

'Bodies that Glitch: Constant Dullaart at Carroll / Fletcher ', *The Photographers' Gallery Blog*, 19 July 2014

## THE PHOTOGRAPHERS' GALLERY

### Bodies that Glitch: Constant Dullaart at Carroll/Fletcher

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Installation view, Carroll/Fletcher, London

Easy to overlook, printed unceremoniously on flimsy A4 paper just inside the entrance to Carroll/Fletcher's current exhibition, *Constant Dullaart: Stringendo, Vanishing Mediators*, is the key to understanding the whole show. The four sheets detail an email from the artist to Jennifer Knoll, the subject of his series *Jennifer in Paradise* (2014). A 1987 photograph of Knoll sitting topless on a picturesque, sun soaked Bora Bora beach echoes throughout the exhibition. Her husband, a co-creator of Photoshop, used the holiday snap to demonstrate the filters of his newly developed software. In the gallery the original photo (now lost) is re-constructed from low-resolution fragments and displayed in series, subjected to the distortions of the editing technology. Knoll's body stretches, blurs, swirls, shatters, discolours and descends into abstraction.

In an exhibition of conceptual work with a problematic lack of wall text, it's Constant Dullaart's letter to Knoll that uncovers the significance of her beach photo:

I still wonder if you felt the world change there on that beach. The fact that reality would be more moldable [sic], that normal people could change their history, brighten up their past ... the world was young, as it still naïvely believed in the authenticity of the photograph ... I am anxious about the future of our surveilled [sic], computer-mediated world

The impact of Photoshop's pioneering filters on photography is at the heart of this exhibition. Although lens-based images have always been subject to manipulation, Photoshop made the ability to radically alter pictures easy and widespread. *Bill and Poppy on the porch* (2014) draws attention to the editing process, as the 'magic wand' tool flashes over a man's body, ready to be cut into and reformed. With Photoshop's development came new means of re-shaping bodies to align them to gendered norms (thinner women, more muscular men). But the same tools also hold the ability to render bodies beyond recognition.



Installation view, Carroll/Fletcher, London

The tension between these two potential uses of Photoshop is encapsulated in the exhibition's very name. Does 'vanishing mediators' refer to the way lens-based manipulation is often harder to spot with sophisticated software? Or, conversely, to the fact that the 'authenticity' of Photoshopped bodies is threatened when the means of editing is made apparent? As Knoll's semi-nude form twists, turns, splits and spills over the walls of Carroll/Fletcher, one is reminded, again, that an understanding of photographs as 'truth' documents is untenable. Indeed, in the context of Dullaart's *Windmill* series (2014), photos under transparent panes embossed to mimic the effects of drugs, the very notion of 'witness' and objective fact is rendered unstable and untrustworthy. There are times when we cannot trust our own eyes.

Although a *decision* is made between uploading documentation of your lunch or your trip to the gym, more crucial is the hegemonic norms reproduced or contested in such an act of representation. Are you a man flexing your muscles in your profile picture, or a woman with bushy armpit hair?

This realisation is particularly pressing in our current climate of ever-expanding surveillance culture. Dullaart offers tools of resistance to such surveillance systems with the shattering and fragmentation of Knoll's body. These visual effects not only make individuals harder to identify, they also reveal the constructed nature of gender norms. As such, *Jennifer in Paradise* can be considered in relation to Glitch Feminism, which

embraces the causality of "error" ... by acknowledging that an error in a social system that has already been disturbed by economic, racial, social, sexual, and cultural stratification ... may not, in fact, be an error at all, but rather a much-needed erratum ... The glitch body is inherently a threat to normative systems.<sup>1</sup>

Such cracks characterise Emilio Gomariz's film *Dragon Glitch* (2011), a glitched fight scene from the animated cartoon *Dragon Ball Z*. The portrayal of normative masculinity (muscular soldiers) is exposed as a construction prone to slippage and undermining. The breakdown of male bodies in the midst of warfare touches on the idea that the shattering of selfhood is a way to think through pacifism. For Leo Bersani and Judith Butler, conflict depends on the fantasy of an identity separate and independent from its Other.<sup>2</sup>



Emilio Gomariz, *Dragon Glitch* (2011)



This issue of war and nationalism is also present in Dullaart's *The Censored Internet* (2014). A group of nineteen flags of countries that have censored the Internet hang in the basement at Carroll/Fletcher. At first glance the distinctness of each (and by extension, the nation they represent) seems evident; but as different coloured lights fade and glow, the flags seem to swap hues, blur, blend and become unrecognisable. The very notion of a country as a unique and isolated entity is thrown into doubt. In fact, is it worth asking whether the Internet could reshape our understandings of the nation state – despite attempts to censor it and subject users to regional laws.

Communication technologies certainly render conventional boundaries ever more porous or 'leaky'.<sup>3</sup> While the public and private spheres have never been wholly separate or walled entities, the web has certainly served to further render unstable the distinction between the two. In Carroll/Fletcher, *Balconisation* (2012) and *Youtube as a window* (2012) set up an equivalence between the balcony and the computer screen. Both are spaces where information can flow freely through; sometimes leaking away from us, as *Terms of Service* (2012/14) – a reading of Google's privacy policy – makes clear. Alternately, balconies and screens are also places to *present* oneself: whether to address a crowd, or curate a selection of selfies. Dullaart recognises that, in such contexts, 'the most important thing is: you must choose to be seen'.<sup>4</sup>



Installation view, Carroll/Fletcher, London

But such a notion of 'free willed' choice simplifies the act of self-representation (whether online or off). Although a *decision* is made between uploading documentation of your lunch or your trip to the gym, more crucial is the hegemonic norms reproduced or contested in such an act of representation. Are you a man flexing your muscles in your profile picture, or a woman with bushy armpit hair? Perhaps we should all take *Jennifer in Paradise's* lead: let's glitch, blur, pixelate, shatter, break, abstract and distort our images. It's time for some new Instagram filters: some that reclaim the radical potential of the very first that rendered Knoll's portrait unrecognisable.

*Constant Dullaart: Stringendo, Vanishing Mediators ran from 13 June – 19 July 2014, at Carroll/Fletcher, London.*

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Legacy Russell, 'Elsewhere, After the Flood: Glitch Feminism and the Genesis of Glitch Body Politic', *Rhizome* (Published 12/3/13, Accessed 13/3/13, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/mar/12/glitch-body-politic>).

<sup>2</sup> Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?: and Other Essays* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2010), p.29-30; Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p.24, p.28-29, p.42, p.46.

<sup>3</sup> Wendy Chun, 'Leaky New Media', *Structures and Textures: Digital Infrastructures and the Organisation of Online Space*, Institute of Contemporary Art, London, 17/5/14.

<sup>4</sup> Constant Dullaart, 'Balconism, balconisation not balkanisation', in Alan Woo ed., *Balconisation* (London: Carroll/Fletcher, 2014), pp.30-34, p.32.