

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.

Liz Flyntz: I thought we could start with talking about *Global Direct* (2013). 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, as well as 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 so 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” per se. Instead I like to work with more abstract material, like how laws, economies and political order are organized and channeled. Many areas of our society are rapidly changing. Global connectivity and trade has disrupted the enormous industrial sectors and management of information and knowledge has become pivotal.

I predict that the 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.

In the case of *Global Direct*, it's 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 effecting 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: The project seems to operate on a few different levels: a curated clearinghouse of information about “e-democracy” (or what I would rather call “electronic communications technology moderated democracy”, but it doesn't seem like that would catch on) and global governance; 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 the most central to the project? Is creating 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 decision, which make the best solution clear and obvious for everyone, even if the participants have very different backgrounds and initial opinions.

Looking at the 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 U.S, 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 that you 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 the ancient Greece, to contemporary mechanics of government, but also organograms of new emergent form of e-democracy, or from academic political philosophy publications. These organograms I collected are in the exhibition presented all together 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 politics of governance is actually a "social algorithm".

The research took me a long time actually - over 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 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 representation, as a symbolic image, but through molding the actual main substance of that field. As an artist, this type of practice requires a lot of research and know-how. I didn't really study economics at school but for years I've been reading and watching documentaries to research how economics works and conceive of how it could be reconfigured.

For this project it 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 from the Pirate Party for example. 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, et cetera. These are ways to take 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 audience at the gallery shows at *Global Direct* that the audience became excited about the organograms about reputation and anonymity. Why do you think that is?

PC: In these exhibitions I just see where people browsing through the installation get excited and stare at the diagram for longer. I would say yeah the reputation system seems to be really successful in a way. It's at least interesting for a lot of people, perhaps because it is something that many people are thinking about today. Everyone of us has a public image over the internet visible through search engines and social media, thus we care more about our reputation, and we 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 just that diagram could bring a lot of improvement in our politics today but it doesn't happen because we only vote for that politician 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 notion 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 some tools to act in a completely anonymous way, you should take into account that politicians, firms, and criminals, will use those tools to do something against you.

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. So you can't always make individual use out of each of the nodes, yet each node works autonomously on specific societal function. For instance, the node anonymity is connected to another one concerning how it's defined citizenship without an authority. In my vision, it isn't the nation state giving you an identity, it is actually your community taking care of it.

LF: What is the feedback? Has their been any response from people that 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 had have enthusiastic feedback and people have been subscribing to the newsletter and sharing it on social media and the mailing lists, and so forth.

LF: What about these other think tanks and NGOs that are doing stuff 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 within the Internet and some who are really active now. That was a way to engage people working professionally in the field, and meanwhile, inspiring other people to look at those ideas and engage them 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 account the potential offered by Internet or bottom-up global self-governance.

LF: It's really a utopian information project, kind of an aggregator of a themed utopia. There's two kinds of things that you make - one is the imagery, like abstractions of structures and another thing 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 artists presenting conceptions of a perfect society has a long history. [*Daily Paywall* (2014) is a new project in which Cirio hacked the websites of the world's most influential newspapers to pull tens of thousands of articles from behind their paywalls, republishing them and making them freely accessible to readers. The project also provided readers with an incentive to read: each article is followed by a short quiz, readers providing the correct answer are given small cash rewards.

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 with actions 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 the cities and with that I intervene in the public sphere somehow with this idea. On the website of *Global Direct* people can suggest slogans for the posters promoting participatory global democracy and social justice, then I print them on the posters with the political symbol of *Global Direct* and I 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, it's 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.

LF: Is there something about the tension between information being freely available and 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 - is 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 is exactly the point that is missing in *Global Direct*, somehow the last flow chart that is missing – the diagram that would illustrate how it's important to have people informed and engaged with political debates.

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 there is so much information out there but so much that is pushed in the mainstream is Infotainment 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, 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 but in *Daily Paywall* there are organizations that directly benefit from keeping that information restricted.

PC: These projects have two different strategies one is more about theory the other is through interventionism. These two strategies are very common in political and artistic developments. On the left hand you have a book and in the right hand you have a gun, both are necessary to overthrow the overgrown power structures in place and conservative cultural norms.

With *Daily Paywall* its not just that I make these subversive projects in order to vandalize or destroy an enemy, I am actually coming up with a new ideas or solutions, that may sound absurd – 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 those 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 the journalists should be rewarded for brave and independent investigations, instead 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.

Addendum: On December 24, 2014 the website hosting company, DreamHost, disabled hosting of TheDailyPaywall.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 publishing in the world. The lawyers cited violations of several international copyright laws, including the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. DailyPaywall.com was online for five days with thousands of visitors and hundreds users funding the model and earning through it.