

**ART DOCUMENTS: THE POLITICS OF THE VISIBLE IN THE WORK OF
TARYN SIMON AND TREVOR PAGLEN**

by

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Abstract

Focusing on the work of two contemporary American photographers, Taryn Simon and Trevor Paglen, this thesis addresses the gap in photographic scholarship between photography as a documentary form and a conceptual one. Each artist activates questions around visibility, representation, and the relationship between aesthetics and politics through photographic practices that shift between image and information, between seductive formalism and revelatory evidence. At stake in this investigation is a broader consideration of the status of the photograph and its relationship to exposure and redaction in an era that assumes information, including visual information, is and should be transparent and freely accessible.

The first chapter introduces a theoretical problem set as the structuring argument of the thesis by articulating a delicate dialectic between visibility and opacity, one that is operative in the revelation and concealment of information through visual means. What the photograph delimits is not contingent, as post-structuralist theory argues, and meanings that press upon the photograph from outside the frame are not arbitrary: what is external to the photograph must be considered equal to what is visible within the frame.

The second chapter introduces photographic projects that demand to be addressed as visualizations of state power, even while the aesthetics of each project simultaneously obscure the labour and lived experiences upon which they are constructed. Taryn Simon's series *Contraband* examines the space of the American border and the violence done to a highly

surveilled but not visible body. Trevor Paglen's series *The Other Night Sky* likewise examines processes of state surveillance and the covert systems of power that exist beyond the visible realm. In the practices of both it is the self-imposed restrictions, often made visible through the use of texts, which render the projects legible.

These projects point to an emergent discursive space that does not speak to the binaries of aesthetics and politics in art, or documentary and conceptual forms of photography. This complex third space must be recognized in order to address a failure of photographic representation that is paradoxically pervasive in the contemporary, image-saturated environment.

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Jayne Wilkinson.

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Introduction

Photography has long held the power to make visible, and to document, the unseen and the unknown aspects of our world. As the technological force par excellence of the past hundred and fifty years, and as a medium however defined, the processes that shape what we have come to understand as the photographic universe¹ continue to challenge the ways we see and understand the world around us. Photographic representation offers a kind of deferred sight, a way to see after the fact what was not visible in the moment. Whether photographs are analogue, digital, formal, vernacular, reportage, conceptual, or any of the wide range of forms that photography now takes, the photograph itself acts as a mirage that simultaneously obscures and reveals the social and the political. This is the result of photography as a process. It is a process that acts upon the relations between the person who produces a photograph, the photograph itself, and the person who views it. But there are also relations that exist external to the framed image, relations that press upon the image with meanings that challenge its reading and interpretation. The situations and environments in which subjects are framed and depicted do not end at the edge of the photograph and these externalities demand consideration. The contingency of the image—the idea that we might interpret meaning based on our subject positions—detracts from the very specificity of the environment in which the photograph was taken. While aesthetics may make a particular image resonant to one person, those same aesthetics or formal choices may turn

¹ The phrase “the photographic universe” is taken from a two-part conference of the same name at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics and the New School, New York, March 2-3, 2011 and April 10-11, 2013. It refers to the ways in which modes of communication are now largely structured around the exchange of photographic, or visual information. Trevor Paglen participated in the 2011 iteration with a presentation titled “The Omnipresent Camera,” <http://photographicuniverse.parsons.edu>.

another away, resulting in an avoidance or negation of the very material realities that must have occurred first in order for the image to be taken. A photograph of a landscape that is unfamiliar might promote a reading that interprets the image in any number of ways: as sublime, as foreign, as reminiscent of something that is familiar through a displaced nostalgia. But such interpretive efforts elide the existence of an actual space, and the real actions, events, and experiences that took place therein. This is the tension with which the photographic must contend: how to use an aesthetics of the visible while at the same time articulating what is not immediately visible but is still, of necessity, embedded within the image.

The work of experimental geographer and artist Trevor Paglen addresses these concerns by self-consciously navigating the thin border between visibility and invisibility. In one of his most notable photographic projects, *The Other Night Sky* (2007–ongoing), Paglen presents images of classified American satellites, objects that are not officially or publicly logged but that orbit the earth to covertly track and collect data. Working with amateur groups who observe and record the movements of such covert satellites, Paglen utilized powerful computer software that enabled him to predict their orbital paths through the night sky.² The photographic results of his efforts are visually seductive, telescopic images of the sky at night. Often shot in remote locations to allow for the fullest depth of darkness, Paglen's skies explode with stars and other celestial bodies and along with them come the familiar sense of wonderment at the contemplation of the vastness of the universe. Indeed there is a high level of aestheticization present in his work, an aesthetics that utilizes a lush minimalism matched with a grand scale and depth that requires one

² Trevor Paglen, *Invisible: Covert Operations and Classified Landscapes*, (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2011), 85.

to consider the photograph as object first and foremost. In his work we see the darkness of deep space penetrated by thousands of tiny points of light, and both the size of the photograph and the scale of its signification overwhelms perception (Figure 1). In this image of the constellation Orion, the viewer will link together the stars in the familiar shape as a way to orient perception, to create a sense of flatness and of projected space—the sky as a screen—to counter the deep space of total sky, a space foreign and unknowable to the viewers grounded below. In works like *MILSTAR3 in Sagittarius* (Figure 2) and *KEYHOLE IMPROVED CRYSTAL Near Scorpio Optical Reconnaissance Satellite* (Figure 3) the starry skies are brighter and fuller, the tiny points of light and atmospheric debris oscillating before our eyes with a reverberation that is almost dizzying. Again the viewer searches for some kind of visual relief, a way to orient perception against the paradox of the flatness of the picture plane and the intense depth, the acknowledgement of which a visualization of space necessarily requires. Here we can more easily recognize the sign of human intervention in the otherworldly realm of space photography with the perfectly straight, razor thin line signifying the flight path of a spacecraft in orbit. The mere suggestion of something out of place, the dissynchronicity of the linear vector against the random field of stars, becomes the sign through which Paglen points outside of the aesthetics of his visually seductive imagery to indicate the broader power structures at work.

Yet Paglen's tiny lines in the sky cannot really tell us much about the processes at which the visual existence of covert satellites within the frame hints. We might know that these secret satellites are used by the American military, and can be tracked and photographed. Certainly this knowledge becomes compelling in light of Paglen's "almost aggressively seductive"

compositions, but even with detailed captioning, the images give little away.³ Comparing Paglen's images to Pollock's "all-over painting," John Beck makes the argument that the images are ethereal and adrift, subordinating aspects of the real that are present to the overall effect of the abstract image.⁴ But like the bits of studio floor that end up in Pollock's work, Paglen's tiny streaks, the blown out points of light, the detailed captions and explanations are all required, even if not immediately legible, in order to make sense of the project at all.⁵ What that requires is an understanding of process, of thinking through the photographic process as one that necessitates research, limits, and exposure at the same time that it abstracts the material it seeks to reveal. Paglen does so in *The Other Night Sky* through an aestheticization of surveillance processes that serves to highlight a paradox of visibility itself, since the mere presence of lights in the sky discloses very little factual information even as they come to signify the covert processes of state surveillance. It is this paradox that becomes the methodology Paglen employs to trouble the discourse around transparency, a discourse that is ultimately embedded within a contemporary moment that seeks to constantly reveal and expose huge quantities of information.

This interest in the paradoxical relationship between exposure and redaction is one taken up by many contemporary artists as visual producers struggle to find ways to visualize the unseen or unpublicized networks of power structuring life under the state. Like Paglen, American artist Taryn Simon produces serial, large-scale, photographic research projects concerned with the

³ John Beck, "Signs of the Sky, Signs of the Times: Photography as Double Agent," *Theory, Culture & Society* 28:7-8 (2011): 136.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, 137.

politics of inaccessible spaces and the challenges of making such spaces visible. Her work too is emblematic of a type of photography that shifts between image and evidence, between seductively formal representations and the unexpected revelation of information, strategically deploying visual and textual details in tandem so that the viewer must consider what happens in the spaces of the photograph prior to its realization. Working almost exclusively in series, each of her projects is set out first through substantial research and planning that involves multiple site visits, archival and institutional research, and pressuring and persuading official representatives of government agencies and corporations to grant her access to prohibited spaces. It is in this concern for the preliminary labour of her projects that Simon's output might be assessed not through the aesthetic images she frames or captures but by the long chains of relations she must first build in order to perform the photographic event.

Much of Simon's visual strategy involves carefully revealing pieces of information to the viewer so that they are able to consider the life of the image prior to its constitution, and the kind of labour, both physical and conceptual, required to bring the work to fruition. In her 2010 series *Contraband* Simon photographed items detained or seized from passengers entering the United States from abroad by remaining continuously on site at Kennedy International Airport's border control facility for five full days. The result are over one thousand photographs that index a hugely diverse range of items, from the banal (cigarettes) to the absurd (animal body parts and corpses) to the unexpected (counterfeited nesting dolls) to the familiar (counterfeit DVDs), all shot against a white background and with the same scale and placement within the frame (Figure 7). This treatment lends the objects a value and presence they would otherwise lack, itemized as though they are museum pieces or luxury goods on display; some develop an almost architectural

presence, while others reveal the decay and disarray of time in transit. As a result what is most interesting about this project is how the photographs come to act metonymically, pointing to a whole range of relations: globalized transit systems, the circulation of illegal goods, the restrictions on travel for certain individuals, the restricted access to spaces of inspection, and the concealment of goods for unknown intentions.

By forcing the viewer to consider what is external to the image itself, Taryn Simon and Trevor Paglen both demand that their projects be addressed as visualizations of the apparatuses of state power, even while the aesthetics of the image simultaneously obscures the networks of labour and lived experiences upon which they are constructed. In this thesis I argue that the practices of each artist articulate a delicate dialectic between visibility and opacity, one operative in the revelation and concealment of information through visual means. At stake in this investigation is a broader consideration of the status of the photograph and its relationship to exposure and redaction in an era that assumes information, including visual information, is and should be transparent and freely accessible. The motivation of this inquiry is not limited to traditional forms of photograph since the problem of representation has broader implications in determining *how* the sign links up with its referent: how is it possible to determine meaning when the signs used to communicate meaning do not appear to signify their referents, whether in traditional forms of photography or the image-saturated forms of communication now prevalent? This is the problem addressed by both artists in their respective practices: how can we visualize systems of power and control when photography fails in its attempts to do so? In much photographic theory of the past few decades the argument that images cannot visualize or represent what they attempt

to has been widely accepted.⁶ But what the photograph delimits is not contingent, as post-structuralist theory has argued, and meanings that press upon the photograph from outside the frame are not always arbitrary. A clear example of this can be found in the circulation of images that suggest evidence of state-led atrocities, such as the famous images of the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. The external contexts for such images, that is the fact that torture happened in a specific place by specific people, must be considered as at least as significant as what is visible within the frame.⁷ This presents an opposition between what *appears* to be made visible, and privileged as such, and what remains opaque to the image. The paradox of visibility is that the very attempt to make visible the hidden apparatuses of state power, apparatuses that allow for processes for example such as state surveillance, border control, and online data tracking, actually obscures the networks of life implicated in such processes. Paglen's and Simon's projects depend upon the lived experiences of those impacted by the hidden, covert operations of state systems (that is, all of us) and yet they are not able to visually represent such lives since both practices rely on an aesthetics that actively avoids the direct representation of human

⁶ Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Linfield has argued that the legacy of Sontag's and Barthes's contributions to photographic theory has been a distrust of images entirely. She quite scathingly critiques postmodern photographic criticism for its hostility to the image, for its critiques of documentary photography and humanism in particular (10). Instead she argues, perhaps thinking in tandem with Azoulay's work, for a way to consider documentary photographs critically by connecting the way we look at images with how we understand and define human rights.

⁷ This problem is one of representation, a problem that requires us to acknowledge a reality within the image even as post-structuralism has often claimed that there can be no truth in images, that they can't be trusted. The challenge is to consider how images operate when we must acknowledge their signifying systems, at least in part, at face value. In a short catalogue text for an exhibition on the relationship between art and war, Boris Groys puts this problem plainly: "For we cannot say that these images are not true; we know that these images are paid by a real loss of life—a loss of life documented by these images. Magritte could easily say that a painted apple is not a real apple or that a painted pipe is not a real pipe. But how can we say that a videotaped beheading is not a real beheading?" Boris Groys, "Art at War," in *Signals in the Dark: Art in the Shadow of War*, (Toronto: Blackwood Gallery, Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, 2008), 13.

experience.⁸ Instead, each artist sets limits and restrictions to their practices in advance of production in order to dictate what can be made visible within the photograph. For both, what is permitted to become visible offers very little factual information and instead each requires accompanying texts to flesh out the limitations of their projects for the viewer. The attempt to reveal what is hidden proves to be, for these artists, completely abstract. The politics of visibility, in an era that privileges transparency, thus becomes a paradox.⁹

In order to fully consider the relationship between what is visible and what is invisible or opaque, between what is contained within the frame and presented as image and what remains outside the frame and unrepresented, and in order to address the connection between the photograph as document and the event it records, I am seeking a method of thinking that accounts for the networks of life that exist prior to the instance of the photograph. Unwilling to label any image a true representation, and unable to track within the image the fleeting, fugitive

⁸ The major exception to this is Simon's first photographic body of work, *The Innocents*, where she researched the stories of people who had served jail time for wrongful convictions, convictions often based on photographic evidence, and made portraits that re-constructed aspects of their narratives. In images that otherwise would provide little information about the individual or the scene, she used extended captions to make those narratives legible. Taryn Simon, Peter Neufeld, and Barry Scheck, *The Innocents*, (New York: Umbrage, 2005).

