

HILARY BAKER

Wall, 2013
Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 30 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST
PHOTO CREDIT: BRIAN FORREST

As the wait began, Laura quit, as if she'd been waiting for this moment to do it. She didn't want to be part of Bangr as a thing in the world thousands of people could know about, something written up in *TechCrunch* and debated on the blogs. That was no surprise to me, but Lance was shocked, wounded, stalking around the office having a tantrum for days. He got over it though, blowing off steam by channeling his rage and sense of powerlessness into the remaining staff. I observed that his hire for Laura's replacement was, in a certain sense, a more astute business decision: Tom, a young, fashionable gay man with a sharp grasp of details, had firsthand user experience of the popular gay hookup apps. This did, however, leave our team entirely male.

As the wait hit the two-week mark, things started to deteriorate. Lance was being increasingly unreasonable, trying to control all the things he could, with everything hanging on the one thing he couldn't. I recall one meeting where he told Samir to "Get us a social following now. End of story."

"But we don't have a product yet!" Samir objected. "I can only get people so excited about a product that will exist in the future, only find so many ways to talk about it."

"I don't care how you do it, I want to see numbers. I don't want our Twitter and Facebook to have pitiful amounts of likes on the day we appear in the App Store!"

"If all you care about is quantity, not quality, you know I can just buy us a bunch of Twitter followers." Lance didn't skip a beat.

"Do it! I'll give you the budget. Pay some black hat some fucking bitcoin and get it moving. I don't care if they're bots, I need to see those numbers."

Samir laughed out loud. All of us were taken aback, but Lance was oblivious. His blue eyes were pinwheels of focus.

"Better yet," he said, "go further. Look into some more guerrilla tactics. Other kinds of social media manipulation, like defensive strategies. Ideally we should have what looks like a grassroots following, with Twitter accounts we control, so in the event that people start to tear down our brand on social media, we can counterattack without looking like the company is doing it."

"Sock puppets?" Samir said.

"More like an army of sock puppets," Lance said, then without looking my way, said, "Have Jason help you if there's programming needed."

As the staff meeting adjourned, Lance marched out first and the rest of us shot each other looks of utter disbelief.

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Ethically questionable though it was, creating an army of Twitter zombies we controlled was a task that appealed to the hacker in me. Plus it gave Samir and me a chance to work together, which meant we were soon pairing up to venture out of the office for lunch meetings or stand around vaping e-cigarettes on Folsom Street, conspiring to jointly quit and "really fuck Lance over" in more or less an exact replay of my working relationship with Jim. Which both of us were aware of; we joked about who would be fired first. I could code, which made me a valuable commodity, but now that Patrick was doing well and knew the codebase, and the app was in beta, I was far from safe from the axe if I enraged our young dictator.

Neither one of us would be fired. Our doom, or liberation, was soon delivered in the form of an article on *TechCrunch* that Tom found.

"Hey, Lance," he said one Tuesday morning around eleven. "You'll want to come over and take a look at this."

A few minutes later we all were hunched over his screen reading the article in silence. It was about an app called Down to Hook Up, which had been spreading like wildfire for the past week. And it was the exact app we were building.

Lance turned and walked to his desk. He picked his hoodie off the back of his chair, put it on, closed his laptop and slid it into his shoulder bag, and left without saying another word. He didn't bother to mumble something about salvaging the situation. We all knew him well enough to understand that in his worldview you were either first, or you were nothing. It was over.

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In fact, Down to Hook Up was not only first, it was better. It did not merely connect you to random people with the visual browsing, tactile controls, and double-opt-in already in vogue in the gay scene; it offered a nice suite of privacy