Photosharing on Flickr:
Intangible Heritage and Emergent publics

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Flickr, a popular 'photosharing' website, is facilitating new public engagements with world heritage sites like the Sydney Opera House. Australian heritage institutions (namely libraries and museums) have recently begun to employ Flickr as a site through which to engage communities with their photographic archives and collections. Yet Flickr is more than an 'online photo album': it is a social and cultural network generated around personal photographic practices. Members can form 'groups': self-organised communities defined by shared interests in places, photographic genres, or the appraisal of photographs. These groups are public spaces for both visual and textual conversations - complex social negotiations involving personal expression and collective identity. For one group, the common interest is the Sydney Opera House, and their shared visual and textual expressions - representations of this building. This paper argues that such socio-visual practices themselves constitute an intangible heritage. By drawing on the work of scholars Jose van Djick and Nancy Van House, Dawson Munjeri and Michael Warner, the paper proposes that this enactment of intangible heritage is implicated in the broader cultural value of the Sydney Opera House.

INTRODUCTION

If Flickr was a nation, it would have a greater population than Australia. In 2008 the website reported a membership of 30 million (Shankland 2008) and a collection of over 3 billion images (Champ 2008). Since its launch in 2004, Flickr's members have established almost half a million[1] public groups, some with populations as large as 90,000 like the group "Black and White".[2] Flickr provides a way to store, organize and publically share photographs online. It is a searchable repository of personal photography[3] covering almost every imaginable subject. Often cited as an example of the Web 2.0 'participatory turn' (O'Reilly 2005), it has already generated a sizeable body of scholarly discussion. This research uses predominantly empirical methods, perhaps because Flickr's open source platform makes metadata (data about data; like tags or user participation) readily available to researchers. This empirical research focuses on Flickr in several common ways: as an example of online social networking (Lerman and Jones 2006; Lerman 2007; Van Zwol 2007; Sigurbjörnsson and Van Zwol 2008), as a community classification system of 'folksonomies' (Kennedy et al. 2007; Davies 2006; Rafferty and Hidderley 2007; Yakel 2006; Lerman et al 2007), as an

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[1] Search performed by author by inserting a 'space' into group search field on 15 December 2008.

[2] Most members as at 15 December 2008.

[3] This term is coined by Jose van Djick, (2008). She uses it to avoid the connotations often attributed to amateur or family photography. It is intended to distinguish these photographic practices from professional or expert ones.

example of 'socio-locative' practices (Ames 2007; Erickson 2007) and as an archive of digital photographs (Van House 2006; 2007; Van House and Ames 2007; Van House and Churchill 2008). However, not all research on Flickr is empirical. Two recent doctoral projects adopt a more 'cultural' approach. Jean Burgess (2007) argues that Flickr is a space for enactments of vernacular creativity and through this, cultural citizenship. Janice Affleck (2007) investigates the opportunities that spaces like Flickr provide for the discursive interpretation of heritage by communities. This paper builds upon Burgess and Affleck's research by investigating how photosharing on Flickr can inform our understanding of community sentiment towards places of cultural significance.

The paper is structured in three parts. First it draws on the work of Dawson Munjeri and other heritage scholars to establish the important role that the intangible plays in the cultural value we attribute to tangible heritage sites and monuments. Second, the paper explores the socio-visual interactions of the group "Sydney Opera House" to understand the way these photographic contributions operate as a visual discourse, which is connected to members' sense of belonging and identity, and can thus be seen as an intangible heritage. This section explores the affective distinction between images and text in such social interactions by building on the work of contemporary theorists Jose van Djick, Elizabeth Chaplin and Nancy Van House, to establish personal photography as a social medium of communication. Thirdly the paper explores how photosharing through groups gives rise to new social formations. Using Michael Warner's writing on publics it traces how two apparently exclusive groups; "Sydney Opera House" and "Sydney-alt" emerged in turn from the visual discourse in a precursor group, "Sydney, Australia". The paper concludes that photosharing is: a public visual discourse; a discursive practice; and a performative mode of intangible heritage around the Sydney Opera House. It argues that discussions on Flickr reveal the complex and multivalent sentiment held for this place and its symbolic 'standing in' for Sydney and Australia. In addition it exposes the way these negotiations are generative, implicated in the emergence of new publics that seek to provide alternate spaces and ways of representing both Sydney and its Opera House, and which thus operate to co-constitute this place as meaningful in the lives of its contemporary communities.

