SCULPTING THE FLOW OF REALITY

Bruce Sterling
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It’s conceptual art, but it leads him into the streets of London to distribute free credit cards.

Paolo Cirio, the “sculptor of data”, is always “structuring unexpected forms”. Commonly these unexpected forms bring him lawsuits and death threats. What you are seeing here, however, are the flows of reality as Paolo perceives them, the basic flows that he “sculpts”. This is the analysis that makes his artwork possible, and in some sense even inevitable – his historical public duty.

Only programmers think like this 32-year-old Italian artist thinks. One could spend an entire lifetime, even a lifetime of intense political engagement and avant-garde art practice, without ever encountering “PHP + DOM parser scripts” or “network consistency tuning”. In Paolo’s world, however, phenomena like these are a given.

Obviously Paolo takes a certain aesthetic pleasure in assembling these graphs. He likes the way they look, but he is especially interested in the affordances they offer him for interventions. They are maps of vulnerabilities assembled, in a word, for hacking. Paolo’s reality can’t be left alone to gently flow through its sets of boxes and arrows; reality has to be hacked.

His means of sculpting data are the typical methods of modern web design: aggregation, fabrication and contextualization. For instance, about a million Facebook profiles can be “aggregated”, and then “contextualized” in a new way – computer-searches for the attractive faces – and then “fabricated” into an involuntary dating site.
Facebook is already a vast dating-site of sorts, and much of what goes on there is invisible to common users. Facebook and its corporate allies are already aggregating, contextualizing and fabricating, all the time. They never ask permission of the users to restructure the data that Facebook users naively contribute. And neither does Paolo; he rarely asks permission, either.

The engineers and the interface designers of Facebook spend amazing amounts of time and energy contemplating elaborate sets of charts, boxes and arrows. This is what they are paid for, and their efforts look remarkably like the charts, boxes and arrows on display in the Aksioma exhibition. Periodically, there is an upgrade review in which the boxes and arrows are reinterpreted and rearranged – commonly in a way intended to generate more money.

However, those professional attempts at reshaping commercial reality don’t always succeed. Reality is resistant to change and reality seems to have an anticommercial bias. For instance, the lamentable MySpace has just as many boxes and arrows as Facebook, yet MySpace is bleeding away its users and transforming into a ghost town. Friendster is already a ghost town, where the arbitrary reality of its programmers has long since ceased to flow through the boxes and arrows. These may be vast young industries, but their mortality rate is colossal.

There is an inherent and even pitiable vulnerability to these costly, elaborate, fragile data structures. However, you won’t be seeing much pity for them from Paolo Cirio or his widely noted collaborator Alessandro Ludovico. They are relentlessly oppositional figures. They are attuned entirely to the historical guilts of our modern data titans: Facebook (for privacy invasions), Amazon (for piracy of books), Google (for turning the organization of knowledge into mere for-profit advertising), and, in a recent London effort, Visa (for turning credit into a failed industry).

There can, it seems, be no peace with the undemocratic dictatorship of the management of public knowledge in an information era. Knowledge is, it seems, unethically exploited by corporations that seize ownership of
information resources that should properly be freed for the public benefit of the planetary population. Seen from this stark point of view, the elaborate software structures of Google, Amazon, Facebook and Visa are mere obfuscations. These enterprises, familiar to all of us, are the constructors of a false social reality.

They are circuit-ticking contrivances for generating false information consciousness. Every Paolo Cirio effort is a propaganda of the deed intended to illuminate this mordant state of our public affairs.

The colossal popularity of Google, Amazon, Facebook and Visa – they are well-nigh beloved everywhere, except in China, Iran and North Korea, and even there they have their ardent fans – may seem to make this a distinct minority viewpoint. However, this bothers Paolo Cirio not at all. On the contrary, it allows his artistic fame to grow with the gigantic size of his enemies. Paolo’s fame is indeed growing, around the world, and probably his fame grows most of all among the employees of Google, Amazon, Facebook and Visa. Not the
shareholders, not the users – these profiteers and victims merely represent two classes and sheep. It is the constructors of the systems, those who patch the crumbling codes together every day, who are the key demographic for artworks of this kind.

These are the people most likely to appreciate the ingenuity of his efforts. They are under attack, and they are offered appeal; they are the battleground where the boxes and arrows mingle.
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