



Paolo Cirio - The Big Plot, 2009

# RECOMBINANT FICTION

Paolo Cirio

Between 2008 and 2010, Cirio researched documentary fiction and invented the genre Recombinant Fiction. His form of experimental fiction presents real facts and issues across multiple media platforms by integrating actors and audiences for a socially-engaged genre of transmedia storytelling. This research has resulted in two fiction projects: Drowning NYC (2010) and The Big Plot (2009). The subjects and techniques of these fictions foresaw issues and modes of narration that are highly relevant today

**TheBigPlot.net** is a story about a Russian spy promoting Alt-Right politics through infiltrating social media with fictional personas who combine personal and political dramas with romance. The fiction is scattered over several social networks and linked in a non-linear story through post blogs, Youtube videos, tweets, pictures on Facebook, and even Wikipedia, LinkedIn, and MySpace profiles. Similar uses of social media channels are applied in **Drowning-NYC.net**, which focuses on a specific physical location and community of a neighborhood in Manhattan and incorporates physical narrative devices and communication



with local residents. This fiction addressed rising sea levels due to global warming and its impact on New York City's urban population, years before Hurricane Sandy caused record flooding in Manhattan.

Both projects made use of professional actors, material from their real life, and their interactions with audience members, who could intervene in the stories though creating new characters and narrations. Ultimately, these artworks are presented as Internet art on the websites of the projects and as offline installations in galleries of art institutions where the elements of the fictions are gathered and reassembled.

Recombinant Fiction is a political and aesthetic genre that integrates a new immersive and participatory form of art. Cirio defined Recombinant Fiction through theoretical writing, a manifesto, and two online artworks.

### Recombinant Fiction intro

In previous ages, mediums for narrating fiction such as theatre, literature, cinema, and television have defined languages, models and formats; each media development provided an expressive shift in forms of storytelling. Nowadays, media are multiplying, hybridizing, and mutating. The way they are used alters continually, creating potentially new ways of producing fiction.

Networked digital media emerge as a productive vehicle to create new forms of fiction. In fact, the rise of forms of storytelling such as 'Transmedia Storytelling', 'Alternate Reality Games', 'Transfiction', 'Dispersed Fiction', and 'Viral and Guerrilla Marketing' is a clear sign of an important revolution in ways to tell stories.

Recombinant Fiction is a political and aesthetic genre of this new immersive and participatory form of art. By identifying valuable and distinctive characteristics and objectives, Recombinant Fiction defines a unique genre able to drive tactical activism and dramatic purposes.

Our contemporary media environment era is characterized by the proliferation of Personal Media [1] (e.g. devices with platforms for instant messaging, blogs, photo, and video sharing services, etc.) resulting in new

modes of personal expression and interpersonal relations. Nonetheless, Mass Media continues to grow as well. Networked media generates new channels and interconnected devices for consuming entertainment and news (e.g. proprietary web platforms, digital TV, portable video/reader players, screen billboard, etc.). This results in the deregulation of advertising restrictions and privacy policies by the corporate media complex to boost the flow of information. Additionally, networked digital technologies accelerate and facilitate the production of



Paolo Cirio - The Big Plot, installation for the exhibition .move at EMARE festival, 2009, Halle - Germany

offline and analogue spaces of information (e.g. print-on-demand, custom manufacturing, Internet of things, organization of public assembly, mapping public spaces etc.). This results in a new mass of active prosumers, and a general increase of information in the environments surrounding humans.