THE SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE ON FLICKR

The Sydney Opera House is a widely recognised symbol of Sydney and an architectural masterpiece of the late Modern Movement. In 2007 the building was distinguished as a "monument of universal value for art and science" and inscribed onto the UNESCO World Heritage List (Dept. Environment and Heritage, and NSW Heritage Office 2006, p27). Designed by Jørn Utzon, the building is renowned architecturally for its pioneering construction systems, while its distinctive sculptural roof forms give it an instantly recognisable silhouette. Since opening in 1973, it has become one of Australia's most popular tourist destinations, and one study has shown that only one in four visitors attends a performance at the Opera House, implying that the rest come specifically to admire the building (ibid., p31). Many visitors use photography to document their experiences.

Much scholarly attention to the Sydney Opera House focuses on its historical and architectural value, both in terms of aesthetics and technological realisation. Less attention has been devoted to sociology – to the

relationship that people and communities have with the building. Many groups have distinct and particular relationships: for tourists it is a destination, for locals a city landmark, for architects a flawed masterpiece, for performers a status symbol, and for many Australians an emblem of national and local identity. Online spaces can help to reveal the cultural import of this place - Flickr retrieves 81,000[4] photographs and 87[5] groups in relation to the Sydney Opera House. On Flickr, World Heritage sites tend to be loci for user-created socio-visual practices: other sites like the Eiffel Tower[6] (UNESCO 1991) and the Taj Mahal (UNESCO 1983) are also popular, each retrieving over 300 and 84 groups respectively. However, close analysis reveals that public sentiment towards such sites is not straightforward but rather involves complex social relationships, questions of representation, and notions of personal identity.

This paper examines public sentiment towards the Sydney Opera House through the Flickr group of the same name and another named "Sydney-alt". Members can contribute to groups by submitting photographs to the group's 'pool' (archive), by commenting on individual photographs in the pool, or by posting a theme for debate or comment in the discussion thread. "Sydney Opera House" has over 600 members and over 2000 photos, whilst "Sydney-alt" has over 460 members and almost 6000 photographic contributions.[7] Each Group is governed by a set of guidelines, serving to curate members' photographic submissions. The description for the group "Sydney Opera House" specifies that "the Sydney Opera House needs to be the main subject of photos submitted to this group, and needs to be featured prominently within the frame". "Sydney-alt" on the other hand "celebrates and records the alternative side of Sydney life and scenery" with a clear warning that "shots of the Bridge and Opera House will probably be deleted on sight". Although these two groups have adopted mutually-exclusive curatorial strategies they are still both defined by the Sydney Opera House. Tracing the conditions of their initial formation reveals how both react to the way the building operates as an icon for Sydney and Australia. But this has further implications: the photographs making up these groups are individual expressions of the building, but collectively on Flickr they become a kind of 'visual conversation'. Groups on Flickr arguably provide discursive spaces in which people come together to negotiate associations, meanings, and representations of the building. These spaces and practices are themselves meaningful, and can inform our understanding of how communities engage with the Sydney Opera House.

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[4] Search performed by the author on 7 November 2008 showed 81,333 photographs tagged 'sydney', 'opera' and 'house'.

[5] There are several ways to explore the photographs on Flickr; by tag descriptions, via Flickr's ranking algorithms (one is called 'interestingness'), geographically, by group, or by date of contribution. For further information see http://www.flickr.com/explore/

[6] The Eiffel Tower is included as part of the listing of the 'Banks of the River Siene'.

[7] Figures given from author's observations of the group "Sydney Opera House" and "Sydney-Alt" (quotations added to distinguish groups from the building itself.

PHOTOSHARING AND INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

The recent adoption of the *UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003)* has brought traditional conceptions of heritage as 'material artefact' into question. Dawson Munjeri argues that although the accepted archaeological conception of heritage locates cultural value in the materiality of monuments, landscapes and buildings, the acknowledgement that everyday practices and immaterial culture are also heritage challenges this notion (2004). In the past "cultural heritage was deemed to be stable and static and having 'intrinsic values' as well as qualities of 'authenticity'" (ibid., p13). UNESCO's main legal instruments, namely the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO 1972) and the Intangible Heritage Convention (UNESCO 2003), appear to divide heritage into two distinct categories - tangible and intangible. However scholars Laurajane Smith (2006) and Barbara Kirchenblatt-Gimblett (2004) argue, alongside Munjeri, that intangible heritage is not separate, but intrinsically connected to more traditionally-conceived, tangible forms of heritage:

