

## The gravity of orbital art

**Humanity's space era has opened the orbit around the Earth not only to space race monuments, scientific and technological advances, but this fall also to orbital art, that will become a message to the far future.**

Since the launch of Sputnik 55 years ago, humans have created a series of artificial rings around the Earth, distinct from the rings of Saturn, that will possibly become one of the most enduring archeological ruins of humanity's existence long after its disappearance from the planet. The rings made of geostationary communication satellites orbiting at around 36,000 km above the equator will experience no appreciable atmospheric drag and after completing their missions, they will remain in orbit indefinitely.

The possibilities and challenges arising from this evidence of our existence have intrigued the initiator of the project *The Last Pictures*, Trevor Paglen, for many years. A well-known experimental geographer and artist, he was inspired by ancient cave paintings, nuclear waste warning signs, the Pioneer Plaques, and Carl Sagan's 1970's Golden Records launched by NASA for extraterrestrial audiences. Trevor has developed a collection of one hundred images that have been etched onto a golden silicon disc launched from Kazakhstan to orbit onboard the Echostar XVI satellite. Being a time capsule, *The Last Pictures* raises some of the most essential questions of human existence, communication, and the social, political, economic, and environmental dilemmas of our times.

We will be discussing with Trevor not only some of the grounding questions ensuing from this audacious project, his previous feat of uncovering state secrets and their artistic representation, but also an allegory of humanity, that may be mirroring our past and anchoring our future.

- 1. What was the starting point for the creation of *The Last Pictures* and how did the artistic, scientific and journalistic approaches complement or disadvantage each other? In such a technically, financially and intellectually challenging project, where you were collaborating with and to a certain extent dependent on others [at least in the last step of the execution], was there friction between the various 'tectonic plates'?**

The idea for the Last Pictures began a long time ago when I realized that communications satellites in geostationary orbits are so far away from Earth that they never come back. They operate for about 15 years, and when they power down, they simply stay in orbit, essentially forever. Communications satellites are the longest-lasting things humans have ever made; they are the material legacy of this historical moment. The Last Pictures is a project with an attempt to tell a story for the distant future.

An enormous number of people collaborated on the project. Philosophers, artists, astronomers, engineers of all sorts, materials scientists, and anthropologists. The project was absolutely dependent on collaboration across a large number of disciplines and it was extremely complicated to organize everything. As we got closer to our delivery date, there was an enormous amount of stress, with dozens of people working 24/7 over Christmas and New Years to make the project a reality. Having said that, everyone rose to the occasion. Over and over, people dropped what they were doing to make it happen. This was true of the researchers, the technical team, and the team who worked on the book.

2. ***The Last Pictures*' golden disk with its 100 images, attached to EchoStarXVI, will soon leave the Earth, which excludes it from the traditional route of being exhibited in institutions for appreciation and validation of the art. However your public presentations amongst art institutions such as MOMA, SFMOMA, LACMA, etc. are an important part of this project. At what point does your 'performance' become a part of the artwork, especially when the physical artefact is no longer present?**

It is a bit ironic to develop such an ambitious public art project that can only vaguely be seen through a telescope! The main way for a broad audience to engage with the work is through the book, published by the University of California Press and Creative Time, and through the speaking engagements. I think that the book, the lecture, and the object in orbit form a continuum. They are all related to one another, different ways of thinking through the central questions that the project raises. There is certainly a tension between the fact that the Last Pictures is both a fairly "weighty" gesture (the idea of making images for the end of time), and at the same time a deeply non-sensical gesture. The Last Pictures will continue orbiting earth long after the humans are gone. Because of that, it is going to a place and time where there is no such a thing as human sense. It is, literally, a "non-sense" project. Those two poles are something we explored a lot in the project, and is something I write a lot about in the book and speak about in public lectures.

