

Domenico Quaranta, 'Healing the Media', *Fabio Paris Art Gallery*, May 2012

Constant Dullaart
Healing



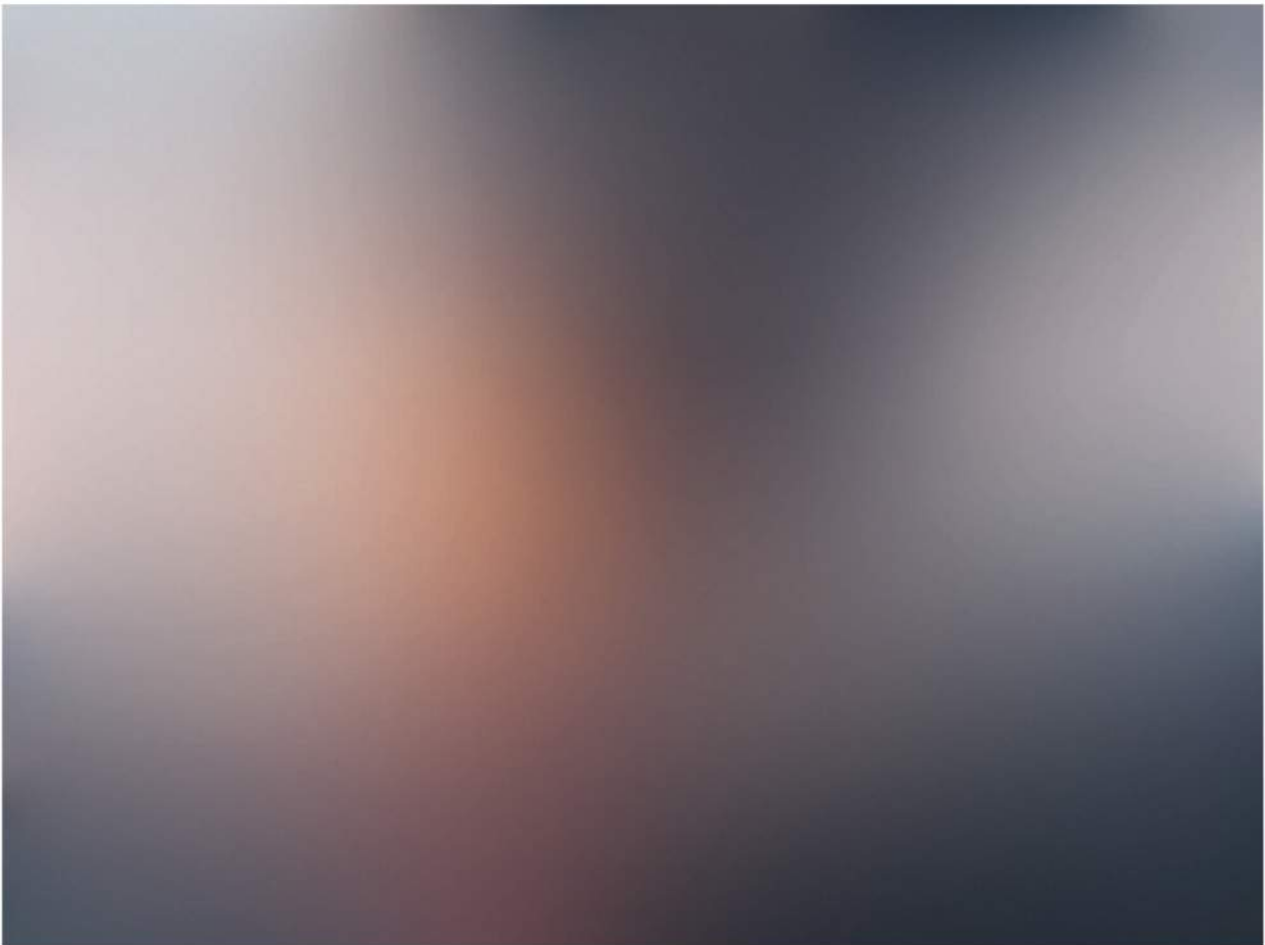
Healing the Media

Domenico Quaranta

Back in the late Sixties, Italian artist Mario Merz took a thin, light blue neon tube, shaped it into a short sentence and placed it into a little black pot. “Che fare?” (“What is to be done?”) is a quote from Lenin, that in its brevity and effectiveness has become a symbol of the hesitation of any revolutionary, when he is forced to choose between theory and action. Merz wasn’t the first neither the only artist to use neon signs in his works of art. At the time, this choice was variously interpreted as a reaction against traditional media; against art and its detachment from reality; against commodification of art; and against aesthetics. Labels such as Arte Povera and Conceptual Art mirror these interpretations. Today, however, another explanation comes to the fore, and seems to make most of the previous ones irrelevant. Using neon lights and signs, Mario Merz, Joseph Kosuth, Dan Flavin and their peers were powerfully criticizing the conventional use of the medium. They were freeing it from its built-in ideology. Neon lights have been conceived to cheaply illuminate badly designed places of alienation like offices and airports. Neon signs are an effective advertisement tool. Using them to convey meaning, or simply to do something different from what they are expected to do is, first and foremost, a reaction against passive acceptance of the habits imposed on us by products and tools, especially by communication tools. The same insights can be applied, of course, to Nam June Paik’s abuse of TV sets, John Cage’s misuse of radios, Ed Rusa’s exploration of type design, and to most of the art dealing with communication media made between the Sixties and the Nineties, from John Baldessari to Richard Prince, from Cindy Sherman to Jenny Holzer to Jodi. In the society of the Spectacle,

language is not neutral anymore. Media are designed and commercialized by companies in order to respond to a specific need, to get a certain result, and often to produce new needs that brand new products will satisfy later. Interfaces and software embed the ideas of the programmers who coded them, and of those who asked them to design them that way. Whatever we say today in a mediated form, it’s like a watermarked image from a data bank: it comes with the signature mark of the tool used to say it, be it a mobile phone or a social network, a photo-editing software or a drum machine. There is no easy way out. And so, *Che fare?