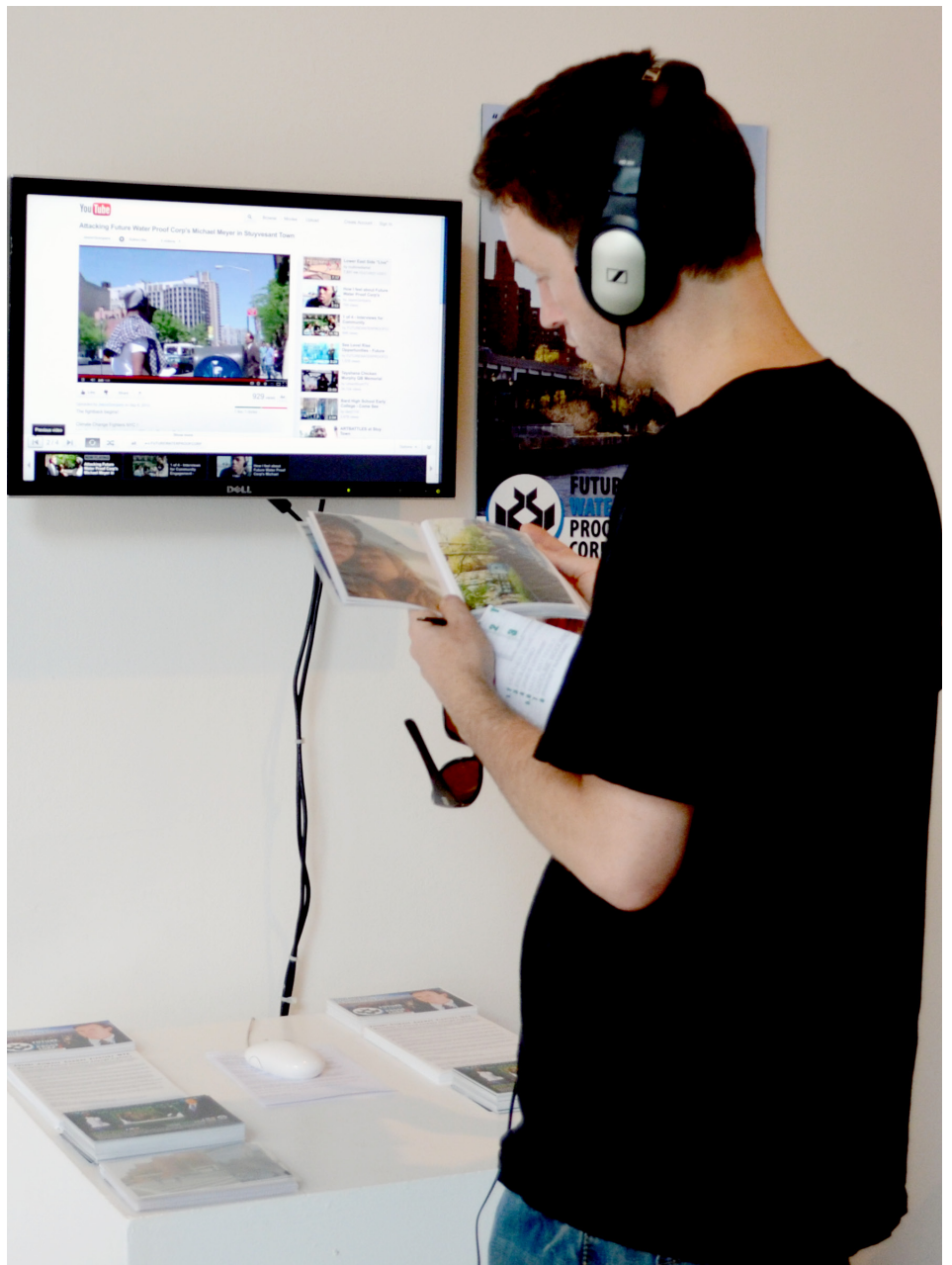
All of the above listed media are digital in origin, and therefore easily reproducible and transmissible through networks (e.g. Internet, GSM, Wi-Fi, etc.). Networked digital media generate an intensification of flow, interactions, and processes of communication. The informational environment created by all those media that broadcast messages, is defined as Infosphere [2]. This conceptual sphere is the space in which modern society is immersed, where people express themselves, build their own realities, and manage societal organization.

