Inert Universalism and the Info-optimism of Legibly Political Art

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In Andrew Cole's introduction to the October 2020 special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* on ideology, he writes that:

> [I]n terms of explaining the inexplicable, the term ideology is like the last person standing, the one holding the bag left to clarify just how a mob of so many human tendencies—like idiocy, indifference, helplessness, hopelessness, vulnerability, fragility, need, resentment, paranoia, narcissism, prejudice, superstition, religion, error, disinhibition, anger, tribalism, hate, brutality—can coerce truth, knowledge, even science, into giving in; or how the latter three find the former absolutely unshakeable and incorrigible.[1]

In this sentence, Cole situates ideology as the favored concept by which reason and rationality, in the guise of truth, knowledge and science, comprehend their limits in the face of mob-like "human tendencies." In using that term "mob," Cole typifies emotion and belief as the mainstay states of being for an irrational rabble, and in contrast, truth, knowledge, and science stand as sovereign. These two sides—the mob and the sovereign—have both been positioned as lighting a path out of political defeat at various high-water marks of political struggle. This cleavage between an ultra-left valorization of spontaneity, the mass, and lived experience as the legitimate mode by which political consciousness arrives as opposed to a more moderate, liberal vision of political education, guided by a vanguard usually in the form of a party, remains alive and well today. One ground upon which this split has prevailed, and in which ideology remains a key category, is within analysis of how conspiracy theories have been central to the far-right populist turn in Europe, the United States and beyond. This essay addresses the dynamic between epistemology, aesthetics, and conspiracy within what I call "legibly political art"—in particular, practices concerned with the corruption of state power over the last decade or so, with the artist Trevor Paglen taken as my primary example.

In terms of thinking about the place of ideology within art historical analysis, Andrew Hemingway emphasizes that while ideology held "almost talismanic power" for Marxists in

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[1] Andrew Cole "Introduction: The Ideology Issue" *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 119, no. 4 (2020), 668.

the 1970s and 1980s, it was an Althusserian variant of the concept that dominated left cultural theory during the period, as represented in the journal *Screen* and within the work of the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.[2] While Hemingway, following Terry Eagleton and others, observes that ideology has since largely retreated from view as a central category for cultural analysis, my discussion here argues that Frederic Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping—itself partially derived from an Althusserian understanding of "authentic art"—has in the last three decades sustained a similarly talismanic power for artists and writers invested in the notion that art is a site from which meaningful ideology critique might be generated.[3] In what follows, I show that, when we begin to question the epistemological foundations of the cognitive map, we cannot excise it quite so easily from conspiracy. In doing so, I address the model of knowledge in legibly political art via the aesthetic category of the sublime (along with the racialized, proprietary dynamics that underpin it), emphasizing this as the glue holding together the dyadic relationship between the respectable quest for knowledge that propels the cognitive map and the low associations of the conspiracy theorist. But first, I want to rehearse the central premises of cognitive mapping, establishing its relationship to my focus on conspiracy, and clarify what I mean by legibly political art.

I. Cognitive Mapping and Legibly Political Art

C. Wright Mills's 1941 assertion that "Theory is an airplane, not a pair of heavy boots; it is of the division of reconnaissance and spying" assists in establishing the relationship between epistemology and aesthetics within what I am calling "legibly political art." In this quote, Mills proposes that theory should provide a totalizing, aerial view, a cartographic drive. As Jeff Kinkle and Alberto Toscano suggest, this anticipates Jameson's influential concept of cognitive mapping, which analyzes "the entanglement between a totalizing vision (its absence, or present impossibility) and a strategic imperative: finding and eventually controlling the 'levers'; diminishing powerlessness."[4] This position suggests that by mapping the dizzying forces of capital (via theory, or art) we can find weak points and begin to build—and eventually seize—power. As Jameson explained, the cognitive map is an aesthetic mode called upon to "enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole."[5] If the protagonist of the cognitive map is the theorist, both Jameson and Sianne Ngai have associated that figure with the detective. As Ngai writes, the theorist/detective's

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[2] Andrew Hemingway, *Landscape between Ideology and the Aesthetic* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 5-6

[3] Althusser writes that "Art (I mean authentic art, not works of an average or mediocre level)…is to make us 'perceive' (but not know) in some sense *from the inside*, by an *internal distance*, the very ideology in which they are held." Louis Althusser "A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre," in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), 204.

[4] The quote is drawn from Mills, quoted in Jeff Kinkle and Alberto Toscano, *Cartographies of the Absolute* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2015), 14.

[5] Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 51.

"hermeneutic quests" through totality (part and parcel of the reconnaissance missions described by Mills) seek to make the "system" transparent, and vulnerable to attack.[6] However, in contrast with the classic image of the worked-up, paranoid detective manically sifting through piles of evidence to prove the connections between disparate pieces of information, Jameson was, from the outset of elaborating this concept, eager to distinguish cognitive mapping from conspiracy theorizing. In his first essay on the matter he wrote that "Conspiracy, one is tempted to say, is the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system."[7] By the time Jameson revisits this argument in his *Postmodernism* book two years later, he had amended the classism of his first diagnosis but remained at pains to distinguish conspiracy as a "degraded" and "garish" version of the cognitive map's superior attempt to "think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system."[8] Jameson's idea of cognitive mapping has been enormously influential on artistic practice and theory since its appearance, and stands as a model of ideology critique which typifies the intentions of what I call legibly political art.

