A Net Artist on Why the Cloud Is a Bad Metaphor for the Internet

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“Red Lines” (image courtesy the artist)

It’s hard to believe that art has existed online for nearly three decades. Early pioneers of internet art in the 1990s broadly saw the worldwide web as a tool of democracy that could connect users around the world and decentralize government’s stronghold on the flow of information.

But in 2018, such unbridled optimism about the internet is hard to trust. Net artists today must resolve the promises of a bygone online era with the realities of alt-right organizing, espionage, and government surveillance on the web. One artist who is trying to find a balance between trusting and being suspicious of the internet is Evan Roth, who recently launched his project “Red Lines” with support from the art nonprofits Creative Capital and Artangel. By clicking on the work’s hyperlink, readers can stream the artwork directly to their digital screens.

Since 2014, Roth has documented the coastal sites where undersea internet cables emerge from the water and into the ground, creating the physical infrastructure of the web so often obfuscated by tech companies talking about ethereal “cloud” computing. I spoke with Roth about the details of his new work and how it relates to our fraught relationship with the internet’s infrastructure today.

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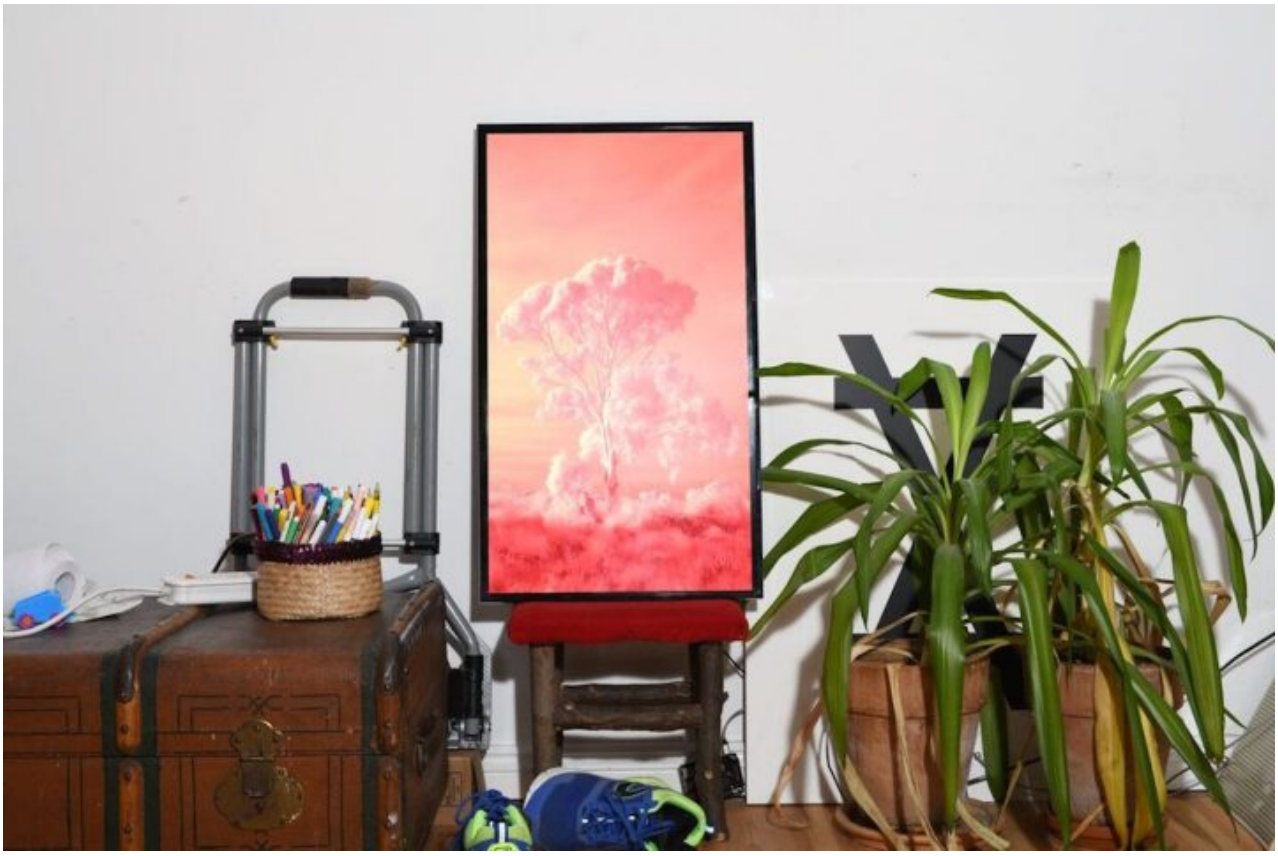


