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Zebracki, M [orcid.org/0000-0003-0053-2093](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0053-2093) (2017) A cybergeography of public art encounter: The case of Rubber Duck. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20 (5). pp. 526-544. ISSN 1367-8779

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877916647142>

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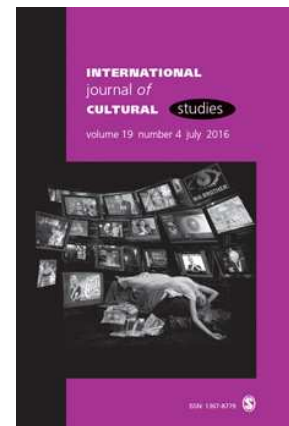
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# A cybergeography of public art encounter: The case of *Rubber Duck*

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This document is an author's copy of the article A cybergeography of public art encounter: The case of *Rubber Duck*, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, first published on 9 May 2016, <http://doi.org/10.1177/1367877916647142>.



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## Abstract

Scholarship has largely been conducted on publics' 'offline' public art encounters, while public art practice has become increasingly integrated with virtual dimensions. This article aims to fill this gap by focusing on digitally mediated public art engagement. A case study on the travelling *Rubber Duck* exhibition (2012–present) interrogates how this artwork is appropriated and narrated through digitally networked spaces (mainly social media, forums and news platforms) after its repeated on-site installations. This article argues for the need to expand on 'virtual relationality': the communication, (re-)negotiation and (re-)siting of public art's roles and meanings through (mainly text- and image-based) social mediations within hybrid, online-offline contexts. Public art encounters are examined along fluid cybergeographical understandings of its social and spatial publicness, temporalities and uses, which deconstruct binaries including material/digital space, permanence/ephemerality and human/non-human.

## Keywords

discourse analysis, expert interview, public art, publics, *Rubber Duck*, social media, virtual ethnography, virtual relationality

Scholarship has largely focused on social engagement with public art in on-site material contexts, despite the proliferation of public art's digital dimensions (Freeman and Sheller, 2015). Kellerman (2014) indicated that cyberspace is an emerging significant 'second action space' and aspect of everyday lived experience. Various strands of literature use different terms, including *cyberspace*, *virtual sphere* and *online space*, to capture contemporary conditions of interconnected global, abstract network spaces of computers and locative devices that enable both people and things to connect online (see Dodge and Kitchin, 2001). The digital turn (Hartley, 2012) has indicated the hybrid nature of the relationships between culture, digital technologies and society, where 'old' and 'new' media do not fit a historically linear pattern but co-emerge and merge in space and time – described as convergence culture by Jenkins (2008). Throughout this article I adhere to this convergence idea in exploring cyberspace through public art and what online public art does to people and places following on a holistic, hybrid understanding of its social and spatial publicness, temporalities and uses.

Public art studies have yet to more firmly frame geographies of online engagement with public art, particularly from bottom-up perspectives. By attending to people's everyday encounters with public art online, this article particularly answers Rose's (2015) call for more human geographical attention to participatory aspects of digitally mediated cultural objects. This article is based on a case study about the globetrotting *Rubber Duck* exhibition that has received substantial attention over (digital) media platforms since its first incarnation in 2012. I challenge prevailing understandings of public art as associated with the material world by analysing engagement along reconfigured comprehensions of spatialities and temporalities of public art's uses as manifested in cyberspace.

Dutch artist Florentijn Hofman, who has a considerable track record in large-scale urban installations,<sup>1</sup> drew inspiration for *Rubber Duck* from the Tolo-patented yellow bath toy. Since 2012, several inflatables, ranging from 5 to 18 metres in height, have been installed in about 20 urban waters across the world, including Amsterdam, Auckland, Baku, Beijing, Hasselt, Hong Kong, Kaohsiung (Figure 1), Keelung, Onomichi, Osaka, Pittsburgh, Saint-Nazaire, São Paulo, Sydney and Taoyuan.<sup>2</sup> Hofman's central mission statement reads:

The *Rubber Duck* knows no frontiers, it doesn't discriminate people and doesn't have a political connotation. The friendly, floating *Rubber Duck* has healing properties: it can

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relieve global tensions as well as define them. The *Rubber Duck* is soft, friendly and suitable for all ages!<sup>3</sup>

This quote suggests the artwork's capacity to bring different people and cultures together, trigger intercultural dialogue, reveal worldly social issues and help to mitigate those issues (while remaining 'apolitical'), and hence to have place-specific relevance. Considering *Rubber Duck's* viral online coverage, I critically engage with the artist's rationale and global scale of ambition in the highly relevant but under-studied context of digital network space, which exists precisely through making connections with people and places around the world. In so doing, I throw light on the artwork's social significance and place-specificness as crystallised within digitally mediated engagement.