I see the dominant mode of legibly political art today as aligned with mainstream liberal politics in its shared positioning of data mining and foreign interference as explaining the rightwards political turn in Europe and the US, and in its proposals that the charting of information against the secrecy such technologies have enabled should form the first step in defeating the future which looms before us, in which we are all victims of a vastly powerful techno-corporate regime that has increasingly fused with the state. This sentiment runs through the work of artists including Trevor Paglen, Olafur Eliasson, Hito Steyerl, Metahaven, Zach Blas and Forensic Architecture. While varying in intention, style, circulation and critical purchase, these artists share a reliance on lens-based media and an additive aesthetic which achieves varying degrees of the sublime in the charting of information usually concerned with exposing surveillance, corrupt technologies, environmental destruction, and illegal activity by the state and capital. Sublime, because in reference to Jameson's concept, the cognitive map is never completed in these works. It sprawls, becomes blurry, leaps across geographies and histories, works associatively, and as such, is often guided by a conspiratorial logic where the acquisition of knowledge becomes relentless, forming a proliferation of dots that are shakily joined together. As Metahaven's film *Information Skies* (2017) announces at one point: "It's raining facts."
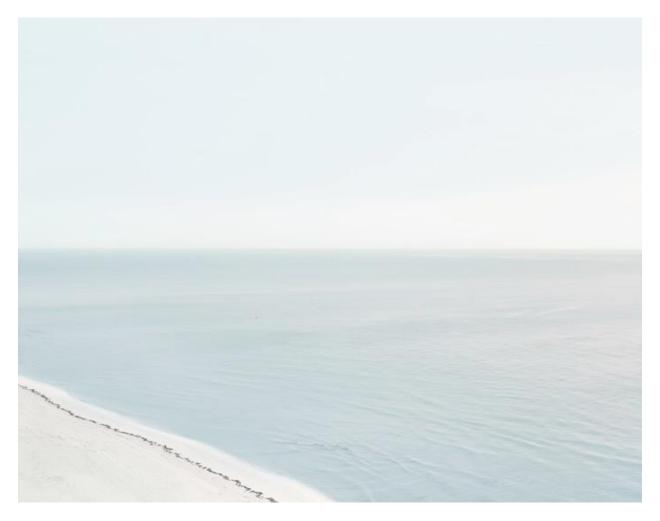
Much critical writing on this type of practice today tends to affirm the notion that a successful artwork is primarily an informative image. David Joselit argues that "medium and post-medium are not good analytic tools"[9] for contemporary art, and instead argues for the term "format" to describe the "unpredictable array of ephemeral currents and charges" that

[6] Ngai*, Ugly* Feelings (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 300.

[7] Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping," in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 356.

[8] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 38

[9] David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), 2.

1. Trevor Paglen, *Documentation of NSA-Tapped Fiber Optic Cable Landing Site, Miami Beach, Florida,* **2015.**

shape a recent history marked by an "explosion" in images.[10] For Joselit, this image saturation results in a "buzz" or swarm that he likens to similar states in other fields: the multitude (as in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in political theory) and chaos theory (in science), with of course, "the internet" as the engine for these transformations.[11] Because of this, Joselit condemns attempts to determine meaning as a form of reification, because it moves "inward towards a thing", i.e., sticks with the art object, rather than outwards into a "chain," "nodal connection," "differential field," "format," or even "commons."[12]

Joselit's argument takes the artwork's relationship to the digital as determining a state where information is in abundance, yet meaning is unstable, even undesirable. Only banal truisms about our political landscape can be secured, because they are already naturalized as

[10] Ibid., 55

[11] Ibid., 16-19.

[12] Ibid., 43.

common sense. As related to the "chain," "connection," and "buzz" he describes, legibly political art is very often overburdened: as soon as one idea is clarified, meaning slips away, is shrugged off, or is simply predetermined to the point where the viewer merely pats herself on the back for understanding that war is bad and surveillance is out of control. Its tonal register is always didactic, but can also be ironic and playful, as most fully expressed in the work of Steyerl. As Daniel Neofetou suggests, writing on Forensic Architecture, this work positions the spectator as "an omniscient surveyor on the right side of history."[13] This quality can be related to Roland Barthes' statement that tautology creates a dead, a motionless world, a line earlier used by Benjamin Buchloh in his assessment of conceptual art (and while the artists I have referred to so far have all become prominent figures in the last decade, their art historical antecedents lie in institutional critique and conceptualism).[14]