⁹ Political theorists such as Jodi Dean have argued that ever-increasing access to information and data has privileged the notion that transparency and democracy are necessarily twinned concepts. She argues that the assumption of transparency and its privileging as a de facto democratic requisite is a fallacy since despite our knowledge of any number of atrocities perpetuated by governments or corporations there is little public outrage or action. Jodi Dean, "Publicity and Deliberation: Democratic Ideals in Dispute: Publicity's Secret," *Political Theory* 29, no. 5 (October 1, 2001): 173-74. In art historical discourse, the question of the ethics of transparency has also been widely debated. As related to identity politics specifically, Craig Owens' pointed critique of Benjamin Buchloh rightly identifies that the notion of transparency cannot simply be taken for granted. To claim that feminist artists render the invisible visible is a troubling one "in a culture in which visibility is always on the side of the male, invisibility on the side of the female." Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism" in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology New Edition*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 347. Transparency and the politics of visibility continues to be fiercely debated throughout Western countries especially, as the move towards banning women from wearing a burqa in public comes continually to the fore. In Canada this has been most evident in Quebec's 2013 tabling of its provincial Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which would limit the right to express one's religious faith with any outward symbols, including scarves or face-coverings.

signs that are continually escaping their referents, this project seeks to analyze photographic artworks whose exterior conditions are engaged, and of vital importance to the meaning of the work, but are not visible. To recognize photographic exteriority requires a responsibility on the part of the viewer, a responsibility that first locates a politics made visible by the creation of an aesthetic experience and secondly, but simultaneously, that is obscured and disguised by that same process of representation. This is not to discount the formal concerns of an internally organized visual matrix but when we spend time *watching* these images, the conditions *beyond* the frame become apparent.¹⁰

If we are to account for conditions external to the image, we must mobilize theoretical models that are not limited to the legacy of post-structuralism, a legacy that has consistently haunted photographic discourse. Drawing on Judith Butler's account of the photographic frame as a constantly shattered, shifting space, and on Ariella Azoulay's extensive discourse on the political citizenry of subjects beyond the image, in the first chapter I suggest ways of thinking beyond the frame in order to analyze what is present but is not visible in the photograph. The limits to representation that framing determines serves to draw attention to the limits of vision itself. How might theoretical debates on such limits, by considering the broader effects of a hyper-visual economy, both implicate and redress artists who navigate their political investments through

¹⁰ Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, trans. Rela Mazali and Ruvik Danieli, (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 16. The term "watching" is borrowed from Azoulay, who uses it to describe a method of engaging with photographs that invokes a temporal dimension to analysis. In contrast to Barthes' "was there", or photography of document of the past, for Azoulay, when photographs "are watched, not looked at, when they are read both out of and into the space of the political relations instated by photography, they seem—conversely—to testify to the fact that the photographed *people* were there. When the assumption is that not only were the photographed people there, but that, in addition, they are still present at the time I'm watching them, my viewing of these photographs is less susceptible to becoming immoral."

visual ideologies of simultaneous revelation and concealment? The challenge herein is that to attempt to reveal extremely restrictive processes operating largely without public transparency—the examples of state surveillance or border control in the case Paglen and Simon respectively—does nothing to actually enunciate those processes. Artists may attempt to reveal, visually, processes of control that operate invisibly, yet what is such visualization capable of expressing? Even when we are attentive to the conditions external to the image, and even if we are able to move past the contingency of the image itself, it is the *processes* of visualization, the very processes that image making demands, which remain clouded by ambiguity.

In the second chapter I consider photographic projects that navigate the dialectic of visualizing systems of power and control in works whose clear, dazzling aesthetics serve to obscure the conditions of the subjects they attempt to represent. Taryn Simon’s extensive series of photographs, *Contraband*, utilizes a strategy of non-representation to depict the site of the American border and the implied violence to the not-present bodies of the border crossers whose contraband belongings are taken from them and subsequently documented by the artist. In Trevor Paglen’s *The Other Night Sky* the juxtaposition between the aestheticization of surveillance and the extensive research processes required to realize what he calls a “post-representationalist” photography fails to represent the extensive breadth of the subjects he investigates.¹¹ Paglen’s project constructs visually striking images of the pervasiveness of coordinated surveillance

¹¹ Julian Stallabrass, “Negative Dialectics in the Google Era: A Conversation with Trevor Paglen,” *October* 138, (Fall 2011): 4. Paglen states that, for him, the point “is to propose and develop forms of post-representationalist photography and imaging wherein both the materiality of a work and its “relations of photography” are intrinsic to what that work is. In other words, I want photography that doesn’t just point to something; it actually *is* that something.”

systems while it challenges the assumptions we might make about what is external to the image through the artist's recourse to extensive geographic and scientific research. For both artists, the off-camera space is understood as political space and becomes a way to access these projects *as* politics. Additionally, it is the limits and restrictions set by each artist in defining their projects, largely presented to the viewer through the detailed, factual information provided, that contributes to the legibility of the image itself. We understand more clearly what we see once we know the boundaries engaged by the artist. It is apparent that these artworks point *outside* the spaces of presentation, which distances the viewer, both spatially and temporally, in order to make clear that art itself is not present but is absent, opaque, or hidden.¹² The impulse to use art and exhibition strategies to draw attention to social struggle and systems of control and oppression are not unique to Paglen and Simon's practices and by considering the proliferation of documentary forms in contemporary art, it is apparent that the interrogation of representation is widespread, particularly where concerned with the limits of photographic practices.

The third chapter addresses how the production of knowledge is linked to the production of visual imagery through the paradoxical relationships of image and information, redaction and revelation. When the image is minimal, aesthetic, formal, and abstracted then how can we come to know what the conditions external to the photograph are? If the knowledge and understanding of such conditions are the *modus operandi* of art practices such as Simon's and Paglen's, we

¹² Boris Groys, "Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation," *Documenta 11*, trans. Steven Lindberg, (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 108. Groys theorizes this externality to the art work with the term "art documentation," which is "by definition not art; it merely refers to art, and in precisely this way it makes it clear that art is no longer present and immediately visible but rather absent and hidden." Groys uses the term to argue for the mutual inscription of art and life under a biopolitical regime where life is managed and art is work.

must ask *how* we are able to understand such conditions. To do so requires addressing the role of language as a representational mode, which offers the possibility of mobilizing the conflict between visibility and opacity in a productive way. For Paglen and Simon it is largely through language, and the use of the caption, that we are pointed to the externalities of the images represented. How then might language itself be a necessary component of visualization? The epilogue points to other artists who have addresses these concerns with attempts to visualize what is non-visual in artworks that actively resist photographic representation. This is evident for example in the heavily researched, text-based drawings of artist Mark Lombardi.¹³ For artists who have built their careers around works that interrogate the limits of photographic representation, it is telling that both Paglen and Simon have recently turned away from singularly authored photographic projects to ones that use language explicitly as the structure for producing images, projects that reveal the very constructed nature of image collections.¹⁴

¹³ Robert Hobbs, *Mark Lombardi: Global Networks*, New York: Independent Curators International, 2003. Lombardi's large-scale drawings use words, symbols, and numbers to create diagrams that attempt to chart relations of power. Like Paglen and Simon he incorporates extensive research, huge amounts of data, into his drawings in such a way that they become almost impenetrable to the viewer. But unlike Paglen and Simon, who use language in an external relation to the central image, Lombardi uses language to construct his images, making the aesthetics of his work visible through the structure of words. Hobbs calls his work "practically the first art to visualize the new global order that [seems] to be one of the key sources of power in the late twentieth century and thereafter" (20).

¹⁴ Trevor Paglen, *The Last Pictures* (Berkeley: University of California, 2012). Taryn Simon and Aaron Swartz, *Image Atlas*, 2012, <http://imageatlas.org>. *The Last Pictures* is a research project that attempted to permanently archive an idiosyncratic selection of twentieth century photographs, and *Image Atlas* is a internet project that Taryn Simon collaborated on with the late Aaron Swartz to develop an image search engine that reveals popular images by nationality.

Chapter 1: Beyond Post-structuralism

While photography has developed a discourse distinct from contemporary art, it has often been unable to articulate the relations between photography as a contemporary art form, photography as a documentary form, and photography as it is now rapidly shared and disseminated as an online visual language, each of which have significant impact on the ways artists use and exhibit lens-based imagery. Perhaps one of the reasons that photography has lacked a language to speak to this complicated position is that the discourse of photography, especially as it pertains to the exhibition of photography as artwork, remains widely indebted to post-structuralist readings of the photograph that prioritize the phenomenological relationship between the image and the viewer.¹⁵ In *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes famously argued that photography's ability to index an earlier moment in time, the "*that has been*" of the past and its effect on the viewer, is what generates meaning in the photograph. Additionally, photography is marked by the experience of temporality, where the viewer recognizes an "anterior future," by reading into the photograph both the "*this will be*" and "*this has been.*"¹⁶ This horror at the death of the subject, the death that has not yet happened but surely will, points only to the relationship between the photograph and the viewer standing before it; it accounts for temporality only after the fact of the photograph and does not consider external events that may occur before or around it. The legacy of Barthes's

¹⁵ Evidence of this haunting is clear in the plentitude of writing and debate on photography that, whether directly or indirectly, incorporate Barthes's now famous terms punctum and studium, and in the numerous conferences and publications that set out to address Barthes' legacy specifically. Examples include James Elkins, ed., *Photography Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2007) and the collection of essays in Geoffrey Batchen's *Photography Degree Zero* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009) which includes contributions from Victor Burgin, Michael Fried, James Elkins, and Rosalind Krauss.

¹⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 96.

notion that photography is pure contingency, that the photograph offers a purely phenomenological experience of viewing, prioritizes the beholder's experience and does not allow for a consideration of the multiple relations that occur outside the frame.¹⁷ This serves to negate the subjects of the photograph and fails to account for photography as an event, action, or process since the interpretation of the image is thus dependent on the moment of its viewing. But now photography is no longer contingent on the relationship between a viewer and an object, and indeed photography as it is experienced in contemporary culture rarely requires its object (the piece of photosensitive paper) at all.

Equally troubled by how photographs come to affect their viewers, the work of Susan Sontag remains a touchstone for theories of trauma and photographic representation. The ethics of representation and the visibility of human subjects, particularly the suffering of the subject, continues to bear important weight in analyzing images even when the terms of the discourse have shifted radically with the advent of digital forms of image transmission. Sontag, in response to the proliferation of images of the Vietnam war, famously argued that photographs depicting horrific experiences are ineffectual in eliciting a response from the viewer since they aestheticize horror and distance us from the subjects, thus numbing us to the image at hand.¹⁸

¹⁷ This prioritization is evident in Barthes's methodology as well. Instead of structural analysis, he responds to photographs perceptually, thinking through the temporal, phenomenological, subjective dimensions of the photograph.

¹⁸ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 105.

She later re-worked this argument to consider how images can and do operate to enrage and incite, and thus to communicate the pain of others.¹⁹

1.1 The politics of the frame

I raise Barthes's and Sontag's influential contributions to photographic discourse here in order to identify the gap between established theories of the photograph as indexical, where meaning is charged through an encounter with the viewer, and artworks that, in addition to such an encounter, demand an expression of the politics of social experience that exist outside of, or cannot be contained within the image itself. While Sontag thoroughly articulates the ways in which trauma and horrific violence impact both viewer and subject, she does not address potential forms of violence that may occur either off-screen or tangentially through relations between the photographer, subject or viewer. This exteriority of violence is an element of Judith Butler's critique of Sontag, where she articulates the frame of the photograph as a permeable, shifting space, one that demands that we, as viewers, recognize the exterior of the image.²⁰ She argues that photographs do not require interpretation because they *are* interpretative objects, already interpreting and framing the objects depicted.²¹ That is, photographs do not depict an

¹⁹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.

²⁰ Butler's critique of Sontag was first published in Judith Butler, "Photography, War, Outrage," *PMLA* 120, No. 3 (May, 2005), 822-827, and then re-worked in the chapter "Torture and the Ethics of Photography: Thinking with Sontag" in *Frames of War*. New York: Verso, 2009.

²¹ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), 71.

object or a subject that requires the viewer to interpret what she sees but instead interpretation happens through the very act of framing that constitutes the photograph itself. Further,

... the frame never quite determines precisely what it is we see, think, recognize, and apprehend. Something exceeds the frame that troubles our sense of reality; in other words, something occurs that does not conform to our established understanding of things.²²

The excess of the frame is troubling because of its lack of visualization. Such excess can never be pictured because it is always *just* escaping the frame, retreating from the conventions that seek to, in Butler's terms, instrumentalize certain versions of reality while alternative versions are delegitimized and discarded.²³ The violence of the frame's function is that it "does not simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality."²⁴ The active frame becomes quite violent then because of this lack of exteriority: it violently excludes that which does not conform to an internal logic. It directs our look by telling us not only what is important to see but also determines how we see it.

Given Butler's assertion that the frame delimits what is visible through an active and continuous process of inclusion and exclusion, we might think of the device of the frame as a boundary that is always excessive, always exterior, always just retreating from our vision. Thus the photographic inheres political potential through the relationship between what is contained and what is jettisoned from the frame, a relationship that is also one of included or excluded temporalities. For Butler this political potential arises from the existence of certain sets of norms

²² Butler, *Frames of War*, 71.

²³ *Ibid*, xiii.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

that dictate which lives are grievable and which are not since the question of the frame is always motivated by the question of life: whose life is valued and whose is not. Butler explains that “norms are enacted through visual and narrative frames, and framing presupposes decisions or practices that leave substantial losses outside the frame.”²⁵ The key to understanding the operations of the frame “would not be to locate what is ‘in’ or ‘outside’ the frame, but what vacillates between those two locations, and what, foreclosed, becomes encrypted in the frame itself.”²⁶ It is in this vacillation between interior and exterior—frame and subject, viewer and producer—that we might acknowledge our own responsibility in viewing by questioning what is being represented, and how. The process of framing is as important as the subjects caught within because ultimately there can be “no seeing without selection.”²⁷ Butler is thus identifying that photographic meaning and power are embedded in photographic processes, not only in photographic objects. Because frames delimit what is perceivable, what is understandable as a grievable life, “this ‘not-seeing’ in the midst of seeing, this not seeing that is the condition of seeing, became the visual norm, a norm that has been a national norm, one conducted by the photographic frame in the scene of torture.”²⁸

While Butler is here referring to the images of torture from Abu Ghraib, we might extrapolate this “not-seeing that is the condition of seeing” to consider images more broadly, even when they do not depict the scene of torture, or even a scene of trauma. For contemporary artists this

²⁵ Butler, *Frames of War*, 75.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

condition of not-seeing that has become the norm, as Butler argues, is the realm in which visual interpretation now exists. As spectators we are accustomed to *not* believing our eyes, to *not* trusting images, to *not* being able to respond to images, to *not* being able to see through the proliferation of images and objects that implore us to do so. Butler's critique asks us to consider the ways in which we must navigate between the subjects framed and the decisions that framed those particular subjects, in a particular way. And she recognizes that to learn to see the frame that blinds us is not a straightforward task.²⁹ For artworks, this means assessing what is external to the image in tandem with the image itself.