> "Cultural heritage should speak through the values that people give it and not the other way round. Objects, collections, buildings etc. become recognized as heritage when they express the value of *society* and so the tangible can only be understood and interpreted through the intangible. *Society and values* are thus intrinsically linked."
> (Munjeri 2004, p13)

Reconceptualising heritage in this way collapses the divide between tangible and intangible modes, and provides a framework for understanding socio-visual practices like photosharing on Flickr as part of the heritage of the Sydney Opera House. This does not discount already recognized values such as the aesthetic quality of the structure or the technological innovations of its realisation, but rather contributes to the understanding of the *social* value of the building.[8] The argument here is that the taking and sharing of photographs on Flickr is one way in which immaterial practices enacted around the Sydney Opera House operate to co-constitute the cultural value of the site itself. The images entail the act of photographing, and are also 'material' artefacts. At the same time the photographs support complex dynamic social interactions that traverse both the personal and the public realms: as mementos of experiences, as expressions of identity, and as instances of communication. Thus, following Munjeri's argument, the cultural value of a place like the Sydney Opera House cannot be dissociated from the social practices enacted by its various

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[8] Heritage in Australia is assessed using the *Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter 1999* which evaluates heritage in terms of its historic, scientific, aesthetic and social value. Social significance or social value, is generally defined as "community attachment." (Beck 1996, p7) Although they are not equivalent, intangible heritage and social value both emphasize immaterial culture. Immaterial culture is more dissonant and more difficult to define than material monuments and places. As such, social value is generally underrepresented in heritage listings in Australia. (Canning and Spenneman 2001)

communities, and these contribute to its importance as a World Heritage site.

Many heritage institutions, like museums and libraries, are increasingly engaging communities in the research and preservation of their collections through online and digital means. (Cameron and Kenderdine 2006; Kalay et al. 2007; Cameron and Mengler 2009). On Flickr there is a dedicated space for heritage institutions called "The Commons". In this online space heritage institutions are able to exhibit and collect public information. For instance Sydney's Powerhouse Museum has published the Tyrrell Collection, an historic archive of photographs for which few records are held, and Flickr members are able to 'tag' or contribute knowledge about a photograph's subject or history. These engagements are extended through "Tyrrell Today", a group dedicated to re-picturing the same scenes in the present. This project exemplifies the leadership of heritage institutions in bringing heritage consciously into the present through public engagements in online spaces.

But outside of established institutional arrangements how might the self-organised groups on Flickr such as "Sydney Opera House" inform and contribute to an understanding of the intrinsic relationship between tangible and intangible heritage? Intangible heritage as defined by the 2003 Convention is constituted in the "expressions, practices and representations" (UNESCO 2003, Article 2.1) enacted by communities and individuals. Photosharing is a social practice involving personal expression; we document what is important to us, and share this within our existing networks. But on Flickr photosharing is made visible and public, allowing members to form new dynamic formations with others outside their usual social networks and with otherwise physically dispersed people. On Flickr, the photograph is deeply embedded in social interactions, as a currency for belonging, as a site of expression and identity and as a mode of communication between participants.

FLICKR GROUPS: SITES FOR VISUAL DISCOURSE

Intangible heritage is defined as the "practices, expressions and representations" which are "constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and [which] provides them with a sense of identity and continuity". (UNESCO 2003, Article 2.1) Intangible Heritage is intertwined with a communal identity dynamically negotiated in the present. This contrasts with more established notions of heritage as material, fixed and located in the past (Munjeri 2004, Smith 2006). Intangible heritage therefore takes place through practices in which people participate, their individual and collective expressions and the representations resulting from these activities. Discourse is temporal, changing and generative of ideas. Affleck's research into the way digital media can offer new interactive paradigms for the interpretation of heritage (as opposed to more traditional descriptive modes) supports the notion that "a virtual community [can] offer a context in which to engage active participants in discursive interpretation" (2007, abstract).

The photographic contributions of members to Flickr groups like "Sydney Opera House" and "Sydney-alt" might simply be seen as contributions to a communal archive, but their interactivity makes this definition ambiguous. The following analysis and observations of interactions occurring in the Flickr group "Sydney Opera House" describes the ways in which these contributions operate as a kind of public discussion

through images. This visual discourse alongside the practice underpinning it, is arguably a kind of intangible heritage, one through which collective identification with a particular place is negotiated.

