#### Kites & Websites

#### Evan Roth



Belenius/Nordenhake **AKSIOMA** 

| Changes have been made to the layout of this book for the digital version to improve screen readability. An unaltered version of the original printed book can be downloaded <a href="here">here</a> . |
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## Sweden

















































# New Zealand



















## France











# Kites & Websites



n57.416450e11.934089, Evan Roth, 2016, courtesy of Belenius/Nordenhake (Image credit: Gustav Hallmer)

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# Internet Landscapes. A Journey in Space and Time

#### Domenico Quaranta

For a long time, and for no particular reason, the Internet has been perceived mainly as a soul without a body: a dematerialized, invisible entity, filling the space between computers, allowing us to communicate almost instantly, and to travel from a website to another in the blink of an eye. The space of communication was virtual, while the physical world was the real world. Visiting the internet was described as "surfing." Together with the ocean, another seminal metaphorical reference was outer space: amateur websites were often sporting shiny starry night backgrounds, and both Netscape and Internet Explorer had references to space in their iconic logos. People who spent a lot of time online used the phrase "In Real Life" (IRL) to talk about what happened when they were offline. At the time, of course, the average Internet user knew, or could understand quite easily, that this "immaterial" network was made possible by the telephone physical infrastructure, which web pages were relying upon, and that emails were traveling through servers. They could even realize, if they thought about it for a minute, that home computers would end up very soon in a third world illegal dumpster, and that the cyberspace required a lot of electricity.

Today, it's pretty different. We know that the Internet is real and what happens online is real. We changed too many devices to dismiss the fact that they may have an impact on the environment. We have been enslaved for too long to the endless flow of information to just enjoy it as surfing. We know that there are companies that are worth billions thanks to our data. We have seen pictures of data centers, maps of the undersea cable, construction sites with a sign saying that the fibre optic is coming soon. Despite all the rhetorics that accompanied the launch of wi-fi communication and cloud services, today our perception of the internet is less mystical and more secular and prosaic. We may still find David Bowie's description of the Internet as "an alien life form" extremely sexy and fascinating, but today it's easier to understand it as a heavy, expensive, and pervasive man-made infrastructure.

And yet, this awareness is, again, a vague perception rather than an actual knowledge. We still travel through the electronic superhighway mostly in immaterial ways. The actual body of the Internet is yet to be explored. Internet Landscapes, by US born, Paris based artist Evan Roth, is a project that brings him to travel through the actual body of the Internet, by visiting and documenting some of its physical manifestations. More precisely, Roth is interested in visiting submarine fiber optic cable landing locations, places where a national or continental network gets connected to the global Internet, which allow people to communicate instantly with any part of the world. The artist selects these locations on a map and, whenever he has the chance to spend some time in a new country, and to fund his traveling, he visits them, doing audio and video recording. The results of this process are later turned into artworks. According to the artist, "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. Through understanding and experiencing the Internet's physicality, one comes to understand the network not as a mythical cloud, but as a human made and controlled system of wires and computers."<sup>2</sup>

The choice to visit submarine fiber optic cable landing locations is meaningful. Most of the Internet infrastructure is undersea and invisible to the human eye. Over the mainland, this gigantic, titanic body is turned into human scale. You may experience the vertigo of the data flow by visiting data centers and server farms, but there everything is recognizable and familiar. You see humans, technology, tangles of small colored cables, lights going on and off. You are probably close to a city. You are online. Submarine fiber optic cable landing locations are usually located in obscure places along a given country's shoreline. They are not meant to be visited, so they are hard to reach from the land. They are often far from the tourist's places. When you get there, you are alone with the cable, the ocean and the wind. It's so uneven to have visitors from the land that the signs informing about the presence of the cable are looking away from you, to the ships that may eventually get too close to the seaside. And yet there, the Internet is not everywhere, "all around you", but exactly where the sign is placed, and manifests itself physically. If you want to do a pilgrimage to the body of the Internet, they are the best places to visit, maybe the only place where you can be alone with the behemoth, spend time with it, meditate upon it.