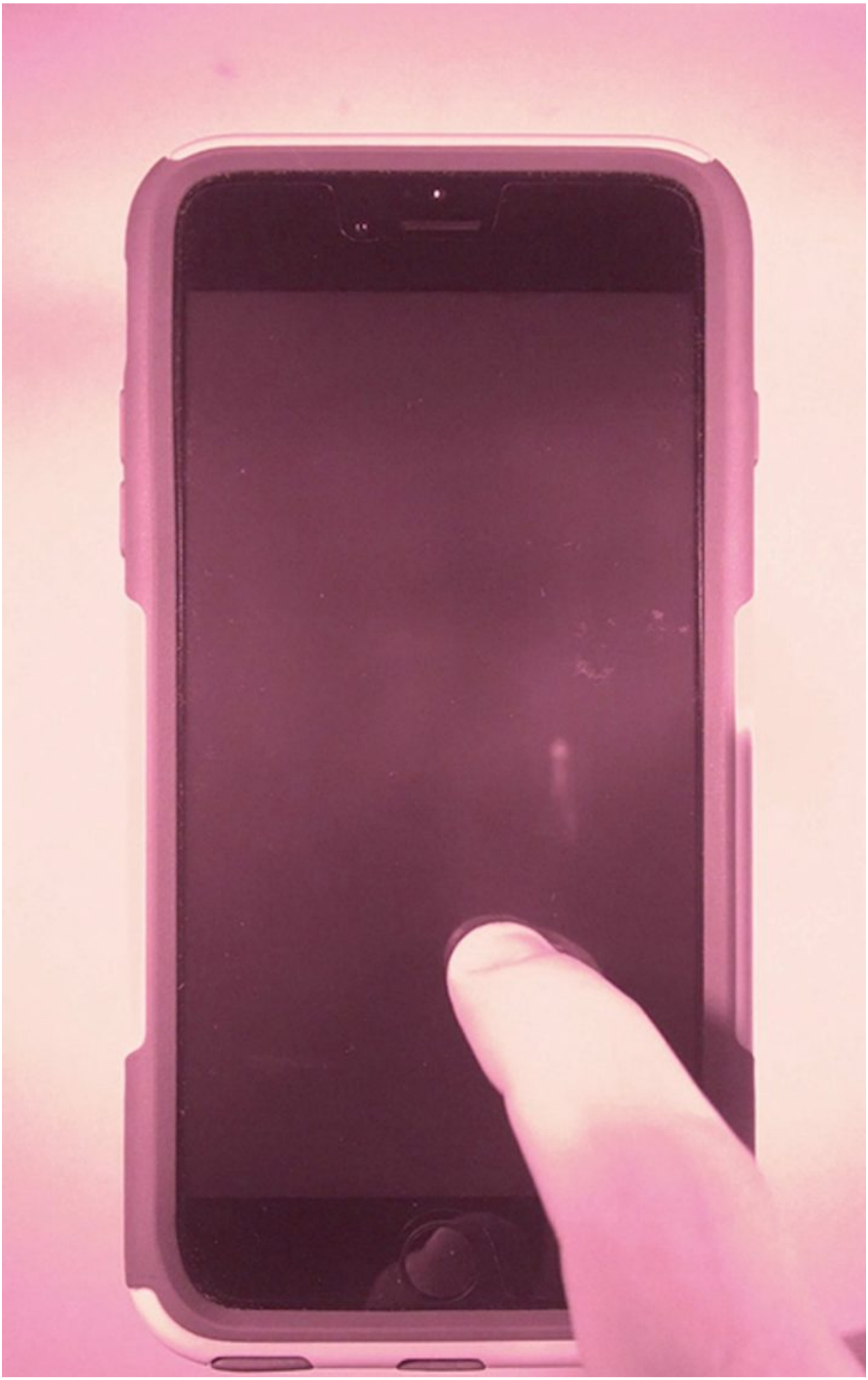
“Red Lines” (image courtesy the artist)

Zachary Small: *What made you interested in creating art on the internet?*

Evan Roth: As an undergraduate in the 2000s, I studied architecture while experimenting with code and making websites under pseudonyms back in the early Flash era. This was a time when Napster and Pirate Bay were in their ascension. Eventually, I quit architecture to dedicate myself to that world. Now, the work I make wrestles with a desire to create net art as a cultural object while staying critical of it.

ZS: *Knowing the internet in the heyday of torrenting, how does that understanding of the online terrain affect your work? More succinctly, how do you define the hacker philosophy?*

ER: In a very basic way, the hacker philosophy involves playing within any given rule structure where you aren’t necessarily supposed to have agency. A hacker tweaks those small moments of power you do have into something bigger. My interest in this philosophy is as a problem-solving technique for artists and activists. Actually, a lot of my work deals with personal empowerment issues, looking for those rare moments when users can gain power that makes us feel bigger than we are.



