

**Edo Dijksterhuis, 'Robin Hood in Times of Digitally Induced Relativism',
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Filter economy and quantified social capital

Constant Dullaart

Art Space of the De Nederlandsche Bank (DNB)

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**Robin Hood in Times of Digitally Induced Relativism
by Edo Dijksterhuis**

In the fall of 1987 John Knoll and his girlfriend Jennifer flew to Tahiti. For months they'd been working on the computer graphics of the film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and they needed a well-earned rest. It was at the pristine Bora-Bora beach that Knoll took a photograph which in the decades ahead became an icon of international geekdom: Jennifer, seen from the back, sitting topless on the white sand with the almost fluorescent blue ocean as backdrop. The picture would have remained just another entry in the family album had Knoll not gone on to invent Photoshop. When demonstrating the new software at Apple he used the image because it easily lent itself for all kinds of technical treatments. "Jennifer in Paradise," as the picture was dubbed, was soon shared, cloned and tweaked by techies worldwide.

For artist Constant Dullaart, Knoll's holiday snap constitutes the "original Photoshop meme," the patient-zero of the visual tsunami unleashed daily by Instagram, Flickr, and dozens of other image sharing and editing programs. For his best-known work to date Dullaart reproduced *Jennifer in Paradise* in 72 panels, using a different Photoshop function for each image. The work is a monument to the appropriation and manipulation of imagery, which has penetrated every detail of our daily lives since the invention of Photoshop a quarter of a century ago.



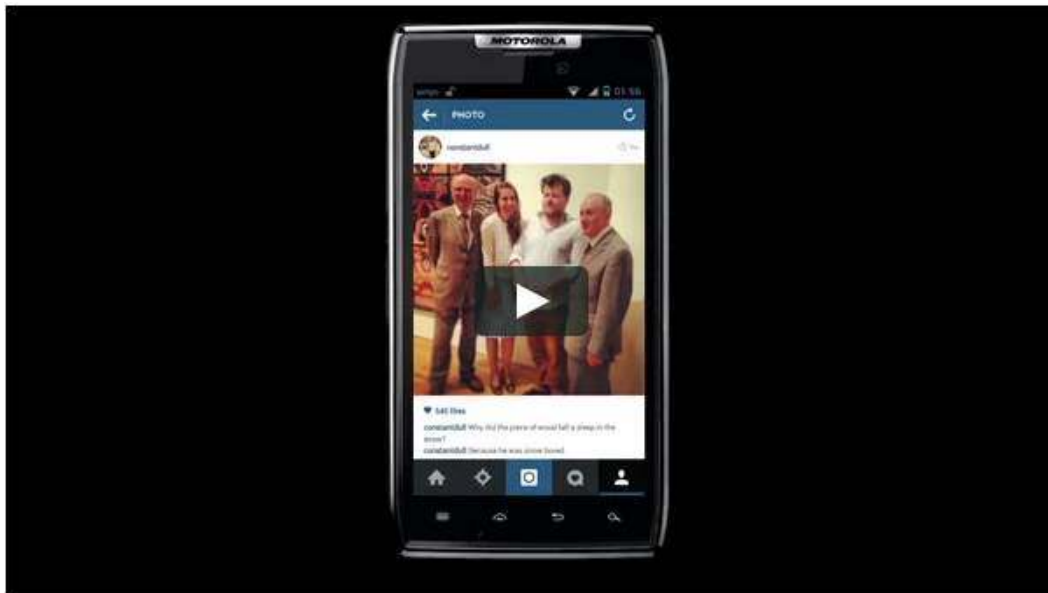
Constant Dullaart, *The Revolving Internet*, 2010, domain name, javascript, html

Only in a few instances is digital enhancement of images disapproved of or even frowned upon. The jury of World Press Photo has over the years disqualified contenders for deleting parts of reality or aesthetically upgrading new images. And the practice of digitally molding fashion models into sticklike frames has been condemned for presenting young women with unrealistic role models. But besides journalistic integrity and body image concerns over unhealthy stereotyping, there's not a lot of ethical no-no's holding back our urge to alter images beyond the traditional photographic manipulation of light, angle, and shutter time. We even seem to have quietly accepted the fact that basically every picture we're presented with is somehow digitally doctored. "What you see is what you get" has become "what you get is what you see."

