

Constant Dullaart 'Why I'm Amassing an Army of Fake Social Media Followers', *Hyperallergic*, November 2015

HYPERALLERGIC

Why I'm Amassing an Army of Fake Social Media Followers

by Constant Dullaart on November 4, 2015

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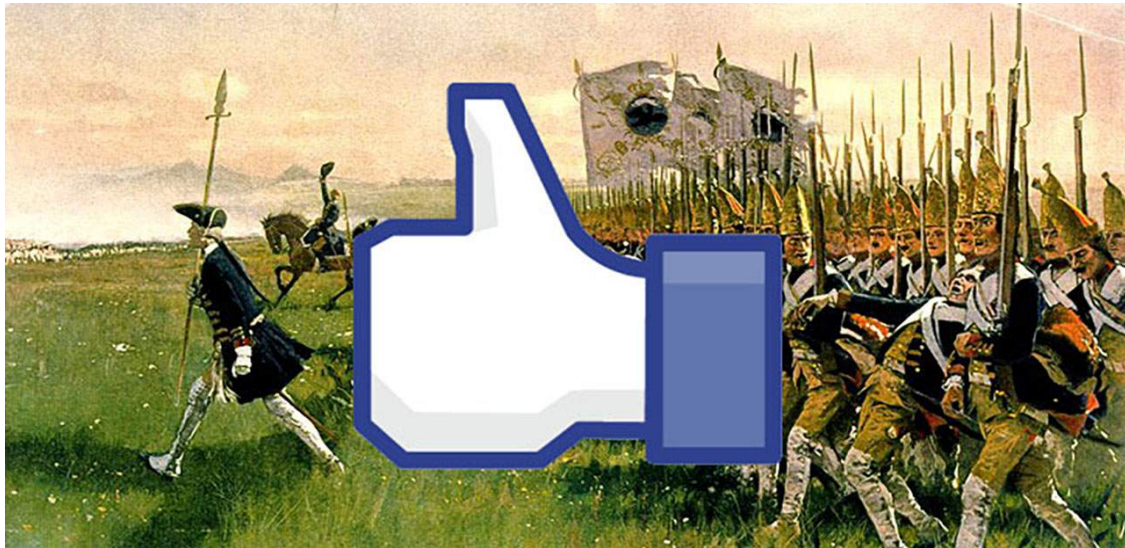


Image by Constant Dullaart featuring Carl Röchling's "Attack of Prussian Infantry" (1745) (all images courtesy the artist)

While wandering across a quiet church square in a small Dutch village, I'm talking on the phone with a journalist from the *New York Times*. The conversation seems oddly misplaced in this picturesque setting where my girlfriend and I came to mourn the passing of a close family member, her mom, my friend. My girlfriend is still in the restaurant overlooking the square, drinking tea with her sister, I stepped out to talk on the phone. Nina Siegal, a freelance journalist based in Amsterdam, is interested in art on Instagram — as am I, as it happens. She tells me she requested my contact details through the [Stedelijk Museum](#) in Amsterdam and my gallery [Carroll/Fletcher](#), in London. Most likely she thinks I would be good for an interview because of an intervention I initiated on Instagram in [October 2014](#), distributing millions of bought followers to a select group of Instagram accounts within the art world.

I bought the fake followers through a contact in Lithuania, whom I approached on eBay. Profiles made to look like actual people, made to follow any profile I wanted for \$0.002 each, so \$5,000 bought me 2.5 million followers. Knowing that fake followers are often used to boost the images of brands, political parties, recording artists, and celebrities, I had long since developed an interest in this artificial audience, the profiles and identities that are formed from appropriated

images and copied bios with spelling errors added. What would happen if I were to use this artificial audience as material for a gesture? A warped perspective on the “attention economy,” of course, in my eyes desperately necessary in our present age of hyper-capitalism.

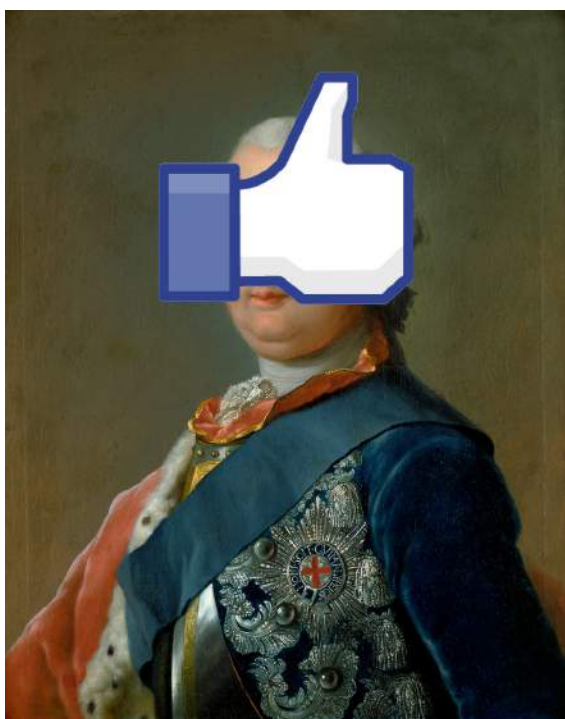


Image by Constant Dullaart featuring Johann Heinrich Tischbein the Elder's portrait of Friedrich II von Hessen (ca. 1770)

