

Jonathan Jones 'Army for hire: the artist employing ghost soldiers to invade Facebook', *The Guardian*, November 2015

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Army for hire: the artist employing ghost soldiers to invade Facebook

In resurrecting an 18th-century mercenary army, Constant Dullaart has found a novel way to skewer the social media empire



'There's a huge market in fake accounts' ... Constant Dullaart's *The Possibility of an Army*, shows the Attack of the Prussian Infantry during the Battle of Hohenfriedberg, by Carl Röchling Photograph: Screengrab



Jonathan Jones

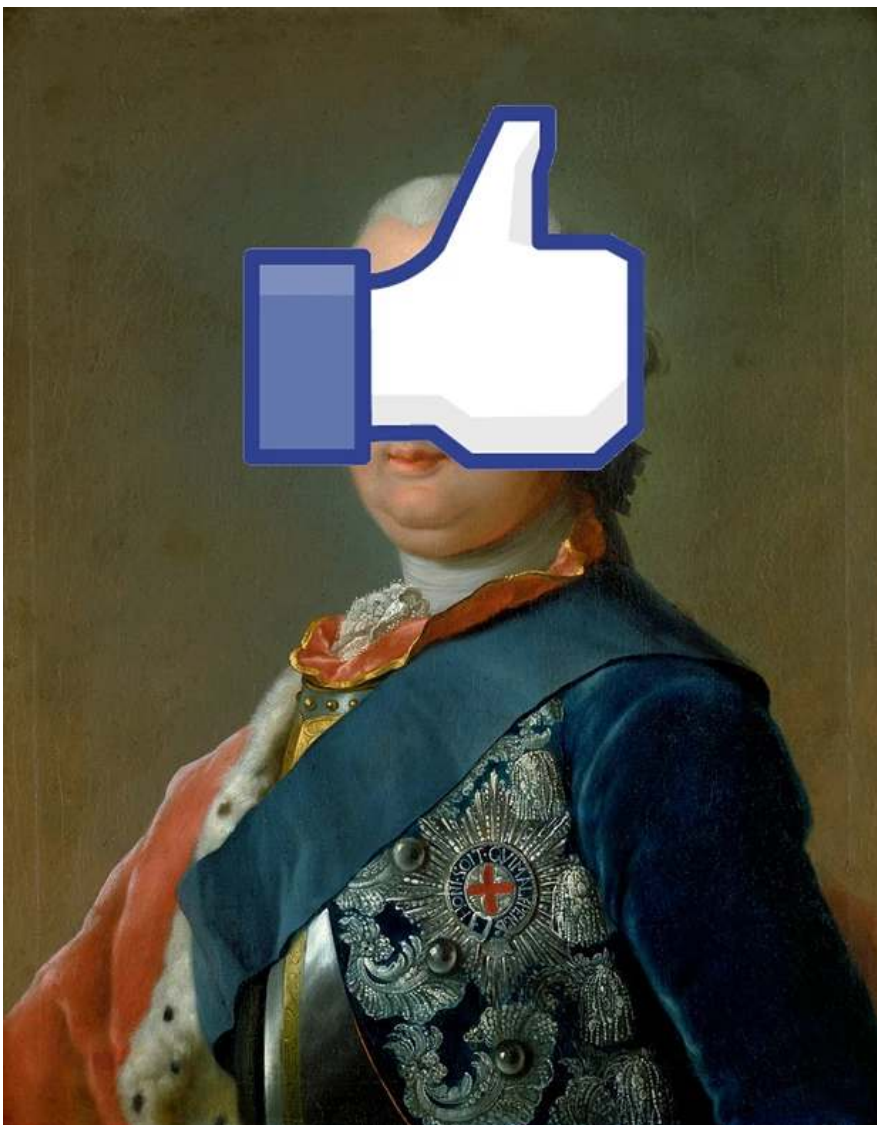
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Constant Dullaart uses the internet to expose the internet. The Dutch artist, who once hunted down the first ever Photoshopped image – so he could see it *before* it was altered – is now taking on the ultimate champion of digital fantasies: Facebook.

He's hiring a ghost army of 18th-century soldiers to attack the most mighty empire of today. His online art intervention, called *The Possibility of an Army*, will expose the

ease with which fake identities can be created online. He has enlisted people to open Facebook accounts with the names of mercenary soldiers hired by Britain in the American war of independence. He is literally creating a fake army of dead men.

“There are already enormous armies of fake accounts,” says Dullaart. “There’s a huge market in selling YouTube views and every kind of social media engagement ... I get frustrated when I see social media quoted as validation of a cultural practice.” Even museums, he claims, use faked responses to enhance their reputations. The providers of such services “make money by giving you big numbers. They generate random behaviour so they look more real. And they’re all around.”



Leader of the avant avant-garde ... Frederick II of Hesse-Cassel, painted by Johann Heinrich Tischbein, liked by

Dullaart.

The integrity of all that happens online seems to be crumbling. Those reviews on Amazon? [A lot are fake](#), according to the online retailer, which is suing more than 1,000 people for their “false, misleading and inauthentic” reviews of books and other commodities. Instagram? The myth has been blown wide open – with users queuing up to reveal sadder realities behind their images using the hashtag [#socialmediaisnotrealife](#). Are these long overdue exposures just more internet ephemera? Or could this be the beginning of the fall of social media?

We all know the online world is riddled with false identities; what Dullaart is saying is that it is a mass market. The chatter of social media is a way of selling us stuff, manipulated by hidden persuaders. His fake army on Facebook is there to test, as he puts it, “how much you need to bypass identity checks”.

Dullaart’s volunteers created PVA – phone verified accounts – with the names of real, but long dead, soldiers in the army of the lost state of Hesse-Cassel. In the 18th century, when Germany was still a patchwork of small states, Frederick II of Hesse-Cassel hit on a brilliant way of enriching his domain: he hired out this well-trained army to fight other peoples’ wars. The Hessians, as they were known, were a regular army for hire. Their most famous ([in America, infamous](#)) employment was on the British side against the American revolution.

“The economy of the Hessian state got a big boost,” says Dullaart. The profits were used in an Enlightenment campaign to improve society. It’s eerily appropriate that they have now returned as a band of Facebook mercenaries, their identities marshalled in the inauthentic, money-spinning world of social media.

“I see Facebook as a very American product, exporting a very American popularity culture,” says Dullaart. The original Hessians fought in the US and have been caricatured as brutal mercenaries, but in reality they “behaved honourably”, he says. “They actually freed a lot of slaves.”

[The Possibility of an Army](#) is at Schirn Kunsthalle museum in Frankfurt on 10 November.