A Pioneering Net Artist Mourns the Unfulfilled Promise of the Internet
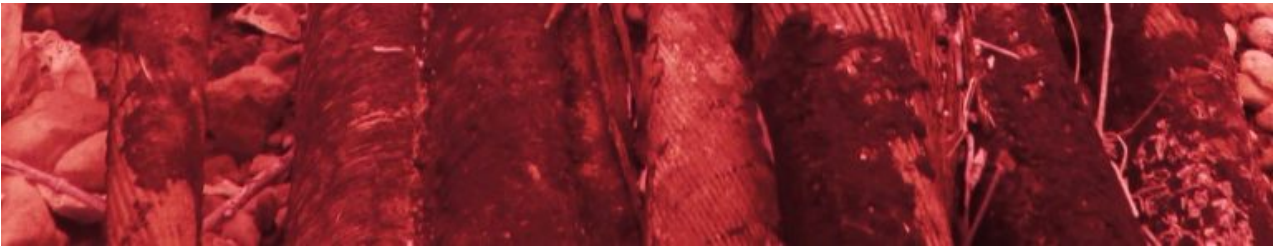
March 25, 2016

Evan Roth, still from "Internet Landscapes: Sydney, 2016" (2016) (all images courtesy Evan Roth)

For the past decade, along with fellow former members of the late hacker-net artist collective Free Art & Technology (FAT) Lab, American artist Evan Roth has been "dedicated to enriching the public domain one mutha-fuckin LOL at a time," as the collective writes in their mission statement. Roth's net art stunts have included amassing a GIF army to Occupy the Internet; hacking his internet cache to create digital "self-portraits;" fooling the Google algorithm into making his name the number one search result for "bad ass mother fucker," and creating a browser plug-in that erases Justin Bieber from the internet.

But in recent years, especially in the wake of the NSA spying scandal, Roth has found himself disillusioned with the "monetization, commercialization, and centralization of the internet," as he tells Hyperallergic. "That breach of trust, that end of online privacy, left people asking, what is this space? Where is it? Who governs it? What does it look like? And I was left asking how to get back to a place where I wanted to make net art in this environment."

Evan Roth, from "Internet Landscapes: Sydney, 2016" (2016)

To explore these questions, Roth spent a week traveling solo to 11 beaches in Sydney, Australia, filming the locations where internet-delivering submarine fibre-optic cables emerge from the water and meet the land. Such cables carry 99% of all transoceanic digital communication, from emails to Skype calls to Netflix videos. Roth tracked down their landing points by scouring Google Streetview shots of Sydney's shores for signs marked "Caution: Submarine Cable."

