias. Here, Claire Bishop has called into question the ways in which Bourriaud ties the structure of a relational work—its form as social relation—to its ethicopolitical effects while ignoring the veils of power and exclusivity that institutional systems use to acknowledge the communal experience as aesthetically valuable.<sup>38</sup> For Bishop, participatory art should not be judged based on ethical standards of “consensual collaboration” between artist and audience during the production process.<sup>39</sup> Rather, the political effects of participatory art emerge from its confrontation with audiences free from ethical fixations. Opposed to Bishop, Grant Kester in his 2004 book *Conversation Pieces* contends that the ethical framework is imperative to the political effects of participatory work, wherein dialogue between artists and non-artists constitute a consensual space for transformative experience.<sup>40</sup>

At the nexus of Bishop and Kester’s writings on the political agency of relational practices lies an impasse between aesthetic autonomy and socio-political concerns. For Kim Charnley, such a paradox boils down to neutralization of political effects, such that both Bishop and Kester aim “to erase contradiction in order to maintain a consistent account of the political—and it is in the attempt to be consistent that the political is erased.”<sup>41</sup> Here,

<sup>36</sup> Stallabrass, “Negative Dialectics,” 6; emphasis added.

<sup>37</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), 14.

<sup>38</sup> Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 65.

<sup>39</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 19–20.

<sup>40</sup> Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

<sup>41</sup> Kim Charnley, “Dissensus and the politics of collaborative practice,” *Art & the Public Sphere* 1, no. 1 (2011): 49.

politics can only emerge in a critical negotiation between the exclusivity of the artist along supporting institutional powers and democratic forms of social relations between artists and non-artists. In advancing this claim, Charnley draws from Rancière's writings on dissensus, wherein if "dissensus is not viewed as the vital element of socially engaged art then even the most rigorous ethics [via Kester] or carefully guarded autonomy [via Bishop] becomes an extension of consensus."<sup>42</sup>

Important for this claim is the political nature of dissensus. According to Rancière, politics should not be thought of as the "exercise of power," but rather as an intervention in the normative relationship between actions, or ways of doing, and a possible horizon of affects, an aesthetic order that he terms the *distribution of the sensible*.<sup>43</sup> This structural law delineates the general and common modes of participation in the social and the modes of perception that shape the experience of the social order. Politics, then, is a re-distribution of the sensible, such that political actions are those that disturb and expose gaps in the rationale underpinning the social body's implicit perceptual frameworks. Political demonstration then, as a dissensus, disrupts the sensible—what is visible and sayable—and brings about a change in the perception of social space, thus making "visible that which had no reason to be seen."<sup>44</sup>

It is important to note, however, that Rancière is not proclaiming that politics brings to bear new perceptual possibilities in the sense that materials, people, and places, which were previously hidden, are suddenly made visible. This might too easily line up with a model of resistance to the black world based on disclosure of classified information, which Paglen's images in fact do not do. Rather, Rancière's interests rest in the ways that certain communities that had previously been denied subjectivity within the common social order might emerge, be recognized, and vocalize their perspectives. In his words:

Politics . . . consists in transforming [the policed public] space of 'moving-along', of circulation, into a space for the appearance of a subject: the people, the workers, the citizens. It consists in re-figuring space, that is in what is to be done, to be seen and to be named in it. It is the instituting of a dispute over the distribution of the sensible . . . it consists in making what was unseen visible; in making what was audible as mere noise heard as speech and in demonstrating that what appeared as mere expression of pleasure and pain is a shared feeling of a good or an evil.<sup>45</sup>

The core of political demonstration then is not just a reorganization of the social order's perceptual limits; it is also a question of space, of asserting that the communal experiences in private spaces of such unrecognized communities are valid alongside the public policed space of the common social order. It is the production of new spaces in which the previously unheard and unseen are recognized, in which the sensible is redistributed to allow for new meanings to generated and understood from previously insignificant materials, affects, and sensory experiences.

Understanding politics as a spatial discourse opens up new resistive possibilities for Paglen's limit-telephotography. It is thus not the case that Paglen's images are resistive in

<sup>42</sup> Charnley, "Dissensus and the politics of collaborative practice," 50.