The Internet Landscapes project is an actual journey. When you set out to do a journey, you can prepare your luggage,

study maps, read travel guides, do vaccinations, prepare everything, but you are unlikely to know in advance what you'll experience, and what you'll find out. What Evan Roth found out when he started visiting the "physical Internet" in the first place were simple landscapes, where the "Internet" layer is somehow removed. Interviewed, he said: "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)." And furthermore: "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."3 This is what he mostly pictured: lonely trees in uncomfortable landscapes. The map of the Internet became his own way to discover the world. The images and videos of the series can be simply enjoyed as such: landscape painting.

### The Wanderer

Traveling to a remote location, in order to do landscape painting. The project Internet Landscapes sets itself in a long artistic tradition, that found its most complete realization in the Romantic myth of the wanderer. Today, traveling is mostly a finalized activity: we travel to a place,

in order to do something. It happens very fast, and the journey has no value per se: it's just a means to an end, an in-between time frame. As a frequent flyer, Evan Roth knows this way of traveling very well, and probably the Internet Landscapes project started in the very same way: a series of trips to well researched locations, in order to experience the Internet physically. But while the project developed, the relationship between the act of travelling and its ends / destination slightly changed: the project became an opportunity to experience traveling in a different way, and this way affected the project and its final result. The Romantic wanderer is a heroic figure engaged in a never ending quest for the natural sublime. Although

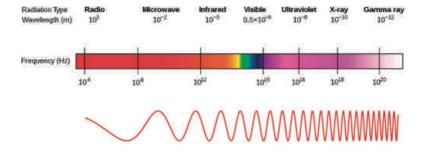


The Beach at Palavas, Gustave Courbet, oil on canvas, 1854

the sublime manifests itself better in some places than others, it can't be found in a specific location, and it isn't rooted into a specific feature or detail of a place. It's more about the overall atmosphere of a place, and it can be experienced through silence, solitude and immersion. Like in Caspar David Friedrich's Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog (1818), or in Gustave Courbet's Le Bord de mer à Palavas (1854), the wanderer is always alone in nature; and although clouds, waves, trees, mountains, rocks, ruins and religious symbols can be often found in romantic landscapes, the sublime does not manifest itself in these single elements, but in their combination, and in the visual language developed by the artist.

Looking for the Internet in submarine fiber optic cable landing locations, the wanderer Evan Roth realizes that the Internet can't be captured by simply shooting the cables, or by pointing the camera to the cable warning signs; and can't be portrayed via documentary means. These pictures, that he sometimes takes, can be good for Instagram, or for the lectures he sometimes gives about the project. Here, in these places where the Internet becomes an invisible yet perceivable part of the landscape, it can be captured only by spending time with it, and by developing a new (audio) visual language.

The visual language adopted for the project is infrared photography. Rarely used in visual arts, infrared photography is a conceptual reference to the architecture of the Internet, which is infrared laser light transmitted through fiber optic cables. Infrared cameras are widely used in the security industry, in such a way that their aesthetics are now



Electromagnetic Spectrum, courtesy of the The Awamutu Space Centre

intimately connected with our daily experience of pervasive surveillance. A less obvious, but very important, reference is to the practices of paranormal researchers, that informs the work done with the audio, too, as we will see below. As the artist explains, paranormal researchers "have developed their own technologies to help them visualize and communicate with an invisible world of disembodied human energy [...] Ghost hunting technologies, like many of today's social media platforms, are made by believers who attempt (and often fail) to use technology to give us human and emotional connections to people we rarely see in person. I find these tools inspirational and relevant in helping me reconnect with the Internet."4 As a ghost hunter, Evan Roth developed his own infrared camera by hacking an ordinary camera, which allowed him to adjust it to his aesthetic and conceptual needs (the camera is shooting near the 1550 nanometer range of the electromagnetic spectrum, which is a common modulation for infrared data transport through fiber optic).

