

Exploring Memory Groups on Flickr

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Independent Study
May 2008
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Following historian Kelvin Lee Klein's admonition on the writing of memory discourses as a huge, often unwieldy affair, and after his advice to carefully investigate various uses of the concept, I will explore the relationship between memory, computer-mediated communication, and the photo sharing website and online community Flickr by first discussing Vannevar Bush's 1952 article in *Atlantic Monthly*, *As We May Think*. Bush described a machine of the future: the memex, a personal machine that allowed its owner to record information via screens, photography, a device that resembles present-day computer scanners, and a keyboard. He compared the operational logic of the memex to memory trails in the brain, which he understood as associative links of ideas and images. On the memex, one could record and create research trails by describing and coding information. At any given point, that information could be recalled in its original form and with its associated links, freeing humans, especially scientists, of having to re-gather and re-order data. The memex would aid the historian in research, allowing for the recording of information, the following of prior data trails, and the expansion of existing ones. It was an active receptacle for information, retaining information changes while continuing to hold previous iterations of information and allowing for humans to trace each other's trails. Bush had conceived a machine that could remember for humans, and help humans to remember.

"As We May Think" presents two ideas in tension with one another that have since characterized much of popular and academic literature on memory and computers: one idea is expressive of a utopian desire for machine (computer) memory to enhance human memory, while the other contends with the possibility that machine memory might completely replace the human ability to remember events in the distant past. Recent scholarship analyzes this tension from an interdisciplinary approach to formulate frameworks for understanding "memory" in terms of contingency, recollection, lived experience, digital technology, media "objects", and communication networks. Jose van Dijk argues that human memories are always mediated through the passage of time, through

“media” such as photographs or videos or the computer, and also through the construction of narratives of personal and group identity. She criticizes the separation of “machine”/“media” memory (associated with “storage”) with human memory; her “mediated memories” are embodied in the brain, enabled by technologies, and embedded in culture.¹ Belinda Barnet expands Bush’s ideas of memory with the introduction of computer networks and nodes of human interaction. Her research assembles narratives of the early history of computers and networks such as Arpanet to the present, and she concludes that the Internet is metonymic of a “cultural memory” experienced on an infinitely larger and more configurable scale of users.²

These tensions, and Bush’s dream of the memex and its associative trails are a metaphor for my attempts to study the “memory trails”—photos, comments, and other traces of communication—of several groups belonging to Flickr, a massive photo sharing website and online community. Groups are created by and comprised of members who upload, tag, and discuss photos that they categorize by theme, event, idea, etc. Some groups are quite large, with thousands of members and thousands of photographs in their “photostream”, the complete set of photos that have been uploaded within a group, while other groups are quite small in member number but large in the quantity of photos each member has posted. Each group on Flickr varies in size, in member composition, in duration of activity and temporal differentiation (frenzied posting within a short amount of time, or slow accruals of photo and metadata, to name some of these differentiations), and in thematic content of photographs within each group. Flickr users can become members of many groups, and choose to spread their activity around without an easily distinguishable consistency.

¹ Jose van Dijk, *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age* (Stanford Press, 2007), 28.

² Belinda Barnet, “Pack-Rat or Amnesiac? Memory, the Archive and the Birth of the Internet,” *Continuum, Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, Jul 2001, Vol. 15 Issue 2, 217-231

On a meta-observational level, the Flickr groups described in this paper are self-consciously creating “memory trails” and are exploring how computer technology, photography, and social relationships of sharing relate to human memory. One Flickr project/group that I found created by the Institute for the Future of The Book and titled The Gates: An Experiment in Collective Memory (Gates Memory Project) even embarked upon a similar exploration to my own in terms of thinking about the metaquestions of group memory, Flickr as archive, and the ephemerality of Web communication. Ben Vershbow, editorial director at IFB and founder of the short lived/aborted Gates Memory project describes the attempt to negotiate the fluid, ongoing experiences of social media and the World Wide Web:

“It could be argued that the web is itself one enormous collective memory. Like memory, it is in a constant state of growth, transformation and decay. Like memory, it is layered, it sprawls, and is traversed both by brightly lit boulevards and shadowed alleyways. To cope with this enigma, humans have always created works that help fix or focus the memory.

How do we use social software (like Flickr) to create works that are in the spirit of the "infinite game" of the web – i.e. free-form, ad hoc, always evolving, and driven by people's enthusiasm to share - but are also edited and shaped into something of lasting value?”

In order to contextualize the considerations of “memory” metaphors within these Flickr groups, I have tried to link my findings to some historic ideas of memory, including Frances' Yates study of the classical art of memory and the ancient Greek practice of remembering objects and images to remember concepts or other aspects of verbal communication; Maurice Halbwachs' idea of collective memory, ritual and routinized activity as a way of organizing a social group's interactions; and some recent writing on the cultural practice of Web memorialization. Additionally I should mention that the groups I have researched

are not 1:1 embodiments of the concepts “mnemonic” or “collective memory” or “memorializing” that I have linked to them. I hope to show that they are variations and mutations of these concepts and like the many discourses of memory, they are continually evolving and transforming.