Rather like institutional critique, legibly political art aims to make things *visible*—and in doing so, reinforces capital's own fantasies of being too large, too complex and too *in*visible to smash—naturalizing, therefore, the continued rule of property and all its associated effects.[15] As Stephanie Schwartz underscores, writing about Steyerl's *Duty Free Art* (2015), much of "the information being 'disclosed' is already out there among the morass of data on the web—it is already known."[16] Pamela Lee describes this mode as the "open secret" which "announces its clandestine bona fides by virtue of its appearance while propelling the fantasy of a media trafficking in the free exchange of information."[17] If the worst aspects of conspiracy theory continuously legitimize the "system" by investing in ghoulish fantasies about its total supremacy—creating a mode of thought which accepts domination except for the "exceptional" individuals who see through the veil—this is also a tendency we can find in aspects of critical analysis that emphasize an upwardly mobile, proprietary relationship to knowledge, as I have begun to outline here. Indeed, I see the emphasis on transparency and information in legibly political art as frequently occupying such a relationship to knowledge, inheriting Sol LeWitt's description of the artist as a "clerk", whose role is to give the knowledge-thirsty viewer "information."[18] As Joshua Shannon and Pamela Lee have observed, conceptualism coincided with the rise of the think tank and the rise of the knowledge industry, yet in writing

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[13] Daniel Neofetou, "Art Investigation," *Art Monthly* 417 (June 2018), https://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/article/art-investigation-by-daniel-neofetou-june-2018.

[14] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1972), 154; Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (winter, 1990), 129.

[15] See Gail Day's criticisms of Jameson's analysis of financialization in Gail Day, *Dialectical Passions: Negation in Postwar Art Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 222-223.

[16] Stephanie Schwartz, "Martha Rosler and Hito Steyerl: War Games," *Art Monthly* 418 (July-August 2018), https://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/article/stephanie-schwartz-martha-rosler-and-hito-steyerl-war-games-jul-aug-2018.

[17] Pamela Lee, *Think Tank Aesthetics: Midcentury Modernism, the Cold War, and the Neoliberal Present* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 226.

[18] LeWitt, cited in Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969," 140

about artists such as Ed Ruscha, Douglas Huebler and Robert Smithson, Shannon argues that "All this art was in some sense dialectical—clinging to fact and spurning it, courting the superficial but careening through to the romantic and transcendental. Most of these artists, whatever their rhetoric, hated facts as much as they loved them."[19] In contrast, today's legibly political art sheds ambivalence—or what Shannon identifies as a dialectical quality—and instead earnestly seeks to inhabit the systems, technologies, tools and aesthetics of the "knowledge industry" as an effective means to counter its egregious effects in the realm of surveillance and secrecy. For the rest of this paper, I focus on Trevor Paglen as symptomatic of this tendency, and in my eyes, the artist who most clearly illuminates the dynamic between knowledge and conspiracy in current legibly political art and its engagement with the state, a quality which I explore through his mobilization of the sublime.

II. Trevor Paglen and Sublime Conspiracy

Over the last fifteen years, Trevor Paglen's practice has taken shape through what he describes as an experimental geography, focused on mass surveillance and data gathering. His work frequently attempts to make visible the activities of shadowy state agencies including the NSA and the CIA, predominantly through photography, but also drawing, mixed media and sculpture. His 2016 project *Landing Sites* captures "some of the primary 'choke points'" of the infrastructure of the internet in order to examine mass surveillance.[20] (Fig. 1) Rendered as a series of C-prints that are sometimes shown alongside mixed media collages, these works each take up specific locations in Hawaii, the United States, Germany, Guam and elsewhere, where the undersea fibre-optic cables that provide the infrastructure of online communication—used by the National Security Agency for surveillance—surface from their watery depths. The photographs are simple yet tasteful views of beaches and seascapes, while the mixed media works use navigational charts produced by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration as their background. These maritime maps indicate the location of the undersea cables to warn ships off from interfering with their functioning. Laid on top of the maps are always a variety of photographs, spreadsheets and diagrams relating to the particular site that is photographed on the C Print and shown in the map, often including leaked documents drawn from the Edward Snowden archive as well as additional photographs by Paglen. In speaking about this realm of imagery, Paglen argues that "we need to learn how to see a parallel universe composed of activations, keypoints, eigenfaces, feature transforms, classifiers, training sets and the like."[21] This is how the third layer of representation on the map functions, seeking to add a layer of meaning that, if read correctly, might demystify the supposed neutrality of the other two layers of representation. The triadic structure marks these diptychs out as partly an investigation into representation itself, thus indicating Paglen's

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[19] Joshua Shannon, *The Recording Machine: Art and Fact During the Cold War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017), 5.

[20] https://paglen.studio/2020/04/09/landing-sites/.

[21] Hal Foster, "You Have a New Memory," *London Review of Books*, vol. 40, no. 19 (October 11, 2018), 43-4 https://www.lrb.co.uk/v40/n19/hal-foster/you-have-a-new-memory.

inheritance of some central features of "hard" conceptualism (most obviously echoing Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* of 1965).

