



Tensta konsthall

Today, it is common knowledge that any activity online is being tracked. Every click, comment, like, share that we do is noticed by what seems to be an all-seeing gaze, be it an authority or marketer. **Autonomy Cube (2014)** is a work by Trevor Paglen (San Francisco/Berlin) made in collaboration with digital civil liberties activist, computer security researcher, and artist Jacob Appelbaum, which subverts that situation. The cube is intended to be placed in art institutions, galleries, and other public spaces, and provides a secure Wi-Fi network to visitors. In this way, it is a sculpture which can be both aesthetically and conceptually appreciated, and practically used.

Autonomy Cube consists of a Plexiglas cube containing two interconnected circuit boards, placed on a pedestal. The sculpture functions by latching onto the host site's Wi-Fi, rerouting the user's traffic to Tor, a global network run by relay volunteers which, through their systems, successively bounce communications, making users' precise information virtually untraceable. The Tor network is based on "onion routing", which relies on several layers of encryption (Tor comes from The Onion Routing), thereby tricking "traffic analysis". It is maintained by thousands of volunteer-run servers and is used by many people around the world to protect their privacy, from activists and journalists, to populations living under dictatorships or other repressive regimes. Because it is functioning as a covert space, it is also attracting people involved with criminal activity.

As a post-Minimalist sculpture, it has direct reference to Hans Haacke's classic sculpture **Condensation Cube (1963–65)**. **Condensation Cube** is an

acrylic cube filled with water which condensates and evaporates, functioning almost like an organism which reacts to its immediate surroundings, which in this case includes the presence of visitors. Paglen's piece plays with notions of autonomy in art history, proposing the need to keep art spaces as civic infrastructures autonomous of data surveillance. At the same time as **Autonomy Cube** functions as a wifi hotspot, it is itself a Tor relay in the vast network which helps – albeit temporarily – keeping the art spaces in question free from scrutiny. While Haacke's sculpture is an example of early – finger pointing and often negative – institutional critique, **Autonomy Cube** aims at enhancing the institution, thus belonging more to a recent wave of "constructive institutional critique". It opens up a whole set of literally new and vast connections, breaking the traditional boundaries of an art institution.

Trevor Paglen is an artist whose work spans image-making, sculpture, investigative journalism, writing, engineering, and numerous other disciplines. Among his chief concerns are learning how to see the historical moment we live in and developing the means to imagine alternative futures. Paglen has had one-person exhibitions at **Secession, Vienna**; **Eli & Edythe Broad Art Museum, Los Angeles**; **Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven**; **Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt**, and **Protocinema, Istanbul**. He participated in group exhibitions at the **Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York**; the **San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco**; **Tate Modern, London** and numerous other venues. In 2016, he received the **Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize**. Paglen holds a B.A. from U.C. Berkeley, an MFA from the **Art Institute of Chicago**, and a Ph.D. in Geography from U.C. Berkeley.

Thursdays and Saturdays, 14:00
Introduction to exhibition

Saturday 25.3, 14:00
Artist presentation by Trevor Paglen

**A conversation between
Trevor Paglen, Maria Lind and
Emily Fahlén**

Maria Lind + Emily Fahlén
Can you tell us how the work on the
Autonomy Cube began?

Trevor Paglen
The genesis of the project was really just thinking about the Internet, which is a highly, highly predatory infrastructure, and trying to imagine what it would look like if it were not the greatest case of mass surveillance in the history of human kind. There are people that have imagined this, for example, within the hacker community and privacy community. The Tor infrastructure, which some of these people have created, is designed to do that — to try to create a way of using the Internet that is, to whatever extent technically possible, free of this kind of monitoring that normally happens online. It is an infrastructure that sits on top of the Internet as we know it. It is largely volunteer run — people have literally set up parts of that infrastructure in their homes and businesses. It's an infrastructure that allows people to take a part of their personal hardware and to make it part of this greater infrastructure whose goal is anonymization and privacy.

I've been thinking about this and looking forward in terms of the role of civic institutions in communication infrastructures. The best we can do in culture, I think, is to be like libraries. To be like places where you go and where you meet ideas and where you encounter things that you might have not otherwise encountered. These institutions contribute to democracy in the sense that they are places for discussion or thinking or expanding our sense of the world. I think of

them as, in the best places, kind of sister institutions to libraries. And libraries are really important for two reasons. First of all is the thing I just mentioned — you can check out any book that you want and follow ideas and follow your interests. But libraries have a second function that is equally as important, which is that the police don't get a record of every book that you've checked out. And that's foundational in the idea of libraries — the fact that the police don't get a record of your interests is just as important as the idea that you can look up whatever topic you want.

