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This paper provides embedded, reflective practice-based insight arising from my experience collaborating to produce online and print-on-demand editions of a magazine showcasing the photography of members of *haphazart! Contemporary Abstracts* group (hereafter referred to as *haphazart!*). The group's online visual, textual and activity-based practices via the photo sharing social networking site *Flickr* are portrayed as achieving cohesive visual identity. Stylistic analysis of pictures in support of this claim is not attempted. Rather negotiation, that Elliot has previously described in *M/C Journal* as innate in collaboration, is identified as the unifying factor. However, the collaborators' adherence to *Flickr's* communication platform proves problematic in the editorial context. Some technical incoherence with possible broader cultural implications is encountered during the process of repurposing images from screen to print.

A Scan of Relevant Literature

> The photographic gaze perceives and captures objects which seem to 'carry within them ready-made' a work of art. But the reminiscences of the gaze are only made possible by knowing and associating with groups that define a tradition.

> The list of valorised subjects is not actually defined with reference to a culture, but rather by familiarity with a limited group. (Chamboredon 144)

As part of the array of socio-cultural practices afforded by Web 2.0 interoperability, sites of produsage (Bruns) are foci for studies originating in many disciplines. *Flickr* provides a rich source of data that researchers interested in the interface between the technological and the social find useful to analyse.

Access to the *Flickr* application programming interface enables quantitative researchers to observe a variety of means by which information is propagated, disseminated and shared. Some findings from this kind of research confirm the intuitive. For example, Negoecsu et al. find that "a large percentage of users engage in sharing with groups and that they do so significantly" ("Analyzing Flickr Groups" 425). They suggest that *Flickr's* Groups feature appears to "naturally bring together two key aspects of social media: content and relations." They also find evidence for what they call *hyper-groups*, which are "communities consisting of groups of *Flickr* groups" ("Flickr Hypergroups" 813). Two separate findings from another research team appear to contradict each other. On one hand, describing what they call "social cascades," Cha et al. claim that "content in the form of ideas, products, and messages spreads across social networks like a virus" ("Characterising Social Cascades"). Yet in 2009 they claim that homocity and reciprocity ensure that "popularity of pictures is localised" ("Measurement-Driven Analysis"). Mislove et al. reflect that the affordances of *Flickr* influence the growth patterns they observe. There is optimism shared by some empiricists that through collation and analysis of *Flickr* tag data, the matching of

perceptual structures of images and image annotation techniques will yield ontology-based taxonomy useful in automatic image annotation and ultimately, the Semantic Web endeavour (Kennedy et al.; Su et al.; Xu et al.).

Qualitative researchers using ethnographic interview techniques also find *Flickr* a valuable resource. In concluding that the photo sharing hobby is for many a "serious leisure" activity, Cox et al. propose that "Flickr is not just a neutral information system but also value laden and has a role within a wider cultural order." They also suggest that "there is genuinely greater scope for individual creativity, releasing the individual to explore their own identity in a way not possible with a camera club." Davies claims that "online spaces provide an arena where collaboration over meanings can be transformative, impacting on how individuals locate themselves within local and global contexts" (550). She says that through shared ways of describing and commenting on images, *Flickrites* develop a common criticality in their endeavour to understand images, each other and their world (554).

From a psychologist's perspective, Suler observes that "interpersonal relationships rarely form and develop by images alone" ("Image, Word, Action" 559). He says that *Flickr* participants communicate in three dimensions: textual (which he calls "verbal"), visual, and via the interpersonal actions that the site affords, such as Favourites. This latter observation can surely be supplemented by including the various games that groups configure within the constraints of the discussion forums. These often include submissions to a theme and voting to select a winning image. Suler describes the place in *Flickr* where one finds identity as one's "cyberpsychological niche" (556). However, many participants subscribe to multiple groups—45.6% of *Flickrites* who share images share them with more than 20 groups (Negoescu et al., "Analyzing Flickr Groups" 420). Is this a reflection of the existence of the *hyper-groups* they describe (2009) or, of the ranging that people do in search of a niche? It is also probable that some people explore more than a singular identity or visual style. Harrison and Bartell suggest that there are more interesting questions than why users create media products or what motivates them to do so:

> the more interesting questions center on understanding what users will choose to do ultimately with [Web2.0] capabilities […] in what terms to define the success of their efforts, and what impact the opportunity for individual and collaborative expression will have on the evolution of communicative forms and character. (167)

This paper addresseses such questions. It arises from a participatory observational context which differs from that of the research described above. It is intended that a different perspective about online group-based participation within the Flickr social networking matrix will avail. However, it will be seen that the themes cited in this introductory review prove pertinent.

Context

As a university teacher of a range of subjects in the digital media field, from contemporary photomedia to social media to collaborative multimedia practice, it is entirely appropriate that I embed myself in projects that engage, challenge and provide me with relevant first-hand experience. As an academic I also undertake and publish research. As a practicing new media artist I exhibit publically on a regular basis and consider myself semi-professional with respect to this activity. While there are common elements to both approaches to research, this paper is written more from

the point of view of 'reflective practice' (Holmes, "Reconciling Experimentum") rather than 'embedded ethnography' (Pink). It is necessarily and unapologetically reflexive.

