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Precarious data aesthetics
An exploration of tactics, tricksters and idiocy in data

Say it with—— —
Bolts!
Oh thunder!
Serpentine aircurrents—— —
Hhhhhphsssssssss! The very word penetrates!

Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, *A Dozen Cocktails – Please* (excerpt)[1]

From fiction as form to fiction as method

On 20 January 2017 the exhibition *As If. The Media Artist as Trickster* opened at the exhibition space Framer Framed in Amsterdam. The idea for the exhibition started more than two years earlier, and David Garcia, Ian Alan Paul (who joined us later) and I decided to convey the spirit of tactical media in the current climate.[2] As a result of the extensive research and our discussions the exhibition became a way to capture and explore the various methods and forms of tactical media in which forms of participation, dialogue and community engagement were emphasised as ways to challenge power and gain control, while blurring the distinction between everyday life and art. In order to focus the vast array of socially engaged practices that appear with increasing regularity in fields ranging from theatre to activism, and urban planning to visual art, we decided to pay homage to the notion of the 'trickster'.[3] The trickster archetype is described as an artful and clever person who aims to create chaos and has the ability to do so with a synthesis of autonomy, sharp humour, and astute storytelling. Although the trickster has a long and varied history, we decided to focus on the trickster in tactical media, and in particular when it used the method of fiction. This provided a means to gain insights into methods, contextualise the conditions of site, and broaden the range of what constitutes tactical media. *As if* became the leading motif to think about the exhibition, two words that, in contrast to 'what if' (by which people try to unmask something or someone), indicate the future present; 'acting as though change has already taken place' (Garcia 2017:83).[4] Fiction as form, or better method,[5] became a perfect tool to uncover and explore how tactical media is still current today.[6] In other words, our message became: if the world is a fiction, then we need to be[come] the authors of it.[7]

Trying to pursue our own dictum, while surfing the web to look for interesting examples, we stumbled upon the website of the Guantanamo Bay Museum for Art and History (GBMAH), which became a perfect vehicle to reflect upon the trickster form while also enacting it. Going through the museum's website showed artworks by several artists, a critical studies centre, and a link to the museum's location on Google Maps. While we realised that the museum couldn't exist in physical space, it did on Google Maps. Intrigued by the story behind the hoax we decided to contact the museum and met its originator and the museum's lead curator, Ian Alan Paul. As we wrote in our exhibition text:

> Guantanamo Bay, or Gitmo as it is usually referred to, is one of those places that doesn't seem to exist. No one really gets to see the place, as reporters' and other visitors' experiences are carefully shaped and guided by U.S. authorities. The detention camp, as a place where people are held, interrogated, and sometimes tortured, remains an imaginary place for all but the prisoners and the national security officials who operate it. Week by week, we read of its imminent closure and its stubborn persistence, making the end of the prison paradoxically appear as inevitable and impossible.

Similarly, and taking on this paradox, Paul decided that the GBMAH should operate as a critical fiction and experimental documentary form, adopting the premise that the Guantanamo Bay detention facilities have been closed and replaced by a museum which critically reflects on the social and political significance of the prison itself. As he mentioned: 'The point isn't to trick people or deceive people (…) It's to increase that one moment of wonder that hopefully leads to the question of what's possible' (Warth 2012). Within the conceptual framework for our exhibition we decided to host a satellite exhibition of GBMAH. Using speculative fiction and simulation as curatorial strategies, i.e., fiction as method, the museum would present itself as a separate institution within the exhibition space itself, and reframe the included artworks within the meta-fiction of the museum. Using various rhetorical strategies including wall text, promotional video displays, posters, and catalogues, the exhibition reframed the works in relation to the suggested past closure of the prison as a strategy of conceptually and politically intervening against the ongoing operation of the prison in the present. In this way, as was mentioned by Paul, 'the exhibition most clearly speaks to a need to reconsider the mediated nature of politics in the contemporary moment, and to seriously consider what possibilities for intervention and political action remain in a time of sweepingly disorienting political change'.[8]

