

# DOMENICO QUARANTA: in conversation with EVAN ROTH

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Evan Roth, Internet Landscape: Sweden, 2016 Installation Photo: Miha Fras / Aksioma

**“The more time I spend alone in nature, the more I forget about all of the politics surrounding the flow of data under my feet.” Interview with Evan Roth**

**Domenico Quaranta:** *You said that visiting the Internet physically is an attempt to repair a relationship that has changed dramatically as the Internet becomes more centralized, monetized and a mechanism for global government spying. Why is it that picturing the Internet as a physical infrastructure can be seen as a critical, broadly political gesture?*

**Evan Roth:** While I've done projects in the past that I would characterize as ranging from direct to indirect political activism, this is not one of those projects. I'm at a crossroads in my own understanding of what the best path forward is as an artist and user given the current state of programmable systems and networked communications. This work was inspired by and involves political issues, but I feel it is more reflective of a personal search for answers rather than anything else.

**Bani Brusadin:** *You are one of the founders of the Free Art & Technology Lab (F.A.T. Lab), an organization of artists and engineers that from 2007 and 2015 worked to enrich the public domain through the research and development of creative technologies and the media. For years, you and F.A.T. Lab have been cunningly playing as users among other users, provoking unexpected results in the encounter of users' intelligence and ingenuity with network technologies and social media. With Internet Landscapes: Sweden has your interest in users' cultures now shifted towards a new area, namely the material side of machines and collective intelligence?*

**ER:** For me there is a connection between the closing of F.A.T. and this new series of work. I think that part of the reason F.A.T. needed to shut down was because the Internet had at some point fundamentally changed and yet our approach to making art and activism within that environment had not. Again, I'm not claiming to know what the new approach should be at this point, but in my work, there is a deliberate change in approach from the fast paced production and consumption of F.A.T. projects to something slower and more contemplative. In some ways this work is an experiment in making art in the exact opposite way that F.A.T. was functioning: alone, slow, not designed for easy sharing. Where F.A.T. was trying to match the speed of the web (or at times even outpace it), this work is trying to pull the Top Gun maneuver in which the brakes are applied very firmly and the web is allowed to speed by. (None of this is to take away from the work of F.A.T., which I am proud of and will stand behind. It was just time for a change for me).

**DQ:** *The use of infrared video in the Internet Landscapes is both related to portraying the physical Internet (information travels through fiber optic cables as infrared laser light) and to the DIY technologies developed by paranormal researchers. This belief in technology as research, as the output of curiosity and free thinking, and as something that can always resist to its subsumption by the forces of power and greed, informs all your work. Are you still positive about it?*

**ER:** I don't have any core belief in the power of technology. My continued interest in it as a medium for creating art comes from two places: 1) the single greatest feeling of self empowerment I've experienced in my lifetime was uploading my first HTML file. It's a

feeling I'm constantly trying to reconnect with in my work. And 2) because it's cheap. There is no other medium I know of that has such a division between the cost to produce and reach of communication. As much as I don't enjoy writing code, it is freeing to divorce creative decision making from the realities of physical production.

**BB:** *In the pictures and videos of Internet Landscapes: Sweden there's apparently nothing to look at. We are witnessing things and places whose intended function has little or nothing to do with what they look like at first sight. Network infrastructures are literally buried under layers of sediment as much as they're buried under layers of 'user-friendly' interfaces...*

**ER:** Yes, I wrestled quite a bit with how much evidence of the Internet to show in the frame. In the end, it was important to me that in this first piece of the series, there not be any cables or direct clues. As I move forward with the series, I will include footage of cables where it makes sense, but from the beginning I always had this vision in my mind of the lonely tree in an uncomfortable landscape. I see the tree as this naturally occurring network diagram that can function as a monument when recontextualized. The branches bring the viewers' eyes away from the clouds and down into the ground where the data is flowing.