In this context, a modern form of fiction should be narrated by networked media and staged in the Infosphere, which can be used as the medium to dramatize reality and find a way to change it by a dramatic representation, as humanity has always done.

## Manifesto

1) The fiction is told through traditional news media, online social media, and public space interventions. The fragments of the fiction converge and evolve in one rhizomatic stage, synchronized and organized by networked digital media.

2) The fiction has conflicts and resolutions among characters with engaging personalities. There are not challenges or gaming aims for the audience, it must be pure fiction and its nature should be obscured but not hidden.



Drowning NYC, installation for the exhibition at EYEBEAM, 2012, NYC - U.S.

3) The fiction penetrates reality by including real entities in the narration. The created fictional reality is made from contemporary real-world patterns, which are semiologically re-linked and mutable in the narrative elements.

4) The fiction is interactive and participatory. It is unfolded with the active interaction of an audience that can participate in it by creating characters and reshaping the storyline through their personal media and by public interventions.

5) The fiction has activist and educational qualities to achieve social change goals, by spotting controversial identities or organizations, or by increasing awareness of real world plights. It must be without commercial or promotional purposes at all.

## Theory for practicing Recombinant Fiction

Recombinant Fiction is composed of layering mediums, spaces, identities, and modes, which can be seen as formally interconnected as a rhizome [3]. The rhizome reflects the abstract



The Big Plot, installation for the exhibition .move at EMARE festival, 2009, Halle - Germany

network structure, the configuration of the Infosphere. The fiction is told through the convergence [4] of narrations broadcasted by networked media. Organized and synchronized, these media create a rhizomatic space of narrative information that audiences can unfold and participate with.

## Stage

The convergence of narrative elements broadcasted by the media is facilitated by the semiological links that can be created among them. Each media of the rhizome is directed organically to broadcast narrative elements of the story that refer to each other. The networked convergence of scenographic elements creates a rhizomatic totality, recognizable as single stage, where the story is told and evolves. This stage embodies the Infosphere, denoted by the media that broadcast messages and by the messages themselves. The broadcasted narrative

signs are linked together in a network of signifiers, which constitutes the rhizome in which all the signs used in the narrative build the environment of the fiction. As in semiotization [5] in theatre, in the Infosphere, signs present in the narrative rhizome became functional to the construction of the fiction.

The fiction is unfolded by links that refer to each other, creating a semiotic networked storyline within which the audience can be actively surrounded. This unfoldment should not have challenges or ludic elements. Instead, it should simply be easy to interact with and readable by the audience. Furthermore, this process of semiotization through linking, quoting, cloning signs of reality is designed to integrate real entities into the fiction, transforming real-world patterns into fictional ones, and vice versa, fictional patterns of the story might be perceivable as real.

## Characters

Characters in the Recombinant Fiction use networked media to dialogue and articulate their messages. Characters show their masks digitally created and tell their stories through the disseminated media of the Infosphere that fit and build their personalities.

General identities and entities are made by bits of information broadcasted, which build their existences in the Infosphere and influence directly their presence in the ordinary physical world. The informational body that is broadcasted in the Infosphere can materialize the representation of the self, a general agency, and any activity. This state of being empowers the characters of the fiction to enact their roles with masks that appear realistic and familiar to the audience. Hence, the way characters use these media reveals personality traits and intensifies the emphatic effect on audiences.

Considering the audience present in the rhizomatic stage of the fiction, they are able to unfold the story and follow the characters' revelations with immediate ease, because characters and audience members share the same tools of expression and communication. This enables the audience to participate in stories by converging their mediated identities of the Infosphere into the rhizomatic narrative stage through their Personal Media (or other media of the Infosphere) and by having direct conversations with the main characters or even creating new characters and adding new elements to the dynamic storyline. The audiences know how to have control over their own characters, since they build their identities and related relationships with others through networked digital media in the everyday life. Often the projection of the self onto the Infosphere is characterized by the at-

tempt to appeal to others. This sort of internalization of the Spectacularization of representation of the self facilitates the personal reinvention for the performative acting in the fiction. Through their participation, audiences turn into characters of the fiction. As they develop their personas and create new narrative aspects, the storyline takes shape and opens to new dramatic concepts. In their new participatory role, the audience consciously performs a responsible act in the fiction's dual being, which is both inside the actual social reality and in the fictional story. As the audience shapes the story, they become aware of its fictitious double identity.