Abstract Photography Hyper-Group

A search of all *Flickr* groups using the query "abstract" is currently likely to return around 14,700 results. However, only in around thirty of them does the group name, its stated rules and, the stream of images that flow through the pool arguably reflect a sense of collective concept and aesthetic that is coherently abstract. This loose complex of groups comprises a hyper-group. Members of these groups often have co-memberships, reciprocal contacts, and regularly post images to a range of groups and comment on others' posts to be found throughout.

Given that one of *Flickr's* largest groups, *Black and White*, currently has around 131,150 members and hosts 2,093,241 items in its pool, these abstract special interest groups are relatively small. The largest, *Abstract Photos*, has 11,338 members and hosts 89,306 items in its pool. The group that is the focus of this paper, *haphazart!*, currently has 2,536 members who have submitted 53,309 items.

The group pool is more like a constantly flowing river because the most recently added images are foremost. Older images become buried in an archive of pages which cannot be reverse accessed at a rate greater than the seven pages linked from a current view. A member's presence is most immediate through images posted to a pool. This structural feature of *Flickr* promotes a desire for currency; a need to post regularly to maintain presence.

Negotiating Coherence to the Abstract

The self-managing social dynamics in groups has, as Suler proposes to be the case for individuals, three dimensions: visual, textual and action. A group integrates the diverse elements, relationships and values which cumulatively constitute its identity with contributions from members in these dimensions. First impressions of that identity are usually derived from the group home page which consists of principal features: the group name, a selection of twelve most recent posts to the pool, some kind of description, a selection of six of the most recent discussion topics, and a list of rules (if any).

In some of these groups, what is considered to constitute an abstract photographic image is described on the group home page. In some it is left to be contested and becomes the topic of ongoing forum debates. In others the specific issue is not discussed—the images are left to speak for themselves. Administrators of some groups require that images are vetted for acceptance. In *haphazart!* particular administrators dutifully delete from the pool on a regular basis any images that they deem not to comply with the group ethic. Whether reasons are given or not is left to the individual prosecutor. Mostly offending images just disappear from the group pool without trace. These are some of the ways that the coherence of a group's visual identity is established and maintained.

Two groups out of the abstract photography hyper-group are noteworthy in that their discussion forums are particularly active. A discussion is just the start of a new thread and may have any number of posts under it. At time of writing *Abstract Photos* has 195 discussions and *haphazart!* — the most talkative by this measure—has 333. *Haphazart!* invites submissions of images to regularly changing themes. There is always lively and idiosyncratic banter in the forum over the selection of a theme. To be submitted an image needs to be identified by a specific theme tag as announced on the group home page. The tag can be added by the photographer themselves or by

anyone else who deems the image appropriate to the theme. An exhibition process ensues. Participant curators search all *Flickr* items according to the theme tag and select from the outcome images they deem to most appropriately and abstractly address the theme. Copies of the images together with comments by the curators are posted to a dedicated discussion board. Other members may also provide responses. This activity forms an ongoing record that may serve as a public indicator of the aesthetic that underlies the group's identity.

In *Abstract Photos* there is an ongoing discussion forum where one can submit an image and request that the moderators rule as to whether or not the image is 'abstract'. The same group has ongoing discussions labelled "Hall of Appropriate" where worthy images are reposted and celebrated and, "Hall of Inappropriate" where images posted to the group pool have been removed and relegated because abstraction has been "so far stretched from its definition that it now resides in a parallel universe" (Askin). Reasons are mostly courteously provided.

In *haphazart!* a relatively small core of around twelve group members regularly contribute to the group discussion board. A curious aspect of this communication is that even though participants present visually with a 'buddy icon' and most with a screen name not their real name, it is usual practice to address each other in discussions by their real Christian names, even when this is not evident in a member's profile. This seems to indicate a common desire for authenticity. The makeup of the core varies from time to time depending on other activities in a member's life. Although one or two may be professionally or semi-professionally engaged as photographers or artists or academics, most of these people would likely consider themselves to be "serious amateurs" (Cox). They are internationally dispersed with bias to the US, UK, Europe and Australia. English is the common language though not the natural tongue of some. The age range is approximately 35 to 65 and the gender mix 50/50. The group is three years old.

Where Do We Go to from Here?

In early January 2009 the *haphazart!* core was sparked into a frenzy of discussion by a post from a member headed "Where do we go to from here?" A proposal was mooted to produce a 'book' featuring images and texts representative of the group. Within three days a new public group with invited membership dedicated to the idea had been established. A smaller working party then retreated to a private *Flickr* group. Four months later Issue One of *haphazart! magazine* was available in print-on-demand and online formats.