Yet, the garnish of data we find on the mixed media works within this series is infrequently legible in any specific sense, and rarely invites any learning that would push the average gallery goer beyond a process reliant on the forms of contextualization that ensure a reassuring, tautological model of knowledge. Paglen's diptych *NSA-Tapped Fiber Optic Cable Landing Site, Mastic Beach, New York, United States* (2014), is one of the few works within this series in which it is actually possible to find out what the data on the surface of the map indicates, thanks to an annotated image of the work hosted on dismagazine.com.[22] Hovering over the images, we learn that they contain a satellite photograph of a building in Shirley, New York which contains the landing station for the cable, a leaked diagram of a cross-section of a fiber optic cable, and a chart listing cables tapped by the NSA and the telecommunications companies managing them, with the latter two drawn from the cache of files which Edward Snowden leaked in 2013. In addition, there is a reproduction of a famous illustration showing the laying of a transatlantic cable in 1858 from Newfoundland to Ireland, a map showing the global infrastructure owned by the telecommunications company Belgacom (which collaborates with the NSA) and a radar image showing the landing points for NSA-tapped cables on Long Island. Alongside these, there are three photographs by Paglen. One shows Mastic beach at sunset; another captures Bude, Cornwall, a site which is home to an NSA/GCHQ base as well as the landing points of several fibreoptic cables; we also see a photograph of a sign on the beach at Mastic which warns against dredging, should ships disturb the precious telecommunications apparatus beneath.

At Altman Siegel Gallery in 2015, Paglen showed a number of these diptychs alongside a work called *Autonomy Cube*, a plexiglass cube stuffed with computer components that support an open Wi-Fi network that sends all its data over the Tor network, thus providing the forms of privacy so invaded upon by the NSA and hinted at in the photographs and collages. Taken together, the autonomy cube, photographs and collages evoke Paglen's attempt, and failure, to render the mechanics of state surveillance visible. Paglen's central means to capture this conundrum takes shape through "trying to take familiar images—of beaches or seascapes or skies or what have you—and suggest[ing] they mean something different from what you think they mean."[23] The mode of suggestion that shores up the clues provided in the works themselves arrives through titling. As he explains, "A lot of my images are of things that are really blurry or muddy and indistinct—contorted military bases, muddy underwater cables, extreme close-ups of courtroom drawings, etc.—but I title them with very specific information, as deadpan and as 'objective' as I can."[24] This practice of combining indistinct representations of already submerged forms of state power with concrete, descriptive titles again denotes Paglen's inheritance of certain tactics common to conceptual art. Indeed,

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[22] http://dismagazine.com/dystopia/73110/trevor-paglen-nsa-tapped-fiber-optic-cable-landing-site-%e2%80%a8mastic-beach-new-york-united-states/

[23] Lauren Cornell, "In Conversation with Trevor Paglen," in Lauren Cornell, Julia Bryan-Wilson, et. al., *Trevor Paglen* (London: Phaidon, 2018), 29.

[24] Ibid., 33.

the contradictory relationship between a quasi-abstract image and a titular implication of violence and corruption is a practice described by Paglen as "splitting the difference between two traditions," and can be related to the model of criticality we find in the work of Hans Haacke.[25]

As Vered Maimon explains, Haacke's work relies on three epistemological premises: first, that critique is a rational endeavor; second, that critical knowledge involves a process of unveiling; and third, faith in forms of empiricism, e.g., his attempts (via visitor surveys, etc). to count and divide a populace into "defined social groups."[26] As Maimon goes on to explain, Haacke's project of "exposing contradictions" forms a means to uncover reality "in the form of 'facts' that presume both a shared notion of rational communication and a formal sense of equality."[27] For the artist Mike Kelley, Haacke's work stood as "academic Puritan agitprop," a view which succinctly identifies the distance from which Haacke mounted his critique of the various systems and institutions his work inhabited.[28] Paglen inherits this model, with this underwriting the way I see such attempts at rational critique as unwittingly ending up in conspiracy thinking for their dogged desire to uncover, unveil and expose the forms of systemic violence that can only presume to *need* revealing from the standpoint of the bourgeoisie. This forms the contact point between today's legibly political art and the liberal imagination. Notably, within both, data is mobilized as a sublime field that is simultaneously responsible for abuses of power, yet also forms the means to safeguard against such abuses in a clamor for facts and rationality. Hal Foster's description of Paglen's practice as asking what we do when Rancière's understanding of "the fundamental stake of politics" as "the distribution of the sensible" fades away exemplifies this conundrum. The sensible has not faded away in a mélange of undecipherable data but rather continues to be experienced as vulnerability, hopelessness, fragility, need, brutality, etc., as Cole observes of the tendencies and affects that ideology feeds upon. Such experiences lie in plain sight, and do not need, as Paglen suggests, schooling in "how to see a parallel universe composed of activations, keypoints, eigenfaces, feature transforms, classifiers, training sets and the like" to be recognized.

