

Domenico Quaranta

# IN IT FOR THE LULZ



Domenico Quaranta

# IN IT FOR THE LULZ

*“Within culture, the regulated coexistence of individuals in a community, identity plays a constitutive part in describing and naming the individual, as community only arises from the joint presence of individuals. The joint presence of different communities in turn generates society.”*

Sakrowski<sup>1</sup>

In November 2015, on the occasion of an exhibition at the Schirn Kunsthalle museum in Frankfurt, Constant Dullaart released the online performance *The Possibility of an Army*, still in progress at the moment of writing.<sup>2</sup> The performance consists in enlisting volunteers to open Facebook accounts with the names of the soldiers of the “Hessian army”, an army of mercenaries of German origin hired by the British government in the XVIII century and used in several conflicts, most notably in the American Revolutionary War (1775 - 1783).

The historical reference is interesting in itself. The Hessian army came from the German state of Hesse-Kassel. As *Wikipedia* explains, “although it was a fairly widespread practice at the time to rent out troops to other princes, it was the Landgraves of Hesse-Kassel who were notable for hiring out contingents of their army as mercenaries during the 17th and 18th centuries. Hesse-Kassel maintained 7% of its entire population under arms throughout the eighteenth century. This force served as a source of mercenaries for other European states.”<sup>3</sup> One of these states was Great Britain, and the widespread use of Hessian troops (about 30,000 soldiers, a quarter of the British army in North America) against the American colonies made “Hessian” a synonym

---

1 Robert Sakrowski, “Identity and Social Networks”, in *Schirn Mag.*, November 26, 2015, online at [http://www.schirn.de/en/magazine/context/identity\\_and\\_social\\_networks/](http://www.schirn.de/en/magazine/context/identity_and_social_networks/).

2 Cf. <http://www.schirn.de/the-possibility-of-an-army/>.

3 Cf. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landgraviate\\_of\\_Hesse-Kassel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landgraviate_of_Hesse-Kassel) (retrieved February 13, 2016)

of “mercenary” in the United States. Their nature of mercenaries made them a subject of either courtship and prosecution: war prisoners and deserters were offered American land and started a new life in the United States. In 1877 they became the subject of a successful satirical letter, “The Sale of the Hessians”, sometimes ascribed to Benjamin Franklin.

An independent state until 1815, when it became part of the German Confederation, in 1866 the reign of Hesse-Kassel was annexed by Prussia and became a province. In the framework of *The Possibility of an Army*, this historical reference works as a parable: there is a (national) identity that is lost long before the disappearance of the actual state; a commerce of lives and a new sense of community that is obviously fake, because it is built on money, opposed to a new sense of community that is obviously genuine, because it is built on land, relationships and culture (the Hessians defending British interests against the pursuit of independence of the British colonies); and finally, the development of a new sense of belonging that is built upon treason and trust (the Hessians deserting the British army upon the promise of becoming free citizens of a new land).

What does this old story have to do with the networked, globalized society of the XXI century, with the form of online society that has been shaped by corporate social networks such as Facebook, and with the contemporary notion of audience? Among the artists that have come to prominence along the last decade, and with a strong link to online cultures, Constant Dullaart is probably the one with the stronger sense of “community”. In his interviews, his work is often contextualized as part of an ongoing conversation taking place, mostly online, between people with different social rules, but somehow belonging to the same “family”. Within this conversation, Dullaart’s work acts sometimes as a response, most often as a trigger and a provocation. Whatever he does, from websites to more conceptual interventions, from filling up a gallery space with postproduced images to writing an open letter or a magazine feature, from launching a company to posting a YouTube video, makes sense, first and foremost, within this conversation, and is judged effective or not by the artist according to the level of debate it is able to

generate. At first, this may look like an elitist attitude, that of somebody who values the reaction of its peers much more than that of society at large. But Constant Dullaart is well aware of the fact that society at large doesn't exist as an abstraction: it is, as Sakrowski acutely points out, the result of "the joint presence of different communities", and the role of the individual within society is defined by his role within his community of reference, or "family", and his ability to make his community have a role in an enlarged conversation, and affect society as a whole.