The ever-expanding internet has engendered a kind of "absolute relativism." Images exist within a context of likewise images, making them recognizable and "readable." But in a realm with limitless capacity to create ever-new universes, no image is without context. It renders all images equally possible, equally true and—eventually—equally acceptable. We, consumers, have been swept up in the dynamics of it all, cutting loose value, truth, and reliability from the gold standard of real life.

Internet artists have responded to the phenomenon in different ways. Someone like Petra Cortright dives headlong into the technical toolbox and confronts the world as a happy-go-lucky tour guide in the United States of Virtuality. [Ed Atkins](#), on the other hand, is more concerned with the physical disconnection the internet presents and infuses his avatars with existentialist angst.

Constant Dullaart is more of an activist, examining and criticizing the assumptions underlying the downtrodden paths of the digital highway system. In an interview he once said that “the industrialization of image manipulation that Photoshop enabled is actually a form of cultural imperialism.” His *Jennifer in Paradise* series can be seen as an act of resistance, an attempt to beat the capitalist Moloch with his own images and tools. By enlarging and exaggerating Dullaart opens our eyes to the subtle mechanism of manipulation we’ve come to accept as normality.



Constant Dullaart, *High Retention, Slow Delivery* (2014) from *voornaam achternaam* on Vimeo,
Commissioned by Jeu de Paume

Fittingly, the show at De Nederlandsche Bank is organized as part of the bank’s “Innovation Month.” A small screen placed awkwardly askew in the middle of the room presents Dullaart’s essay on social media. The artist *bought 2.5 million fake followers* and set about equally distributing them over Instagram accounts of art institutions and art professionals. These often function as a channels for selling art, taking the popularity contest of Facebook one step further and effectively casting the audience in the role of commodity. By equalizing the accounts Dullaart nullified their relative worth and neutralized them. The printed out placards with ghost profiles look like posters for an election that has obviously been rigged.

While during Innovation Month the bank’s personnel is undoubtedly schooled in technological singularity, cybercrime, and whatnot, digital native Dullaart has chosen to present mostly physical art works, driving home his point even more effectively. By translating the virtual to the physical he highlights the ethical blind spots inherent to the internet. Being at the vanguard of image

manipulation Photoshop is his preferred target. Both simple and powerful is the massive glass plate he engraved with Photoshop's characteristic brushstrokes. Translucent, it leaves the wall behind it recognizable enough, but the tools of transformation can never be denied.



Constant Dullaart, *Eyjafjallajökull*, from series *HEALED*, 2011-ongoing, Spot Healed disaster images, lambda prints, variable sizes

For his *Healing*-series Dullaart employed Photoshop's healing brush—a tool implying that some images are to be considered sick and in need of virtual medical care. The artist selected photos depicting the explosion of an oil drilling platform in the Gulf of Mexico and the nuclear disaster in Fukushima. In their healed state they look like a romantic sunset and a soothing Jasper Johns monochrome. It's a bit like Thomas Ruff's aestheticized pixel images but with a more vicious bite.

Like Ruff, Dullaart also poses the question of authorship and ownership. While internet superpowers like Facebook-appropriate snaps uploaded by individual users and blatantly enlist them for marketing and advertising purposes, tech companies tend to be extremely protective of what they consider their property. An army of lawyers is on stand-by to curtail the free movement and use of images on the internet. Dullaart tricks the internet giants at their own game by turning the tables and stealing from

them. He did so with *Jennifer in Paradise* and now he's done it again with images taken from John Knoll's website. He printed and overlayed them with engraved glass mimicking Photoshop brushes. On the wall of the art space the tiger behind ice crystals and the bamboo stalk obscured by milk glass stop being stock photography and become something else altogether. Robin Hood has struck again.