Photography professor captures hidden world of internet data

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AnnieLaurie Erickson, an assistant professor of photography in the Tulane University School of Liberal Arts, captures images of data centers around the world in her ongoing project “Data Shadows.” (Photo by AnnieLaurie Erickson)

Artistically intrigued by the unseen, AnnieLaurie Erickson, an assistant professor of photography in the Tulane University School of Liberal Arts, set out to document one of the mysteries of the internet: where it lives.

In her ongoing project “Data Shadows,” Erickson captures images of data centers around the world.

Next month she will display work from the project in “Into the Digital Mesh,” opening March 3 at the Galveston Arts Center, during FotoFest 2018, a biennial photography event in Houston.
Erickson said during the last four years she has tracked unmarked locations of the world’s largest
data centers, properties of notoriously secretive companies like Google, Apple and Facebook.

Then she began “building an archive that looks at the stuff that comprises the physical apparatus of
the internet and digital surveillance, and that houses our data. How our data is used affects our
daily lives, yet we are not allowed access to it.”

The work includes complex and sometimes startling imagery of massive cooling towers, solar farms
and miles of cable. The large tech companies did not grant her access to their private property, she
said, so she photographed from the outside, sometimes outside a barbed-wire fence. Once, while
standing on public property in Oklahoma, she attracted the attention of Google security personnel,
local police and state police all at once, a situation she described as “intense.”

Some of the smaller data centers, like the one operated by Tulane University, allowed her to
photograph inside.

One of the features of Erickson’s exhibit is interactive eyetracking software. As a viewer looks at an
image through the eyetracker, a recording of their eyes’ path of vision appears on screens
elsewhere in the exhibit.

“There’s a voyeuristic relationship in the gallery where other viewers can see more than the
singular viewer who’s creating the eye trails,” Erickson said. “It kind of mimics the experience that
we have as we live our lives on the internet.”