

## ***Meaning***

By Paolo Cirio, 2019.

### **Introductory abstract.**

The artwork *Meaning* consists of a series of three flowcharts created by the artist Paolo Cirio to outline his *Internet Semiotics* theory about the formation of meaning on the Internet. The artist's concept is expressed through the diagrammatic language along with a written essay that explains the theory resembled in the visual artworks. The use of mirrors and the multidimensional elements of the physical artworks allow for an open-ended reading, compelling viewers into self-reflection on the significance of the Internet in their lives and society. Cirio's semiotics introduces paradigms on how humans adapt to the conditions of the Internet. It encapsulates semiotics itself in a work of art about the production, reception, and alteration of the flow of information forming meaning within networks. This artwork delves into the cognitive, sociological, and psychological aspects of the modern construction of social meaning, exploring both an anthropology and a philosophy of the Internet.

### ***Internet Semiotics***

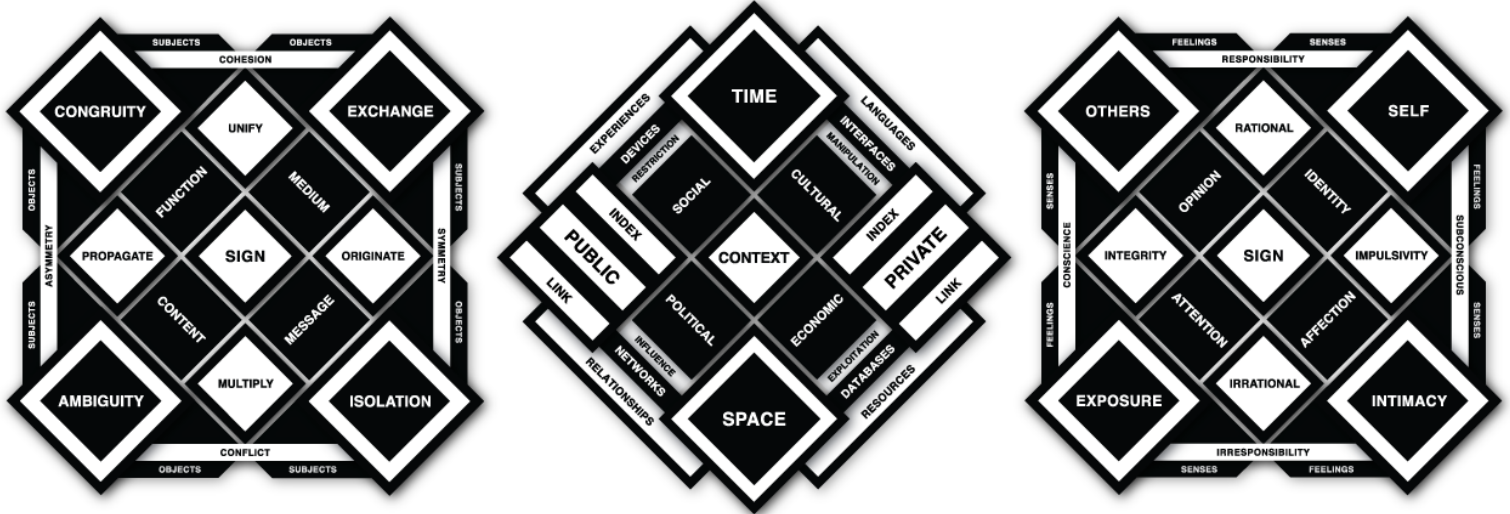
The *Internet Semiotics* theory by Paolo Cirio stems from the creation of his artwork *Meaning*. His study analyzes the properties of the medium and its modes of social signification within society. For a critical theory of the Internet, this semiotic study aims to outline the systems, flows, and outcomes relating to the production, reception, and alteration of structures of meaning generated by information circulating through networks.

This semiotic analysis is based on the canonical semiotic model of communication, where the *sign* is used to transmit information, while *signifier*, *signified*, *referent*, and *context* are crucial parts of the *semiosis* process, forming meaning through signifying media systems and social dynamics. This theoretical framework aims to expand the field of semiotics for the medium of the Internet by accounting for its unique features and its role as the ultimate meaning-making tool greatly affecting humans.

