

# Infra-red Wuthering Heights: Interview with Evan Roth

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Filippo Lorenzin



## Contemporary ArtInterviewsNet Art

A bright red sky, white clouds. I hear white noise, punctuated by brief silences, voices, music notes; is it the sound of electronical wind what I'm hearing?

I notice I'm just watching the upper part of a larger canvas, so I slowly scroll down reaching the gently moving branches of a tree – it was wind, after all. Behind the plant there is a hill, nothing more. Red and black, silence and voice; red and white, silence and white noise. The composition of the elements feels obvious, something familiar to me because of my educated visual perception; at a second thought, it recalls me the depictions of dark woods, towering mountains and high falls which have been painted by Romantic artists toward the end of 18th century, especially in Germany, which I studied and seen so many times in my life. Men in front of the nature, fascinated and scared at the same time; depictions of emotional landscapes, where trees and clouds are directioning the very feelings of the artist.

The work I'm writing about is the new project by U.S. artist **Evan Roth**, *Internet Landscapes*(2016), a series of videos which can be watched only online. Focused on the experiences he had when travelled around Sweden searching for the physicality of internet, the project is part of the **Masters&Servers** open call programme. The locations documented by **Roth** with infra-red video and binaural audio recordings are the main Internet submarine fibre optic cable landing locations, transitional moments in which fibre optic cables join the undersea communication network, allowing continents to communicate.



Internet Landscape: Sydney

**Evan Roth** is an artist based in Paris whose practice visualizes and archives culture through unintended uses of technologies. Creating prints, sculptures, videos and websites, his work explores the relationship between unintended uses and empowerment and the effect that philosophies from hacker communities can have when applied to digital and non-digital systems. His work is in the public collections of the **Museum of Modern Art**, New York, and the **Israel Museum**. Recent exhibitions include the 2016 **Biennale of Sydney**; *Electronic Superhighway (2016-1966)* at **Whitechapel Gallery**, London; and *This Is for Everyone* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Roth co-founded the arts organizations [Graffiti Research Lab](#) and the [Free Art and Technology Lab](#) and in 2016 was a recipient of [Creative Capital funding](#).

**Filippo Lorenzin:** Let's start with a mandatory question. When did you start to think to the theoretical premises of *Internet Landscapes*? To find the relations between the so-called "digital" world and the tactile reality is a need that have been always explored by artists – I'm thinking to *King's Cross Phone* (1994) by **Heath Bunting** and especially *Alpha 3.4* (2002) by duo **Tsunamii.net**, for which they used GPS devices to track their positions while walking from the city of Kiel (the location of the web server of *Documenta*) to Kassel (the physical location of the event). It's true that in recent times artists are increasingly get interested in this question and I can't help but think this is related to the adoption of social media platforms by more and more people around the world. It is as if we don't perceive anymore a boundary between a place and the information we can find on the Web. What do you think?



**Evan Roth:** I've been dealing with issues related to the *Internet Landscapes* series since around 2010, but I didn't start working on it directly until 2014. Since I started experimenting with making work online in 2001, a lot of things have changed about myself and the Internet. In 2014, I was in a bit of a crossroads with my practice, with the Internet feeling less and less like a place where I wanted to make work. This was one year after the **NSA/GCHQ** spying scandal was revealed, and several years into the corporate takeover of the web.

I was looking for a way to personally and artistically re-engage with a slightly more mature network, while still trying to hold on to some of the magic and empowerment I felt from the earlier, more adolescent, iteration of the web. It was within this mindset that I came across **Andrew Blumb's** *Tubes: A Journey to the Center of the Internet* (2012) and **Neal Stephenson's** *Mother Earth Mother Board* (1996), two important texts about the physicality of the Internet. Within a few months of reading these books, I was on the UK coast of Cornwall making work that would turn into my *Voices Over the Horizon* exhibition at **Carroll/Fletcher**.



