

**FROM WHITE CUBE TO ACTIVISM.  
THE ART OF COSTANTINO CIERVO**

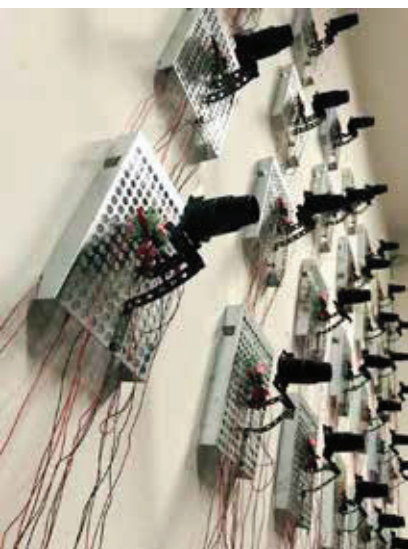
Matthias Reichelt

Symmetrical order, technical perfection, gleaming, highly polished steel casings, monitors with video- and computer-based animations combined with kinetics. This could be a description of the formal and aesthetic essence of the art of Costantino Ciervo, who was born in Naples in 1961 and has lived in Berlin for several decades, although his work also includes impressive drawings, photo-collages and performances.

It is, however, predominantly electronic installations and sculptures that Ciervo uses to pose highly topical questions about humanity in a world permeated by capitalism. In the exhibition at O&O Baukunst's O&O Depot the central position is occupied by an untitled wall installation from 1992 that consists of 64 permanently operating circuits and an equal number of modules, equipped with camera lenses, relays, seven segment displays and cabling. There is also a movement detector that integrates the public as a parameter that influences the circuits. The photographic lenses,

which show the binary circuits, not between 0 and 1 but between 6 and 4, often upside down, make the circuits legible in a mirror-inverted version and are at the same time an irritant. The complex symbolises the 64-bit technology on which not only computer technology but also the increasingly complex algorithms are based. They are growing more and more sophisticated and in the form of an artificial intelligence regulate large areas of social life, from the weather report to framing of the news to the stock exchange and they manipulate both market behaviour and people's wishes.

The work described above was shown at the 45th Venice Biennale in 1993. At a very early stage Ciervo here questioned the technology that today determines our digital age to the greatest degree. People in public space prefer formatted images on their smart phone to perceiving their surroundings through their own senses. Many people, living a secluded existence in special spaces, shape the kind of world that suits them and no longer make any attempt at all to form unaltered impressions without transmission by a digital media. However, Ciervo is in no way a Luddite bent on hindering the development of digital technology with all its complexity and speed; on the contrary, he sees it also as an opportunity and uses it for his art. His criticism is directed at the profit-oriented use for the purposes of control, manipulation and the retention of power. Ciervo explains: "the installation reveals a paradox: through interaction with the viewer, the users gain the impression that they share in the flow of information and can help to determine it. In fact, however, they function only like a relay of a system that actually operates entirely independently of them."



*Ohne Titel / Senza Titolo,*  
1993

A square that constantly changes its status, first black with a white NO and then white with a black YES, also shapes Costantino Ciervo's website

and refers to the electronic-installation based work of the artist who, at a high level of technical and aesthetic sophistication, brings conflicting socio-political themes together by means of multi-media in order to suggest questions through the tension they create. In his video sculptures Ciervo forms images that are poetic, and at times even allegorical, but which do not offer any unequivocal answers, as monocausal explanations are regarded as unsatisfactory by this artist who in the fields of economics and philosophy has studied the writings of Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci as well as Antonio Negri and Darrow Schecter.

The title of the exhibition *here and now* comes from a work made in 2017, which took a critical look at the urbanization of the world. On three monitors an eagle flies over an endless urbanised landscape with calm, regular beats of its wings. For some time now more than half of humanity has been living in large conurbations and this development is growing continuously. What does the increase of density through architecture mean for society on the one hand and for nature on the other? Despite how realistic they may seem, the images were actually programmed by Ciervo on the computer. His mega-city is, in fact, a conglomerate made up of London, Paris, Munich, Moscow, Peking, Panama and other urban spaces, and the apparently natural movement of the eagle is computer-generated. Below the three screens, barely noticeable, an egg is slowly transported from left to right. The parallel use of two movements at different speeds and in opposite directions dissolves certainty about space and time and opens up a view – beyond evolution – of the speed of global change in the Anthropocene age. Although this epoch is extremely short compared to the overall history of the earth, the changing situations brought about, above all by the developed capitalist countries, are very serious and are not just worrying but alarming.



*Out-Look, 2017*

Most people do not belong to the group of those who profit from this situation and many suffer from cramped living conditions in the expanding large cities, which Ciervo uses as the theme for his work series *Cell* (2006) with photographs from China (Peking and Shanghai). Against photos of satellite settlements for thousands of residents, a monitor that is fixed to a beam by means of electronic magnetism is moved up and down and shows two insects captured in a glass (a fly and a beetle).

The allocation of ethical values and their relationship to clearly defined ideologies has become difficult, at the very latest since the end of the competition between systems and capitalism's worldwide victory. The certainty of classification has been lost and the confusion is immense. In the reflective surfaces of *Trans-Tendenz* (2010) viewers can see themselves and can read or hear contrastingly combined statements – both positive and negative – in monitors in two scales that move up and down; then the self-questioning can begin.

With the app *Send Protest!* (2016) developed for Android smartphones as well as for I-phones, the artist encourages us to engage in criticism of the situation. This app makes it possible to upload photographs and videos about exploitation, repression, suppression or other scandalous situations from all around the globe and to share them. Several images from the SP archive were integrated in the work *Out-Look* (2017).

Ciervo's art is as topical as it is political. His enormously technically oriented and aesthetic objects and installations pose important questions about the state of society today. But that alone is not enough for him. With *Send Protest!* he traverses the border between the white cube and activism in public space.