


Notorious for stealing one million Facebook profiles and posting them on a bogus dating site, with his project called Face to Facebook* –resulting in almost being sued– Paolo Cirio is a media artist, who not only should the general public look out for, but big companies too.

Paolo has exhibited works in galleries worldwide including London, Paris, Hong Kong and New York. He has won many awards including the Award of Distinction at Prix Ars Electronica in 2011. This September will see him distribute 750 counterfeit Visa credit cards in Liverpool for AND, Abandon Normal Devices festival, as well as presenting a talk at ISEA, Inter-Society for the Electronic Arts, Istanbul.

Underneath the spectacle of media-fuelled information, mainly focused on his Face to Facebook project –which is not really touched upon below, due to the above reason, but do check out his website to find out more, it's very interesting! Paolo Cirio may seem like a professional troublemaker, but in fact is just a cool guy with a countercultural mission.

LONDON | UK

Paolo Cirio & I

 Latayah Gill

LG: Hello. Paolo, how did it all start?

PC: Well, I grew up in north Italy, Turin, where I got my degree in cinema and theatre theory. But I've always been interested in activism. Italy has this weird situation in regards to the media, because of Berlusconi's control over it. There is this famous slogan that says 'Don't hate the media, become the media', which means to try to push your content inside the media by any means necessary. When I was 22, I worked as an assistant on a project for The Yes Men, the famous Yes Men.

LG: That is quite impressive, what was the project?

PC: We rented tapes from Blockbuster, and then recorded political messages halfway. So people rented a movie, which would be interrupted by a message against Bush. It was the Bush era. They were Hollywood movies of course. Soon after, I pursued my own project. I organised a virtual demonstration against NATO. I created a website called *Stop the NATO*, and set up a function directing people to NATO's website, causing the site to collapse.

LG: Did NATO pick up on that?

PC: I did that three times, I guess it was the second time when they started to investigate. I was just researching my project and found a book called *Space Security*. It is an official book about future weapons and military strategies. My website and what I did was mentioned. At that time I was a pure activist, I was just really upset about the war. After that I started to do street art.

LG: How did you go from being a political activist to becoming involved with street art?

PC: I feel the media in a broad way, and realised that my project was heavily-centred on the virtual sphere.

LG: So you decided to hit the street.

PC: Yeah. It was 2003, around the time street art was becoming popular. Artists were sharing through forums and websites, but the movement was still quite underground. It was about political action, people hitting the streets with their messages. For me personally, it was just another medium.





I consider the street a type of billboard, because billboards play a role in brainwashing as much as T.V. If you go to Oxford Street in London for example, you really are under the visual pollution of big companies and brands. What you see in public spaces influences you.

LG: It's interesting when you think about how the media is constructed and how it can influence our perception of reality. This idea seems quite prominent within your work; can you tell me about some of your projects?

PC: The last one, I branded a fake company and created a fictitious story based in a real neighbourhood in New York. The company was called *Future Waterproof Corp*, and was interested in exploiting sea-level rise due to global warming. I found an actor to pose as the company's CEO and created a website. I then spread posters all over the neighbourhood and bought ads in the local newspaper, so residents would recognise it as a credible company. I also interviewed residents via another actor. The other character was a 19 year-old kid who lived in the neighbourhood. He was in opposition to the company's plans. So I created a story with a hero and a villain. The project was called *Drowning NYC*. It was kind of a parody. I used the media to tell a story and the story itself became media.

LG: How did the residents respond to the discovery of the fake story?

PC: Some were really enthusiastic, others didn't give a shit. But still, I had their attention for five minutes. My aim is to engage people outside of galleries or museums.

LG: When you were planning the project did you think about the ethical aspects, in terms of trickery?

PC: When you are an activist you think about delivering your message by any means necessary. You don't think to manipulate people.

LG: Do you think the big corporations can justify themselves in the same way, when they deliver their message by means of manipulation?

PC: No because they don't do that for the social good, they do it for their private interest. I did a previous project using the same techniques; it was more successful and was called *The Big Plot*.

LG: The Big Plot?