1.2 The photograph as an event

Butler's consideration of the relationship between photographic imagery and continual war summarizes the frame as that which determines and delimits what is knowable and who is recognizable as a subject with rights. Implicit here is a powerful critique of the tendency to read photographs based on the experience of viewer and image alone since photography as a process instigates much broader relations. Writer and theorist Ariella Azoulay takes this argument much further than Butler does in order to directly address such excluded, unrecognized lives through the web of relationships that a photograph is capable of pointing to, or indeed is capable of constructing.

²⁹ Butler, *Frames of War*, 100.

For Azoulay, photography instigates what she terms a “civil contract,” a bond of mutual responsibility between spectator, photographer, and subject.³⁰ This bond is activated through the imprinting of an image that is always the product of an encounter, but an encounter that is without a single author, and cannot generate a single narrative for a single person exclusively.³¹ Because the photograph bears the traces of this confrontation but may not visualize them it is always excessive, it always shows more than you think is present.³² As such, the photograph creates and allows for a space of “civic negotiation” between its actors, or what Azoulay terms its protagonists.³³ Azoulay demands that we read photographs not as an aesthetic exercise but as a kind of *watching*, a reconstructing of the photographic event or situation, where viewing might become a civic skill, or responsibility.³⁴

As Butler’s does, Azoulay’s work confronts some of Sontag’s earlier thinking on the depiction of traumatic events. If for Sontag the contradiction of pathos and fascination, of visual interest and horrific imagery, serves to divide the viewing subject from the photographed one, for Azoulay overcoming such a divide between subjects is photography’s explicit task. Azoulay makes an

³⁰ Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, trans. by Reli Mazali and Ruvik Danieli, (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 16-17.

³¹ Ibid, 13.

³² Ibid, 11. Furthermore, the photograph not only shows more than you think, Azoulay argues that “every photograph of others bears the traces of the meeting between the photographed persons and the photographer, neither of whom can, on their own, determine how this meeting will be inscribed in the resulting image.”

³³ Ibid, 13.

³⁴ Ibid, 14. Azoulay’s claim is that we need to stop looking and start watching photographs, invoking time as a dimension for analysis: “When and where the subject of the photograph is a person who has suffered some form of injury, a viewing of the photograph that reconstructs the photographic situation and allows a reading of the injury inflicted on others becomes a civic skill, not an exercise in aesthetic appreciation.”

important distinction between the “photograph as a product of the act of photographing and photography as an event of a special kind.”³⁵ Where the photograph is here the product of an action, Azoulay’s definition of photography is necessarily more wide-ranging. Photography occurs not only at the moment of the literal or metaphorical camera shutter clicking but expands much farther to include broad temporalities and the many moments that occur before and after the moment of image taking occurs. Photography becomes an event that does not have precise limits because the event of photography involves numerous protagonists—viewer, photographer, subject—interacting together in different temporal spaces.³⁶ As she states, photography can take place either through the mediation of the camera *or* the photograph.³⁷ This provides the basis for a method of thinking about photography as a process, as something that exists beyond its paper traces but that requires a radical redefinition if we are to move away from theorizing photography in the context of its material sources.

³⁵ Ariella Azoulay, “Different Ways Not to Say Deportation,” *Fillip* 16 (May, 2012): insert, 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ The argument against the photograph, or the argument that photography exists as a process that is separate from the material support of the printed photograph alone, is one that bears significant relevance for documentary forms. While Azoulay recognizes both the camera and the photograph as forms of mediation, others have argued that the photograph itself can no longer contribute to the event of photography. In “Photography after the photograph: event, archive and the Non-Symbolic” art critic and historian John Roberts addresses the loss of space for the documentary photograph amongst the rise of digital media: “...digitalization, essentially, destroys the to-be-looked-at-ness of the discrete photo-document, in turn, further reinforcing the general conditions of distracted consumption of the naturalized image.” He recognizes here a cultural divergence between photography and digitalization. John Roberts, “Photography after the Photograph: Event, Archive, and the Non-Symbolic,” *Oxford Art Journal* 32, 2. (2009): 289.

1.3 Envisaging the human subject

In drawing out some central tenets of Azoulay's and Butler's recent thinking, I attempt to locate a politics that exists external to the dictates of the image itself. This will come to bear directly on the projects of Paglen and Simon since both artists attempt to make visible apparatuses of state power but cannot, with images, possibly do so. Their projects demand that we negotiate between what we see, what we read, and perhaps what we already know. However I recognize that the objects of this study differ in significant ways from the vernacular imagery Butler and Azoulay attend to.³⁸ The images they are each primarily concerned with circulated largely as press photography or photojournalism, whereas the works of analysis in the present study circulate exclusively as artworks. Butler's thinking on photography comes from her sustained examination of precarity, of how we come to recognize what counts as a life, and the violence that constructing frames of recognition entails. For Azoulay the protagonists in the picture, the subjects that must be accounted for, are visible as persons, even if they are not always identifiable as such. Conversely, Paglen and Simon's works may fail to envisage their human subjects but in their persistent attempts to visualize and reveal hidden processes of state power, their works approach and brush against the militarization of life in multifaceted ways. We do not *see* the infliction of trauma on a body, yet the human subject is necessarily present beyond the frame. Both Simon and Paglen address the legacy of post-structuralism specifically through working methodologies that conflate the visual formalism and highly aesthetic format of their

³⁸ Butler examines the infamous photographs of torture by American soldiers in Iraq at Abu Ghraib; Azoulay analyzes photographs from the partitioning of Israel and Palestine in 1948 and the Israeli occupation from 1967 onwards, amongst other historical documents. Unlike Butler, Azoulay also spends time attending to photographic artworks, particularly those that intersect with vernacular photography in both her major texts *The Civil Contract of Photography* and *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*.

pictures with the investigative research that both are required to do in order to bring their projects to fruition.

What both of the above theories account for are the *limits* of representation. Butler and Azoulay draw our attention to such limits and to what is at stake politically if we are not able to recognize the limitations and externalities of photography—its framing devices, its temporalities, its participants—as such. This theoretical attempt to understand photography through elements external to the image is extremely important for interpreting contemporary image production and dissemination. Developing a theoretical model that looks outside the image in order to construct meaning within the image has significance not only for photographic practices but for the way we understand and consume visual information in an era that assumes data is, or should be, transparent. The “ideology of communication transparency” is one that both artists take on, through recourse to the genealogies and aesthetics of photographic media.”³⁹ This problem has equal bearing on theories of vision, on ideas that determine how we see what we see, and on the dialectic between revelation and concealment: why do we assume that transparency is aspirational?

1.4 Thinking beyond vision

Photographic theory, or pictorial theory, has addressed what we might call an exteriority of the photograph, where the conditions of life beyond the frame must be called into question in order

³⁹ Pamela Lee, “Open Secret,” *Artforum*. May 2011. <http://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201105&id=28060>, 11. Lee is here referring to Paglen only, but her description of the justification of his project applies equally to Taryn Simon.

to address the politics of the image in a post-9/11 environment. In the decade following the events of September 11, 2001 questions around the limitations of images have been widely addressed and the role and power of images interrogated.⁴⁰ The parameters of this inquiry seem to be shifting as photographs are increasingly freed from their role as objects and can now be considered digital processes. Since images are increasingly part of wide networks of communication and dissemination that operate beyond vision. Image production happens automatically, or sometimes algorithmically. We actually have very limited control over the ways that our images are viewed, used, manipulated, circulated and re-circulated. Images that we might consider our own are no longer truly ours; we have relinquished our rights to images for the ease of transmission and communication offered by image-based social networks. We live within a hyper-visual environment and the ways in which images are used and engaged have shifted so definitively away from the tangible, material of a printed photograph that we can no longer think of the photograph as a representation, as an index of an event or place.

Implored as we are by the political stakes of representation to consider what happens in the spaces beyond the ones framed by the photograph, the demands of visual representation seem ill-equipped to consider these missing subjects, and the conditions under which they are made visible or not. If the image of a torture victim fails to tell us that a person, a specific person, has been victimized then we not only need to find ways to acknowledge what is external to, what comes before, or prior to, or adjacent to, the image, we also need to understand the photograph

⁴⁰ For example, Butler's thinking around the photographic frame and Azoulay's arguments for photography as a meeting of protagonists, as a temporal event, both suggest that we attend to the exteriority of the image. W.J.T. Mitchell has likewise addressed a kind of exteriority in his wide-ranging study of visual culture, *What do pictures want? The lives and loves of images*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

not only as a kind of failed document but as a process of an act of documenting. This is a subtle but important distinction between an object of visualization (the photograph) and a process of visualization, a process that is yet to be named. The philosophical discourse of speculative realism—which has developed during the same period that writers like Butler and Azoulay have been considering photographic externalities—works to address visuality as a kind of process. This is akin to the argument for photography as process, but expanded to breach the boundaries of representation. Instead this is a discourse that argues against representation, as it relates to vision, by critiquing the concept that thinking and being must be correlative or mutually inscribed.⁴¹ Debates around the effects of a hyper-visual post-capitalist system have clear implications for artists who navigate their political or social investments with attempts to reveal the hidden and secretive operations of such systems. How can we think through works produced by artists whose intent is to make visible the invisible, when the end results of their projects fail to do so? When the image fails to act as a document and instead acts as an aesthetic object? What seems to be required is a way to think about visualization that might account for its opposition by understanding the negation of vision not as a *negative* action but as a powerfully resistant potentiality, where opacity assumes a position of primacy. Or, at the least, where opacity occupies a position of tension between revelation and redaction and is addressed on equal terms.

⁴¹ Levi Bryant, Graham Harman, and Nick Srnicek. “Towards a Speculative Philosophy,” in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, (Melbourne, Australia: re.press, 2011), 2. The term “speculative realism” was first used at a one-day conference of the same name, April 27, 2007 at University of London Goldsmiths. It was chaired by Alberto Toscano and featured presentations by four philosophers, Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Harman, and Quentin Meillassoux, with different philosophical modes of inquiry but all who are concerned with finding space for criticality amongst or against anti-representational modes.

1.5 The impossibility of representation

This is a problem set repeatedly addressed by Alexander Galloway and is one he considers most specifically in his critique of Jacques Rancière's essay "Are some things unrepresentable?" where Rancière argues that the question of unrepresentability is directly connected to the ways in which political violence may, or may not, be put into an image.⁴² Galloway does not consider the politics of images exclusively, as Rancière, Butler, Azoulay and others do. Instead he thinks about representation as it relates to sites of power within the information society, what he recognizes as a society of control. He frames the argument by asking if, and how, it is possible for something to be unrepresentable in a world saturated by data and information,⁴³ and he approaches the issue of transparency and secrecy through investigating the relative opacity of data visualization. Whereas Rancière's longstanding examination of the intersections of aesthetics and politics places him within a discourse that firmly roots questions of representation within questions of political violence,⁴⁴ for Galloway the impossibility of representation is precisely that neither political nor aesthetic representation is ever possible. He identifies that "one of the key consequences of the control society is that we have moved from a condition in which singular machines produce proliferations of images, into a condition in which multitudes

⁴² Alexander Galloway, "Are Some Things Unrepresentable?," *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, no. 7–8 (2011), 85. Galloway also addresses this question of the impossibility of representation in Alexander Galloway, "Black Box, Black Bloc," in *Communization and Its Discontents: Contestation, Critique, and Contemporary Struggles*, ed. Benjamin Noys, 237-252, New York: Minor Compositions, 2011.

⁴³ Galloway, *Unrepresentable*, 85.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 93. For Galloway this discourse includes texts from Sontag, Butler, Georges Didi-Huberman, and Harun Farocki.

of machines produce singular images.”⁴⁵ One camera does not produce many images, but many cameras (or computers, or smartphones) produce one image. This is a situation where photography no longer records an event but is instead a process or accumulation of many micro-events; it does not track a unified point in time, it opens onto many. Photography is no longer the click of the shutter, even in the metaphorical sense when we speak of digital photography, but instead photography has become the instantaneous uploading, tagging, geo-tagging, searching, facial recognizing, networking, sharing, and filtering of images. This networked image landscape is one where innumerable machines produce not individual, varied, differentiated images but singular images, images that conform to societal codes and conventions.⁴⁶

Galloway extends the discourse around representation to suggest that at present it does not, or cannot, address contemporary modes of production. Representation in any kind of politically significant way is simply not possible. Like Butler, Groys and others, he points to the example of Abu Ghraib, where the photographs were released, where representation supposedly happened and even if one feels anxiety about the outcome still nothing changed.⁴⁷ For Galloway this illustrates how “adequate visualizations of [the] control society have not happened. Representation has not happened. At least not yet.”⁴⁸ This is because, as he explains, “the

⁴⁵ Ibid, 94. Emphasis original.

⁴⁶ One only has to enter search terms into an image search engine to illustrate this point effectively. While it could be argued that photography has always had the capability to simply reproduce singular or identical images, we have not before had the capability to see them together. The internet offers the ability to search and catalogue individual images from multiple, fragmented sources that together project a single image of any given term, idea, incident, or subject.

