

'Spike Conversations: Art As Start-Up', Spike Art Magazine, October 2015



## SPIKE CONVERSATIONS: ART AS START-UP?



*The artist Constant Dullaart has a dream to come true. Curator Toke Lykkeberg wants to show the world how it really is. One has founded a company, the other has brought an everyday commercial aesthetic into the Musée d'Art Modern de la Ville de Paris. What role do artists play in start-up culture? Are we experiencing a rematerialisation of the art object?*

**Alexander Scrimgeour:** Toke, against the backdrop of the exhibition “Co-Workers”, how do you see the relationship between art and commercial culture or even start-up models? You have spoken about it in terms of updating the Pop tradition.

**Toke Lykkeberg:** I think for the last few years we’ve been in a situation similar to London and New York in the late 1950s and early 60s, which the curator and critic Lawrence Alloway talked about as an art-culture continuum. A new generation of artists are tired of making art only for the art world and want to bridge the boundaries between art, music, fashion, and philosophy.

**Alexander Scrimgeour:** And commerce! Constant, one of your projects is a company that recently successfully funded its Kickstarter campaign to produce a DullTech-branded media player. And, of course, you’re a branded person as we speak, advertising your own company on your T-shirt. But, if I understand you correctly, you have a difficult relationship to your product.

**Constant Dullaart:** I found it interesting to research what happens if an artist starts to behave completely as a company. It is partly a way for me to experience what it’s like to engage my social capital or even just my friends, who are giving me 20 euros to make my dream come true [*laughter*] – my dream of being a corporation and making even more money. I found it really interesting to see how there is this validation of making money, but also that I was continuously being asked to make my project or my product more streamlined, more efficient.

**Alexander Scrimgeour:** By Kickstarter you mean?

**Constant Dullaart:** By Kickstarter but even by friends. They were telling me, “You have to make your commercial shorter!” and I’m like, “It’s *DullTech!*” It’s about not-being-exciting-tech; the commercial is too long on purpose, and it’s about resisting the slickness that is bombarding us from all angles.

**Alexander Scrimgeour:** Is that why you started DullTech?

**Constant Dullaart:** I was doing a residency in China and I found my position as a sponsored white overweight dude being shipped around between all these wannabe art institutions very problematic. I was also trying to figure out what my relationship was to all the hardware being produced in China and I needed to have a storyline to get into the factories. So I needed to have a company, a product: this is what it came out of.

I WAS SEEING IF I COULD DO ALMOST  
PARTICIPATORY ANTHROPOLOGY. I  
CAN BE A START-UP AND CRITICISE IT  
AT THE SAME TIME. I FIND IT  
FASCINATING.

**Alexander Scrimgeour:** What does the framing of art offer us in this situation? There are models such as the parasitic, where you occupy a field and take from it what you need, and hacking, where you get into it and mess with it from the inside. And, after seeing “Co-Workers”, I was wondering also about the embrace or even celebration of a contemporary commercial aesthetic. Is that going too far?

**Toke Lykkeberg:** No, no. I am just wondering, where do you see the celebration? Isn't it just the presence of a certain aesthetic? It's the world that we're in and when you enter the museum you're still in that world. It might look like a celebration because that is something that was actively negated in the 90s and the early 00s: people were talking about resistance and critique, which are both ways of putting things at a distance, instead of dealing with the world we are actually living in. That's what we're trying to do in the show.

**Alexander Scrimgeour:** What I found strange about the show was the phrase in the wall text when you come in: “The visitor is invited to wander, to waste his or her time and, why not, to push back to tomorrow the organisation of his or her priorities.”

**Toke Lykkeberg:** We were interested in this concept of procrastination. We live in a performance culture where you constantly have to deliver and at the same time you are a constant failure because you cannot constantly deliver. So while you should be working you constantly slip into reading soccer news.

**Alexander Scrimgeour:** That's what the exhibition reminded me of, most of all – spending time on the Internet.

**Toke Lykkeberg:** We want people to be able to be in the show with all their guilty pleasures. This sounds oldschool but it's a bit like Bertolt Brecht's idea about the smoker as the ideal viewer in the theatre: the one who is preoccupied by his own stuff, satisfied by their own thing while they are in the presence of art.

**Alexander Scrimgeour:** But with a show like “Co-Workers”, which is framed by being in a museum, there are objects for people to engage with.

**Toke Lykkeberg:** In the academic art world objects have had a very hard time since the 60s, but artists are now finally understanding that there was a lot of bullshit in the discourse. I remember reading an interview with Joseph Kosuth in the *Guardian* where he said, “Big museums haven’t really been collecting me.” Well why do you think they didn’t collect you? Should they collect your ideas? The answer there is that both museums and the market are interested in objects: otherwise you can just go into philosophy. If there is an object quality to an artwork it just makes it more complex more nuanced, you can access the artwork not just on the level of ideas but on a sensual level and aesthetic level.