* Along the Sixties, for the first time artists realized that language and media didn’t belong to them anymore. Reactions spanned from creating new languages and media, to exploring failures and mistakes in commercial media, to appropriation and détournement as tactics of resistance. This way, art acquired a new social function, which is, in my opinion, the main function of art in contemporary society: to set language free, or at least to raise awareness about its current condition. To show that, behind any Photoshop filter, web page design, video effect, game engine there is an ideology; and that any improvement to our ability to communicate also acts as a limitation, an attempt to control, regulate, normalize the signal.

Dutch artist Constant Dullaart takes this mission very seriously, and pursues it with the most simple, effective means. Most of his works might be seen, at a first glance, as easy-to-get one liners, the kind we got tired of, almost a century after Duchamp’s *Fountain*. Readers are warned: don’t fall into the trap. Mr. Dullaart is the rare kind of man able to distill a complex content



into something as simple as a tweet, a joke, an eye-blink. Take, for example, his series of works dealing with the Google interface:

The Disagreeing Internet (2008): the Google home page moves fast from left to right and back. Available at the URL <http://thedisagreeinginternet.com/>.

The Doubting Internet (2010): the Google home page tilts left to right and back. Available at the URL <http://thedoubtinginternet.com/>.

The Sleeping Internet (2011): the Google home page going off and on, fading to black in a way that emulates the behavior of Apple's computers sleeping light, available at the URL <http://thedoubtinginternet.com/>.

The Revolving Internet (2010): the Google home page rotates full circle, while the browser plays *The Windmills Of Your Mind*. Available at the URL <http://therevolvinginternet.com/>.

Internet Spread (2011): the Google home page is split into two pages by a shadowy line in the middle, as if it was a book. Available at the URL <http://internetspread.com/>.