Internet communication is comprised of innumerable clusters of messages and a wide range of semiotic structures, each with several *signifiers* accompanying interactions and relations among the participants involved in the meaning creation process. This multiplicity of agents and linkages on the Internet enables potentially infinite combinations of meaning through connections among *signifiers*. Furthermore, unlike former mass media and communication technologies, the Internet is the first medium that allows the receiver to send immediate feedback and the sender to follow the receiver's interactions. This multidirectional communication can be intimate and private between just a few individuals, or exposed in public, with both intended and unintended receivers. In addition, anyone is able to broadcast information and the communication process can be specifically designed for participants in wide communities or specific individuals. These features uniquely shape the exchange and construction of the meaning of information on the Internet, while these particular qualities of the media interrelate with large and complex social dimensions.

The media of the Internet is the object of this semiotic analysis focusing on human behaviors, interpersonal relations, and social orders. The theory of *Internet Semiotics* is primarily concerned with the construction of personal and social realities, which relates to the field of *Social Semiotics*. As such, this study considers all semiotic forms as socially constituted and inherent to *Social Behaviorism*.

The *Internet Semiotics* theory is illustrated by Cirio through three visual artworks, each consisting of a diagram representing the spectrum of social processes, effects, and functions of the Internet. They address positive and negative social aspects impacting both the personal and the collective spheres. For instance, *semiosis* on the Internet can lead to knowledge construction, trust building, and social awareness as easily as it can lead to isolating echo chambers, ambiguous deceptions, and irrational antisocial behaviors. Similarly, the social context influences the process of meaning formation with tensions over power structures and socioeconomic conditions produced and reproduced by the Internet.