As mentioned, one of our aims was to enact the trickster aesthetic, as we believed it could have the potential to engage audiences in much more substantial ways: by not only thinking historically about this form of activist and artistic practice but also finding themselves immersed within it. In addition, GBMAH would provide visitors with the chance to reflect on the specificity of the Guantanamo site in relation to the site of the exhibition itself, and invite dissonant and disjunctive readings. As such, the meta-fiction of the museum's installation / satellite exhibition wasn't meant to simply operate as a hoax but were meant to produce new opportunities for poetic and imaginative reorganisations of present discussions and positions, a form of tricking ourselves into believing something to be possible. Because, as keenly observed by art critic Alexis C. Madrigal, 'If Gitmo exists because of one fiction, perhaps it can be closed by another? Or put another (augmented) way, germane to this digital project: if we change Gitmo's website, can it actually change its physical and legal reality?' (Madrigal 2012). While most reporters and visitors immediately saw through the hoax, some still believed the imaginary reality of GBMAH. Yet, the use of fiction, trickery and hoaxes is now mostly charged with negative connotations, begging the question – as we wondered as well – if there still is a place for art that acts in disruptive ways in the precarious swathe of data? If so, how is it different from older examples, and how to recognise its aesthetic?

Between urinals and coy flappertoys

On 18 September 1910, while walking with her husband, Felix Paul Greve, on a crowded Fifth Avenue in Pittsburg, Elsa von Freytag Loringhoven (then known by her husband's name and according to the newspaper Elsie Greve) and her husband were arrested and incarcerated on charges of being 'suspicious persons' – she was dressed in 'men's clothes and puffing a cigarette'. 'They were all right (…) the woman was wearing men's clothes only because she could walk better and keep up with her husband, who was walking out his vacation', they were released the same evening.[9] Breaking with gender stereotypes, bourgeoisie etiquette and sexual repression, Elsa was one of the most pronounced and abstruse Dada artists at the time. At times she would shave or colour her hair, glue stamps on her cheeks, or wear a brassiere made from tomato cans joined with a green ribbon (Lappin 2004). Her looks, in which she blurred the distinction between her private and her artistic life, were early examples of performance art, and her sculpture and poetry were directed against the prudishness, conservatism, greed and shallowness of Western societies. Rather than the display of femininity that could be witnessed in some of the cabarets in cafés and night clubs around the turn of the century (Ostende 2019), her looks were shocking, and could be described as idiocy rather than trickery. She would create her costumes from junk, pieces of scrap or items she pocketed at the dime store, for which she was arrested and sent to jail. But as her friend and publisher Margaret Anderson mentioned, the Baroness learned to leap 'from patrol wagons with such agility that policemen let her go in admiration' (Anderson 1969[1930]: 179). Performance as a way of life, the sourcing of material and 'the serendipitous way they came into her hands were part of the total experience of her aesthetic' (Lappin 2004). Moreover, the performativity and aesthetic were, as also argued by performance art scholar Amelia Jones, an

‘opening up of artistic production to the vicissitudes of reception such that the process of making meaning is itself marked as a political – and, specifically, gendered-act’ (Jones 1998: 142–3). It is a performance perhaps best described as precarious aesthetics: a tension between transparency and opacity, and between the literal and the metaphorical, which is articulated and operating at the mercy of bodies and technologies that are unstable and prone to fail.[10]

Apart from her poetry, most of it published in *The Little Review*, a magazine for the arts founded by Margaret Anderson and co-edited with Jane Heap and Ezra Pound, a few photographs by Bernice Abbott and Man Ray, and some anecdotal descriptions, little is actually known about the Baroness as Elsa entitled herself.[11] For a long time, her existence and influence were downplayed or even ignored in most art historical accounts of Dada. Yet in one of her surviving sculptures, *God* (1917)[12], her mastery of form and parody clearly comes out. *God* consists of a cast iron plumbing trap set on a mitre box but turned around, becoming a phallic assemblage of plumbing and carpentry materials. As a non-functioning twisted phallus, *God* is a mockery of religion and masculine power more generally, as well as commentary on the American belief in technology. The work is often compared to *Fountain* (1917), the iconic artwork from the Dada period. In most art historical analyses, the *readymade* is attributed to Marcel Duchamp, who submitted it anonymously to the exhibition of the American Society of Independent Artists in 1917.[13] However, because the urinal is signed ‘R.Mutt’, and since initially Duchamp denied authorship of the artwork to test the perhaps biased committee, the authorship of *Fountain* is still topic of much debate. In the early 1960s when asked to reproduce the work, he explained in an interview how the idea ‘arose in a conversation with Arensberg and Joseph Stella, and “they immediately went to buy the item”’ (Camfield 1987: 68). Moreover, he said that Mutt was a pseudonym, a modification of Mott Works, a manufacturer of plumbing supplies, as well as a play on the comic Mutt and Jeff. The ‘R’ stood for Richard, a pun on ‘rich-art’ which was French slang for ‘money-bags’ (Camfield 1987: 69). However, and since Duchamp was known to be ambiguous and even would contradict himself, his initial denial and a letter he sent to his sister a few days after the exhibition in 1917 and that became public in 1983 aroused new suspicions about the authorship of *Fountain.* In the letter he wrote: ‘one of my female friends under a masculine pseudonym, Richard Mutt, sent in a porcelain urinal as a sculpture’ (Seigel 1995: 117). In her groundbreaking biography of the Baroness, literary historian Irene Gammel (2002) suggests that *Fountain* could also be attributed to the Baroness, due to the likeness to *God*, her creations with found objects (readymades), her inclination to offend in humorous ways, the letter Duchamp wrote to his sister mentioning a ‘female friend’, or the letters R.Mutt, which in German could be read as ‘Urmutter’, could speak to her earlier connection to the Munich Cosmic Circle, or refer to ‘Armut’, a pun that supposedly the Baroness would have relished.[14] Similarly, she referred to Duchamp as ‘m’ars’, a combination of ‘my arse’ and ‘Mars’, the god of war, and she called herself ‘m’ars teutonic’, a female god of war (Gammel 2002: 227). Was Duchamp a fraud or a trickster? Was *Fountain* – and the story around it – an act of idiocy, or a tactical move?

