

Trevor Paglen: *Orbital Reflector*
Collection CAE1904

Introduction/Abstract

Conceived by artist Trevor Paglen, *Orbital Reflector* was a “Nonfunctional Satellite” sculpture intended to self-inflate like a balloon and become as bright as a star in the Big Dipper, thus creating a visible sculpture in the night sky, had it not been “lost in space.”

Biographical Note: Trevor Paglen

Trevor Paglen (born 1974) is an American artist, geographer, and author whose work addresses secrecy, mass surveillance, and data collection. He works to make the invisible visible by documenting the American surveillance state from vantage points at various public locations, photographing distant military facilities, and the paths of information-gathering satellites. Paglen has had solo exhibitions at Vienna Secession, Eli & Edythe Broad Art Museum, Van Abbe Museum, Frankfurt Kunstverein, and Protocinema Istanbul, and participated in group exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Tate Modern, and numerous other venues. He launched an artwork into distant orbit around Earth in collaboration with Creative Time and MIT (*The Last Pictures*), contributed research and cinematography to the Academy Award-winning film *Citizenfour*, and created a radioactive sculpture for the exclusion zone in Fukushima, Japan. Paglen earned a B.A. in 1998 from the University of California Berkeley, a Master of Fine Arts degree in 2002 from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and a Ph.D. in geography in 2008 from the University of California Berkeley. He is credited with coining the term "Experimental Geography" to describe practices coupling experimental cultural production and art-making with ideas from critical human geography. The 2009 book *Experimental Geography: Radical Approaches to Landscape, Cartography, and Urbanism* was largely inspired by Paglen's work. His projects and publications include *I Could Tell You But Then You Would Have to be Destroyed by Me*; *Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon's Secret World*. New York; *Invisible: Covert Operations and Classified Landscapes, Photographs by Trevor Paglen*; *The Last Pictures*; and *Trevor Paglen* from Phaidon in London.

Scope and Content

Artist Trevor Paglen began designing “Nonfunctional Satellites” in 2013 with the help of aerospace engineers. They were conceived to be “space-worthy sculptures designed as small, lightweight satellites that expand to become large, highly reflective structures.” By placing one of these objects into low-earth orbit, Paglen hoped to create a visible sculpture in the night sky, visible from the earth below after sunset and before dawn as a bright, slowly moving, flickering star. The sculpture would remain in orbit for several weeks before burning up upon reentry through the atmosphere. His intention was to create a response “to the question of what aerospace engineering would look like if its methods were decoupled from the corporate and military interests underlying the industry. The nonfunctional satellite recasts the old question of ‘art for art's sake’ within a different context, asking whether we can imagine something like ‘aerospace engineering for aerospace engineering's sake.’ ”

Orbital Reflector was a sculpture constructed of a lightweight material similar to Mylar. It was housed in a small box-like infrastructure known as a CubeSat and launched into space aboard a rocket. Once in low Earth orbit at a distance of about 350 miles (575 kilometers) from Earth, the CubeSat was meant to open and release the sculpture, which would self-inflate like a balloon and would have been as bright as a star in the Big Dipper. Global Western, an aerospace firm, worked with Trevor Paglen and the Nevada Museum of Art to design and manufacture *Orbital Reflector*. Spaceflight Industries arranged for the launch of *Orbital Reflector* on board a

SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket. The launch went as planned on December 3, 2018, but due to the large number of CubeSats deployed simultaneously the Air Force was unable to assign a tracking number to it, and the FCC thereupon declined to give permission for it to open. The sculpture is, in essence, “lost in space.”

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