POSTmatter - Show and Tell
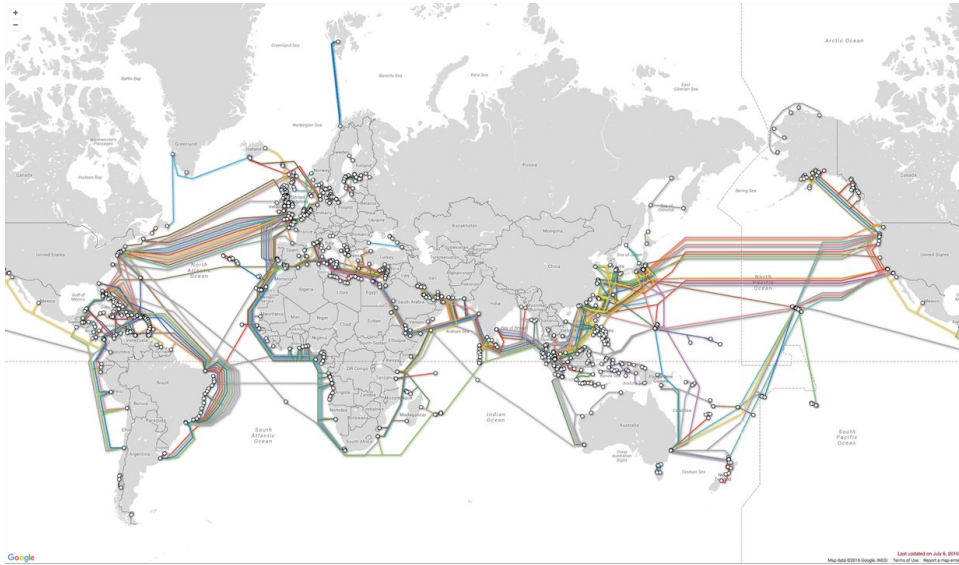
Essay: Orit Gat considers the recent focus on undersea cables in the work of several artists

At the entrance to the exhibition 'Big Bang Data' at Somerset House in London last winter was a submarine cable map, printed and pasted to the floor, across which viewers walked. It was a decent introduction to a show that explored the effect data (or networked technology) has had on contemporary society. The submarine cable map is a familiar enough image: white dots where the cable lands, usually adjacent to major coastal cities (much internet infrastructure follows the telegram cables laid in the mid-19th century), and different coloured codes for the different lines, all set against a neutral, flattened form of the atlas.

The submarine cable map tells much about the spread of global capitalism, especially now that it's the norm for international corporations to join the conglomerates that own these cables, whereas they used to be unions of telecommunications companies. Of course, this is not to say that a local telecommunication company is in any way "innocent" where Facebook is "guilty" of overreaching or anything, but Facebook has a different stake in connecting users to the internet and owning the hardware that serves them. The map also demonstrates uneven development (which is visually frightening, where the large majority of activity happens across the North Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, with the global south relying on much fewer points of access, and the only non-landlocked countries that are not connected are North Korea, El Salvador, and Guinea-Bissau). A very material history —and present, and future—of global connectivity, its trends and implications is equally evident.

To *see* the cable map the way we look at street views on Google Maps, the way we stare at the globe on Google Earth, means to make out the link between geography and the materiality of the networked technology's infrastructure. Which seems obvious, but

studying a map, in this case, is an experiment in refusal. It's an experiment in the refusal of the dominant language with which we discuss technology—the "cloud" is a series of links between servers; "openness" is a decentralised resource (though open source is also a method of maintaining free software, in a business-friendly, hivemind-labor-sort-of-way. The "democratising" potential of the internet is hailed by multinational corporations, those same corporations that stand to benefit from both the positive PR of the "freedom" that platforms like Twitter promote, just as they profit from every new user. Without the use of scare quotes, these terms above promote an understanding of the internet as an ecosystem with its own rules, and one that is presented as intangible and ubiquitous, though we all see images of massive server farms, recognise the energy drain that the need to cool these servers creates, and are aware of the fact that fibre optic cables run alongside most infrastructure, from highways to gas pipes and train lines.