Yet we might say that Paglen's argument for acquiring such specialized modes of looking is the result of the ideology of data. In Orit Halpern's account, our current relationship with data stems from Norbert Weiner's dream of a "world where there is no 'unknown' left

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[25] Ibid. Paglen's *Autonomy Cube* of course directly refers to Haacke's *Condensation Cube* (1963-67). For more on this, see: Luke Skrebowski, "Resistance at a Moment of Danger: On Trevor Paglen's Recent Work," in John P. Jacob and Luke Skrebowski, eds., *Trevor Paglen: Sites Unseen* (London: D. Giles Limited, 2018), 163.

[26] Vered Maimon, "The Third Citizen: On Models of Criticality in Contemporary Artistic Practices," *October* 129 (summer 2009), 88. The absence of the third premise from Paglen's model of criticality perhaps marks Haacke's explorations of class antagonisms as the most defendable aspect of his model of critique.

[27] Ibid., 92. Maimon associates this with a Habermasian model of rational communication; ibid., 96.

[28] Mike Kelley, "Death and Transfiguration: On Paul Thek," [1992] in Mike Kelley, *Foul Perfection: Essays and Criticism*, ed. John C. Welchman (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2003), 145.

to discover, only an accumulation of records that must be recombined, analyzed, and pro-cesssed."[29] As Halpern explains, the overwhelming data load which has emerged following the era of cybernetics, and information harvesting's negative associations with totalitarian-ism, led to new aesthetic techniques of "visualization" which are intended to allow the non-specialist to navigate and make transparent the information load.[30] Many writers have described the aesthetic effect of this visualization as sublime. Drawing on Erich Fromm, Will Davies describes the overwhelming quanta of data as having an oppressive and pacifying function that he links with the Kantian sublime.[31] Anthony McCosker and Rowan Wilken associate data visualization more specifically with the Kantian mathematical sublime, arguing that the contemporary fascination with "big data," and attempts to account for the scale, speed and effects of globalized networked computing and associated social interactions, are the product of a sublime "cast of mind" appealing to techniques of reason and rationalization in the face of the conflicting senses of fear and pleasure associated with big data.[32]

Paglen's practice has frequently been linked with the sublime by writers such as Pamela Lee, Julian Stallabrass and Hal Foster, for his capturing of vast landscapes in panoramic images and his pleasantly fuzzy color field photographs.[33] Among other subjects, many of Paglen's works capture military and spy satellites, chemical and biological weapon proving grounds, deadly reaper drones, and the already mentioned photographs of NSA-tapped fiber optic cables in the depths of the ocean. (Fig. 2) The strategy of blurring the image also recurs in his photographs of aircrafts, terminals, drones, control towers and hangars, which actually are, and are also presented as, leaked classified documents. In most cases, the sublime is mobilized to describe Paglen as an artist working through the limits of representa-tion, or as he puts it, in relation to the sublime as a category that makes you confront the limits of your own senses.[34] Somewhat differently, Stallabrass describes Paglen's practice as success-fully moving beyond the sublime mode common to much contemporary large-scale museum photography because he views Paglen as interrogating the way information is *denied*, mean-ing his work *questions*, rather than merely reproduces, the aesthetics of the data sublime as a secretive system of knowledge predicated on false transparency; an assessment which lies close to Jameson's proposal that the cognitive map offers up an analysis, as well as a

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[29] Orit Halpern, *Beautiful Data: A History of Vision and Reason since 1945* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 12

[30] Ibid., 22

[31] William Davis, "The Data Sublime," *The New Inquiry*, January 12, 2015, https://thenewinquiry.com/the-data-sublime/.

[32] Anthony McCosker and Rowan Wilken, "Rethinking 'Big Data' as Visual Knowledge: The Sublime and the Diagrammatic in Data Visualisation," *Visual Studies*, vol. 29, no. 2 (2014), 158.

[33] Pamela Lee, "The Open Secret: The Work of Art between Disclosure and Redaction," *Artforum*, vol 49, no. 9 (May 2011).

[34] "Trevor Paglen with Hunter Braithwaite," https://brooklynrail.org/2015/09/art/trevor-paglen-with-hunter-braithwaite.

2. Trevor Paglen, *Control Tower (Area 52); Tonopah Test Range, NV; Distance ~ 20 miles; 11:55 a.m.*, 2006.

representation of late capitalist totality.[35] Along similar lines, Lee describes Paglen's work as situating the sublime as a "function of a military-aesthetic complex continuous with the law," which links with Jameson's proposition that cognitive mapping should "enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole."[36] What I want to do in this next section is push at these arguments, all of which continue to assume that the problem with the sublime lies in its unknowability, and therefore deduce that greater transparency and more information is the solution to that which lies at the edge of sense.

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[35] Stallabrass doesn't name names, but I would imagine he is thinking of figures such as Andreas Gursky and Edward Burtynsky. Julian Stallabrass and Trevor Paglen, "Negative Dialectics in the Google Era: A Conversation with Trevor Paglen," *October* 138 (fall 2011), 12.

[36] Lee, *Think Tank Aesthetics*, 255; Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 51.