Recent empirical work on Flickr by Radu-Andrei Negoescu and Daniel Gatica-Perez (2008) analyses sharing behaviour in relation to groups, revealing that although a small number of very active users own the majority of photographs on Flickr, half of the site's members do contribute at least one photograph to a group. They conclude "that sharing photos in groups is an important part of the photosharing practices of Flickr users" (ibid., p419). Part of what makes participating on Flickr meaningful is the social interactions and negotiations that occur through the exchange and sharing of photographs.

A second study by Nicholas Pissard and Christopher Prieur examines the social relationships of community members to determine if Flickr is more akin to a photo archive or a social media site (2007). To do this they draw data on each group, denoting discussion threads as 'social' (Flickr like a social media site) and common tags as 'thematic' (Flickr is like an archive). They conclude that thematic groups tend to focus on geographical locations, while social ones are more likely to be based on abstract themes. Under these parameters "Sydney Opera House" might be classified as a thematic group (it presently has no discussions)[9] and "Sydney-alt" as a social group (since it has 198). However, Pissard and Prieur's study ignores the possibility that group interactions could be visual; that is that 'conversations' might not be in a textual form. Their study negates the potential of images as a medium of communication. Recent scholarship on cameraphone photography provides a counterpoint to this assumption.

Multimodal communication (images and text in combination) is becoming more ubiquitous as technologies (like mobile phones) begin to incorporate cameras. This exposes the multiple ways that images are being integrated into many social interactions. Much of the canonical theory on photography has understood the photograph as a memory artefact (Barthes 1981[1980] & Sontag 1973, cited in Van Djick 2008, p58). However, more recent work by scholars such as Jose Van Djick (2005; 2007; 2008) and Nancy Van House (2004; 2007) describes new and more ephemeral social uses for photographs. Their research builds on the seminal work on 'Kodak Culture' by Richard Chalfen (1987). Here Chalfen argues that amateur photography entails more than the automated making of images; that personal photographs serve to reinforce social relations. Van Djick's research on contemporary digital photographic practices concurs with Chalfen, and further she asserts that this phenomenon is not new - photography has always "served as an instrument of communication and as a means of sharing experience" (2008, p59). Van Djick's theoretical critique is supported by the empirical analyses of Van House. In her study of cameraphone photography, Van House finds that digital photographs sent and received in this social context are not intended as memory artefacts, but rather are fleeting forms of communication. This, as Van Djick asserts, has a significant impact on the photograph as medium of social interaction:

> "When pictures become a visual language conveyed through the channel of a communication
> medium, the value of individual pictures decreases while the general significance of visual

[9] Administrators can delete discussion threads. This group had seven discussion threads in December 2008, but these have now all been deleted since the appointment of a new administrator.

communication increases. A thousand pictures sent over the phone may now be worth a single word: 'see!' Taking, sending and receiving photographs is a real-time experience and, like spoken words, image exchanges are not meant to be archived (Van House et al., 2005). Because of their abundance, these photographs gain value as 'moments', while losing value as mementoes." (2008, p62).

On Flickr photographs are displayed in real time. As members upload and contribute photographs to groups, individual members' home pages are immediately updated with the new contributions (fig.1). Interactions on Flickr, like those via cameraphones, do not necessarily need to be textual, as their significance can lie in sharing a 'moment' - that is, an experience. Pissard and Prieur's assumption that the degree of social interaction is indicated only through textual discussions ignores the communicative value of images. The temporal distribution of these images makes them more akin to messages or 'moments' than to memory artefacts. Moreover the photographs gain communicative value in being contributed to the group, just as the cameraphone photograph becomes a message upon sending. Contribution modifies these images from artefacts into communications and thus makes the group an active social space rather than an archive.