We spoke about the accounts I had selected and how the people behind these accounts often use follower counts to validate their cultural output. Optimizing the relevance of an artwork or artist through public relations isn't a new thing of course, but the accessibility of this type of brand management had started to influence artists. [Brad Troemels](#) speaks about “[aesthletes](#),” for example, describing artists conforming to their audience's aesthetic demands to receive addictive notifications of the audience's approval in the form of “likes,” in order to pursue a more socially and financially validated art practice. Another example is [Petra Cortright](#), an LA-based artist and good friend, who priced her video works according to the view count on YouTube. While the reliability of such numbers is unclear in a time when viewcounts are purged and [Twitter admits](#) millions of accounts do not

represent actual human beings, it is an interesting concept. The bots are accepted as part of our social fabric, as long as they don't spam us, right? But what actually happens to an art practice if you quantify the link between audience reception and market value? What is the quality of the followers, how many ‘managed’ or artificial identities are injected to increase market value?

Many other artistic careers are justified in the press through their popularity on social media. Ai Weiwei is often mentioned with a Twitter or Instagram link and the number of persons following him on these Western-based social media. The larger the audience, the more valuable the cultural contribution, it seems. Who can avoid speaking about blockbuster exhibitions, queuing for hours, or an image that was “liked” 3 million times? Take Kylie Jenner, for instance,

the [current record-holder](#) for the most “liked” image on Instagram, who seems to be popular for her body, genealogy, and her popularity level itself. Hard to miss, perhaps, but do we need to discuss her contribution to culture at length? The regime of audience validation within cultural critique has reached frightening levels. The kind journalist listened to my detailed explanation of how [my commission for the Jeu de Paume](#), a well-known museum in Paris, came about. I carefully explained why I decided to round out these Instagram accounts at 100,000 followers, making them equally important if one only considers the number of followers. I could hear her typing away while I said I bought over 70,000 “likes” for Richard Prince, 50,000 for Klaus Biesenbach, 40,000 for Ai Weiwei, 96,000 for Stefan Simchowicz, 97,000 for Petra Cortright, and a petty 2,700 or so for Hans Ulrich Obrist. I felt guilty bombarding her with so many numbers and the research I had done into the world of fake “likes” and followers, so I stopped and offered to send her my ‘before and after’ screengrabs. After a slight pause she asked: Did you ever directly sell any artworks through Instagram, and do you think this happens a lot with other artists? I said I honestly didn’t know, and said I wouldn’t feel good speculating about how many people went to one of my galleries because they saw my work on Instagram, let alone give numbers on other galleries and artists. Though I did point her to some dealers and collectors active on Instagram.



Image by Constant Dullaart

Later she asked again if I could prove which of my sales really happened through Instagram, so I decided to emphasize that my work was meant to comment on the value of audience quantification in the art world, in times when everything, even social relationships (now called social capital), can be defined in monetary terms. When I returned to the restaurant to join my girlfriend, she smiled and said she felt proud looking at me on the quant village square talking to the *New York Times*. Sadly, Siegal chose not to include my references in [her article in the New York Times](#) published in August. She chose instead to use Instagram follower counts, such as those for Simon de Pury, Ai Weiwei, and others, to validate the position of

the artists mentioned in her article, even using some accounts I had told that I had manipulated, like de Pury's. It ended up being a promotional article for Instagram, validating the false attention economy it establishes, popularizing an auction house that relies on this economic system.

This is only the most recent example of journalism trying to validate cultural output by using false audience numbers. It's like citing a museum's attendance record even though you know it's doctored, or presidential elections with sold votes. Earlier articles even mentioned my work while relating art practices such as Ryan Gander's or Richard Prince's to follower counts: validating art practices by citing follower counts from a commercial image-sharing platform known to be false. How do we end the unbridled use of this false validation system in journalism? How can we make clear that follower counts, "views," and "likes" are not and will never be trustworthy measures of social commitment as long as financial incentive is in place to manipulate these counts? Quantified social feedback does not mean quality. How do we keep this objectivist system celebrating efficiency and a corporate, Western approach to art and culture from manipulating cultural critique? Do we need to sell T-shirts and tote bags on Kickstarter before we can criticize these false validation systems? I am thinking it is time to use more dramatic means. I shall commence to recruit a virtual, Discordianist, Hessian army.

This article is an edited version of a piece published in the [Schirn Magazine](#) ahead of Constant Dullaart's launch of [The Possibility of an Army](#) on November 10 at the [Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt](#) (Römerberg, Frankfurt, Germany).