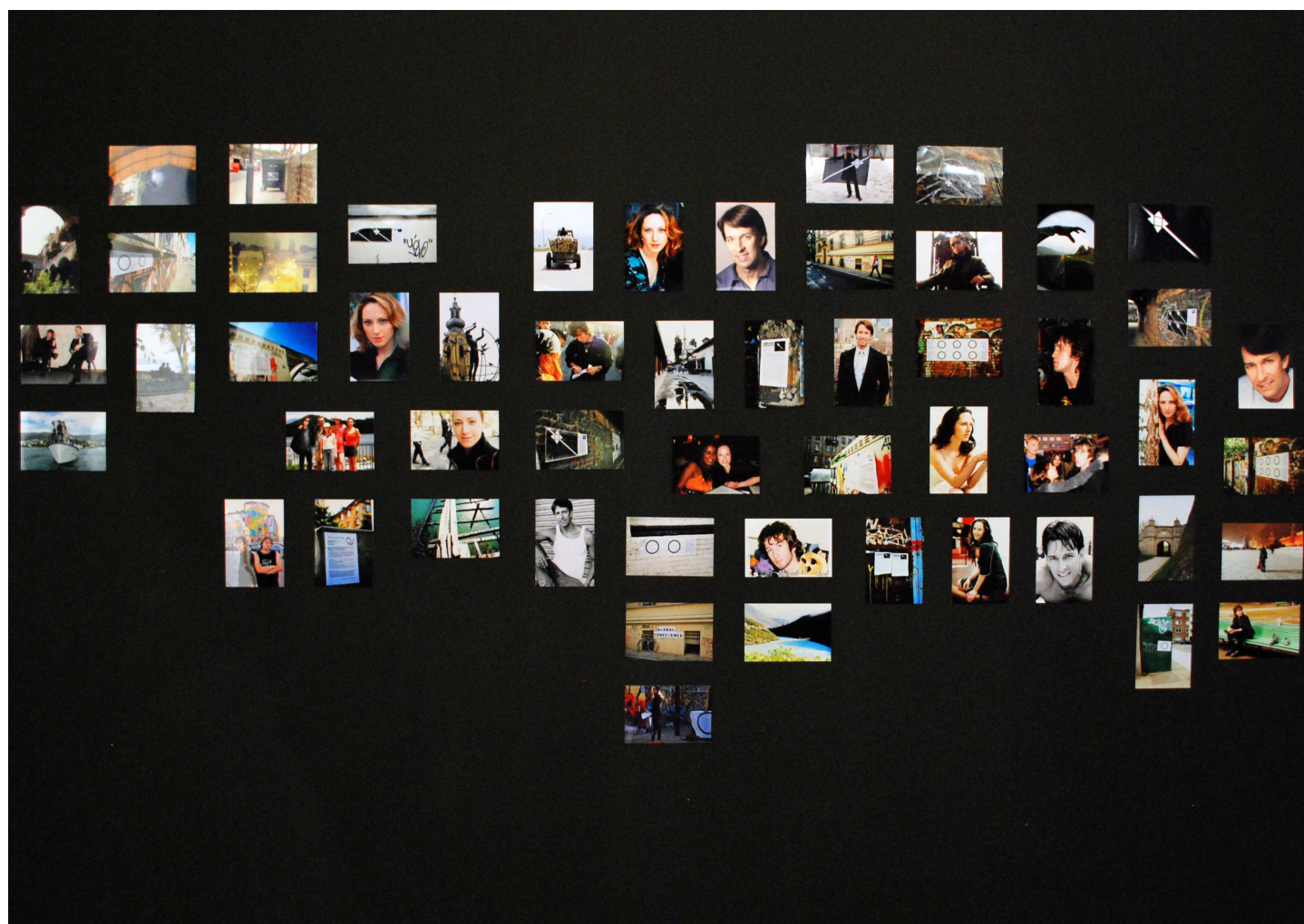
### Drama

The fiction uses variable forms of dramaturgical structures with interweaved situations among characters.