3. **In the last decades, with the proliferation of communication and information technologies, the world lies at our fingertips. During this relatively short period, our values, relationships, experiences and possibilities have changed fundamentally. However there has been a great alienation, and disconnection from reality, as it is gradually substituted by 'mediated experience'. How does this change of perception effect the appreciation of art? In the future do you think the physical presence of art will be essential?**

The Last Pictures is designed to feel anachronistic. We live in a world where we cannot help but to see thousands of full-color images daily. The Last Pictures is 100 images. Most of the images we see are digital, fleeting and temporary; the Last Pictures is analog and extremely-archival, designed to last billions of years. One of the things I like about physical art is that it asks us to slow down our vision, and to look closely rather than distractedly. I like going to museums to look at paintings and photographs, because it invites me to pay attention in a way that I don't normally do in my everyday life. I think that the Last Pictures takes this to an extreme case. With the Last Pictures, we've made something like cave-paintings for the distant future. The project consists of images that are extremely durable, and that become detached from their specific histories and meanings. What happens to an image once it is detached from history and culture? This was a very interesting question to explore with the project.

4. **While studying visual art in Chicago, you encountered the Situationists, a 1960s-era anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist movement that rejected any separation between art and politics. How do you see this distinction today? What kind of social reform, if any, would you expect to stir from your work?**

One of the most important things I want out of art is that it helps us to see who we are now. With a nod to Aristotle, humans are political animals, so there's often a political dimension to what I'm interested in. I don't really see art as separate from politics – how could it be, given that we are fundamentally political beings? Having said that, I'm not sure that art can help very much with thinking about developing and implementing policies. Art can help develop a visual and cultural

vocabulary that can help coordinate our thoughts and attention and to develop cultural frameworks of seeing.

5. **Your previous projects, such as *The Black Sites* and *Limit Telephotography*, offered intriguing images of secret prisons and secret military bases respectively. To what extent is the attraction here the very idea of vanishing secrecy in our interconnected society? Is possibly Sartre's description of vision, as being like "the voyeuristic pleasure of looking through a keyhole...", apt to your revealing photography practice; or how would you distinguish it?**

I am not particularly interested in the whole conversation about photography and voyeurism, but I am interested in thinking about the relationship between making images and political rights and claims. In that sense, I think about many of the images of military installations in terms of performance. To take a photograph of a classified military installation is to insist on one's right to photograph, to insist on one's right to make images. So there is a performative aspect to that. Having said that, I'm also interested in what images do and don't reveal. The very strange dance with meaning that images engage in. An image seems to mean a great deal, and yet it is always elusive what exactly it is that they mean. This is obviously one of the major themes with the Last Pictures, and is one of the big continuities in my work in general.

6. **Climbing desert mountains to survey forbidden sites, shooting spy satellites, tracking secret military prisons in countries like Afghanistan are just some of your well-known projects. Mentioned earlier by Dr. Gray Brechin in California magazine: "He's our superstar." Did the role of your father as an Air Force doctor who treated spy-plane pilots effect your adventurous approach? Who has significantly inspired you on your trajectory, who are your 'heroes'?**

Growing up in the military made me very aware of its influence on American society as a whole, and made me comfortable around the culture. I have a deep empathy for the people in the military, but am very critical of the oversized role it plays in American politics. As for my approach to art-making, I don't consider it particularly adventurous. I am always interested in seeing first-hand whatever it is I'm interested in. If I'm working on military or intelligence sites, that means travelling to some fairly obscure places, I suppose.

As for heroes, I'm not a big fan of the idea. I think we get into trouble when we expect great people to do great things for all of us. I think that power lies in people doing things together, cooperatively, rather than the idea of singular individuals shaping history.

7. **Surely there must be some backlash, where your actions are criticized and discredited. Does your artistic execution, where some images evoke painting or pictorial art photography, and therefore the limited information available to the viewer protect you? How do you cope with rigorously regulated visual culture, as W.J.T. Mitchell puts it: 'When seeing is prohibited and invisibility is mandated'?**

The United States is a deeply contradictory place. On one hand, it has an enormous "deep state" comprised of secret institutions and covert operations. On the other hand, it's probably the most open society on earth. There are actually no laws concerning state secrecy that apply to civilians. Everything I do is perfectly legal. Of course, my work makes some people upset, but that's probably true of most art.

