

UNRAVELLING THE IMAGE WEB

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A red thread in Paolo Cirio's artistic and activist practice is the consistent investigation of mechanisms of social control and political manipulation by state agencies and tech companies. In various media and visualisations, he analyses, appropriates, mimics or paraphrases complex and often covert information processes. The three bodies of work, Attention, Property and Derivatives, emerged during 2019 in accordance with the artist's conceptualisation of the term Internet Photography.

As Cirio points out, the networked circulation of photography across a wide field of symbolic, economic and affective contexts calls for new ethical, legal and semiotic inquiries into the photographic medium. As images enter the variable and transient mechanisms of both algorithmic and personal online dissemination, they can be grabbed by or attach themselves to powerful, popular and profitable dataflows. Viewers thus need an expanded interpretative toolbox in order to critically approach the various image uses and imagine alternative understandings. Cirio's works unfold as both critical exposures and provocative visualisations of what online imagery does – and potentially could do.

To a certain extent, Attention, Property and Derivatives perform as metapictures, whether by employing an almost forensic gaze, by asking potential buyers to sign a contract with the artist or by symbolically staging a legal argument around image rights. The three research based works punctuate the dreams and hopes of the internet as per se democratic, accessible and empowering, but they also represent methods of regaining agency in the political image economy.

That images are capital – and indeed that “image is everything” – was already manifest in 1980s consumerism and analogue advertising and dissected by neo-Marxist cultural theory. But the mechanisms of online image flow drastically affect the conditions of the images' surplus value, which influencer marketing is a prime illustration of. Cirio's Attention dissects the attention economy that pervades personalized advertising through social media selfies and points to how followers ultimately are being deceived and manipulated by unclear product placement. Consumers become influencers, as Cirio notes, and the symbols of consumerism are carefully staged as desirable objects. In Attention, the influencer selfies are deconstructed by zooming in and pulling out details, which are displayed in sculptural image layers. Scrutinizing the portraits as made up by fragments is a methodological parallel to how the classical criminologist would inspect ID-photographs, which lends a forensic quality to the work. By turning the tracing of clues and evidence of the hidden advertisement into an aesthetic principle Attention unfolds as more than a mere iconoclast neo-Marxist dismissal of the power of the image: it is driven by the intellectual pleasure of visual analysis and forensic investigation that the viewer can engage in and continue. As part of the project, the public is encouraged to discover and report similar hidden advertisements on a continuously expanding online archive.

Images circulating on the web are not automatically accessible or fully visible. As images are capital they are regulated by copyright and to a large extent monopolised by powerful companies. An example is Getty Images Inc.'s archive acquisitions and control of stock photography, which is the subject of investigation in Cirio's two-part series Property, J. Paul Getty and Property, White House. Both visualize how cultural knowledge and political histories slip from public access into private property through aggressive claims of image ownership. Cirio shares his background research on Getty Images as gatekeeper, including incidences of photographers losing copyright of their own images and highly problematic deals with Google leading to limitations in information access. For Property, White House Cirio selected a series of nine historical photos of US presidents sold by Getty Images, which he then located and reprinted from public image archives. In the tradition of appropriation art, such as Sherrie Levine's rephotography of canonical images,

the work points to context-dependent questions of photographic authorship, ownership and commodification as Cirio compares identical images from two sources and displays the image with information about photographer, licence holder and his own reframing. Whereas Levine's appropriations questioned photography's role in museums and other art institutions, Cirio's point to the precarious lives of image archives in online domains. Getty Images is but one part of the family empire originating from Getty Oil, whose founder is put on display in Property, J. Paul Getty. Portraits of the Getty patriarch are superimposed with colour filters and text fragments from legal clauses relating to Getty Images licence agreements, creating visual obstacles that symbolize the protection of monopoly. As Cirio poignantly states: "Images are the new oil in contemporary visual capital". By surfacing the property laws and trade agreements that govern the use of archival and artistic imagery, the Property series points to the legal and economic obstructions we encounter when searching for and experiencing images on screens.

J. Paul Getty was not only an oil magnate but also an ardent art collector, and in Derivatives Cirio visualizes the financial speculation of the art market. Here reproductions of auctioned art works are displayed salon style, each superimposed with their economic value in USD printed in large numbers. As in the Property series the numbers literally arrest the gaze and prevent access to and from the pleasure of viewing the canonical art works. Derivatives illustrates how the notion of aesthetic value is entangled with institutional value as well as political and monetary power. Ultimately the numbers on the surface of the original artwork might not be disturbing to the collector and certainly not to the art market – they are the artwork. Cirio also probes how monetary value is ascribed to a piece of art and how dealers seek to increase it, thus pointing to the manipulation of prices at art auctions. Again, Cirio advances the legacy of appropriation art – particularly the work of Hans Haacke comes to mind – as he compels us as art viewers and cultural consumers to recognize ourselves in the image economy: Derivatives is also a performative project in which potential buyers of Cirio's works sign a financial derivative contract with him.

Attention, Property and Derivatives investigate the current conditions of negotiating ideas of value and taste through online imagery. How do economic, legal and semantic systems influence how images are made, performed and perceived? And what does that mean for our understanding of the photographic medium specifically? We are surrounded by online imagery that constantly shift between radically different contexts. With smart phones and social media, we are all photographers and publishers – but other actors and factors are in control of the dissemination, access and meaning of images. With the spirit of John Berger's Ways of Seeing, Cirio appeals to our critical sense and investment in understanding how the Internet redefines photography's ethics, aesthetics as well as social and political capability. This is at the core of his notion of Internet Photography: rather than photographing and adding to the vast amount of photos on the web, it is a strategy to visualize "privacy violation, social control, free speech, economic inequalities, political spin, negative self-image, and self-expression". Thus Paolo Cirio's Internet Photography offers means to produce visual evidence of the politics of networked imagery – and in Attention, Property and Derivatives this strategy produces an artistic forensics of online exploitative image capitalism.

Text by Louise Wolthers Researcher and Curator, The Hasselblad Foundation.

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