Queerying Public Art in Digitally Networked Space

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Abstract

There is an increasing interest among geographers in studying social engagement with public artwork, but there remains a lack of scholarship on how such engagement operates in digitally networked space. This article examines this gap on the basis of a virtual ethnography involving (social) media analysis on encounters with Paul McCarthy's temporary installation *Tree* in Place Vendôme, Paris, 2014. This artwork, a 24-metre inflatable resembling a giant butt plug, unleashed a heated debate over social media about the artwork's (mis)uses of the locality and urban public sphere. From this case study, remembering/forgetting and materiality/digitality emerged as ambiguous appropriations/qualities of this public artwork. Accordingly, experiences foremostly navigated between obscene and misplaced values (e.g., postmodern/'sexualised' artwork style vs. classical site architecture and romantic urban imagery) and between ludic and radical responses (including comic, anti-permanence and anti-heteropatriarchal messaging). Considering the ambiguous and sexuality-related ramifications, I pursue 'queerying' as method for examining online mediated public-art engagement. The study demonstrates how receptions and interactions digitally intertwined with the temporary material artwork – where the examined digital material was not an intentional part of the artwork as initiated by the artist. Specifically, the queerying analysis shows how dialectical online and offline public-art engagements with *Tree* negotiated (i.e. mediated) and augmented one another and offered alternative ways for conceptualising user agency and spatial connectivity. This study offers scholars

a critical geographical mode for inquiring into the bottom-up digital co-production of public art and how online media can be employed both as research sites and tools.

Keywords

Public art; virtual ethnography; social media analysis; media analysis; *Tree*; butt plug; Paris; internet

Introduction and Rationale

This article analyses the under-examined topic of social engagement with public artwork in digitally networked space. Conventionally taken as artworks commissioned and designed for freely accessible public material sites (Miles, 1997), digital technologies have provided more tools and new/reconfigured spaces for engagement with public artwork (Freeman and Sheller, 2015). As argued by Bishop (2012), the "digitisation of our existence" (ibid., 436) broadly requires public art to be understood through the dialectic between the physical and virtual. This area, i.e. online public-art engagement in relation to public-art encounters in physical/offline space, merits specific research attention.

There is an upsurge of interest among critical human geographers to explore relationships between public art, space, audience and identity (e.g., Zebracki, 2012; Warren, 2013; Gould and Estrada, 2014; Pollock and Paddison, 2014; Smith, 2015), but the digital dimensions of public-art engagement have largely remained under-charted. In a recent call, Rose (2015) argued that geographers should further embark on the role of digital mediation of culture/arts in the everyday life. Such digital mediation, as observed by Kidd (2014), particularly involves (empowering) bottom-up participation, stressing the importance of contents that are 'curated', exchanged or self-created by online users.

This study's concern with digital engagement with material public art contributes to broader geographical scholarship on the re-arrangement of public spaces of experience as much as of experiences of public space in digital culture. It particularly expands current literature on the roles and uses of public art in physical contexts (e.g., Knight, 2008; Stevens and Franck, 2015; Cartiere and Zebracki, 2016) by supplementing insights into how social engagement operates in the 'online territory' of public art, where specific attention is paid to the function of Web 2.0: the digitally networked spaces of social media. The empirical contribution of this study can be understood through the explicit inclusion of this territory as field of public-art research.

This article investigates the online-offline dialectic of public-art engagement on the basis of an in-depth case study of *Tree*, created by the leading

American contemporary artist Paul McCarthy. This 24-metre inflatable in Paris' historically prominent Place Vendôme was meant as temporary installation as part of 2014 Fiac, the International Fair of Contemporary Art. But its material existence was very short-lived as it was demolished just two days after its unveiling on 16 October 2014 (*The Independent* [Dearden], 2014a; *The Guardian*, 2014b). The artist acknowledged that his work was partially inspired by an anal sex toy, building on earlier exhibitions (see Zebracki, 2012; *Le Monde* [Jardonnet], 2014).

Tree, for many, was a different, odd, 'queer' public artwork: its values were associated with abnormal, inappropriate, indecent, etc., and therefore an unacceptable expression in the confines of public space. Others showed appreciation for its playful and radical elements. Considering its ambiguous and sexuality-related framings, I have adopted the critical word play of 'queerying' to refer to a public artwork with a queer twist as well as to a method for queerly analysing online public-art engagement and, as such, to question, to 'queery', the opacities and ambivalences in *Tree*'s digitally networked space. This may offer alternative viewpoints of co-production of public art as they have been primarily studied in offline contexts so far.

The article proceeds as follows. I first explain the research context and use of queerying as method. I then frame a queer studying of the geographies of public-art engagement as mediated online. Thereupon I discuss the data collection and analysis. The subsequent section presents a vignette of *Tree*, which further situates its provenance, purpose (as conceived by the artist and exhibition organisers), and the occurrence of key events. This vignette feeds into the analysis of *Tree*'s digitally networked modus operandi. The article concludes with a discussion of findings and research implications of digitally mediated public-art engagement. I particularly discuss how critical geographers can take this study further both conceptually and methodologically. The study is also useful to scholars interested in queer semiotics, considering the use of both textual and visual language, as appeared from the mediated engagements with *Tree*, to queery norms and values of this particular type of public art.

Context and Queer Method

I take *Tree* as a salient and timely example of explaining digitally networked debates about public art, involving both online and offline aspects of public-art engagement. The artwork, and especially the sexuality-related content of this "inflatable sex toy tree" (as typographically phrased by *The Huffington Post* [Brooks], 2014b), appeared to exercise many minds and roused various positive and negative emotions. The inflammatory debate navigated between serious dialogue and (foremostly) phatic and whimsical communications driven by network sociality: the maintenance of a network of (often cursory and perfunctory) digital social connections/'friendships' (see Miller, 2008).

Social media interactions – particularly on the platforms Facebook and Instagram (focused on photo- and video-sharing) and the microblogging site

Twitter – were largely characterised by the latter type of communications. Visuals and comments also circulated on other social networking websites, such as the image- and photo-sharing website Flickr and microblogging platform Tumblr, but these sites did not dominate the online mediated debate about *Tree*.

Media coverage revealed that social engagements with *Tree* were reciprocally bound up with online and physical/offline components (Figure 1 and Figure 2). A considerable number of onlookers expressed dissatisfaction on the artwork's material site and many online users did so over social media accounts. The artist was even slapped in the face during the formal unveiling. Individuals vandalised the inflatable's guide wires just two days after its placement, resulting in viral media coverage (*The Independent* [Saul], 2014b). The telling online/offline reciprocities of this case study are helpful in examining geographies of the digital mediation of an object of art that is deemed 'dissonant' mainly based on its sexuality-related content.