Evan Roth - Internet Landscape

**Filippo Lorenzin:** Quoting curator **Lindsay Howard**, "it's not magic; the cloud is just someone else's computer" ("Curating Internet Art, Online and IRL", *Observer*, 2/25/16). The idea that internet has not physical features makes it a realm with infinite possibilities, for better or worse; showing the the places where the infrastructure is based seems to me a realist act, a stand against the economical values of centralized virtual platforms. *Internet Landscapes* is, in this sense, a poetic response to this question, isn't it?

**Evan Roth:** Yes, for me, even as we are witnessing the slow death of the open Internet, the realization that at its core it's still just wires and computers is empowering. With giants like the **NSA and Google**, entities that at times feel impossible to visually comprehend (let alone struggle against), seeing and touching awkwardly exposed fiber optic cables on remote beaches is reassuring to me.

**Filippo Lorenzin:** Your work has been often accosted to the Postinternet field of research since the very invention of this term. In fact, most of your projects explore what happens after we took for granted the facts we are online 24/7 regardless our actual activity, for instance. How do you relate with this juxtaposition? Speaking of art market, some critics have outlined how going after the virtual often meant to make something quite similar to ordinary art works – something with its own physicality, something which can be sold. What's your position in regards to this question?

**Evan Roth:** I've never felt connected to (or a part of) most of the work that has commonly fallen under the umbrella of "Post-Internet". In some ways I see this current series I'm making as a reaction against a certain strain of Post-Internet art that heavily embraces the aesthetics of the corporate web. My reference points are more related to landscape painting and the net.art movement, which deal with nature, the network and culture in ways that I feel are much more meaningful.

One thing I find interesting about art galleries and art collectors is the association between time and art. The amount of time I invest in viewing a piece of art in a gallery or in my own home is vastly different from the amount of time I spend with a piece of art online. So, in addition to collecting work from other artists, I've also started living with more of my own work (not just in my studio but at home). I've noticed that seeing a piece repeatedly over an extended period of time really helps me come to a better understanding of what is working and what is not working with it.

Now I try to live with all new work I make for at least a month or two before showing it. Thinking about pieces that live on these different timelines, which might range from a few seconds on Instagram to 50 years on the wall, is also an influence in the Internet Landscape series, where I force myself to disconnect from the timing of the Internet, both in the making and presentation of the work.



Evan Roth, *Internet Landscape: Sydney*

**Filippo Lorenzin:** Reading your statements about this project, one particular sentence stroke me: “through understanding and experiencing the Internet’s physicality, one comes to understand the network not as a mythical cloud, but as a human made and controlled system of wires and computers”. To expose an infrastructure means to show the cultural premises for which it was built so I’d like to know to which degree you feel ***Internet Landscapes*** as a disruptively political work.

**Evan Roth:** The more this project progresses, it becomes less about fiber optic cables. I see *Internet Landscapes* more as a series about a personal struggle to find optimism and inspiration within an environment that feels irreversible changed. It’s reflective of the cultural and political issues that precipitated this change, but I don’t view the project as disruptive in that I’m not claiming to prescribe a solution.

**Filippo Lorenzin:** The evident connection between the depiction of Nature in this project and Romanticism is one of the aspects that most fascinates me, especially in relation to the Sublime. Nature plays a fundamental role both in the paintings of Romantic painters and in your series, though in different ways; for the first ones, it’s only Nature which can cause astonishment “and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other.” (**Edmund Burke, “On the Sublime”, 1756**). In your case, this emotion is reached watching a human construct deeply interconnected with the environment, as if it’s part of Nature itself. What’s your opinion?

