

# Cultural Matter: Constant Dullaart



## THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ARMY

*The Possibility Of An Army* (2017) emerged out of a collaboration between Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt. In 2016, on invitation of Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt, Constant Dullaart created an online performance based on a historical army of mercenaries who fought in the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783). He built this army of artificial profiles inspired by the Hessian troops, framing his new army as one which could bring about a second 'social media revolution'. Constant Dullaart had to enter the shadow industry of fake accounts and the economy of attention contacting partners in lands like Bangladesh, the Philippines and in the end Pakistan to run the operations needed for this project. Through an Indian operative, he set up 15,000 accounts, whose names represented that of the original Hessian Army. In order to authenticate his profiles, Dullaart also used unique SIM cards, some of which are exhibited here, to authenticate the profiles. The work eventually got picked up by several media sources, including the BBC, after which the army was largely eliminated. However, verified with unique phone numbers, these soldiers, however, have since then been brought back 'to life'. Despite the artificial identities being tethered to particular 'profiles', Dullaart uses them as a material or as a gesture, rather than as distinct actors in space. As Constant Dullaart points out, *The Possibility Of An Army* represents a sentimental gesture which nostalgically reflects on the loss of an Internet which was posited as being an 'alternative' to the hierarchical, bureaucratic and oppressive regimes of contemporary life.

## THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ARMY AT LIMA

*The Possibility Of An Army* is part of a broader exploration of the ways in which identity and data interact in a the virtual environment of the web. As part of his Instagram intervention, *High Retention, Slow Delivery*, Constant Dullaart bought 2.5 million followers for 5,000 dollars through a Lithuanian contact (Dullaart, 2015). In this work commissioned by Jeu de Paume, Constant leveled the quantified 'social capital' of members of the art world by making them all reach 100,000 followers—buying 40,000 for Ai Weiwei, and 2,700 for Hans Ulrich Obrist. By manipulating the numbers on Instagram, he brings to light the unseen industries that influence the reputation of certain people, and also showcases how 'the audience has become a commodity'. In his other Instagram-based work, *Phantom Love* (2017), he choreographed an army of Instagram accounts to recite poems in the comment sections of certain posts, each line being written by a separate account. The poems constitute a public intervention and includes the hashtag 'this is public space'. In all these works, artificial identities are used to explore and intervene in the ways in which data and algorithms have begun to shape our lives—as he states they can be used to influence politics, to elevate a brand or public persona, and even add relevance to art in an increasingly spectacular contemporary art world.”

## ECHO ARMY BAG

Most recently, Constant Dullaart has created *Echo Army Bag* for this exhibition. It is a piece which explores the Amazon Echo—a device that is always on, with a personal assistant ‘Alexa’ that responds to your questions and demands. In the words of Alexa: “I can play music, answer questions, get the news and weather, create to do lists, and much more.” In an advertisement for the product, when the child asks ‘is it for me?’, the father answers ‘it’s for everyone’. The piece places fifteen Echos in a Whole Foods bag, which represents the recent merger between Amazon and Whole Foods. Once activated, a speaker asks Alexa to tell a joke. In response, various the various Echos respond with different jokes to the audience member. Amazon Echo’s Alexa, also, in a way, represents this companies’ desire to not only serve as an assistant that can deliver any goods, but also as a personal assistant which infiltrates our household and intimate relationships. This process would bring the social quantification logic that aids them to create personalized shopping experiences into giving advice and help for more personal and interpersonal matters. The creation of the ‘Alexa’ identity also showcases a desire to anthropomorphize the technology in order to bond with its human users.

## ABOUT CONSTANT DULLAART

Constant Dullaart (1979) is a former resident of the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, and lives and works in Berlin. His works are shown in Whitechapel Gallery London, Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Import Projects Berlin, Utah Museum of Contemporary Art, ZKM Karlsruhe, Victoria & Albert Museum London, and MAAT Lisbon. Dullaart has curated several exhibitions and lectured at universities and academies throughout Europe. In 2015, he was awarded the Prix Net-Art, the international prize for internet art. Dullaart is part of the group of artists who later became known as post-internet and is one of the key figures of that movement. His work tries to expose the structures of the industry behind the internet, often by way of appropriation or intervention. His artwork does not only shed light on the role of digital technologies in society, but also how they have shifted our visual language, the ways in which we relate to each other, and even how we constitute our identities—what identities have come to represent and how they get subsumed into different systems of value under the attention economy.

## ABOUT CULTURAL MATTER

This series of Cultural Matter exhibitions aims to explore the different ways in which we can see digital technologies as cultural matter, and as an avenue through which we can understand the digital era. Curated by Sanneke Huisman and Jan Robert Leegte, the Cultural Matter exhibition has also included artists Nicholas O’Brien, Harm van den Dorpel, Constant Dullaart, Olia Lialina, and UBERMORGEN.

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