I have come to experience *Tree*'s digitally networked space as one that is filled with ambiguity in meaning and fractures in social engagement. I do not only recognise the Christmas tree, a butt plug in disguise (or the other way round), as indictment of (the hegemonic pleasures of) capitalism within the oeuvre of McCarthy's work. There is a compelling analogue with academic debates that produced a similar critique. Sedgwick (1993) coined the term 'Christmas effect' in reference to what Gibson-Graham (1999, 80) described as "the 'depressing' set of [capitalist] circumstances" in their seminal work *Queer(y)ing Capitalism* – which has been adopted in a larger, ongoing theoretical and political project challenging neoliberal ideologies (see Yekani et al., 2013). Detamore (2010a, 60) defined the 'Christmas effect' as one that "brings the multiple voices such as the Church, State, markets, media, and so on into a monolithic voice aiming toward the expectation of a similar predictable outcome (in this case Christmas)". For me, the material volume of *Tree* set forth such monolithic voice. At the same time, its inscribed art codes queeried the imposed expectations/predictabilities of which art forms and intimacies are 'normal' for being/becoming exhibited in the public sphere.

Figure 1 (top) and **Figure 2** (bottom) provide publicly accessible online users' postings about *Tree* on the photo- and video-sharing social networking site of Instagram. These posts include a thread of playful comments by the account holder and other Instagram users. Figure 1 provides a relatively close view of *Tree*. Figure 2's wider view gives an impression of the artwork in proportion to surrounding edifices, most notably the 44-m tall Vendôme Column (1871). At the time of *Tree*'s exposition (October 2014), the Column was under restoration and completely covered by a construction box, displaying an image of the Column.

I express a belief in the power of queerying as situated qualitative methodology for examining online mediated public-art engagement on a number of levels. The deliberate use of this verb speaks out a transformative disposition. It

involves a disposition to critically question/'queery', and offers, as strikingly put by Jones and Adams (2010, 203), "a chance for movement, a means to transform the static of a noun – *queer* – into the action of a verb – *queer[y]ing* ... moving theory into methodological activism".[1] I used queerying as iterative method to inscribe myself into the research field, assemble (tacit) knowledges of the digitally mediated human-art-space nexus, and problematise these knowledges by commencing with queerying again. In this sense, as per Boellstorff (2010, 229), queerying implies both method and knowledge, thus unsettling the binary between techne (craft or practical knowledge) and the study outcome: episteme (knowledge as such). As knowledge is typically expressed by words in academe, queerying holds an innate relationship with the linguistic landscape and queer scholars have therefore introduced neologisms to challenge established concepts. For example, Milani (2015) used the term 'sexual cityzenship' to ambivalently signify alignment and disruption of state-sanctioned and rights-based LGBT discourses.

This study and the engendered knowledge should be seen as situated: "grounded in the physicality of specific human bodies and their artefacts" (Barnes, 2000, 743), fascinatingly coalescing in this specific study on human interactions with an art(efact). Situated knowledges, hence, divulge 'partial perspectives' (Haraway, 1991). This study is queer(y)ing subject/object research positionalities, ensuing from vulnerable engagement which has gained currency in queer studies (Behar, 1996; Brown and Nash, 2010). My examination is grounded in my positionality as a geography and queer scholar with a deep interest in public art and in Paul McCarthy's postmodern work with explicit sexual content; a male gay person with an embodied understanding of, yes, the butt plug and (self-experienced prejudice towards) 'non-heterosexual' culture; a traveller with familiarity with *Tree*'s former material locality; as well as an active social media user/'traveller' with a developed understanding of the affordances of online platforms on which *Tree* has been debated. This is to say, my intimate situated knowledges of both the subject and sites of research disclose this study's potentialities for engagement as well as partialities of the knowledges produced.

Queer studies have offered a myriad of ways to destabilise (dominant) knowledges and have laid open partialities, and fractures, accordingly (see Browne and Nash, 2010). It has particularly gained prominence for its major contributions to scholarship on all kinds of issues related to sexual identity (politics), an area that thus inherently intersects with *Tree*'s sexuality-related tenor. As notable example, Sedgwick (1991) triggered a debate on the deconstruction of the social prevalence and tenacity of the emic homosexual/heterosexual dichotomy, which *Tree* challenges, too.

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[1] At the same time, queerying may grammatically function as a gerund, too: e.g., the queerying of *Tree*.

Queerying or 'queer studying', following Boellstorff (2010), pursues a synergistic rather than confrontational approach to analysing partial perspectives and differences therein. As put by Cohen (2013, 151), "as a verb, as an action, queer holds limitless possibilities for unanticipated conjugations". The ambiguities involved in online mediated social engagements with *Tree* make this an interesting case for considering such conjugations. The study's particular focus on digitally networked public art adds another layer of queerying that relates to the negotiation of online and offline spaces. This implies a 'surfing binarism' in the words of Boellstorff (2010), which renders the virtual/'actual' dimension as fluid. In the following, I conceptually explain in greater length such queer studying of online public-art engagement.

Queer Studying of Online Mediated Public-Art Engagement

Dodge and Kitchin (2001) sparked off an extensive geographical debate about the implications of interacting, both socially and spatially, through global computers and internet networks. Large populations with online access are able to connect over vast geographical distances (in real life, in real time, or asynchronous time) (ibid.). However, it is important to realise that online public sites are not necessarily more accessible than physical public spaces, considering, for example, people with high levels of digital illiteracy, underprivileged people (across the Global South) who are excluded from internet access, and non-urban areas disconnected from cyberspace.

For those 'connected', it is difficult or even impossible to imagine contemporary culture without digitally networked reality (Rose, 2015). While Kellerman (2014) considered such virtual reality as 'second action space', I would rather propose to phrase this as 'holistic action space' to stress how the virtual has become a full and indelible part of the majority of people's participation in digitalised societies. Such holistic action space breaks conventional divides between the body and the inorganic, present and absent, close and far, the individual and environment, and representations and non-representations (see De Souza e Silva, 2004; Boellstorff, 2010; Cohen, 2013; Crang, 2015).

Digital technologies do not only have implications for the everyday life world. Framing them as 'digital geohumanities' (Crang, 2015), geographers can use digital technologies as research tools to not only open up new experiences of space but also to alter, queery, those experiences. The same relevance holds for everyday online users: they appropriate digital technologies to communicate and co-create visual culture (Rose, 2015).

Based on a multidisciplinary literature review across geography, cultural and media studies, I have identified user agency and spatial connectivity as conceptual lenses for queerying digitally mediated public-art engagement, which I respectively discuss in the remainder of this section. I attend to how such engagement may reconfigure both public art's spaces of experience and experiences of space. Potentials and criticisms of social media are particularly

incorporated into this section's theoretical critique of how people connect online/offline through public artwork.

User agency

As said, hitherto public-art scholarship has been considered mostly through offline engagement. Stevens and Franck (2015) indicated that public art (in terms of its planning, design process and material outcome) has increasingly provided audiences with capacities/choices for participation and co-creation, which I interpret as user agency. So, this has implied growing possibilities for engagement and consequently made the communities of interest, or publics, more active participants rather than passive onlookers. Gauthier (2015) argued that so-called digitally 'networked monuments' enhance user experiences and imageries of the object of art, of its physical surroundings as well as of digital public places – the result is a new cyber-psychogeography.

There are various forms of digitally networked monuments: public artworks with QR codes (functioning as digital interpretative panels) and objects with dedicated websites and augmented-reality applications (Geroimenko, 2015; Rhodes, 2015). The *Tree* case mainly concentrates on public art as object and experience through online *mediated* discussion, rather than through *direct* experience of the work of art (as differentiated by Seth Price http://distributedhistory.com, cited in Gauthier, 2015, 22). The role of social media seems to play a major role in how online users digitally engage with public artworks today (Gauthier, 2015) – including *Tree* as argued.