<sup>43</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, 36.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-38.

that they reveal information previously kept hidden by federal powers. Rather, in attempting to render the black world visible, Paglen interrogates the limits of what can be made sensible, forcing recognition of those things that federal powers hold beyond the boundaries of what can currently be perceived. He thus relocates the resistive agency of limit-telephotography from the aesthetic register of the image to a spatial discourse of its political effects: interrogating the structural invisibility of militarized sites, the dimensional limits of representation through lens-based media, and the territories of knowledge about the black world that is continually rendered inaccessible by mechanisms of secrecy.

### **Resistance: Experimental Geography as Dissensus**

In order to understand the production of limit-telephotography as a spatial practice, Paglen adopts what he refers to as a “critical geographic perspective.”<sup>46</sup> Under this framework, he examines the two main theoretical underpinnings of geographic study: First, materialism, which employs an analytic approach to the idea that the world is made out of spatial interactions of materials; and second, the production of space, which refers to the dialectical ways in which space is actively constructed by human activity, and human activity is defined by space. Geography for Paglen “is not just a method of inquiry, but necessarily entails the production of a space of inquiry.”<sup>47</sup> With these two theoretical bases, Paglen understands the cultural production of limit-telephotography as necessarily a spatial practice, wherein he not only attempts to represent space by visually acknowledging the materiality of the black sites, but also contributes to the production of the space of inquiry, knowledge, and discourse about covert military operations and federal secrecy.<sup>48</sup> By incorporating this approach into his practice, Paglen works through what he terms an “experimental geography”:

Practices that recognize that cultural production and the production of space cannot be separated from each another, and that cultural and intellectual production is a spatial practice. Moreover, experimental geography means not only seeing the production of space as an ontological condition, but actively experimenting with the production of space as an integral part of one’s own practice.<sup>49</sup>

As a work of experimental geography, Paglen’s limit-telephotography sets into relief the two theoretical frameworks of geographic inquiry. On the one hand, Paglen complicates the field-based perceptions of the landscape’s material dimensions through its intentional abstracted

<sup>46</sup> Paglen, “Experimental Geography,” 37.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 31. Paglen comes to this conclusion by way of the theories of Marx and Lefebvre. Here, he accepts Marx’s argument that a fundamental characteristic of human existence is “the production of material life itself,” that humans produce their existence in a dialectical relation to the rest of the world. Likewise, following Lefebvre, he also accepts that production is a fundamentally spatial practice, that humans create the world around them and are in turn created by the world around them. Thus, in light of both of these arguments, Paglen concludes that “cultural production (like all production) is a spatial practice.”

<sup>48</sup> Paglen alludes to this analysis in his interview with *The Rumpus*: “It’s helpful to think about state secrecy as a landscape, as a set of institutions and facts on the ground, in addition to a series of bureaucratic operations. In traditional social sciences, the way that you think about secrecy is in terms of bureaucracy and culture. I think that if you add geography to that, you can explain how secrecy works in a more robust way. And that also explains some of the failures of oversight [of] the secret state, historically.”

<sup>49</sup> Paglen, “Experimental Geography,” 31.

visual register. On the other hand, he also aims to produce new spaces of knowledge about that black world by questioning and reconfiguring their perceptual limits. Through material, perceptual, and epistemic spaces, he exposes gaps in the experiential horizons of the black world, and brings to bear new modes of participation with the black world that are technically legal, yet certainly disapproved.