By now, when we're looking at cultural institutions, a lot of them are almost on auto pilot in the sense that they're installing surveillance systems and trying to track visitors, their movements, what art they're interested in, and so forth. Maybe museums should instead be doing the exact opposite; maybe they should create safe spaces that are free of the kind of surveillance that happens everywhere else in society. *Autonomy Cube* is not a solution to surveillance: it is a proposal that we think about the ethics of infrastructures.

EF

As the systems of control expand, the possibilities for disobedience and the space for resistance and alternative systems all seem to be shrinking. On the other hand, has a system of control ever existed without blind spots? The Tor-network that is the focus of the *Autonomy cube* is one example that could be described as both existing in a blind spot but also actively expanding the blind spot itself. How do you regard potential loopholes in the current, and future, situation? Do you think that they are somehow constant?

TP

I don't think so at all. I think that systems of power get more and more efficient as they're able to collect more and more data and parse it. I often think about what the civil rights movement would have looked like if J. Edgar Hoover had access to today's NSA and could issue secret court orders to Google, Facebook, and Twitter.

ML

What about the relationship to Hans Haacke's 1965 sculpture "*Condensation Cube*," which deals with another system — the climate of the exhibition space and how it is affected by the presence of people, and the relationship to minimalist sculpture in general?

TP

That is an obvious reference, and it's an important reference for a couple of different reasons. One, in a purely formal way, it's thinking about systems, about architecture, about infrastructure. It's also phenomenological, if you look at it in terms of the kind of "received story" of minimalism, which is that there's a phenomenological experience of that, right? And I think that mobile data is certainly a part of the 21st century's phenomenology. That feels to me like maybe the 2016 version of how the minimalist sculpture was read.

ML

I think it's brilliant.

TP

I don't think that this piece is a piece of institutional critique so much as an institutional enhancement. The point of it is not to be critical, it's just to propose a different way of seeing the world.

ML

If it is a critique, then it is a sort of constructive institutional critique.

TP

It's not meant to point fingers and say "you're doing it wrong."

EF

There is a certain "here and now" inherent in your works, since you are dealing with technologies of our time, technologies that are constantly changing. At the same time, your artistic language seems to aim for the "timeless," speaking to art history and its traditions, with minimalistic sculpture, the landscape portrait, and so on. What are your thoughts on what time does to your work? Do you think about how your works will be perceived in the future, when the "now" that they deal with will be in the past?

TP

I don't think art works are ever "timeless" — we always understand them through the moment in history that we're viewing them from. When I'm developing art works, I try to see the specificities of the historical moment we're living in but at the same time recognize that other artists throughout history have asked very similar questions and seen broadly similar dynamics in society. So I try to speak to both — trying to see the historical moment we're living in but at the same time recognizing that whenever you're making art, you're having a conversation with your ancestors as much as you're having a conversation with the other people who are alive today.

ML

What does the sculpture do in different contexts? For instance, when you have shown it in the Berlin Biennale, the Gwangju Biennale, the Photographers' Gallery in London, and at Witte de With in Rotterdam.

TP

The work is not site specific — the proposal for each location is one and the same.

ML

In a recent article in The New York Review of Books, Sweden's roll as a central node in a network of state-led surveillance activities, steered by the US, is being discussed. "Sweden has been at the vanguard of a rapid expansion of state surveillance across northern Europe" writes Hugh Eakin. According to the article, FRA (Försvarets Radioanstalt, Sweden's National Defence Radio Establishment) which is vacuuming all communication coming in and out of the country's fiber optics cables, is sharing this surveillance data with the NSA whose officials describe them as an "ideal collaborator". This is presumably also including active hacking into foreign computers and computer networks, as well as servers and hard drives. "Possible targets might be the administrators of foreign computer networks, government ministries, oil, defense, and other major corporations, as well as suspected terrorist groups or other designated individuals" continues Eakin. He also points out that FRA has admission to use NSA's most powerful analytic tool, the so-called XKeyscore which can track almost anything a user does on the internet. In light of this, do you have any comments on showing *Autonomy Cube* in Sweden

TP

Much like the Internet's architecture itself, tools like Xkeyscore and the NSA's massive data collection capabilities operate at global scales, with little reference to physical and political borders. Clearly, Sweden is a country whose lax attitude towards secret state surveillance is something that the NSA and other global intelligence agencies capitalize on.

Maria Lind is the director and Emily Fahlén is the mediator at Tensta konsthall.



Staff at Tensta konsthall

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