I recognise three queerying particularities of user agency in social media engagement with public art, which question established, normative socio-spatial relations. First, contrary to offline contexts, publics in digitally networked public art can be, but are not necessarily, inscribed around specific physical sites of the public artwork (if any at all). This particularly problematises conventional ideas of public art's site-specificity (Kwon, 2004). Digital audiences of public art can be approached as distributed, and therefore often non-site-specific, publics (Gauthier, 2015).

Accordingly, it is not entirely clear where the publics, and publicness/privateness, starts and ends, nor how they are situated in the mediated appreciation of the public artwork (Zebracki, 2016). The publics can be virtually anywhere: on the site of the artwork or somewhere else in a different place in the physical world or on the World Wide Web. Digitally networked space queeries, in line with Hartley (2012), Habermasian conceptions of the (material) public sphere: the digital world renders publics, and 'publicness', as fluid along social, spatial and temporal lines. Hence, digitally networked publics should be understood as plural and contingent (Freeman and Sheller, 2015). Digitally networked public-art spaces, thus, can entail en masse engagement and the encounter of 'others' through digital (co-)creation, composing/curating, sharing and self-publishing content worldwide

(Gauthier, 2015). This queeries dominant artist/audience, expert/amateur and authenticity/quality divides (Kidd, 2014).

It is important to acknowledge that agency within online public-art engagement is structured along possibilities and limitations of digital technologies in relation to people's technological and digital literacies. Digital publics are distributed, as said: online users can hold multiple social media accounts, making them dispersed even at the very individual level as online user. They can embody multiple 'squared' screen realities and, consequently, have multiple options for online engagement.

The second particularity of digitally networked public art is that it may enable an object to be distributed and 'live on' in a digital capacity once its material origin is no longer in existence. This not only reconfigures but also extends both the spatial and temporal capacities for engagement. Rhodes (2015) cast criticism on artwork's capacity for digital eternity: things will also be forgotten in the digital public sphere. The author critically discerns a human "anxiety of obsolescence" (ibid., 60), which I would even call an obsession for 'digital hoarding' in some cases. Following Mitchell (2005), it is the (digitally mediated) image that is particularly important in the reception and reproduction of public art. People seem to have very strong responses towards everyday images, which might explain human's urge to visual documentation/archiving (ibid.).

A third particularity of user agency in digitally networked public-art space is coupled with the purpose of network sociality (see Miller, 2008). Poignantly expressed by the metaphor of "teen girl Tumblr aesthetic" in Santos (2015), much social internet activity overshadows informational and dialogical purports. Malinowski (1994) conceptualised network sociality communication as part and parcel of a 'phatic communion'. Phatic communication, following Miller (2008), has the upper hand in online users' general usage of social media. Goriunova (2012a) and Gauthier (2015) discussed how much (re)production of public art on the internet, especially user-created content (Kidd, 2014), demonstrates 'funny', facile and ludic interactions (see also Stevens, 2007); for example, photos representing sexually-toned behaviour around public artwork, especially and, not surprisingly, with sexuality content (see, for example, Alexander, 2014).

It is important to stress that the design of prevailing social media platforms instigates specific (and often phatic) communication; for instance, Twitter only allows 140-character messaging (see Kidd, 2014). This somewhat limits online users' agency in engaging with (visual) culture and other online users. As also pointed out by Margolis (2015), a deep online interplay between cultural objects and information processing among online users is more often the exception than the rule.

Limits to user agency are, moreover, also imposed by top-level agents and mechanisms responsible for governing/controlling, archiving and reusing (and potentially abusing) social user data, as ethically challenged by Goriunova (2012b),

Lodi (2014) and Gauthier (2015). Such limits are therefore queerying grander matters such as surveillance/'spying', censorship, ownership, authorship, rights and responsibilities in the digital age (ibid.). That said, digitally networked public-art spaces may possess the potential for online users to boost self-empowerment, self-control and democratic participation in the digital society (Lichty, 2015).

Spatial connectivity

Digital public-art engagement can be strictly perceived along internet-based connectivity. But here it would be more precise to understand spatial connectivity – which I see as the condition of connecting or being connected through digitally networked space – along navigation through multi-user environments, thus queerying binary oppositions such as here/there. Hybrid space is a useful descriptor in this context, introduced by De Souza e Silva (2004) to indicate the overlapping of multiple digital user environments with multiple physical environments. I queery hybrid space as a 'space of in-betweenness', where there is an ambiguous experience of both spatial presence and absence (see Dodge and Kitchin, 2001). These can involve various digital and physical (screen) spaces, including those of desktops and mobile devices (Verhoeff, 2012). In my view, these instruments, as physical objects, act as portals to the digital world and produce new senses of publicness that are distant from, yet queerly related to, the material object of art.

Thus, the material is still very relevant in the digital world. Bishop (2012) made a plea for a post-digital reaction attending to the 'return' of the object/physicality. Freeman and Sheller (2015) used Massumi's (2011) idea of semblance – being the "manner in which the virtual actually appears" (ibid., 16; see also Boellstorff, 2010) – to argue that "digital mediation layered onto public space brings with it an embodied re-thinking of materiality" (Freeman and Sheller, 2015, 4).

The latter strongly resonates with the affective turn in geography (see Thrift, 2008) and cultural geographical debates/deconstructions of representational/non-representational realities, or rather the more-than-representational condition (Lorimer, 2008). The experience of materiality, or rather the co-emergence of object art and digital art at once (Rhodes, 2015), becomes re-activated, or even more intensified, through the appropriation of digital and online technologies. As put by Freeman and Sheller (2015, 2), "the digital, ironically, returns us to the world's potentialities, and re-animates its material, spatial, corporeal aliveness". In this light, I argue that some (real-time) interactions with digitally networked public art possess the quality of relaying in-situ experience of material public artwork and, as such, provide vicariously close connections/feelings with it – including for those who have been unable to encounter the artwork in real life.

Hence, digital technologies render experiences of public art not merely through computer screen-based presentations (Freeman and Sheller, 2015). The digital should be queeried: as argued by Lichty (2015), it infers a false divide

between analogue and digital worlds as much as between 'old' and 'new' media. Several scholars have challenged these divides under more holistic terms such as convergence culture (Jenkins, 2008) and polymedia (Madianou and Miller, 2013) to emphasise the intertwinement of old/new and analogue/digital media. Kitchin and Dodge (2011), moreover, analysed how everyday digital life worlds are geographically connected/constructed through code. Code/space not only questions conventional dyads of human/object and software/hardware. It also reshapes and potentially heightens experiences and meanings of physical spaces (ibid.). This implies the amalgamation of the virtual/actual distinction (Deleuze, 1994; Boellstorff, 2010) as inherent in experiencing hybrid space (De Souza e Silva, 2004).