Following however is a brief critically reflective review of some of the collaborative curatorial, editorial and production processes for Issue Two which commenced in early June 2009. Most of the team had also been involved with Issue One. I was the only newcomer and replaced the person who had undertaken the design for Issue One. I was not provided access to the prior private editorial ruminations but apparently the collaborative curatorial and editorial decision-making practices the group had previously established persisted, and these took place entirely within the discussion forums of a new dedicated private *Flickr* group. Over a five-month period there were 1066 posts in 54 discussions concerning matters such as: change of format from the previous; selection of themes, artists and images; conduct of and editing of interviews; authoring of texts; copyright and reproduction. The idiom of those communications can be described as: discursive, sporadic, idiosyncratic, resourceful, collegial, cooperative, emphatic, earnest and purposeful. The selection process could not be said to follow anything close to a shared manifesto, or articulation of style. It was established that there would be two primary themes: the square format and contributors' use of colour. Selection progressed by way of visual presentation and

counter presentation until some kind of consensus was reached often involving informal votes of preference.

Stretching the Limits of the *Flickr* Social Tools

The magazine editorial collaborators continue to use the facilities with which they are familiar from regular *Flickr* group participation. However, the strict vertically linear format of the *Flickr* discussion format is particularly unsuited to lengthy, complex, asynchronous, multithreaded discussion. For this purpose it causes unnecessary strain, fatigue and confusion. Where images are included, the forums have set and maximum display sizes and are not flexibly configured into matrixes. Images cannot readily be communally changed or moved about like texts in a wiki. Likewise, the *Flickrmail* facility is of limited use for specialist editorial processes. Attachments cannot be added.

This opinion expressed by a collaborator in the initial, open discussion for Issue One prevailed among Issue Two participants:

> do we want the members to go to another site to observe what is going on with the magazine? if that's ok, then using google groups or something like that might make sense; if we want others to observe (and learn from) the process - we may want to do it here [in *Flickr*]. (Valentine)

The opinion appears socially constructive; but because the final editorial process and production processes took place in a separate private forum, ultimately the suggested learning between one issue and the next did not take place. During Issue Two development the reluctance to try other online collaboration tools for the selection processes requiring visual comparative evaluation of images and trials of sequencing adhered. A number of ingenious methods of working within *Flickr* were devised and deployed and, in my opinion, proved frustratingly impractical and inefficient.

The digital layout, design, collation and formatting of images and texts, all took place on my personal computer using professional software tools. Difficulties arose in progressively sharing this work for the purposes of review, appraisal and proofing. Eventually I ignored protests and insisted the team review demonstrations I had converted for sharing in *Google Documents*. But, with only one exception, I could not tempt collaborators to try commenting or editing in that environment. For example, instead of moving the sequence of images dynamically themselves, or even typing suggestions directly into *Google Documents*, they would post responses in *Flickr*.

To Share and to Hold

From the first imaginings of Issue One the need to have as an outcome something *in one's hands* was expressed and this objective is apparently shared by all in the *haphazart!* core as an ongoing imperative. Various printing options have been nominated, discussed and evaluated. In the end one print-on-demand provider was selected on the basis of recommendation. The ethos of *haphazart!* is clearly not profit-making and conflicts with that of the printing organisation. Presumably to maintain an incentive to purchase the print copy online preview is restricted to the first 15 pages. To satisfy the co-requisite to make available the full 120 pages for free online viewing a second host that specialises in online presentation of publications is also utilised. In this way *haphazart!* members satisfy their common desires for sharing selected visual content and ideas with an online special interest audience *and*, for a physical object of

art to relish—with all the connotations of preciousness, fetish, talisman, trophy, and bookish notions of haptic pleasure and visual treasure. The irony of publishing a frozen chunk of the ever-flowing *Flickriver*, whose temporally changing nature is arguably one of its most interesting qualities, is not a consideration.

Most of them profess to be simply satisfying their own desire for self expression and would eschew any critical judgement as to whether this anarchic and discursive mode of operation results in a coherent statement about contemporary photographic abstraction. However there remains a distinct possibility that a number of core *haphazart!ists* aspire to transcend: popular taste; the discernment encouraged in camera clubs; and, the rhetoric of those involved professionally (Bourdieu et al.); and seek to engage with the "awareness of illegitimacy and the difficulties implied by the constitution of photography as an artistic medium" (Chamboredon 130).

Incoherence: A Technical Note

My personal experience of photography ranges from the filmic to the digital (Holmes, "Bridging Adelaide"). For a number of years I specialised in facsimile graphic reproduction of artwork. In those days I became aware that films were 'blind' to the psychophysical affect of some few particular paint pigments. They just could not be reproduced. Even so, as I handled the dozens of images contributed to *haphazart!²*, converting them from the pixellated place where *Flickr* exists to the resolution and gamut of the ink based colour space of books, I was surprised at the number of hue values that exist in the former that do not translate into the latter. In some cases the affect is subtle so that judicious tweaking of colour levels or local colour adjustment will satisfy discerning comparison between the screenic original and the 'soft proof' that simulates the printed outcome. In other cases a conversion simply does not compute. I am moved to contemplate, along with Harrison and Bartell (op. cit.) just how much of the experience of media in the shared digital space is incomparably new?

Acknowledgement

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