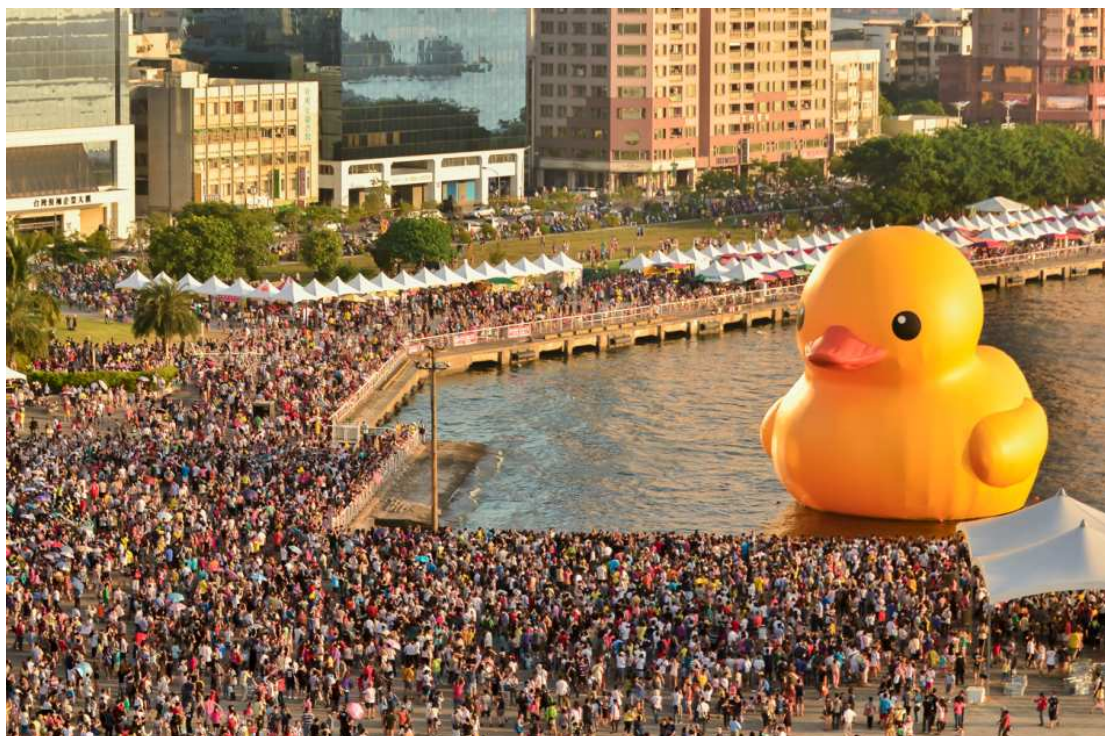
First, I analyse my central notion of the 'virtual relationality' of encounters with public art by dovetailing human geographical, new media and public art scholarship. The under-examined spatial and temporal dimensions of online (mis)uses of public art, alongside new possibilities for and critiques of online engagement are discussed, respectively. I then move on to the study's methodology. The results are presented and analysed along *Rubber Duck's* degrees of social significance and place-specificness, followed by concluding reflections.

### **Virtual relationality**

Scholarship has under-addressed the online roles of public artwork in everyday life. Starting from the premise that engagements in the offline world as well as online space should be seen in a dialectical and hybrid interface, I discuss three interrelated areas that support more firmly including cyberspace in public art scholarship. The first area is public art's spatiality: online engagements with public art have rendered conventional binary spatial notions (e.g. public/private and material/digital spaces) more fluid and less certain, creating novel ways for public exchange of experiences, and thus establishing a new under-explored sense of 'publicness'. The second area is a concern with time: digitally mediated public art engagements have created new understandings of permanence and ephemerality that do not necessarily tally with unidimensional, chronological temporal frameworks. The third area attends to the online (spatio-temporally) reconfigured uses of public art in a global hybrid space.

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**Figure 1.** *Rubber Duck* (18m), Kaohsiung, Taiwan, 2013.

Source: Courtesy of Studio Florentijn Hofman.

In their seminal geographical public art study, Massey and Rose (2003) introduced the notion of 'social relationality', grounded in Lefebvre's (1991) theorem that space entails a socially co-produced entity. 'Social relationality' is defined as the very essence, and therefore 'publicness', of public art: 'for an artwork to be public [and hence meaningful], negotiation between social differences has to be part of what the artwork does. If negotiation among diverse social identities is not invited, then the artwork is not public' (Massey and Rose, 2003: 19). They applied their notion to public art's potential uses and meanings as situated in a material world, which strongly depend on the artwork's physical, spatial and temporal properties (e.g. size, colour, shape, position, permanence/ephemerality). Not all people engage with the same gamut of properties; also, they pursue these properties to different degrees and in different ways, making any generalisations impracticable (Massey and Rose, 2003: 19).

I extend the notion of social relationality to what I term 'virtual relationality': the mediation and appropriation/repurposing/challenging of public art's properties and roles in digitally

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mediated social relations and hence networked spaces. Thus, the focus is on online users' social (re)constructions of public art in digital communities, covering popular social media outlets focused on user-created content (i.e. Web 2.0). These include Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, as well as forums and online news platforms, which differ in user-creation potential and bottom-up social agency (Hartley, 2012).

### ***Online uses: reconfiguring spatialities and temporalities***

Virtually mediated public art requires a reconfigured understanding of space and time vis-à-vis public art engagement prior to the emergence of digital culture. Social media have substantially affected and digitally intensified quotidian life (Brake, 2014; Hartley, 2012). Although digitally mediated content as such does not carry any spatial-material 'mass' for tactile engagement (see Dodge and Kitchin, 2001), it is layered over the material world and people's 'real-world' experiences. As argued by Crang et al. (1999: 1): '[digital] technologies are seen as facilitating, if not producing, a qualitatively different human experience of dwelling in the world; new articulations of near and far, present and absent, body and technology, self and environment'.

Where offline public art encounters typically involve multiple in-situ users within single material environments, online and particularly digital mobile public art engagements may involve digital multi-user environments to overlap with multiple material environments (see De Souza e Silva, 2004). Such 'messiness' of space in digital culture (Rose, 2015) fundamentally reconfigures the dominant Habermasian notion of the public sphere: contemporary digital culture is spatialised along fluidly dispersed, and potentially invisible, publics (Hartley, 2012). Social relations and identities are, accordingly, expanded and reconfigured by multi-directional technological-digital practices such as uploading, downloading and streaming through desktops, mobile devices and do-it-yourself (DIY) technologies (Hartley, 2012; Kidd, 2014). This fits Jenkins's (2008) understanding of convergence culture, wherein offline/online engagements and analogue/digital and hardware/software technologies coexist in 'real life' and real time, thereby augmenting one another and deconstructing open/closed space divides.

The 'digitisation of our existence' (Bishop, 2012: 436) has further blurred public/private and physical/immaterial boundaries, and provided augmented and immersive

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understandings of public values of cultural objects. Also, it has provided the empowering opportunity for everyday citizens to create content beyond institutionalised spaces, for example, through YouTube, Instagram, Tumblr (Kidd, 2014). This essentially marks the shift from people as passive audiences/visitors/end users towards participatory, self-authoritative, purposive and creative *publics* (Goriunova, 2013; Kidd, 2014), consequently boosting grassroots agency, collaborative meaning-making and collective intelligence (Hartley, 2012). Hartley (2012) argued that social media in particular (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Tumblr) offer fewer limitations to participation and interaction than more conventional media that have been extrapolated into the digital sphere, such as online television.