Such hybrid space queeries the spatial (material/digital) specificity of public artworks. While Kwon (2004) critiqued the often random, non-site specific sitings of public artworks, and how such 'plop art' co-creates the "commodification and serialisation of [sterile] places" (Kwon, 2004, 55), its implications in digitally networked space have remained under-addressed. Plop art might lay bare uniform aesthetics and norms as well as establish an (un)desired precedent for future works of public art and public expectations thereof. Kwon (2004) indicated that plop art usually leaves little surprise and opportunities for 'authentic' public engagement. Much online mediated engagement with *Tree* appeared to challenge its lack of locational specificity, or its disconnection from the material locale, while it was given a specific locus over social networks. I accordingly queery *Tree*'s spatially erratic material/digital dimensions further in the analysis.
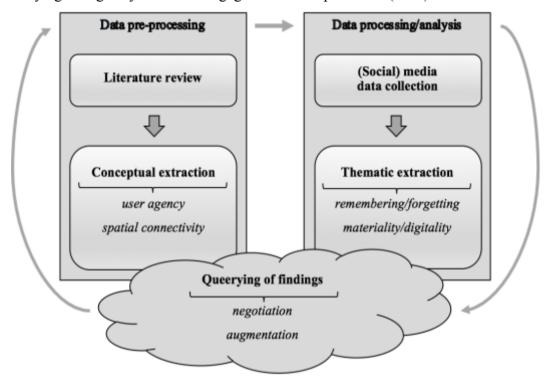
Data Collection and Analysis

I conducted the case study in 2014–15, 'freshly' after the removal of *Tree*. In the purview of queer studying, I provide a qualitative analysis of patterns in digitally mediated engagement with *Tree*, while acknowledging the partiality of insights provided and hence refraining from claims on any external validity. Insights may be nevertheless transferable as 'opportunities to learn' (Stake, 2000) in commensurable contexts.

The study contributes to methodologies for the examination of human engagement with public artwork in online mediated space – thus indicating some kind of digital praxiography (after Mol, 2002). Specifically, I conducted virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000) to examine online users' uses and experiences of the artwork as embedded in broader online cultural and communication settings. I collected data on the basis of labelling by the conceptual lenses of user agency and spatial connectivity from the literature review till I arrived at an unprompted data saturation point (Bryman, 2008).

I arrived at two overarching ambiguous themes: remembering/forgetting and materiality/digitality. These themes structure the findings section, where I queery how dialectical online and offline public-art engagements negotiated (i.e. mediated) and augmented one another, respectively, and as such queeried notions

of user agency and spatial connectivity. See Figure 3 for a flow chart that I have created for a dual purpose: to provide a quick synthesis of the research process (and therefore a bookmarker for this text) as well as to present queerying visually. Following Banks and Zeitlyn (2015), the use of visuals to support writing about the research process and findings may provide transformative experiences beyond a critical engagement with text alone. In Figure 3, I have pictured the queerying of findings as a critical thought cloud. This cloud visually overlays – and means to interfere with – the schematic representations of data pre-processing and analysis. This cloud, as such, carries the action to negotiate and augment the key concepts and empirical themes.

Figure 3. Flow chart[2] of data collection, analysis and findings through the queer studying of digitally mediated engagements with public art (*Tree*).

The virtual ethnography included social media analysis (see Batrinca and Treleaven, 2015) of public content produced by online users. I used keywords and hashtags related to the artwork, artist and locality through search engines to manually assemble about 200 distinct posts in total (barring identical crosspostings like retweets/shares and comments within posts), notably over Facebook, Instagram and Twitter on which engagements with *Tree* trended after its vandalisation (*Artnet* [Forbes], 2014; *Hyperallergic* [Vartanian], 2014b). The search also involved a digital snowball data sample method: some content included links to other online

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[2] Chart design inspired by He et al. (2013).

items through which I gathered data from source to source, and identified discursive threads correspondingly (see Rogers, 2013). The items were text-, audio- or video-based and were often a combination of the three.

In playful reference to 1974's Watergate (and all ensuing affairs that got the –gate suffix), a myriad of social media postings were tagged with the monopolising hashtag 'pluggate', which I used to retrieve a multiplicity of posts, including all featuring in this article, except for Figure 7. As expressed by *The Huffington Post* [Brooks] (2014b), #pluggate culminated in "social media mania" when *Tree* was vandalised and, then, the "Twitterverse mourned". I used/reviewed all kinds of other hashtags, of which popular ones included #buttplug, #paulmccarthy, #plugvendome, and #pluganal: "the mildly more polite French term for a butt plug" (*The Guardian* [Farago], 2014a).

Again, following situated knowledges (Haraway, 1991), both the items and arguments drawn from them are partial. I queerly acknowledge partiality in that they are neither providing an exhaustive representation of mediated views and interactions, nor are they fully representative of each other. However, they resonate with the grander themes as distilled from the analysis.

Furthermore, I performed media discourse analysis (see Berger, 2013), involving the comparative examination of about 60 news items (including text- and video-based narratives[3]) regarding offline and online interactions with the artwork to identify their social and cultural meanings. The (social) media analyses together allowed me to contextualise and triangulate findings, thus based on a collection of user-created content as well as content produced by formal newsagents. Although Kidd (2014) argued that user-created content might offer critical interventions opposite to formal/elitist news content and mainstream journalism, this article's queeries this binarism – rather, they informed each other, both textually and (audio)visually.

Following Driscoll and Gregg's ethical advice (2012), online research was conducted on publicly accessible content only, which are still extant as of writing. In this article, I have processed all data anonymously. Following Zimmer's (2012) ethical reservations, this implicated the full anonymisation of online user identity details throughout the article in text and image. By doing so, however, the hegemonic hierarchy of a 'named author' and 'unnamed informant' would be reproduced (Dahl, 2010) – as also voiced by queer ethics critiques of researcher/researched relationships (Gibson-Graham, 1999; Detamore, 2010b). The virtual ethnography, moreover, involved covert observations, where I did not have any direct interaction with online users to not influence any of the communicative threads and respect the authenticity of user-created content.

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[3] The majority of these news reports was in the English language. Many of which covered sources in French media and quality papers such as *Le Monde*.

A Vignette of *Tree* Alias Butt Plug

The perceived image of the 'butt plug', as imparted in the Introduction, appeared to be the most disturbing element of McCarthy's inflatable *Tree*. Feelings were running high and (social) media vigorously reported on this artwork from the very outset. Dominant digitally mediated experiences addressed *Tree*'s 'indecency' and that it would not chime with Place Vendôme, the city of Paris, and even French culture at large.

The butt plug is a recurrent idiom in McCarthy's contemporary inflatables, performance and video work. Clearly identifiable forerunners of *Tree* were *Air Pressure* (2009) with the inflatables *Black Plug* and *Santa Claus with Plug* in Utrecht and the permanent public sculpture *Santa Claus* (again with butt plug) in Rotterdam, the Netherlands (Zebracki, 2012). McCarthy's artwork is garnished with explicit sexual references, frequently inciting feelings of disgust on the part of viewers. For example, McCarthy created a video showing Snow White being raped by the Seven Dwarfs. He also crafted an animatronic sculpture representing George W. Bush figures having sexual intercourse with pigs (Lipsyte and Nye, 2007; *The Guardian* [Searle], 2011).