Visually, infrared photography adds a layer of abstraction to the image or the video. It alters the image in such a way that makes us less sensitive to phenomenological aspects of the single landscape (the light of the day, the color of the sea, the beauty or ugliness of the details). These landscapes make us think more to the sinopy of a fresco, or to a white marble low relief, than to documentary photography. Infrared photography turns the image into something poetic, painterly, eternal, magic.

Something similar happens with the audio. Roth custom built an instrumental transcommunication device based on the spirit box, a tool commonly used in paranormal communities that scans radio frequencies at regular intervals, recording a mix of white noise and audio fragments. His version reads his own pulse and changes radio frequencies in real time with his heart rate. The final result is composed of a mix of ambient sounds from the surrounding nature, along with fragments of local radio frequencies controlled through the spirit box.

In other words, Evan Roth is using contemporary means of communication in order to capture, in the tradition of romantic landscape painting, the invisible (and inaudible) level of reality: the one at which the Internet manifests itself as an endless data flow.

### Kites

The journey of the wanderer is always a travel through time, and within himself. By traveling, the wanderer often meditates on the traces left by human history on the landscape, and engages a visible transformation of his own mind. Romantic travel tales are always bildungsroman: think



The Chapel of the Virgin at Subiaco, Samuel Morse, oil on canvas, 1830

to John Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress, or Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels, as famous examples. Engaging his quest for the traces of the physical Internet in space, Roth also engaged a pilgrimage through time: exploring the tradition of romantic painting, the history of the Internet and of communication technologies, and the intersections between the two. For example he discovered that Samuel Morse, the inventor of the Morse code, was also an amateur landscape painter.

On a personal level, Roth discovered his own difficulties about standing alone in nature. After years of compulsive web surfing, hyperactive tab jumping, multitasking and instant communication he, as probably most of us, initially found the experience of nature and loneliness extremely



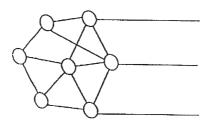
George Kemp, Marconi's Chief Assistant, with a Baden-Powell kite, courtesy of GEC-Marconi

boring. As he explained: "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."5 On a broader, more general level, the Internet Landscapes project is the consequence of his personal need to review his past approach to communication technologies, and the road that brought him to his current view. Internet Landscapes are his coming-of-age story.

These two levels of traveling are what brought Roth to print his landscapes on kites, instead of making regular photo prints. As a children's game, kites work as a reference to

#### INTERNET



Patent US5729594, March 17 1998

Roth's juvenile, spontaneous approach to the Internet as a medium, and to his coming-of-age process. In the history of electronic communications, however, kites are one of the first tools used to experiment with transatlantic wireless communications. More specifically, in December 1901 Guglielmo Marconi successfully used six hexagonal kites to transmit radio waves over the ocean. Roth's kites reference Marconi's kites both in size and shape, while at the same time hinting to the hexagram shape often used to represent the Internet in patent filings.

### Web Sites

While the Internet Landscapes pictures have been turned into kites, the audio and video recordings have been used to build websites. By visiting them, the viewer may be struck by the level of "site unspecificity" they seem to display. The URL is impossible to recall, and to type: you need a straight link, or to copy and paste it. Videos are embedded full page, but they are vertical and don't resize, so you always see just a part of the image. The soundtrack looks like white noise. According to the habits of current web surfing, you probably open them on a browser tab, among many others. Try to spend time with them, without checking your Facebook account every thirty seconds or so. It's hard. It's boring.

The best way to experience them is probably in an exhibition space, on a vertical screen. There, you can enjoy them as paintings. Roth tried out various solutions: setting up installations reminiscent of the "cable alert" signs he found on submarine fiber optic cable landing locations; or on wall,

on huge flat screens or miniaturized on tiny LCD displays. In the exhibition space, we can enjoy them as a simple aesthetic experience: an exercise in immersion, contemplation and slowness. On a web browser, they are background noise at best. So, why are they online?