For me this project was never meant to be a journalistic endeavour. It's art that is more about my own struggles and understanding of my surroundings than it is about seeing cables. I didn't want this to turn into a project where I was just running around planting flags and taking photos in an effort to become the mayor of the Internet on Foursquare. For that reason I also allow myself to think more painterly (for lack of a better word) when I'm on location. The research guides me to the location, but once I'm there, I try to allow myself a lot of freedom to make something that captures the essence of an internal dialog rather than just trying to document what is (or is not) there to see of the Internet.

I would also point out that there are things happening within the frame. On first glance it seems as if nothing is going on, but you should be able to notice subtle changes in light as clouds pass in front of the sun, animals, people, airplanes and boats moving in and out of frame, and changes in the wind and wave patterns. These aren't "actions" as we are used to actions in a typical Internet experience, but actions in nature.

I also think there is a performance aspect in watching the piece from start to finish. All of the things that might happen during that period (email notifications, SMS messages, incoming tweets, your impulse to move the mouse so you can see how much time is left) are all a part of the viewing experience. These clips, which are typically shorter than the length of a TED talk, can seem like an eternity to watch in their entirety (especially when viewed in the privacy of your own browser).

**DQ:** *The generation we both belong to shares the common feeling that the Internet is not what it used to be; that the utopian, open space that we used to inhabit is over. I'm starting to be quite ambivalent about this feeling: although I've lived the Internet's recent history, and I can recognize the shift from the institutional Internet to the corporate web,*

*from online communities to social networks, and from a space of freedom and sharing to a tool of mass surveillance, I can't resist to seeing in this narrative the usual way in which the old men speak to younger generations: it was much better when I was young – you will never experience this kind of freedom. How can we preserve the values on which the early Internet was built without being nostalgic?*

**ER:** I am still learning a lot about the contemporary network from ideas that Jodi, Olia Lialina and Piratbyran had over a decade ago. I see the work I'm doing now as being directly influenced by those voices, and even more than nostalgia, I think what you see is a struggle in this current environment for the work to embody many of these older ideas and values that I feel are still very relevant.

Despite how much has changed, there is still nothing stopping anyone from registering a URL, pointing it to a networked computer and making a website. That right hasn't been taken away from us, it's just less convenient than other options. And if we collectively begin to grow tired of counting our friends, followers and likes, I think there is something empowering in knowing that what was true 20 years ago is still true today. If I want to make a really boring website about a tree, I can still go do that.

The longer I work on this series, the less and less it is about the Internet. Nostalgia that happens to be embedded in the work is probably less about the "the Internet" and more about a younger and more naive period in my own development (personally and artistically).

Similarly, I think any frustrations I have with the current state of the Internet is not directed at "the bad guys" but rather at myself for seeing what I wanted to see instead of what was inevitably to come.