Digital surfing can involve myriad uses of art: for example, browsing, sharing, creating, editing, and curating or composing first- or second-hand art content, which can be done over, for example, image management and sharing platforms of Flickr and Pinterest (Kidd, 2014). Digitally networked space enhances the affective experience of public art (Gauthier, 2015), as it essentially inscribes publics around the artwork's appreciation through *ekphrasis* (discursive commentary) (Rhodes, 2015). This expands Warner's (2002: 62) definition of publics to the digital: 'a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse. It is not texts themselves that create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time.' Rather, as textual and visual elements of user-created content are often digitally amalgamated over digital sites and time, I would prefer to speak of dynamic/moving 'text-images' (e.g. emoticons, annotated photos). Rhodes (2015) provides the example of proliferating augmented reality applications for mobile phone users to visually and discursively 're-texture' real-world environments, including public streets and museums (e.g. the Louvre and the Guggenheim). So, after Boellstorff (2008), online activities can inform publics' expressions and 'doings' in the public artwork's material locality,<sup>4</sup> and the other way round – producing temporally dynamic social, spatial, material and digital parameters of public art experience.

Online interactions can occur in a synchronous, real-time manner (e.g. live tweeting, interactive Facebook chats) or in an asynchronous fashion: users can communicate, at different and self-selected times, about public art through, for example, forums, weblogs, social media profiles. After Dodge and Kitchin (2001), digital public art content can instantly emerge and disappear 'in a click', denoting an ambiguous status of being permanent,

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temporary or somewhere in between. For example, a temporary artwork removed from its physical locality might 'live on' as entity on the internet or be 'resurrected' through a mobile augmented reality application.

### ***New possibilities for engagement***

Digitally networked relations can put local and global 'whole populations' in contact over vast geographical distances (Hartley, 2012). Publics across the global digital world can be connected around an artwork in a specific material locality (if any at all) and interactions can be particularly intensified on platforms with large communities (e.g. Facebook and Twitter). In comparison to offline interactions, it should be noted that online users sometimes have more substantial control over (dis)closing identity: for example, 'real' profile photo vs. avatar on Facebook; active tweeter vs. passive 'liker' or 'silent voyeur' (see Kidd, 2014). Moreover, although digital participation might be commonplace, it is not necessarily possible everywhere and equal for all people in society, considering the requirements for internet access, digital communication skills/literacy and membership of online accounts (see Brake, 2014).

According to Stevens and Lossau (2015), the making and consumption of public art have traditionally been strongly conditional on authoritative control and the 'privileged category of engagement' of sponsors and artists (2015: 7), who impose *functions* and 'manipulate audiences so that they will perform what the artwork prescribes' (2015: 5). They employed the word *use* to address a power shift to publics, 'who find their own purposes in the aesthetic objects and experiences presented to them' (2015: 5). Applying their argument to digital culture, this power shift becomes particularly notable considering online users' potentially strong possibility to (re)imagine, (re)purpose and (re)occupy spaces through especially social media (which are usually user-friendly and free of charge) (Kidd, 2014; Lodi, 2014).

This grassroots condition of what can be considered 'post-internet art' (Gauthier, 2015) has incited a new digital consumer agency and democracy (Hartley, 2012; Jenkins, 2008) that breaks the art world's conventional artist/audience, expert/novice and authenticity/quality binaries. 'Amateurs' have gained digital capital to, for example, crowdsource and produce high-quality content to 'game' established media and art world systems (Kidd, 2014). So,

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digital publics might be considered real self-organising citizens whose content can be appreciated through the 'digital aesthetics' of bottom-up/DIY creative (co-)production. This produces novel digital knowledges and senses of digital citizenship and increases the legitimacy of ordinary views and grassroots engagements. This legitimacy, however, is often challenged by authorities' formal evaluations of 'expert' output and 'measurable' quality (Kidd, 2014).

### ***Critiques of online engagement***

Why and how do publics engage with public art online? Miller (2008) argued that online users, depending on any cultural and linguistic communicative barriers, navigate through individualisation (e.g. personal stories/blogs with little social exchange) and network sociability: social bonding practices to construct and maintain personal digital networks (e.g. Facebook and Instagram accounts). Particularly in the context of network sociability, Hartley (2012) observed upsurges of play and humour, indicating acts of 'silly citizenship'. These imply whimsical, light e-communications (e.g. sharing 'cool'/'fun' pics and memes), which may subvert elite, seriously informed and adultist rationalities. Despite the light-hearted intent of such communications, Goriunova (2013) deploys an existential critique that reveals the dark matter of light e-communications: in her view, the *en masse* techno-human subjectification has involved a performance of idiocy revealing 'the trouble of the current human condition' (2013: 11).

Miller (2008) voiced a similar nihilistic assessment of much indiscriminate digital communication, which he termed phatic communication – 'communication without content has taken precedence' (2008: 398) – moving away from substantial discursive dialogue towards the primary purpose of conveying sociability and maintaining a social network. Miller (2008) associates phatic communication with database principles of endless growth (e.g. constant microblogging on Twitter); obliviousness of informational production/consumption (see Hartley, 2012); prevailing 'promiscuity' in network sociality (e.g. ceaselessly adding 'friends'); the desire to be 'followed' on Twitter, Instagram, etc.; and expectations of ongoing 'connected presence' (Licoppe and Smoreda, 2005). The latter denotes 'must have' feelings of being/staying connected with other online users through internet and mobile devices

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everywhere and at any time – while there is a coexisting paradox of being present and absent.

Phatic communication might be imposed by the medium itself. Twitter allows 140 characters per tweet only, but social networks such as Facebook, Instagram and Tumblr do not impose any character limit, although a conditioned code on social networks is to keep messages as short as possible (Kidd, 2014). Particularly the popular platform of Facebook, compared to the prevalent microblogging, text-focused platform of Twitter, offers substantial functional space and visual prominence for network sociality and thus maintaining social relationships (Kidd, 2014).

Online practices can be motivated by, for example, (phatic) indifference and everyday banalities, or emotional attachment and ensuing heated debates, acts of public shaming, and trolling (i.e. posting inflammatory content in discussions over internet) (see Brake, 2014). Amin's (2002) notion of 'micropublic', originally designating offline spaces for intercultural encounter, offers a relevant angle for exploring public art's social significance. A digital micropublic would, then, entail digitally mediated space, ranging from indifferent/non-judgemental to antagonistic/judgemental atmospheres, wherein publics encounter, exchange, negotiate, bridge, challenge and/or potentially transgress everyday social and cultural values, differences and norms through public artwork (after Bishop, 2012).

Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, a long curved wall traversing NYC's Federal Plaza (1981) served as classic example of how public resistance in the real world, as mediated by print media, radio and television, led to the destruction of this public artwork in 1989. The vandalism of Paul McCarthy's *Tree*, a 24m-tall inflatable sculpture resembling a butt plug in Place Vendôme in Paris 2014, demonstrated the power of social media in reciprocally affecting public art online and offline. Gauthier (2015: 29–30) conveyed that the *Tree* case is a:

noteworthy story of the rejection of a public artwork in a networked age ... it revealed rifts in the fabric of the French public ... the virtual layer outstripped the physical ... the assault transferred from the online to the physical realm ...

(The artist was even slapped in his face by an offended onlooker.) The heated debate was accelerated online: *Tree* became a meme and ludic visual reinterpretations circulated, which challenged heteronormative society and aristocratic architecture. Some even took this work

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as worthy successor of the Eiffel Tower. *Tree* is physically no longer in the Place Vendôme, but continues to exist as a conversation piece both in 'real life' and online. This example illustrates *Tree* as creating a digital micropublic, wherein users digitally mediated 'co-authorship' of public art and repurposed its roles along reconfigured senses of space and time.

## Methodology

Considering its rich digital exposure since its first installation in 2012, *Rubber Duck* is a pertinent case for analysing online public art engagement. The study of this popular urban installation, a genre with which I am highly familiar, is not isolated and might produce inductive insights into online encounters with public art of similar calibre. I conducted 'virtual ethnography', described by Hine (2000: 8) as a useful method 'to develop an enriched sense of the meanings of the technology and the cultures which enable it and are enabled by it'. This is also a particularly useful method to reach and involve publics who might be difficult or impossible to approach in 'real life' (Kidd, 2014). Following Driscoll and Gregg's (2010) proffered advice, I conducted e-observations in a covert manner so as not to intervene in authentic communicative flows.

Online discussion of *Rubber Duck* has mostly been taking place in the form of 'text-images' on the social media platforms of Twitter and Facebook. Annotated photos and videos have moreover been circulated, particularly over Pinterest and YouTube respectively. Artist statements and project descriptions circulated on the artist's studio homepage, international tourist boards and listing sites (to arouse interest in on-site visiting), and news platforms in relation to nearly every exhibit. About a hundred unique, distinct items (created/published by formal agents as well as everyday online users) were gathered to gain a solid impression of *Rubber Duck's* coverage in digitally networked space. This was largely done through manual sampling on search engines of social networking websites and Google – entailing a snowballing technique as content often referred to/hyperlinked other content. Distinct items were considered, among other things, posts, news stories, op-eds, videos and tweets – shares/crosspostings of second-hand content, retweets and intra-post comments (e.g. replies to YouTube films and comments on Facebook posts) were screened but not counted as such.

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The content was usually a hybrid of textual and (audio)visual materials, mostly photographs (see 'remix culture' in Kidd, 2014). Keywords and hashtags, referring to the artist, artwork and the artwork's various physical locations, yielded a geographical breadth of information. The collection involved one automatic retrieval method: the Twittersphere was also scraped with TweetDeck, enabling to locate tweets in a set radius (e.g. 5 km) around the artwork's GPS location (a form of 'geofencing').

Content accumulated and evolved over the duration of the *Rubber Duck* project, enabling an aggregated and diachronic textual and (audio)visual discourse analysis. I identified discursive threads in the artwork's online uses along spatial and temporal dimensions until I reached an unprompted stage of data saturation. This also involved thick description: the analytic embedment of online engagement with *Rubber Duck* in broader digital media contexts (wherein I am firmly embedded as active social media user). On ethical grounds to do with ownership/usage of user-created content (see Kidd, 2014), only publicly accessible online scripts and expressions were analysed and are anonymously reported here.

I complemented the virtual ethnography with an in-depth semi-structured expert interview (administered in Dutch) with *Rubber Duck*'s creator at his home studio (11 November 2014), who provided consent for identifying his views. The 'inter-view' implied a setting of trust allowing me to conversationally and viscerally situate my findings within the artist's frame of mind as it had evolved throughout the project. In a triangulating fashion, I post-analysed findings from the virtual observations, discourse analysis of secondary data and in-vivo/first-hand data analysis.

## Results and discussion

Analysis of online uses of *Rubber Duck* revealed various degrees of engagements, ranging from dialogical to rather phatic communications that disclosed differing associations with time and space. Sharing, commenting and curating/editing practices were the most salient interrelated engagement types, which are hereinafter questioned regarding, first, the extent to which engagements can be grasped in the spirit of critical or somewhat phatic digital micropublics – to what degree do online users unleash and negotiate any critical thoughts and deep feelings (or not)? Second, engagements are analysed for the extent to which they

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unfold any everyday place-specific attachments or rather global, universal and thus more generic spatial and temporal connections.

### ***Critical or phatic digital micropublics?***

*Rubber Duck's* online coverage had accelerated over the project, and Facebook and Twitter in particular were strewn with user-created content. I observed that most of the content was intended to entertain both content-creator and content-consumer. Online promotional materials by Hofman's studio and local authorities hosting *Rubber Duck* on their waters emphasised the cultural grandeur of both the artwork and city. User-created content, again and again, particularly played along with the artwork's flagship allure and sensational spectacles of official unveilings.

A salient illustration was the massively attended and richly online documented entry of *Rubber Duck* into Keelung, Taiwan. The inflatable became even more virally reported on New Year's Eve 2013/14 when it 'exploded' in front of a large crowd, just 11 days after its installation. Dramatic news reports presented headlines like 'it's a Duck meltdown'.<sup>5</sup> Online speculative threads about the explosion's cause reinforced the sensation-seeking spectacle; for example, online users wondered whether this resulted from any technical issues or vandalism. Hofman (interview) refuted any dramatic hearsay and imparted that *Rubber Duck* was preventively deflated due to an approaching typhoon. Hofman loathed (social) media's ongoing pursuit of theatrical news value and parroting reporting at moments of 'crisis': 'they hear of something without knowing the origin', he said.