- 8. *The Last Pictures* project combines certain contradictory forces. There is this grand gesture of relinquishing humanity's longest lasting artefacts to space, communicating our existence to the future, and on the other hand you have mentioned the absurdity of such a concept with a critique of that very gesture. Perhaps an important part of this project may be it's transformative potential, what can it teach us about ourselves and what can it change right now. What were your goals with *The Last Pictures* and what are the actual reflections on it so far?**

There may or may not be an audience in the distant future for the Last Pictures. I personally do not think that it will ever be found, but everyone who worked on the project has a different opinion about this question. The scientists at MIT are convinced that it will be found by robots in the distant future. My project manager, Alexis Lowry, thinks that it will be found by humans a few hundred years from now during a massive clean-up of space. One of the things I like about the project is that it asks us to consider various possible futures.

Whether there is an audience in the distant future, there is a guaranteed audience now. For me, the project is an opportunity to think about a collection of fairly serious questions. What sort of attitude do we want to have towards the future? How can we begin to understand the impact of human civilization on the earth's surface? What are some of the anxieties and uncertainties characterizing the historical moment we live in? What is to be done?

I've been very pleased that so many people have been willing to go along with me in asking some of these rather big questions as the project has begun to come out. I was worried that the project would seem frivolous or un-serious to people. I've been pleasantly surprised that the project has been able to capture other people's imagination in the same way that it's captured my own.

- 9. Rather a contrast to the Golden Records' 'utopia' images, *The Last Pictures* is like a silent movie about a deeply troubled species. The tension of an uncertain future is greatly embodied in the first selected picture of the back of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*. Described previously by Walter Benjamin as picturing the angel of history, whose alarmed face turned toward the past sees one single catastrophe, while a storm wind caught in his wings propels him into the future to which his back is turned. Do you think that the melancholy emanating from the selection of the pictures reflects the spirit of our society?**

The Last Pictures is a deeply melancholic project. I'm very suspicious of the way we've come to understand ideas like "progress." I think that at this moment of uncertainty around everything from climate change to the global economy to the future of political institutions, I think that some of the contradictory forces at play in the modern project have become very obvious to a lot of people.

Having said that, I cannot speak for anyone other than myself. The project was put together by a relatively small group of people (relative to the population of earth), and we had no pretensions of trying to speak for anyone other than ourselves. The Last Pictures is not a "portrait of humanity" or a definitive record of humankind. It's a montage of images expressing some of the uncertainties, anxieties, and questions that a group of people have. A group of people that lived at the time when the great communication-satellite-monuments in the sky were built.

- 10. Human beings have long tried to overcome their frailty and mortality by producing a body of work that would live on through the ages. How does the possibility of conquering this aspect of our ungraspable presence make you feel?**

All of us who worked on the project were very nervous about that aspect of the project. None of us were interested in trying to immortalize ourselves or to engage in something transcendental. For me personally, I see myself as a cave-painter making obscure markings on the 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of a remote corner of the earth. That remote corner of the earth just happens to be in space.

## **Biography**

Trevor Paglen (born in 1974) is an internationally recognized American artist, experimental geographer, and author, currently based in New York.

Among his books are *Blank Spots on the Map*, *Torture Taxi*, and *I Could Tell You But Then You Would Have to Be Destroyed by Me* and his most recent one *The Last Pictures*.

Paglen holds an MFA from the Art Institute of Chicago, and a Ph.D. in Geography from U.C. Berkeley.

He has received grants and awards from the Smithsonian, Art Matters, Artadia, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the LUMA foundation, the Eyebeam Center for Art and Technology, and the Aperture Foundation.

His work has been exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Tate Modern, London; The Walker Arts Center, Minneapolis; The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; Institute for Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams; the 2008 Taipei Biennial; the Istanbul Biennial 2009, and numerous other places.

[www.paglen.com](http://www.paglen.com)

Kristína Jarošová

Kristina Jarošová (1985), art critic, gallerist, curator and freelance journalist. Graduated from Comenius University with a Masters degree in Marketing and Communication, completed the Arts and Business Semester course at Sotheby's Institute of Art London and a current student of MA Contemporary Art Theory at Goldsmiths University.