The paradigm of the trickster comprises ‘artfulness in creating chaos and the ability to do so with a synthesis of autonomy, pointed humour, and clever storytelling’ (Weppler 2018). Duchamp was certainly a pioneer in these areas, as art historian Francis Naumann mentions: ‘Duchamp – like the competent chess player that he was – fully anticipated the potential repercussions of his actions, not only as they applied to his own artistic development, but as they related to larger aesthetic concerns affecting the very nature of art’ (Naumann 2012: 79). Moreover, his initial refusal to publicly admit authorship and the silence on the part of the Baroness, both play into the mythic histories of Dada. If anything, his radical and provocative artistic gesture – which Duchamp denied when asked to explain his motives, possibly fearing accusations that it was a hoax or continuing the myth – became a method that has inspired artists to this day. At the same time, the Baroness’ use of homonyms signals the wicked acts of a jester. Indeed, poetry is where the Baroness is at her best. Dadaist disregard for conventional syntax, it’s acerbic and (on the surface) nonsensical approach to language, the use of portmanteau constructions – a linguistic blend of words, such as her Phalluspistol, Kissambushed or Coy flappertoy (for a vibrator), which themselves are miniature poems – and optophonetics, a written form of sound poetry in which typographic variations or repetitive letters signal certain sound effects, similar to musical notation, are clear threads in her oeuvre.[15] Moreover, being true to Dada form, the poems

sparked debate for being scandalous literary performances. As asserted by theatre scholar David Escoffery, the 'rhetoric of nonsense' performed by Dada is the 'key factor determining the character of a performance event' (Escoffery 2005: 7). The randomness or nonsense create confusion but are also tactics to persuade the audience to participate and collaborate in enacting the tension between the text and the sounds, as well as to provoke a response. In the contemporary 'big data era' chaos seems to be the norm. Cluttered with texts, images and video, chaos is thriving on the web; yet amid the disorder the trajectories of the Baroness and Duchamp can still be traced in poetic tactical experiments.

Digital Dada

On 29/9/2017 Dutch artist Constant Dullaart posted his first version of *Phantom Love* on Instagram. Constant is known for his exploration and subversion of the web as a medium of communication and distribution, in particular in relation to the technical and socio-political constraints that influence the use and experience of the web. In the mid-noughties he met like-minded artists through online websites such as del.icio.us or they started their own group blogging sites such as Nasty Nets or Club Internet. While arguably less political than the earlier generation of net artists, the 'surfclubs' explored the formal aesthetics of the web and its content. Particularly prominent was the copying, manipulation and appropriation of existing data, or found footage, from the web, and the creation of new classifications and taxonomies for digital databases. These experiments could be seen as a consequence of, or reflection on, the information overload in a big data era, which signalled 'a new condition in which everything was available and up for grabs' (Moioli 2016). Yet, it is also similar to Dadaism in which the acts of idiocy cannot be disentangled from the intention to provoke a response from fellow artists, the online audience and perhaps in some cases the elitist art world.[16] With the increase of social media companies who offered 'free' spaces to communicate and share information, surfclubs ceased to exist and some of the artists moved to these platforms. Simultaneously their content became more political, as it quickly transpired that the corporations behind the platforms were less interested in encouraging creativity and more interested in the profit they could make off their users content and their behaviour within their space. The economic drive of the web, which became more and more apparent in the noughties, has always been a focus and creative force for Constant: from participating in 'domain squatting' or 'domain parking' (an – at times – lucrative business strategy buying and reselling prominent domain names for resale) and 'link dumps' (a more touted money-making strategy that was particularly popular when keyword searching was an optimisation tactic in digital marketing: registered domain names consisted of frequently used keywords that were used to aggregate cheap ads rather than content), which he tagged as *readymades* in his del.icio.us account;[17] and idiotic experiments such as *YouTube as a Subject* (2008) and the subsequent versions;[18] or *The Disagreeing Internet* (2008), the first of a series of browser-based works in which he animated the Google search home page as an ironic gesture towards the increased usage and power of centralised platforms;[19] to starting his own company *DullTech*™ (2015), a performative artwork and a hardware start-up that creates technically simplified – or dull – products, which evolved into *dull.live*™, an 'accelerating incubator environment' that served as a commercial co-working space and a physical platform to question labour ethics and identity politics in a neo-liberal environment.[20]