Accordingly, Paglen's experimental geography begins to gesture to the ways in which the space of knowledge about the black world that is opened up by limit-telephotography can be inflected with political agency. As Paglen remarks, "[i]f human activities are inextricably spatial, then new forms of freedom and democracy can only emerge in dialectical relation to the production of new spaces."<sup>50</sup> In framing his understanding of artistic production within geopolitics as a spatial discourse, particularly one that is dialectical, Paglen seems to echo Rancière's analysis of a dissensual politics. For the latter, political demonstration registers a dialectical confrontation between the perceptual space of the sensible and imperceptible space of the political body—the result of which "is the construction of a paradoxical world that put together two separate worlds."<sup>51</sup> For Paglen, such a dialectical reading of a spatialized politics allows us to locate the resistive potentials of his work neither in the physical spaces that Paglen occupies in order to take his photographs nor the spaces in which one may encounter his works, but rather in the discursive space that critically situates the civic body against the geography of secrecy and invisibility of the black world. This is a dialectical space that emerges from a coming together of public knowledge and federal secrecy when the imperceptible is forced into recognition through a play of spatial discourses (whether in the image, its production, or in critical encounters). As Emily Eliza Scott contends, we might then approach the resistive potential of experimental geography "not in terms of their production of new images, objects, or experiences, but in terms of their production of potentially new spatial-political configurations."<sup>52</sup> Alan Ingram joins Scott in chorus, arguing that geopolitical art functions "not just as a form of resistance, refusal or critique but . . . [as] an index of and contributor to political and spatial transformation."<sup>53</sup> He asserts that while it cannot be assumed that such creative interventions generate critical or radical results, they can produce the potential to represent the ways in which discourses shaping social and political life might be reproduced, changed, or disrupted. Here, Ingram grants particular emphasis to the potential for artistic practices to assume agency in mobilizing other kinds of action, rather than fully encompass the entire possible range of critical intervention or political resistance. Citing Rancière, Ingram continues: "the (geo)political effects of any particular artistic intervention cannot be assumed or inferred, only corroborated by corresponding actions. The question then becomes less what such art works mean than what critical approaches to geopolitics might do with them."<sup>54</sup>

Adopting a "relational way of thinking" into the spatial discourse of experimental geography insists on the ways in which Paglen negotiates and reconfigures the relations of production involved in creating cultural work about the geography of the government's black world, and further how that practice of reconfiguration can reveal new political horizons. Paglen remarks in this vein that "experimental geography takes for granted the fact that

<sup>50</sup> Paglen, "Experimental Geography," 31.

<sup>51</sup> Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, 39.

<sup>52</sup> Scott, "Invisible-5's' Illumination of Peripheral Geographies," 44.

<sup>53</sup> Alan Ingram, "Making geopolitics otherwise: artistic interventions in global political space," *The Geographical Journal* 177, no.3 (Sept 2011): 218.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.



there can be no 'outside' of politics, because there can be no 'outside' to the production of space (and the production of space is ipso facto political)."<sup>55</sup> It is then not the case that Paglen's images contain the radical potential to subvert the discourses of secrecy operative in the black world, but rather that his practice of limit-telephotography produces the very political spaces from which these aesthetic objects may emerge. And because Paglen locates the possibilities for a resistive agency in the production of spaces for new human relations, he sets into relief the material and spatial concerns of an experimental geographic approach to the lived experience of producing limit-telephotography—from collaboration with field guides to occupying territory. Accordingly, Paglen is not attempting to breach federal secrecy by photographing black sites, nor is he exclusively concerned with negating the secrecy that manages black sites, as even the aesthetic register of his images reproduces the veil of invisibility that obscures access to seeing and understanding these spaces. Rather, limit-telephotography emerges from a new system of relationships with the black world, one that provokes alternative and radical perceptions of the networks and representations of people, spaces, and power in the military-industrial complex. Paglen's documentary practice is one that negotiates the possibilities for rescuing material landscapes and geographic space from the black world in order to inspire the potential for critical engagements in the public sphere, or as Margarida Carvalho remarks in her work on geopoetics, "to inhabit [space] and make it communal."<sup>56</sup>

### Towards a New Documentation

As a collaborative art practice of experimental geography, Paglen's *Limit Telephotography* series questions itself on the grounds of how well these images serve as forms of documentation of the black world. Just as Paglen is skeptical about claiming that his photographs are documents of anything, the visual abstraction likewise prevents normative modes of knowledge production at work in the documentary genre. Arguably, these images can only serve to index Paglen's physical presence at a particular location proximal to the military facility under investigation, which perhaps is mostly attributable to the precision of the titles of each photograph. In this sense, one might reason that Paglen's work is not only invested in documenting the black world, but also the process of occupying territory, or perhaps even the politics of production of limit-telephotography.

Yet, such a thesis fails to account for the inability to read this type of documentation in the images themselves. First and foremost, Paglen photographs classified military bases in the remotes recesses of the American Southwest, and not his own process of creating these images in the form of photographs of expeditions and meetings with astronomers. He does not turn the camera on himself. Perhaps then the question becomes not how to document a collaborative art practice, but rather how a collaborative art practice can function as a form of documentation. Here, Paglen remarks that the process of creating these images—from the project planning to the expedition—opens up the critical space from which these images appear: "I try to immerse myself in the 'world' of my research to the point where the

<sup>55</sup> Paglen, "Experimental Geography," 32.