III. Racialization, the Sublime, Visibility

As an aesthetic category, the knowledge produced by the sublime is foundationally tied up with the violent naturalization of racial difference, as demonstrated by the Edmund Burke's 1757 treatise on the subject and in Immanuel Kant's *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764). For Burke, the sublime is associated with darkness and thus blackness, both naturalized and universalized as prompting terror, which he "proves" by relaying a story about a blind boy who gains sight and, upon first seeing a Black woman, is "struck with horror."[37] As David Lloyd writes, Burke's anonymous Black woman is invoked "merely to confirm the logic of the sublime," forming an "abyssal abstraction as the dark counter-figure of universality."[38] So, for Burke, the sublime has particular sensual properties that universally elicit fear and a sense of being overwhelmed, or consumed, in the rational subject. Colloquially, this informs the way vast landscapes are described as sublime, perhaps the most commonly held usage of the term, but as Lloyd notes, Burke's account of the sublime also forms part of the foundational way in which, for aesthetic theory's governing of "the possibility and structure of representation itself, the figures of race—the Savage and the Black—stand as the absolute instances of the pathological, arrested at the threshold and barred from access to civility and humanity."[39] Lloyd's appraisal also holds true for the account of the sublime in Kant's *Observations*, where the ability to experience the sublime and the beautiful as discreet categories is determined by race, nation and gender, as exemplified in his assessment that "The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the ridiculous" while the "savages" of North America have a "sublime character of mind."[40]

The racism of Burke's writing on the sublime and Kant's *Observations* is well known, with this aspect often explained away as evidence that the latter must be considered as part of Kant's "pre-critical" phase. However, as Meg Armstrong insists, while the invocation of racial difference as related to the sublime is no longer explicit in Kant's *Third Critique*, we should pay attention to how rational thought is employed as the means to manage this category. As Kant writes in the *Third Critique*, the sublime is not "contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason" and "provokes a representation of limitlessness."[41] Crucially, the sublime here does not denote particular forms, as Burke described it, nor the capacities of this or that ethnicity to relate to certain states and forms, as Kant had described in the *Observations*, but is rather "the mere capacity of thinking which evidences a faculty of

[37] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* [1757], ed. James T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), 144-145.

[38] David Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 68.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Immanuel Kant, "Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime" [1764], in Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer, eds., *Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 58-59.

[41] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* [1790], trans. James Creed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 245-246.

mind transcending every standard of the senses."[42] This evokes precisely what Armstrong identifies in writing that "aesthetic discourse was not only integral to the construction of a 'self-determining' bourgeois subject, but also that this subject was positioned within growing discourses of difference in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries."[43] As Lloyd summarizes, this aspect of the Kantian sublime is the product of the "pleasure taken by the subject" in the recognition of his "opposition to the despotism of the senses," representing the triumph of reason.[44]

I would argue that it is in this frame we can consider the link between the sublime and conspiracy in Paglen's and, more broadly, legibly political art's accumulative relationship to information and "reason" as the tools which might shatter the sublime logic of state secrecy. Although these practices are by no means intentionally racist (and in fact may often propound forms of liberal antiracism), they are founded upon valorizing the mastery of the self-possessed rational subject in confrontation with the unbounded, unrepresentable sublime, an aesthetic model that has deeply racialized origins. For Hal Foster, it is this relationship to information and reason that undergirds the criticality of Paglen's practice. Foster describes the mode of viewing that his work necessitates as "critical-paranoid," explaining that he uses this term positively, as Philip K. Dick did, to refer to a person determined to discover the truth.[45] Paglen's description of his practice aligns with these accounts, stressing that his intention is to show "what invisibility looks like" in order to clarify that secrecy "nourishes the worst excesses of power," rather than to lay claim to a process of unveiling the truth.[46] The notion that secrecy nourishes the worst excesses of power and the drive to disrupt state secrecy forms the central idea governing the work of Wikileaks, with which Paglen has frequently collaborated. While there is much to admire in the bravery of figures like Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, there are real political limits to what James Butler describes as the "info-optimism" underpinning Wikileaks, and more specifically Julian Assange's politics. As he explains:

> What is missing from Assange's political folk theory is the middle term: how a population interprets and then acts on information in order to change the world. Information itself does not make us 'more intelligent' or 'more just', to use Assange's terms—these qualities do not simply arise out of information like a fine aroma.

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[42] Ibid., 251.

[43] Meg Armstrong, "'The Effects of Blackness': Gender, Race, and the Sublime in Aesthetic Theories of Burke and Kant," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 54, no. 3 (1996), 213. Or, as Cedric Robinson writes, in "a world-system where 'traditional' authority was violently challenged, Kant sought the justification for political discipline, spiritual and intellectual submission and rationality, i.e. a catechism for state bureaucrats." Cedric Robinson, *An Anthropology of Marxism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 81.

[44] Lloyd*, Under Representation*, 53.

[45]Foster, "You Have a New Memory."

[46] Megan O' Grady "Art for a Post-Surveillance Age," *New York Times Style Magazine*, Aug 29, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/29/t-magazine/art/trevor-paglen.html.