Constant's works have obvious connections to Dadaist practices. A digital Dada can be seen in the use of metonyms, the search for the mundane in 'readymade' domain names, and by enacting his art by being Dull.[21] With *Phantom Love* he broadened his tactics to use poetry and language as a means to further disrupt the conventional use of social media platforms. Although his main criticism is focused on the commercialisation and standardisation of the web through technical aesthetic appropriation and performative gestures, here he also directs his attention to the users of these platforms. In a series of five performances, Constant uploaded lines of poetry to the Instagram accounts of semi-public organisations. Helped by an 'army' of Instagram accounts, several artificially constructed identities were made to recite the poems. Each account would deliver one line in turn as comments to a posted image. The project is based on his previous experience with creating fictitious identities and social media accounts for his projects *High Retention, Slow Delivery* (2014) and *The Possibility of an Army* (2016). While he exposed the influence of the 'like economy' in the former, by showing how Instagram and similar social media platforms treat its users as commodities rather than real identities, in the latter,

he built his ‘army’ to confront the concept of digital identity. In short, due to the verification protocols most social media use, thousands of simcards were bought and connected to existing names, in this case those of deceased Hessian Mercenaries – the German soldiers who served as auxiliaries to the British Army most notably in the American Revolutionary War, which were then infiltrated into several social circles on Facebook. A fake army emerged, and since Dullaart had outsourced some of the work via marketing software services including Facedominator and Massplanner, but mostly through Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) hackers in Pakistan, the Philippines, India or Bangladesh, many of the eighteenth-century Germanic names were linked to Pakistani or Philippine accounts. As such, the performance managed to discuss the value of identity and the quantification of social capital, while also exposing the technical intricacies and hidden labour behind the like economy. Intrigued by the merging of the social and the technical, in *Phantom Love* he used the troops to amplify another dubious practice in Instagram.

This time he moved to public organisations with questionable Instagram accounts: EU Council, US Customs Border Protection, Historic Green-Wood Cemetery; Department of Homeland Security, and the Internet Society, an American non-profit that provides leadership in Internet-related standards, education, access and policy. All of them seem to seek validation from their ‘audience’ via their Instagram account. The fictitious accounts are used as new tools and actors for communication, albeit in ambiguous and disconcerting ways. At first sight the comments seem random, nonsensical and trivial. For example, the first two comments responding to an image posted by the Department of Homeland Security (Fig. 1) resemble regular responses, a critical and a positive reflection on the initial post, yet the third comment is more cryptic ‘cesarsantana420 to know ones way around’, and it is followed by another fifty or so arbitrary sentences. Or so it seems. However, when reading one after the other a strict and consistent pattern and rhythm emerge and the narrative unfolds.