The story is told with dialogues, statements, monologues, public interventions, and actions about a fictional scenario that take place in a storyline over the Infosphere's stage.

Characters tell about discoveries, conflicts, reversals, resolutions, and twists in their existences, through background dramas of personal feelings and foreground plots of public fights. The fiction should trigger the original aims of dramatization of human condition for cathartic functions, representation of possibilities, and escapism from daily pressures through engaging stories.

In the first person narrative voice, main and minor characters communicate their experiences and claims directly to the audience with their masks. Characters' voices are broadcast over any media functional to the



The Big Plot, installation for the exhibition 10th Cairo Prize at Palazzo della Permanente, 2009, Milan - Italy



Drowning NYC, 2010

expression of the characters. Concurrently other media broadcast information to build the scenography and the atmosphere of the drama.

The fiction is broadcasted live. Narrative situations happen in real time. Narrative information is communicated simultaneously with the characters' declarations and dialogues, creating a fiction that occurs during a concentrated span of time. Audiences are pervaded in the story as they find themselves engaged with the progress of fiction or as they attend scheduled events.

The action line oscillates on a variable and mutable timeline. Multiple references among situations and characters on the timeline make it unbroken and comprehensible as a complete reticulated sequence of narrative occur-

rences. After the live broadcasting, the final documentation of all the narrative elements allows audiences to browse the fiction permanently.

The drama is set in the present, with scenarios contextual to the contemporary society and scripts similar to the ordinary behaviors of the audience. In order to thoroughly penetrate reality with an active fiction, the topic of the main conflict in the fiction should be a real world social matter familiar to the audience and engaged with mainstream media content.

Its fictional nature is announced; the audience must notice or perceive to attend at a fictional drama, through narrative patterns blurred with real patterns, to involve the audience in an immersive fiction. Real and illusory events come to inform each other.

Memory and associative processes are subtly moving and shifting at all times in relation to the present context.

### Tactical functions of the fiction

Over the course of human history, stories have always been used to understand and interpret reality, from religions to ideologies, beliefs and identifications in large narratives defined civilizations. However it is in our mediated society that stories replace realities in creating fragmented artificial worlds and capturing people's minds and imaginations within them. Reality continues to be redefined not only by its narrated image as fabricated by the entertainment and media industries, but recently also by the single individual who thinks and produces his/her own image to fit the artificial worlds.

Only by dramatizing the artificial reality of the Infosphere audiences can understand and then change their physical reality, over which they have recently lost control. Recombinant Fiction is about staging a drama inside the Hyperreality and Spectacularization of society to engage participants in a process as political agents.

The endeavor toward an efficient modern drama with effective outcomes requires strategy on stages and mediums as well as the employment of languages and aesthetics that speaks to the mindset of an individualized audience. The educational, informative, and transformative purposes of the dramatic actions should be developed for motivating and transforming audiences usually indifferent to social issues and for mobilizing victims of oppression. This can be accomplished by infiltrating the audience's language and environments with stories and characters that allure the attention and interest of the target. Through identification with the characters' dilemmas and public claims, Recombinant Fiction becomes a useful tool to reach new and large audiences whilst creating concern for social issues.

Tactical Recombinant Fiction can be a powerful art form to change human consciousness, demystify absurd beliefs, undermine unethical powers, and inform on social problems through networked storytelling.