Constant Dullaart  
*The Possibility of an Army, 2015*

In this sense, Constant Dullaart is the prototypical net artist, where "net art" is intended in its original, more genuine meaning: a family of artists who are kept together by friendship, mutual respect, common interests, the sense of belonging to an online society which shares values of equality and access, beyond physical distance and differences of language, race, gender, "real world" reputation and income. Something very different from the power relationships, the institutional pedigree and the commercial value that define the reputation of an artist within the art world, and from the audience metrics that are starting to define the reputation of an artist within the networked society. When an artist starts being successful in the art world, he often forgets to care about this peer to peer dialogue, giving more importance to

collectors' feedback, gallery representation, magazine reviews. When anyone joins social networks, he's very easily and almost inadvertently drawn to care more about numbers than people, and to commodify himself, his friends and the contents they produce. In this situation, Dullaart often takes upon his large shoulders the role of the one who wants to make these points clear, and to change the situation for the better.

At first, this approach may seem idealistic, paternalistic, nostalgic and naive at best - all words that have been often used in interviews by journalists who want to challenge him, and that Dullaart is never scared to confront with. When asked about his "general attitude to internet browsing in 2015", Dullaart replied: "In it for the lulz."<sup>4</sup> This reply should be extended to his work to explain why it is so strongly related to the internet. "For the lulz" is a popular catchphrase in the internet jargon, "used to express that one carried out a specific action for the sake of personal comic enjoyment. This is sometimes used to explain why one has posted offensive, far-fetched or disgusting contents on image boards and discussion forums."<sup>5</sup> But this sentence should be related, on the one hand, to the hacker ethic as explained by Linus Torvalds, when he puts entertainment at the top of a scale of values that includes survival and social life. Entertainment - with a capital "E" is for him "something intrinsically interesting and challenging", that "gives your life meaning".<sup>6</sup> And, on the other hand, to the notion - well known on 4chan and in the online communities where this catchphrase originated - that the lulz are intimately connected with a networked environment which is structurally open and free of control and censorship. The lulz are what made the internet attractive for the first generations of netizens - and the main motivation behind the big battles for the freedom of the internet.

And the lulz are the main motivation behind Dullaart's work. "What the

---

4 Opening Times, "Constant Dullaart Interview", 2015, online at <http://otdac.org/main/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/OT-Constant-Dullaart-Interview.pdf>.

5 Cf. *Know Your Meme*, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/i-did-it-for-the-lulz/> retrieved February 13, 2016).

6 Linus Torvalds, "What Makes Hackers Tick? a.k.a. Linus's Law", in Pekka Himanen, *The Hacker Ethic and the Spirit of the Information Age*, Random House, New York 2001, pp. XV - XVI.

Internet stood for, for a long time, is something that I'm still nostalgically supporting. I think that was a beautiful system but it's gone, over", he said in an interview.<sup>7</sup> Although this sentence may sound quite pessimistic, Dullaart never stops advocating for the kind of environment and community he experienced as a young dog. He understands the internet as a living system, whose evolution can be affected not just by the big subjects and the ruling forces, but also by the actions of the single individual, however minimal. In a situation in which everything can start the feedback loop that could reverse the current trend, acting responsibly and according to his understanding of the current situation is his only way to deal with it. Constant Dullaart is a systemic artist whose works can be only understood as actions within a system, responding to something and waiting for a response.

Dullaart grew up in an internet "designed to be used by everyone. With a certain amount of technical knowledge – which of course depends on how much time, education and money you have – it was basically accessible."<sup>8</sup> He started following del.icio.us accounts, discovering and becoming friend of the people behind them, looking at them through tags and links. He took part in surfing clubs, group blogs where small communities of people shared, reframed, commented and discussed found online material. He made websites and posted videos on YouTube, enjoying the level of response and the quality of the conversation, and actively looking for it. Then the corporate web, that was already developing in those early years, became more regulated, more controlled, more opaque in its ways of working. "Now we're working in all these corporate backyards. These servers used to be private backyards connecting to each other, making a kind of artificial public space but now it's not public space but a fucking big shopping mall owned by Facebook. We follow their rules, in their proprietary system."<sup>9</sup> The first subject of his criticism was, of course, Google. He made it less absolute by making it agree<sup>10</sup>, disagree<sup>11</sup>, rotate<sup>12</sup>,

---

7 Alison Ordnung, "An Interview with Constant Dullaart", in *AQNB*, March 12, 2014, online at <http://www.aqnb.com/2014/03/12/an-interview-with-constant-dullaart/>.