Still from “Dances for Mobile Phones: Paraguay” (2015). Multi channel video (courtesy Upstream Gallery/artist)

ZS: *How does “Red Lines” fit into your framework? Today, it sometimes feels like society is reversing course in its renewed preference for physical rather than digital forms of information. Looking at your other works, like “Dances with Mobile Phones” (2015), I get the sense that you’re also tracing this debate between the physical and digital, the material and the ethereal.*

ER: There was a phase of my career that was net-only. Then, I got interested into questions about how to make the internet physical. I’m still interested in that real-online divide because the web is such a bad archiving tool. Often when I’m interested in work on a screen, it has to do with a larger timescale than we are accustomed to with the internet. It’s interesting to imagine what people 50 or 100 years from now will think about net culture, but just last week I struggled to get a computer from only 10 years ago to boot up and run something online. Part of what interests me is how to preserve something like this. For me, “Red Lines” is about using the web to connect with my past work; it’s also about asking questions of scale and manageability.

ZS: *It must be hard to make money as a net artist.*

ER: Oh, of course it is. There aren’t so many collectors out there buying websites. That’s why a project like “Red Lines” relies on organizations like Creative Capital and Artangel. Before this work, I hadn’t seen so many examples of net art that can function on such a scale without institutional support.

But forget buyers and collectors, it’s already hard for institutions to support net artists, and sometimes they make mistakes due to misunderstanding the medium. There’s a lot of education still needed about how to support and conserve net art.

ZS: *To go back to “Red Lines,” why did you specifically choose to focus on fiber optic cables?*

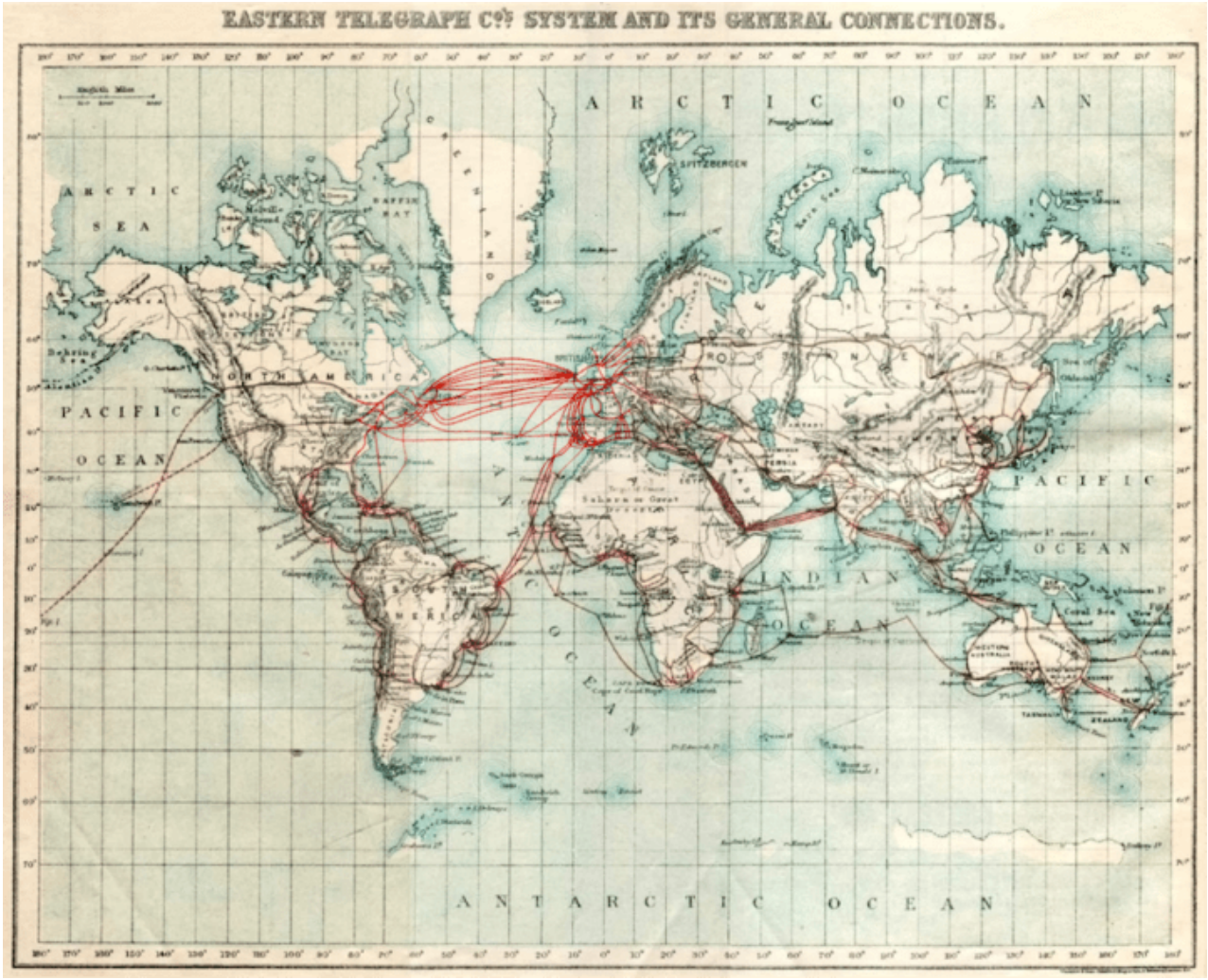
ER: The idea of infrastructure is interesting to me in this moment when we are asked to rethink our relationship with the internet. Especially after the NSA surveillance controversy, the public is more aware about how valuable our online networks are. I think it’s also clear that the metaphor of “the cloud” is a really bad one. Personally, this news made me unsure if I wanted to continue making art within a network that I was growing increasingly critical about. I had to question the system in jeopardy, and where specifically the dangers of this network were.

