# frieze d/e

## Unseen Sites

INTERNET, LOGISTICS

### Trevor Paglen explains the photography competition he organized as part of his show at Frankfurter Kunstverein



Söhnke Streckel, photo contest submission showing BND telecommunications tower, Brocken, Saxony-Anhalt, 2013 (courtesy: Söhnke Streckel & Frankfurter Kunstverein)

The recent conversation about mass surveillance has been limited, I think, by the fact that we have very poor metaphors with which to understand such systems, how they work and what they look like. Visualization of these systems becomes, then, an artistic question. Can we as artists imagine metaphors, or create images, that would allow us to comprehend mass surveillance? Algorithmic systems are so far removed from the technologies of our senses I'm not sure that we can. You literally cannot see an algorithm, but it's there all the same.

In January 2014, when I was working on the cinematography for *Citizenfour* (2014), Laura Poitras's documentary about Edward Snowden and the global surveillance scandals, I travelled around Germany, where the film was in large part made, photographing different landscapes. Many of these 'landscapes' were in fact US National Security Agency (NSA) bases.

Photographing such sites inevitably attracts the attention of the security employed in and around them – mostly American and non-American private security contractors but also the German police and the American military – who inevitably start asking questions: 'What are you doing here?' 'What is this for?' 'Don't you know you can't take pictures?' Sometimes, American military police would ask to see my photos. Once I showed them what I had taken and they asked me to delete a photograph. I said no. A jurisdictional issue arises when photographing NSA bases in Germany. Signs on the fences warn that photography is forbidden, but that's not true. A US military officer has no legal power over a German national standing on German soil outside an American military base – nor, for that matter, over an American national on German soil, as in my case.
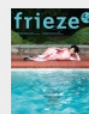


Trevor Paglen, *NSA/GCHQ Surveillance Base, Bude, Cornwall, UK*, 2014 (courtesy: the artist, Altman Siegel, San Francisco, Metro Pictures, New York & Galerie Thomas Zander, Cologne)
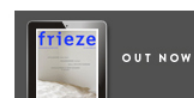
Legal questions like this come up time and again in such situations. The public is often unaware of its rights. It turns out that you can photograph whatever you want in Germany under a copyright exception called *Panoramafreiheit*, or 'Freedom of Panorama', provided you can see the thing photographed with your own eyes and not additional aids. In the US people have been intimidated or harrassed for photographing military sites, but even there it's not a criminal offence and, despite the common misconception, it's not a legal grey zone – even if the 'Freedom of Panorama' is not stated explicitly.

When Frankfurter Kunstverein approached me to do an exhibition there this summer I thought it would be interesting to hold a photography contest and ask the public to submit images showing 'landscapes of surveillance' – however they might want to interpret that phrase. The aim was to expand the visual vocabulary we have of such places (whatever they might be). After all, the vocabulary that we use to understand the world is as much image- as language-based; photography, for me, is as much about taking photographs as insisting on one's right to do so. After all, one of the successes of *Citizenfour* was how it shaped the public's 'common sense' understanding of a figure like Snowden.

The description of the 'places' I'm calling upon people to photograph for the competition is deliberately vague. There's a section on the contest website that says, 'these are the kinds of sites you might be interested in', including a map and a list of so-called SIGINT (Signals-Intelligence) sites – lists maintained by the NSA and some by the Bundesnachrichtendienst (BND). But I'm curious to see what people come up with: a picture of a spy satellite? A picture of Angela Merkel's mobile phone infected with a piece of malware, perhaps? I hope people are creative with it. As for the information accompanying the submitted images, it's entirely up to the photographer. The upload system is not a secure server. The instructions merely state that a JPEG should be sent to a Gmail address by 31 May. It's explicitly stated that American military personnel are eligible to submit images too (though its somewhat doubtful that any will do so).



Jacob Appelbaum & Trevor Paglen, *Autonomy Cube*, 2014 (courtesy: the artist, Altman Siegel, San Francisco, Metro Pictures, New York & Galerie Thomas Zander, Cologne)

Perhaps there will be an interesting set of philosophical questions that come up in the judging process, in terms of selecting 'winners'. The jury consists of myself, Nils Bremer, Franziska Nori of the Frankfurter Kunstverein, Luminita Sabau and Ditmar Schädel who will choose the five winning photographs. Those will be included in a section of my exhibition The Octopus at the Frankfurter Kunstverein. We'll also publish them in a local magazine, the Journal Frankfurt, along with – I hope – interviews with the winning photographers.

Frankfurt is an interesting place in relation to these themes: it's the site of the German Commercial Internet Exchange (DE-CIX) which offers a neutral local network where any carrier, ISP or network operator can connect and exchange traffic. The DE-CIX is the busiest internet exchange point in the world. The NSA – using a technique called 'deep packet inspection' which analyzes data looking for what are called 'selectors': names, passwords, phone numbers – collects internet traffic data nearby in the Dagger Complex in Griesheim. For *The Octopus*, I want to install an anonymous TOR network router, a project called the *Autonomy Cube* (2014) conceived with my friend Jacob Appelbaum. The cube anonymizes traffic from users accessing the open WiFi network in the museum, and also from users connected worldwide, whose traffic is routed through this TOR network.

For the photo contest, initially I imagined participants would be amateur photographers. Amateur photography is a field in its own right, with its own infrastructures and platforms. But right away, we started to get a lot of emails from people saying, 'why can't I submit photos taken on my mobile phone?' The rules specified that submitted photographs had to be taken using a 'real' camera, not a smartphone. That was when it occurred to me, 'shit, that's a really good point!' So we changed that rule the next day thereby really making the competition public. Of course this reveals my own prejudice when it comes to taking images – my process has always been a much slower one, because I'm always shooting with weird gear and giant cameras.

In terms of digital imagery, it's useful to think about what Hito Steyerl has called the 'poor image'. For Steyerl the copied, degraded image seems to have a reality quotient that the original 'clear' image doesn't. Counter-intuitively, there seems to be an aesthetics of objectivity that comes from the 'poor image'. For example, with photos or footage of Rodney King or Abu Ghraib, there is a sense of 'truth', precisely because these images are grainy or badly shot or very 'low quality'. The shaky camera is a signifier for 'actually' being there; the scene not being staged. That whole aesthetic has been co-opted by reality TV, which, of course, sets up highly constructed situations.

For me personally, I'm probably a product of a certain Modernist tradition, in the sense that I think there's something to be said for an encounter with the 'Other', with a kind of 'Sublime'. Think of Alfred Stieglitz's photographs of cloud formations for example. A traditional notion of abstraction in art is that there is something productive about images that don't speak for themselves, that don't present themselves as objective. That way a situation is created whereby an image can ask you, the viewer, to fill that content in yourself. Or it creates the realization you cannot fill that content. It renders the image an open question. The result is an acknowledgment that an image is a fusion of something that's out in the world with something that's in your head. Clearly the photo contest has a juridical-legal component as well as an aesthetic one. For me, instead of 'either/or', why not 'both/and'?
*As told to Pablo Larios*

—*by Trevor Paglen*

*Trevor Paglen is a US artist currently based in New York and Berlin. His exhibition The Octopus is on view at Frankfurter Kunstverein from 20 June till 30 August 2015.*