Written in 2009, revised in 2018

■ PAOLO CIRIO

Quotes

"There will be never winning over the system on the real layer [...] because the system relies on symbolic-violence", J. Baudrillard. [6]

"Theatre is a rehearsal for revolution no matter that the action is fictional; what matters is that is action!", A. Boal. [7]

Footnotes and theories that have inspired Recombinant Fiction:

"Recombinant Theatre" by Critical Art Ensemble

"Invisible and Forum Theatre" by Augusto Boal

"TransMedia Storytelling" and "Convergence Culture" by Henry Jenkins

"Dispersed Fiction" by Jason Nelson

"TransFiction" by Alok Nandi

[1] "The digitalization and personal use of media technologies have destabilized the traditional dichotomization between mass communication and interpersonal communication, and therefore between mass media and personal media." Marika Lüders, 'Conceptualizing personal media', New Media & Society, Vol. 10, No. 5, 683-702, 2008

[2] "The infosphere denotes the whole informational environment constituted by all informational entities (thus including informational agents as well), their properties, interactions, processes and mutual relations." Luciano Floridi, 'Ethics in the Infosphere', The Philosophers' Magazine, 6: 18-19, 2001.

[3] Related to the theory of Rhizome as "Principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be." G. Deleuze, F. Guattari 'A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia' Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004

[4] "'Convergence' must be understood as a process that has several different manifestation." Henry Jenkins, 'Convergence? I diverge', Technology Review, 2001.

[5] "The semiotization of an element of performance occurs when it appears clearly as the sign of something. Within the framework' of the stage

or the theatrical event, all that is presented to the audience becomes a sign that "wishes" to communicate a signified."

Patrice Pavis, Christine Shantz, 'Dictionary of the theatre: terms, concepts, and analysis', University of Toronto Press, 1998.

[6] J. Baudrillard, 'Symbolic Exchange and Death', Sage, London, 1993, ISBN 0803983999

[7] A. Boal, 'Theatre of the Oppressed', Pluto Press, 2008, ISBN 0745328385

## PAOLO CIRIO

PAOLO CIRIO'S ART PRACTICE EMBODIES THE CONFLICTS, CONTRADICTIONS, ETHICS, LIMITS, AND POTENTIALS INHERENT TO THE SOCIAL COMPLEXITY OF INFORMATION SOCIETY THROUGH A CRITICAL AND PROACTIVE APPROACH. CIRIO'S ARTWORKS STIMULATE WAYS OF SEEING, EXAMINING, AND CHALLENGING MODERN COMPLEX SOCIAL SYSTEMS, PROCESSES, AND DYNAMICS. CIRIO USES POPULAR LANGUAGE, IRONY, INTERVENTIONS, AND SEDUCTIVE VISUALS TO ENGAGE A WIDE PUBLIC IN WORKS OF ART ABOUT CRITICAL ISSUES. HIS AESTHETIC INVESTIGATIONS ARE HIGHLY CONCEPTUAL WITH LAYERED AND INTERCONNECTED MEANINGS, FUNCTIONS AND AGENTS PRESENTED AS WHOLE CLOSED REFERENTIAL SYSTEM OF INTERRELATED IDEAS AND ACTIONS. PAOLO CIRIO'S FINE ART TRANSLATES CRITIQUES OF INFORMATION SYSTEMS INTO ARTIFACTS TO VISUALLY DOCUMENT AND ILLUSTRATE SOCIAL STRUCTURES EXAMINED BY HIS CONCEPTUAL WORK. CIRIO'S INSTALLATION ART COMBINES IMAGES, PHOTOGRAPHS, DIAGRAMS, DOCUMENTS, PUBLIC ART, AND VIDEOS TO ENGAGE THE GENERAL AUDIENCE IN EXPERIENCING AND DISCOVERING SUBJECTS, OUTCOMES, AND SIGNIFICANCE OF HIS INTERVENTIONS AND CONCEPTS.

