PAOLO CIRIO

JV Can you briefly introduce yourself and your artistic activity at the moment?

PC I define myself mainly as an artist. More specifically, as a conceptual artist and an activist, as my work campaigns for social issues. I am also a media technology, art and political theorist. My work is research-based and investigative and often tries to speak up on subjects to generate certain reactions and resolve problems. Some of my works are strictly visual, but most operate on several levels and mediums.

JV How did your urge to challenge technical issues related to technology come about? Were you compelled by your studies in telecommunication and electronic systems?

PC Actually, it was the other way around. When I was in high school, I studied only technology—I had to educate myself in classical philosophy. Later at university, in reaction against my technical studies, I studied the theory of performance art and anthropology. Yet, to me, technology was the most appropriate medium to address art, politics and philosophy. That was in the mid- and late 90s, when network technology was relatively limited. But I intuited that the internet and technology in general were going to directly affect all societies.

While network technology had already been influential socioeconomically since the 60s, it became exponentially more so around 2010 when social media and smartphones reached everyone. The network in the 60s and 70s was made up of very few nodes used by banks and the military. In the 80s it started to be used in the counterculture. But those networks were still formed by very few nodes. In the 90s small and big business started to become part of it, which led to a financial bubble but also to investments in technology. By 2010 every person had become a node in a pervasive network. At that point the internet became not just a technology but a social agent affecting every social area: the economy, politics, culture and so on. Shortly after, in 2016, it was already a common assumption that the internet had ruined democracy.

My work and attitude also changed with these developments. A decade ago, I couldn't have expected that the internet would become controlled by so few companies and used by bad actors to the point of ruining and manipulating everyone's lives. That's when I started to address ethics, around 2016. I have always been critical of technology as a form of social progress, but from that point I also started to be critical of the internet as a liberating tool. I still have a positive view of hacker ethics but am definitely less on board with total freedom of the internet, and I'm thus looking at how it can be abused. That is how ethics have become such a central issue theoretically and professionally.

JV How do you translate the automation of photographic processes in your work with these aesthetic considerations in mind?

PC My first project that used photos as a primary medium was in 2011, *Face to Facebook*,

with Alessandro Ludovico, an Italian art historian. It was an intuitive and radical project, but I almost regret what happened. Back in 2009, as a hacker who had been working with the internet for ten years already, I was shocked that people were posting all these photos on this platform called Facebook without questioning its privacy and security. Also, as an artist, I was amazed that I could automatically grab these photos in large numbers. I was already doing internet art, but suddenly I had this new opportunity to involve hundreds of thousands of people in my artwork. As material for an artist, this was mind blowing. These individuals could become part of my work.

I started to scrape pictures and assemble this huge amount of data composed of the actual picture profile file and some of the personal information including 'likes'. Back then, there was this thing called facial recognition, artificial intelligence, nothing compared to today. We learned that in Japan they had started to use it in a train station to gauge emotion. No one knew about it, but somehow we found this piece of news. We started to look for an algorithm for facial recognition and artificial intelligence to recognise facial expression. There was basically only one available. I still think this was the first time artists used facial recognition and AI on huge numbers of photos. Publishing the resulting database on a custom-made dating website generated an overwhelming number of personal and press reactions. Yet Facebook was doing something even worse with users' data, which we only recently discovered following several scandals around privacy violations and profiling of citizens.

My next project was *Street Ghosts* (2012). Even though I was just an artist obtaining pictures that were available and recontextualising them, both projects were quite controversial. In a way, there were no ethics in these projects, which was intentional. My *Anti-Social Sculptures* (2012–14), which I have also written about, represent this historical period in which there was a total lack of ethics associated with internet platforms and personal data. Slowly regulations were implemented as a result of scandals, people losing their jobs, and lives ruined by data leaks and algorithms. My work *Obscurity* (2016) integrates these developments and 'the right to be forgotten'—a controversial regulation even for free speech advocates—which I campaigned for in the US by focusing on mugshots and their visibility to search engines. I collected, blurred and republished over 10 million mugshots, which generated a huge positive response from the people affected. In this project I also introduced the ethics of who decides what should stay public or be removed from the internet, which has since become central to global internet politics through content moderation policies.

JV In a text you wrote for *Unthinking Photography* in 2016, you state that capturing the internet photographically means positioning the camera inside databases, screens and algorithms. Can you explain that idea of getting inside the machine and trying to figure out how it works?

PC Across the last century, photographers, especially art photographers, have questioned how we take, display and see pictures—breaking down their cameras to explore the hardware involved in creating the picture, taking pictures and placing them in other contexts, or juxtaposing them. I also break down the camera, which is now the algorithm and network, to show how photographs are made and what can be done by modifying the devices that take them, questioning their circulation and display by putting them in different contexts, changing their meaning by manipulating them, and addressing how they are seen, interpreted or re-enacted by viewers.