<sup>56</sup> Margarida Carvalho, "Affective Territories," *INFLExions Journal* 3 (2009), 17. Carvalho defines geopoetics as "a dynamic cartography in which localization and route are combined into subversive maps that highlight the creation of experimental, communal and creative strategies for appropriation and transformation of both media and new technologies—namely those that are central to the current 'surveillance society'—as a means to enhance the sharing, creation and free flux of signals, things, people, actions, and affections," 15.



materials virtually 'tell' me how they want to be expressed."<sup>57</sup> Limit-telephotography thus emerges from the politics of production, not the other way around.

Yet, to what extent do the politics of production of limit-telephotography—or further, the dialectical dissensus of experimental geographies—apply to other sites of encounter? In many ways, Paglen's consideration of that spatial discourse of relational aesthetics seems bounded to the artist and his creative process rather than extend beyond the production to the viewer who considers his work in a book, website, or exhibition. In these contexts, particular framing devices allow for these images to be located within a political agenda, such as gallery text, Paglen's artist biography, critical publications, and other kinds of paratextual information. Yet, at the same time that these devices identify the political potentials of Paglen's experimental geography, they also nullify such effects by situating the vital dissensual properties of limit-telephotography within a consensual critical discourse—that is to say, such images are political because they are proclaimed to be so.



### Figure 3

Trevor Paglen, *Detachment 3, Air Force Flight Test Center, Groom Lake, NV* Distance approx. 26 miles, from the *Limit Telephotography* series, 2008. C-print, 40 x 50 in. Copyright Trevor Paglen, courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York; Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

<sup>57</sup> Paglen, "Sources and Methods," 144.

Perhaps here we approach another 'limit' to Paglen's limit-telephotography: the limit of political agency itself. In reflecting on the relationship between dissensus and collaborative art practices, Charnley takes special note of Rancière's skepticism of collaborative works that confess themselves to be political "because it confuses the boundary between art and the social."<sup>58</sup> Charnley continues:

As [Rancière] puts it: ' . . . the more [art] goes out into the streets and professes to be engaging in a form of social intervention, the more it anticipates and mimics its own effects. Art thus risks becoming a parody of its alleged efficacy.' There is something disappointing about this avoidance of questions that are raised when art is confronted by a limit, in the moment of attempting to transgress it. At this moment the dissensus is a radical one, in as much as it is a disjuncture between art's self-understanding and its social reality.<sup>59</sup>


This limit, however, is not a deficit to Paglen's political aspirations, but rather an important nodal point for locating the resistive possibilities for a dissensual agency, which for Paglen, operates through his confrontation with the documentary genre. If the photographs are forms of documentation, then they confront the limit of political demonstration, but fail to surpass it. Because the images obscure evidence of the black world by metaphorizing the discourse of secrecy through the abstract visual register, they can only be political if they are labeled as such and qualified by paratextual information.

Yet, if we reconsider the collaborative art practice itself as the documentation of Paglen's encounter with the black world, then the visual register of limit-telephotography, which obscures evidentiary claims of the photographic index, should prompt viewers to turn away from thinking about the images as documentation in order to consider how the politics of production of limit-telephotography are attended by a multiplicity of effects, both in terms of their inception and reception, which may suggest or potentiate other kinds of agency. In this case, the encounter with limit-telephotography images would be a kind of participation in Paglen's collaborative network alongside those astronomers and fellow researchers that contributed to their production. The goal of this form of documentation becomes political when it negates the premise of its own appeals to knowledge formation. Paglen certainly doesn't illuminate anything about the black world, but perhaps he doesn't have to. When encountering his images, such sites suddenly become palpable, allowing for geographic material to enter into critical discourse. Even the most uninformed viewer who takes a sudden interest in the black world can gain political agency in seeking information, questioning sources of data, and joining others in protesting federal operations. Thus, while the political agency of Paglen's project cannot be located in the images themselves, it is possible to rethink how certain forms of engagement with limit-telephotography can re-inscribe alternative modes of civic participation with the black world into the field of spatio-political meanings articulated by the official aesthetic, legal, and constitutional forms of state power.

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<sup>58</sup> Charnley, "Dissensus and the politics of collaborative practice," 51.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 5; emphasis added.

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