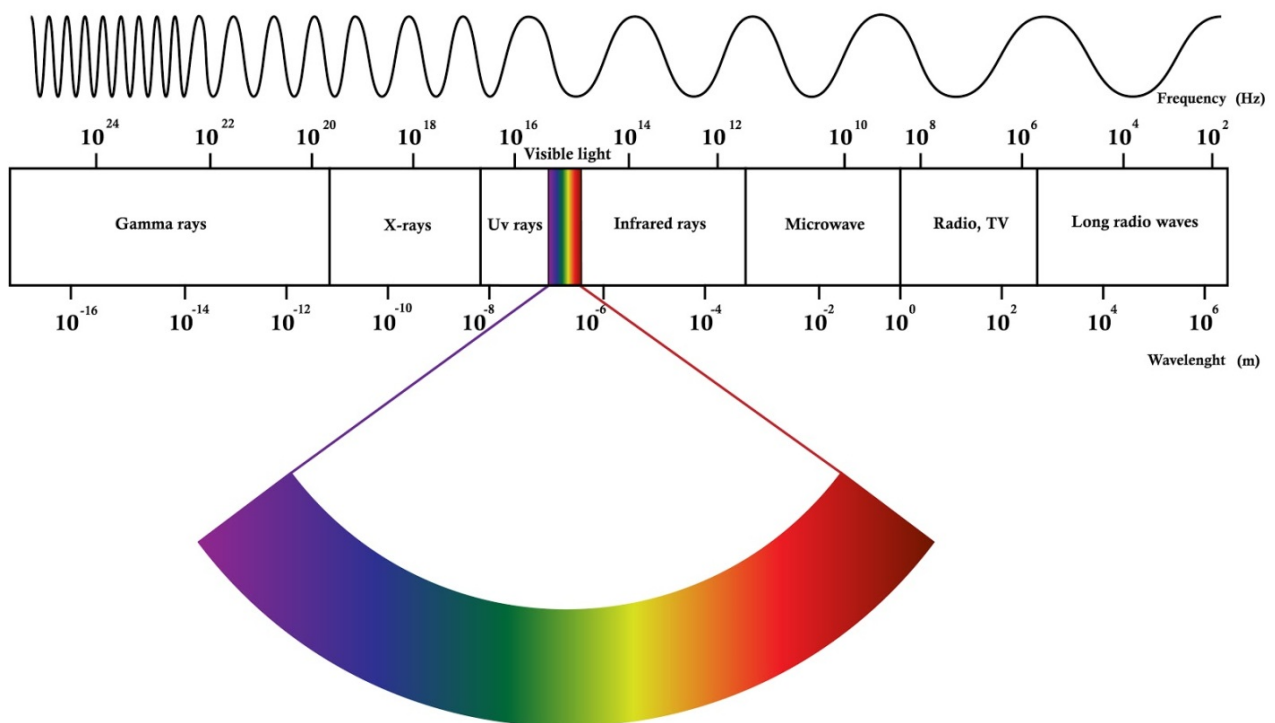
**DQ:** *Another thing that I feel is that, if the Internet has turned bad, it's our fault. It's the generation that grew up in the Nineties that made the current Internet, both actively (by making the tools and launching the start-ups) and passively (by not resisting it). And by describing it as an irreversible process, by being nostalgic, we are implicitly inviting younger generations to adapt to it. How can we be realistic without being perceived as a conservative force?*

**ER:** I think it is possible to be realistic and have something more than a conservative or purely pessimistic voice in the conversation, and my hope is that this is reflected in the work.

I am also working on a new series of related work where I am building kites with similar IR landscape imagery printed on them. To me, kites are generally reminiscent of simpler and more innocent times. With a hexagonal shape and the use of antenna wire in their construction, the kites I'm making also serve as a historical reference to Guglielmo Marconi's early experiments in long distance communication. In 1901 in Poldhu, UK, Marconi successfully used a kite with antenna wire to receive the very first wireless signal across the Atlantic Ocean. Initially, Marconi was trying to use a twenty mast circular aerial to receive the signal but it was destroyed in a storm. When this heavier and more

expensive infrastructure failed, he found a lightweight, locally sourced and more accessible solution in an unexpected form. For me, the ruins of Poldhu act as an analogy for the current network of cables, and Marconi's kite is the elegant hack that put the power of communication infrastructure back in the hands of hobbyists (i.e., kite makers). In this sense, the work is meant to be both nostalgic yet still suggestive of a path towards change.

I also view the use of the radio spectrum (both in the kites and in the networked video series) more as a sign of optimism than of nostalgia or defeat. Radio, which, at the time, might have seemed even more magical and powerful than the Internet did to our generation, only had a 10 year heyday before the introduction of television (which essentially replaced it). With this in mind, it doesn't seem so far fetched to me that some fundamental change to the Internet, or new form of communication along the spectrum, could happen within our lifetimes.