Figure 1. Real time update from "Sydney Opera House" group as displayed on individual member's home page. Photographs courtesy of "Sydney Opera House" group members (from left to right) – Peter Lee, "metalsnowski", Asim Aly-Khan, Daniel Moctezuma-Baker and "c.e.andersen". *Image reproduced with permission of Yahoo! Inc. ©2009 Yahoo! Inc. FLICKR and the FLICKR logo are registered trademarks of Yahoo! Inc..*

When photographs are contributed to a Flickr group, they are presented in two different ways: as a slideshow, or as a page of thumbnails (fig.2 and fig.3). These presentation modes offer different ways in which to interact with the images in the group's pool. For example, viewing the photographs as a slideshow shows the collection one image at a time, in chronological order of submission. In this case new contributions supplant older ones, and the narrative moves from the present to the past, with recent events (in the Sydney Opera House example, including events like the Luminous festival held in 2009) creating a cluster of identifiable images. Although the submissions to the group are initially curated by the group's guidelines, which in the case of "Sydney Opera House" requires the building to be the main subject of the image, the slideshow is a serendipitous sequence and representation of the building. The photographs are not organised like an exhibition, where narrative or categorisation orders the viewer's experience. In slideshow mode typical silhouettes of the Sydney Opera House are followed by tightly cropped details of the tiled surfaces of the roof forms; spectacular sunsets which proclaim their authors technical skill are followed

by flat, slightly-out-of-focus snapshots. As one representation of the Sydney Opera House is overlaid by the next, each contribution asserts itself against the previous one. However, these visual messages are not operating like a verbal dialogue. Their specific meaning remains ambiguous. It raises the question of how images convey meaning.

Figure 2. Slideshow mode showing photograph by Flickr user "ace_homer" from "Sydney Opera House" group pool. http://www.flickr.com/photos/20719570@N04/3457980106/. Photograph courtesy of Scott Henry. *Image reproduced with permission of Yahoo! Inc. ©2009 Yahoo! Inc. FLICKR and the FLICKR logo are registered trademarks of Yahoo! Inc.*

It would be a mistake to assume that images communicate in an equivalent way to text. A picture, as W. J. T. Mitchell states in *What do pictures want?* "is a very peculiar and paradoxical creature, both concrete and abstract, both a specific individual thing and a symbolic form that embraces a totality" (2005, pxvii). Further, Elizabeth Chaplin states that "what is distinctive about images – including photographs – is that they are polysemic: [that is] their meanings float." (2006(b), p42). Sequential contributions to the group "Sydney Opera House" do not operate like a verbal dialogue but rather work together to build a larger more complete picture or representation of the place, albeit one which is a messy, dissonant and contingent. In short these contributions are part of an ongoing dynamic visual discourse.

The second way of exploring the photographs of "Sydney Opera House" is through the group's 'photo pool' page (fig.3). Here the images are presented as an array of thumbnails; thirty images to each page, each one underlined with the photographer's name. Clicking on any thumbnail will link to the individual page for that photograph, where members can leave comments and feedback. (fig.4) In contrast to the sequential viewing of the photographs in slideshow mode, seeing them laid out as "massed images… create[s] a micro-world whose visual coherence is such that we acquire an understanding of that society and its ethos which is not straightforwardly a function of verbal conventions" (Chaplin 1994, p212). Images collected in the online space of the Flickr group come together to collectively form a specific kind of representation of the Sydney Opera House. The contributions serve to connect members with each other in a collective project, where experiences of photographing the same building are shared.
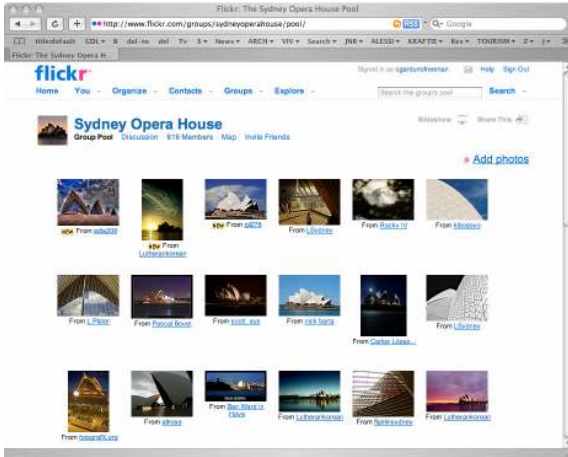
Figure 3. Thumbnail mode showing group pool from "Sydney Opera House"