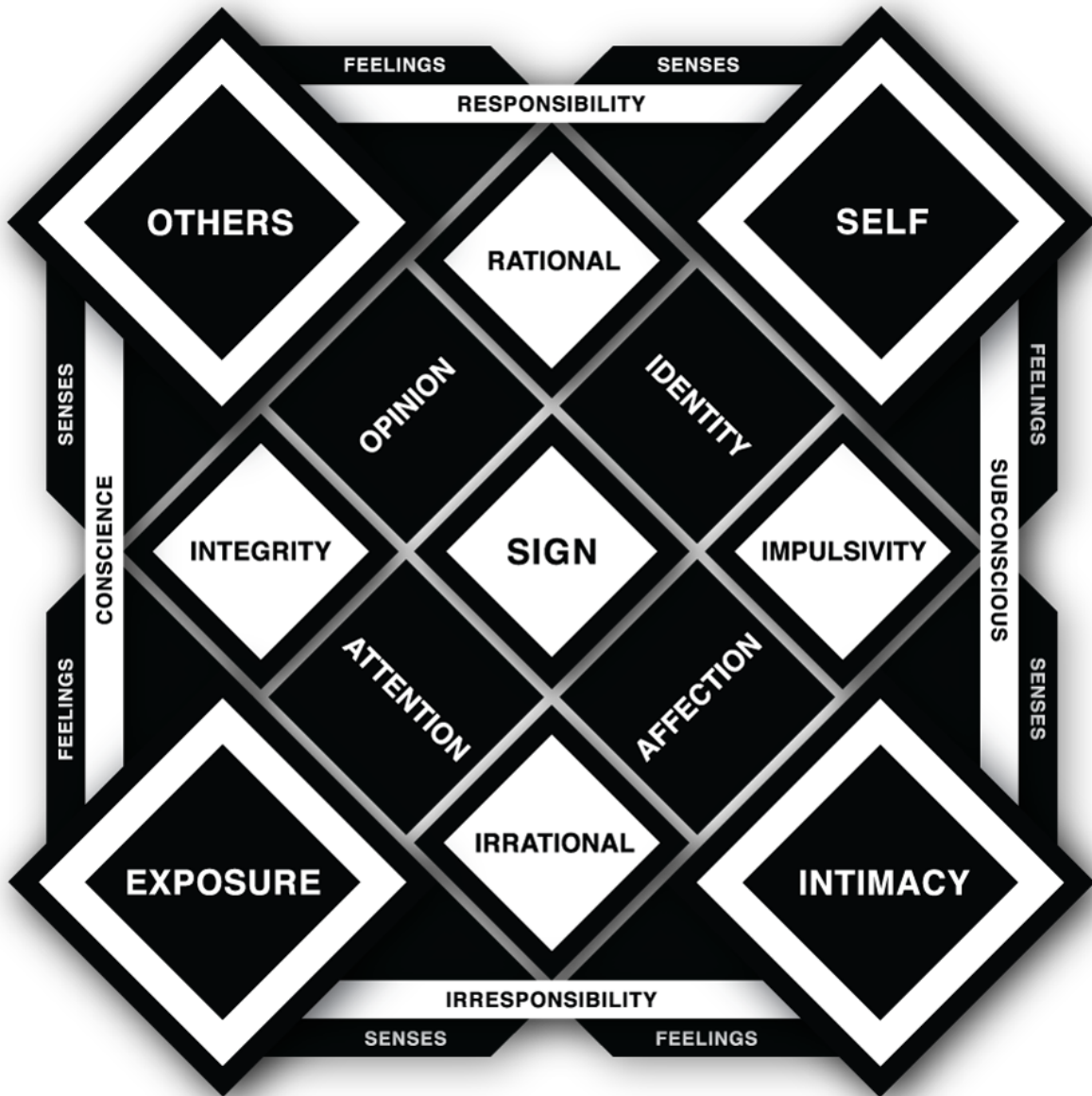


The diagrams created for this theory present social processes with multidimensional and multifaceted readings, from the central subjects outward, from macro to micro elements, large to small, and front to back. The linked and opposing words in the nonlinear flowcharts illustrate the interlocking possibilities of social signification of information circulating online.

These flowcharts outline the formation of meaning in three key areas: the personal subjectivity, the social context, and the collective social dimension. The flowchart *Context* is central, affecting any process in the construction of meaning and influencing the signification processes of the semiotic *sign*. The other two flowcharts, *Subjectivity* and *Collectivity*, illustrate two crucial roles in the social signification of the *sign*: one role for *Subjectivity* concerning the reception of meaning in the personal sphere, and one role for *Collectivity* concerning the production of meaning in the collective sphere.

## ***Subjectivity***

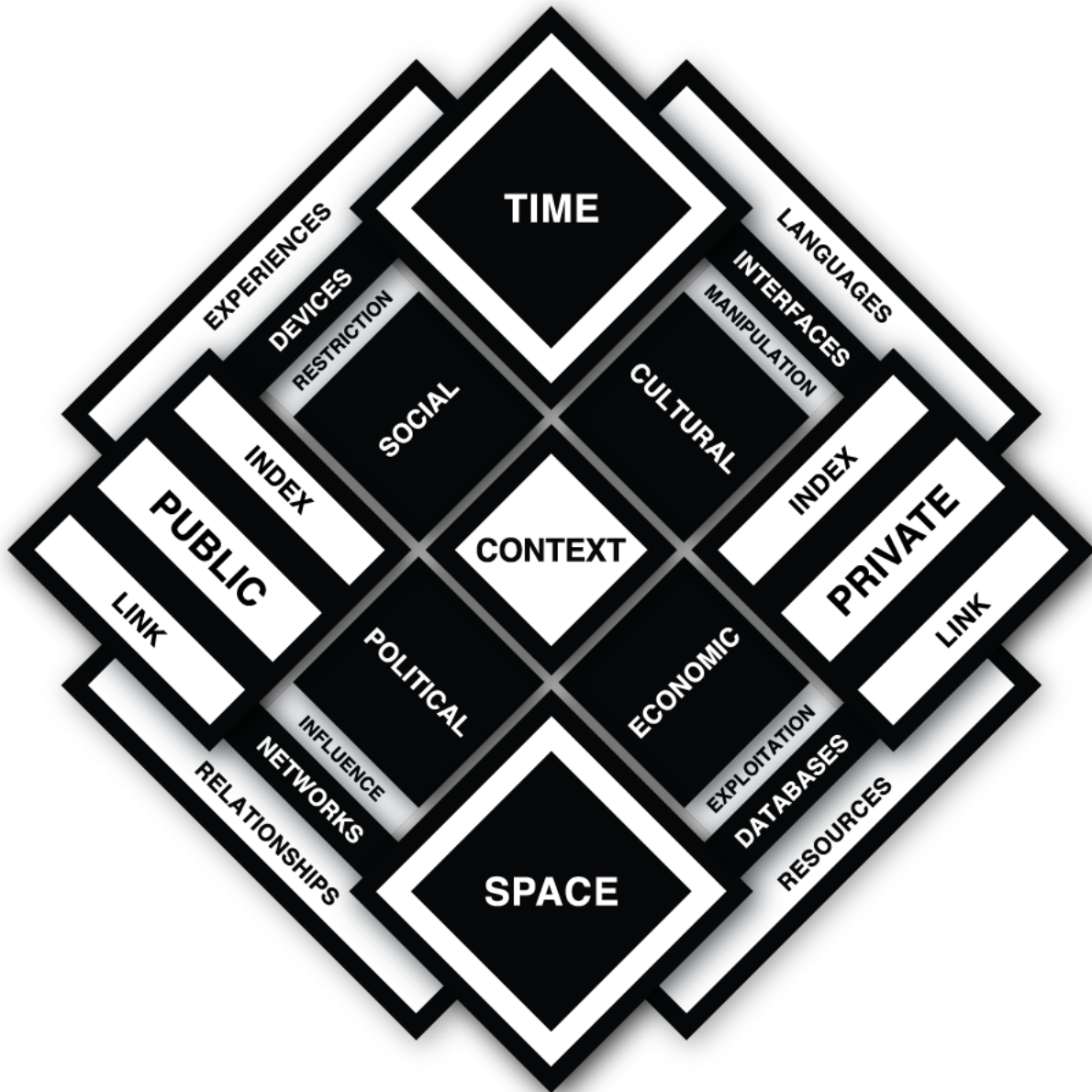
**Meaning formation in the subjectivity.**