McCarthy's particular use of the butt plug, along with 'desacralising' iconographies/phantasies of American culture, such as the ketchup bottle, TV, porn, and Disney characters (e.g., *Blockhead*, a phallic-shaped Pinocchio inflatable), can be taken as device for queerying existential boundaries of stage/reality and human/inhuman (see Lipsyte and Nye, 2007). McCarthy himself claims to idolise anarchist antipodes, most remarkably the pirate figure. McCarthy's visual language may serve as grander critique, an anti-symbol, an up-yours if it may be, regarding capitalist consumer society (Zebracki, 2012; Curtis, 2014). In the (social) media quarrel about *Tree*'s perceived offensive design, McCarthy acknowledged that his work can be regarded as both ludic intervention and abstract meta-critique of society:

> It all started with a joke. Originally, I thought that a butt plug had a shape similar to the sculptures of Constantin Brâncusi. Afterwards, I realised that it looked like a Christmas tree. … People can be offended if they want to think of it as a plug, but for me it is more of an abstraction (Paul McCarthy, cited in *Le Monde* [Jardonnet], 2014, translated in *The Independent* [Saul], 2014b).

Tree's commissioner, Fiac, did not issue any formal statement about this artwork. As part of Paris' continuing *Hors les murs* (Beyond the Walls) programme, the commissioner gave McCarthy carte blanche, who was the selected artist for the 2014 cohort (*Le Monde* [Jardonnet], 2014).

Tree clearly followed art-historical codes as encrypted in McCarthy's previous work. Although the artwork bequeathed substantial publicity to his butt plug series, members of the public were not necessarily aware of the deeper codes. As said, *Tree* met with opposition and was often described over (social) media as

an "art scandal" (*Time* [Lacayo], 2014). The scandal was fuelled when a passer-by, a local resident, slapped McCarthy's face and yelled out that he is "not French and the work has no place on the square" (*Le Monde* [Jardonnet], 2014, translated in *London Evening Standard* [Rucki], 2014). This violent incident together with the final vandalisation of the artwork, as virally engaged online, radically signalled that some felt that *Tree* and its creator did not belong to the site.

The Rise and Fall of *Tree*:
A Digitally Networked Story of Public Art and Its (Dis)Contents

The findings are presented under two ambiguous themes that emerged from the analysis: remembering/forgetting and materiality/digitality. I queery these ambiguous values/appropriations by scrutinising how online/offline public-art engagements with *Tree* negotiated (i.e. mediated) and augmented each other – which in turn queeries conceptions of user agency and spatial connectivity.

Queerying remembering/forgetting

Directly after its unveiling, social media and news coverage about *Tree* went viral and reached its culmination when *Tree* was vandalised and France's president François Hollande issued an "auspicious" statement backing up *Tree*'s raison d'être (*AFP*, 2014). As conveyed to Agence France-Presse (ibid.), Hollande reminded the broad public that …

> France will always stand beside artists, as I stand beside Paul McCarthy, whose work was marred, regardless of what one's opinion of the work was … We must always respect the work of artists. France is always ready to welcome artists and designers from all over the world. France is not herself [sic] when she is curled up, plagued by ignorance and intolerance (translated in *The Huffington Post* [Brooks], 2014b).

Hollande's view was supported by the Culture Minister and the mayor of Paris (*BBC*, 2014), whose authoritative voices transmitted the idea that politics should provide both physical and mental room for artistic freedom. They emphasised that any attempt of censorship, either offline or online, would detract from the freedom of expression as democratic core value. This was also an implicit reaction against upward tendencies on the web of censoring certain content, such as 'problematic' phrases and hashtags, and blocking membership accounts or even entire social media platforms – although the operation of a largely deterritorialised web makes the geographical control of media and user-created content tricky (see Ibrahim, 2015).

That said, public resistance among individuals and radical collectives, including identity activists and Catholic conservatives, suggested that *Tree* was pushing the freedom of expression 'too far' and associated the artwork's perceived deviant and obscene values of its material design with its online representations/remembering, too. For example, the right-wing pressure group

Printemps Français (*Le Monde* [Jardonnet], 2014) tweeted: "a giant 24-metre high butt plug has just been set up at Place Vendôme! Place Vendôme disfigured! Paris humiliated! (translated in *RT*, 2014).

Such disconcerted or outspoken negative responses uncovered a compelling field of tension between the free artistic reign of the 'art world' (Becker, 1984) *vis-à-vis* the sorts of expressions of affection that are socially accepted as 'normal' and, hence, allowed to be uttered in the public sphere. For some, the butt plug as allegedly embodied by *Tree* was associated with a form of pornography which was excused under the veil of 'art' (see *Apollo* [Holmboe], 2014). *Tree* also became a plaything to negotiate what and where things can be shown and said over social media, and as such to question online borders of normality.

Despite authorities' recognition of the freedom of expression, it was interesting to observe that there was a critical mass of online users aiming at policing the rights and wrongs of artwork in public space as well as its online mediation. Jane (2016) has phrased such self-policing digital publics as 'digilantes'. User-created content particularly opened up some kind of politicised space for forgetting *Tree*, or banning the artwork altogether. This indicated a sense of censorship from below to counter-voice liberal state and art-world principles.

Although *Tree* was invested with much negative public opinion on social media, there were several fan pages of well-disposed digilantes who augmented the commotion by a positive change of tack. For instance, there was a *Tree*-dedicated public Twitter account, entitled "Parisian Buttplug" (@PButtplug). Its first post was "*Bonjour, Paris! Je suis in you!*" and its (rhyming) bio read: "*ceci n'est pas un Christmas Tree*".

These responses were meant to represent *Tree* as a funny, humorous and witty/surrealist artwork, and so were various trivial microbloggings by a few enthusiasts – which, in the phraseology of Hartley (2012), can be seen as acts of 'silly citizenship'. Deep mnemonic engagement did not quite set the tone. Rather, the hashtags #buttplug, #paulmccarthy, #plugvendome and #pluganal, which prevailed in online posts as indicated earlier, created a digital index for sketchy navigation of user-created content within and between social media platforms.

Some online users, nevertheless, playfully negotiated some of the conventional and normative codes as entrenched in the historical, political and cultural fabrics of aristocratic sites of Place Vendôme and alike. I second Gauthier (2015) in that the figure of the anal sex toy, particularly connected to male gay culture, can be taken as upfront rejection of conservative cultural (and especially sexual) values/norms as well as the public sphere's heteropatriarchy: hegemony of both heteronormativity and patriarchy. This critical message was enforced online by the photoshopped image in Figure 4. Although this parody is another salient example of 'silly citizenship' (Hartley, 2012), it queeries borders of free expression in the (digital) public realm.

Figure 4. A ludic response to *Tree* by a Twitterer. This photoshopped image became one of the trend-setting online *Tree* imageries (memes). Translation of the tweet: "#PlugGate: McCarthy 'understands reactions to his work' and is already planning a 'less ambiguous' installation."

In Figure 4, *Tree*-esque balls, in the same colour and plastic aesthetic as *Tree*, are 'added' to the base of the Column. This imagery queerly plays on the imagination. The Vendôme Column was covered by a construction box during the art fair but uncovered in the image, as if a condom were removed to elicit phallic worship in bare splendour. The "less ambiguous" representation in this posting is a frisky intervention in, or rather further provocation of, much online mediated discomfort about *Tree*. This post was soon retweeted over more than 150 times, an indication of network sociality (Miller, 2008).