⁴⁷ Galloway, *Unrepresentable*, 95.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

constitutive axis for representation always has a relationship with the mode of production,” which is no longer a production based on a creator–apparatus–viewer relationship.⁴⁹ It is clear now that to make something or someone visible, to produce from multiple sources a singular image is *not* to produce or generate power. Galloway argues strongly, “the point of unrepresentability *is* the point of power. And the point of power today is not in the image. The point of power today resides in networks, computers, algorithms, information, and data.”⁵⁰

This is an unusual position since historically vision has been tied to representation through the image. But Galloway’s is an argument against the possibilities of visualization full stop. Where Butler and Azoulay might argue that the signs in the image cannot be considered in isolation from each other, that is they cannot be considered free-floating or unmoored from their referents and that they must actually *mean* something even if they do not appear to. For Galloway the signs, symbols and imagery that we use to attempt to make data visual, to attempt to make visual sense of so much unending, infinite data, can only *appear* to forge a relationship with any determined meanings. For him there seems to be little or no power in images, despite their massive proliferation. The generation of power resides in the notion that the image is a screen, which is a front for real power that exists in networks, algorithms, data sets, and relationships of information. These systems of power are yet to be made visual or visible in any meaningful way, and the attempt to make visual systems of power is indeed a pressing one. The question remains not only whether representation is possible, but also whether it can locate and visualize power at

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid. Emphasis mine.

all, particularly when political and visual representation is being continually denied across many discourses.

1.6 Visualizing networks of power and exchange

Critic and theorist Alberto Toscano likewise addresses the resistance to figuration and imaging that Galloway points to as a defining crisis of our current moment. For Toscano it is through an investigation of the unusual and proliferate instances of high frequency stock market trading, and the much broader financialization of life, that he is thinking through the ways that an increasingly visual society is struggling to find meaning in increasingly abstract or empty images. The question turns on how we might envisage, or represent, processes that happen invisibly, instantaneously, and largely without public knowledge or control. In his account, the attempts to model or diagram the algorithms that underlie high frequency trades are counterintuitive, “since they break with a model of representation as mirror, photograph, correlation. They are... engines and cameras, or camera-engines.”⁵¹ That is, the representations themselves are productive, they are engines, or image-engines, that spur further, future interactions, encounters, diagrams: “...as representations of practically abstract processes and relations, they [algorithms] are also representations of invisibilities.”⁵² We no longer have representations that are mirrors or windows, as we might historically consider painting, or

⁵¹ Alberto Toscano, “Gaming the Plumbing: High-Frequency Trading and the Spaces of Capital,” *Mute* 3, no. 4 (January 16, 2013), <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/gaming-plumbing-high-frequency-trading-and-spaces-capital>, 2. Toscano draws the reference to camera-engines from Donald MacKenzie, *An Engine Not a Camera: How Financial Models Shape Markets*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2.

representations that bear direct indexical relationships to the real, as photography has often been considered. Toscano argues that representation is *itself* productive, not reflective.

In the attempts to visualize algorithms, what are we actually attempting to see or uncover? Is it the economy, the government, a system of exchange, labour? Here we have networks that cannot become image representations because the algorithm or network itself is productive; it is a rule, one that is constantly evolving and responding but one that fails to communicate anything of significance.⁵³ Again, this suggests that the primary problem set is one that negotiates questions of transparency and opacity, between what is possible to represent and what is not. Toscano puts it plainly: “The opacity of transactions happening fathoms beneath our perceptual threshold and far beyond our mathematical comprehension makes most ‘representations’ of this bleeding-edge of finance capital so many ciphers of our ignorance.”⁵⁴ But while we seek the transparency that we assume will make such systems more equal, or just, or at the very least visible and knowable, at the same time we assume that opacity means the opposite, that when systems are operative in the black, they are unknowable and untenable. But philosophical inquiry does not necessarily make this assumption. In order to assess how opacity and obscurity might be a politically salient model, I will turn to arguments made by François Laruelle, whose work Galloway is in dialogue with, in order to address the often ideologically charged concept of the opaque.

⁵³ Ibid, 3.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 8.

1.7 Vision and darkness

It is possible to argue then that the problem of a dialectical relationship between visibility and opacity is a theoretical one, not for photography per se, but for vision. Drawing on arguments made by Laruelle, Galloway identifies with a position that understands vision as foundational only when it abandons perception, that is only through darkness, through blackness, is vision possible.⁵⁵ This appeal to vision is at the core of Laruelle's argument when he questions how photography might be considered beyond its material limits, beyond the perceptual or phenomenological experience of the image, and recalibrated as a process of networking, one that stubbornly (and paradoxically) *resists* imaging.⁵⁶ Laruelle offers a radical way to think about photography as a philosophical activity, not a technical one.⁵⁷ For Laruelle photography proper exists outside its material structures and *in vision*, his term is "vision-force," where a photographic process of representation occurs parallel to the one recorded on paper.⁵⁸ While the overarching project of his text is more philosophical than theoretical, Laruelle is at times very specific about how photography must be thought of as process. He writes,

⁵⁵ Alexander Galloway. "Rocket: Present at Every Point of the Remote," part of the series *Dark Nights of the Universe*, co-presented by The Public School, New York and Recess Activities, New York. April 26–29, 2012. In this recent lecture Galloway articulated this argument, as well as clarifying some of his theoretical ideas in relation to Laruelle more broadly. <http://archive.org/details/DarkNightsOfTheUniverseEtNoxSicutDiesIlluminabitur>

⁵⁶ Laruelle works through these arguments in François Laruelle, *The Concept of Non-Photography*, trans. Robin Mackay, (Falmouth, U.K.: Ubramonic, 2011) and expands upon them in François Laruelle, *Photo-Fiction, a Non-Standard Aesthetics*, trans. Drew S. Burk, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Univocal, 2012).

⁵⁷ Laruelle, *The Concept of Non-Photography*, 21. Laruelle asserts, "The photo—not in its material support, but in its being-photo of the object – is none other than that which, through vision-force, is given immediately as the 'in-itself' of the object."

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Photography can be reduced neither to its technological conditions of existence, nor to the experiential complex that associates old images, technical means linked to the medium, perception or aesthetic norms. It is an immanent process that traverses and animates this materiality, a *thinking* instigated by the artificial simulation of perception. There is a thinking in and of photography, it is the set of ideal conditions or conditions of Being of the phenomenon ‘in photo,’ which relate the techno-perceptual conditions to Identity or to the real.⁵⁹

Thinking photography as co-terminus with being, of photography as a process that is immanent to vision such that photography has *always* existed, and that the photographic stance is one that marks the human condition: these are Laruelle’s arguments for photography as philosophy. Or rather for non-photography, where the “non-” is not a refusal, but suggests that photography cannot be described or understood on its own terms, in the same way he argues philosophy cannot be. For Laruelle, thinking philosophically is already a reduction, so a theory of photography based on exclusively its supports (camera, print, pixel) is already thinking it on its own set of terms. This is a reductive way to think of representation, since it only considers the processes that are already a part of it, reducing it only to its component parts.

Where Laruelle addresses the philosophical contexts of the “black universe” there is little in his work to specifically address the politics of these contexts. Photography becomes a method of thinking, an immanent process,⁶⁰ but that process is left without the urgency of representation or the necessity of attempting to visualize what is not necessarily visible. For Galloway, the driving question of what, or by extension who, is unrepresentable is addressed by asking: “What is the status of the obscure, of negation, of the dark corners of being that are rarely ever subsumed by

⁵⁹ Ibid, 39-40.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

dialectical becoming, or even strategically excluded from it?”⁶¹ For Galloway, it *is* political. The fact that no visualization or representation exists that *could* make a network like the Internet visible has serious political consequences, even if representation has failed to make political violence visible or significant, in the way that Butler might argue.

Galloway specifically and also Azoulay and Butler each participate in a discourse around what Galloway terms “the politicization of absence and presence oriented themes,” including questions of invisibility, opacity, anonymity, identification, recognition, legibility, and the tactics of such.⁶² How then are artists, who of course tread in the visual and use visual means, tropes, conceits, and concepts to express ideas, to come to terms with this so-called failure of representation? The politics of representation is a well-tread topic in contemporary art but is of ever more concern as artists attempt to navigate a contemporary moment in which visual culture and the proliferation of images has been completely normalized and even usurped by a society that uses images to control its subjects in specific, often destructive ways. The following chapter will examine projects by Taryn Simon and Trevor Paglen that navigate this balance, this dialectic positioning between the urgency of attempting to visualize systems of power and control and the inability to do so.

⁶¹ Alexander Galloway, “Black Box, Black Bloc,” *Communization and Its Discontents: Contestation, Critique, and Contemporary Struggles*, ed. Benjamin Noys (New York: Minor Compositions, 2011), 240.

⁶² Ibid, 247. As Galloway states, we are witnessing a rise in “the politicization of absence – and presence – oriented themes such as invisibility, opacity, and anonymity, or the relationship between identification and legibility, or the tactics of nonexistence and disappearance, new struggles around prevention, the therapeutics of the body, piracy and contagion, informatics capture and the making-present of data (via data mining.)”

Chapter 2: Taryn Simon and Trevor Paglen

Debates around visibility, visuality and systems of biopolitical control, as discussed in Chapter One, are widely addressed by contemporary artists. This chapter will introduce projects that navigate the tension between the necessity of visualizing systems of control and the inability to do so, in works that simultaneously obscure the labour, conditions, and bodies of people within such systems. In the works of American artists Taryn Simon and Trevor Paglen sustained attention is given to investigating hidden networks, processes, and spaces of power and privilege that operate outside of a publicly visible realm.

Simon, who typically works with serial projects and yields much more research than will be made evident in the resulting photographs, has produced a sustained investigation into what lies within the borders of the United States but is not typically photographed, addressed or acknowledged. In her series *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* (2007) and its follow-up project, *Contraband* (2009), Simon's work examined the limits of what is publicly-permissible and therefore knowable, through photographs that reveal the often banal spaces of American jurisdiction and social existence. In each of these expansive, intensive and serial projects she investigates what is at stake when we simply accept the photographic form as evidence. In her first major photographic series, *The Innocents* (2003), Simon researched the stories of people who had served jail time but were then released for wrongful convictions, convictions often based on photographic misidentification, and made portraits that re-constructed aspects of these narratives. In images that otherwise would provide little information, she used extended captions to make these narratives legible. In *An American Index of the Hidden and*

Unfamiliar, she expanded this strategy by including large explanatory texts as counterpoints to the visual minimalism of the images. The research and labour of the artist forms a primary part of the work, since the images mean very little unless the viewer is able to situate them in relation to the seemingly objective but in fact highly constructed texts.

For Paglen, his ongoing research into aspects of covert government operations is an attempt to reveal to his audience the hidden but omnipresent aspects of government surveillance, even as the visual paucity of his photographs deny such possibilities. In his series *The Other Night Sky* (2007-ongoing) he presents photographs of classified American satellites, objects that are not officially or publicly logged but that orbit the earth to covertly track or collect data. Working with amateur groups who record the movements of these satellites in order to calculate and predict their paths in the sky, Paglen produces visually seductive, abstract images, purposefully referencing works from the canon of art history and photography. More recently Paglen has expanded this project to include the observation and photographing of American military drones in an ongoing, untitled series of photographs (Figures 4–7). In both series, the mere presence of lights in the sky discloses very little factual information, so making them visible does little other than signify the covert processes of state surveillance.

In each case the artist employs a methodology where the sustained preliminary research required becomes as an important tool in the conceptualization of the final project. Indeed both artists' work is emblematic of a type of photography that shifts between image and evidence, between seductively formal representations and the unexpected revelation of information. Each strategically deploys visual and textual details in tandem so that the viewer becomes aware of the

broader issues at stake in each image and is able to consider what happens prior to the photographic event. This activates questions around visibility, participation, and the relationship between aesthetics and politics in works that attempt to expose the representational limits of photography itself. Through an analysis of Simon's project *Contraband* and Paglen's series *The Other Night Sky*, I ask how the aesthetics of the formal, photographic image might serve to obscure the labour of the artist and, more significantly, the lives that externally press upon the frame. Both Simon and Paglen struggle to make visible the apparatuses of state power while simultaneously obscuring their own labour as researchers and likewise the networks of life their projects depend upon. In each instance where the artist attempts to reveal or make visible an invisible process or action, the artist simultaneously becomes complicit in the systems that he or she attempts to critique. The trajectory of revelatory enlightenment is not ontologically progressive or just: simply because one is in a position to reveal or point to injustices, as both Simon and Paglen are, does not mean that the visualization of such injustices is necessarily a condemnation or critique. Each artist asks the viewer to question more than what is being made visible through an interrogation of the role of photography itself. As such, to recognize an exteriority to the image, what lies outside of the visible frame, requires a responsibility on the part of the viewer to dislocate sole agency from viewer, artist or image and instead relocate it in the lived spaces beyond the artwork proper.

2.1 Taryn Simon's *Contraband*

In Taryn Simon's exhaustive series of photographs, *Contraband*, we see image after image depicting volumes of objects of every sort (Figure 7). The objects are, as the title indicates, all

contraband items, objects that were either seized from passengers entering the United States at JFK Airport or contained in packages that were intercepted at customs. Simon photographed these objects with a formal, almost forensic set-up during an intensive shoot where she remained on-site at the airport's border control facility for five days. Commentaries and reviews of the project frequently mention the physical labour involved as she suffered from sleep deprivation and various other physical stresses while remaining constantly attuned to the continuous, twenty-four hour flow of imported goods.⁶³ The results of Simon's commitment are over a thousand photographs that catalogue a hugely diverse range of items, from the ordinary and familiar, such as cigarettes, DVDs, and fruit, to the unexpected and unusual, including animal body parts and corpses, to the seemingly innocent, such as Snow White nesting dolls and other toys, to the illicit and illegal, including heroin and other drugs. All are shot against a white backdrop and use the same scale and placement within the frame. This uniformity offers up a kind of "production-line aesthetic,"⁶⁴ one that conceals the intense concentration of labour expended by both Simon and her assistants in production, and the concentration of labour contained within the objects themselves. Itemized and arranged as though they are museum objects or luxury goods on display, and carefully ordered in an encyclopedic publication,⁶⁵ the photographic treatment lends

⁶³ Fred Skolnick, "National Security: Interview with Taryn Simon," *Interview* (October, 2010), 40-55. While many reviews mention her sleep deprivation, in this unusual interview Simon described, more than she typically does, the working conditions at the airport during the project for both her and her team. The interviewer was Fred Skolnick, Deputy Chief Agricultural Specialist in the passenger-baggage section at JFK, who helped her during the five days she was on-site and sifting through the seizures.