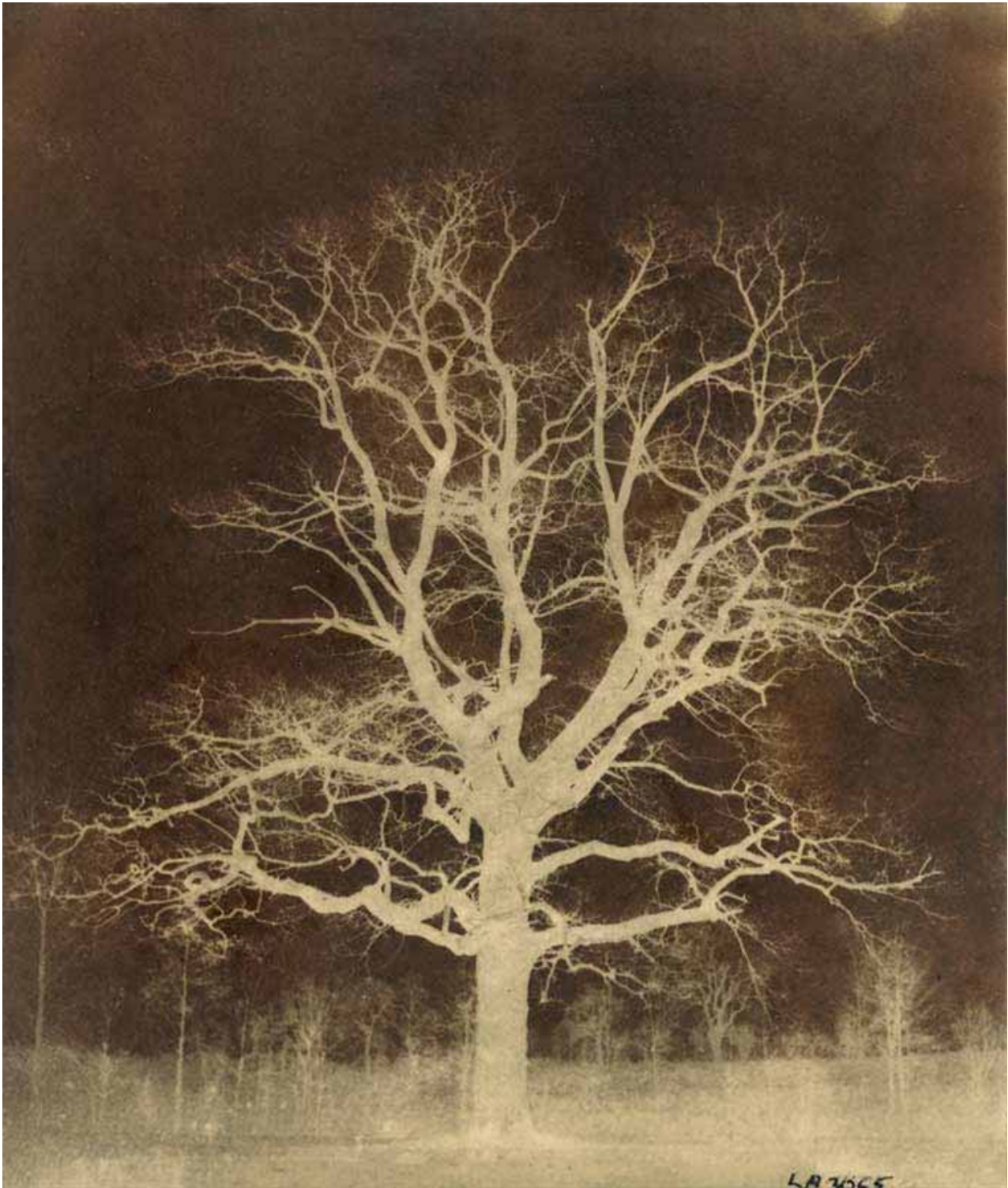
**Evan Roth:** I do feel the work is connected with historic ideas of landscape painting (Romanticism as well as Japanese landscape painting), but, in some ways, for almost the exact opposite reasons. Where the Romantics were inspired through their astonishment

with nature, my astonishment was in my total inability to “suspend all motions” in these environments. Throughout the course of this series, I’ve found myself time and time again in some of the most beautiful, dramatic and remote natural settings.