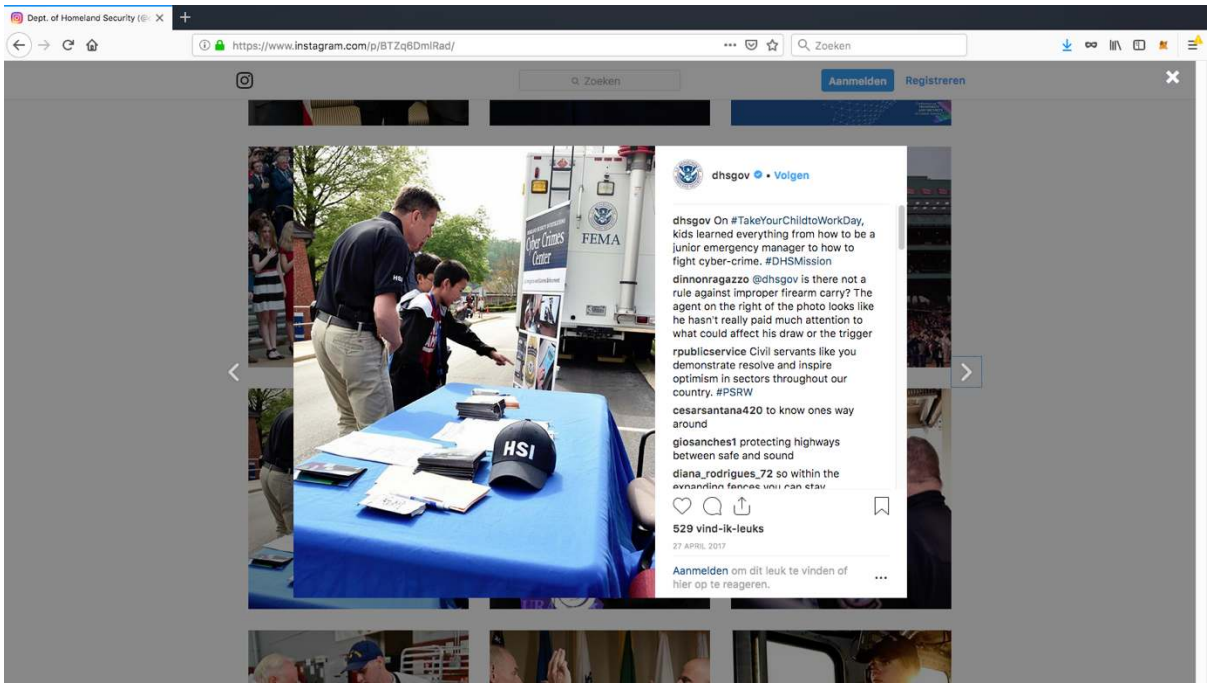

Fig. 1 Screenshot Phantom Love - Institutions Based on Lore

Speaking in tongues, Constant lets his forces recite consecutively, the stanza has a militant or techno narrative, and a chorus develops which is at once nonsensical and sensible, social and technical, prank and political statement. While the first poems still follow a functional cadence and rhyme, the later ones are increasingly complex: interspersed with additional punctuation marks, abstract symbols and emojis, creating visual patterns as well as signalling the often automated nonsensical response mechanisms on social media, and using words from different languages to create double meanings; for instance, ‘kind’ (UK) and ‘kind’ (Dutch, for child), further convolutes and confuses. To find out what is happening requires a close reading: who or what is speaking, what or who is spoken about, and how do the

comments relate to each other and to the main account. In the process, the reader becomes immersed in the intermingled identities and voices; some of them human while others are propelled by the technology. Although Constant is not interested in writing computer-generated poetry, the technical aspect is nevertheless an important part of the work, in particular how artificial identities are created and intercepted or not, and thus affect the meaning and context of the poem. Indeed, while Constant made a strict protocol for the 'armies', what actually happens is that each line needs to be logged manually, and one follows the other after it has been validated, yet it may happen that the verification comment comes later than expected and someone has already pushed the button twice. So, the same line might appear suddenly in two different accounts. However, inevitably, the rhythm and content will change as identities are unmasked, either because they are discovered as fake or because the owner discovers that her/his account is used in ways s/he doesn't like.[22] The latter, also known as a 'stealth account', relates to Dadaist tactics where identity was often not clear, or used in ambiguous ways. Similarly, in *Phantom Love* the distinction between real and fake accounts is not straightforward: while Constant instigated the process, the technical machine performs – or conducts – the outcome, at times interrupted by human input. Moreover, the poems were released anonymously, and although one is signed at the bottom and Constant revealed his authorship after a while, most users will likely have been puzzled as to what happened: are the poems idiocy, a critique or a praise? The regularity of the stanzas and the irregularity of the words and symbols, the formal instruction versus the mechanical randomness, and the ambiguous use of identities, infused by computational processes the poems expand beyond themselves, creating multiple readings and understandings.

