

Portugal was a paradox. As were Argentina, Australia, France, Hong Kong, India, New Zealand, South Africa, Sweden, the USA and the United Kingdom. Since 2014, the artist Evan Roth has travelled around the world seeking out the internet. In each case, his destination is the location in that country where the fibre-optic cables that connect us to it snake in from the sea. But at the places where connectivity originates, the signal is often at its most faint. Secluded intentionally from marine traffic and footfall, the areas where the cables land are purposefully remote and therefore badly served by the mobile network. You can see the internet, but you cannot connect.

Travelling alone to a GPS coordinate in a cheap rental car, Roth packs a camera adapted to shoot in the infrared spectrum, that which the light travelling through the cables belongs to. The accident of filming life passing in front of a static lens landed Georges Méliès a magic trick at the dawn of cinema;¹ Yasujiro Ozu, Béla Tarr, Lav Diaz and Chantal Akerman intentionally fixed their backgrounds; and, with even less expectation of drama in these deserted zones, Roth similarly sets his tripod. The cable is the destination, but not the mark. Roth switches out the generative mode that shaped much of his prior work and instead lets his eyes select the frame. The result? Monochromes so devoid of action that they appear as photographs unless you stay with them for long enough to notice a breeze break the stillness of a tree, an ocean or the sky.

Deep in the internet since dial-up days, back when a group of students at Stanford University were misspelling ‘googol’ and Dr Dre was busy suing Napster, Roth was part of the decentralised open-source community that held the web as their own utopia. As it evolved, they began to witness paradise being paved over by a few monopolising platforms, one of which really did used to be called Facemash. Roth first tried to keep up with and even overtake this steamroll as part of the activist artist collective Free Art & Technology Lab, producing works that criticised and parodied the new cartels, but the 2013 state surveillance scandal broke the mood and the artist and the internet fell out. After a period of largely one-sided beef, Roth decided to make an attempt at recovering that early optimism. This time solo, serious, he began his pilgrimages at a very different pace. In a conversation with Bani Brusadin in 2016, Roth described this work as “trying to pull the *Top Gun* maneuver in which the brakes are applied very firmly and the web is allowed to speed by.”²

When Roth returns home, he leaves his work behind. His portraits of the internet’s entry point into that country are uploaded onto independent servers located within its borders. Here they become *Landscapes* (2016–ongoing). This series of works began in Sweden, home of Piratbyrå, the radical thinktank / philosophy that changed how the world shared. The Pirate Bay that they founded lost its right to use that country’s top-level domain the year Roth enlisted his first work with the same registry. Each *Landscape* has an individual title made up of the GPS coordinates of where it was shot and the top-level domain of the country in which it is hosted: a URL that gives its location on the web and on the globe. When viewing <https://n57.889503e11.685638.se/> (2016), you are activating the pathway between yourself, wherever you are, and that server in Sweden. The *Landscape* is literally travelling through the subaquatic cables that connect you to it. It looks like a painting, is installed like a sculpture – captive on a screen, its power and ethernet cables co-opted as part of the work – but each

¹ Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.115.

² Eva & Franco Mattes, Bani Brusadin, *The Black Chamber surveillance, paranoia, invisibility & the internet* (Brescia: Link Editions, 2016), <http://www.evan-roth.com/press/black_chamber_catalogue_link-aksioma_2016-eroth-excerpt.pdf> [accessed 1 May 2020] p.130.

Landscape is best thought of as a participatory performance that takes place as you connect. As MTAA would have it, the art happens here.³

This ongoing series evolved in 2018 when, working with network activists Sarah Grant and Danja Vasiliev of research development lab Cosmic, Roth built a peer-to-peer network to distribute *Landscapes*. Riffing off the British Empire's original name for their globe-girdling telecommunications network, the All Red Line,⁴ the routes along which many of our fibre-optic cables travel today, he called it *Red Lines*. In naming the work after the structure that connected this imperialist nation with others it had colonised, Roth questions what power structures are embedded in the network today. How much have things really changed?