Notwithstanding, such quick circulations can produce a lasting impact, as user-created content, such as the one in Figure 4 and many more variants, became memorialised as internet memes: trending, oft-mimicking circulating concepts, activities or media pieces in digitally networked space. As articulated by the *Los Angeles Times* [Miranda] (2014): "the [*Tree*'s] form and early demise have already inspired a slew of internet memes" (ibid.). The reporter commented on the *2001 Space Odyssey Tree Meme*, created by an "arts aficionado". Designated by this journal as "hilarious collage", it pictures *Tree* in lieu of the black monolith in a scene of Stanley Kubrick's influential cult film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). The
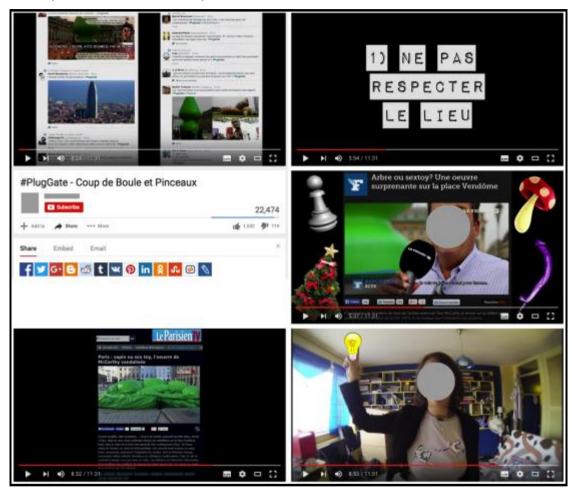
media report's title moved on to proclaim the 'immortalisation' of *Tree* online: "Paul McCarthy's 'tree' sculpture may be gone, but it lives on in memes". Such meme-fied mash-up of *Tree*, thus, may create a digitally networked space for remembering the artwork within the scope of popular media culture.

In the view of Gauthier (2015), *Tree* reflects an outward rejection of public artwork in the digital age. Yet, the networked story of *Tree* has been performed in a more ambiguous way. Social internet activities around the artwork negotiated the material artwork in a twofold mode: one that recollected *Tree*'s radical message, or wake-up call, stressing the freedom of artistic expression and subversion of aesthetic and sexual norms. The other way disdained *Tree*'s aesthetic, spatial and even moral (dis)connections with the local people, place and *zeitgeist*, and therefore appropriated this temporary artwork as an abject object, a travesty of postmodern art – something to be disremembered and made 'invisible' in digitally networked space.

Media/news and user-created content about *Tree* still circulate as of writing, although the 'hotness' of the topic has somewhat subsided. In a sense, online content seems to serve as digital archive of *Tree*'s ephemeral material appearance. Figure 5 presents a robust example of a digital episodic memorialisation of the social (e-)interactions with *Tree*. An online user lively operated as authentic, self-selective curator of digital (social) media content about the *Tree* ordeal. This user appeared to be an active online self-broadcasted art critic who astutely situated the artwork within art history and the mediated public debate. Based on self-selected news stories in print and digital media, this video offers a meta-analysis of the artwork's provenance and both negative and positive receptions. This example not only entails what Kidd (2014) phrased as remix culture: a collage of textual, visual and audio materials. It also demonstrates how everyday online users can conduct and self-disseminate their own uncommissioned 're-search'. In Figure 5, I have included a compilation of video stills, explained hereinafter.

The top-left still shows an impression of the Twittersphere: a print screen of a Twitter feed generated through the popular hashtag 'pluggate'. The top-right still depicts a title introducing the discussion point about the extent to which *Tree* would "not respect the site". The middle-right still is a print screen of an interview by *Le Figaro* with a passer-by. In this episode, several excerpts of media interviews with publics are discussed. Images which interviewees associated with *Tree* are included in the video's frame: for example, chess piece, mushroom, Christmas tree, sex toy. The bottom-left still indicates a discussion of dramatic news coverage about the artwork. The bottom-right still shows the video's creator, explaining how *Tree* might offer enlightening insights into people's relationships with contested artwork in public space. Bulbs 'touched' by this video's creator literally highlight these insights.

Figure 5. Compilation of stills from a publicly accessible YouTube video that provides a personal, audio-visual commentary of *Tree*. The translated title of this video (administered in French) reads: "Headbutt and Brushes".

Judging by the comments on this video (viewed more than 20,000 times as of writing), it appealed to somewhat self-selected, art-engaged digital publics. Some commenters appeared informed about *Tree*'s esoteric (art) codes. Interestingly, in the comments thread, an analogy is drawn with issues of disrupting the *status quo* by way of graffiti, taken as unauthorised creative intervention. Commenters discussed to what extent the vandalisation of *Tree* could be taken as a legitimate public response. A compelling public comment read: "I would venture to say that, vandalism or not, the reactions to this 'work' ... are an integral part of it, regardless of the artistic media used".[4] I echo this point; I take this YouTube video plus comments thread as a digital interpretative panel (see Rhodes, 2015), or as

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[4] Translated into English from French: "*j'irais jusqu'à dire personnellement que vandalisme ou pas, les réactions provoquées par cette 'œuvre' ... en font partie intégrante. Quel que soit le média artistique*" [user link blinded].

virtual graffiti as it were, where online users textually and (audio)visually 're-write' the public artwork.[5]

Thus, this YouTube video is an expressive example of how, due to digital technologies and platforms, everyday online users create/edit/transmit/share and hence empower and sustain their own digitalised narratives about ephemeral material public art, which might otherwise be read, seen or heard only to a limited degree, if at all. Also, the video might be dug up and further engaged by future publics – which might serve as useful reference material for learning about digitally distributed support for contested artwork with sexuality-related content.[6] Paradoxically, online content like this video might contain a valuable space for those who want to remember *Tree*, but a challenging space for those who wish to forget 'it' ever happened.

Queerying materiality/digitality

Online users' digital networking of *Tree* intrinsically displayed a close connection to contextual awareness of the offline material artwork as well as of the possibilities and limitations for communication in digital environments. Digital user-created content was not a premeditated component of the artwork as initially conceived by the artist. This has lent a meta-reality to the material artwork and correspondingly offered new possibilities for engagement. The high velocity and density of the online mediation of *Tree* engaged publics far beyond its (former) material locality. The global network space and the affordances of social media platforms provided online users anywhere in the world with the potential to imagine *Tree* in different places, or their very own place – but again note that many people without internet access remain excluded.

The tweet depicted in Figure 6, for example, was posted directly after *Tree* was removed, providing a sort of digital 'immediacy' (Bell and Lyall, 2005). This case is therefore a striking illustration of how global digital publics engaged with both the local material artwork along a digitally networked debate. This example also illustrated how places become not only spatially connected but also augmented via digital imagery/imaginations.

I find Hollywood, in reference to its filmmaking industry, a powerful metaphor for grasping the staging of place through artwork. Different from dominant, top-down direction in much filmmaking, this example demonstrates how places are (re)constructed through digital assemblages created by everyday online users as situated in converging online and offline media contexts (see Jenkins, 2008). Around *Tree*, there was not merely a convergence of media platforms but

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[5] Such virtual add-on can sometimes be made a solicited element of the public artwork, as demonstrated by Radice's (2012) case study on a digital mobile installation.