8 *Ibid.*

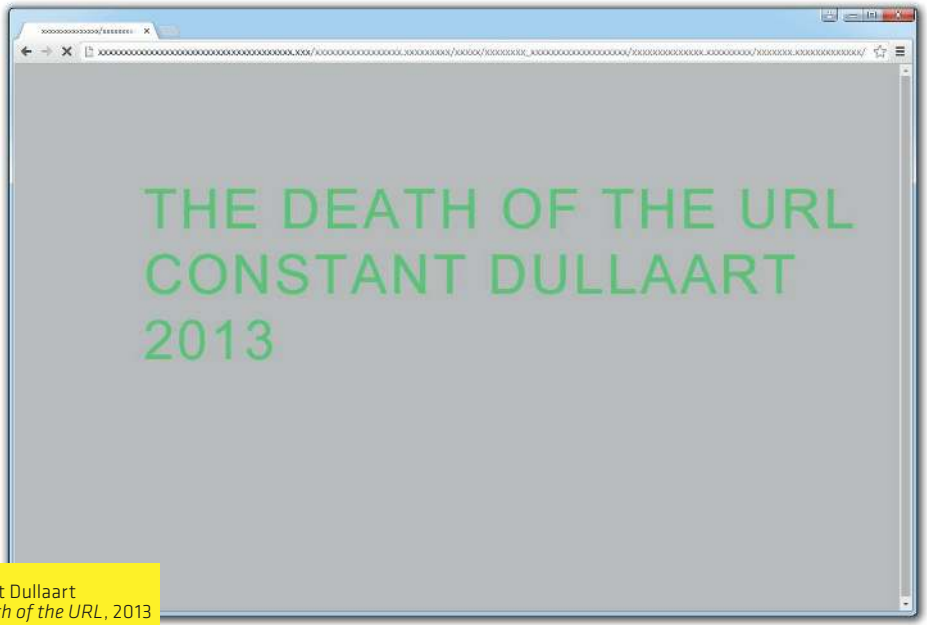
9 *Ibid.*

10 <http://theagreeinginternet.com/>

11 <http://thedisagreeinginternet.com/>

12 <http://therevolvinginternet.com/>





Constant Dullaart  
*The Death of the URL*, 2013

that informs *High Retention, Slow Delivery* (2014), *The Possibility of an Army* and, in part, the *Balconism Manifesto* (2014). The latter is a densely written call to action and responsibility, illustrating between the lines the position Dullaart outlined for himself: “The most important thing is: you must choose to be seen [...] Remaining unseen, by making a clearer choice where to be seen. We are in the brave new now, get ready to choose your balcony, to escape the warm enclosure of the social web, to address, to talk to the people outside your algorithm bubble.”<sup>16</sup> *High Retention, Slow Delivery* is a (partially) successful attempt to talk to people outside of the artist’s algorithmic bubble by addressing his algorithmic bubble itself. In this performative gesture commissioned by the Jeu de Paume, Dullaart spent 5,000 euros to buy 2.5 million fake Instagram followers and distribute them between about 30 accounts (mainly artists, collectors, dealers and curators) in order to “equalize” them, bringing all of them to 100,000 followers: “The

16 Constant Dullaart, “Balconism”, in *Artpapers*, March / April 2014, online at [http://artpapers.org/feature\\_articles/feature3\\_2014\\_0304.html](http://artpapers.org/feature_articles/feature3_2014_0304.html).

aspiring artists have been made equal to the world famous ones, the young gallery to the rich institution, the critic to the wealthy power hungry collector. 100,000 followers for everyone, as a social economic reset, and what social value their profiles represented before is lost.”<sup>17</sup> While the actual performance was addressing, in a quite aggressive and direct way, a sample of the art world Dullaart belongs to, the video essay and its transcript documenting the performance on the Jeu de Paume website submitted these topics to a wider audience. The artist’s dissatisfaction for the feedback that came from both demographics is well expressed in the “Declaration”<sup>18</sup> he wrote for the *Possibility of an Army*, where he tells the story of a *New York Times* journalist who, after interviewing him about the project, used the data he provided in order to validate through audience metrics the very same accounts he artificially equalized.<sup>19</sup> A feedback loop that brought him to think “it is time to use more dramatic terms. I shall commence to recruit a virtual, Discordianist, Hessian army.”

*Jennifer in Paradise* (2013), his most visual and “gallery friendly” body of work so far, can be understood in these terms, too. And it is, indeed, his most successful attempt to impact on the cultural debate at large. Thanks to Dullaart’s effective restoration and redistribution, the story of the first image ever photoshopped, was taken over by the *Guardian*<sup>20</sup>, which was able to reach out John Knoll, the inventor of Photoshop, and his wife Jennifer, the woman pictured in the image on the beach of Bora Bora; and to push John to “re-enact” his first Photoshop demos, thus finally giving back this lost image to where it belongs, the commons and the history of images. Although the series of digital and material works related to this project

---

17 Constant Dullaart, “High Retention, Slow Delivery”, in *DIS Magazine*, 2014, online at <http://dismagazine.com/dystopia/67039/constant-dullaart-100000-followers-for-everyone/>.