The filming requires me to be still in these locations for periods of 10 – 20 minutes at a time, and what I found during these moments of stillness was that I really wanted to check my inbox. After 30 seconds I would instinctively reach for my pocket to see what was happening on email/twitter/Instagram. I remember one time I was filming on top of a cliff in Sweden looking out over the water and whales started coming up for air. It was so quiet that the sounds of their breaths were strikingly loud. Despite this being one of the most beautiful moments I’ve had in nature, I was disappointed in myself as I went from witnessing this sublime moment, to feeling slightly bored, and then finally questioning whether I should post it on Instagram, all within the course of two minutes.

These moments have changed my interactions with nature and the Internet and my understanding of how the two can be connected through art. Over the course of the last 10 years, I think we have seen the influence of the Internet on media to make everything shorter and more easily consumed. This influence has undoubtedly had an effect on art, including my own art with varying degrees of self awareness. Part of what interests me in the *Internet Landscape* series is the struggle to take more control over my relationship with time and how it is connected to the consumption of media, nature and the moments when I am not being social (online or in person).





05. Henry Fox Talbot, Oak tree in winter (c. 1842-43), calotype

**Filippo Lorenzin:** Aesthetically, the pictures recall me calotype by **William Fox Talbot** and other early photographic experiments of XIX century – which were often inspired by Romantic pictures, not surprisingly. I've read you employed an infrared camera to shoot the pictures and record the videos as a reference to the infrared laser light-based architecture of internet. Watching the pictures seems to see whole environments communicating with each other across seas and mountains. What do you think?

**Evan Roth:** I like this connection. While the primary reason for shooting in IR remains as a reference to the architecture of the Internet, I also see the use of a self-modified camera as being a connection to the **DIY** and hacking practices that have informed a lot of my art

practice. The old hacker adage “know your tools” is at the heart of what set me out to visit the Internet in the first place.

Even more invisible than the buried fiber optic cables are the electromagnetic waves that carry our data through cables and air. The demystification of the Internet is a repeating element in the project, and the use of IR imagery is also intended to visualize these invisible waves.

**Filippo Lorenzin:** Another important feature of *Internet Landscapes* is the audio. You used an instrumental transcommunication device built by yourself that records the surrounding environment and fm radio waves, mirroring the harmonious depiction of Nature and human constructs of the pictures. The sound is often spooky, something which is not spontaneous by nature and neither industrial. Could you explain what's the value of this recording in the work?

**Evan Roth:** The audio is recorded on location in two channels: one being the ambient sounds of nature (primarily wind and water) and the other from a custom designed piece of hardware that scans radio frequencies in sync with my heartrate. Blending these two different kinds of aural landscapes may sound uneasy, but, to me, the act of scanning implies a search that I think suggests something optimistic.



E06. Evan Roth, *Kites and Websites* exhibition (2016), installation view

**Filippo Lorenzin:** You presented the book about *Internet Landscapes* on the occasion of your recent solo show in Stockholm, *“Kites & Websites”* (Belenius/Nordenhake, 31/3-24/4/2016); it contains the pictures you took around the world and a critical text by **Domenico Quaranta**. The way in which the pictures are arranged, their vertical formats



