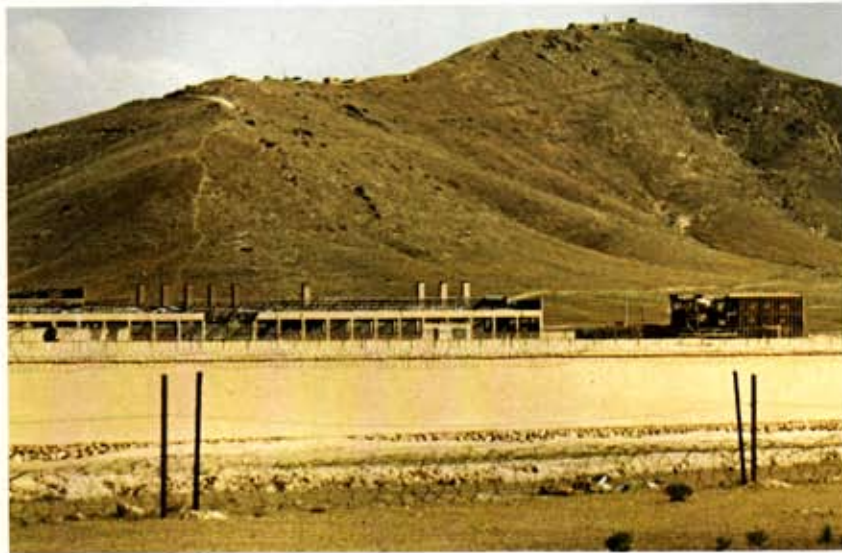


# Unmarked Territory

Trevor Paglen's Exploration of the CIA's *Black Sites*

For the past few years, California-based artist Trevor Paglen has devoted his time to bringing into plain view that which has intentionally been kept concealed. As a self-proclaimed "experimental geographer," Paglen gives visual form to the findings of his search for evidence of covert and questionable US military operations<sup>1</sup>. Rather than examining their essence, he focuses on the infrastructure that permits their continued existence.



Paglen has concentrated his efforts on tracing and exposing the CIA's "Black Sites" – the secret prisons that the agency has set up around the world since the mid 1990s in order to detain foreign terror suspects. Termed by the CIA as the "Extraordinary Rendition" program, these sites have become synonymous with torture under the guise of security. These off-limits military and intelligence

facilities are inter-dispersed around the world in an unassuming manner. Using high-powered telescopic lens that allow one to reveal elements concealed in our landscape (a technique he termed 'Limit Telephotography'), Paglen located and documented several of these sites, thus extracting them from a state of anonymity and into one of irrevocable truth. These abstracted images project an inherent

## The individuals that are sent to these locations are 'ghost prisoners' [...]

ethereal and flattened quality, having been captured from a great distance in desert surroundings.

With the aid of satellite imagery, a compass, a map drawn by a former detainee and various testimonies, Paglen located the Salt Pit in Afghanistan – one of the most classified detention facilities of the CIA. He photographed the site from an immense distance through the window of his vehicle, producing a unique image of the lone structure that is most likely invisible to the average observer<sup>2</sup>.

The individuals that are sent to these locations are 'ghost prisoners,' as they remain nameless throughout the detainment process, and no record of their imprisonment is made. In his photographs and short video loops, Paglen traces the eerie process that unfolds. Once captured, the suspects are transported in aircrafts belonging to an unmarked fleet. Through researching logs of flights taking off all around the country, Paglen discovered that the same planes that transport military and intelligence personnel to and from their workplace are the ones that are used to transfer the suspects to countries famed for their detention prisons. These

flights take off from secluded US airstrips so as to mask their ultimate destination. As part of this body of work, Paglen displays photographs and videos he shot from 20-50 miles away of the transport of the employees in these unassuming jets. Despite their ambiguous quality, these images serve as irrefutable evidence of the existence of these operations.

In order to execute these flights in a legal manner, the CIA meticulously constructs dummy corporations – complete with official corporate filings and fabricated boards of directors – that allegedly lease the planes to the CIA. Paglen followed the paper trail left behind and pieced together the bogus signatures of the supposed company directors. Placing them side-by-side, it is evident from a mere quick glance that the signatures bearing the same name were not written by the same individual. These fake identities act as a front for military personnel "signing off" on yet another flight of prisoners to a detention facility.

These sites – although physically present – do not officially 'exist' in our reality. Therefore, being given access to these images and documents is the true value of Paglen's work. By exercising counter-surveillance, he manages to dirty a well-polished structure – making visible that which is meant to remain hidden. Thus he demonstrates that this knowledge is just below the surface – anyone could potentially access it, bring it into view, and deepen the dent in the evermore daunting structure of our authoritarian surroundings. †

Yaelle Amir

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Paglen published the findings of his research, which serve as a background for this project, in the book he co-authored with A.C. Thompson *Torture Taxi: On the Trail of the CIA's Rendition Flights*, Hoboken, NJ: Melville House, 2006

<sup>2</sup> This is the only known image ever captured of this prison from the ground. Instead of licensing it to the media he donated the rights to Amnesty International and produced a print in an edition of one, thus adding to its aura of mystery and obscurity.