http://www.flickr.com/groups/sydneyoperahouse/pool/

Photographs courtesy of "Sydney Opera House" group members (from top left to right) Marc Emond, Peter Lee, Lee Gilbert, Laurie Wilson, Ben Hockman, Alastair McAlpine, "L_Plater", Pascal Bovet, "scott_aus", Nick Barta, Carlos Lopez Molina, Laurie Wilson, "fotografX.org", "allrose", Ben Ward, Peter Lee, "flgirlinsydney" and Peter Lee. *Image reproduced with permission of Yahoo! Inc. ©2009 Yahoo! Inc. FLICKR and the FLICKR logo are registered trademarks of Yahoo! Inc.*
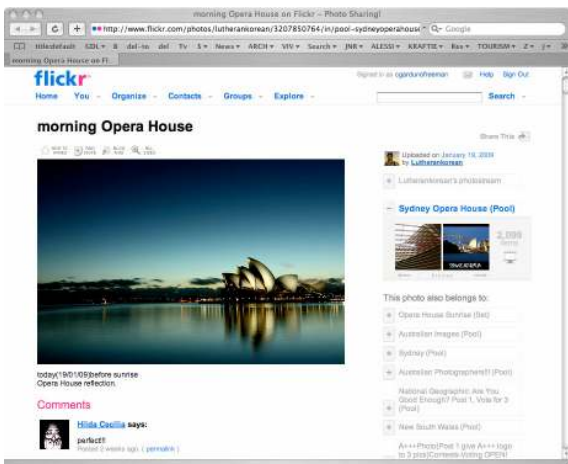
Figure 4. Individual mode showing photograph by Flickr user "Lutherankorean" from "Sydney Opera House" group pool

http://www.flickr.com/photos/lutherankorean/3207850764/in/pool-sydneyoperahouse

Main photograph courtesy of Peter Lee, small photographs courtesy of Ben Ward (left) and "flgirlinsydney" (right), comment courtesy of Hilda Caraballo. *Image reproduced with permission of Yahoo! Inc. ©2009 Yahoo! Inc. FLICKR and the FLICKR logo are registered trademarks of Yahoo! Inc.*

The point here is that the images cannot be neatly categorised as either message or artefact, but rather operate in multiple ways. As Van House outlines from her research into cameraphones, there appear to be three types of motivations for the sharing of photographs: as artefacts which mediate 'memory, identity and

narrative'; as practices which help to 'maintain relationships'; and as modes of 'self representation' or a medium of 'self expression' (2004, 2007). The photographs in the group "Sydney Opera House" are visual messages, shared moments of experience that connect members to the group and to each other. Van Djick surmises that the increase in photography as communication is not really attributable to the advent of digital technologies, but rather is part of a social and cultural change:

> "Digital photography is part of this larger transformation in which the self becomes the centre of a virtual universe made up of informational and spatial flows; individuals articulate their identity as social beings not only by taking and storing photographs to document their lives, but by participating in communal photographic exchanges that mark their identity as interactive producers and consumers of culture." (Van Djick 2008, p63)

However these images are also artefacts – representations of this World Heritage site, circulating in a broader public space, where they sometimes dissonate with the dominant visual discourse. They have no narrative, no rhetoric regarding the 'story' of the Sydney Opera House, they are not carefully selected by an institution to maintain authenticity in a traditional heritage sense. Although many of them reproduce the picturesque visual representations of travel brochures and architectural magazines, they exist publicly outside of these formal institutions. Rather, these socio-visual enactments are practices that provide a collective sense of identity that is constantly renegotiated in the present: an intangible heritage of the Sydney Opera House.

SOCIAL FORMATIONS THROUGH PHOTOSHARING PRACTICES

Flickr is part of a new culture of online photosharing; an area recently explored by Andrew D. Miller and W. Keith Edwards (2007). Photosharing on Flickr, they find, is implicated in new socialisation styles associated with social media sites. Miller and Edwards find two major types of users on Flickr. One is an infrequent participant who tends to share within their existing social networks. The second, whom they call "Snaprs" are more active participants who have embraced Flickr as a public online space. Snaprs make their whole photographic collection accessible, not only to Flickr members, but to anyone on the Internet. Snaprs are also more active in discussion threads: textual debates implicated in the formation of new groups. Although the group "Sydney Opera House" and its antithesis "Sydney-alt" appear as separate entities, they both emerge as a result of discussions on the visual criteria of a third group called "Sydney, Australia". Here members raise the ubiquity of the Sydney Opera House as a symbol for Sydney, and argue it is a clichéd representation. This visual discourse centered around what represents Sydney (and by extension Australia) is a generative negotiation process leading to new public formations. These Flickr members, or "Snaprs" are jointly negotiating a collective identity through the definition and re-definition of a group's visual criteria. These negotiations expose the groups on Flickr to be dynamic and interconnected formations.