The *sign* in the *reception regimes* creating meaning on the Internet splits between personal affections and identity in one direction and public attention and opinion in the opposite direction. When the *sign* is received and consumed privately, the subconscious flows through an impulsive formation of meaning for the self. When the *sign* is public, the consciousness flows through a self-aware production of meaning concerning others. The meaning of information is formed through responsible civic and personal integrity, or through irresponsibility, potentially causing antisocial behaviors. On the Internet, interpersonal systems of social relations, behavioral tendencies, and cognitive thinking are affected by the process of signification flowing through both personal and public uses of information. Identity and opinion can both vary, from being self-centered to being for public interest, while seeking attention or affection can be emotive with both intimate and public information.

## Context

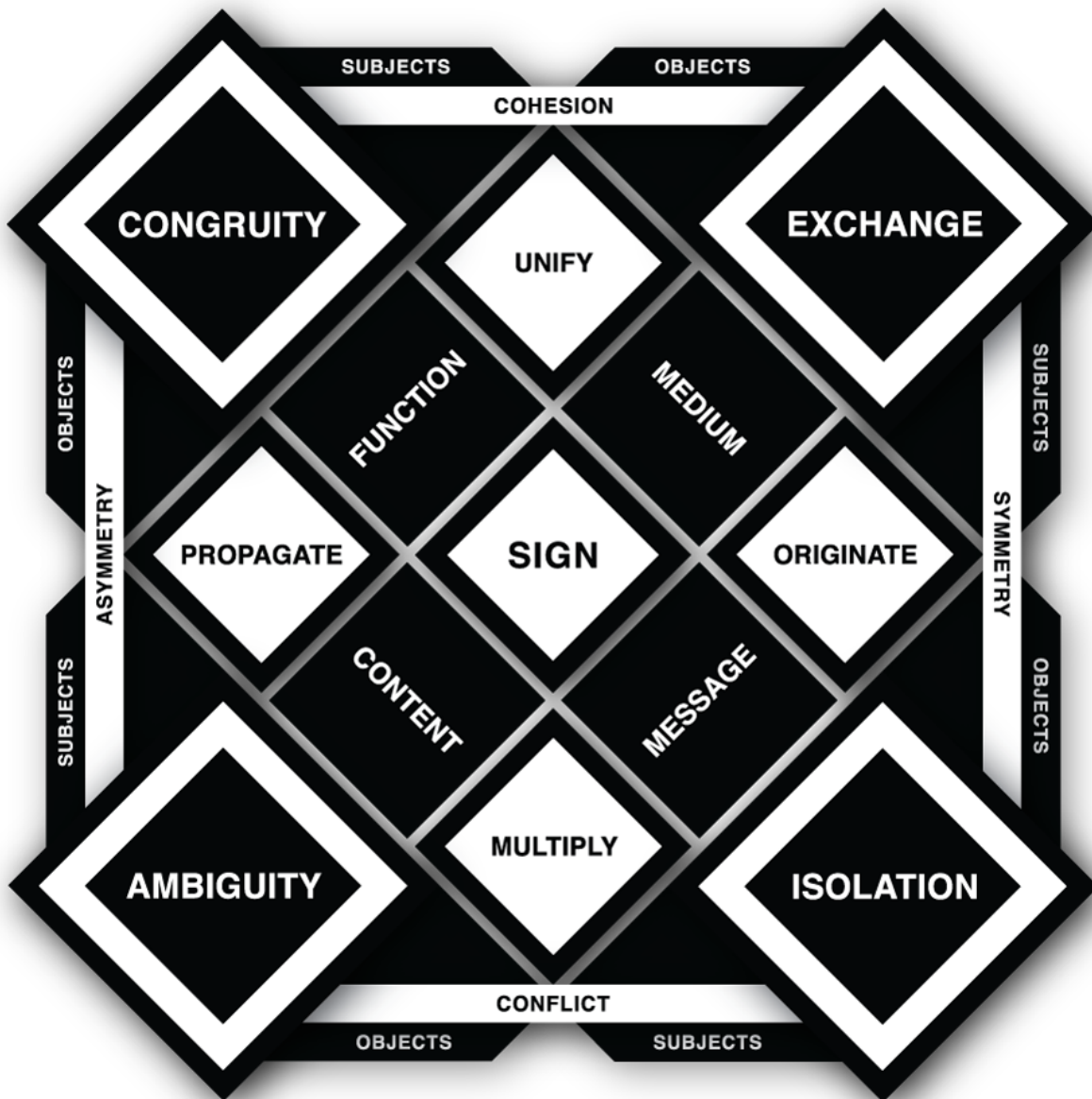
Meaning formation in the context.