Precarious aesthetics in data

By undermining the fundamental structures of the platform and subverting the like economy through the practice of commenting, Constant manages to create confusion, if only for an 'Instagram moment'. That these moments don't last is not lost on Constant. The domain name http://www.attention.rip/ and the tag #attentionrip are the preambles for the day the predictable will happen: the accounts will be identified and subsequently shut down.[23] In an attempt to save the precarious aesthetics Constant recorded the entries via webrecorder.io where they can be read in full, albeit that the immediate surprise of the sudden encounter (in many accounts one post is liked many times more than others) and thus its tactical appeal is lost. As he mentions on the home page of attention.rip: 'each poem, within its originally emphemeral publication, sufferes [sic] the entropy of the attention economy'. Like much Dadaist poetry, in particular those by the Baroness, Constant's poetry alienates in its form, in the context in which it performs, and in how it interweaves the technical with the human and the social. In this sense, Constant explores the philosophical, aesthetic and political implications in an even more rigorous and systemic way while raising some important questions: What constitutes poetry in a socio-technical environment? What are its aims? Where are its borders? How to act out poetry? How to become poetry?

On 9 January 2020, I saw Erica Scourti's work *Difficult to Find the Lost Things* (2019) as part of the exhibition *24/7* at Somerset House in London (Fig. 2). The exhibition, curated by Sarah Cook and Jonathan Reekie, explored the non-stop nature of contemporary life. Erica's work is a large drawing comprising doodles and small images, some of them half coloured and overlaid with words and short sentences in different languages. The chaotic jumble turns out to be a digital collage she made on her phone in which she traces fragments from her own online archive. On headphones you can hear her reading out in a monotonous and almost lethargic voice the words and sentences, muddled up in English and Greek. The result is a highly dense, layered and chaotic work, which fits the contemporary attention economy, in which data and information circulate in overwhelming, inescapable and never-ending streams. The Greek/English artist has become known for her performative projects based on her online life. From emphasising the banality of how Google

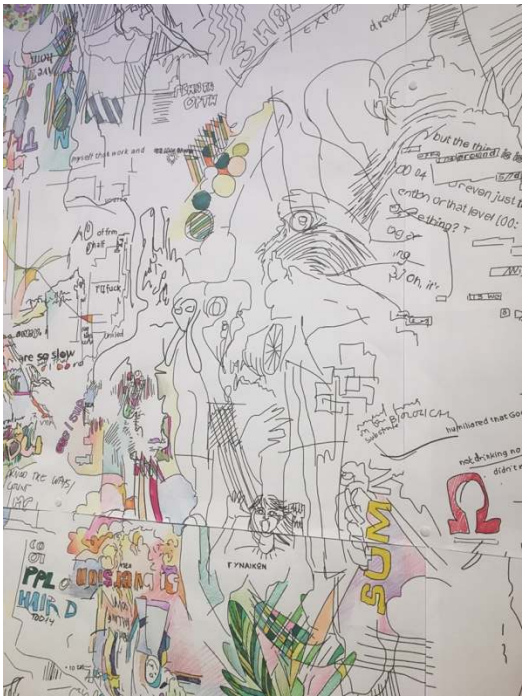

Fig. 2. Erica Scourti, *Difficult to Find the Lost Things* (2019), detail

encapsulates personal information in keywords (*Life in AdWords*, 2012–2013), in which she e-mailed her diary to herself via her Gmail account, and each day read aloud the keywords that Google came up with in front of a webcam. By asking a ghostwriter to write her biography based on her online traces in social media, e-mail accounts and search history (*The Outage*, 2014), or asking others to participate in her work by either responding to her requests (*So Like You*, 2014), collate fragments (from her online archive parsed by algorithms or semi-automated editing systems) and imagine the missing links to create short stories about her life (*Dark Archives*, 2015), and by including snippets of personal exchanges with friends and family into her work which are edited and read randomly by a voice imitation algorithm (*Slip Tongue*, 2018). The projects are process-led scenarios in which human and computer language intermingle and form a collaborative authorship, and where it is never fully clear who the actor is and what is influenced by whom. Countering the presumed clarity and objective stance of technology, Erica emphasises the fragmentation, the noise, the non-transparency and the nonsensical that take place in the executions of computer processes. While she has a profound interest in the working and outcomes of algorithms and how they exert power, she always challenges the process with human influence. The results are often semi-fictions or estranged poetry in a hybrid language, being and speaking both Greek and English, coupled with software and its processes, which is performed or visualised in intimate yet satirical ways.