This is one reason I'm so obsessed with the electromagnetic spectrum at the moment. I love the idea that whether we are communicating with visual light (painting), IR (fiber optic), microwaves (wifi/cellular) or VHF/UHF (radio and TV), it is all happening on a single spectrum differentiated only by the distance between peaks of waves. When I look at simple spectrum diagrams like this, I get excited because I know the answer to many of the problems with our current communication structures are there. This is one reason why you see the spectrum range (from visible light to near infrared to radio) showing up in the work in various ways. The kite itself is in part meant as a visualization of an invisible EM wave. The height of radio towers are often dictated not by line of site issues, but by the length of the EM wave they are interested in transmitting and receiving. The antennas you see spotting the landscape are typically  $\frac{1}{4}$  or  $\frac{1}{2}$  the length of the actual wave they are built to transmit. The former architect in me sees this as one of the most poetic

relationships between form and function in the built environment. So the spool of antenna wire that sits below the kites in the exhibition is of a specific length (41.3m), which corresponds to a frequency (3.6MHz) useful in shortwave radio communication.

**Ruth McCullough:** *It feels like the project is not just about Internet landscapes, but about how data interact with the landscape, not just through the internet file transfer, fibre optics and infrared, but the radio waves, wifi and mobile 3G. This is present through the audio recordings that scan the radio waves tuned by your heart beat. Can you explain more about this experience and what we are listening too? These field recordings seem to be a new dimension to your work, can you explain the significance?*

**ER:** Yes, the project started as a venture to find the Internet, but has slowly changed more broadly to the relationship between data and the landscape, and then again to the relationship between the self and nature.

The audio is composed of two channels: the first is from a microphone recording ambient audio and the second is scanning through various radio frequencies, with each change in frequency tied to my heart rate. Both were recorded on the same location as the video was shot. The radio device is a custom piece of hardware and I plan on releasing the design diagrams for it online soon. The hardware is connected to my fingertip and takes a heart rate reading through IR light, which is reflected in part by blood cells. When a heartbeat is detected, a microcontroller increments to a new radio frequency. The result is a droning sound composed primarily (but not entirely) of static. When the two channels are blended together, various rhythms mix together: water on the shore, pulses from the heart and waves transmitted through air and fiber.

I originally came across the radio scanning technique when researching technologies developed for paranormal investigations. This community developed the Spirit Box, which is a custom built or hacked radio that constantly sweeps through radio frequencies. The belief is that communication could occur through the connected pieces of “inter-frequencies” heard in the radio spectrum. And while my interest and intent is not connected with the paranormal, they are an amazing community of tool builders and their DIY approach towards communication across the electromagnetic spectrum is inspiring.

**DQ:** *The Internet Landscapes remove the Internet from the space of myth and religion and bring it to a more human scale: portraying the Internet as a physical body, made of undersea cables and human-built infrastructures, is also a way to resist the idea of the Internet as an immaterial soul, that was forged by Internet utopians and subsumed by corporations. Do you agree?*

**ER:** Yes, and this is why I think you see a growing interest in other artists, activists and writers working in this space. When everything was kittens, unicorns and .mp3 files, there wasn't any real need to think of the Internet as anything but Willy Wonka's digital chocolate factory. Who wants to talk about how it all works when we could be watching Charlie Bit My Finger? At some point, however, I think many people started seeing that things were going awry. Some people saw this earlier than others, and some people point

to different things as being more or less troubling, but whether it's for spying or targeted marketing or centralization, I think many people were left rethinking their relationship with the Internet. At this point I think there is natural tendency to say, "Ok wait, things got fucked up. How did this happen? What is this system? Where is it? How does it function? Who owns what aspects of it? How is that space regulated?" And at least for me personally (although I suspect this might be the case for others as well), after going through a disempowering experience with the Internet, there is something re-empowering and grounding about understanding more about the system physically. Yes, seeing the cables maybe does break the myth of an Internet forged by Internet utopians, but I think it also lessens the feeling of the network being something we have no influence or control over. And just from a personal standpoint, venturing away from the screen and visiting the landscape of the Internet has made me more excited about making art in that medium again.