A website may look like a painting, but it's not a painting. Behind the surface, there are a lot of levels you can play with. There is a source code, that you can use to inform the browser about how to display the page, but also to hide information that is interesting only for human eyes. There are files that are assembled by the source code in order to turn an archive into a multimedia experience. These files are physically stored on a server located somewhere in the world, and are associated with a numerical address that can



The Kite's Message, Honor C. Appleton, 1926

be translated into words. By typing this address, we activate a flow of information that travels from the server, through the cables, to our screen. Along this journey, information is converted into infrared light, and then again into information that is interpreted and displayed. By doing a website, instead of a painting, you can play with all these things, and Evan Roth does. For his websites, he bought server space in the countries he visited. Whenever we load them, we ask some data packets stored, for example, in Sweden, to travel through the very same place they represent to reappear on our computer. The web address - something like <a href="http://">http://</a> n57.630653e11.878293.se/ - is actually displaying the GPS coordinates of the place portrayed in the work: if we paste it in an online maps system such as Google Maps, we can experience a different way of "visiting" the place. But it may be even easier if we check the source code of the page. There we can find some useful information, including the Google Maps link of the visited location and a link to a traceroute information file, displaying the path of packets across an Internet Protocol (IP) network.

In other words, these websites are actually "web sites", places on the network that mirror both visually and conceptually the physical places they portray, in a complexity of layers and references that makes the experience of the project richer as long as we dig deep.

### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Check out David Bowie's 2000 BBC interview with Jeremy Paxman: http://www.factmag.com/2016/01/11/david-bowie-internet-jeremy-paxman-interview/.
- <sup>2</sup> Evan Roth, "Internet Landscapes. Project Outline", 2016, unpublished.
- <sup>2</sup> Bani Brusadin, Ruth McCullough, Domenico Quaranta, "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, in Bani Brusadin, Eva and Franco Mattes, Domenico Quaranta (Eds.), The Black Chamber. Surveillance, paranoia, invisibility & the internet, exhibition catalogue, Link Editions and Aksioma, March 2016.
- <sup>4</sup> Evan Roth, "Internet Landscapes. Project Outline", cit.
- <sup>5</sup> B. Brusadin, R. McCullough, D. Quaranta, "The more time I spend alone in nature...", cit.

# Biography



Evan Roth is an American artist based in Paris whose practice visualizes and archives culture through unintended uses of technologies. Creating prints, sculptures, videos and websites, his work explores the relationship between misuse and empowerment and the effect that philosophies from hacker communities can have when applied to digital and non-digital systems.

His work is in the public collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Israel Museum. Recent exhibitions include the 2016 Biennale of Sydney; Electronic Superhighway (2016-1966) at Whitechapel Gallery, London; and This Is for Everyone at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Roth co-founded the arts organizations Graffiti Research Lab and the Free Art and Technology Lab and in 2016 was a recipient of Creative Capital funding.

#### **Education**

2003 - 2005

MFA Design Technology (MFADT) Parsons School of Design, New York City, NY 1996 – 2000

B.S. Architecture University of Maryland, College Park, MD

#### Collections

The Israel Museum, Jerusalem (Self Portrait: Multi-Touch Painting series, 2013) Museum of Modern Art, New York (Graffiti Taxonomy: New York, 2011) Museum of Modern Art, New York (Graffiti Taxonomy: Paris, 2011) Museum of Modern Art, New York (Eyewriter, 2009) Museum of Modern Art, New York (L.A.S.E.R. Tag, 2008) National Media Museum, Bradford UK (Eyewriter, 2012)

#### Solo Exhibitions

Belenius/Nordenhake, Kites & Websites, Stockholm, Sweden, 2016 Belenius/Nordenhake, Silhouettes, Stockholm, Sweden, 2015 Foosaner Art Museum, Intellectual Property Donor, Melbourne, FL, 2015 Knoxville Museum of Art, Intellectual Property Donor, Knoxville, TN, 2015 Carroll/Fletcher, Voices Over the Horizon, London, UK, 2015 Ulrich Museum of Art, Intellectual Property Donor, Wichita State University, Wichita, KS, 2015 Gallery Niklas Belenius, Memory, Stockholm, Sweden, 2014 Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery, Intellectual Property Donor, Wesleyan