PC: *The Big Plot*. I called it a romantic spy story. One character was a spy; there was also a journalist, a psychologist and a pilot. The four characters spoke to each other via Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, blogs and also through performances in public spaces. It was quite a complex project. That was in 2008/2009, the beginning of social networks. It examined how anyone could create a fictional life via social networks. I cloned the identity of a real alleged Russian spy, simply by opening up a Facebook account with his name. After a while some former friends contacted me thinking I was the real spy.

LG: But it was all make-believe?

PC: Mainly fictional, but mixed with reality. At one point, I lost control of my story because someone created other characters and started interacting with my characters! It was the first time someone had used social media in such a way. It really represented the idea that anyone can spy on someone. How, if you want to know more about someone, you can simply *google* their name and start to find clues about that person, until you begin to understand their life.

LG: You know William Shakespeare wrote 'All the world is a stage...'

PC: No.

LG: It's from *As you like it*. That quote springs to mind when I listen to you. Do you feel almost godlike when you orchestrate these projects? It's almost as if you are a puppeteer.

PC: Yeah.

LG: Who controls you Paolo?

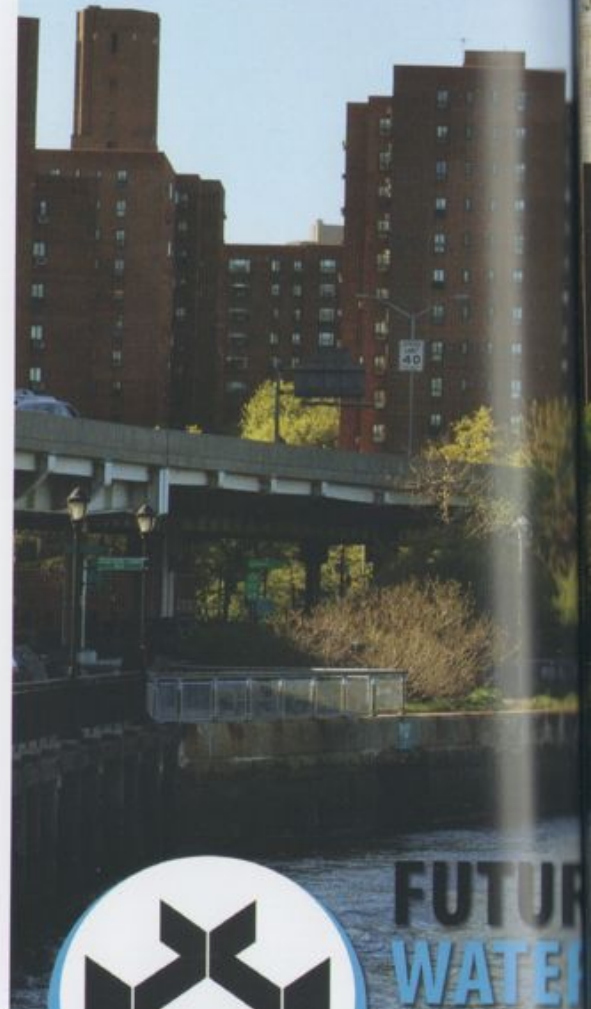
PC: [Laughs] No-one. I mean, I am the author!

LG: How hard is it to hold on to reality when you are frequently dabbling in these fictional worlds?

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PC: [Laughs] You become really paranoid! Oh I don't know. Maybe I am not in this world anymore, who knows? I know how the media works, so I am more conscious than normal people. For example, everyone seems to be on Facebook, all of the time. But because I have this experience, I think I am more aware somehow, rather than lost in this unreal reality.

LG: **Where do you find joy, how do you have fun?**

PC: Fun? I have fun when I realise that a person like me can be a threat to NATO, this super military power. Or when I did *Face to Facebook*. Facebook is one of the biggest corporations in the world, and I put them in an embarrassing situation. That is fun, of course! I am probably too obsessed with my work though, but I think every artist is.

The media and all its forms, has developed in ways that someone born 200 years ago would never have imagined. It plays a huge role in modern society. It influences our perceptions, dictates our methods of communication, exploits our private urges and invades our spiritual existence. It is a complex entity, which operates in a separate reality, which can serve as both valuable and harmful. But whatever realms host forms of life, art will imitate, and no doubt follow™

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