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ART PROJECT - THE WORLD THAT THE PORTUGUESE CREATED



Exhibition
Lisbon and Porto

> text: SÍLVIA GOMES

EVAN ROTH *Red Lines with* *Landscapes: Portugal*

The exhibition *Red Lines with Landscapes: Portugal*, by Evan Roth, is the latest addition to the Red Lines project that the artist has been developing for the past two years, which involves the mapping of submarine data transmission cables and the video recording of the coastal landscapes where they have been laid.



r_08r_65137mp_121803.jpg, 2020 (video still)

There is a widespread belief that the Internet, the digital world and telecommunications are all in the 'cloud', so one might presuppose that most data is transmitted via satellite. In reality, a Wi-Fi network is only truly wireless as far as the nearest antenna or cell tower, from where the data is then conveyed by land and subsea fiber-optic cables.

What was the fundamental motive of interest for developing this investigation?

Was there any other artistic project essential to the drawing up of *Red Lines* and the technical knowledge needed for its realisation?

In 2014 I began questioning how fundamental a role I wanted the internet to play in my artistic practice. Prior to that, peer-to-peer networks like Napster, LimeWire, Soul Seek, and The Pirate Bay, together with ideas stemming from free software communities, were very influential in my desire to make art in this medium (i.e., net art). But the web becoming more monetised, centralised, and an instrument of mass surveillance called into question the initial reasons I found it such an inspiring and liberating medium in which to work.

In the beginning I wanted to visit the internet physically as a way to reset my relationship with it, and to find a way

to continue making work within this medium. Very quickly, this desire was replaced by a more general enthusiasm for making work within the landscape. I came to view communications systems as just another element (like clouds and trees) within the environment, rather than something totally separate from it. The more time I spent filming outdoors the more I came to understand time as one of the primary elements of the project. There was such a jarring disconnect between the time I spent behind my phone screen from the time I spent behind the lens of the camera that I wanted that dichotomy to be present in the viewing of the work as well. I see this in *Red Lines*, for example, through the relationship between the speed in which data is transferred via the infrared laser light and the stillness of nature.

It has been estimated that fiber-optic cables move around 97% of all intercontinental data. From the same perspective, *Red Lines* networks carries videos from the server where they are hosted to anyone's electronic device, anywhere in the world. In turn, someone who is in Portugal, for instance, and accesses a video filmed in New Zealand, is activating the submarine cable route between the two countries, integrating the peer-to-peer network that al-

Pop-up at Viaduct Furniture, London, 2018. Photo: Matthew Andrews, courtesy Artangel



lows real-time sharing between users.

A democratisation of the work of art and its experience occurs by making it available for free, and by removing it from the usual art spaces to bring it into people's homes, where its access enhances its availability to others, feeding this synergy that the project aims for and is essential to it.

Do you always seek to manifest this kind of concern and to spread awareness through your work?

I see there as being three primary aspects of 'place' in the work: the landscape (where it is filmed), the network (where it is shared) and the home (where it is viewed). I feel that issues surrounding democratisation exist especially in the latter two.

The network is powered by a mix of regional servers set up in the countries in which I filmed together with all of the people that are viewing the work on their own computers and smartphones. The fact that the medium of the work is a peer-to-peer network is significant because when you are viewing the work you are also sharing it and strengthening the network. This allows the project to live completely outside of the servers owned by Amazon, Google, and Facebook, whose dominance and influence played a role in sending me down this path at the onset.

The home is also an important place in the project. Living with artwork is an experience that I didn't have for several years until I started trading pieces with friends. What I noticed is that when you occupy space with art on a longer timeline, it starts to take root in a different part of your brain. I typically live with work for three months before I consider it ready for public exhibition, and that has become part of my art making process. This way I feel that I really come to know a piece in a different way and that the strengths and weaknesses are harder to intellectually maneuver around.

For me a large part of *Red Lines* is giving others an opportunity to experience living with art. An affordance of net art is that one can have a primary viewing experience of the work for free at home. This is one of the main factors that drew me to the web as a medium for art in the first place. Most net art, however, is meant to be viewed in short bursts (e.g., surfing) while *Red Lines* is meant to be left in stasis: the laptop then turned on its side, or the smartphone mounted, and left untouched. The work then exists in the home not as a replica (like a poster of a painting) but as the actual work in its intended form. This way, the hurdle of ownership, which prevents most people from living with art, is circumvented. My hope is that a small percentage of people who visit the exhibition will set up the work in their own home, become an active node in the network and come to a different understanding of the pieces.

This project has all kinds of layers that ultimately define it: the videos are filmed in infrared - the light spectrum by which data is transmitted through fiber optics - and

always displayed on vertically-aligned screens.

Another particularity is how in the installation 19th-century landscape paintings are incorporated, with paintings from the MNAC's collection in the Lisbon exhibition, and through a collaboration with the Soares dos Reis Museum in Porto.

What kind of relationships do you establish between those works and your moving landscapes, and what other readings can it bring to your work?