For instance, in *Attention* (2019), which is about Instagram influencers, I question not only the camera and algorithm, but how the technology changes the way people stand in front of the camera and how people produce pictures made for the algorithm. It becomes an anthropological issue. The camera and the display change the way we pose and eventually how people act and feel; it is connected to

and goes beyond publicity. I indirectly refer to 60s and 70s semiotic photography studies on how pictures were composed and published in magazines and on TV or billboards for advertising. I'm following the legacy of John Berger in the internet era.

JV What are some examples of the algorithm influencing people's behaviour in front of the camera?

PC We easily get used to it. Think about the first cameras: there was a very long exposure, and the photographers used a particular flash so people had to stay in a perfect pose for a long time to avoid being blurry or wasting the shot. Now, the Instagram algorithm itself features a picture based on a person's make-up, posture and facial features, which leads people to pose in a very particular way or even to surgery. The 'Instagram Face' is a way of looking and being in society created by the Instagram camera, which chooses certain pictures, so people adapt to the algorithm. The type of photos people produce feed the platform's canon, which becomes society's canon. This is how people become influencers, adapting to the platform, its algorithms and filters, and eventually changing the way they act in daily life. The camera asks for that kind of model.
A lot of artists these days look at AI algorithms. We forget that it is not only about technology's infrastructure but also about the branding, editorial and format of the media. Look at TikTok: all of a sudden people are making dance scenes of a few seconds in front of the camera. So, there is not only technology but a mutual influence between lifestyle and marketing impacting how technology changes society.

JV I'm curious to hear more about how people change their behaviour to look good on Instagram for instance. We like to joke about that, but it's true.

PC There have been scandals about how Instagram features naked bodies, primarily of white people, certain types of make-up and lifestyles. The algorithms look at the pictures but also at the personas. If you're a celebrity, or act like one, the platform will make your profile more of a model for everyone else, suggested automatically by the algorithms. To understand the virality of some content, you also have to understand the algorithm, which decides what's popular.

Another project I've done on these algorithms is *Sociality* (2018). It is not about photos but the actual technology, from devices to platform interfaces or algorithms. Among the twenty thousand algorithms I document, some recognise what is inside photos, others decide which photos to push on the social platform. In *Sociality* it is strictly about how the photos are seen by the algorithm.

JV What are some examples of the algorithm as artwork?

PC Sociality is a good example. Algorithms are shown in a diagram, a flowchart. Some of my works in the 'Internet Photography' category can be considered photography because they mainly consist of photos or visual pictures. In the 'Flowcharts' category are flowcharts of algorithms, or concepts or economic and political models too complex to be shown in one picture, and so the flowchart helps. An example of a work with both flowcharts and photos is Face to Facebook, in which a flowchart explains how the pictures were automatically obtained and republished.

JV Can you say a few words about property and your exploration of stock images, especially Getty Images?

PC Getty has assembled photos, some taken illegitimately from public libraries, to which they automatically apply legal contracts and claim ownership. They're supposed to distribute royalties to the photographers, but often they keep these fees. Legally they have managed to bind most of the pictures out there on the internet to their own legal contracts. My project is a provocation. Visually I assembled some of their contracts or pictures in the public domain but that Getty sells as their own because they automatically apply the same contract. This project is more of a

legal consideration of copyright and ownership of photos on the internet rather than about technology.

JV Can you talk about the difficulties your project *Capture* (2020) encountered in France with the country's interest in facial recognition?

PC This project against facial recognition comes ten years after my first project addressing this technology, *Face to Facebook*. In this case I am campaigning to ban facial recognition in Europe and have written a long legal text as a petition. We have great privacy regulations in Europe but not yet in this regard. In France facial recognition is already used by the police; there is even a proposal to require that all French citizens have their face scanned for their national IDs. Meanwhile the country also has a problem with police brutality, where officers hide their face when being violent towards protestors. So, I combined banning facial recognition and police accountability in this project. I assembled a database of faces of police officers from photos taken by French activists and found on the internet, and published four thousand images of police officers' faces on a website where they could be identified by name. I only used facial recognition to crop faces out of photos, not to extract biometric data.

The police unions and the interior minister reacted strongly because they thought I was really identifying all these police officers. They threatened me, and I had to take down the database. This overreaction shows the confusion and fear about this technology and the need to inform people about it. The media coverage and attention were extensive, but the actual topic was not sufficiently addressed, even though the petition obtained over 50,000 signatures.

Shortly after this project, the interior minister used the latest terrorist attacks and the press coverage of my project to push a new security law to prohibit the publication of photos of police officers and to authorise drones to use facial recognition. What they ignored is that I am against the blanket use of facial recognition even on police, as I think it is a dangerous weapon in any hands. I think terrible scenarios will result from the use of facial recognition, and at some point, it will be banned globally.