[6] A remarkable comparable example is Anish Kapoor's *Dirty Corner*. This temporary installation at the Palace of Versailles in 2015 became dubbed 'The Queen's Vagina' (*The Independent* [Jenne], 2015).

also a coming-together of user-created content – in other words, "the convergence of sound, image, videos and semantic words", which according to Ibrahim (2015, 10) composes the Web 2.0 environment. Such convergences of media and content, attended by a high and overwhelming volume of data, were likely to evoke a pervasive, immersive experience of digitally networked engagement with the public artwork.

Figure 6. Example of public user-created content on Twitter. This post shows a tweet and manipulated photo, presenting a playful welcoming of *Tree* to Hollywood.

User-created content, such as the photomontage in Figure 6, can be comprehended as simulacrum of real-world contexts. Such content mostly assembled visual and textual materials about *Tree*, which were often edited based on second-hand digital content retrieved from publicly accessible social media accounts. Sometimes users also included first-hand photographic material (see Figures 1 and 2). The user-created content as shown in Figure 6 appeared to be fairly professionally photoshopped. Potentially, this created a sense of realness, as if *Tree* were re-sited in 'real' place. This post acted as digital portal to connect global online users and to let them experience *Tree* in a location different from its original incarnation.

Moreover, bottom-up user agency and edited/self-created and shared content might act as alternative signs/voices beyond formal/elitist contexts of public-art making. Therefore, online users may, following Kidd (2004), be understood as 'amateur' publics who, through grassroots participation, queeried established public-art practice and 'official' digital communications about *Tree*'s material artwork.

Tree's anti-monumentality and anti-permanence (Gauthier, 2015) – considering its 'other' materiality (an inflatable consisting of plastic and air) and 'other' temporality (being intentionally 'parachuted' and destined to be short-lived) – radically challenged expectations about the roles and uses of artwork in public space with classical historical heritage. *Tree*'s form was particularly seen in contravention of pedestal-based equestrian statues portraying 'serious' historical figures as well as the sunken architecture of some memorials. *Tree* might, therefore, be taken as a work that subverted the 'heavy' *status quo*: the grander conventions of the traditional material art domain as embodied by Place Vendôme. Some online users reconfigured *Tree* as a 'light' monument, both literally and figuratively, which (re)negotiated the ambiguous roles and uses of public art in the digitally networked age. For example, an art critic applauded *Tree*'s equivocality as follows:

> This tree is like a giant fantasy … In the French tradition it is a fantastical work. It is oversized; it can be analysed from different angles. It needs this kind of ambiguity, too. It is like a big dream that has entered the public space (Chiara Parisi, cited in *The Huffington Post* [Brooks], 2014a).

This quote interprets precisely *Tree*'s place-specificity (see Kwon, 2004), hence matching this type of place as epitome of 'the French tradition'. Despite the fact that there is no longer a material reification of *Tree*, it continues to compose a malleable, mutable digital reality in networked space. It also appeared to serve as window on controversial public artwork in other classical material public places in the past and present. Figure 7 presents a telling example of how online user-created content negotiated *Tree*'s temporality and (anti-)monumentality with notable material artworks over time. In my view, the online user made the point that although the other phallus-like structures have become acclaimed as iconic artworks, their right to exist was initially challenged, too. The Twitterer included the Eiffel Tower as key comparison. Although this edifice was supposed to be demolished in 20 years after creation (Gallant, 2002, 162), it has become a widespread symbolic mainstay for Paris or even whole France (ibid., 160).

The overview in this post is certainly not all-embracing. For instance, the controversial postmodern Buren Columns (1986) at Palais Royal in Paris have become an "ancient monument to modernity", which is "beloved by tourists [but] is no longer popular with the man who created it" – as maintenance of the material work came to a standstill (*The Independent* [Lichfield], 2008; see also Heinich,

1998). In queerying this case, could the material removal and the initiation of digital perpetuity become a plausible option for the artist of this predetermined 'permanent' public artwork?

Figure 7. A tweet with photo compilation situating *Tree* in the ambiguous historical trajectory of rejected/accepted and temporary/permanent artworks that have eventually grown into (inter)national cultural heritage spectacles. Is *Tree* perhaps a notable successor of offline landmarks within the digitally networked society today?

Reverting to the tweet in Figure 7, which I conceptualise as digital time machine of *Tree*, I queery whether this artwork might become an emblematic monument, but then in the context of digital culture. The online 'infomediation' travel agency Easyvoyage satirically counter-voiced the well-trodden 'romantic' Eiffel Tower-steered imagination of Paris:

> As the Parisian landmark celebrated its 126th birthday yesterday, the French capital announced plans to deconstruct the Eiffel Tower. The iron structure will be replaced by a giant sculpture designed by Paul

> McCarthy, widely agreed to be more in keeping with the city's romantic tone (Easyvoyage ["The Editorial Team", 2015).

This appeared to be an April Fools' hoax[7] which, again, added fuel to *Tree*'s social media controversy about its very material existence. It appeared to me that the combination of users' prior knowledge of McCarthy's ongoing use of the butt plug in his oeuvre and the online 'comeback' of the butt plug, in the guise of *Tree*, contributed to exponential social internet activity around the butt plug figure specifically. Onlookers' offline/in-situ experience of *Tree*, following Gauthier (2015), cannot be taken apart from its online 'layering' – as the latter actively set the parameters for the public debate and drew penetrating attention to the public artwork in 'real' space. All the more so, the assault on McCarthy can be seen as extrapolation of the online dispute to the offline world (ibid.).

Such augmented condition was also unveiled by some pro-campaigning activities, whereby online attention to the artwork was drawn into material place. Figure 8 shows an example of an in-situ demonstration through a flashmob that was widely engaged over social media (see *Hyperallergic* [Vartanian], 2014b). Participants resisted the swift complete removal of *Tree* by local authorities "after the artist agreed that its time in Place Vendôme was over" (*Hyperallergic* [Nechvatal], 2014a) – the artist explicitly did not want *Tree* to be reinstated (contrary to the Buren Columns case), or replaced.

Thus, it can be argued that precisely the online presence/experience of *Tree* intensified its offline presence/experience. Digital mental maps and social interactions over the internet overlapped with those in material spaces, hence contributing to a hybrid spatial presence/experience of the public artwork (after De Souza e Silva, 2004). Some offline local behaviours were infused by the digitally networked debate. Below peculiar (unverified) "outcome" was highlighted over social media:

> [A local sex-toy wholesaler] noted that previously customers for anal plugs were almost exclusively male and gay, but in recent weeks [November 2014] heterosexuals – with an equal mix of men and women – had been snapping up the products (*The Local* [Mulholland], 2014).

This anecdote put *Tree*'s interpretation as anti-heteronormative message into inverted perspective. This occurrence possibly recognised the butt plug as 'guilty pleasure' for all.

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[7] As arresting precedent, *The Local* (2013) released an April fool's joke conveying that various feminist activist collectives have united to campaign for replacing the Eiffel Tower, taken as "symbol of France's outdated male-dominated culture", by a 'Tour Eiffelle' (ibid.).