⁶⁴ Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Ever Airport: Notes on Taryn Simon's Contraband," *Contraband*, (London: Steidl, 2010), http://tarynsimon.com/docs/Ever_Airport.pdf, 2.

⁶⁵ Taryn Simon, *Contraband* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl Publishing, 2010).

value and presence to the objects, often imbuing an architectural quality to items that simultaneously reveal the decay and disarray of time spent in transit.

With this project we see in plain view what is typically kept secret and intentionally concealed. Objects that have been so carefully hidden by their transporters are here revealed to the viewer and left for inspection in the gleaming white of the stark studio backdrop. What is it that we are actually looking at, or for, when we consider this body of work? Should we consider the objects as depicted, a series of carefully laid out, contemporary still lifes? Do the objects act metonymically for official systems of global trade, and for all the counter-economies that mimic those systems through counterfeiting and subversion? Taken in series, this project certainly points to the networks of external relationships required to realize it: relations between the artist and the border patrol, between people detained and those working in security departments, and ultimately those with the power to grant access to a publicly inaccessible space. If negotiating such relationships is the primary artistic labour of the project, as Simon claims it is,⁶⁶ how might we assess the project as a whole, given that Simon creates visual representations that point to these relations, and significantly to a vast number of specific lives and lived experiences, while refusing to depict them?⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Obrist, 3.

⁶⁷ Simon's work subverts the challenges of political representation by choosing *not* to image potentially marginalized people (or at least those who would be identified and targeted by border patrol) but instead to reveal and catalogue the objects and things that are left behind.

In its entirety, what *Contraband* presents is a carefully catalogued taxonomy of the objects deemed threatening to a neoliberal economy under globalization. The miscellaneous, seemingly innocent everyday objects themselves are rarely threatening and the instances of weapons are relatively few. But in their arbitrary juxtaposition and overwhelming number the magnitude of international trade and security regulations at the site of the border becomes apparent: the accidentally detained immigration papers point to the widespread screening of visible minorities and post-9/11 human rights abuses in the face of the threat of terrorism; the plethora of various types of food, even the sandwiches left from an on-board snack become harbingers of bio-terrorism or potential outbreak; the category titled “Branding” highlights the role of a geographic border in brand protection for major corporations, including Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Tommy Hilfiger and many others. In each case a pre-photographic space is manifest through an image that points outside itself, that reminds us of the specific situation of border interrogation that must first occur prior to its visual representation. We can likewise read in these images an extra-photographic, a context outside of the image proper, where the careful staging and framing of individual objects and the participation required of border personnel enables a monumentalized image.⁶⁸

Simon’s project is an unusual form of documentation, one that highlights certain types of information while excluding others in order to create an administered, constructed photograph that manages the viewer as much as it organizes the image. Multiplied many times over and

⁶⁸ Simon, *Contraband*, 479. Simon’s catalogue indicates at least a dozen people working for official agencies were involved in the project, and she names several officers with American border patrol, although the number of guards or security agents encountered could be much higher.

viewed in different contexts—exhibition, publication, online—the objects as images accrue multiple meanings. Whether familiar or unusual, serial or individual, each object in its representation as both image and artwork accrues meaning that might be completely dislodged from its point of origin. That is, the image is not simply a representation of a particular object, nor is it a document of a specific event. The image here is constructed from the residual evidence of a person, a body whose movements were restricted and challenged and whose belongings, whether legal, illegal, restricted, or counterfeit were confiscated and ripped from their body. These visual remains point to a life outside the frame, a life that demands consideration. By framing the objects in such a way, Simon opens the images to the occurrence of numerous, multi-faceted readings as it is the responsibility of the viewer to account for the narratives that existed *prior* to the photograph, the narratives that allow the photographs to exist at all. This is a contingency not based upon experience *per se* but that, in its potential multiplicity of readings, speaks to our specifically contested historical moment: in a highly globalized, post 9/11 environment, the site of the border is a highly controlled space that is at once political and ideological while simultaneously tangible, physical and social.

2.2 Politics and invisibility at the border

Simon's attempt to reveal the traces of a space that defines the American border, and its attempts to interrupt the flow of goods across it, opens onto an argument around the politics of visibility since it is specifically by *not* making visible those who populate such concealed, underground, illegal or illicit networks that Simon's work treads a certain tension between recognizing

precarity and aestheticizing it.⁶⁹ There is no question that in this project the viewer is called to witness the asymmetrical remains of border interrogation, from the highly traumatic seizing of immigration papers to the relatively banal seizure of lunch foods. For those who, through force, coercion or desire, cross borders with illegal substances, the ripping of objects held close to the body is made visible in the material presence of the object and at the same time invisible by the complete absence of the body in these images. Recognizing the border as a space of traumatic experience articulates a paradox of contemporary globalization: that we seek the free-flow of goods in an open economy while at the same time build heavily secured, increasingly militarized borders.⁷⁰ This paradox that finds parallel in images that make visible and transparent the objects caught at the border while simultaneously obscuring the thousand plus lives that are here balanced against Simon's own.

Simon's strategy is one that *attempts* to reveal the border space, that by photographing the objects taken as contraband she is attempting to reveal, to *make visible* the space of the border and what flows across it. But she nullifies this attempt with the highly aestheticized, whited-out,

⁶⁹ This tension around the aestheticization of precarity, especially as it connect to documentary photography and question of visibility, has its antecedents in the political work of artists like Martha Rosler. In *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974-5) Rosler made a pointed critique of the limitations of documentary photography by inserting captions onto photographs of so-called "empty" streets, in an attempt to make visible the inhabitants of the Bowery rendered invisible by society. Though not visually depicted, their presence is made real by the viewer, since the interpretation required to convert the photograph into a stereotype is based on references drawn from outside the image.

⁷⁰ Wendy Brown, "Porous Sovereignty, Walled Democracy." Presented at Simpson Center for the Humanities, University of Washington, April 22, 2008. <http://arcade.stanford.edu/content/porous-sovereignty-walled-democracy>. Brown argues that globalization harbors tensions between opening and barricading, between fusion and partition, between erasure and re-inscription. Pointing to a range of examples, from the Israeli separation wall in the West Bank, to the American-built wall along its southern border with Mexico, Brown argues that the paradox of globalization is that we want borders that are open to economic flows but simultaneously heavily-secured and often closed to people. We want secrecy and security for some things but openness and transparency for others.

internally consistent, formally structured images that violently erase the identity of the objects' owners. The violent strength of the political attempts to erase the visibility of peoples crossing the border is evidenced here: while Simon was able to navigate and negotiate her way into the privileged/inaccessible space of the border interrogation rooms at JFK airport, she could only do so in order to picture objects, not people. What she calls a performance, a durational work that required her to be tethered to the twenty-four hour cycle of goods and people flowing into the United States, serves to situate her in a position that becomes akin to a policing one. Setting up a temporary studio in order to photograph objects as soon as they were detained but before they are sent to be destroyed, her position becomes a policing action, one that documents nearly as many details (except biographical information) about the objects as their "official" documentation by state officials would have. In a sense, Simon became the unofficial photographer of the American customs department, if only for a short period. This role is, at least in part, reminiscent of the recent attempt by Canadian reality TV producers to film the lives of border control guards, where the subsequent filming of raids on "illegal" citizens became a human rights issue around the rights of citizens to choose to not be represented while detained at the border.⁷¹ Although Simon does not image the people whose lives stand behind the objects depicted, Simon's project does intervene in the act of policing the border, an intervention that serves to further trouble the relationship between representation and political presence.

Given that Simon's project cannot simply be read as a form of documenting the hidden and unseen, I argue that her projects articulate a delicate dialectic between visibility and opacity, one

⁷¹ See <http://www.ctvnews.ca/entertainment/b-c-rights-group-says-border-reality-tv-show-violates-privacy-laws-1.1301132>.

operative in the politics necessarily assumed present. While the problems of representation and aestheticization stubbornly permeate the images, her work takes up that very challenge as its primary problem set precisely in its refusal to document its subjects. Instead, *Contraband* refers to conditions that exist outside the frame, in a conceptual conceit that finds its subjects temporally located in the pre-photographic networks of labour and social relations, the extra-photographic contexts that condition such networks, and post-photographic encounters that change and multiply with each viewer or situation. This conscious effort on the part of the artist to simultaneously redact and expose information, to both obscure and reveal, requires a method of thinking beyond photographic indexicality, where the image can no longer be considered exclusively as a document, index, or marker of time. The *Contraband* series asks us to consider the photographs as constructed and contested, in part as image-evidence of the often violent processes of border control and security, and in part as documents unable to make those same processes visible. This is precisely why the theories outlined in the first chapter bear examination. Simon's work articulates itself within a complex third term somewhere between transparency and opacity that finds its form in a refusal of representation that is evident both culturally and politically. We must accept the objects as signifiers of the moments prior to the photograph, even if the objects made visible, as signifiers, do not always correspond to their referents.

2.3 Trevor Paglen's *The Other Night Sky*

Like Simon, Trevor Paglen is concerned with the politics of inaccessible spaces and interrogating the unseen networks that structure life under the state. He too activates questions around

visibility, participation, and the relationship between aesthetics and politics in works that expose the representational limits of photography. While their subject matter and strategies differ in significant ways, Paglen's work is similarly emblematic of a photography that shifts between image and information, between a seductive formalism and the carefully controlled revelation of pieces of evidence, strategically deploying visual and textual details in tandem, so that the viewer becomes aware of what exists outside the confines of the frame. For each artist the exteriority of the frame only becomes visible, or legible, when the viewer is able to identify the limits and restrictions imposed by each artist, limits that are often the result of a long, careful process of research. The research process required by each artist to make their projects legible to an audience who would otherwise read the aesthetics of the image alone, contributes to a very specific artistic strategy. In both cases, it is a strategy that moves away from the kind of aesthetic or visual research artists might typically employ and instead re-frames aesthetics in the context of their respective backgrounds in journalism (Simon) and geography (Paglen.)⁷²

In one of his earliest photographic projects, *The Other Night Sky*, Paglen presents images of classified American satellites, objects that are not officially or publicly logged but that orbit the earth to covertly track or collect data. Working with amateur groups who observe and record the movements of satellites in order to calculate and predict their paths in the sky, Paglen produces visually seductive, sublime, telescopic images of the sky at night. Often shot in remote locations, Paglen's skies are filled with stars, and light, and the familiar sense of wonderment that comes

⁷² Simon began her career in photography working for news publications, including *The New York Times Magazine* who hired her for the work that became *The Innocents*. Paglen began his career in geography, completing his doctorate degree in geography. His dissertation was later published as *Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon's Secret World* and served as the basis for many of his early art projects.

with the contemplation of the universe. This aestheticization of surveillance processes serves to highlight a paradox of visibility itself, since the mere presence of lights in the sky discloses very little factual information even as they signify the covert processes of state surveillance.

Paglen's more recent series *Untitled (Drones)* shifts his focus to observing and recording the paths of American military drones, an investigation that dovetails with the increased use of drones under the Obama administration.⁷³ Drones, or "unmanned aerial vehicles," operate simultaneously as automatic recording devices and weapons, looking back at us with their eyeless vision to animate a geographically indeterminate space between viewer and viewed. Such indeterminacy is matched by Paglen's visual strategy, where his large, saturated prints utilize flat, abstract fields of colour. The viewer is thrust into a vividly atmospheric space, and with no horizon line to orient us towards either earth or sky our normal sense of spatial orientation is confused. The clouds spread wide across the picture plane, serving to reflect, colour, abstract and obscure, attracting our gaze to search for what is held within them. Often only after close scrutiny does the tiny point of the drone reveal itself, like a tear rupturing the fabric of the sky, to remind us that the sky is not neutral. Heaving with "the electromagnetic waves of encrypted information that pulse through the atmosphere," the sky bears the digital information required to keep UAVs airborne.⁷⁴ This is why the question of aesthetic

⁷³ The increased use of drone strikes under the Obama administration has been well documented over the past several years and continues to be questioned. See http://www.salon.com/2013/12/03/rising_number_of_drone_killings_raises_questions_about_obamas_rules_for_use_partner/

⁷⁴ Brian Homes. "Visiting the Planetarium: Images of the Black World," in *Trevor Paglen*, (Vienna: Revolver Verlag, Vienna Secession, 2010), 5.

representation persists in Paglen's work: he uses striking and sublime images to paradoxically articulate that the sky can no longer act as a projection of our desire for limitless freedom.