> Assange's putative theory is additive and iterative: if this flow of information does not work, try that one; if the change you want is not forthcoming, seek more leaks, more flow. But politics isn't reducible to information: conflicts over legitimacy, power and values, the possibility of civic trust or legal redress—all of these frame politics, and cannot be detached from it or transcended by simply adding more information.[47]

Butler's description of the info-optimism of Wikileaks as an additive and iterative epistemology corresponds directly with the aesthetic tendencies I have described here as defining legibly political art, taking Trevor Paglen as exemplary. Thinking through the sublime as emergent from a confrontation with limitlessness is closely related to Jameson's comparison of the paranoid detective with the intellectual, with the quest to expose and analyze both galvanized and befouled by the "potentially infinite network" of contemporary social relations.[48]

This is a project underpinned by the notion of the self-possessive subject, which, in its relationship to property and commerce, is one "that is thoroughly racial in its constitution," as Brenna Bhandar writes.[49] So, while Stallabrass affirms Paglen's engagement with the sublime as far more critical than the paralyzing views offered by other contemporary art photographers, I argue that the additive, info-optimistic nature of his work is equally paralyzing, in its accumulative, bureaucratic and indeed reformist logic which seems to suggest nothing can be changed until all facts are present and approved. In this sense, legibly political art's accumulative relationship to information risks losing sight of the immediate need to begin re-making our world, all facts present or not. The endgame of this information overload is captured succinctly in James Bridle's *New Dark Age*, a book which recognizes the "ticker" problem (meaning the endless scroll of live updates) inherent to the digital sublime yet cannot help reproducing its paralyzing effects. Across the book, Bridle explores surveillance, state secrets, the loss of privacy online, and conspiracy theory, concluding that the information we relentlessly gather must result in an ethical choice to live "consciously in the gray zone," which would mean making "peace with the otherwise-irreconcilable, conflicting worldviews that prevent us from taking meaningful action in the present."[50] In this account, an accumulative relationship to information results in an individualized, liberal politics that makes peace with inaction as a kind of inert universalism. Perhaps this suggests that those liberals who believe endlessly in the power of information tend to be invested in property not only as an intellectual right, but a material one. Such subjects tend to dislike secrecy as much as they worry about their own privacy. And in so doing, they reproduce rather than

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[47] James Butler "Assange and Political Thinking" *London Review of Books* blog, 17 April 2019 https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2019/april/assange-and-political-thinking

[48] Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press; BFI Publishing, 1992, p. 6.

[49] Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018, p. 164

[50] James Bridle, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (London: Verso, 2018), 214

seek to dismantle state power, particularly in their selective focus on the "secret" state, rather than the incessant exploitation and brutality that provide the lifeblood of capital.

To be more specific, in 2007 the typical Euro-North American liberal subject of today saw financialization as the main problem (rather than capitalism itself), and more recently blamed the election of Trump and Brexit overwhelmingly on Russian interference, Cambridge Analytica and the perversion of a democratic process. While I do not dispute the real damage these events have caused, I follow Mark Neocleous' assessment that it is a mistake to view the state as having been "hollowed out" and, relatedly, would stress the urgency of overcoming capitalism, rather than parceling out financialization, as the problem.[51] All that said, I do not question the necessity of investigating the state's most egregiously corrupted quarters, and would never argue against the need for the state to renew or expand its commitment to providing education, healthcare and social security while it exists. But this cannot be our horizon for freedom, precisely because those seemingly benign features of the capitalist state have also persistently assisted in processes of racialization, exclusion, and the creation of differential levels of citizenship, and consequently, humanity. Twentieth-century welfarism may attempt to compensate for the capitalist state's historic denial of full citizenship for those dispossessed of property, but the unremitting wedding of the law to the commodity form within the terrain of property relations remains *the* crucial ground upon which poverty, racism and patriarchy grows, a reality that remains to be undone.[52] This is evidenced everywhere, from the vast expansion of the US carceral apparatus, to austerity, the criminalization of the poor, the anti-immigration hostile environment policy within the UK, to the violent enforcement of Europe's borders and the repression of anti-government activists in locations from the US to Russia to India.

As already indicated via Paglen's preoccupations, the last of these examples has received much attention and provided occasional (anti-)heroes, such as Assange, Manning, and Snowden. On the one hand, these figures enjoy a base of support among middle-class left liberals who view the information generated in the exposure of state and corporate corruption by Wikileaks, *Guardian* journalists, and in films such as *Citizen Four* as key mechanisms in the quest to restore a "reasonable," uncorrupted state. Yet, on the other hand, such figures and institutions equally enjoy the support of an anti-political, populist base, as in the Anonymous movement and its associated legions. While they diverge on matters of decorum, investment in democracy, and often age and class, these seemingly divergent bases are in fact two sides of the same coin. Both sides of this coin—liberalism and its grubby, populist cousin—invest in a conspiratorial view of the situation, and in knowledge as a form of property. They also often share a more-or-less overt investment in whiteness (continued investment in structural racism in the former, and frequent outright white supremacy in the latter), and delay engagement with the way property relations underpin the social crises of the present and have done so for the entirety of capitalism's history. This, I would argue, is also what links the

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[51] Mark Neocleous, "Security, Commodity, Fetishism," *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2007), 354.