18 Constant Dullaart, “Declaration”, in *Schirn Mag*, November 2, 2015, online at <http://www.schirn.de/en/magazine/context/declaration/>.

19 Nina Siegal, “Instagram Takes on Growing Role in the Art Market”, in *The New York Times*, August 9, 2015, online at [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/10/arts/design/instagram-takes-on-growing-role-in-the-art-market.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/10/arts/design/instagram-takes-on-growing-role-in-the-art-market.html?_r=0).

20 Gordon Comstock, “Jennifer in paradise: the story of the first Photoshopped image”, in *The Guardian*, June 13, 2014, online at <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/photography-blog/2014/jun/13/photoshop-first-image-jennifer-in-paradise-photography-artefact-knoll-dullaart>.

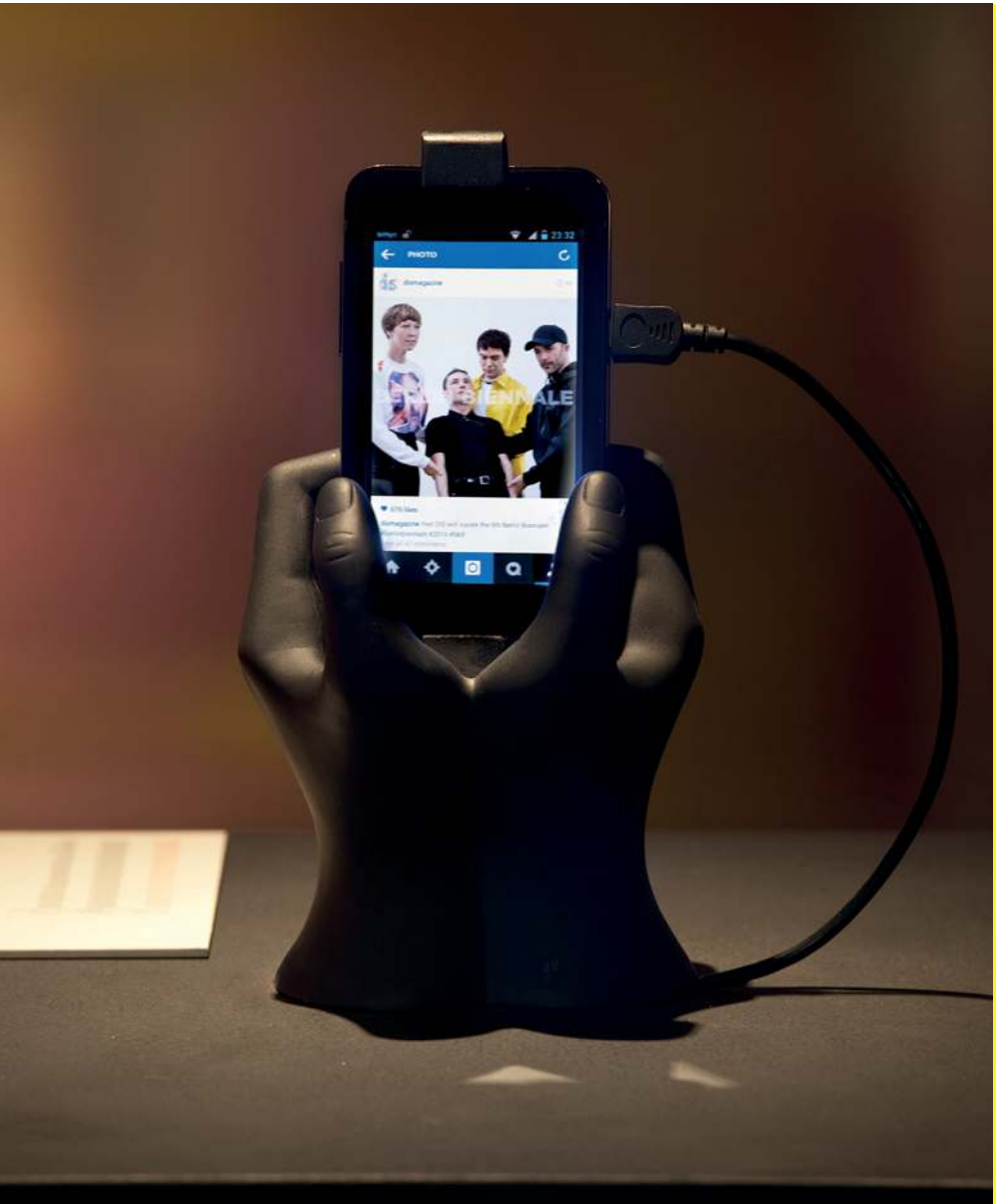


Constant Dullaart  
*Jennifer in Paradise*, 2013

could be seen as a formalist, meta-reflection about the way reality and digital tools constantly remediate themselves, the project started as an attempt to get in touch with a single person, Jennifer, and was publicly launched with an open letter to her, published on *Rhizome*.<sup>21</sup> The project of rescuing the first photoshopped image is interesting in itself, of course. But Dullaart is not a media archaeologist, he's an artist; and sometimes I find myself speculating about whether he would have started such a project, if the picture would have pictured, instead of a topless woman lying on a beach, a horse, a car, or a skyline. If he wasn't moved by this very human question: what brings a man to use a picture of his beloved wife as a demo image for a program of image postproduction, allowing other people to clone, embellish, deform her?

---

21 Constant Dullaart, "A Letter to Jennifer Knoll", in *Rhizome*, September 5, 2013, online at <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/sep/5/letter-jennifer-knoll/>.



Constant Dullaart  
*High Retention, Slow Delivery!*, 2014  
Instagram performance commissioned by Jeu de Paumes, Paris & HMKV Dortmund  
Courtesy: CarrollFletcher London, Future Gallery Berlin & the artist  
Exhibition view: *Evil Clowns*, HMKV at Dortmunder U

This is what I love the most, in the end, in the work of Constant Dullaart: the fact that almost every project finds its first impulse in a very human need of connection, in the will to establish a relationship, in the warm, sympathetic understanding of the other; a sympathy that sometimes involves even bots and artificial lives, as it happens in *High Retention, Slow Delivery*: “5 images, following thousands of people, and no one cares about their life. They can be used to influence politics, by supporting political causes online, and even add relevance to art. Amassed from appropriated content, hashtag icebucketchallenge, hashtag Assad, hashtag Nike, hashtag postinternet.”<sup>22</sup>