Paglen's work pivots on the tension between aesthetic representation and the documenting of very specific instances of state surveillance. He probes at the limits of photography and what a photographic document is able to do: is an image of a drone or a geo-stationary satellite, even with all of the supplemental text that the artist includes, capable of telling us anything about the American military complex and its secretive, violent actions? Does it actually expose or reveal, as Paglen attempts to do? This disjunction between what Paglen would call the relational aspects of his projects, what exists external to the image, and the highly aestheticized, historically referential qualities of the image itself, is a problem set with an established history in aerial photography. Given that Paglen's photographs of the sky offer a kind of inversion of surveillance, a watching from below, the discourse on aerial imaging becomes compelling. In his text on the wartime photographs of Edward Steichen, Allan Sekula constructs a striking binary division between the aerial photograph as documentary evidence, an image that yields to a rationalized act of interpretation,⁷⁵ and the aestheticized object, the artwork that manifests benign neutrality through its abstraction.⁷⁶ Yet the binary between image and information elides the fact that aerial photographs cannot be reduced to either pure document or pure art object. In Sekula's text, the aerial photograph enacts a dichotomy between something that can be productively

⁷⁵ Allan Sekula, "The Instrumental Image: Steichen at War," *Artforum* 14, no. 4, (December 1975): 27.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 29. Sekula rightfully questions the valorization of such images, denying the neutrality associated with images that represent the landscapes of war as seemingly depopulated and thus aestheticized. He suggests that with these photographs it's possible to "have one's war and enjoy it too," in a reading that "acknowledges and celebrates the documentary status of the image while translating the representation into an abstraction." (32)

interpreted as evidence and the abstraction that the process of taking a photograph necessitates. No other type of photography both reveals and conceals its limits in such a way, obscuring its objects at the same time that it reveals its process. Paglen's work similarly disrupts the binary between document and aesthetic object. First, by capturing images of the contemporary equivalent of a cameraman in a fighter plane—covert satellites, military drones—Paglen exposes the apparatuses of surveillance and war, in what has been termed an exchange of gazes, where “the masters of surveillance are in their turn surveilled.”⁷⁷ But such images only reverse the gaze in a symbolic sense and as documents they reveal little. There is no dramatic disclosure here, no unmasking of the war apparatus, no shocking military secret uncovered. In fact Paglen is quite frank and open about his work and claims he makes no attempt to hide his research from the American government or the other institutional bodies he critiques.⁷⁸ Instead his work offers the viewer a means of inquiry through the *process* that makes visible the structures of power that seek to operate through invisibility. Paglen states that the means of achieving a particular abstraction are critical to the final image since “they imply a politics of seeing and of relations of seeing.”⁷⁹ Using detailed and informative titles and texts to accompany each image, Paglen emphasizes the process required to produce his images, what he terms relational photography. In so doing he fully engages image and apparatus, where his practice encompasses the “seeing

⁷⁷ Holmes, 4.

⁷⁸ Trevor Paglen, “Seeing The Secret State: Six Landscapes,” presented at the 30th Chaos Communication Conference, Congress Center, Hamburg, Germany, December 27-30th, 2013. Paglen claims he does not address audience questions around law enforcement and intelligence agencies because, as civic institutions, he has the right to critique their activities. He states that our attitude should not be to fear such institutions or to participate in a culture of fear that allows for secrecy and covert activities to continue. However, Paglen is also very careful about how often and when his public appearances are recorded and are very selectively circulated which suggests he is indeed very conscious of his position as a public figure of critique.

⁷⁹ Julian Stallabrass, “Negative Dialectics in the Google Era: A Conversation with Trevor Paglen,” *October* 138 (Fall 2011), 7.

machines,” that allow a historically determined type of vision.⁸⁰ Thus the image and its production are in constant tension, in an “apparent disjunction between process and visual result.”⁸¹

In writing about Paglen’s work, Pamela Lee argues that although a powerful component of his practice overall is his commitment to exposing the so-called “dark world of military technology [and] the invisible apparatuses that function as part of the American military’s power,” this is only the most obvious or apparent aspect of his work.⁸² She goes on to argue that, in fact, it is “the work’s conflicted visual economy that troubles the self-evidence and immediacy of appearances, taking on the ideology of communicational transparency through steady recourse to the genealogies and aesthetics of photographic media.”⁸³ Paglen is arguably not exposing the apparatuses of state power at all, but is himself covertly working within them through the specific aesthetics of photographic media. His work does not so much reveal or expose the unseen, dark corners of power, but the aesthetic gloss of each image complicates the ideology of transparency itself. What Lee’s argument points to is how specifically these issues, the tension between what is evidence and what is abstract, what is document and what is aesthetic are part of

⁸⁰ Trevor Paglen, “The Omnipresent Camera,” (presentation, The Photographic Universe: A Conference, Vera List Center for Art and Politics, New York, NY, March 2-3, 2011).

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Pamela Lee, “Open Secret,” *Artforum* 49, no. 9 (May 2011), 11.
<http://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201105&id=28060>

⁸³ Ibid.

a particular aesthetic tradition in which photographic visuality is completely enmeshed within the processes of the apparatus.⁸⁴

2.4 Post-representationalist photography

The relational process that Paglen identifies in his work are present not only because of his close working relationships with a wide range of amateur and professional scientific communities, but because of his interest in developing forms of what he calls “post-representationalist photography” a photography that *is* the process itself.⁸⁵ This disjunction between process and result, between visibility and opacity, between the secret and its revelation, is the point on which Paglen’s project turns. His systems of relations are entirely about seeing, about what is visible to be seen, and about the making visible of subjects through “a protracted process of education, research, investigation, and often trespassing and law-breaking, a counter-spying on the intelligence complex.”⁸⁶ It is in his mobilization of a post-representationalist practice that the work reveals the disjunction between process and result, one that shifts our attention “from the truth or exposure value of the image to photography’s complex framing of the relation between knowledge and vision.”⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Ibid, 12.

⁸⁵ Stallabrass, 4. In this interview Paglen states: “The point, for me, is to propose and develop forms of post-representationalist photography and imaging wherein both the materiality of a work and its “relations of photography” are intrinsic to what that work is. In other words, I want photography that doesn’t just point to something; it actually is that something.”

⁸⁶ Solnit, 10.

⁸⁷ Karen Beckman, “Telescopes, Transparency, and Torture: Trevor Paglen and the Politics of Exposure,” *Art Journal*, 66, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 67.

Taryn Simon makes similar claims when she states that almost all of what she considers her photographic labour occurs and remains undocumented and off camera.⁸⁸ For each artist, research, communication, and analysis comprise a substantial part of their projects, and while neither enacts participation as their sole strategy, both *use* photography to refer back to a durational process of research and negotiation. If negotiating relationships is the primary artistic labour of their projects, how might we assess these works visually, given that both offer representations that point to a vast number of specific lives and lived experiences, while refusing to depict them?⁸⁹ How then can we account for representation in this work? Who are the subjects, or protagonists, present here? Does the lack of visualization point to irresponsibility on the part of the artist, to use as subjects people or networks that can never be appropriately involved or compensated in the final project? Or is the inability to make such invisible operations visible point to a larger question on the limitations of photographic representation in our current moment?

⁸⁸ Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Ever Airport: Notes on Taryn Simon's Contraband," *Contraband* (London: Steidl, 2010), http://tarynsimon.com/docs/Ever_Airport.pdf, 3.

⁸⁹ Here Simon subverts the challenges of representation by choosing not to image potentially marginalized people (or at least those who would be identified and targeted by border patrol) but instead to reveal and catalogue the objects and things that are left behind. And even when she is depicting people, (in both *The Innocents Project* and *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters* projects) the images still function as stand-ins for a pre-photographic moment.

2.5 Art documentation and forms of life

These questions are ones brought to bear on the intersections of life and art, where the lives of subjects are held in balance by their visual representation, or lack thereof. In a recent collection of essays, critic and theorist Boris Groys considered how the consolidation of art and life transforms the objects being discussed when we discuss works of art specifically.⁹⁰ Whereas art might traditionally be identified by its form, for example the traditional media of painting, sculpture, drawing, and more recent forms of photography, performance, and video, or by its occupation of the obvious spaces of where art is displayed, such as the gallery or museum, Groys points out that as forms and media continue to blur together it is increasingly difficult to talk about a work of art as autonomous from the context of its production.⁹¹ Groys identifies a categorical shift from autonomous works of art to what he terms “art documentation,” and this concept might be mobilized to address subjects who exist beyond the representative frame: “Art documentation is by definition not art; it merely refers to art, and in precisely this way it makes it clear that art in this case is no longer present and immediately visible but [is] rather absent and hidden.”⁹² Groys suggests that art exists *outside* the space of its presentation, distanced from the viewer both spatially and temporally, and the documents on display point to an activity that cannot be purely apprehended by the viewer. Art documentation does not make the past or future

⁹⁰ Boris Groys, *Art Power*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

⁹¹ Boris Groys, “Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation,” *Documenta 11*, trans. Steven Lindberg, (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 108. The term “production” is used here to refer specifically to contemporary forms of art making. Where the historic concept of “artist” considered all artists creators—creating masterful, autonomous artworks—contemporary artists are more frequently thought of as producers, the people who organize the conditions of production that enable the artwork to come into existence.

⁹² *Ibid.*

temporalities of artworks visible, but it becomes the only form possible to represent artistic activities that cannot be represented in other ways.⁹³

For Groys art documentation as form is deeply connected to the biopolitical, in part because it forces art and life to truly merge. Groys argues that,

... art becomes biopolitical, because it begins to use artistic means to produce and document life as a pure activity. Indeed, art documentation as an art form could only develop under the conditions of today's biopolitical age, in which life itself has become the object of technical and artistic intervention.⁹⁴

Here it seems that Groys is arguing for art documentation as a new form of both art and life, as a new way of addressing the fact that biological life structures politics and power. Artists who intervene directly into social life through strategies of debate, activism, and research, and by enduring unusual living situations, employing and directing others in production, engaging directly with publics and numerous other strategies, are forcing art to become synonymous with life because both structure themselves as pure activity, an activity with no aesthetic object required.⁹⁵

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 109.

⁹⁵ Groys, writing for the *Documenta 11* catalogue in 2002, makes these arguments at a time when “relational aesthetics” is being debated across the art world. His rationale though has less to do with the type of works promoted by Bourriaud and others associated with relational practice at that time. Instead he seems to have pre-dated a movement coming out of institutions like New York’s Creative Time. The idea of life as the primary medium for art production is the general thesis throughout the contributions to *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* and has become a well-trod argument for socially-engaged contemporary artists. See Nato Thompson, ed., *Living as form: Socially engaged art from 1991-2011*, (Cambridge, Mass: Creative Time, 2012).

Yet Paglen and Simon both present highly aesthetic works, where the visual power of the image cannot be discounted. This distinguishes them both from the discourse on contemporary relational works. Both Paglen and Simon go to pains to suggest that their work is not simply about the image, but about the practice of creating images and the relations of seeing that those images enable. Groys does not argue that all creative impulses are now art documents instead of artworks, but that what art documentation does, in contrast to works of art, is beyond the results of an artistic practice. In the case of such documentation, art is political not because it shares with politics a making visible within space,⁹⁶ but is able to be political when it encounters its document, when it is without result because it becomes pure activity, and the document is able to point outsiders, those outside the life inscribed, towards it. In the example of *Contraband*, this would mean the art is the durational performance of living at the airport, for Paglen the art would be his acts of research. Representation in each case becomes only a signpost, a way to signify, to point to something else, something outside the frame. But if art documentation is primarily narrative, how do those signposts accrue visual meaning? In the final chapter of this thesis I will account for the ways in which language becomes a necessary matrix to add meaning and signification to these projects.

Groys, writing in 2002, developed the concept of art documentation at a time when documentary media and techniques were becoming, and have since continued to be, incredibly powerful and

⁹⁶ This is one of the main arguments put forward by Jacques Rancière in his large body of work on the relationships between art and politics. He argues that both aesthetics and politics cannot be separated because both are regimes of the sensible and are equally concerned with the framing, or delimiting, of the spaces of the sensible. His major texts on aesthetics include: *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (2000 / 2004), *The Future of the Image* (2007), *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (2009), *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009) and the essays in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (2010.)

prominent strategies in contemporary art. Critics like T.J. Demos have noted this trend as it relates to photography specifically and his writing on the topic has identified how the relationship between the medium of photography and representation is dramatically shifting.⁹⁷ Demos highlights how contemporary artists are returning to photography for its ability to reproduce an exterior, visual world and to bear witness to the experience of real social and political conditions, rather than to generate “endless signs of signs,” even for artists who clearly use fictional set-ups or strategies.⁹⁸ Demos argues that photography’s turn to documentary is due, in part, to artists using the camera to “expose and validate the diverse conditions of everyday life that normally go unrepresented within mainstream Western media.”⁹⁹ Or, in other words, using the camera to exploit a democratic or political potential. This return to documentary practices is, for Demos, at least in part symptomatic of globalization.¹⁰⁰ What Demos here suggests is that the long history of documentary photography has been usurped and creatively critiqued by artists who blend fact and fiction. This strategy, which has become so symptomatic of contemporary photo-based practices, also at the same time necessitates a focus on the artist, a renewed exertion of the ways that life and art are, par Groys, indeed intertwined. As the spaces to look at

⁹⁷ T.J. Demos, “The Ends of Photography,” in Alonso, Rodrigo et al. *Vitamin Ph: New Perspectives in Photography*, (London: Phaidon, 2006), 6.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 7.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 8. Demos identifies two recent developments—the reinvention of documentary practice in contemporary photography and the fragmentation of photography as medium into a hybrid—as both informed by post-modernism’s schizophrenic oscillation between a world of empty, fragmented signs and globalism’s tendency towards unification and standardization (6). He points to Allan Sekula’s photographic project *Fish Story* as a precursor to work today that fluctuates between documentation and aesthetic construction and he argues that Sekula’s image- and text-based projects are provocative models for documentary investigation into the changing social topographies under advanced capitalism. (8)

documentary-type images continue to move away from the magazines and photo-books of the 20th century and into the gallery space, it is worth considering how the gallery is one of the remaining spaces that might actually offer the political space required from which to consider images seriously. Certainly the Internet and online forums also offer some such spaces, but increasingly the radical potential of the Internet is compromised by the near total consolidation of economic powers that collect and distribute information through its channels. Demos even goes so far as to attribute to contemporary art the possibility of forming “an experimental and inclusive democratic sphere [that would] counter the social omissions and political manipulations found in governmental propaganda and consumerist spectacle”¹⁰¹ so that art itself become an alternative to all types of contemporary photojournalism.¹⁰² In his analyses of artists like Guy Tillim and Bruno Serralongue he recognizes how such serial projects, often accompanied by extensive captioning and embedded in the photographer’s existing practice of social activism, allow a complex narrative to be developed and communicated over many images, instead of relying on the one, spectacular image.¹⁰³

While Taryn Simon’s projects differ in significant ways from the less conceptual projects of Tillim and Serralongue, *Contraband* might likewise be considered a series of photographs that do not seek to retrieve a singular, specific representational image but is rather a photography that offers a process of looking, pointing to events or moments as they unfold. The objects present as

¹⁰¹ T.J. Demos, “Photography’s (Post) Humanist Interventions: Or, Can Photography Make the World More Liveable?” *The Eye is a Lonely Hunter: Images of Humankind* (4th Fotofestival: Mannheim, Ludwigshafen, Heidelberg, 2011), 191.

