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Trevor Paglen's art includes secure Wi-Fi for viewers

By **Kenneth Baker** Updated 12:32 pm, Friday, March 20, 2015



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"Autonomy Cube" (2014), mixed media by Trevor Paglen and Jacob Appelbaum, creates a Wi-Fi hotspot to access Tor.

Trevor Paglen has just won the 2015 Award for Courage and Creativity in Art and Technology given by Eyebeam, a Brooklyn nonprofit dedicated to promoting artists' inventiveness in new media. (Paglen shares the award with **Ayah Bdeir**, founder of littleBits, maker of components that enable non-geeks to participate in electronics innovation.)

Altman Siegel's show of recent work by Paglen allows gallery visitors not already familiar with his work to see why it frequently garners acclaim. Paglen's work fascinates because it sometimes strains credulity and partly because it challenges viewers' tolerance for the notion that sharpness in social or political critique can qualify otherwise unprepossessing stuff as "art."

The most radical departure from what Paglen has shown here before — and the most

confrontational — is “Autonomy Cube” (2014), a collaboration with **Jacob Appelbaum**. Inside thick cube of clear acrylic, an ironic reference to minimal sculpture’s boast of intellectual transparency, Paglen and Appelbaum have placed custom electronics that create a Wi-Fi hotspot through which gallery visitors can log on to the Tor network that encrypts Web searches and other communications.

This work takes Paglen’s critical activism to a new level, enlisting visitors in intervening in the surveillance nexus that he deplors.

The title “Autonomy Cube” plays on the outmoded idea of the artwork as a special sort of thing disengaged from the hugger-mugger of material culture and society at large. The work raises the stakes of so-called participatory art. It asks, almost dares, willing gallery visitors to trust the security of a network they may never have used or heard of before. And it treats the vaunted idea of an artwork as a vehicle of communication more literally and demonstrably than anything else in the art realm that I can think of.

Other works in the show include the video “Code Names of the Surveillance State” (2014), which purports to present as a continuous vertical scroll a list in uniform white-on-black letters of the official slang of spycraft.

Plausibility wanes as the terms pile up in their hundreds. Perhaps we can believe “Goldfinger” or “Mysterio,” but do people with high security clearances really refer to “Google Turds,” “Gourmet Trough,” “Mysterious Jerboa” and such with straight faces?

Suppose that only half, or merely a tenth, of the code names Paglen has compiled are genuine; that would still bespeak a labyrinthine apparatus of secrecy protecting — whom, from what? That we are not entitled to know is Paglen’s point, though he does leave us feeling entitled to think that it all may be about protecting power elites from *us*.

Another video, “Circles” (2015), this one projected, Paglen shot from a helicopter spiraling above Britain’s counterpart to the **National Security Agency, GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters)**.

The huge circular building and its surroundings, bearing an unnerving resemblance to British architect **Norman Foster**’s proposal for Apple’s new campus, imply a massive workforce engaged in, well, activities of which state security keeps almost everyone in ignorance, for reasons of — never mind.

Had Paglen shot the video, which now and then zooms in on people stationed or passing within or outside the building, without warning, his helicopter almost surely would have provoked an aerial escort to a secure landing area, or worse. But GCHQ apparently viewed Paglen’s project

as vouching for its civic probity. A viewer, after some minutes of the soundtrack — a muffled, modified drone of the rotor blades — comes away with a different impression.

Several of Paglen's other works here consist of photographs of innocent-looking shoreline spots that happen to be where undersea networks of fiber optic cables, connecting American and other national surveillance networks, make subterranean landfall. One such picture has a pendant work: a collage of images, maps and formerly top-secret technical details made public by **Edward Snowden**.

Martin Wong at CCA: For something in a completely different creative register, see "Martin Wong: Painting Is Forbidden" at the **Wattis Institute of California College of the Arts** in San Francisco. Its title derives from a notebook entry by the artist that rather too casually likens a painter's compulsion to a serial killer's.

To see "Martin Wong," you have to make your way through a bloodless constellation of over-thought, under-realized objects by Belgian collaborators Jos de Gruyter and **Harald Thys**, but the Wong show will quickly eclipse it in memory.

Wong (1946-1999) grew up in San Francisco and died here, a victim of AIDS-related affliction; but spent time in the 1970s and '80s in gay and other subcultural circles in New York.

There he made paintings primarily, and wrote poems on scroll-like sheets of paper, perfecting a kind of obsessive calligraphy not quite illegible but tending to defeat even a committed reader.

Wong's undated poem "Chapter 11 Scarry Night" begins as a fantasy narrative of the violent falling-out between **Vincent van Gogh** and **Paul Gauguin**, a sort of origin myth of Vincent's famous painting "Starry Night," but readers will soon find themselves losing the thread among the downward-sloping tines of Wong's upper-case E's and the arrowheads of his D's. Still, the title's nice play on "starry," "scary" and "scarry" — that is, leaving scars — lingers in the mind. Wong's idiosyncratic spelling and phrasing often leave a viewer wondering at what level he knew what he was doing, and in what sense it matters.

Wong had a prodigious drawing hand, capable both of forming convincing likenesses and of spinning off wildly into seemingly psychedelic invention.

Some of his ceramics suggest outsider art curiosities, others, unidentified fossils or incised grave markers.

Wong's work has enjoyed growing posthumous recognition recently. In 2012, Vietnamese American artist **Danh Vo** took advantage of winning the **Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's**

Hugo Boss Prize to bring before New Yorkers a vast trove of artifacts that Wong had collected, many of which fed his art in one way or another.

The CCA show offers the Bay Area the deepest look at Wong's work that it has ever had. Congratulations to the college's 2015 graduate class in curatorial practice, whose project this is:

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Trevor Paglen: Photographs and documentation, video and electronics. Through May 2. Altman Siegel Gallery, 49 Geary St., S.F. (415) 576-9300. www.altmansiegel.com.

Martin Wong: Painting Is Forbidden: Paintings, drawings, ceramic sculpture and ephemera. Through April 18. CCA Wattis Institute Kent and Vicki Logan Galleries, 360 Kansas St., S.F. (415) 355-9670. www.wattis.org.

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