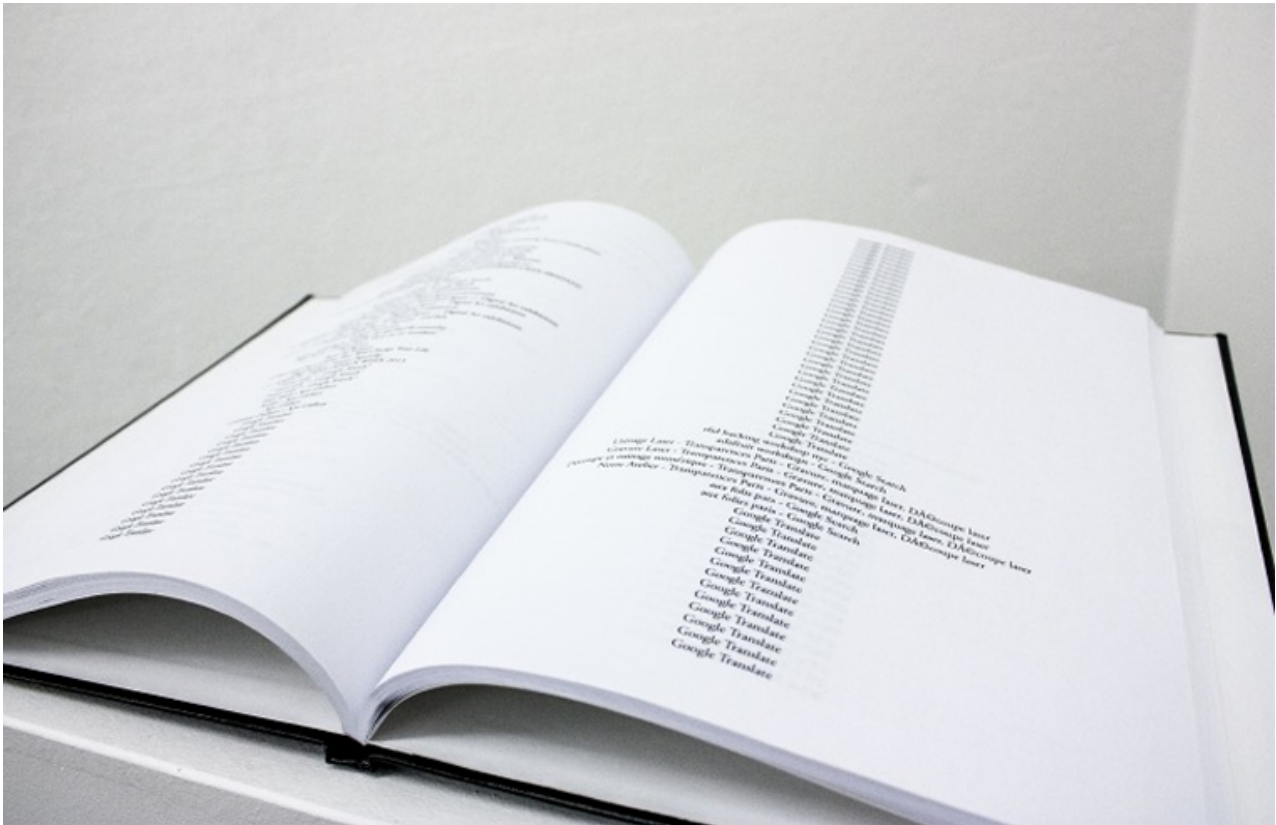
and the rhythm of red, white and black patterns recall a silent ecstatic fruition of the project – something that maybe is lost if installed or watched on a laptop screen. Could you tell us about this publication?

**Evan Roth:** The book is a different experience than the exhibition. It's a collection of photos taken during my trips to various communication infrastructure points in Sweden, New Zealand and France. It's meant to document the journey and I hope the photos collectively work together to communicate a search through these landscapes.

**Filippo Lorenzin:** In 2014 you published with **Link Editions** a book entitled *Since You Were Born* in which the reader finds the chronological history of every website you visited on your computer over a three month period beginning with the birth of your daughter. I'm very fascinated by how this operation is gentle and radical at the same time; the change of a father's habits are recorded with mathematical precision and rendered in their own crudeness while still gathering a relevant emotive charge. Could you tell what aspects are shared by this project and *Internet Landscapes*? I can see many points, especially in regards to a sentimental inquiry of internet dynamics.

**Evan Roth:** My relationship with Domenico actually goes back further than that piece. In 2011 he curated one of my *InternetCache Self Portraits* (the first I made in the series) into an exhibition called *Collect the WWWorld: The Artist as Archivist in the Internet Age*. This exhibition was really fascinating with a great group of artists (Cory Arcangel, Constant Dullaart, Jodi, Oliver Laric, Olia Lialina, Eva and Franco Mattes, Seth Price, and many more). It's a nice connection to the *Since You Were Born* piece though, which is a personal favorite of mine.

