

Cybercrusaders

BY CHIN-CHIN YAP

The surreal intersection of art, activism and computer hacking

Paolo Cirio is an Italian conceptual artist who uses the internet to investigate contemporary power structures, often by means that border on the illegal. He is part of a burgeoning field of artists whose work is variously known as “hacker art,” “digital legal art,” “digital actionism” and, perhaps most memorably, “cease and desist art,” a term coined by the critic and curator Simona Lodi. In her 2010 exhibition “Cease and Desist Art: Yes, This Is Illegal!”, Lodi declared: “Artists working in this field . . . target Facebook, Twitter and other centralized social networks—not anonymously, but [by] putting themselves on the front line . . . A new form of art has emerged . . . based on the capacity to provoke companies targeted by pirate artists, plagiarists, hackers and troublemakers . . . Earning oneself a cease-and-desist letter has become the new frontier in art, a symbol of the cause for the freedom to create in the Corporation Era.”

Today, computer hackers are a media staple for their hijinks, ranging from credit-card theft to ideological crusades against government and corporate misdoings. The most famous hacks are rooted in traditions of civil disobedience. Hackers and artists often share fundamental principles: commitment to creating beauty and elegance, a desire to subvert or improve the existing order, and a belief in freedom of expression and unconventional thinking. In his dissertation “The Art of Code” (2002), Maurice J. Black likens computer programmers to poets and asserts that “computer programmers from the 1950s onward . . . relied heavily on traditional aesthetic ideals of formal elegance, crisp and creative expression, striking originality, local precision and gorgeous overall effect to guide their work.”

Yet the field of hacker art remains relatively limited. Electronic art and net art are the mediums of countless artists who use technology to articulate images, concepts and even public projects. However, the number of artists who manipulate software and internet systems to produce potentially illegal outputs is still small. Hacking, by necessity, implies disruption and, consequently, potential run-ins with the law—a line that only a minority of artists are willing to flirt with. The practice is also unlikely to be financially profitable.

One pioneering collective in the hacker-art field is the Electronic Disturbance



PAOLO CIRIO, certificates of incorporation received upon purchase in *Loophole for All*, 2013. Courtesy the artist.

Theater (EDT), a small group that advocates “Electronic Civil Disobedience.” One of the earliest examples of hacker art is EDT’s *FloodNet* (1998), a computer application that distributed denial-of-service attacks against the websites of the Mexican Secretariat of the Interior and the United States Department of Defense as an act of support for the Zapatista rebels in Mexico. More recently, EDT exhibited its Transborder Immigrant Tool at the 2010 California Biennial, a simple mobile-phone navigation system that provides Mexicans attempting to cross the border to the United States with helpful directions, the locations of water and help centers, and even audio poetry.

Ubermorgen consists of another well-known pair of hacker artists—Lizvix and Hans Bernhard—and has collaborated with Paolo Cirio on various projects. In 2000, Ubermorgen took over the notorious *Voteauction.com* website from James Baumgartner, an MFA student at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in upstate New York. *Voteauction.com* (later renamed *Vote-auction.net*), which was launched during the US presidential elections to satirize the corrupting power of soft money in campaign contributions, offered US citizens the opportunity to sell their votes to the highest bidder.

Cirio himself is one of the most notorious

hacker artists exhibiting on the art circuit today, calling himself a “contemporary artist and pirate” who “investigates perception and creation of cultural, political and economic realities manipulated by modes of control over information’s power.” He has been awarded media art prizes such as Berlin’s Transmediale Award and the Award of Distinction for Interactive Art from *Prix Ars Electronica*, Linz. Authored with Alessandro Ludovico, his “Hacking Monopolism Trilogy” (2005–11) targeted the three internet behemoths Google, Amazon and Facebook. The first part of the trilogy, a joint project with Ubermorgen entitled *Google Will Eat Itself* (2005), was essentially a classic click-fraud scheme whereby participants’ online clicks triggered bots that clicked through hidden websites full of Google ads, thereby generating advertising micropayments from Google. These payments were used to buy Google stock and distribute it back to the participants, hence “giving” Google to the people. This “auto-cannibalistic scheme” could be used to buy up all of Google and hand it over to the public, a process that would have taken about 202,345,117 years according to the artists’ calculations. The project was widely profiled in the media, and the artists received a cease-and-desist letter from Google’s legal department.