**DQ:** *You talk about your travels to fiber optic landing locations as "pilgrimages". Although you explain these pilgrimages as a way to "reconnect with the Internet", I have the feeling that they are more a way to reconnect to the world: by experiencing nature, by allowing you a different experience of time and space. Is this distinction any good?*

**ER:** Yes, in fact the longer I work on this new series, the more peripheral the Internet becomes in my thinking. I've been using the phrase "Internet landscapes" to informally describe the work, but lately I've been dropping the "Internet" and just calling them "landscapes" (which I think is more true to what they are). Even though the Internet is a strong character in the narrative, the work is really more about the questioning of my surroundings and search for solutions to issues that fundamentally challenge my art practice and worldview.

All of the research that goes into finding these specific places on the globe (which are usually remote beaches) is still a part of the work. But, the more time I spend alone in nature, the more I forget about all of the politics surrounding the flow of data under my feet. There is a meditative quality embedded in the work that stems directly from my experience in producing the work. When I'm in the field filming, I usually shoot still tripod shots between 10 and 15 minutes in duration. Because I'm recording audio (both from the ambient surroundings as well as from the radio spectrum), I need to remain stationary for the entire duration of the clip. In that sense the filming process is like a digital retreat with mandatory periods of 15 minutes of solitary meditation in nature. And what was most striking to me when I started this process was not "omg, this retreat into nature and being away from screens is amazing!", it was more, "holy shit, this is boring." In the beginning I found myself negotiating internally whether certain shots were worth the 15 minutes of stillness that was required. As I continued with the project, however, this perception of time became one of the most interesting aspects of the work. The resulting networked video pieces are intentionally on the timeline of nature to try and recreate what I felt rather than the quick editing that's usually associated with online video. In past work, I have sometimes felt the influence of the Internet in the art making process more strongly and have made work that I know would play better online (in part because I wanted to reach a



larger audience). But, if one of these newer videos were put on Reddit or Buzzfeed, my guess is that the comment thread might be less than appreciative in large part because the pacing of the work stands at complete odds with the pacing of the web. These videos may not be easy to consume, but my hope is that for some viewers, it will offer a solitary meditative moment in their day that mimics part of what I was thinking and feeling when I was on location doing the filming.

**BB:** *Why choose Sweden and how is it related to your personal and political background?*

**ER:** A lot of my thinking about the data, and the yin and yang relationship between copying and pasting, stems from the now defunct Swedish think tank Piratbyrå. In the past I have visited more technically important network locations (for example Porthcurno in the UK), but when I envision my own personal Internet monuments, I see them in Sweden.

Even in the midst of the file sharing debate, Piratbyrå was always interested in the personal connections between individuals brought about by these massively connected systems (online and offline). A 2014 exhibition at Furtherfield, which was partly a Piratbyrå retrospective, was subtitled “Piracy as Friendship.” The title and program highlighted the idea that bus rides and building fires are perhaps more interesting “social media” than what we can find online.

On the Gothenburg portion of the trip I stayed with Magnus Ericksson (former Piratbyrå/F.A.T. member) and artist Geraldine Juarez (former Telecomix/F.A.T. member, she also organized the Furtherfield show). They are friends whose thinking has influenced a lot of my understanding on the current state of the Internet. Sleeping on their couch and having conversations around their kitchen table (rather than IRC) was for me another reason Sweden was the right place to look for a personal connection with the Internet.

**DQ:** *Is kopimi another utopia from the past or something we can still believe in?*

**ER:** In an online economy in which many of the largest companies don’t make any content (Twitter, Facebook, Google, etc), the philosophy of kopimi has definitely become more complicated for me. My guess is that these companies would like nothing more than to be legally able to copy all of the world’s data to their servers (“collect it all!”) in an effort to sell more advertising space. That being said, for better or for worse, I still keep coming back to kopimi. It is probably an oversimplified way of looking at the digital landscape, but I still believe in the core notion that the natural state of data is to be freely copied. I’ve used this analogy before, but I liken it to an ill-equipped dam holding back water. There are barriers to stop data from being copied (legal and technical) but on a long enough time line, they will always fail because the water wants to go downstream. I still get excited everytime I see triangles and the number 23.

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