I think the two pieces are linked closely in that they both deal with parallel coming of age stories between an individual (myself) and the Internet. They also wrestle with the question of "how much am I changing versus how much is the world changing?" As much as the *Landscape* series is a reaction to a changing Internet (and other issues addressed above), a lot in the work deals with a changing self, much of which probably stems from the change of becoming a parent. I have found being a parent very grounding. It has given me a better understanding of what is unquestionably meaningful and important whereas in the arts these terms are often fluid and debatable. This has influenced my work a lot and has pushed me to make work that I personally find more significant.



Evan Roth, *Since You Were Born* (2014), book

**Filippo Lorenzin:** Profiling, the act of recording and analysing a person's psychological and behavioral characteristics, has been the object of your interest in another project, ***Internet Cache Self Portrait***. If *Since You Were Born* recalls a diary because of its structure and premises, this series of works looks like an uncensored flux of pictures in which corporate imagery and intimate life become a single landscape. Starting from this point of view, I'd like to know if these works were linked to how you perceived internet at the time and if it's changed since then.

**Evan Roth:** On one level, all three of these projects (***Internet Landscapes***, ***Since You Were Born*** and ***Internet Cache Self Portraits***) are my attempts to come to a better visual and conceptual understanding of what the network is, and how it affects us individually and as a society. While my perception of the Internet has changed since I started working on these series, my interest in and approach towards making these pieces has not.

A lot of the work I have made in the last five years involves archiving on some level. This is true of *Since You Were Born* and *Internet Cache Self Portraits*, along with *Dances for Mobile Phones*(2015), *Silhouettes*(2014), *A Tribute to Heather*(2013), *Multi-Touch Paintings*(2012), *Forgetting Spring*(2013) and others. The impetus for wanting to archive these moments is driven by the feeling that we are living in times of rapid change. In that sense, my hope is that the work will actually become more interesting over time as things (myself, society, technology, etc.) continue to evolve.



Evan Roth, *Angry Birds All Levels* (2012), installation view

**Filippo Lorenzin:** The need to reflect on the intimate relation between the individuals and the surrounding electronic environments composed by devices, clouds and screens can be noticed in many other works of your recent past. *Angry Birds All Levels* (2012) is exemplary in this sense; the traces of the interaction between two reactive bodies (the individual and the screen) obviously recall some researches of *action painters* or, to say more, the Japanese art of calligraphy. The thing that strikes me most is that these are the actual movements you have to do if you want to complete all the game; there's a certain degree of mechanization in showing how to succeed. What's your opinion?

**Evan Roth:** Yes, I feel that piece (as well as the *Dances for Mobile Phones* and **the Multi-Touch series**) is dealing with new prescribed human gestures. If you remove the phone from these interactions, the resulting movements that are now routine to us (slide to unlock, pinch to zoom, swipe next, etc) are very new on the longer timeline of human evolution. They are different than painting and calligraphy in the sense that these gestures are representative of us collectively conforming to a tool rather than the tool acting as a liberating device for free expression.