To access the work, the viewer sets their device to p2p.redlines.network, where they will connect with one of the 82 – at the time of writing – *Landscapes* that form the network. As others also view the work, they become nodes on the network. The videos activate the path between server and viewer, while also being shared between peers. By viewing the work, you make the network stronger and enable others to view it, too. The experience is simultaneous: if you see a pohutukawa tree shading a picnic bench on Takapuna Beach in New Zealand, that is the location to which your peers are also connected. You can't message them, but as a series of IP addresses flash up, you know they are there, attending this nearly day-long looped screening alongside you. The servers switch out roughly every 18 minutes, the average time the artist would go without checking his phone when making the work.

The term 'Slow Cinema' is younger than the millennium, but the impulse to engage boredom as a function of attention has been around much longer.⁵ In a few months spanning 1972 and 1973, Tony Conrad made his *Yellow Movie* series: gull-white household emulsion painted in a rectangle proportioned to resemble a cinema screen. Competitively slow, Conrad's films were designed to yellow over time, an unwatchable narrative spanning years, rather than the hours Warhol captured of a skyscraper or a sleeping lover at night a decade previous.

Rejecting spontaneity and formlessness for methodologies so precise and minimal that the works may as well exist in a sentence as much as being actualised, these films could be seen as an abandonment of Romanticism. Roth's is a reprise. Just as poets Shelley, Keats and Byron, and painters Casper David Friedrich and Constable tracked down inspiration in nature with their backs turned to the rising industrialisation of the late eighteenth century, Roth swung his camera away from the acceleration of hyper-fast financial trades and the slum architecture of social media sites that shaped the beginning of the twenty-first. Whereas artists like Femke Herregraven and Trevor Paglen and writers like Andrew Blum, Nicole Starosielski and Neal Stephenson point their lens and sharpened pencils at the cables and produce work that directly critiques their role in advancing capitalism or state surveillance, Roth seemingly shades the infrastructure and looks – like Friedrich's *Wanderer* – over the fog.

Writer Orit Gat linked Roth with the Romantics back in 2016,⁶ comparing the title of his sculpture *Burial Ceremony* (2015), 2km of fibre-optic cable coiled into an infinity loop, with that of J.M.W. Turner's *Peace – Burial at Sea* (1842). The oil painting, daylight knifed rough onto the canvas, reproduces the submersion of a friend's body off the coast of Gibraltar. *Ceremony* is in some ways a

³ MTAA, *Simple Net Art Diagram* (1997). Digital image. <<https://anthology.rhizome.org/simple-net-art-diagram>> [accessed 1 May 2020]

⁴ George Johnson, *The All Red Line: The Annals and Aims of The Pacific Cable Project*, (Ottawa: James Hope & Sons, 1903). <<https://archive.org/details/allredlineannals00johnuoft>> [accessed 12 January 2021]

⁵ Susan Sontag, *As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks, 1964-1980*, ed. by David Rieff (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012)

⁶ Orit Gat, 'New Mythologies', *POSTmatter* (2016) <<http://postmatter.merimedia.com/articles/new-mythologies/orit-gat/>> [accessed 1 May 2020]

readymade; engineers really do unspool the cable into that figure-of-eight configuration before laying it underground. As much, it is the imagined remnant of a spiritual act: a ritualistic interment of material as holy as a temple, where our god is the internet. Switch out the underground conduit for subaquatic housing, and the work titles are interchangeable. Unlike other Romantics, Turner was captivated by the Industrial Revolution that his lifetime spanned – Blake’s satanic mills, Wordsworth’s urban din – and painted it in tinted steam. Only traces appear in his sketches and paintings; it is never centred or glorified, but its presence places Turner’s work in his specific time in a way that Constable’s redlining of industry does not. Isolated, there is little visible to date or locate *Landscapes*, still less to identify why they were made, but look as hard at the screen as we have collectively stared at Turner’s paintings and you’ll uncover a wire, a submerged cable, or a sign facing the sea. If we take into account the post-internet practice that Roth’s work contemporises, the aesthetic movement that swallowed the consumer web whole and ejected it as glitching glimmering neon magma, it appears Roth has not so much given the internet the cold shoulder as given his audience a cool-headed way to look back at it. Not such a foggy outlook after all. Summer 2019 brought these alt-Romantic artists physically closer still when the Usher Gallery in Lincoln, United Kingdom, agreed to let Roth place an ethernet cable as close as one has ever been to a Turner painting in his rehang of works from their collection alongside *Red Lines*. The exhibition was a curatorial hit and sparked a deeper study of the familial ties between Roth’s landscapes and those that were created the last time technology took a corner at such speed.