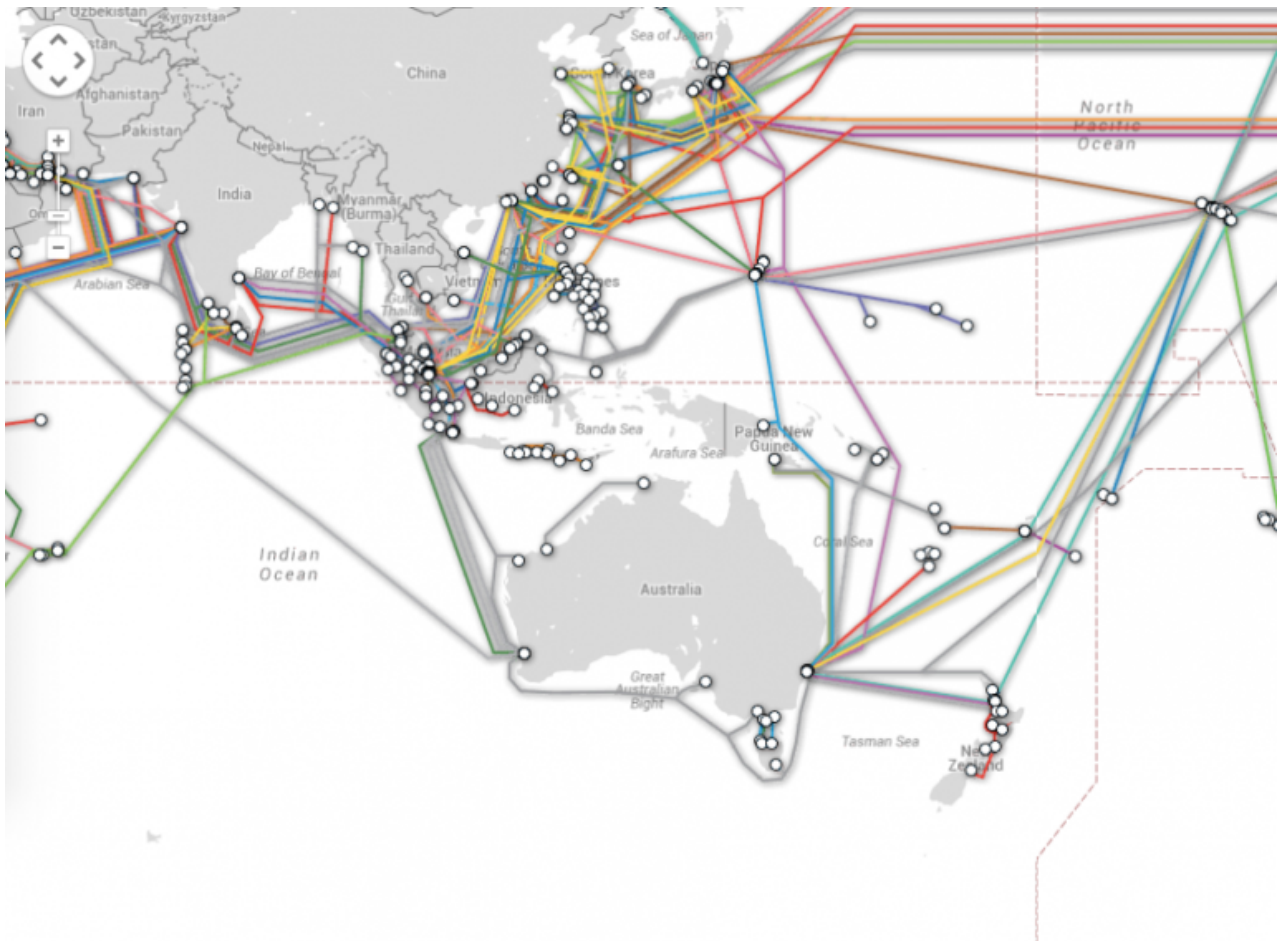Evan Roth, from "Internet Landscapes: Sydney, 2016" (2016)

The resulting "network videos," as Roth calls them, make up his latest piece, "Internet Landscapes: Sydney, 2016," which will appear online only as part of the Biennale of Sydney. The work is a series of portraits of the internet's physical infrastructure, the real-world intersections between nature and contemporary technology.

The artwork explores warped perceptions of place and physical distance in the digital age. The footage, filmed on an infrared camera as a reference to the infrared laser light that's transmitted through fibreoptic cables, is hosted on a website with a server in Sydney. In order for the footage to reach your computer screen, it's converted into infrared light, which coincidentally travels through cables at the same location depicted in the videos.

Evan Roth, from "Internet Landscapes: Sydney, 2016" (2016)