From the beginning there was a historic connection in the compositions, to Romance period landscape paintings and Chinese and Japanese landscape watercolors (often vertically-oriented on scrolls and incorporating lots of blank space). I was interested in how the ordering principles of horizon lines and network lines could be combined to create singular depictions of landscape that would become part of this dialogue.

In addition, I was also experimenting with connections to history in the ways those pieces were installed. At one point I started installing the works in tightly grouped clusters that were meant to mimic the way in which paintings from the Romance period were often hung. For an exhibition in Paris, *Landscape With a Ruin* I utilised historic architecture; in *Common Interests and Reciprocal Esteem* I

(top right)
Pietro Antonlo Martini, 1738-1797, *Exposition au Salon de 1787*, 1787. Public domain

(right below)
Red Lines with Landscapes: Portugal, 2020. Installation view at Fidelidade Arte. Photo: Bruno Lopes

(below)
Landscape with a Ruin, Paris, 2017. Photo: Vinciane Lebrun-Verguethen, courtesy of the Mona Bismarck American Center



was pairing them with a historic text; last year I was invited by The Collection Museum in Lincoln (UK) to work with their romance period English landscape paintings, making the historical connection less of a reference and more of a direct dialogue with landscape art from the past.

For the show at Fidelidade Arte, I was given the generous invitation to work with the collection of the Chiado Museum. The results are a mix of new *Red Lines* pieces filmed in Portugal hung alongside historic Portuguese paintings. This process was about making a singular dialogue surrounding landscape that connects different times and mediums.

According to the map www.submarinecablemap.com there are currently about 400 submarine cables around the planet, connecting all the continents at several landing points, 5 of which are located in Portugal.

The *Red Lines* map shows us 11 of these points, that mark the location of the servers in which the videos filmed in those territories are stored.

If the goal is to totally complete the map, *Red Lines* still has literally a sea of possibilities from where it can evolve.

Can that potential be overwhelming, due to the resources it implies, or do you have the will to pursue it and make it happen?

Could this be a project that you will continue to pursue throughout your career, or might it draw to an end soon?

The short answer is no, I don't feel the need to visit all of these locations. While research is part of my process, the

project in the end is much more about one person's journey through landscape and time than it is an exhaustive report on the physicality of the network.

This work has been the majority of my artistic practice for the past five years, which is the longest amount of time I've been so fully invested in a single project. I've never been so personally engaged, curious and motivated this far into a project. Because so much of *Red Lines* is about time and slowness in the face of accelerationism, I felt like it made sense for me to slow down my art-making process as well, not by slowing down the amount of hours I'm working, but in terms of the turnaround between ideation and what I consider to be completion. Had I stopped one year into the project I think it could have remained a piece just about infrastructure. Now I hope that it is much more a project about landscape, history, power, and time than it is about cables. The performance of *Red Lines* (which is the peer-to-peer component that connects all of the individual pieces in the series) will come to an end in September of this year. I'm very grateful to Artangel, who has been funding the network's production, maintenance, and hosting costs (as well as to Creative Capital who also heavily supported the project). Originally *Red Lines* was supposed to be a one year performance but they have graciously funded it for a second year. Whether or not I will continue making new pieces in this series, certain aspects of *Red Lines* are already carrying over into new projects.

Being a multifaceted artist and having carried out such diverse projects, I would like you to highlight some of tho-

se works (e.g. *EyeWriter*), establishing a connection with topics that are so dear to you like Art, Technology, Hacking and Activism.

My artistic career started with my graduate thesis, titled *Graffiti Analysis*, which centered on making free software for graffiti writers. This transitioned into Graffiti Research Lab, a group I co-founded in New York, which extended that idea to making free and open source tools (software and hardware) for use in public space by graffiti writers, street artists and activists. We had some successes with projects like LED Throwies and LASER Tag. But what we realised was that social hacking was actually much more powerful in terms of affecting culture than technical hacking. I then co-founded the F.A.T. Lab in response to this, and we made projects like the fake Google Streetview Car and collaborated on others like *EyeWriter*, which was an eye

tracking system designed with (and for) paralysed graffiti writer TEMPTI, allowing him and others to draw with only eye movement.

Looking back on this body of work I'm both proud and critical. Underlying a lot of those projects was an optimistic yet naive belief that free software, free speech, and collective practices could be used to shift power imbalances in society. *Red Lines* is in large part me wrestling with the fact that those assumptions have turned out to be more false than true. It is still an open, free and collective endeavour that exists as a peer to peer network, but where G.R.L. and F.A.T. LAB projects embraced speed, maximised audience, and attempted to provide solutions, *Red Lines* embraces slowness, more intimate audiences, and is more reflective of my struggles with questions I don't know how to answer. //

(on the left)
<https://redlines.network/> (map)

(on the right)
Red Lines with Landscapes: Portugal, 2020. Installation view at Fidelidade Arte. Photo: Bruno Lopes

