

Artist Evan Roth Used Ghost Hunting Equipment to Find the Physical Internet

 [vice.com/en/article/z4q3mx/evan-roth-physical-internet-ghost-hunting](https://www.vice.com/en/article/z4q3mx/evan-roth-physical-internet-ghost-hunting)

Artist Evan Roth's latest exhibition—*Voices Over the Horizon* at the Carroll / Fletcher gallery in London—took him to the coastline of England's southwest. It's here on the far reaches of the British mainland that he found the internet. Or, at least, he found the markers and infrastructure that supports and houses the physical internet—the secretive transoceanic deep sea cables that materially connect the UK to Europe and Asia, carrying data across the seabed so we can tweet our opinions on the new gold MacBook.

Resting as it does on the Atlantic, the area has historically been a place where global trade meets the latest communications technology. Transatlantic telegraph cables first crossed land there in 1866. And before that, smugglers and pirates used the area to surreptitiously bring goods to shore, hiding in the many bays, coves, and inlets nestled in the coastline.

Roth set upon this area armed with ghost hunting equipment, using (or mis-using) it to record and trace the physical internet that resides and hides among the villages and haunting scenery that makes the area such a tourist haven.

Eroded by the Edward Snowden revelations and the way the internet has now become commoditized, homogenized, and centralized by the Big Five (Facebook, Apple, Google, Amazon, Microsoft), Roth went on a solitary pilgrimage in autumn 2014 to find the physical dwelling of the internet and somehow reconnect to it—to channel those initial feelings of excitement, awe, and promise he first felt with the internet back in the 1990s. "To reforge a relationship that I think is broken." Roth notes.

Using ghost hunting technologies had a great symmetry and also gave him a chance to rekindle his somewhat jaded relationship to technology: "There are similarities between the two [internet and ghost-hunting]" explains Roth. "Ghost hunting communities talk a lot about ghosts as being disembodied human energy, so in that sense there's a crossover because the internet is this place where we send all of our selves, packaged into the fiber optics as data and information."

Porthcurno, in Cornwall, is one of the landing points for the Fiber-Optic Link Around the Globe (FLAG) cable, it also happens to be the point where the first transatlantic telegraph cable was laid. In a piece for the show, *Web Portal*, Roth created embossings of manhole covers located near the landings locations for FLAG. He was led to some of them by a *Wired* article by author Neal Stephenson, written back in 1996, when Stephenson trekked the same coast as part of his global wanderings "chronicling the laying of the longest wire on Earth."

These everyday connections to the world below are also the closest public access points to the "actual laser light that is the internet." So the rubbings become ritual actions, Roth's equivalent to grave rubbings—and indicators of the submarine cables that lie beneath.

Interestingly, on the cliffs at Porthcurno lies a pyramidal marker of white-washed stone indicating where the transatlantic telegraph cables first came up from the ocean. Perhaps in the future a similar tribute or monument will be made marking where the FLAG cables, and so the internet, begins its journey to Estepona in Spain through the Middle East, to Southeast Asia and onwards to Japan.

Roth recreated his own version of the stone pyramid in the gallery—*Benben*, a half-scale homage with graphics created using a modded hand scanner to replicate original's facade. The result is a distorted, abstract representation of the pyramid filtered through a digital device.

On a different note, the exhibition space walls, upon entrance, are adorned with purple-hued videos of iPhones and multi-touch gestures from disembodied hands. The series, entitled *Dances for Mobiles*, filmed individuals performing everyday interactions with their touchscreens. A full-spectrum infrared and ultraviolet camera, built by the Cleveland Paranormal Society, was used to capture ethereal human energy. Roth uses it to give us a new perspective on how we interact with our phones, the screens become blank and the gestures become decontextualized, isolated, and peculiar.

A series of landscape photos in the exhibition trace the physical internet around the Cornish coastline, where GCHQ satellites rest on cliff tops or deception takes the form of a typical country cottage, which is actually sheltering important infrastructure and is covertly monitored by Cable & Wireless—these images have laser-etchings underneath, readings from a ghost-hunting device taken at the same locations.

Downstairs is a screen showing the murky Cornish coast in autumn but shot with a full-spectrum ghost hunting camera, turning the sky and sea a mystical purple, with audio recorded on a instrument Roth custom built with help from open-source engineers within the paranormal community. The tool scans radio frequencies looking for patterns or messages that might be a ghostly entity trying to communicate. These are mixed with sounds of the wind and rain creating a snapshot and evoking the sensation Roth felt being out there.

"For technical reasons, the cables come to shore in these really remote locations, and there's something really poetic about going in search and communing with this thing." Roth says, "But when you get there it's really lonely. And there's something powerful in that, it's not paranormal at all, but in terms of turning away from the screen and going into nature to find the fiber optics, you end up just being alone."

Also in this room are handheld ghost hunting devices, creating a live stream fed into a website—white noise anomalies, temperature fluctuations, and electromagnetic frequencies—which are converted online on voicesoverthehorizon.com into live visuals

and eerie audio. And on the walls are *Sonograms*, data visualisations of ambient sound recorded at key locations along the coast, like where the GCHQ satellites are.

The whole exhibition is a physicalizing of the internet, rendering it tangible through the exhibits (sometimes literally like with *Burial Ceremony*, 1.5 miles of fiber optic cables sculpted into the eight-shape of infinity), reminding us that, although we experience it virtually, it has a very material presence in the world—and in this way reclaiming it from the hands of corporations and government surveillance.

In a way the internet has become a ghost of its former utopian promises, a place still haunted by the ideals of its birth but moving towards a more controlled and closed future, a place of targeted marketing and constant monitoring, where data is the new commodity. At least, that's the feeling from people who have grown cynical with the now-tired concept of the internet as a new democracy for ideas, communication, and creativity. And so now people are looking to reconnect with it, and one way to do that is to seek out the infrastructure, to find its physical footprint as a kind of quest.

"There's a lot happening in that realm," Roth notes. "In fact I think there's a little bit of a swell actually, people are getting more interested in the infrastructure of the web, because people are realising how important it is. What I'm trying to do with the exhibition is trying to get across what it feels like to share proximity with this thing that we're all so engaged with."