University, Middletown, CT, 2014 XPO Gallery, View In Room, Paris, France, 2013

Aksioma Institute for Contemporary Art, Flight Mode, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 2013 N2 Galeria, Evan Roth: La Vanguardia Americana, Barcelona, Spain, 2012 Eastern Michigan University Gallery of Art, Welcome to Detroit, Detroit, MI, 2012 90 Bowery, When We Were Kings, New York City, NY, 2011

### **Group Exhibitions**

#### 2016

Whitechapel Gallery, Electronic Superhighway, London Biennale of Sydney, Sydney, Australia Skuc Gallery, The Black Chamber: surveillance, paranoia, invisibility & the internet, Ljubljana, Slovenia

#### 2015

This Is for Everyone, Museum of Modern Art, New York City, NY Ego Update, NRW-Forum, Dusseldorf, Germany

Biennial of Asunción, Asunción, Paraguay

Galerie Krinzinger, MANKIND / MACHINEKIND, Vienna, Austria Utah Museum of Contemporary Art, Panopticon, Salt Lake City, UT

Kunsthaus Kaufbeuren, #NEULAND (with Aram Bartholl and JODI),

Kaufbeuren, Germany

LISTE Art Fair Basel (with HeK), PEBKAC - IMHO, Basel, Switzerland Hessel Museum of Art, Signal from Noise, Bard College, NY Belenius/Nordenhake, STATE OF BEING, Stockholm, Sweden

Gray Area Foundation, F.A.T. GOLD: San Francisco, San Francisco, CA

#### 2014

Alingsas Konsthallen, SNEL HEST, Alingsas, Sweden

Carroll Fletcher Gallery, Unoriginal Genius, curated by Domenico Quaranta, London, UK

Carroll Fletcher Gallery, Pencil / Line / Eraser, London, UK

Mestna galerija Ljubljana, net.art Painters and Poets, Ljubljana, Solvenia MuseumPark, Data Culture: Browser-Based Art, Rotterdam, Netherlands Furtherfield, Piracy as Friendship, London, UK

House of Electronic Arts Basel, Art & Arcade, curated by Alain Bieber, Basel, Switzerland

MU, Art & Arcade, curated by Alain Bieber, Eindhoven, Netherlands XPO Gallery, FULL SCREEN, curated by Aram Bartholl, Paris, France MU, F.A.T.Gold, Eindhoven, Netherlands

#### 2013

Museum of Moving Image, A Tribute to Heather, New York City, NY Rua Red, Beyond the White Cube (dual show with Constant Dullaart), curated by Nora O'Murchu, Dublin, Ireland

House of Electronic Arts Basel, Und Everybody Says Yeah, curated by Bieber Alain, Basel, Switzerland

Museum of Art, Seoul National University, Data Curation, Seoul, Korea Import Projects, Gordian Conviviality, curated by Max Schreier, Berlin, Germany XPO Gallery, OFFLINE ART: new2, Paris, France

Kasseler Kunstverein, OFFLINE ART: Hardcore, curated by Aram Bartholl, Kassel, Germany

FAT Gold, Eyebeam, New York City, NY Kim? Contemporary Arts, Save As, Riga, Latvia

#### 2012

Collect the WWWorld: The Artist as Archivist in the Internet Age, 319 Scholes, Brooklyn, NY

Kunsthalle Wien, BLK River, Vienna, Austria

Arts Le Havre, Biennale d'Art Contemporian, Le Prix Partouche, Le Havre, France Museum of the Moving Image, DVD Dead Drop, curated by Aram Bartholl, New York City, NY

Jeu de Paume Virtual Space, Form@ts, Paris, France

House for Electronic Arts Basel, Collect the WWWorld: The Artist as Archivist in the Internet Age, curated by Domenico Quaranta, Basel, Switzerland Bemis Center for Contemporary Art, "Transceiver", curated by Drift Station and Joel Damon, Omaha, NE

Centre de Cultura Contemporania de Barcelona, The Influencers 2012, curated by Eva and Franco Mattes, and Bani Brusadin, Barcelona, Spain Contemporary Art Center, Is This Thing On?, Cincinnati, OH