In 2020, with Culturgest as accomplice, Roth raided the Museu do Chiado’s collection of Portuguese landscape paintings. The artist selected works just as *Landscapes* are framed, by eye, and exhibited them in a hang so calm that it belied none of the complexities of the install. Fidelidade Arte in Lisbon housed irreplaceable borrowed oils in ornamental gilded carved wooden frames shoulder to shoulder with Roth’s eclectic selection of screens, ethernet cables cascading between them into routers at the viewer’s feet, all hung in a configuration as close to a cloud as *Red Lines* will ever get. In the most classically picturesque internet landscape, a scene so bucolic it nearly evaded inclusion, a sole horse hangs out by a pool of water on Argentina’s Costa del Este,⁷ its reflection mirrored in the water’s surface was mirrored again in those of livestock drinking in Tomás da Anunciação’s *Paisagem e Animais* (1851) hung just beneath. Waves crash in a loop onto a South African beach north of Cape Town;⁸ its coastline crosses a 55” screen then seemingly extends into Cristino da Silva’s *Marinha* (c.1855–60), where the waves curl with the same velocity, though frozen in oils. The pace through the smaller galleries that lead to this detonation of scenes in the main chamber was slowed to a stop by a series of paired landscapes. António Carneiro’s *Nocturno* (1910) overlapped with a view of the Espaço Interpretativo da Lagoa Pequena, a nature reserve in Sesimbra.⁹ Here the link was textural. The grid of cracks in the oil-painted night sky appeared like a retinal impression in the digital sky over Sesimbra. The two white buildings that break the skyline of Marques de Oliveira’s *Recanto de aldeia, Póvoa de Varzim* (c.1882–90) exited the painting to manifest physically in the exhibition as twin cheap white mobile phones hosting alternately a fallen tree and a shark’s-fin rock jutting from the ocean. A window that looks out over the Atlantic from the Cabo Espichel lighthouse¹⁰ is modestly installed on another mobile phone screen in reverence to *No atelier* (c.1916) by Aurélia de Sousa, the only work by a woman it was possible to include in the exhibition. Just as Roth’s view of the ocean is boxed in stone, Aurélia’s landscape is contained by a gilded frame and balanced on an easel in a studio, its implied creator rendered slumped at a table to its right. On its own, the painting hints at

⁷ Evan Roth, <https://s36.611388w56.706666.com.ar> (2018)

⁸ Evan Roth, <https://s33.336681e18.160858.co.za> (2015)

⁹ Evan Roth, <https://n38.522410w9.142097.pt> (2020)

¹⁰ Evan Roth, <https://n38.413366w9.220378.pt> (2020)

creative exhaustion. Paired with Roth's window onto the Atlantic, it is transformed into a scene of the specific peace secured by work finished.

The internet landscapes grouped in pairs or triplets were box-fresh additions to the network, all filmed at the Portugal cable landing point Culturgest had shipped Roth off to at the close of 2019. The country's cable routes are more well-worn. In Hans Christian Andersen's short story *The Great Sea-Serpent* (1872),¹¹ Portugal's first telecommunications cable is mistaken by fish for an "enormous incomprehensible sea-eel" and at one point risks being bitten in half by a shark. The *Hibernia*, the ship that laid this cable, sailed from Carcavelos on 2 June 1870 and landed in Porthcurno six days later, completing the last leg of the link between Britain and colonised India. One and a half centuries later, Roth's new Portugal landscapes entered the *Red Lines* network; in the same beat, the United Kingdom exited the European Union.