Operating in this mix of her own experiences and (digital) memorabilia with abstract computer protocols that are unstable and liable to fail, her performances, similar to Constant's, are inherently – and with time – increasingly precarious. By drawing attention to the opacity and limitations of the media she works with, whether human or non-human, the works can be explored as a precarious mediation of the themes she addresses. In a rhythmic ebb and flow of words, she and her co-workers interweave traces of events, meetings, notes, doodles and personal emotions from laughter to crying, which drift in and out of each other's purview. Acting out the banal and mundane, in some cases throughout nearly year-long daily performances (*Life in Adwords*), her endurance and stoic reading of the words provides them with an emotional and poetic quality that is both fun, ironic and subversive. Using her private everyday self as a site for artistic experimentation and expression, like Dadaism, and particularly that of the Baroness, she takes pleasure in the confusion of boundaries, whether it is of language and fiction or body and identity. While never really being sure where the artistic and the private life begin or end, as she mentions: 'As human and algorithmic witnesses become ever more entangled, the subject that emerges (…) is not only casting a digital shadow, but becomes inextricable from it' (Scourti 2017: 161),

Erica's semi-autobiographical poetic gestures can quickly become compulsive in the endless self-branding of social media. This is not only true for herself, but also for her friends and family whose personal exchanges can become part of her work. It could be argued that these tactics merely play into the mechanisms of neoliberal economics and thus reinforce the power dynamics at play. While being very aware of these implications, Erica, and Constant for that matter, show how an intensive scrutiny of the different roles and by applying tactics of exaggeration and extreme appropriation compliance to rules can empower. Rather than merely being random or chaotic, her method is a tactic: she disrupts in the sea of data and by using the technical translations and filling the gaps with fiction, fragments of videos, photos or drawings, she enacts a precarious aesthetics in which she elides the distinctions between offline and online, private and public, fact and fiction.

Similar to Constant, Erica emphasises the sociopolitical implications of personal data being filtered, tracked and managed by confronting the performativity of algorithms, bots and other automated software. By exposing the mundane in a playful, visual way both artists encourage users to be more poetic, to disrupt, misuse and intervene in the computational processes in order to take back control. Indeed, as we tried to show via the many artworks in our exhibition *As If. The Media Artist as Trickster*, when assuming fiction as reality it is possible to 'acquire new possibilities for action specific to the circumstances of their creation' (Shaw and Reeves-Evison 2017: 11). In other words, taking advantage of invisibility, loss and gaps, amid a legacy of tactical media artists, fiction as method penetrates the everyday and becomes a systemic critique, which enables seeing things anew by disrupting the routine of online experience.

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[1] *A Dozen Cocktails—Please* was published in *Sulfur* (1983). It is also available online as part of the project *In Transition: Selected Poems by the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven* by Tanya Clement. For more information see https://digital.lib.umd.edu/transition/poem?pid=umd:55430.

[2] Besides this core curatorial team, we collaborated intensively with the organisers of the venues that showed the exhibition, in particular Mike Stubbs (FACT, Liverpool), Sabine Himmelsbach (HeK, Basel) and Josien Pieterse and Cas Bool (Framer Framed), as well as Eric Kluitenberg who, with David Garcia, initiated the tactical media events.

[3] It was curator Nat Muller who was involved in the early stages of the project and who first recognised the connection between tactical media art and the persona of the trickster in art practices.

[4] In the second and third iteration of the exhibition (at HeK, Basel and FACT, Liverpool), the title of the show changed to *How Much Of This Is Fiction*, taken from one of the works in the exhibition by Swiss artist Maia Gusberti. The words are presented as an illuminated neon sign that can function in various contexts, as Gusberti explained, it 'can be read and interpreted differently: as a subtitle for its environment, a spatial commentary, a hanging question or an assertion'. http://www.maiagusberti.net/?n=Projects.HowMuchOfThis.

[5] For more information about 'fiction as method', see Garcia 2017, and the introduction by Shaw and Reeves-Evison in the same volume.

[6] The exhibition gained in currency, as just a few weeks before the opening it became known that alt.right memes used classical DIY tactical media methods that helped to bring Donald Trump to power, and moreover that the art and politics we were celebrating deliberately used fiction and hoaxes, at a point when terms like 'post-truth' and 'fake news' had become emblematic of the widespread erosion of trust in rational debate in the public sphere. For more information about the consequences of these events and our position, see Garcia (2017).

[7] I'm paraphrasing J.G. Ballard, who in the introduction of his book *Crash* describes a media landscape 'ruled by fictions of every kind […] soft drink commercials coexist in an over-lit realm ruled by advertizing and pseudo-events, science and Pornography,' which in turn suggests a new role for the novelist: 'The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality' (quoted in Garcia 2017).