**Alexander Scrimgeour:** But if there is no real difference between the objects in the museum and the objects outside the museum, does this framing put things in a certain aesthetic category, or function as a distancing mechanism?

**Constant Dullaart:** I’m thinking about the Victoria and Albert Museum and how they are collecting design things that are very current. If something is out there – a 3D-printed gun, for example, then they collect it. They are looking to collect as fast as possible, almost removing the frame by being so quick to respond. But if I can say one more thing, I have a strange anecdote. I met Bill Atkinson last year, he is the person who made the “undo” function, the drop-down menu, some of the first commercial drawing software, and HyperCard which is a precursor of the browser. He also made a precursor of the iPhone: a small little computer that could send messages to other devices. Later, when he didn’t work for Apple anymore, the iPhone came out and he saw pictures of it published in a magazine advertisement. He cut a piece of wood into the same dimensions and pasted the image from the advertisement onto it so he could feel exactly what it would be like to hold it in his hands. Then he carried it around in his pocket for six weeks until he could get a real iPhone. I was thinking that this guy who made such great abstract steps still needed a wooden effigy to reflect on something that didn’t exist yet. It’s a mode of transport: something that helps us. It’s a voodoo doll. An object can often be a representation.

**Toke Lykkeberg:** I’ve been preoccupied for a number of years with what one could call the rematerialisation of the art object. Conceptual art was very important for a long time as a way of legitimising artworks; it was part of the foundation of relational aesthetics, for instance. But I think that’s over now – what’s interesting to reflect on today is the relationship between the emergence of conceptual art and the democratisation of telecommunication. With the Internet we got into an even more immaterial realm than with

the telephone, and I think, finally, with social media and the Internet of Things we understand how important the material structure of this new communication network is. That's why artists are interested in how things materialise. They are interested in how our means of production have changed.

**Alexander Scrimgeour:** But if art is just a mirror for things that already exist then isn't there a danger that its reception is also driven by our preprogrammed responses to things that already exist?

**Toke Lykkeberg:** Well, Goya had to get into the King's castle to paint the royal family as jerks, and I think we're still in that situation. It's very much like Andy Warhol. It's affirmative and critical and therefore it's beyond that distinction; that is no longer relevant.

**Alexander Scrimgeour:** I guess one thing that it comes down to – which might be another of these outdated distinctions – is whether it makes sense to think of it in terms of Left and Right: is this also a political discussion in that sense?

**Toke Lykkeberg:** It's cool if an artist is ambiguous politically.

## IF AN ARTIST HAS A VERY CLEAR-CUT POLITICAL AGENDA I DON'T EAT THE APPLE: IT'S PROPAGANDA, IT'S POLITICAL ACTIVISM.

If there is something specific about art it's that it is a space where we can allow things to be more complex. We can ask questions without getting answers. I think that art can be many things, and it would be a shame to reduce it to just having one function, which is the critical.

**Alexander Scrimgeour:** Constant, do you see yourself as a political artist?

**Constant Dullaart:** I see a challenge, let's say, rather than a responsibility, to offer the tools to get to grips with a certain subject – to view it from a different angle. For one recent project, I bought 2.5 million Instagram followers and distributed them over 30 art world accounts, equalising them all to 100,000. So, for example, I made Hans Ulrich Obrist just as important as Ai Weiwei, Petra Cortright, Amalia Ulman, and myself. It was absurdly

symbolic, of course, to equalise the social capital reflected in Instagram follower counts – it's basically what Lenin did. I became the Lenin of Instagram [*laughter*] and I'm ok with that. I did it to highlight how false that system of quantification of social capital is, and to reflect on the commodification of the social and what that does to our ways of engaging with each other. Material is developing so radically, we're in a cultural or an information revolution. We need the next few decades to reflect on this and see what the fuck is going on, how this is fucking up our lives, what benefits it is bringing, and how can we use it for good?

*This conversation took place at Paris Internationale art fair in October 2015.*

*Dutch artist Constant Dullaart (\*1979) works primarily with the Internet as an alternative space of presentation and (mis)representation. His online performance The Possibility of an Army is currently on view at Schirn Kunsthalle's website. Recent solo exhibitions include "Jennifer in Paradise" at Futura in Prague (2015), "High Retention Slow Delivery" at Jeu de Paume in Paris; "Stringendo, Vanishing Mediators" at Carroll / Fletcher in London (2014). He lives in Berlin and Amsterdam.*

*Toke Lykkeberg (\*1977) is a critic and curator. He co-founded the artist-run space IMO in Copenhagen. This year he co-curated the exhibition "Co-Workers – Network as Artist" currently on view at Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, and the 8th Momentum Nordic Biennial of Contemporary Art in Oslo.*

*Alexander Scrimgeour is Spike's editor at large. He lives in Berlin.*