The exhibition format was transposed to Culturgest Porto in October of the same year, with late-nineteenth-century landscapes from the Museu Nacional dos Reis the local swag to accompany *Red Lines*. This time an impressive 181" screen hosted an archived simulation of the p2p work, cycling through its 20-hour loop in the atrium at the centre of the exhibition. In the spaces that circle this monolith, the storm-blown trees of Silva Porto's *Cabanas* (c. 1874–1879) and Henrique Pousão's *Tempestade* (1882) could be the ones that still resist the coastal wind in Roth's Portugal *Landscapes* hung alongside them. Another *Tempestade* by Pousão butts up against a slice of networked cliff, lending its digital counterpart some of its expressionistic drama.

It is not possible to speak of these exhibitions without describing the year that divided them. The day before the show in Lisbon opened, a student returning from Wuhan was diagnosed as India's first case of a new coronavirus. On the opening night, France banned flights from China. A few days later, the first Argentine infected was quarantined with 3,500 other people on a cruise ship off the coast of Japan. The supermarkets emptied, the hospitals filled up. 150 years previous, connectivity had come early to Portugal, but Covid-19 came slow. It took the virus until March to reach the country. A fortnight later, Fidelidade Arte and everything else shut down. By the time the exhibition in Porto closed on 6 December 2020, 1.5 million people had died of a disease that when its sister exhibition in Lisbon had opened, didn't even have a name.

As the pandemic settled in for the long haul, we became hopelessly reliant on cables. Travel bans cleared the skies but the cloud beneath our feet grew. We looked for ways to connect with each other, downloading new apps in a heartbeat and, on the next, tiring of them. Caught in the ebb and flow, the number of peers on the *Red Lines* network crept up. Although striking in a gallery context, the work was originally conceived as a synchronised performance for individuals, a non-social network silently connecting people in their homes and workplaces, something we should live with, not just visit. There are few other places you can just be somewhere online and know someone else is there too, experiencing the same thing. Despite the precarious situation in which galleries found themselves, Roth was invited to exhibit *Red Lines* in Uruguay, China and Germany in addition to the planned exhibitions in Portugal. Tens of thousands of people hooked up to its servers in 2020. The work had found its time.

The infrastructure on which humankind relies is delicate. It took not much more than a shark to cut Asia's internet capacity in half when a ship's anchor sliced through a cable in 2008. Theorist and

¹¹ Hans Christian Andersen, 'The Great Sea-Serpent', *Scribner's Monthly*, 3 (1872), 325–329

educator Dr Dhanashree Thorat seems to vocalise Roth's stance on the internet when she urges an awareness of both its fragility and its power, "The outsize role of these submarine cables in shaping global communication merits close attention to their ownership, management and political ties to nation-states."¹² Drawing attention to the physicality of the web, *Red Lines* begins that work. It also seeks to replicate the change in tempo that Roth's mind and body underwent in making it. Although the data is still hurtling beneath the oceans to reach you, as you swap the vertigo of infinite scroll for a stroboscopic moment of equanimity, one that you are always sharing with someone else on this globe, your relationship to the internet shifts. A view from a window or another work of art could afford you this serenity, but only at the cost of disconnection. 2014-Roth was the canary in the mine. In 2020, the rest of us, hyper-connected, started to develop the symptoms of another sickness. It takes a lot to put down a phone when we are living through historic moments every 18 minutes, when there is so much to know. For those that connect, *Red Lines* is a kind of antidote: enough of the poison to cure the ill. The virus has brought the world to a standstill and, as Arundhati Roy put it, nothing could be worse than a return to normality.¹³ We are at a point when our participation in the acceleration and centralisation of technology is becoming evident. The way to take a corner at speed is to hit the brake first.

¹² Dhanashree Thorat, 'Colonial Topographies of Internet Infrastructure: The Sedimented and Linked Networks of the Telegraph and Submarine Fiber Optic Internet', *South Asian Review*, 40 (2019), 252–267

¹³ Arundhati Roy, 'The pandemic is a portal', *Financial Times* (3 April 2020) < <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca> > [accessed 1 May 2020]