#### 2011

Museum of Modern Art, Talk To Me, New York City, NY
Portsmouth Museum of Art, ilmage: The Uncommon Portrait, Porstmouth, NH
Collect the WWWorld: The Artist as Archivist in the Internet Age, Brescia, Italy
NIMk, Cloud Sounds, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
2010 [14th] Japan Media Arts Festival, Tokyo, Japan
Welat Internetcafe, SPEED SHOW vol.5: Open Internet, Paris, France

#### 2010

Centre Pompidou, Studio 13/16, Paris, France British Design Museum, Brit. Insurance Design of the Year 2010, London, UK Kunsthalle Wien, Street and Studio From Basquiat to Seripop, Vienna, Austria SPEED SHOW vol.1 & 2: TELE-INTERNET, Berlin, Germany Pointe Ephemere, In Famous Carousel, Paris, France

#### 2009

Fondation Cartier, Born In The Streets, Paris, France Kurzfilmtage, 55th International Short Film Festival, Oberhausen, Germany Filmwinter, Festival For Expanded Media, Stuttgart, Germany NIMk - Montevideo / Time Based Arts, Versions, Amsterdam, Netherlands CREAM, International Festival for Arts and Media, Yokohama, Japan Future Gallery, Michael Jackson Doesn't Quit (Part 2), Berlin, Germany

#### 2008

Museum of Modern Art, Rough Cut: Design Takes a Sharp Edge, New York City, NY Tate Modern, Street Art, London, UK Museum of Modern Art, Design and the Elastic Mind, New York City, NY Sundance Film Festival, New Frontiers 2008, Park City, UT NIMk, Speaking Out Loud, Amsterdam, Netherlands Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, Beyond a Memorable Fancy, New York City, NY Total Museum of Contemporary Art, Hack the City! & Play-ing, Seoul, Korea Brooklyn Academy of Music, Brooklyn, NY

#### Awards and Commissions

Creative Capital Emerging Fields Award Recipient, 2016
Masters & Servers: Networked Culture in the Post-Digital Age Grant, 2015
2013 Commission by the Museum of Moving Image, New York City, NY
Smithsonian's Cooper-Hewitt 2012 National Design Award in Interaction Design

Eastern Michigan University, 2012 McAndless Distinguished Professorship, Detroit, MI

La Gaite Lyrique, Artist in Residence (July 2011), Paris, France Transmediale, 2011 Open Web Award, Berlin, Germany 2010 [14th] Japan Media Arts Festival, Excellence Prize in Interactive Art, Tokyo, Japan

Turku 2011, Grand Prix in Digital, Turku, Finland
Ars Electronica, 2010 Golden Nica in Interactive Art, Linz, Austria
FutureEverything, 2010 FutureEverything Award, Manchester, UK
Rhizome at the New Museum, Seven on Seven (2010), New York City, NY
Transmediale, 2010 Award Nomination, Berlin, Germany
British Design Museum, Nominated for the Brit Insurance Interactive Award
2010, London, UK

British Design Museum, Brit Insurance Interactive Award 2010, London, UK Transito\_MX, 03/Autonomies of Disagreement Project Selection, Mexico City, Mexico Rhizome at the New Museum, 2009 Rhizome Commission, New York City, NY Rhizome at the New Museum, 2007 Rhizome Commission, New York City, NY Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Off the Record Commission 2006, New York, NY Ars Electronica Prix, 2006 Award of Distinction in Interactive Art, Linz, Austria Eyebeam, Fellow (2005 to 2007), New York, NY

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Building the kites was made possible through the generous knowledge sharing of the kite making community. I would like to specifically thank Tylan Billings, who in addition to answering many questions, graciously sent me a kite that acted as a guide; Andrew Newton, whose detailed online instructions I consulted heavily; and, Gary Engvall, whose kite making instructions have influenced many kites.

Evan Roth www.evan-roth.com

### Colophon

Evan Roth Kites & Websites

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