The *context* for any system of signs and significations on the Internet relates to society and the medium itself. In one direction, the social, cultural, economic, and political contexts of information alter the production of subjects and objects in the collectivity, as well as the perceiving of feelings and senses in the subjectivity. In the other direction, society is impacted with the contexts of the exploitation, influence, restriction, and manipulation of information. The *semiosis* process takes place through the multidirectional flows of signification generated by the material contexts implied outside and inside the Internet. The fundamental forms of information organization on the Internet, links and indexes, are the structures forming crucial contexts in the signification process. The temporal and spacial locations are contextual factors in relation to public and private information. The sites where information is located and the time when the information is published, processed, or removed act as the contexts transforming every other component in the process of signification. Communication unfolds in time, however, on the Internet it can become permanently recorded or withdrawn after publication, while timestamps can be used as proofs. Thus, the time and location of information within indexes, feeds, links, and forums changes the scope and its effects, influencing subjectivity and collectivity when circulating through the social dimensions of exposure, intimacy,

## Collectivity

Meaning formation in the collectivity.



The *sign* in the *production regimes* creating meaning on the Internet expands its role with messages, functions, content, and medium, all becoming recursive signs. The origination and propagation of meaning permeates sources, senders, channels, and codes. This convolution of the flows of signification can unify or multiply meaning. Conflicts or cohesions of meanings emerge, consequentially convergence of meanings generate congruity and knowledge exchange in one direction, while the discordance of meanings creates ambiguity and isolation in the other direction. Combinations of meanings form at every level on the Internet. They affect social relations and power dynamics through symmetrical and asymmetrical structures of information. Organizing medium and function can drive the making of cohesive social groups with coherence of meaning, while divergent messages and content can generate antagonising information, potentially leading to conflict and social polarization.

This theory of *Internet Semiotics* integrates the principles and notions of the science of applied semiotics. It presupposes the properties of any *sign system* (such as text, image, video, etc.) and the correlations found among them. It assimilates the semiotic analysis of the *signifier*, *signified*, *referent*, and *code*, and it considers these variables as culturally and socially constructed. *Internet Semiotics* mainly accounts for the social semiotic processes common among different cultures and their specific socioeconomic conditions.

The theory of *Internet Semiotics* by Paolo Cirio aims to advance semiotic studies by reflecting on the social dimensions of the modern medium of the network.

Research, artworks, and essay by Paolo Cirio.  
2018-2019.

## **Glossary**

*Semiotics* or *Semiology*: It is the field of study concerned with signs, significations, and the process of creating meaning.

*Semiotic* or *Semiological*: It is the adjective that refers to this field of study and its objects.

*Semiosis*: It refers specifically to the processes and effects of the production, reception, alteration, and circulation of meanings in all forms, used by all kinds of agents of communication.

*Sign*: Images, texts, videos, messages, interfaces, languages, behaviours, etc.

*Signifier*: Carriers of meaning as mental image and perceivable part of the sign.

*Signified*: The concept, content, or meaning as signified by the sign.

*Referent*: The concrete thing to which the sign refers.

*Syntagm*: A significant combination of signs in space-time.

*Code*: A set of conventions in use to communicate meaning.

*Continental Semiotics* or *Semiology*: A rationalist, structuralist form deriving from Saussure.

*American Semiotics*: A behaviorist and positivistic form deriving from Peirce.

*Social Semiotics*: A field of semiotics primarily concerned with human semiosis as an inherently social phenomenon.

*Social Behaviorism*: A sociological theory in which communicative activity is the means through which society and a sense of self is constituted.

## **General theories of semiotics and renowned semanticists:**

Saussure, Peirce, Morris, Mead, Hjelmslev, Jakobson, Barthes, Greimas, and Eco.