To recognise language as a tool to conceal and abstract rather than a method of explanation means to acknowledge, too, how this rhetoric and its values serve established power structures.[1] One way to counter this linguistic obstacle is visual. I look at the Asia-Pacific Gateway on the submarine cable map. It went live in the second quarter of 2016, connects eight countries—Japan, South Korea, China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore—and was initiated by a consortium of telecommunications company like China Mobile and Vietnam Telecom International, alongside Facebook. The APG is the first cable Facebook invested in (though at the time of this writing, Facebook and Microsoft are collaborating with Spanish company Telefonica to lay a new cable between the United States and Spain), and it speaks to the company's expansion ideals, but also to its aspirations: whatever it is Facebook is going to do, it will require a lot of bandwidth and a global reach.

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The visuals I see when researching these two specific cables: a Getty Images photographs of coiled rope in the foreground with six workmen in the background, the caption reading, "a work crew in France installs a submarine cable in March." A peacock light, made of series of thin white fibre optic strips connected to a source of light, which breaks into rainbow colours. A worker in overalls, ankle-deep in the ocean, pushing down a 10cm diameter cable.

Is it important to be able to see, to imagine the infrastructure that supports our daily activities? There is the knowledge that our ocean floors were lined with fibre optics encased in plastic and rubber, and there are the visuals around it, the image of the man in the sea, the photograph of colorful light as it travels. Arguably we need a visual language in order to resist the notion that information travels via abstract clouds in the sky. And that visual language will not be found in the Getty Images accompanying newspaper articles about technology infrastructure.

Art can, and does, offer a new way of representing this visual problem. Evan Roth's sculpture *Burial Ceremony* is made of two kilometers of fiber optic cables. Placed in the middle of the gallery (*Burial Ceremony* was shown at Carroll/Fletcher in 2015), the reeled-out cable, organised in an inverted-eight shape reminiscent of the infinity symbol which is industry practice for spooling the precious cables, takes up almost the entire room. The title of the work echoes the subject of nineteenth-century paintings, such as J.M.W Turner's *Burial at Sea (*1842), but its form and materiality point to the fact that the subject of this work is consciousness raising. One of the arguments to be made in favour of this kind of work, however, is that while it takes a textual, infrastructural problem and attempts to formulate answers for visually, it also looks back to art history and participates in a debate that is rooted in the historiography of art history: the connection between form and content, subject and visuals.

This is where the ocean theme comes in as a handy, almost too-neat example. In a classic essay in the history of art, "The Open Window and the Storm-Tossed Boat," Lorenz Eitner discusses the two romantic, nineteenth-century subject matters as a way of exemplifying that aesthetic significance was inherent to the viewpoints these artists are working with rather than an excuse or a context for representation. He writes: "The reluctance to come to grips with subject matter has had strange effects on the history of modern art. Although the subjects treated by the century's most prominent artists cannot be wholly ignored, they are usually approached without much curiosity and their meanings are seldom deeply probed. Manet, it appears, painted his Execution of Maximilian to solve pictorial problems which Goya had raised; Degas' studies of the ballet were entirely motivated by an interest in motion and design. … The neglect of subject matter stems from the conviction that the essential qualities of art reside in form, not in extraneous ideas; that form is meaning, not a vehicle for meaning. … The artists of the nineteenth century had no doubt that subject matter could possess aesthetic significance."[2]

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To document, to discuss, to bring into the gallery any kind of visual language around infrastructure means to work with *landscapes*. Trevor Paglen's last show at Metro Pictures gallery in New York included a series of large-scale seascapes presented as diptychs alongside maritime maps including information about the cables that hit the shore at those points, their materiality and history, and the proof (by way of leaks from the Snowden archives) of them being tapped by the NSA. The landscape becomes ominous, dark when conflated with information. And it's accompanied by photos taken underwater of submarine cables: dark, indecipherable images of deep blues and the cold brown-gray of the ocean floor, the subjects in question snake along the composition without claiming primacy. Titles play a crucial work in identifying Paglen's subjects and concerns, otherwise, those submarine images are almost indiscernible: the cables look similar to one another, the turquoise of the water doesn't change much between the Atlantic and the Pacific.