*Rubber Duck's* online coverage repeatedly entailed entertaining narratives characterised by random snapshots as embedded in everyday trivial activities (which bear a strong resemblance to the *Tree* case). This suggested that the artwork carried meaning, no matter how subtle, in people's 'little daily things'. On Studio Florentijn Hofman's Facebook account, the artist occasionally shared user-created, banal imageries and stories about the work alongside news headlines and official promotional materials. A telling example was a Facebook photo titled *Enjoying [sic] ice creams*.<sup>6</sup> This image showed a senior couple eating ice creams in front of the installation, floating on Parramatta River in a public park during Sydney Festival in January 2014. As of 19 March 2014, 965 online users worldwide had clicked this photo's 'like' button, 22 had commented on it and 59 had shared the post. Most of the shares indicated

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uncommented, fairly facile referrals. These, in their turn, were often liked or commented upon by Facebook friends of the respective users, demonstrating vivid interactions. The comments were largely brief. Rather than environmental references, they stressed 'people-art' emotions in the sphere of aesthetics, amusement, sympathy and fun, for example, 'so cute', 'lovely', 'enjoying *Rubber Duck*', 'best pic', 'enjoyment of innocence and his wife',<sup>7</sup> and 'who let the duck out?'<sup>8</sup> – an array of narrated interventions that may have been indicators of 'silly citizenship' (Hartley, 2012).

I experienced this example as a quite personalised portrait of *Rubber Duck*. Online sharing appeared to interact between the intimate scale of the digital photograph, the artwork's material scale, and internet's global scale. This expanded the artwork's publicness in a multi-layered way: it showed how something personal had been made accessible to online users anywhere in the physical world. Moreover, the posted photo of *Rubber Duck* with the ice-cream eating couple can be rendered as a hybrid, 'more-than-human' ecology: it interlinked art matter with human corporeality and digitally mediated not only a sense of everydayness but also everywhere. Ice-cream eating was made a familiar yet extraordinary experience by the artwork's presence. Through the digital text-image, users could transport themselves mentally into similar simple joys of everyday life, potentially providing vicarious experiences and moments of (virtually distant) interpersonal encounter.

Another salient example of an interactive Facebook thread (combining practices of sharing, visual editing and textual commenting), laid bare a playful yet critical eye for cultural consumer behaviour. In reference to Robert Pirsig's icon of American cultural-philosophical literature, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values*, a Facebook user shared one of Hofman's photographs of *Rubber Duck* and whimsically annotated: 'Zen and the art of eating soft serve'.<sup>9</sup> Another Facebook user entered into a dialogue and commented: 'where's the pitchfork?', to which the first commenter replied: 'American Gothic *Rubber Duck*. I can do that'. This provoked a reaction: he uploaded an edited image of the much-parodied *American Gothic* (with 'apologies to Grant Wood'), depicting a yellow duck protruding between the farmer and spinster daughter. The other user amusingly commented: 'they look like they are about to duck'. The first commenter then wittily replied in reference to what has become *de rigeur* in social media: 'duck wants in on the selfie'. This user's comment can be critically linked to 'plop art' (Kwon, 2004): perceived random (and

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potentially intrusive) sitings of public art around the world – just as some people have come to experience the act of taking selfies as inconsiderately invasive in (public) art spaces.<sup>10</sup> The latter is also indicative of phatic online communication, where ‘the ephemerality of digital effort is always flickering with the energy of immortalised selfies’ (Freeman and Sheller, 2015: 6).

I consider the two previous examples significant illustrations of Dodge and Kitchin’s (2001) argument on temporality in digital network space. The respective digital posts and associated threads appeared to be offline when I attempted to revisit them as of the time of writing, in June 2015. Philosophically, there is nevertheless ‘connected presence’ (Licoppe and Smoreda, 2005) in that the current post-analysis resuscitates this content in a sense and makes the online users’ encounters present again (albeit in their virtual absence).

Furthermore, I observed that a substantial number of encounters with *Rubber Duck* over social media lacked any deeper social critique in their discursive and visual semiotic contexts – resonating with Miller’s (2008) theorem of hegemonic phatic e-communication in digital network sociality. The examined engagements seemed to be mostly situated in atmospheres of sensation and echoed everyone-pleasing and consensual art-making, as also insinuated by the artist’s mission statement. Public news debate challenged the artist’s statement, resulting in ample digital footage. For instance, in an online broadcast of the popular Dutch late-night talk show *Pauw & Witteman*, the interviewer Jeroen Pauw considered Hofman a shrewd entrepreneur who uses *Rubber Duck* as a popular mass article: ‘if you make something big it will catch the eye, so people find it attractive to have the bath duck floating in their harbour’.<sup>11</sup> Hofman explained he materially scaled up the yellow bath duck to create the feeling of a global, harmonious artwork. ‘The worldly waters have become our bathtub’, Hofman said, and therefore he believed that his artwork reconciles and breaks down all barriers between people. Hofman imparted that some citizens of Pittsburgh petitioned local authorities to prolong the artwork’s presence: ‘people seem to fall in love with it and want to keep it’.

That said, there was online activity about how *Rubber Duck* was used for geopolitical purposes, which uncovered social and political tensions that might mount around large-scale urban art installations like this one. The Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) in Taiwan ‘hijacked’ the artwork as figurehead for a presidential election campaign vibrantly played over social

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media. 'In *Rubber Duck* we would have a unique president who could even cross the Taiwan Strait by itself, depending on the prevailing wind', said a KMT representative.<sup>12</sup> Hofman (interview) asserted that over social media 'many lies were going around about alleged high sums that politicians offered in the race to get the bath duck to their location for political profit'. This suggested that city authorities, in China in particular, used *Rubber Duck* as online plaything to underscore their importance within political hierarchies in 'real life'. Moreover, China's authoritarian government and its official control formed a critical motif in some online users' appropriations of *Rubber Duck*. Most notably, in 2013, a user of the Chinese microblogging and social networking site Sina Weibo posted a photoshopped version of the 'Tank Man' photograph close to the anniversary of the student-led Tiananmen Square protests on 4 June 1989. The edited image featured a column of *Rubber Ducks* instead of tanks and soon became a meme (with some quirky variants), as in the *Tree* case. Some highly placed officials engaged with this meme. For example, while the Chinese government censored various words including 'big yellow duck' on Sina Weibo, a United States Foreign Service Officer tweeted 'Chinese netizens 1, Chinese censors 0'.<sup>13</sup>