The next section of the paper follows the discussions through which "Sydney Opera House and "Sydney-alt" were formed. At the time of writing, all but one of the discussion threads in "Sydney Opera House" were advertisements. However, the discussion titled "Buildings based on the Sydney Opera House" (2006) generated much member interest (this thread has now been removed, see fig.5). The conversation

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exemplifies the active role Snaprs play in the definition of the guidelines of groups, and how a rift between members leads to the formation of new publics on Flickr. In this instance one member, "yewenyi," proposes the group include photographs of buildings that look similar to the Sydney Opera House. He provides his own photograph of a structure, on JiuJiang Road in Shanghai, China, which is 'opera-house-shaped'. Flickr groups like most social formations are politically structured. The group has three tiers; members, moderators and administrators who govern the group and can remove photographs or posts. "Xenedis" the administrator of "Sydney Opera House" rejects the proposition replying that this group "is for photos of the *one and only* Sydney Opera House. :-)" [italics as per posting]. This rejection is peculiar as two other examples in the group's pool depict representations rather than photographs of the building. The first is a stylised drawing of the Sydney Opera House printed on a shirt by fashion label Mambo, and the second a photo of watermelon pieces arranged to allude to the building's form (fig.6a and 6b). The exclusion of "yewenyi's" and the inclusion of these other examples may thus lie in the former's architectural articulation. It appears that the representation *of* architecture is acceptable, but not representation *through* architecture. The reproduced building is somehow construed as an inauthentic version of the Opera House, whilst the representations are an homage to it.

Figure 5 "Sydney Opera House" group discussion thread: "Buildings based on the Sydney Opera House" 26 February 2006. No longer available – removed from website.
Discussion courtesy of "Sydney Opera House" group members as they appear from top: Brian Yap. "Xenedis", Kent Johnson and Andrew Finden. *Image reproduced with permission of Yahoo! Inc. ©2009 Yahoo! Inc. FLICKR and the FLICKR logo are registered trademarks of Yahoo! Inc.*

"Yewenyi" responds to this rejection by threatening to form a new group called "Not the Sydney Opera House" to accommodate representations of the Sydney Opera House. This never comes about. Nonetheless, the discourse surrounding the visual criteria or curation of acceptable submission appears to be closely linked with the formation of new groups. These negotiations of inclusion and exclusion serve to draw together some members and exclude others. Like all social formations, Flickr groups are subject to peer pressure, dynamics and ruling hierarchies. But Flickr's structure encourages new public formations by allowing any member to establish a public group.

Figure 6a (left) and 6b (right). Other 'representations of the Sydney opera House in group pool. (Right hand image supplied by Reg Mombassa indicating extent of image found in Sydney Opera House pool. (Can be seen here http://www.flickr.com/photos/80651083@N00/129830971/)
Left image by "Patrick_Boland" http://www.flickr.com/photos/patrickboland/109610311/
Right image by Reg Mombassa
Photographs courtesy of Patrick Boland and Reg Mombassa. *Image reproduced with permission of Yahoo! Inc. ©2009 Yahoo! Inc. FLICKR and the FLICKR logo are registered trademarks of Yahoo! Inc.*

Michael Warner's *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002) addresses the notion that publics are complex and multifarious entities. Warner disagrees with much of the literature in the social sciences, which frames publics as existing entities to be studied empirically. Warner proposes a more interpretive approach towards publics, one that embraces these social entities as animated, dynamic and multileveled (Loizidou, 2003, p77). Further he argues that rather than producing texts, publics emerge in relation to texts; each 'text' (or photo or Flickr group) co-constitutes an audience, and a public.

> "Each time we address a public... we draw on what seems like simple common sense. If we did not
> have a practical sense of what publics are, if we could not unself-consciously take them for granted
> as really existing and addressable social entities, we could not produce most of the books or films
> or broadcasts or journals that make up so much of our culture; we could not conduct elections or

indeed imagine ourselves as members of nations or movements. Yet publics exist only by virtue of their imagining. They are a kind of fiction that has taken on life, and very potent life at that." (Warner 2002, p8)

This imagined sense of belonging as described by Warner is illustrated by members' relationships to the groups "Sydney Opera House" and "Sydney-alt". These groups, although defined by the inclusion and exclusion of photographs of the Sydney Opera House respectively, in fact share members. Further they are not entirely exclusive; within "Sydney-alt's" pool of 6000 contributions there are at least 33 photographs of the Sydney Opera House.[10] These photographs that apparently contravene the curatorial guidelines of the group have nevertheless not 'been deleted on sight'. Arguably then it is the group's imagined sense of identity, their rejection of the Sydney Opera House as a symbol for Sydney, which fuels their cohesive presentation as a public form. Further, it is this very same process of negotiation between members, of their relationships and identity regarding the Sydney Opera House, that has led to the very emergence of both these antithetical formations.

