

Photomonitor:



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Stringendo, Vanishing Mediators / Reviewed by Paul Carey-Kent / 08.07.14

Despite a name set up in English for contrary jests, the Dutch new media artist Constant Dullaart (born 1979) is forever moving forward in interesting ways. There are three main aspects to his complicated 27 work show at Carroll / Fletcher, highlighting pioneer developers of digital technologies; the power relations behind the role of those technologies in our lives now; and how digitalisation has changed the ways in which we represent and perceive the world. All feed into an exhibition which is consistently entertaining but most successful as art when the last of those is the focus. Moreover, 'Stringendo, Vanishing Mediators' is informed by Dullaart's own theory of 'balconisation', presented and reflected on by others in an accompanying book.

To start with the beginnings, Dullaart's hero here is Bill Atkinson, creator of Macpaint and much else. The 'marching ants' highlighting device invented by Atkinson, which animates the border of a selected area, came from his observation of the apparently flowing waterfall in an electric sign for Hamms Beer. Dullaart shows the original sign (now a collector's item) and applies the marching ants to lightbox versions of photographs taken by Atkinson. There are also blown-up versions of the first demonstration drawings which he made on Macpaint. An 'unseen hero' takes centre stage, which is fascinating and looks good, but is also more homage than artistic exploration or critique: we may be influenced by Atkinson's inventions, but benignly.

Issues of power and less favourable influence are plainest – perhaps too plain – in a collection of 19 flags representing nations who have censored the Internet; and in the voiceover to a Google home page on which a search bar as mouth intones Google's Terms of Service. Dullaart calls fresh attention to those rarely-read details ('we will automatically collect and store certain information'...) and to how Google changes them at will. He feels such corporatism isn't in the originating spirit of the Internet: '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'.

It's when Dullaart considers how those pioneer products, and that power, can influence how we see things that matters get most persuasive as art. Dullaart has quoted the striking example of YouTube's application for improving videos: he put in film of an earthquake, and sure enough the shaking was removed! Dullaart calls attention to how 'the architecture of the software is actively influencing what users are able to do with it', and claims that 'the industrialisation of image manipulation that Photoshop enabled is actually a form of cultural imperialism'.

That feeds into various photographs overlaid by plastic constructions which act as an analogy for how the windows we look through most are now those on the computer: one such set utilises Dullaart's own photographs taken on acid, referencing in turn how the original ideas behind the Internet were typically sparked under the influence of drugs. A parallel process uses Widisoft to turn pop songs into scores, which are then to be played by pianola, revealing the failure of the programme to capture the whole experience: I say 'to be' because at the time of my visit, this particular technology had defeated the gallery...

The most immediately striking project in 'Vanishing Mediators' deftly combines history, power and its effect on how we see the world. Twelve lenticular prints of a half-naked woman on a beach dominate the gallery's biggest wall, and are distorted into various patterns as you walk past. They're from 72 which Dullaart has made, using all of the currently available Photoshop filters, of originator John Knoll's girlfriend. 'Jennifer in Paradise' was used as the first demonstration image for Photoshop, with the somewhat uncomfortable result that Knoll's girlfriend (now wife) became an object to be cloned, copied and altered in various ways to show the capabilities of the software. Dullaart plays the archivist, protesting at the difficulty of tracking down a high res version of what he regarded as a historically significant image, and unsuccessfully attempting to engage Mrs Knoll (his emails to her are also shown) in order to point up the ambiguities built into the origin of the now-ubiquitous process of on-screen manipulation.

There's a sense, then, in which Jennifer Knoll was the last person to be snapped with the default expectation that photographs cannot lie. She also stands at the interface between public and private, which is explored by Dullaart's theory of 'balconisation'. There are two physical balconies in the show, above one of which Dullaart's essay text is projected. Their presence is inspired by the sight of *Julian Assange standing on a balcony of the Ecuadorian Embassy in London* – UK territory, but so close to being Ecuadorian territory the British authorities didn't try to enter. It became, in Dullaart's words, a 'space outside society'. Maybe, Dullaart concludes, 'we're all on the balcony' in the online world. There, we should be ready to escape the warm enclosure of the social web, to address people outside our algorithm bubble. In the context of the show, this becomes a higher order theory for how we should respond to the process of digitalisation as a whole, to how corporations and programmes structure our understanding of the world. We need to stand on our particular balcony 'and choose to be out in public and we have to define cultural codes of how to do that'.

Will people think about all these things? Maybe they'll be too busy playing on the corporate platforms of Google, Facebook and Instagram to realise how their choices are being constrained and their behaviour influenced. Yet the recent revelations about Facebook conducting psychological tests without explicit permission may give pause. The influence of the digital may indeed be reaching a stringendo (a musical passage performed with increasing speed as the final orchestral climax approaches) and Carroll / Fletcher itself acts as something of a platform from which an engaging overview of such matters can be achieved.

- review by *Paul Carey-Kent*