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Takedown Notice: A Conversation with Paolo Cirio

By Liz Flyntz

Paolo Cirio is a conceptual artist whose work, while often based on digital networks and presented on the internet, is more concerned with underlying social structures than with the affect and aesthetics of the internet. Cirio's work tends to be text- and data-intensive. He targets the biggest multinational corporations out there: Amazon, Facebook, Visa, Google Maps, Twitter. And Cirio has gone for the jugular with each of them—he has scraped one million profiles from Facebook and posted them to a fake dating site (*Face to Facebook*, 2011); released tens of thousands of pay-per-view articles from major financial news outlets around the world, offering cash rewards to readers who successfully answered quizzes about them (*Daily Paywall*, 2014); and unveiled the legal identities of over two hundred thousand global companies using the Cayman Islands as a tax haven (*Loophole for All*, 2013). The pieces are often exhibited in some physical manifestation, as well as published online, where they enjoy a half-life during which the targets in question issue legal cease-and-desist letters and industry journals try to make sense of an “information performance artist” destroying the credibility and security reputations of major brands.

Within the world of interventionist media art, Cirio is probably best known for the project *Google Will Eat Itself (GWEI)*—*Hacking Monopolism Trilogy* created in 2005 in collaboration with artist Alessandro Ludovico and artist collective Ubermorgen. For this project he purchased Google text ads, placed them on hidden websites, and used bots to click the ads, which created revenue that was then used to purchase Google shares. In a conflation of Robin Hood and Ouroboros, the funds from this recursive process were distributed back to random visitors to the website for GTTP Ltd. (Google To The People Public Company).

Cirio and I met in 2013 while I was installing the exhibition component of the MediaCity conference in Buffalo, New York. His *Street Ghosts* (2012) project was being included in the show, and we spent two days printing life-size color images of local people captured via Google Street View onto large format paper in SUNY Buffalo's Department of Architecture print lab, and then driving around the city sticking them to walls in the physical locations where the pictures were taken. It is a testament to the kind of weird synchronicity that tends to happen in Buffalo that when installing

the work, we randomly encountered one of the people whose image we selected and printed from Google Street View—a first for Cirio, who's been presenting different iterations of this project in cities all over the world for several years now.

In keeping with the themes of globalized networks and communication, we spoke via Skype on December 12, 2014, although we both live in New York City now.

LIZ FLYNTZ: I thought we could start by talking about *Global Direct* (2014). I think the most succinct way I could describe this project is “a creative revisioning of the potential for global democratic decision-making, using networked connectivity.” The project consists of fifteen diagrams you created that illustrate different forms of government, and concepts related to governance such as “citizenship” and “accountability,” as well as a website, a public poster campaign, and a number of short video statements by thinkers and theorists working on global democracy concepts.

There are many organizations and think tanks trying to leverage communications technology and data sharing to create more accessible and horizontal modes of decision-making. What is different about *Global Direct* as an art project with the same aims? What are you trying to accomplish?

PAOLO CIRIO: It's true there are several new organizations working around open government data, decision-making applications, or participatory budgeting. All of them require rethinking how politics have created human civilization, now with very different tools and problems to solve. It's this highly creative process that *Global Direct* looks at, indicating how there is a role for artists to intervene with social practices to revitalize the popular understanding and formation of societies.

With my work, I'm not interested in technology, nor do I make “social practice” work per se. Instead I like to work with more abstract material, like how laws, economies, and political orders are organized and channeled. Many areas of our society are rapidly changing. Global connectivity and trade has disrupted the enormous industrial sector, and the management of information and knowledge has become pivotal.

I predict that national governments are going to be very different in a few decades. In my work I look at these changes and contradictions, trying to come up with new creative ideas for how these complex networks of power relations can be reconfigured for a better social reality.

Global Direct is really proposing a “vision board” to suggest simulations in the real world. We are still pretty far from seeing billions of people around the world deciding on global issues together, yet this participation is desperately needed, considering that climate change, neoliberalism, and surveillance are affecting all of us to the same degree. *Global Direct* looks at this unresolvable situation, but with a positive approach, as my work often tries to do. I think pure critique and apocalyptic views are getting quite banal and useless these days.

LF: You describe this project thus: “*Global Direct* deploys alternatives to the current political and socioeconomic landscape and encourages creative thought about alternative models based on individuals collaborating through global networks. Ultimately, the artwork may be considered a

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