[52] Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano, "Race, Real Estate and Real Abstraction," *Radical Philosophy* 194 (November-December 2015), https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/race-real-estate-and-real-abstraction.

respectable reconnaissance missions of Wikileaks with fake news and the low conspiracies of Alex Jones or QAnon. While Francis Bacon's ubiquitous quote "knowledge is power" has been incorporated across the political spectrum and underpins the quests for transparency at the heart of much contemporary legibly political art, the form of power inscribed in the valorization of that mode of knowledge is inextricable from the maintenance of property relations, in all their violence, for which of course Bacon himself was an advocate. To return to Jameson, what I want to emphasize is that we cannot excise the aesthetic of the cognitive map from conspiracy quite so easily when we begin to question the epistemological foundations of the latter. As Fran Mason writes, summarizing this entanglement:

> "[C]onspiracy theory" and "cognitive mapping" are attempts to map society without the subject being mapped him-or herself. By this logic "knowledge" of the conspiracy seemingly gives the subject a position of independence and authenticity outside the domain of the conspiracy and its world of ignorance, control and inauthenticity, while "cognitive mapping" seems to offer the same possibilities for living outside ideology.[53]

The line of questioning opened up here in my discussion of legibly political art, taking Paglen as exemplary, seeks to follow Lloyd's argument that the naturalization of representation within aesthetics is part of the forging of a self-determining modern subject that is aligned with an "aesthetic pedagogy whose end is the submission of the subject to the State."[54] Against this mode, and moving beyond the cognitive map as the de-facto "critical" aesthetic theory mobilized in relation to Western art since its appearance at the end of the 1980s, how might we instead develop a non-proprietary relationship to knowledge, against the accumulation of facts, but without fetishizing feeling and "lived experience" as an immanent political truth, which is often positioned as the alternative to the above? Indeed, while Fran Mason's diagnosis of the entanglement of conspiracy and cognitive mapping is persuasive, I remain opposed to the idea that in recognizing this, we must conclude, as she does along similar lines to Bridle's "gray zone," that the conspiratorial subject is a naturalized effect of a "post-modern self incapable of critical distance," marked by "scattered," "global," and "fluid" conditions which obviate any capacity for commitment.[55] Instead, we might try to inhabit a different side of conspiracy, that is, the forms of conspiracy that are marked by commitment to social transformation along lines akin to that which Marx criticized in his writing about the conspirator-faction associated with Blanquism following the 1848 uprisings. As he wrote, the conspirators have "no other purpose than the most immediate one of overthrowing the existing government."[56] This kind of immediacy, in thinking about writing and making art,

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[53] Mason, "A Poor Person's Cognitive Mapping," in Peter Knight, ed*., Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2002), 50.

[54] Lloyd, *Under Representation*, 7.

[55] Mason, "A Poor Person's Cognitive Mapping," 53-4.

[56] Karl Marx, "*Les Conspirateurs*, par A. Chenu; ex-capitaine des gardes du citoyen Caussidière," *Neue Rheinische Zeitung. Politisch-ökonomische Revue* 4 (April 1850), in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 10 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978),

might be thought alongside Michael Taussig's suggestion that writing might become "…an exercise in life itself, at one with life and within life as lived in social affairs, not transcendent or even a means to such, but contiguous with action and reaction in the great chain of storytelling telling…'[57] This idea of being contiguous with action is a means to avoid the lofty and proprietary tendencies of critique as a mode which emphasizes distance in order to see through the veil of ideology, but equally the additive and sprawling logic of conspiracy theory as one which creates exceptional individuals who learn to see through a mystified social reality. In contrast, how could art, and writing about art, assume what Kerstin Stakemeier delineates as a process of "commitment" rather than "critique"?[58] Here, commitment emphasizes shifts in consciousness as a collective process, overturning "critique" as a mode of knowledge accumulation that lies proximate to the accumulation of power via professional "specializations," or expertise that seeks out the imposition of a static "common sense" on those who encounter its productions. Through commitment, we might arrive at conspiracy as an action, or mode of creation which materializes in response to the violent abstractions of capital—a kind of collective rather than sovereign situation, and one which lies close to Lloyd's description of the "irreducible element of art … its excess over ends, over instrumentality, over representation."[59]

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https://blanqui.kingston.ac.uk/critical-assessments/karl-marx/#review-8216les-conspirateurs-par-a-chenu8217.

[57] Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 7.

[58] Kerstin Stakemeier, "Critique," in Andrew Hemingway and Larne Abse Gogarty, eds., "Keywords for Marxist Art History," *Kunst und Politik. das Jahrbuch der Guernica-Gesellschaft* 21 (2020), 47-55.

[59] Lloyd, *Under Representation*, 158.