

Landlines / Linhas Fixas

Landline is a compound word that forms a drawing in one's mind. It is a horizontal contour that cuts through space, defining the ground and the above. Drawing a line is simple enough, but to spatially define a void is an abstract thought. One needs to reinvent physics symbolically. A crudely drawn connection between two points is all it takes to make a horizon, to give the emptiness direction – a future and a past. Where a line can be a communication tool between existing and alternative worlds, this exhibition connects a long-distance call between physical, social, and spiritual structures. The artists' works touch on various themes, such as urbanisation, displacement, memories of technology and its social and esoteric relations.

The exhibition title refers to the undersea internet cables that carry data across the Atlantic Ocean, connecting the South American and European continents. The transmitted data, a non-linear stream of human interrelations, travels deep below international waters and beyond our awareness. Approximately seventy-one per cent of the surface of the Earth consists of oceans, yet humans have only explored a fraction of the oceanic floor. Scientists have investigated far greater percentages of planet Mars than the seabeds on Earth¹. Our internet infrastructure – the arteries of modern globalisation – lies in absolute darkness.

On the initiative of Dom Pedro II, the last monarch of Brazil, the first telegraphic submarine cable arrived by boat at Copacabana beach in 1873. The new era of long-distance communication also coincided with the rise of the spiritualist beliefs of the late nineteenth century, which was rooted in the mediumship between the material and spiritual plane. In Brazil, the followers of Allan Kardec's spiritist doctrine became widely popular and spread across the country. The telegraph cable's ability to transmit messages across the Atlantic was a wonder of the Second Industrial Revolution. But the uncharted potential of the technology was simultaneously associated with a paranormal potential – as a landline to the otherworldly. "The invisibility and intangibility of electric current, and its capacity to collapse time and space into a single, continuous plane of reference, provided the perfect analogy for the existence of the human soul beyond the body. After all, if telegraphic technologies could harness electromagnetic forces in order to communicate intentional messages, why should it not be possible to develop comparable techniques in order to communicate with the dead?"²

From ancient history until the Renaissance, the Atlantic Ocean was seen as a mythological void in the West. It was known as the frontiers of the world, the sea of darkness, and the passageway between the old and the so-called New World. The term *Atlantic* derives from 'The sea of Atlas' – after the Greek mythological Titan who holds the heavens on his shoulders. The imaginary lost continent of Atlantis was described as 'the Island of Atlas' by Plato in *Timaeus* and *Critias*. The speculations of an undiscovered civilisation continued to resurface throughout the early colonial age when Europeans identified Atlantis as the Americas.

To this day, fantasies of a submerged continent keep the myth of Atlantis afloat in online news media. With high-speed connection comes the risk of over-information, and our cognitive sense of urgency and factuality adapts. Atlantis-2 was the name of the first submarine fibre-optic cable system to connect Brazil and Europe with internet. It launched in February 2000 and was disconnected again in January 2022 when substituted by the superior EllaLink cable. But where its name may have been a metaphor for the internet utopia of the early 2000s, it is now a fitting metaphor for the looming eco-collapse that the world faces. Though the 8,500-kilometre-long cable is currently in the process of being retrieved, many others of the 500+ privately owned cables are prone to remain buried in the ocean as infrastructural ruins of human civilisation.

/ Andreas Albrechtsen

¹Why we have better maps of Mars than of the seafloor – and what USGS is doing to change that', 17 November 2023, <https://www.usgs.gov/news/science-snippet/why-we-have-better-maps-mars-seafloor-and-what-usgs-doing-change>

²Jeremy Stolow, 'Wired Religion: Spiritualism and Telegraphic Globalization in the Nineteenth Century', in *Empires and Autonomy: Moments in the History of Globalization*, eds. Stephen Streeter, John Weaver, and William Coleman (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2019), p.89.