Cirio describes his latest project, *Loophole*

for All (2013) (online at Loophole4ALL.com) as “a service to democratize offshore business for people who don’t want to pay for their riches. It empowers everyone to evade taxes, hide money and debt, and get away with anything by stealing the identities of real offshore companies.” Cirio claimed to have hacked the Cayman Islands Registry of Companies and stolen the information of about 200,000 companies. While each Cayman Islands entity usually costs about USD 600 to establish, Cirio offered much lower prices, ranging from 99 cents for a certificate of incorporation to USD 49 for a Cayman mailbox with rerouting services. He claimed that these products were now accessible to middle-class individuals and small businesses that would not normally have the knowledge or wherewithal to exploit offshore companies for tax avoidance.

In its first month, *Loophole for All* created a media frenzy, sold USD 700 worth of Cayman corporate identities, and had its PayPal account suspended. The Cayman Islands Financial Services Ministry issued a statement denying that their servers had been hacked, and that the certificates displayed by Cirio on his website were fake. It is clear to a casual viewer that the certificates are not authentic; they contain the names of real companies, but designate Cirio as the “Registrar of Companies.” The artist responded: “[The] Cayman government

[sells] incorporation of fake shell companies, whose main purpose is to defraud the rest of the world, causing onshore budget deficits and ever-growing impoverishment. [Its] work must be considered illegal, shameful and ‘the biggest tax scam in the world,’ as the US President Barack Obama described Cayman’s activity in 2008.”

Each of these hacker-art projects is designed to raise specific legal issues that underscore imbalances of political and economic power. A pertinent question is how law-enforcement authorities should treat hacking activity that is technically illegal but is carried out in the name of art and not cybercrime. For example, Cirio’s action of stealing the Cayman companies’ corporate information technically constitutes cybercrime, and it is arguable that his marketing of the companies to customers constitutes fraud, since customers cannot legally exploit the stolen companies.

To avoid negative publicity, it is likely that the Cayman authorities will treat Cirio less harshly than they would real cybercriminals. Hacker artists primarily seek publicity, and usually have no motive for profit or malicious harm beyond the exposition of ideas or information that they believe belong in the public domain; hence, prosecuting them is tricky as it would be hard to prove criminal intent. A counter-argument is that artists like Cirio, no matter how well intentioned,

expose security flaws that could be exploited by other hackers who might have less noble intentions.

The level of legal response to hacker art often depends on its effectiveness and media coverage. A standard response is the “cease-and-desist” letter from corporations such as Google and Facebook that Cirio, Ubermorgen and others have received. Ricardo Dominguez, the founder of EDT, was investigated by the FBI Office of Cybercrime and his tenure at the University of California San Diego jeopardized subsequent to launching the Transborder Immigrant Tool. The alarm caused by Ubermorgen’s Vote-auction.net stemmed from apparent uncertainty about whether the site could really fulfill its promise to sell votes. Over 21,000 bidders signed up, and the site received temporary restraining orders and injunctions from 13 US states on counts of illegal vote trading and consumer fraud. The California secretary of state Bill Jones declared that the company’s owner was committing a felony regardless of whether the site was a “parody,” and threatened that the more than 2,500 California voters who had signed up with Vote-auction.net could be prosecuted for felony and considered “part of a conspiracy.”

Hacker artists are seeking to expose the inequality and corruption inherent in existing political and economic infrastructures by pushing them to their logical limits, thereby revealing the systemic hypocrisy that makes tax havens and soft money possible for the rich while denying the same benefits to ordinary citizens. Despite their disruptive tactics, most share a laudable vision of creating elegantly transparent and efficient systems with real-world impact. In a 2013 text commissioned by Creative Time Reports, Cirio states: “I believe that artists can create legislative and financial models for the complex needs of the 21st century, incorporating the search for beauty into new forms of social organization . . . Contemporary artists should intervene in proposing policies that work for our times, while guiding us in interpreting and unveiling the invisible truths of our world . . . Designing new ideas for governance is the real creative challenge of today. Faced with the austerity recommended by politicians and economists, artists can activate the utopian imagination, fostering beauty and shared cultural values in social structures.”



Hans Bernhard of **UBERMORGEN** in a 2010 CNN Live televised discussion concerning the aims and implications of Vote-auction.net, a satirical site launched during the 2000 US presidential campaign.