What these discussion threads reveal is that both "Xenedis" (administrator of "Sydney Opera House") and "Naddsy" (administrator of "Sydney-alt") are also administrators in a third group "Sydney, Australia". This group has over 2500 members and more than 24,000 photographic contributions. In a discussion titled "Administration Roles for all", (Sydney, Australia 2006b) "Xenedis" proposes that an image of the Sydney Opera House or the Sydney Harbour Bridge be the group's identifying 'icon'. On Flickr, members and groups can represent themselves with a thumbnail image (fig.7). This idea is rejected by the group as they consider these to be clichéd symbols for Sydney, and refer "Xenedis" to an earlier discussion titled "Two Sydney groups…..why?" (Sydney, Australia 2006a). In this earlier discussion "Naddsy" asks why there are two groups on the subject of Sydney, which incites responses on the visual parameters of the group. They agree to exclude Sydney's famous icons in lieu of a more 'real' (or authentic) representation of Sydney leading to the proposal of several new groups. What is revealed is the complex nature of attachments to the Sydney Opera House and how the formation of new groups is a strategy to control the abundant contribution of photographs of the building to groups associated with Australia. On the one hand this place is revered and admired, but its liberal use as a metonym for Sydney, and by extension for Sydney-siders, clashes with a more complex and nuanced sense of such a population's identification with their city. Much of the literature on the Sydney Opera House describes its history and the difficult circumstances of its realisation (Murray 2004), or the intentions and aspirations of Utzon, its architect (Drew 2001). But here on Flickr, outside of formal institutions, these complex dissonant relationships to the Sydney Opera House can co-exist. The visual association between the building and the city of Sydney, somehow impacts on the sense of identity of the members of "Sydney, Australia" (or at least those vocal in the discussions cited). It is too clichéd, too expected, too simplistic to represent oneself visually through these icons, as if to do so would imply a public that is unthinking and uncritical. Further these discussions also reveal popular attitudes towards the building: people have affection for it, they identify with its World Heritage listing, but they do so critically.

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[10] Search performed by the author on 27 January 2009

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Figure 7. "Sydney, Australia" Group Icon.

Intangible Heritage challenges traditional conceptions of material heritage because of its dynamic and discursive nature. Heritage as a practice has grown out of notions of patrimony, where material artefacts from the past were safeguarded for future generations. But this conception of heritage has been criticised for its exclusion of non-western cultural practices, and for its exclusion of certain communities even in the west. To conceive of heritage as a social practice is to understand that places of significance like the Sydney Opera House are co-constituted by photosharing practices. Intangible heritage provides an aperture in which alternative accounts can be included, even those which lie outside the narrative of its World Heritage listing.

Further, these practices demonstrate two things: first the way images are socially embedded in these interactions, and second that images operate distinctively to textual discussion. An image represents in a way which text cannot. Images are ambiguous, their meaning is referential and contextual, unspecific. However it is arguably this very ambiguity and lack of specificity, which make them interpretive objects, and messages, around which these conversations and discussion can occur.

Images communicate experience instantly in a way that might take a thousand words. The increasing ubiquity of images in communication and expression heightens their import as an area of study and research. But these visual exchanges, as demonstrated through the photographic contributions to "Sydney Opera House" are also operating in the broader visual arena, one saturated by professional images of the Sydney Opera House, carefully curated and selected to convey specific narratives of this place. Taking personal photographs is a powerful way of re-appropriating the building back into everyday life. The complex and dynamic public formations on Flickr, centred on or defined by the Sydney Opera House, reveal that public sentiment about this building is not straightforward, but personal, entwined with collective identity, and that the significance of this building is not a static entity which can be measured or fixed, but exists dynamically in the lived experiences of its publics. Photosharing publicly on Flickr is a generative, discursive practice, which reframes heritage from residing in the past to actively existing in the present

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