Let me go back, for the last time, to the “Declaration” written as a prelude to *The Possibility of an Army*. In the text, the artist speaks about his Instagram performance to a *New York Times* journalist “while wandering across a quiet church square in a small Dutch village”, where he was brought by the funeral of his girlfriend’s mom. Different social relationships are pictured along the text: the warm, authentic human relationship connecting the artist to his girlfriend and “her mom, my friend”; the formal, opportunistic relationship connecting the artist to the journalist, who simulates interest for his project but is actually collecting data to write a completely different story about how Instagram can be used to sell art; the reduction of people to metrics (followers, likes and number of comments); and the deployment of bots, accepted as “part of our social fabric” but without caring at all about them. One of these social relationships is face to face; the other ones are subject to different levels of mediation. Communication media are born as “extensions of men”. In its first years, the internet proved to be the place of warm, authentic relationships, the place where to look for friends, not followers, and where to engage in peer-to-peer discussions, not just add a number to a stack. It doesn’t have to go like this. We can change this trend, if we really want to. We can start with a small, poetic gesture like joining a virtual army of dead soldiers.

---

22 Constant Dullaart, “High Retention, Slow Delivery”, cit.

Domenico Quaranta  
IN IT FOR THE LULZ

PostScript<sup>UM</sup> #25  
Series edited by Janez Janša



**Publisher:** Aksioma – Institute for Contemporary Art, Ljubljana  
[www.aksioma.org](http://www.aksioma.org) | [aksioma@aksioma.org](mailto:aksioma@aksioma.org)

**Represented by:** Marcela Okretič

**Proofreading:** Philip Jan Nagel

**Design:** Luka Umek

**Layout:** Sonja Grdina

**(c) Aksioma** | Text and image copyrights by authors | Ljubljana 2016

**Printed and distributed by:** Lulu.com | [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com)

In the framework of Masters & Servers | [www.mastersandservers.org](http://www.mastersandservers.org)



Published on the occasion of the exhibition:

**Constant Dullaart**

***The Censored Internet***

[www.aksioma.org/censored.internet](http://www.aksioma.org/censored.internet)

Aksioma | Project Space  
Komenskega 18, Ljubljana, Slovenia  
3 March–10 April 2015

Supported by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union, the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia and the Municipality of Ljubljana.



Co-funded by the  
Creative Europe Programme  
of the European Union



REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA  
MINISTRY OF CULTURE



City of  
Ljubljana

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