I became interested in visiting the internet *somewhere*. Others focus on the mines where minerals come from, or maybe the data centers. I liked how the cables coming up from the ocean are at these strange transition points around the globe. You find yourself looking for these massive networks but end up finding yourself completely alone, because, by design, these cables are isolated for safety reasons.

ZS: *But even still, there are tremendous concerns that the internet infrastructure we have now is in great peril. There has been significant concern, for example, about the undersea cables threaded through the Suez Canal, which are largely responsible for threading the internet from Europe to East Asia.*

ER: The title of "Red Lines" actually conceals a double-meaning. The first is an obvious reference to the infrared light traveling through fiber optic cables, but the other alludes to the lines of political power. Like the Suez Canal, "Red Lines" is a direct reference to the British Empire, which rendered colonies on its maps with light-pink colors and dark-red outlines. Later, telegraph maps used during World War I used that same red line to connect strategic outposts of communication. Our culture tends to forget that technological systems we use today come from somewhere. It is not a system separated from political ideology and power structures. So when you build a fiber optic cable on the same exact beach where those telegraph cables once were, it becomes clear that they are not just carrying data, but existing power structures.

Screenshot of "Red Lines'" peer-to-peer network (screenshot by author)



The Eastern Telegraph Company (1901). System and its general connections. Chart of submarine telegraph cable routes, showing the global reach of telecommunications at the beginning of the 20th century (via Wikipedia)

ZS: *Those cables operate on what is called a "peer-to-peer" network — there's something misleading about that terminology. If cables are built on a history of political power dynamics, it's not any more democratic today when businesses control those same means of information, is it?*

ER: We will continue to be trapped in a house owned by somebody else until the structures of communication change more fundamentally, though I do believe it will happen in our lifetime. Even if the "peer-to-peer" network is a reference to a more optimistic period in my life when I believed that the internet could be a force of pure good in the world, it operates through "Red Lines" as nostalgia. And all the visual references I'm making to the Romantic period of landscape painting are tied to that same conversation. In hindsight, those artists were making a similar mistake. Their paintings were usually a reference for their own nostalgia for a version of the world thought to be a better place. And I'm cognizant of the danger of such thinking, especially today when nostalgia operates on the political level of "Make America Great Again."

“Red Lines” (image courtesy the artist)

ZS: *For a user experiencing “Red Lines,” there’s also a formal question of how art today is mediated through screens.*

ER: Net art has always had a core part of its experience on home turf: your screen. I’m not doing anything new in that sense, but “Red Lines” is trying to bridge the gap between art and life. You can live with the art; it’s not like seeing something on Instagram or a gallery exhibition. You see something more in the work when you wake up to it every day. This was an opportunity to give people that experience for free.

I’m also very interested in how people will experience this work. Probably the easiest way is to get “Red Lines” running on your current phone or laptop. Open your phone and leave it open as long as you can. Start paying attention to when you want to close it and why.

ZS: *It sounds like a durational performance. Those questions of why one looks at or looks away from an artwork.*

ER: Right, or how it interacts with your computer or phone when different notifications pop up. When I leave my notifications on, it plays with the landscape of the work and reminds me that this is a single moment in time. When and why I swipe notifications away or check them — when does that screen stop being a display device for art and start becoming an endless scroll through information?

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.