Nonetheless, everyday online users' 'prosaic' and 'banal' acts (Amin, 2002) primarily set the tone for *Rubber Duck's* digital micropublic – rather than sustained dialogues and practices subverting the established order. Mostly by posting, commenting and curating/editing, publics offered other users text-images as digital 'contact zones' to react upon (after Askins and Pain, 2011). Unilateral communications and banal interactions typified these micropublics. Examples were legion: 'if you still do the duck face in pictures I'm judging you'<sup>14</sup> represents one of the many one-liners. Snapshots were tweeted of people kissing<sup>15</sup> and squeezing<sup>16</sup> *Rubber Duck*. The depicted poses drew a compelling parallel with tourists' photo-taking behaviours in offline space (e.g. clichéd snaps of people apparently holding up the Leaning Tower of Pisa). The previous snapshots sparked off interaction between online users and Hofman himself – a direct connection that might be unlikely to occur in offline space. Hofman retweeted the snapshots and added to the latter: 'don't squish me!'<sup>17</sup>

Although this small intervention showed, in the vein of Amin (2002), a prosaic dialogue, it revealed interesting banal transgressions at two levels. First, Hofman, by his simple line, discursively incarnated his own artwork in online space. He augmented *Rubber Duck's* offline

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postmodern visual language with a digitally transmitted ironic-textual dimension. Also, despite the artwork's super-large material scale, Hofman's irony hinted that *Rubber Duck* can be 'cuddled' online, thus making it more-than-visual and 'digitally tactile' within online experience, which contradicts the 'only-visual' existence of digital content as implied by Dodge and Kitchin (2001). Second, this example showed how the use of public artwork through social media can lower the threshold for everyday interactions between the artwork's creator and its audiences. Also, the Twitter thread under discussion might be described as an interactive interpretative panel thrown open to the virtual public at large.

Hofman (interview) moreover indicated that *Rubber Duck's* online omnipresence might have made him more approachable as 'emailing body', too. His art studio receives and replies to daily fan email. As we spoke, Hofman printed out and discussed an email that he just received from a South Korean schoolgirl. She enclosed her school essay about *Rubber Duck* and wrote that its 'cute appearance' inspired teachers, friends and herself. Hofman pointed that the profuse e-communication about the artwork both revealed and contributed to real-world impacts on people. But it remained largely indistinct to me how social relationships were exactly deepened in digitally networked spaces.

### ***Place-specific or universal?***

*Rubber Duck's* generic style and touring nature raise questions about the degree to which this public artwork speaks to specific places and publics or rather to global (art) trends and global (digital) markets and audiences. Hofman's oeuvre resonates with the postmodern aesthetic of determinedly oversized and kitschy artwork by leading contemporary artists like Jeff Koons and Paul McCarthy (see *Tree* and the 'Butt Plug Gnome'; Zebracki, 2012). Some might consequently experience this 'uncultivated' aesthetic as disconnected from local architecture and falling short of deliberate dialogue with local publics – see 'plop art', which according to Kwon (2004) reflects the globalised art world's marketed habits/desires, resulting in the 'commodification and serialisation of places' (2004: 55). Others might, nevertheless, experience deeper meanings, locational awareness and connectedness with local or global (digital) publics.

I observed an analogy between online engagement with *Rubber Duck* and its commodification in offline space. The travelling exhibition could, indeed, be considered a

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serial spatial project propagating homogeneous expectations about its object (enlarged plastic inflatable bath toy), location (urban water and skyline as backdrop), audience (large voyeuristic crowd) and habits (mostly photo-taking and merchandising practices). Digitally mediated images/imaginings reproduced and enhanced these expectations and, as such, amplified non-concrete social identities and space-times.

That said, some place-specific text-images of *Rubber Duck* were created through mobile devices on the spot (which could be seen as portable digital simulacra of the artwork). Online users occasionally carried over experiences while being among crowds beholding the artwork in situ, channelling feelings of encountering the artwork together. I encountered the content through my computer in my own geographical localities (university campus and home space), situated in places and times different from the exhibitions. The intimate scale of some online materials let me, in some capacity, vicariously co-sense mediated experiences of in-situ onlookers. For example, I gained a relayed experience from my encounter with this tweet: 'lol @ the giant duck floating around campus'.<sup>18</sup> The Twitterer accompanied this post with a photograph taken on the artwork's site in real time. This instance vividly played on my imagination of what it would mean to experience *Rubber Duck* in my everyday locale (e.g. as intruding, aestheticising, alienating, place matching?).

Amateur entries were often interlinked with professional news narratives. As such, e-communications (a)synchronously linked to other digital places and offline realities, awaking an indeterminate, digitally compressed sense of space-time. Although Miller (2008) identified much social media activity as apathetic and indifferent, its viral potential could monopolise some explicit (positive or negative) attitudes and lend colour to public debates accordingly. Some digital encounters with *Rubber Duck* were outspoken. *CityLab*, for example, published a clearly critical op-ed, shared by more than 1,000 social media users:

The *Rubber Duck* artist must be stopped: the inflatable spectacles of Florentijn Hofman don't belong in every harbour in the wide world ... *Rubber Duck* sends an infantilising message about the role of public art in cities.<sup>19</sup>

The author applied similar critiques to Hofman's other travelling installations, including the floating supersized wooden hippo sculpture. Strikingly, content created by both official media and grassroots largely presented various *Rubber Duck* exhibition spaces as spatially

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and socially undifferentiated and disassociated. 'Unique' environmental elements, beyond the presence of water for the *Duck*, were not quite fleshed out through artwork properties and complexities. A broadly homogenised online gaze fetishised images of the bath toy and the object's large-scale stature in lieu of attending to the diversity within publics and what the artwork really does to the *couleur locale*. Although some online narration indicated place-specific experience, universal place images dominated. A thorough public induction by the exhibition organisers and promoters could have been an opportunity to heighten awareness of this artwork's potential site specificity (see Kwon, 2004) on the part of both online and offline publics.

Nevertheless, spatial attachments occasionally clearly filtered through user-created content, for example, in the guise of references to other *Rubber Duck* exhibitions that called up its geographical trajectory. A Facebook thread about the Sydney-based installation included a user's post of a self-taken, annotated photograph of *Rubber Duck* in Pittsburgh: 'thank you [Hofman] for bringing your duck to Pittsburgh. We loved having him here!'<sup>20</sup> Such gratitude/interest, no matter how trivial, might precisely be the public response that flagship-art marketing strategies aim for, both offline and online.