[8] Quote from an interview we conducted with Anne Celine Sikma and Iona Sharp Casas for Framer Framed, see https://framerframed.nl/dossier/interview-with-the-curators-the-exhibition-as-if/.

[9] 'She Wore Men's Clothes', *The New York Times*, 17 September, 1910: 6.

[10] The notion of precarious aesthetics in art is mostly used in relation to *transcoding, flickering*, and *blurring* (Bourriaud 2009) and is connected to media such as film, photography and video in which low-definition media, 'poor' images or an analogue nostalgia are recurring practices. Yet, precarious also means 'vulnerable to the will or decision of others', 'insecurely founded', and depending on 'chance or circumstance; uncertain; liable to fail; exposed to risk, hazardous; insecure, unstable'; in this sense it is 'fundamentally relational; it is grounded in a condition that is contingent on other people or entities' (Fetveit 2015). Hence, it is also a political construct or action that is based on social, technical and aesthetic relations.

[11] The Baroness was born as Else Hildegard Plötz on 12 July 1874 on the island Swinemünde off Germany's north coast. She named herself Baroness after she married the German Baron von Freytag-Loringhoven in 1913.

[12] For a long time, the sculpture was attributed to Morton Schamberg; here I follow Francis Naumann's detailed research and attribution of the work to the Baroness, which was photographed by Schamberg (Naumann 1994:171).

[13] Since Duchamp was also a member, and he wanted to test the committee and chose the urinal for its dislikeable and perhaps offensive nature: '[it] sprang from the idea of making an experiment concerned with taste: choose the object which has the least chance of being liked. A urinal – very few people think there is anything wonderful about a urinal' (Hahn 1964: 22).

[14] https://www.theartstory.org/artist/von-freytag-loringhoven-elsa/life-and-legacy/.

[15] For an extensive description and analysis of some of her poems, see Clement (2011).

[16] Idiocy is deeply connected to Dada, as can be seen in slogans written in different languages that were used on posters, such as 'Dada est contre le futur, Dada est mort, Dada est idiot, vive Dada!' (Theo van Doesburg and Kurt Schwitters, *Kleine Dada Soirée*, 1922). Whereas idiocy was often, and certainly in the case of the Baroness, a mode of living and a method to act

politically in public by performing the seemingly nonsensical and transforming or disrupting the normative, in digital media idiocy returns as an aesthetic phenomenon that is engendered and played out through the infrastructure of the web. Moreover, and as media theorist Olga Goriunova emphasizes, idiocy is now 'deeply networked and technical, and is also a new kind of idiocy itself, a creative atmospheric idiocy marginally but globally encompassing networked stages' (2012: 224).

[17] For more information, see Droitcour 2009. Moreover, continuing Dada tactics through these readymades, one of Constant's projects *suggesteddomain.com* (2009) involved buying several parked domains which together would read the ambiguous – and anonymous – letter explaining the importance of *Fountain* at the time: 'He CHOSE it. He.took An.article Of.life placed.it So.that its.usefull Significance.disappeared under.the New.title And.point of.view Created.anew thought.for That.object'.

[18] For more information about the work, see Guida 2011, and about the concept of versioning, see Dekker 2018 (30–1; 109–14). The practice of versioning (i.e., mixing or mutating one work into another) is also interesting in relation to the Baroness, who would combine different versions of a poem into one reading. Rather than merely being a method that leads to an end result, it showed – as also in the case of versioning – a process in which a 'transtextual dialog resulted between poems', which as explained by Thayer, 'became a method for expression that incorporated significant elements of time' (2018).

[19] For more information, see Connor 2018.

[20] For more information, see Thayer 2018, and http://www.upstreamgallery.nl/exhibitions/161/dulllife-hack-hustle-historicize.

[21] While his name, Constant Dullaart, is not merely a portmanteau, he managed to bring dullness to the next level. Whereas Dada felt the world was becoming dull, too routine and needed shaking up, which they did by challenging their audience, Constant embraces and enacts the Dull with a performative act in the form of a real-world start-up DullTech™.

[22] People can sell the access to their accounts to businesses, who can use their profiles in return for likes or additional friends. For more information see, for instance, Confessore et al. 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/01/27/technology/social-media-bots.html

[23] It is important to note here the value of the domain name, also known as location bar or URL as these are often part of the concept or narrative. For more information, see Dekker 2020.