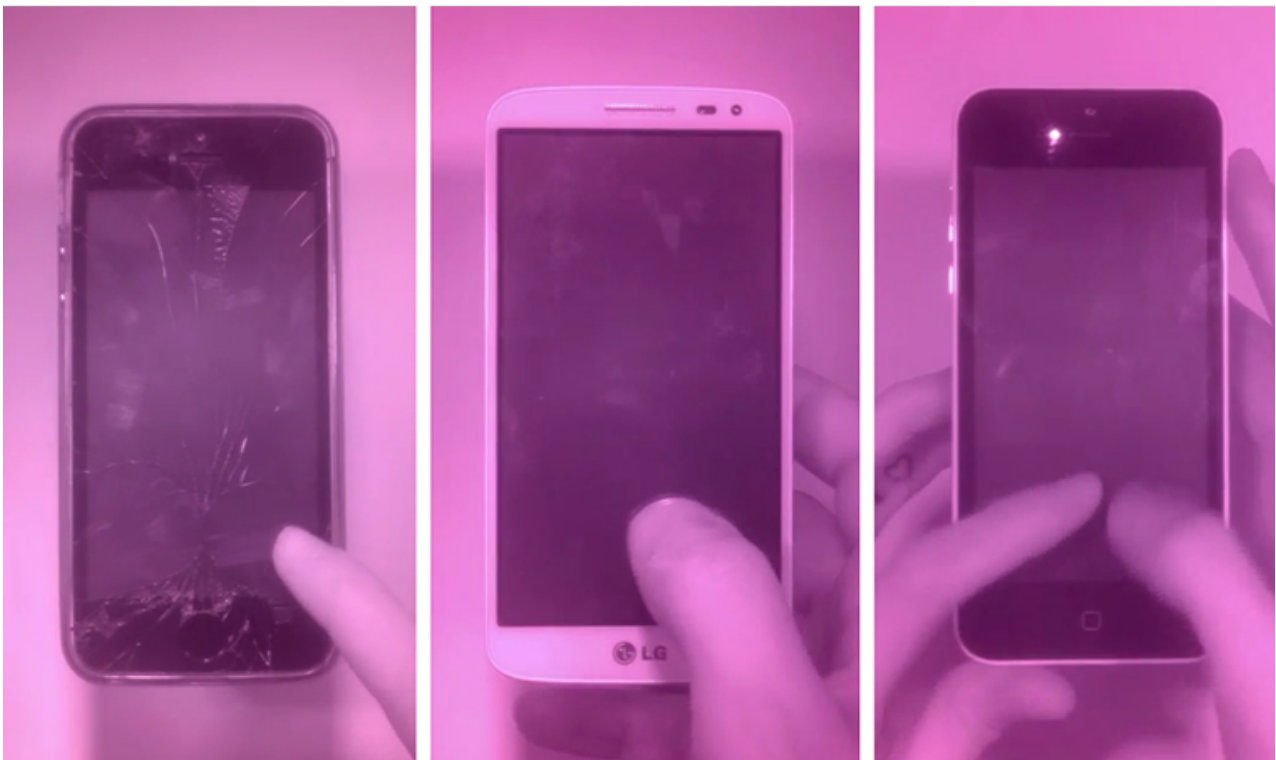
**Filippo Lorenzin:** *Dances for Mobile Phone* is a series of videos focused on some of the same questions at the basis of *Angry Birds All Levels* and all the other works I mentioned before; in this sense, it looks to me you changed the scale of your inquiry – from a private and somehow driven use of electronic devices to the a broader quest for the genuinity of the system behind them. What do you think?

**Evan Roth:** Where the two pieces diverge for me is in their relationship to time. To give some background, *Angry Birds All Levels* has since grown into a different piece called *Level Cleared* (2012). The difference between the two is that the original version (*Angry*



*Birds All Levels*) was composed of every winning screen in the Angry Birds game (while omitting the non-winning screens) and focused on the repetitive gestures that the game requires users to perform. *Angry Birds All Levels* wasn't totally successful in my mind because I was also interested in the notion of "causal computing" and the moments of time we lose in small increments with our smartphones.

So in ***Level Cleared*** I individually trace my movements on every screen (both winning and losing) that I had to pass to complete the game. The number of sheets in the installation increased from 300 to 1500, and I hope that in addition to visualizing the repetitive gestures of these games, the amount of effort and time we potentially spend on apps might give us pause when viewed this way. So, in my mind, the *Level Cleared* piece is dealing more with time than with gesture, which is the central focus of the ***Dances for Mobile Phones*** series.



Evan Roth, *Dances for Mobile Phone* (2015), screenshot

**Filippo Lorenzin:** In which way *Internet Landscapes* fits within your recent artistic research? Are you already working on any future development?

**Evan Roth:** I'm planning to continue this research path for at least two more years (and potentially longer). From a personal standpoint, this series has helped me reconnect with nature and solitude, as well as helped me to fall in love with net art again. Earlier this year I received a **Creative Capital** grant that will allow me to document landing locations in Africa, South America and Asia over the course of the next two years.

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