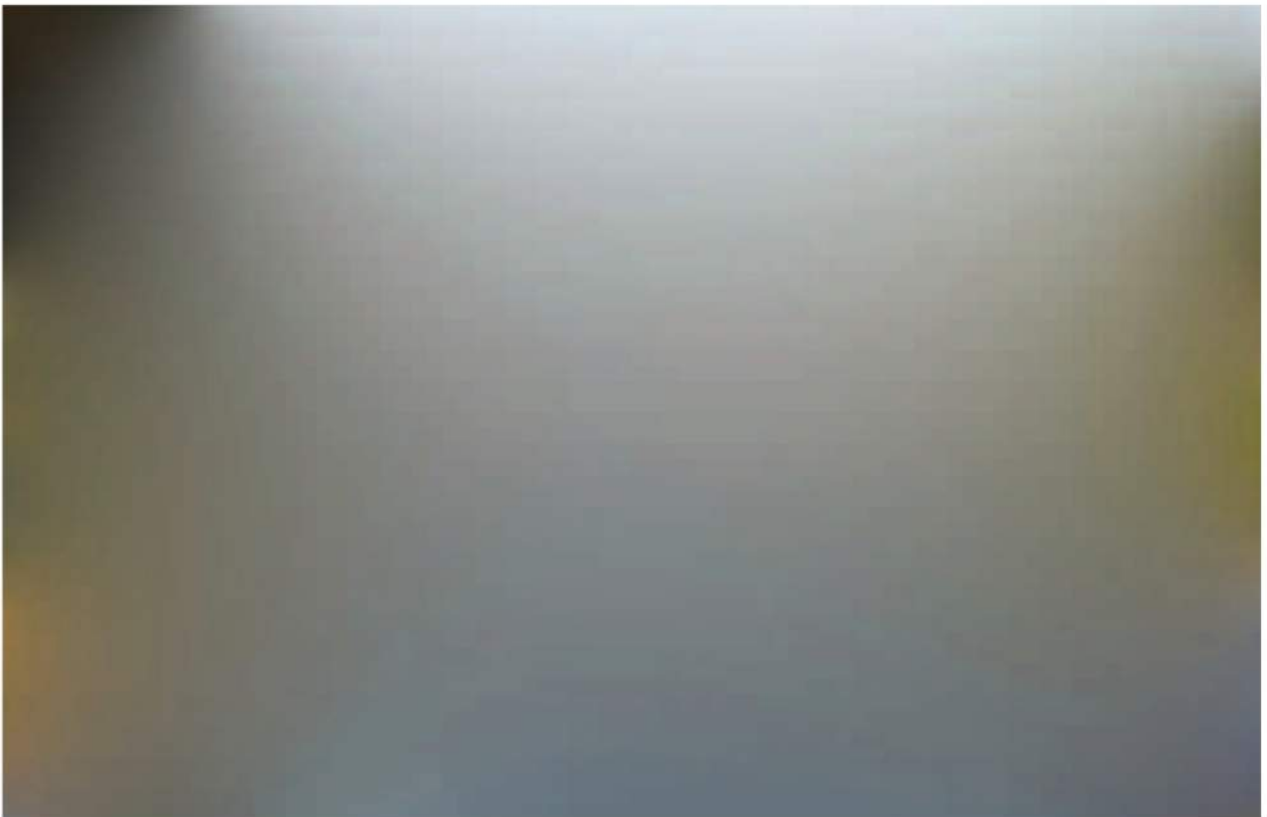
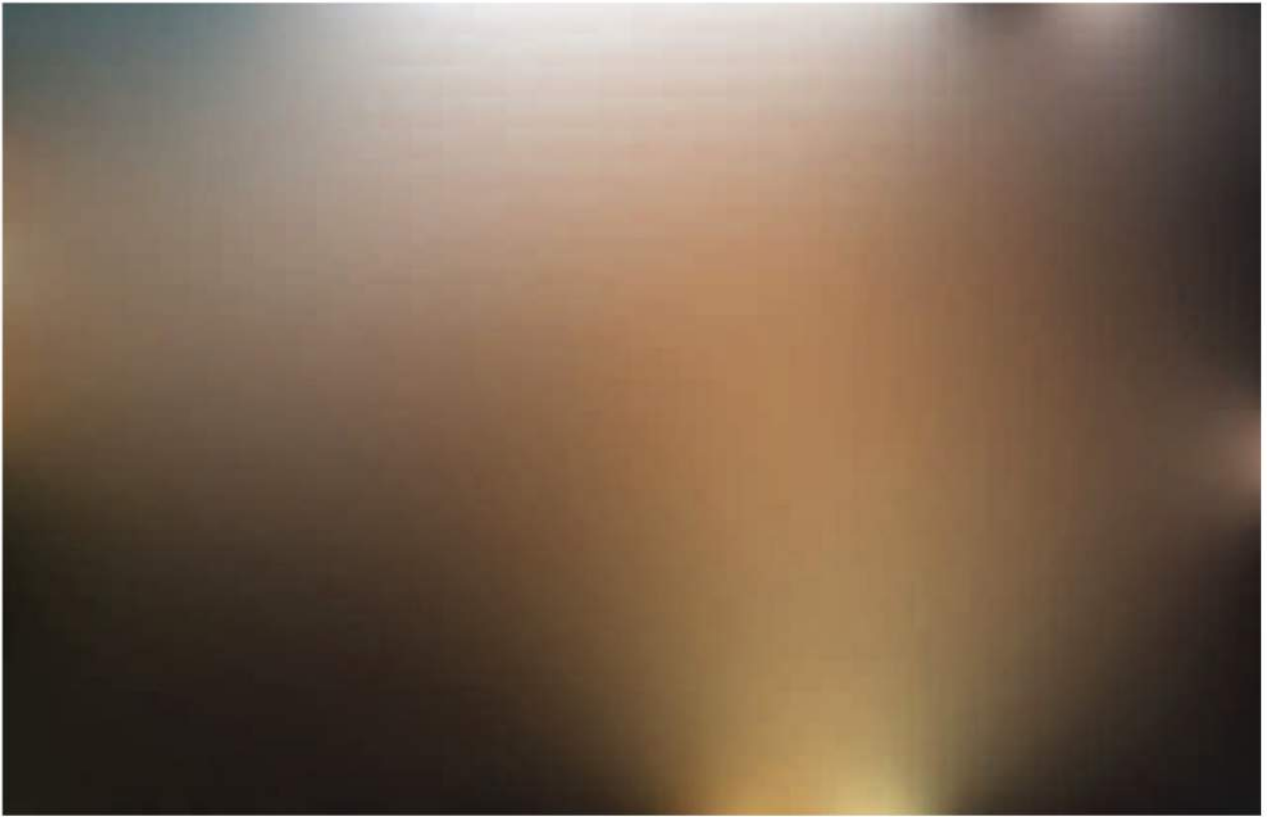
The Censored Internet (2011): every single word displayed on the Google home page when running a search is censored. Available at the URL <http://thecensoredinternet.com/>.