Figure 8. An Instagram posting showing members of the public campaigning against *Tree*'s unanticipated earlier removal from Place Vendôme after the artwork was vandalised.

Offline engagements, such as illustrated in Figure 8, also fed back to online communities. Pro-campaigning was carried out in a lively way in the form of tweets such as "I plug Paris! The Great Lobby love pluging [sic] Paris!". But there was also some rather inconsiderate reuse of previous serious-laden campaigns. For instance, a Twitterer published an image of Michelle Obama holding a paper with the script: "#BringBackOur[image of a hand holding *Tree*]". Similar to the use of the '-gate' suffix, this was done to recall the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag in the (social media) outrage over the mass abduction of school children by Boko Haram in Nigeria in 2014.

The latter resonates with what Goriunova (2012b) called the "new media idiocy", posing fundamental questions about why people post 'silly' – or misplaced and insensitive matter – on social media. This critically questions how images drive user agency in ever-intensifying socially networked spaces, as aptly put by Mitchell (2005, NP): "why do we behave as if pictures were alive, possessing the power to influence us, to persuade us, seduce us, or even lead us astray?".

Conclusion and Discussion

This virtual ethnographic case-study research on *Tree* has offered critical geographers a queerying method for analysing digitally networked public art on the basis of media receptions and social media interactions, which appeared to be of a variably positive, negative or ambiguous nature. It has shown how examined receptions and interactions intertwined with the temporary material artwork (which were not a deliberate part of the artwork as originally conceived by the artist). The

analysis demonstrated how they negotiated (i.e. mediated) online and offline public-art engagements, and accordingly co-produced new augmented versions of the artwork in digital public space. This study, as such, has filled a specific gap in geographical scholarship on public art, which has remained mostly focused on engagement with permanent public artworks in offline contexts – rather than the present-day ubiquitous Web 2.0 (social media) environment.

Considering the ambiguous and sexuality-related ramifications of the artwork, I pursued a queer studying of how engagement with public art of this calibre (temporary, postmodern and sexuality-related, amongst others) operated in digitally networked space, and in so doing queeried knowledges of public-art engagement as conventionally studied. I identified user agency (capacities/choices for participation/co-creation) and spatial connectivity (condition of connecting or being connected through digitally networked space) as conceptual lenses for queerying online mediated public-art engagement. Two ambiguous themes emerged from the analysis on (social) media engagements: remembering/forgetting and materiality/digitality. I deconstructed these dichotomies to then queery user agency and spatial connectivity – signifying the iterative nature of the method.

This queerying study, after Boellstorff (2010), asked for an activated approach (techne) that moves beyond academic spectatorship. It therefore required the acknowledgement of partiality in the knowledge (episteme) produced. I explained the partiality subsistent in this situated virtual fieldwork, wherein I inscribed my positionality (as gay male geography and public-art scholar as well as social media user) to buttress my 'inter-esse' in/between art, sexuality and social media. This in and of itself was a queerying experience: conducting research in virtual space through the dual use of hardware/software involved space-time navigations in an abstract, intangible global network of computers. This reconfigured/estranged relationship between here/there, presence/absence, researcher/researched, public/private as conventionally understood in offline geographical fieldwork.

Also, this study has shown critical geographers the broader methodological potential of this type of virtual research. It has particularly addressed the value of queerying as mode for the challenging inquiry of topics – as well as the unsettling of knowledges – within (non-sexuality-related) fields, as specific as public-art research, which are not directly associated with 'queer' (Plummer, 2011). Accordingly, scholars do not need to be identified as 'queer' to undertake queer research (Yekani et al, 2013).

The overall user-created portraiture of *Tree* suggested a fluid virtual-physical ecology, where online and offline public-art engagements contradicted, complemented and/or reinforced each other. The networked debate about this artwork operated as critical negotiation of various conventions/normativities. Most notably, on the one hand, some publics appropriated grander critiques of the human capitalist condition and anti-normative messages directed against heteropatriarchy

as well as the dominance of permanent statuary in public space. On the other hand, some aesthetically opposed to the alleged mismatch between the artwork and the classical architecture of the square. And an array of online mediated views, moreover, took *Tree* as an idiotic art piece and objected morally to the perceived obscene butt plug figure.

Banal interactions dominated, which were characterised by often predictable phatic communications (see Miller, 2008), including boundless postings/(re)tweets/sharings. The fleetingly and indiscriminately created/exchanged/discussed online content particularly queeried the site-specificity of the artwork in online mediation. They usually implied scant attention to either the artwork's socio-physical contexts or the websites' affordances. A more digital site-specific appropriation would, then, require a firmer commitment to the remit, functionality, user groups and readership/'usership' of the social networking sites and its communities – although some limitations for engagement are inherent in the medium itself (e.g., required account holdership; the character limit on Twitter).

Some online users, nevertheless, did show profound engagement with *Tree* (for instance on critical expert review forums), and hence engaged with it in a site-specific fashion online. Much user-created content was fraught with frivolous responses to *Tree* and played along with it on equally ludic-oriented websites. These included humoristic comments and photomontages (associated with acts of 'silly citizenship'; Hartley, 2012), of which some developed into trending parodies (memes). An augmentation of digital and physical specificities could be especially identified for those users who thoroughly encountered the artwork both in real life and online.

Digital publics from all around the world – yet excluding those without internet access and without the ability to consult or create online content – possessed the capacity to experience *Tree* online and (re)collect/'direct' their own networked story about the artwork. This dialectically augmented the artwork's offline publicness in online public space. Online mediated engagements walked a tightrope between encouragingly the remembering of *Tree* and adversely forgetting it through overlapping, equivocal dimensions of materiality and digitality.

To a certain extent, the socially networked public artwork served as queerying action space for ventilating (alternative) voices about the material object in the performative shapes of, for instance, the combined online and in-situ campaigns (against or in favour of *Tree*) and the ultimate radical act of vandalising the physical artwork. Even if there were a desire to forget *Tree*, it might not be answered by what I call the 'mnemonic immediacy' of the ongoing digital (discursive and (audio)visual) reproduction of the public artwork that was once 'temporary' in a physical setting. Also, this e-article digitally 'reincarnates' *Tree* and provides an online academic space for further engagement with this public artwork.

In conclusion, critical geographers can learn from the insights of this specific queerying virtual case study on *Tree*. It may queerly inform future research about how the roles, (mis)uses and values of especially controversial temporary, sexuality-related public art in material space are critically (re)negotiated over social networking sites (see, for example, Kapoor's *Dirty Corner* in *The Independent* [Jenne], 2015); how such work is co-produced by public engagers in online space (in real time or asynchronously); how new 'permanent' realities of the artwork are created in digital public space; and how online and offline social engagements with public artwork give form and thus augment each other (where neither the material nor digital are subsidiaries of one another).

Follow-up research in this area would answer Rose's (2015) recent call for geographers to re-orient at both digital cultural mediation and fieldwork in virtual space. Specifically, I encourage further queerying case studies on how digital technologies may offer novel modes of engaging with and co-producing public artwork through different digitally mediated public/private spaces of the everyday life. Future research may further fathom the fluid intersections between online/offline spaces and publics of permanent/ephemeral public artwork – and queery how human practice meets the inorganic within such digitally mediated ambiance.

Acknowledgements

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