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 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 unsolvable 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...
political manifesto to inspire future political trends and organizations through an unconventional and visionary reorganization of society.” The project seems to operate on a few different levels: a curated clearinghouse of information about global governance and “e-democracy” (or what I would rather call “electronic communications technology–moderated democracy,” but I suspect that wouldn’t catch on); a site for interaction via the “suggest a slogan” portal; and a presentation of the diagrams you created to present the organizational structures you’re proposing. Which of these components is most central to the project? Are the diagrams intended to create greater clarity around these complex structures for contemporary image-mediated visual thinkers? Is democracy actually a design problem? 

PC: More than image-mediated thinkers, I’d say it is intended for algorithm- and interface-mediated thinkers. In fact, most of those organograms I drew look like algorithms where flows of feedbacks among social variables are processed to maintain the system efficiently. Algorithms are really conceptual images that produce thoughts, actions, and new social dynamics.

The most central is for me probably the “information”; among all the research on social science I went through, I was fascinated by the deliberative opinion poll experiments, where a group of random people is asked to deliberate on something. The individuals involved in these experiments usually all agree on the decision to deliberate after being exposed to accurate information briefs on the subject of debate, which tend to make the best solution clear and obvious for everyone, even if the participants have very different backgrounds and initial opinions.

Looking at the one hundred organograms of present governmental structures around the world that I collected (which can be seen in the “Yesterday” section of Global Direct), you will notice that most of them are actually vertical processes of decision-making, all based on a centralized hierarchy. After all, you won’t see much difference between Iran and the United States, the Chinese government, or even the Nazi one—we are still pretty much in the same pattern of one or two centuries ago.

In contrast, the diagrams that I suggest, which can be seen in the “Program” section, have a circular shape and they represent nodes of adaptive network structures where everyone can plug in, but with continual popular oversight and improvement of the system. This type of network became the paradigm for new political structures where decentralization plays an important role in managing the complexity and speed of contemporary global society.

LF: So you started using that kind of diagram—what you are calling organograms—although yours are much less hierarchical than the ones we typically see to illustrate corporate structure.

PC: In the exhibitions I display the fifteen organograms I drew with large prints. These diagrams are informed by actual organograms that illustrate how governance is supposed to work, from ancient Greece to contemporary mechanics of government—but also organograms of new emergent forms of e-democracy, or from academic political philosophy publications. The organograms I collected are presented all together in the exhibition in folders or spread on a table. The audiences go through them, and it is really overwhelming of course, but they can get an impression of how diagrams are actually central in designing our society, and how the politics of governance is actually a “social algorithm.”

The research took me a long time, actually—more than a year. I also worked with a social science PhD student at Columbia University. We went through several publications and websites to select the organograms that would represent a variety of types of governments and structures around the world.

For me, this project was important particularly for the research, because I really wanted to know more about social science and making a work of art with it. I find it very important for artists to confront contemporary matters that are relevant. As with other projects that I’ve done, I wanted to investigate the subject of the artwork, like finance for example, as a material to work with—not just as a representation, as a symbolic image, but through molding the actual primary substance of that field. As an artist, this type of practice requires a lot of research and know-how. I didn’t study economics at school, but for years I’ve been reading and watching documentaries to research how economics works and to conceive of how it could be reconfigured.

This project was about social science. I combined that research into present and former governments with what people are trying to do today to innovate new forms of government. There
are organograms influenced by the philosophies of the Pirate Party—for instance, the diagram *Global Direct: Active Stakeholder.*

There’s another illustration that comes from an app that has been developed recently to collect voter feedback. There is not just one form of democracy, there are many: delegative democracy, deliberative democracy, consensus democracy, and so on. These are ways to bring public opinion together in a popular way somehow. Design-wise, they are really different. Today we have representative democracy, of course, which is really broken, because decisions need to be made much faster today.

**LF:** I’m curious: You wrote that the audiences at the gallery shows of *Global Direct* became excited about the organograms representing reputation and anonymity. Why do you think that is?

**PC:** In these exhibitions I just observe where people browsing through the installation get excited and stare at the diagram for longer. I would say that the reputation system seems to be really successful in a way. It is at least interesting for a lot of people, perhaps because it is something that many people are thinking about today. Every one of us has a public image visible over the internet through search engines and social media, and thus we care more about our reputation and even change our behavior based on the idea of who is watching and following us.

In this case, that kind of public reputation becomes something that is pivotal to evaluate in the political sphere, as today we have politicians who have been in jail or taken bribes, for instance, who are still in government. And so that type of diagram could bring a lot of improvement to our politics today, but it doesn’t happen because we only vote for those politicians every few years.

The other diagram that grabs the audience’s attention is the one dealing with anonymity and accountability of people in governance and in society. The point is, in a situation in which everyone is watched (and it is really easy to surveil everyone) how do you manage accountability and anonymity in governance? How can we avoid being persecuted or watched by the authorities but make sure that someone in power is actually watched for their accountability? That is an important one for me, because I see a lot of people being confused about the concept of transparency. I think this should really be defined and democratically managed in our future. You cannot ask for complete anonymity and then ask for complete accountability. When you offer tools to act in a completely anonymous way, you should take into account that politicians, bankers, and criminals may use those tools to do something against you or your friends.

However, this project looks at all the social complexities that we should take into account today to bring about some improvement. For instance, there are several connections between identity, reputation, and accountability. All these organograms I drew are nodes of many that work together in a large network, which is the ultimate holistic social system. You can’t always make individual use out of each of the nodes, yet each node works autonomously on a specific social problem we have today. For instance, the node called “anonymity” is connected to another one concerning how one defines one’s citizenship without an authority. And so, in my vision, it isn’t a state giving you an identity, it is actually your community giving you an identity and taking care of it.