All these works display a simple, single behavior. They all deal with the home page of Google, which remains fully functional despite its unorthodox appearance. Whether you first read the domain name, or first focused on the content of the page, when you put them together you get the joke, and you probably smile. And then? Then you leave, maybe a bit disappointed (especially if you were told that this is a work of art), but also richer in a way. You now know, consciously or unconsciously, that Google is not God. That Google is not the absolute, untouchable, clear thing it pretends to be. It censors, and can be censored. It can be displayed upside down. It can disagree, doubt and sleep. *The Revolving Internet* is like Andersen's famous tale, *The Emperor's New Clothes*: when you read it, nothing really changes, except your perception of those in power. Maybe your king is naked, too.

Let's make another example. Three early web based works by Constant Dullaart deal with the trope of blowing up something. Visit blownupballoon.com (2008) and you'll first see a white web page. Scrolling the page, you end up seeing some pink, but only if you download the embedded image you'll end up "seeing" the content of the page: a small jpg of a pink balloon, 198x225 px large, blown up to

10120x13029 pixels in order to disappear in the page. The same happens with blownupexplosion.com (2008), featuring the picture of an explosion in Iraq, and blownupblowup.com (2008), where Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow Up* (1966) is displayed full page, 10 times bigger than the original file. And here, what comes after disappointment? The joke is, again, revealed by the URL. The content can't be fully experienced and, at least in the first two cases, it has little or no relevance. The three web sites look like wasted domains. Useless web pages. Yet, what is a web page? Anybody who took a lesson of html can tell you that html is a markup language allowing you to build a page, to position elements on it, and to format text. A conventional use of html will bring you to design a conventional web page, where everything is functional to the content: and this is what browser developers want us to do. Displaying a single image and blowing it up in a way that only the title allows us to understand what it is, Dullaart is doing with web pages the same that Mario Merz did with neon signs: he sets the medium free from its conventional, functional use; he makes these conventions visible to everybody; and he proposes another idea of what a website is, or can be.

In the end, most of Constant Dullaart's work is not about software and web sites. It's about companies and media designers taking control on the way we see the word; it's about the way we represent it through languages that they developed, and that we adopt passively, taking advantage of what they allow without caring about what they don't allow us to do, and using their powerful tools without caring about their cultural implications, and their impact on what we say with them.



HEALED_Deepwater-article-1031994-01DA767100000578-97_468x306_popup

2011, archival c-print on dibond 60x80 cm, unique

HEALED_japan-earthquake-bp36

2011, archival c-print on dibond 60x80 cm, unique

If you followed me up to this point, you probably already got what's at stake in *Healing* (2010 - 2012). The series includes some pictures and a video, all appropriated from the internet, all picturing a disaster (the infamous Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the earthquake in Japan), and all "healed" with the Healing Brush tool offered to us by the latest versions of Photoshop, the most used photo-editing software. The Healing Brush tool has been designed to allow you to correct small imperfections, like spots, causing them to disappear into the surrounding image. It implies that the photo you shot, or the image you scanned, is ill, but it can be easily healed using the right tool. It is, therefore, the by-product of an ideology of post-production, perfecting and falsification, deeply rooted in the software it is part of.

Applying it to the entire image, and to any single frame of the video, Dullaart clearly misuses the software, asking it to do what it wasn't meant for; but he also performs a conceptual leap that allows him to raise many different issues at the same time. Applying the filter to the entire image (and so emphasizing it), and using it to manipulate a news item, Dullaart shows how photography definitely lost its nature of index and proof that something happened, which only survives in our imagination, as a consequence of our inertia and our fear to lose any grasp on reality, and any connection between truth and language. Asking Photoshop to heal reality through its media representation, Dullaart plays with the promises of the software, but also with the widespread belief that, if something doesn't exist as an image, it doesn't exist at all. Last but not least, by playfully subverting the tool and its promises, Dullaart "heals" the medium and the

user, providing a different understanding of its potential, limitations and biases.

A final note. Disappointing the audience, as well as reducing the artwork to a single yet powerful gesture, are common strategies in performance art. We already ran out of space, and considering Dullaart's performance based works would go far beyond the limits of this essay. With his irony, his strong personality and his physical presence, Dullaart is doubtlessly a great performer, able to raise awareness about the impact of media on our visual landscape and about the socio-cultural context where the action takes place, be it a museum or a webcam streaming to an online sex video chat service. But the paradigm of performance can be useful also to better understand his work in general, which is innerly performative even when it takes the shape of a website, an installation, a manipulated found image. It usually happens in a public space, the internet; it responds to the media, and it invites you to respond to itself, to complete the process, or to repeat the same gesture again and again. And it does it often successfully, which make me more hopeful that, in the end, we will maybe succeed in healing the media.

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Curated by Domenico Quaranta

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