Landscape becomes a layered zone in these works. When she photographs seascapes for her ongoing series "The All Infrared Line" (2012–2016), artist Femke Herregraven's focus on submarine fiber optic cables is a reflection on the role this infrastructure plays in global trading, especially as a result of high-frequency trading, where every millisecond gained by laying a new fiber optic cable (or abandoning them altogether in favor of microwaves) is worth billions of dollars. The result is again, photographs and videos of seascapes, which, like Paglen, quote from a long history of pictorial language.

The formal proximity of the ocean theme allows us to see that these works do a similar move to the artists Eitner discusses: they draw meaning and political agency from their subject matters while relying on aesthetic significance for attention. None of these are works *about* the physical properties of the internet, but rather they are about labour, surveillance, and the international monetary system. They are all related in looking to the ocean, but they're also related in that their methodology is to take this invisible and make it visible. The question is, however, whether that is all that this work could do. Whether to show what is unseen, expose what is concealed, is the only methodology at hand for the contemporary artist dealing with these questions. I have no interest in pointing to artists and their works as a problem—as an art critic, and as a person who is interested in and concerned about issues of visibility of infrastructure, surveillance, the international monetary system, and the way networked technology allows for all of the above, I believe in works that hone in on this politics of visibility. Still, there's a need to challenge the idea that this gesture is the only possible method to reflect these issues.

What could other methodologies for art to interfere with and reflect on this visual problem look like? Media theorist Jussi Parikka offers reuse, recycling, and remixing as artistic methodologies, especially in the appendix, co-authored with Garnet Hertz, to his *Geology of Media*, "Zombie Media: Circuit Bending Media Archeology Into an Art Method."[3] In that chapter, Parikka discusses the dominance of planned obsolescence in the design of hardware and proposes looking into the construction of technologies and their possible misuse (Parikka adorably links this as far back as Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*) could be a way of countering, or refusing, these wasteful exploitative designs. And though he doesn't give many examples of successful artistic practices that do this, that reuse or repurpose hardware or "old" media, as a strategy it is significant for both its environmental and mental effectiveness: both sparing the earth from another piece of hardware in a landfill, also raising viewers' consciousness to the objecthood of the devices we use (objecthood which is often only recognised when a glass screen breaks, then forgotten when the phone is replaced).

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Another method, which in the context of this essay feels almost cheeky, is text. To counter a linguistic problem with language, fight fire with fire. Tyler Coburn's book and series of performances at data centers *I'm That Angel* (2011–) are the result of ongoing research into the conditions of labor and language on Web 2.0. It is the feverish, quick, sharply written confession of a content-farm employee, and it talks back to the viewer—"You are

not a human. You are an eyeball."—just as it describes the protagonist's situation: "I am not a writer. I am a content farmer. These words mean more to the Google robot than they do 2 u."[4] *I'm That Angel* generates discourse both in textual space (in the form of a book that is in the collection of the libraries of MoMA and Banff, for example) and in restricted spaces: the performances bring viewers together into data centers, where they are usually not allowed, and which they oftentimes have never seen. To discuss the materiality of the internet means to recognize its sensual effects: Evan Roth, for example, in his "Internet Landscapes" series records infrared video as well as sound—wind, white noise, the artist's hearbeats, broken up conversations. And in *Tubes*, Andrew Blum's best-seller travelogue searching for the physical properties, there's a lovely, memorable passage in which Blum describes that the internet has a smell: it's the scent of air conditioning units working nonstop, the fragrance of ozone released by the compressors. [5] Language, as Blum's book exemplifies well, is descriptive, and can create strong imagery.