But sometimes goals were more ambitious. The Netherlands Embassy in Beijing invited Hofman to deliver a press conference as part of 2013 Beijing Design Week as well as Guest City Amsterdam.<sup>21</sup> This did not just serve to promote the spatial identity and creative economies of both cities and their respective countries. Many counterfeit goods appeared to circulate, particularly over mainland China, and therefore the Design Week official declared: 'We want to use the *Rubber Duck* case to drive an awareness programme raising the sensibility towards intellectual property rights around China.'<sup>22</sup>

The online incarnation of *Rubber Duck* suggested an enactment of globalised, commodified values of popular culture. Various offline as well as online pop-up stores mushroomed mainly in the Far East, and especially in South Korea and China, selling all kinds of products, including bath supplies, eco-bags, mugs, beddings, smartphone cases, T-shirts, school supplies and even humidifiers, with slogans such as 'enjoy the *Rubber Duck* and get energy from the duck in your daily life!' (Song, 2014). Such (e-)commerce embedded in an economic culture of imitation might not only mutually reinforce phatic online behaviour (see Miller's [2008] grander critique of increasing nihilism in western (e-)culture). It might further

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market/standardise spaces for public art engagement and, thus, cultivate 'hands-off' relationships with specific offline places. Hofman, in our conversation, acknowledged being somewhat flattered by the various (counterfeit) pastiches. At the same time, he advanced a critique of neoliberal livelihood strategies: much (online) merchandise of *Rubber Duck*, especially within the scope of illegal trade culture, just indicates a way to scratch a living by merchants coping with broader, large-scale commercial competition.

Some online commenters criticised the artwork's dearth of unique spatial quality. In the comments thread of the YouTube tabloid video *Florentijn Hofman's Giant Rubber Duck to Swim to Hong Kong Harbour City*,<sup>23</sup> a user made a plea for an alternative public artwork: 'hmmmm might have been better if they did giant pink dolphins, the ones that are becoming endangered because of pollution in the Pearl River :o' (i.e. 'surprise' emoticon). In this video, Hofman conveyed that '[*Rubber Duck*] brings back memories of your childhood; and as everyone had a childhood, the *Rubber Duck* connects everyone'. A critical screening renders this statement as eschewing social differences, which thus challenges the artwork's 'publicness' following Massey and Rose's (2003) criterion of social relationality. Hofman (interview) pursued a romantic naïveté in an ambiguous way. Although he demonstrated awareness that people could take the artwork as universal/non-place-specific, he indicated its place-specific and supra-spatial/global relevance and potential to stir intercultural curiosity:

I am in duty bound to enter into engagements with the audience.... *Rubber Duck* laboratises human behaviours.... It is a catalyst: it shows what is going on and makes people around the world interested in new places.

Hofman (interview) imparted that he received a great number of positive testimonials from arts and civil society organisations, as well as individuals who enjoyed *Rubber Duck* through both analogue and digital communication channels. For example, he received a box of chocolates from the father of an autistic child for whom this artwork seemed to have therapeutic effects. Hofman expressed his belief in how (social) media can be used as effective tool to communicate locally grounded emotional narratives, even if they are 'just' about excitement. For instance, in a Facebook announcement of *Rubber Duck* in Seoul, SBS News World shared:

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#FlorentijnHofman, the artist who is known for his famous #RubberDuck sculpture, is posing in front of camera with yellow *Rubber Duck*. 'Korea has been through so many sad incidents lately. I wish *Rubber Duck* spreads joy and happiness to people in Korea', said Hofman at the press conference today.<sup>24</sup>

However, Hofman (interview) stressed that his piece is more than just about ubiquitous pleasure and fun. We should approach this artwork 'as pedagogical piece.... It can make everyday people proud owners of their environment', he said. Hofman indicated that online sharing of his mission statement might have made publics more aware of public art's local relevance, but also of how creative online network practices could make positive global impacts.

## Conclusion

This article aimed to open up an important aspect of contemporary culture through the nexus of public art, digital and online technology, and society. Scholarship has been largely remiss in addressing people–space relationships through the lens of everyday online public art engagement beyond rather formalist interpretations of artworks in physical locations. The presented cybergeographical case study on *Rubber Duck* therefore attended to digitally networked spaces of engagement and how online roles of public art can be explored along new senses of social and spatial publicness, temporalities and uses. This article elaborated the notion of 'virtual relationality' (after Massey and Rose, 2003): the assemblage of digital content from the creator, diverse media and online users expressed how public art's roles and meanings were exchanged and negotiated/challenged once mediated and hence co-created online. This linked scales of everyday offline living spaces to the translocal/global metaphysical spheres of cyberspace.

What can scholars as well as practitioners, artists, commissioners and policy makers learn from the case study presented here? First, this case has revealed an understanding of public art through socially, spatially and temporally fluid contexts among multiple (micro)publics. It has also served as microcosm diagnostic of public art's potential online uses. Digitally mediated engagements with *Rubber Duck* implied online and offline reality as a hybrid, two-layered palimpsest for real-world encounters (in 'real life', on the internet, in real time,

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offline, in synchronous or asynchronous interactions, etc.). Also, over the course of the exhibitions, user-created content produced a (lasting or potentially obsolescent) digital archive of stories and memories. This implied the amalgamation of second- and first-hand, as well as offline and online experiences/narratives published on personal or others' online user accounts. Moreover, it re-territorialised and also withered material and virtual spaces and their boundaries (see convergence culture in Jenkins, 2008).

Thus, digitally mediated public art engagement is multi-layered in non-linear choreographies of space, time and society. As argued by Freeman and Sheller (2015: 6), digital public art does not only involve 'multiple modes of perception and communication[.] Beyond objects, [computer-screen-based] representations, or texts, it is about modes of activity, intensity, and coming together', which, according to them, intensify the spatial-material world, too (see De Souza e Silva, 2004). Hofman (interview) remarked '*ceci n'est pas un canard*' to precisely express the 'surrealistic' nature of imaging/imagining, socialising and spatialising public art in digital culture.