¹⁰² Ibid, 196.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

images offer no singular point of entry into thinking about the border as a site of trauma, as a banal semi-public space, as the site of global economic trade, as an engine for the production of certain types of lives and the exclusion of others. This aspect of unfolding, of watching, of attending to the externalities of the image, of watching what is actually *not* revealed, or *not* seen, is a strategy not unfamiliar to other contemporary artists working to expose some of the limits of photography as a practice while simultaneously examining its political import.

Chapter 3: Language and Text

A number of contemporary artists use documentary forms of photography, not to document an art event or to extend the past into the present in the way conceptual artists in the '60s and '70s would have, for example,¹⁰⁴ but as the kind of “result without a result” that Groys describes as a document that points to art as pure activity, art as a process of living.¹⁰⁵ These artists demand that we consider the unseen relations, events, people, situations, and institutions that precede the photograph, or exceed it. To do so we cannot use a model that considers exclusively the aesthetics of the image. And when artists ask their viewers to think beyond the image in a way that exceeds the space of the aesthetic, it requires more effort on the part of the viewer than simply knowing the context of a given project. The parameters, limits and research boundaries of these projects must be made legible in some way. To think about how an image may act as a document, and how image-based practices navigate between the intent to reveal or describe and an inability to do so, the use of text to direct viewers outside the image becomes a common critical strategy. Paglen and Simon both use extended, detailed captioning in order to make their projects legible and to frame and push against the limitations of the image. To see one of their images without an understanding of the limitations of the specific project would be to reduce the image to aesthetics only because the fuller, external spaces of the image would not be visible. In order to make the projects readable as artworks, the subjects of the works must be made legible

¹⁰⁴ Catherine Grant, “The Performance Space of the Photograph: From ‘The Anti-Photographers’ to ‘The Directorial Mode,’” *Re-Bus: A Journal of Art History and Theory* 5 (Spring, 2010), 8.
<http://www.essex.ac.uk/arhistory/rebus/PDFS/Issue%205/Grant2.pdf>

¹⁰⁵ Boris Groys, “Art in the age of biopolitics,” 109. For example, we might think of contemporary artists Hito Steyerl, Bruno Serralongue, Guy Tillim, Yto Barrada, or Walid Raad, who each subvert conventions of documentary tropes in their work.

even if they are not visible, and to do so both artists rely on larger narratives that work in tandem with the image. The question of the role of language becomes implicit: is language always required in order to make otherwise abstract works readable and knowable? Without language each project becomes a meditative abstraction, an illusion. It is the incorporation of writing, in the form of the caption, which points the viewer to the subject of the image. Without the grounding of extended or specific captions the viewer would be speculating at the research, labour, or people that preceded the image. With the addition of the caption, the limits and meanings of each project become less abstract and more legible. If both artists are treading a line between revelation and concealment, between opacity and transparency, it is through the caption that this negotiated border becomes most discernable. Indeed, the troubling of the relationship between image and text is one that both Paglen and Simon hinge their practices on, since without the texts or captions, it would be impossible to assign meaning to these largely abstract images.

3.1 The caption

Writing about Simon's most recent series, *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters*, photographic theorist and historian Geoffrey Batchen claims that the "interactive combination of text and photograph is typical of Simon's work; it, rather than photography, is her true medium."¹⁰⁶ Simon's work implores us to look differently, to look using different methods and different time frames than we are accustomed to. The tiny texts crafted to accompany the images

¹⁰⁶ Geoffrey Batchen, "Revenant," in *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I-XVIII* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2012), 743.

are strategically placed, to be read in conjunction with the image so that “the image first informs the text, which provides us with an architecture of seeing and reading.”¹⁰⁷ In *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* this simultaneous seeing and reading is most pronounced since the captions are not just explanatory titles but are short texts that attempt to explain or complicate the contexts for each image. For example, in *Nuclear Waste Encapsulation and Storage Facility, Cherenkov Radiation Hanford Site, US Department of Energy, Southeastern Washington State* (Figure 10) the title of the photograph clearly states where it was taken, however by reading the text we understand that we are looking at nuclear waste capsules submerged in water and shot from above, as well as a range of statistics and historical evidence about nuclear energy use and radiation in the U.S. The image is an aesthetically speculative one, a surreal and looming pattern of dots that almost seems to form the contours of the continental USA, an abstracted image to be certain. With the information offered in the accompanying text—that this is one of the most contaminated sites in the US—the viewer is suddenly navigating an image whose subtle beauty becomes terrifying. What is the destructive potential of these glowing blue dots? What are we actually able to see here, when the haze of glowing radioactivity blacks out the actual objects being photographed? The glare of the surface of the image blinds us to what is shown and the viewer is required to infer much since the visual minimalism of the image is both striking and reductive.

¹⁰⁷ Sarah James, “Taryn Simon: Photography Between the Image and the Word,” in *Deutsche BÖRSE Photography Prize 2009*, ed. Stefanie Braun, (London: The Photographers’ Gallery, 2009), 3.

In *Bureau of Engraving and Printing, US Department of the Treasury, Washington, District of Columbia* (Figure 11) what we see is similarly qualified by what we read. We can identify the stacks of paper bills piled up on wooden pallets and secured with belts but they look far too artificial to be actual currency, as though we are witness to a constructed scene, a contemporary recreation of an original site. The location of the photograph suggests a certain veracity, but it is not until we read through the short text explaining how much these stacks total (over \$220,800,000 USD) and how much money is printed in the U.S. on a daily basis that we come to understand the overwhelming signification here made visual. The viewer oscillates between knowledge of the huge value here depicted and its very material ordinariness, as though this was any type of product waiting to be packed and shipped. Yet there are blind spots here too, for how can such an image speak to the vast disparities of wealth in the American economy? Perhaps this image acts as a harbinger for the global economic crash of 2008, which would happen in the year following the date of the photograph and the impacts of which could not be imagined at the time.

In each of these images, and in this project as a whole, the attempt to visually reveal a very privileged, inaccessible, hidden space is balanced against the requirement to disclose, through text, the parameters of those spaces. Often these spaces offer a mythical, sublime, or fantastical signification to a public imaginary. In her refusal to provide answers or positions on any of these topics Simon indeed “shifts the burden of assigning that meaning from the artist to a viewer, making us all complicit in the act of signification, and indeed in the histories we are asked to witness.”¹⁰⁸ This is no small burden for the viewer, and this is precisely the type of responsibility

¹⁰⁸ Batchen, 751.

in viewing that Azoulay's civil contract of photography calls upon us to acknowledge. If the viewer is, as Batchen suggests, obliged to become complicit in the act of signification, then the question of what is knowable and seeable is an urgent one. The image reveals its contingencies not because the viewer can read anything into it, but it is a contingency based in part upon an individual being able to navigate between visual and linguistic texts: "The political semiotic of these photographs suggests that what is widely known and feared in the public sphere can rarely be seen in the public realm. Strategically blocking our sight lines with blind spots and white outs, Simon mobilizes the viewer's attention by displacing it, even disorienting it."¹⁰⁹ In *Contraband* this act of visually displacing our attention is done so by isolating the objects on the pure white of a seamless studio back-drop. In *American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* it is done with the highly formal compositions that elide the visual information contained within the gleaming sheen of CIA Headquarters or the minimalism that reduces the digital content of the internet to a few intersecting lines (Figures 12 and 13). What results is "a photography that proffers transparency [and the] utopian promise of liberal democracy, but then renders that transparency opaque, even reflective."¹¹⁰ Paglen and Simon both "proffer transparency" in their working methodologies, but their highly aesthetic images hypnotize us with a luminous glow, obscuring more than they are able to reveal. It is precisely this dialectic between transparency and opacity that is operative in the negotiation of image and text. The caption must bring with it the political motivation of the image.

¹⁰⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, "Beyond Photography," in *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters I-XVIII*, (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2012), 11.

¹¹⁰ Batchen, 751.

The ability of the caption to act as a determinant of meaning has been critiqued in photographic theory, notably by Sontag when she claimed, “no caption can permanently restrict or secure a picture’s meaning.”¹¹¹ Even the caption, which is “the missing voice, and is expected to speak for truth” cannot entirely fulfill an explanatory role.¹¹² It may limit interpretation but it cannot contain the plurality of meanings that all photographs invariably propose. Yet when studying the photograph as a mediator between subject, artist and viewer, it is harder to claim that the caption does not carry value since a caption cannot be inscribed *onto* an image but must always remain exterior. This means that the photographic image always “remains in need of interpretation and cannot be converted into certified data.”¹¹³ For art critic Jan Verwoert the photograph is in need of interpretation and without the caption it is difficult, if not impossible to do so. He also points to Rosler’s *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974-5) to show how the use of caption can insert into the photograph the people who were not, or are not, visible. Here language, through the caption, points us outside the image proper.

By considering that language itself is external to the image we might reconcile the notion of Butler’s constantly breaking, shifting, re-organizing frame with the necessity to find meaning outside of the image through the interpretive power of the caption. Verwoert’s broader argument asserts that the increased interest in the production and discussion of documentary strategies in

¹¹¹ Sontag, *On Photography*, 108.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 109.

¹¹³ Jan Verwoert, “Research and Display: Transformation of the Documentary Practice in Recent Art,” in *The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art*, eds. Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008), 205.

the wider art discourse is really a move towards a critique of representation, one that needs to address the reality of our surroundings.¹¹⁴ Such a critique of representation is urgently required, particularly given the widespread assumptions that access to more information and more images will somehow translate into evidence that might provide the basis for an increasingly knowledgeable society.¹¹⁵

Political scientist Jodi Dean, writing in the early 2000s, has provided powerful arguments for the critique of a transparent public sphere. For Dean, the assumptions that the public has a right to know, that knowledge will come through transparent processes, and that such knowledge is a fundamental obligation of a democratic society, is a problematic assertion that veils the ideological function of the very idea of a public sphere. She points out that contemporary technoculture relies on the notion that the solution to any problem is publicity, or really, transparency, and that more information and greater access to that information is the answer.¹¹⁶ Her work investigates the secret—that which is purposefully kept hidden and inaccessible—as the limit of such publicity:

... I argue that democratic politics has been formatted through a dynamic of concealment and disclosure, through a primary opposition between what is hidden

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 210.

¹¹⁵ This assumption is common in the widespread notion that information can be neutralized and that transparency should be sought after. We might think of the revelation of the massive quantities of information through Wikileaks that directly implicates the American military: even when this information is available, there is not a causal connection between information and access, justice, or equality.

¹¹⁶ Jodi Dean, "Publicity's Secret," *Political Theory* 29, no. 5 (October 2001): 624. Remarkably, Dean makes this argument in a pre-Wikileaks era. This rhetoric around the availability of information and the perceived transparency of institutions has become much stronger in the past decade as the methodologies of contemporary journalism, publicity, and communication technologies continues to shift.

and what is revealed. The fantasy of a public to which democracy appeals and the ideal of publicity at its normative core require the secret as their disavowed basis.¹¹⁷

Dean recognizes the need to critique the assumptions that publicity, or openness, is necessary for democratic political practice. But the ideology of the public sphere is incredibly strong. We think, as a public, that we should have the right to know, and the assumption of that right is increasing in a time when a touch of our keyboard can bring us incalculable amounts of data. Dean states, “this injunction to reveal misreads the sense that something is withheld as the public’s missing authorization. The secret can’t be told. It can’t be filled in. It’s simply the form through which the fantasy of the public takes account of its failure in advance.”¹¹⁸

This is not to discount the tangible results that the revelation of classified government documents can bring to society, particularly when the effects are global as was the case with Wikileaks or with Edward Snowden’s revelations about American spying through the National Security Agency. Dean acknowledges that the politics of the public sphere have always been based on the association between power and secrecy, and that to reveal such secrets is to grant or re-distribute that power.¹¹⁹ Yet such acts of revelation fail to have political impact since, as she argues, “All sorts of horrible political processes are perfectly transparent today. The problem is that people don’t seem to mind, that they are so enthralled by transparency that they have lost the will to

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 625. Further she states, “the new configuration of technology, publicity, and secrecy in the information age pushes us to challenge the premise of the public sphere—indeed, to think about the ways publicity functions as technocultural ideology.” (641)

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 646.

¹¹⁹ Jodi Dean, *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 173-4

fight.”¹²⁰ So even if it were possible that images could reveal something about their referents, it is an endgame since the aspiration to transparency is a trap.

How does such a critique of the assumed transparency of the public sphere press itself into artworks? Following Dean, the problem becomes less one regarding the attempts to visualize the invisible but instead addresses the problem that visibility itself is an ideology, one powerfully tied to the contemporary global order. This makes it incredibly difficult to articulate or critique. Even Paglen, who certainly points to the *limits* of photographic communication, is as much a part of a system of surveillance as the government systems he critiques or attempts to expose. Google, surely one of the largest global companies most implicated for facilitating widespread surveillance strategies, invited Paglen to speak at their campus headquarters.¹²¹ His work as artist-in-residence at MIT on archival materials became a kind of think tank for material scientists launching surveillance satellites into space. And while his work has been widely embraced by the art world as critical, it is perhaps just critical enough without being legitimately threatening to a neoliberal order. Likewise for Taryn Simon, whose process of photographing objects intended to generate income for the marginalized serves to generate her own income and contribute to her value as an artist. The circulation of largely counterfeit items that feeds an underground economy of often impoverished vendors is transformed into reproducible objects

¹²⁰ Ibid, 173. Dean elaborates: “The politics of the public sphere has been based on the idea that power is always hidden and secret. But clearly this is not the case today. We know full well that corporations are destroying the environment, employing slaves, holding population hostage to their threats to move their operations to locales with cheaper labor. All sorts of horrible political processes are perfectly transparent today. The problem is that people don't seem to mind, that they are so enthralled by transparency that they have lost the will to fight.”