Part of the reason for the centrality of the visualisation method is exhibitions. Like "Big Bang Data," mentioned earlier, a growing number of shows focused on the internet have been presented across the world in the past couple of years, which highlight this kind of work, from "Under the Clouds: From Paranoia to the Digital Sublime" in June 2015 at the Serralves Museum in Porto to "Electronic Superhighway" at the Whitechapel Gallery, in London, which opened January 2016. The recent wave of exhibitions on the topic exposes an anxiety in the art context to participate in the discourse about how networked technology affects our lives, as well as over the role of art in this context. And so, these will include maps of submarine cables; lots and lots of screens and exposed wires (not because of sloppy installation, but rather as a way of making technology *less* seamless, more visible); many a projection of live data culled from the web. These exhibitions promote a certain look for art that critically engages with networked technology: it needs to be sizable enough to compete with the spectacle of trying to envision the scale and reach of the web; it is often on and connected to the internet.

The proliferation of shows about networked technology and its possible discontent are related to museums' mission to reflect upon the way technological changes affect artists' work. Temporary exhibitions, too, are a good space in which to think about a constantly shifting and changing topic. The question these exhibitions never ask, however, is whether in the context of the politics of networked technology, visual culture is just a tool or the endgoal, and what creating a visual language could do, and could mean. This is an urgent conversation in the art context, in which the potential of the visual medium is of paramount importance, and it is essential to question again here whether visual culture is just a tool or an endgoal.

This essay could have looked away from the sea and onto the sky to discuss drones as a subject in artistic production; it could have looked to physical surveillance and the work of Zach Blas (whose *Facial Weaponization Suite* [2011–14], a series of masks meant to disguise the wearer's features from being tracked by closed-circuit television cameras, was widely shown in the context of the abovementioned exhibitions); it could have looked

to the rhetoric of media corporations in the work of artists like Simon Denny. The interest in the sea is a visual one, too, as a subject artists have taken to for centuries, a subject which is a metaphor for economic conditions, questions of space and geography and the position of man in front of bigger forces, from Caspar David Friedrich to Trevor Paglen. I used to think that the focus on visual impact as a sole strategy to consider solutions for an infrastructural problem was misguided, but I don't believe that anymore: through the ocean theme, I recognise that this is a strand of contemporary work that combines the issues of contemporary politics with those of art history.

And a last caveat: I'm not even sure these questions of methodology and presentation are long-term problems. The next question on the table to replace this query into the role of images in our understanding of technology and power structures will be about the role of technology in the creation of the image itself, in its manipulation and circulation. The machine-sight of a drone is a much more complex issue than whether or not our eyes can see an image of that drone, printed large-scale on high-quality photo paper (and it's a question that, unsurprisingly, Paglen has written about well[6]). What constitutes interference in this process? It may not be a visual problem but a technical one. And so, we flip again: from art's role to make visible, to art drawing our attention to the limits of the visual. But we can't close our eyes to it.

New York and London based Orit Gat writes at the various intersections of contemporary art, publishing and internet culture. She is Features Editor at Rhizome, Contributing Editor at The White Review and Momus, and Managing Editor at WdW Review.

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[1] "The ways in which the rhetoric of computation, and the belief-system associated with it, benefits and fits into established structures of institutional power. I investigate these benefits in two ways: first, by looking at those aspects of institutional power aided through belief in the superior utility of computerization as a form of social and political organization; second, by examining how the rhetoric of computerization circulates throughout our society, both inside of powerful institutions and outside of them, and then how that rhetoric entails beliefs about human subjectivity that endorse institutional power in a reciprocal manner." David Golumbia, *The Cultural Logic of Computation* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2009), 3.

[2] Lorenz Eitner, "The Open Window and the Storm-Tossed Boat: An Essay in the Iconography of Romanticism," *The Art Bulletin* Vol. 37, No. 4 (December 1955): 281–282.

[3] Jussi Parikka and Garnet Hertz "Zombie Media: Circuit Bending Media Archeology Into an Art Method" in Parikka, *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 141–153.

[4] Tyler Coburn, *I'm That Angel* (2012), 9.

[5] Andrew Blum, *Tubes: A Journey to the Center of the Internet* (New York: Ecco/HarperCollins, 2012), 44.

[6] http://blog.fotomuseum.ch/author/trevor-pagle/