Additionally, each clip's URL doubles as GPS coordinates of the filming location, which the viewer can virtually tour by pasting it into Google Maps. The fact that the work is presented online only, of course, also affects the way the viewer experiences the work — it'll likely be open on your browser amid countless other tabs; maybe you'll only watch five seconds of a slow, boring clip before being distracted by a cat video or a Facebook comment; this, too, is intentional.
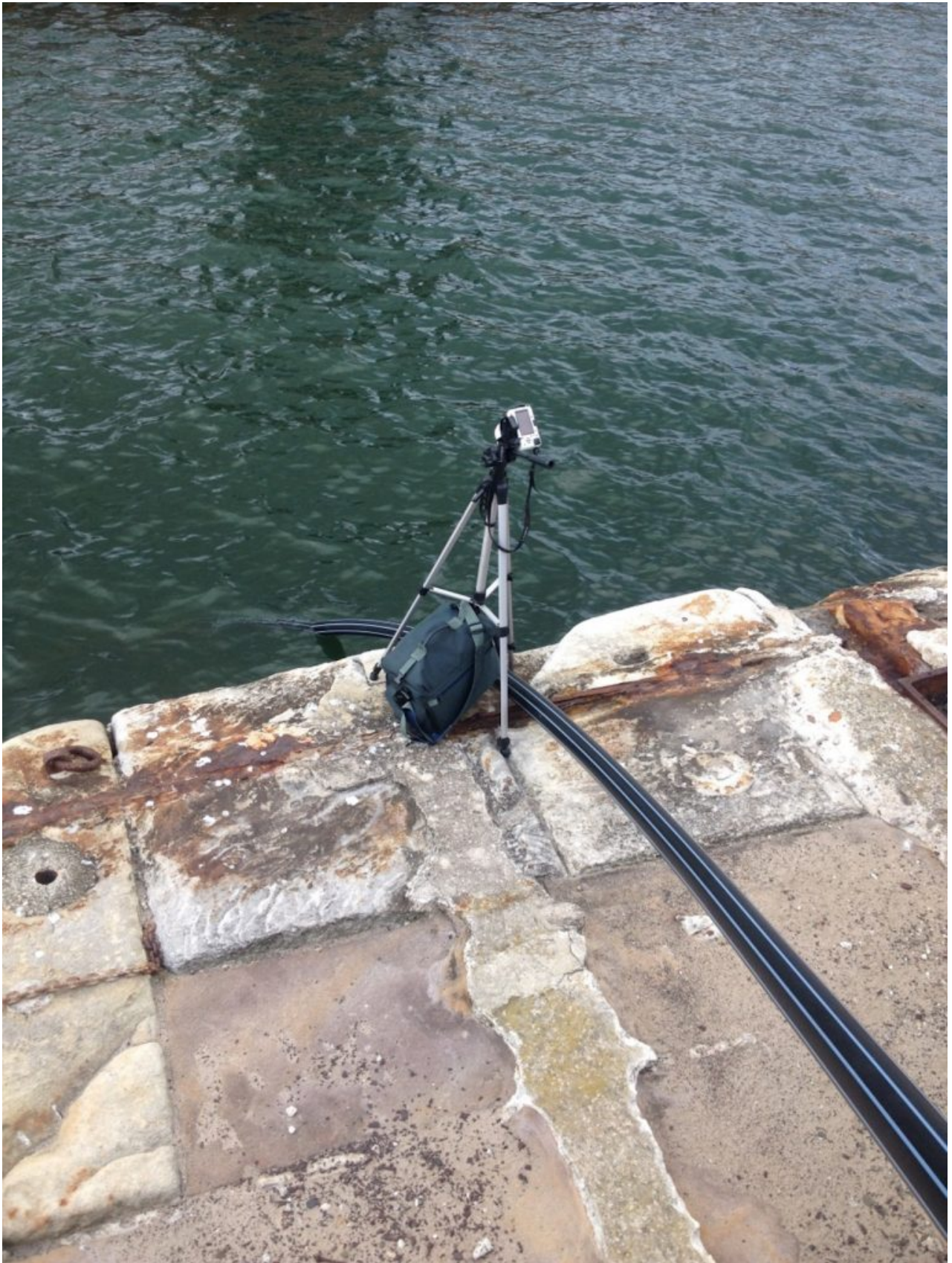
Evan Roth, from "Internet Landscapes: Sydney, 2016" (2016)

Roth is part of an aging generation of artists who developed their creative practices during the internet's infancy, inspired by its novelty and anarchy, and who are now grappling with the end of online privacy and freedom. He's not the first artist to use fibreoptic cables as a muse in this endeavor. His work echoes that of Trevor Paglen, who photographs the landing points of NSA-tapped fibre-optic internet cables; it's also inspired by Andrew Blum's book *Tubes: A Journey to the Center of the Internet*.

The videos in "Internet Landscapes: Sydney 2016" strive to make the invisible visible, to demystify the illusory boundary between digital life and IRL. Our limited senses can make it seem like digital data occupies some magical, intangible "cloud" dimension, but when you examine the network's nuts and bolts, "it stops being a *Wizard of Oz* scenario," Roth says. "You realize it really is just a bunch of wires and computers."