As such, this study asked for a deconstruction of dominant binaries, including material/digital space, permanence/ephemerality, artist/audience, public/private and human/non-human, to understand the experience and (co-)creation of public art through interwoven offline and online media and representations (see Jenkins, 2008). Through (co-)creating, sharing, commenting, curating/editing, both officials and publics showed the agency to act, self-disclose and strike their own notes, implying new media technologies' potential for informal education and cultural democratisation beyond the expert/novice binary (see Gauthier, 2015; Hartley, 2012). Despite digital culture's democratic changes in context, audience and status (Hartley, 2012), there is still dependency on others for gaining trust and authenticity over social media (Miller, 2008). This case could particularly educate public art commissioners about how meaningful engagement could be invited/explored in digitally networked spaces, which also traverse offline spaces (e.g. streets and museums), and how publics' shared participation and sense of ownership might be boosted in digital practice.

Second, this case study has demonstrated that online network practices sometimes did and sometimes did not elicit critical reflections on society and culture in regard to, for example, artistic celebration, intercultural communication, place promotion, formal or

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social/informal ownership, public privacy, copyright protection, (co-)authorship, preservation and archiving (see Gauthier, 2015). Sometimes, online users created their own digital vignettes of *Rubber Duck*'s matter/meanings, which occasionally reproduced or undermined views by other users. Resonating with Kidd (2014), user-created content may also be interpreted as interventions in formal and mainstream journalistic practices.

Much observed e-activity was characterised by techno-human subjectification (see Goriunova, 2013), revealing flattening, phatic communications (see Miller, 2008). Online behaviours were largely focused on sheer social networking and fleeting, oft-entertaining cursory uses (see 'silly citizenship' in Hartley, 2012), rather than on pursuing sustained dialogues, well-considered information transfer, and deep(er) awareness of one another. Online users often just scratched the geographical surface of the various exhibition spaces, as if *Rubber Duck* was cut out of its offline space and indiscriminately put online. But the travelling exhibition induced also some senses of 'belonging-in-movement'. Moreover, this case study, like the example of *Tree* discussed earlier, can also show how (massively) consumed artwork in physical space might reciprocally resonate with online interactions: debates, commotion, parodies, memes, etc. Heedless mass-reproduction of public art in both material and digital capacities might be, following Miller (2008), embedded within, and reinforce, probable nihilistic consequences of digital communication.

Third, this case might also be food for thought about the ethics of care for involving publics in as well as conducting research on engagements with public artwork in a digital neoliberal society (see Kidd, 2014; Lodi, 2014): what are the (shared) responsibilities and cosmopolitan values of online users in the (co-)creation and exchange of public art content and what do they say about respect, agony, bonding and living together? More broadly, what are sensible and accountable online research methodologies and ethics for examining user-created content? To what extent is user-created content expropriated/exploited once it is uploaded to commercially owned sites (see Hartley, 2012)? What kind of publicness exists in the 'technological Panopticon' of smart city contexts and their foreseeable futures, wherein 'we ourselves produce the data that fulfil the contemporary paradigm of surveillance and control' (Lodi, 2014: 283)?

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Further research can move these areas further in critically exploring the potentialities and limitations regarding the use of digital media as sites of public art research and digital technologies as methodological tools to study public art engagements in the everyday life.

### Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Florentijn Hofman for the interview and hospitality at his home studio. I am also thankful to David Bell, John Hartley and the anonymous referees for their useful insights that have strengthened this article. Any errors remain my own.

### Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

### Notes

1. See: <http://www.florentijnhofman.nl/dev/projects.php> (accessed June 2014).
2. See: <http://www.florentijnhofman.nl/dev/project.php?id=192> (accessed June 2014).
3. See: <http://www.florentijnhofman.nl/dev/project.php?id=192> (accessed June 2014).
4. These in-situ expressions and doings (through, e.g., language, social behaviours and creative acts) might, in a sense, be considered 'virtual' *avant la lettre* (Boellstorff, 2008).
5. See: <http://news.yahoo.com/video/giant-rubber-duck-explodes-taiwan-220330915.html> (accessed June 2014).
6. See: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Florentijn-Hofman/150549391639902?fref=ts> (accessed June 2014; account offline as of time of writing, June 2015).
7. Translated from '悠閒享受童心的夫婦'.
8. See: <https://www.facebook.com/shares/view?id=758302390864596> (accessed June 2014; offline as of time of writing).
9. This and the rest of the sequence of comments reported in this paragraph are from: <https://www.facebook.com/shares/view?id=758302390864596> (accessed June 2014; offline as of time of writing).
10. See: [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/us/museum-rules-talk-softly-and-carry-no-selfie-stick.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/us/museum-rules-talk-softly-and-carry-no-selfie-stick.html?_r=0) (accessed June 2015).

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11. For Pauw's interview with Hofman, from which this and the subsequent Hofman comments were taken, see: <http://pauwenwitteman.vara.nl/media/302263> (accessed June 2014).
12. See: <http://wantchinatimes.com/news-subclass-cnt.aspx?id=20150401000077&cid=1101> (accessed June 2014).
13. See: <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/big-yellow-duck>.
14. See: <https://twitter.com/TheFloatingDuck/status/392769479496970241> (accessed June 2014).
15. See: <https://twitter.com/KnKyKc/status/393213240148512768> (accessed June 2014).
16. See: <https://twitter.com/hillie16/status/392992085949054976/photo/1> (accessed June 2014).
17. See: <https://twitter.com/hillie16/status/392992085949054976/photo/1>.
18. See: <https://twitter.com/crsalpz/status/445641874422759424/photo/1> (accessed June 2014).
19. See: <http://www.citylab.com/design/2014/09/the-rubber-duck-artist-must-be-stopped/379577> (accessed June 2014).
20. See: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Florentijn-Hofman/150549391639902?fref=ts> (accessed June 2014; offline as of writing).
21. See: <http://china.nlembassy.org/news/2013/06/original-rubber-duck-floats-to-beijing.html> (accessed January 2016).
22. See: <http://china.nlembassy.org/news/2013/06/original-rubber-duck-floats-to-beijing.html>.
23. See: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ituX4zu6N\\_o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ituX4zu6N_o) (accessed June 2014).
24. See: <https://www.facebook.com/SBSNEWSWORLD/posts/1516327551938875> (accessed June 2014).

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### Author biography

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