**LF:** What has been the feedback? Has there been any response from people who have just randomly encountered the website or exhibition?

**PC:** Actually, I am a little bit surprised because I’m aware that this is a really dense and complex project. But I have had enthusiastic feedback, and people have been subscribing to the newsletter and sharing it on social media and mailing lists and so forth.

**LF:** What about these other think tanks and NGOs that are doing work around responsive democracy, global governance, and direct democracy? Did you approach all of those organizations?

**PC:** I try to avoid actual political parties. I always only look at independent and academic organizations and philosophers. I interviewed those people who were the pioneers of advocating participatory democracy on the internet and some who are really active now. That was a way to engage people working professionally in that field and, meanwhile, to inspire other people to look at those ideas and engage with some of the alternatives I assembled. I don’t think that many people are aware that there are so many organizations out there trying to improve and innovate on government.

Even fewer people are thinking that we need democratic global governance. It’s still considered such a bizarre idea that I didn’t find many people talking about it. I found only one
philosopher and some UN programs and papers talking about participatory global democracy, which, however, weren't taking into account the potential offered by the internet or bottom-up global self-governance.

LF: It's really a utopian information project, kind of an aggregator of a themed utopia. There are two kinds of things that you make. One is the imagery, like abstractions of structures, and the other is something that's more interventionist. Global Direct seems really different than Daily Paywall, for instance. There's something similar about them because they're about access and information. But there's nothing subversive about Global Direct, really, and there is a long history of artists presenting conceptions of a perfect society.

PC: No, it's not that all my works need to be subversive. I wanted to research and come up with a new idea concerning my interests. With Global Direct, what goes beyond the concept to action is that I also try to propagandize the new political philosophy I put together, so I have this campaign with posters that I paste around cities (so far, Prague and Parma) and, with that, I intervene in the public sphere with the political symbol of Global Direct and paste them illegally on public walls. Sometimes I wish I had more resources and support to make a proper political movement out of this.

What interests me, however, is looking at the potential for the information revolution in general. Often I do this kind of intervention to provoke people to think about the extent of our sociopolitical conditions, but what really interests me is working with something that is more abstract. Not just information, but all the complexity we have today and the way our society is changing, beyond just the perception of images. For me it's really interesting to use the complexity of law, economy, and in this case, government, as a material to make art. I know it might sound really abstract, but that's what I think my art is about.

LF: Is there something there, too, about the tension between some information being freely available but strategic information that relates to systems being proprietary?

PC: If you look at my agenda—the broader agenda I have as an activist or as this kind of artist—it's looking at the potential of information, especially distribution of information and the correct way to interpret information. So in the case of Daily Paywall, it concerns exactly the point that is missing in Global Direct, somehow the last flow chart that is missing—the diagram that would illustrate the flow of information to citizens.

You can have the perfect system in place to have a great democracy, but first of all you need to have people engaged with the factual information, so that they can make good decisions; you have to spread the culture of democracy so that people want to participate. The actual problem today is that people don't care about anything; there is so much information out there, but so much that is pushed in the mainstream is garbage that confuses and distracts people. Although we have more information than ever before, how that information is distributed is broken and people are not motivated to understand and make good use of valuable information for social advancement.

LF: But for the owners of information it becomes beneficial to restrict access, so with Global Direct it's not enough to hypothesize the perfect system and distribute that information to everyone. There's no pushback in Global Direct in terms of keeping that information restricted, whereas in Daily Paywall there are organizations that directly benefit from keeping that information restricted.

PC: These projects have two different strategies. One is more ideological; the other is more direct action. These two strategies are very common in political and artistic developments. In the left hand you have a book, and in the right hand you have a weapon; both are necessary to overthrow the overgrown power structures in place.

With Daily Paywall it's not just that I make these subversive projects in order to vandalize or destroy an enemy; I am actually coming up with new ideas or solutions that may sound crazy, but that would actually work and provide a huge social and economic improvement if fully implemented. With both projects, I'm not proposing taking everything down and creating a totally new society or new way of distributing information, but rather using what we have today and improving it. For instance, with Daily Paywall I'm not really taking on those newspapers—actually my point is that these newspapers are the most interesting out there, but common people are not reading these media outlets. We need people to be more engaged with information regarding factual global developments, and the newspapers should be providing this information for free. And journalists should be rewarded for brave and independent investigations, instead of for manipulating opinions.

LF: I wonder what will happen with Paywall?

PC: I have no idea. I don't know if I should worry about it now. My only hope is that they just write me an email or a letter with a takedown notice, and that they don't do anything crazy to me.1

LIZ FLYNTZ is a curator, writer, and artist investigating the intersections between contemporary and historic media art.

NOTE 1: On December 24, 2014, the website hosting company DreamHost, disabled hosting of DailyPaywall.com due to terms of service violations, based on complaints of copyright violation from the Financial Times. The same day, the Wall Street Journal terminated the account of the artist and banned him for violation of their subscriber agreement and terms of use. Upon inquiry, the artist found that the hosting company was alerted by the lawyers of Pearson, PLC, a multinational publishing company headquartered in London and the largest education publisher in the world. The lawyers cited violations of international copyright law, including sections of the 2000 “E-Commerce Directive” of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. DailyPaywall.com was online for five days with thousands of visitors and hundreds of users funding the model and earning through it.

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