Evan Roth, from "Internet Landscapes: Sydney, 2016" (2016)

Like Paglen and the rest of generation Web 1.0, "I experienced the world both pre- and post-internet, and the disappointment comes from having an overly optimistic view, in its infancy, of what it was and could be," Roth says. Borne of the surveillance age, "Internet

Landscapes" is more contemplative and less punchline-driven than Roth's earlier net-art hijinks, a zoomed-out, skeptical investigation of what this former architect calls "the medium that made me want to be an artist in the first place."
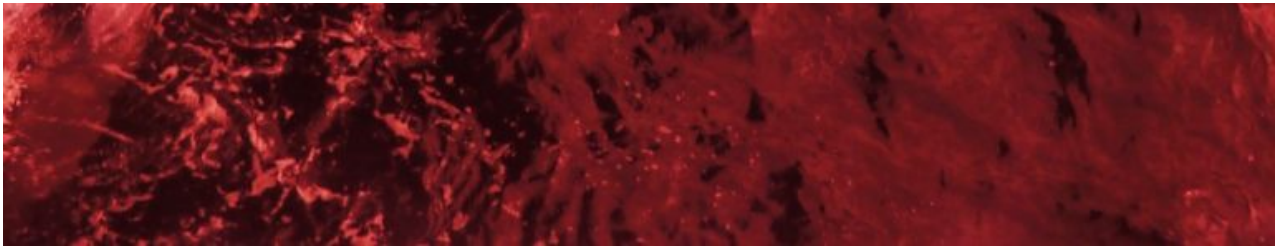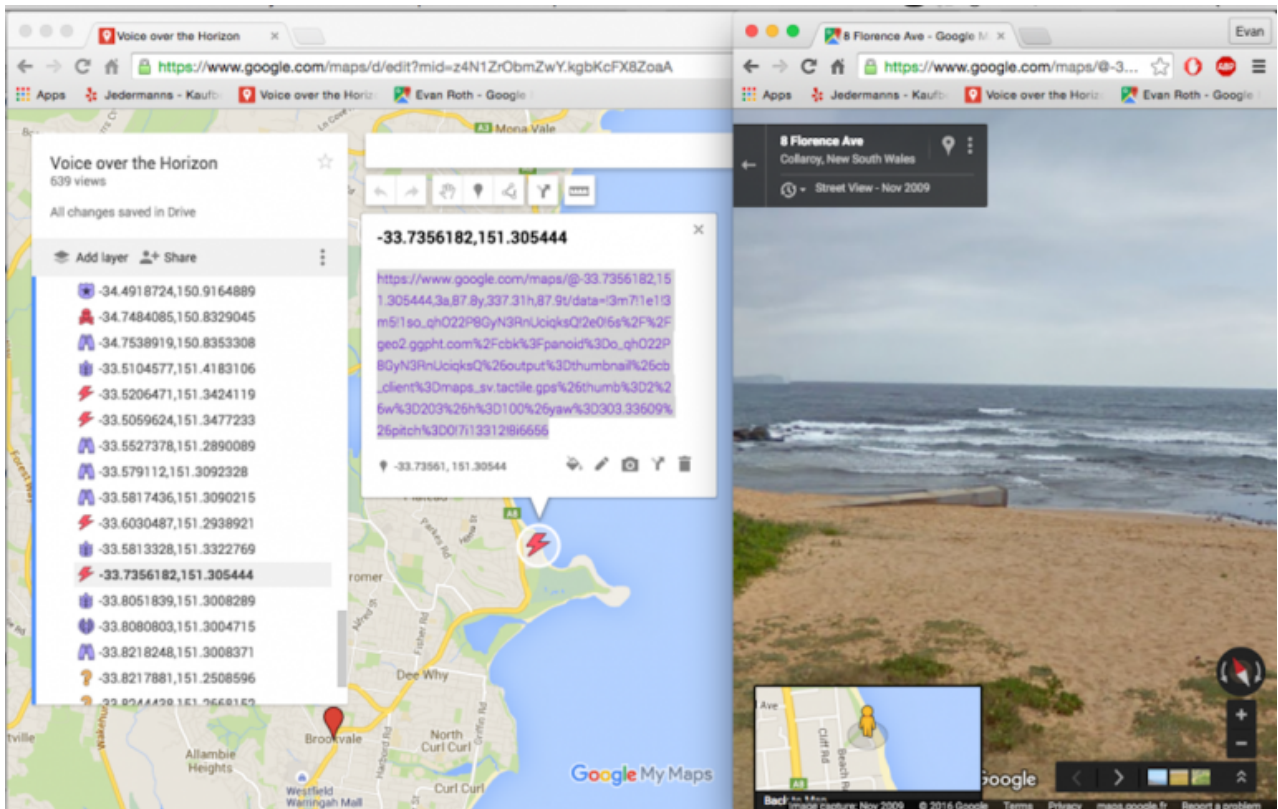

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Internet Landscapes: Sydney *is on view online as part of the 2016 Biennale of Sydney, which runs until June 5.*