¹²¹ Trevor Paglen, “Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon’s Secret World,” Authors@Google Speaker Series, Google Headquarters, Mountain View, California. February 11, 2009.

that trade in the stratospheres of the contemporary art market. In the work of each artist the politics of the image overlaps with the politics of transparency, where transparency cannot simply be assumed to be a neutral, democratic, open state. The fact that both have been taken up enthusiastically by the structures of power that govern the art world makes a critique of such, whether implied or overt, difficult if not impossible.

The questions addressed throughout this thesis may appear specific to photography as an aesthetic and artistic practice, but ultimately they have much broader implications in an era that privileges communicational transparency to the point where certain freedoms and values are being severely limited. As visual forms of communication become the most prevalent forms of social media—and the trend towards image-sharing sites like Instagram offers evidence of this shift—the currency of this form of exchange is the ability to store and manipulate data in ever expanding, seamless, and seemingly invisible sites. How information is presented, represented, and understood in a networked era are questions that are only beginning to be fully addressed.

Epilogue: Visualizing networks

In examining how artists confront the politics of our era, the methods of making hidden networks of power visible are not limited to image-based practices. Indeed artists across mediums confront questions of visibility and transparency. The work of the late artist Mark Lombardi uses language in a way that often serves to reverse the operative matrix of language, caption and image that Simon and Paglen mobilize in their attempts to reveal networks of power. Lombardi's works use text as form, to construct and build the parameters of the image itself. His large-scale, detailed, flow-chart-like drawings map the relationships, and abuses, of power in the financial and government sectors. These obsessively researched artworks present information in a way that utilizes similar strategies to Simon and Paglen, but with radically different form. Whereas for Simon and Paglen their photographic output often involves compressing years of research into images with very minimal detail, for Lombardi the results of years of research and planning all come together on a single piece of paper that is incredibly visually detailed, to the point of oversaturation. The eye cannot keep looking and reading simultaneously. There is no visual rest or respite in work that uses language exclusively, as compared to the aesthetics of the photographic image, as its medium of interrogation and abstraction.

When viewed at a distance Lombardi's works become subtle abstractions, delicate works almost akin to the work of minimalist painters like Agnes Martin. When viewed at reading distance, the actuality of these intricate networks can be read literally, and the detailed connections traced. Clearly being negotiated here is a tension between abstraction and information, whether it is the movements of capital that are being abstracted, or the impossibility of visualizing those

movements. Ryan Bigge claims “Lombardi’s diagrams make abstract movements of capital concrete and comprehensible.”¹²² But do they? Lombardi’s drawings may have attracted the attention of the CIA post-9/11, in an odd attempt to retrieve specific information from his drawings, but in the end the CIA garnered little.¹²³ What might seem tangible, in language, is still free-floating and unable to fully reveal or visualize the immense amounts of research required to make each piece. It is in the process of visualizing the data collected that these works become more than data, that they become works of art. However, that process is likewise an abstracting one, since “the density of text necessitates the viewer take a number of steps backward, since the facts can easily overwhelm the piece’s beauty. Only from a distance can the work be seen, rather than read.”¹²⁴ The beauty of the piece notwithstanding, Lombardi’s work treads a space between being seen as a whole and being read in part, where it becomes impossible for it to be read as a whole. The information collected is made visual exclusively through language and because we are able to parse out bits of information from the whole, we are able to at least partially visualize what is constantly, always, operating as unseen.

As though to further extend their mutual investigations into the representational lack inherent in visual imagery, Taryn Simon and Trevor Paglen have both recently turned away from individual photographic practices and towards ones that consider online archives, cataloguing systems, and the relationships between texts and systems of image dissemination. In Simon’s *Image Atlas* and

¹²² Ryan Bigge, “Making the Invisible Visible: The Neo-Conceptual Tentacles of Mark Lombardi,” *Left History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Historical Inquiry and Debate* 10, No. 2 (2005): 128.

¹²³ Robert Hobbs, *Mark Lombardi: Global Networks*, (New York: Independent Curators International, 2003), 11.

¹²⁴ Bigge, 129.

in Paglen's *The Last Pictures* both artists attempt to intervene into the endlessly multiplying chain of images that we face daily. As images are collected, added, tagged and saved in online databases around the world, the selection of images and the decisions that guide the way we see groups of images together must be recognized not as neutral but as powerfully instrumental. In the same way that Paglen and Simon have both sought to understand the limits of the photographic, they have each moved into works that expose those limits at the edge of the digital, where the process of photography is not one delimited by camera or photograph, but one that recognizes the algorithmic processes that operate invisibly to guide what is available to view online.

Image Atlas, 2012, developed by Simon in partnership with the late Internet activist Aaron Swartz, is a website that incorporates user-entered search terms to show the most popular images for the given term in a number of different countries (Figures 14 and 15). As visual communication through digital networks becomes increasingly about image tagging and sharing, about photography as a communication process and much less a document, this project addresses some of the issues of translation and misinterpretation that language is subject to. Simon states that "it investigates the engines that deliver supposedly neutral statistical data. ... We have begun to naturalize the way a search engine works: we trust it to deliver us the best information. The Image Atlas reveals how subjective and contingent the process of search really is."¹²⁵ Instead of critiquing the failure of photographic representation, here Simon is concerned with the

¹²⁵ Lauren Cornell, "Taryn Simon's Visual Babel," *The New Yorker* (August 2, 2012): <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2012/08/on-image-atlas-an-interview-with-taryn-simon.html>.

contemporary image networks that dictate how we get so much of the visual information we consume. If earlier projects required language, through the texts and captions, in order to make sense of the image and to point to the conceptual limits of the project, *Image Atlas* takes the Internet as its subject in order to require not language but the structures that attach texts to images through the process of the search. The steps of translation and dissemination that an image search requires are, as the project illustrates, not transparent but are deeply contingent and are deeply invested within power structures that are impossible to visualize. The viewer here becomes complicit in those structures as their own subjectivity adds another layer to a highly contingent database of imagery. We can only speculate at the images that are dead, that are not visible, that do not turn up in any search and whose digital material is left unseen.

Paglen's recent project speaks to the other side of the contemporary proliferation of images by artificially limiting the number of images we can keep in perpetual circulation in a conceptual conceit that uses the technology of geosynchronous satellites and highly archival processes to etch a disc with one hundred images and accompanying texts that will orbit the earth indefinitely. While *The Last Pictures* is certainly fraught with many ethical and political questions, it also points to the poverty of images, where one hundred images become an arbitrary way of limiting what is possible to represent of the whole of humankind. Paglen states that "many of these images are opaque until their stories are told" and as a result he attempts to narrate these images through the accompanying texts.¹²⁶ However since they are unevenly applied (some have lengthy explanatory paragraphs, others only titles) the lack of information speaks as much as the

¹²⁶ Trevor Paglen, *The Last Pictures*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), ix.

explanations do. For example, photographs of the Separation Wall in Jerusalem (Figure 16) or the passport of displaced Palestinian Ahmad Said Mohammed Bseisy (Figure 17) each include lengthy descriptions of the lives of the subjects of the photograph, offering context and specificity to images that otherwise fail to fully reflect their import. But other images that could equally be enriched by text are left with ambiguous titles: *Fingerprints* (Figure 18) shows the a selection of several sets of fingerprints, hinting at the control of the body of a subject through policing procedures without telling us anything about the specific subjects; *Illinois State Penitentiary at Stateville, Joliet, Illinois* (Figure 19) famously recalls Foucault's theory of the panopticon and disciplinary procedure but nothing is stated to make this connection explicit, so the viewer is left speculating. The power of such a strategy is just this: viewers must insert themselves into the stream of imagery to consider what is unrepresentable, what fails visual representation. Paglen makes a somewhat over-determined comparison between 20th century imaging and the cave paintings of the pit at Lascaux by pointing out that the scenes there *imply* a narrative when there is none, creating an impression but explaining little.¹²⁷ He suggests this is true of all images: "they can't explain or narrate much of anything at all. Instead they ask us to see what we're predisposed to see."¹²⁸ *The Last Pictures* then really becomes a project about failure, where the photographs are already set to fail to represent what they are set out to. If we are already predisposed to see what we will see, how can images actually speak to the external conditions that allowed for their production? One of the scientists Paglen worked with on this

¹²⁷ Ibid,14.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

project articulates the problem poignantly in a conversation on ecological collapse: “the things that most threaten us are those for which there are no images.”¹²⁹

How can we visualize subjects as wide ranging as border policing, surveillance systems, drone attacks, economic inequality, environmental catastrophe, late capitalism, global finance? This is the overarching question that both Paglen and Simon concern themselves with, in projects that interrogate the limits of photography and representation during a contemporary moment where the definition of photography, as a medium, a practice, and a process, is in continual flux. While the images of such subjects come to be largely symbolic, when we attend to the images in context, through language or texts that point to outside sources, we begin to address the contingency of the image without being didactic.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 13. Here Paglen is paraphrasing from a remark made to him during his research by biologist Susan Oyama.

Illustrations

Figure 1 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was an image of the artwork listed below.

Figure 1. Trevor Paglen. *NEMESIS Rocket Body in Orion (Discarded rocket from Satellite Data System Spacecraft; USA 179rb)*, 2009, chromogenic print, 60 x 48 inches.

Figure 2 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was an image of the artwork listed below.

Figure 2. Trevor Paglen. *MILSTAR3 in Sagittarius (Inactive Communication and Targeting Satellite; USA 143)*, 2008, chromogenic print, 60 x 48 inches.

Figure 3 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was an image of the artwork listed below.

Figure 3. Trevor Paglen. *KEYHOLE IMPROVED CRYSTAL Near Scorpio Optical Reconnaissance Satellite USA 129*, 2007, chromogenic print, 60 x 48 inches.

Figure 4 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was an image of the artwork listed below.

Figure 4. Trevor Paglen. *Untitled (Predators; Indian Springs, NV)*, 2010, chromogenic print, 60 x 48 inches.

Figure 5 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was an image of the artwork listed below.

Figure 5. Trevor Paglen. *Untitled (Reaper Drone)*, 2010, chromogenic print, 48 x 60 inches.

Figure 6 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was an image of the artwork listed below.

Figure 6. Trevor Paglen. *Untitled (Reaper Drone)*, 2010, chromogenic print, 48 x 60 inches.

Figure 7 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was an image of the artworks listed below.

Figure 7. Selections from Taryn Simon's *Contraband*, 2009-10, inkjet prints installed in Plexiglas boxes, 9 1/4 x 22 3/4 x 2 1/2 inches:

- *Unmarked pills, China (prohibited), PHARMACEUTICALS, MISC., (COUNTERFEIT/ILLEGAL/PROHIBITED)*
- *Steroids, Testosterone & Sustanon, Pakistan (illegal) ANABOLIC STEROIDS*

(ILLEGAL)

- Peppers, *Capsicum spp.*, Ghana (prohibited) PEPPERS (PROHIBITED)
- Gold dust, India (undeclared) GOLD DUST (UNDECLARED)
- DVDs, *Lost*, Season 4 (pirated)
- TELEVISION SERIES (PIRATED)

Figure 8 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was an image of the artwork listed below.

Figure 8. Taryn Simon. Installation view of *Contraband*, Lever House, New York, NY, 2010.

Figure 9 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was an image of the artwork listed below.

Figure 9. Taryn Simon. Installation view of *CIGARETTES & TOBACCO (ABANDONED ILLEGAL PROHIBITED)*, 2010.

Figure 10 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was an image of the artwork listed below.

Figure 10. *Nuclear Waste Encapsulation and Storage Facility Cherenkov Radiation, Hanford Site, U.S. Department of Energy Southeastern Washington State*, 2007, chromogenic print, 371/4 x 441/2 inches.

Figure 11 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was an image of the artwork listed below.

Figure 11. *Bureau of Engraving and Printing, US Department of the Treasury, Washington, District of Columbia. Stacks of freshly printed, uncut \$100 and \$20 notes totaling over \$220,800,000*, 2007, chromogenic print, 371/4 x 441/2 inches.

Figure 12 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was an image of the artwork listed below.

Figure 12. *The Central Intelligence Agency, Art. CIA Original Headquarters Building. Langley, Virginia*, 2007, chromogenic print, 371/4 x 441/2 inches.

Figure 13 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was an image of the artwork listed below.

Figure 13. *Transatlantic Sub-Marine Cables Reaching Land. VSNL International, Avon, New Jersey*, 2007, chromogenic print, 371/4 x 441/2 inches.

Figure 14 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was an image of the artwork listed below.

Figure 14. Taryn Simon and Aaron Swartz. *Image Atlas*. 2012. Screen grab of www.imageatlas.org, with the search terms “Taryn Simon”. Accessed December 1, 2013.

Figure 15 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was an image of the artwork listed below.

Figure 15. Taryn Simon and Aaron Swartz. *Image Atlas*. 2012. Screen grab of www.imageatlas.org, with the search term “surveillance”. Accessed December 1, 2013.

Figure 16 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was an image of the artwork listed below.

Figure 16. *Separation Wall, Jerusalem*. 2009, photograph. From: Trevor Paglen, *The Last Pictures*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012. Plate 57.

Figure 17 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was an image of the artwork listed below.

Figure 17. *Ahmad Said Mohammed Bseisy, Passport*. nd, photograph. From: Trevor Paglen, *The Last Pictures*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012. Plate 67.

Figure 18 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was an image of the artwork listed below.

Figure 18. Trevor Paglen, *Fingerprints*. 2012, photograph. From: Trevor Paglen, *The Last Pictures*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012. Plate 59.

Figure 19 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It was an image of the artwork listed below.

Figure 19. *Illinois State Penitentiary at Stateville, Joliet, Illinois*, nd, postcard. From: Trevor Paglen, *The Last Pictures*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012. Plate 58.

* All images were removed because copyright permissions were not granted.

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