Photography and Memory: Some Considerations

I will briefly discuss the relationship between photography and memory, and also outline some introductory problems in the examination of digital photography and a photo sharing platform like Flickr. There are numerous trajectories of research and I can only name a few of them in this paper. Studies of photography and memory are often linked to ideas of a historical past and of preserving a moment in the historical past, and some historians seek to articulate how photographs help an individual to construct narratives of the past in conjunction with such activities as assembling family albums or collecting images. Other cultural critics emphasize the process of looking at a photo as itself a phenomenological and ontological engagement with history. Roland Barthes, for example, comments upon the experience of looking at photographs and thinking about the past as a personal activity that is not without its ontological challenges. To Barthes, the photograph initially denies access to the viewer: its content is transparent because it is directly attached to its material self. Upon closer, sustained looking, the persons, places and objects within a photograph may come into “being” and convey its nature as historical evidence, and communicate to a viewer a sense of the irrefutable past.³ Yet another kind of project completely different from the idea of photography, personal memory and personal history is one that emphasizes the circulation of iconic photographs in mass media, their rhetorical and cultural power, and how such images are used to create “collective memories” and ideas of history. Robert Hariman and John Louise Lucaites, for example, write about how the “accidental napalm” photo of the Vietnam War was appropriated by various groups at different moments in time (from the sixties until the present) to

³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*,

construct discourses of war, peace, American conquest and violence while advocating a kind of collective memory formed around the photograph.

To make things more complicated, digital photography in the era of computers, networks and mass media sharing platforms render ideas of “irrefutable past” problematic, as it does the distinction between “personal” “private” memory and “collective memory”; for example, argues that digital images can be endlessly manipulated and recontextualized to serve an infinity of ends, and can be viewed by a large population of people, though not necessarily one that may be specifiable⁴. I do not wish to provide an ontology of digital photography, the “memory” of computer technology and networks, and the positioning of human memory in between the two. I don’t think such a clear ontology or causal relationship exists. Flickr is a hybrid of an index, content filter, and participatory website for digital photographs. It connects large and small groups of people, is mutable in form, and makes the question of photography and, for example, a strictly “personal” or subjective memory a difficult one to answer. Additionally, if we are to follow Jay David Bolter’s remediation argument, photography on the Web is no longer a “pure” medium- it is a re-presentation of content and a remediation of experience, and as such rendered all the more difficult to assess based on a set of formal aesthetic criteria.⁵ The same digital photograph can appear on one’s camera, on one’s phone, on one’s private password-protected myspace page, printed out photographic paper, recirculated all over the Web on Flickr and end up on the front page of a newspaper. There are endless variations of the digital photographic image and its presentation and representation. The same can then be said, to some extent, of explicit “memory” criteria in relation to photography on Flickr.

I believe there is a powerful argument to be made about the meanings and the interpretative depth that individuals can attribute to specific images on Flickr. My

⁴ Lev Manovich,

⁵ Jay David Bolter, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

project, however, mainly concerns the work of groups together working on building visual and textual chains and patterns of communication based on ideas of memory through association, recollection, and memorialization. The Flickr photographs uploaded by members of each group that I studied are images of people, places and objects that have a direct relation to a “past” reality that is contingent on innumerable factors, but as I shall show, some of these pasts are shared events in time and space, and recorded via photographs.

My Memory Project and its Methodology:

Flickr presents an interesting challenge to the researcher because the collections of photographs on the website are so dense, and to some extent, haphazardly organized. By this I mean that when examining photographs there is not organizational logic, such as the Dewey decimal system but rather an associative logic based on the tags that users give to their photos.⁶ As mentioned before, online photographs and the comments and traces that are attached to them are unstable, subject to alteration and even to removal at any given moment in time by any number of persons including Flickr’s system and group administrators, or the photographers themselves. Within each group, members have their own accounts where their work can be further organized and individualized. Many photographers use Flickr as a kind of online portfolio for their work, but their work is never fully isolated from the photo sharing context and they receive continual comments on their work from other members.

On Flickr, members can create “groups” that are named after themes, objects, places, events— essentially any desired category with the exception of what the system administrators at Yahoo, the company that owns Flickr, deem as graphic or offensive content. Once these entities are created, group founders (very often the organizers leading the codification of behavior in a group) can establish regulations and guidelines for posting, tagging and discussing photographs, and can also designate group administrators to make sure that the objective of the

group is maintained. Although a small number of Flickr groups are invitation only, most are open to the public to join so long as one possesses a Flickr account, which can be obtained by creating a free Yahoo e-mail address. Users can set photos to private (limited to specific users) or public viewing and can tag and annotate photos.

My preliminary investigation involved searching online in Flickr for groups that had the word “memory” appended to their names. After discovering several groups that interested me with their memory projects, I interviewed a number of each specific group’s members. Specifically, the groups that I looked at were:

Memory Maps

Maps from Memory

The Gates: An Experiment in Collective Memory

I evaluated the projects and Flickr groups on a number of factors, including the number of members of a group, member activity of a group starting from its creation to peak activity and decline, the photos contained within one thematic or otherwise organized set and the comments associated with the photos. Finally, I tried to connect my findings with historic ideas of memory to understand the kinds of memory projects that these groups were pursuing.

Memory Maps and From Memory: Mnemonics and Remembering Space

“Mnemonics”, or as historian Frances Yates calls it, the “art of memory” was a form of pedagogy and practice in ancient Greece that addressed the process and the patterns associated with memorizing ideas, words, phrases, images, places for future recollection and more specifically for speechmaking purposes. Yates discusses the classical practice of the art of memory at length, explaining how rhetoricians from Cicero used the technique of loci by linking words and images to objects and places in space. This act helped orators to remember ideas

through the creation and repetition of circuits and paths of such spatial and imagistic associations. As Yates states:

“It is not difficult to get hold of the general principles of the mnemonic. The first step was to imprint on the memory a series of loci or places. The commonest, though not the only, type of mnemonic place system used was the architectural type...The images by which the speech is to be remembered...are then placed in imagination on the places which have been memorized in the building. This done, as soon as the memory of the facts requires to be reviewed, all these places are visited in turn and the various deposits demanded of their custodians. We have to think of the ancient orator as moving in imagination through his memory building whilst he is making his speech, drawing from the memorized places the images he has placed on them.”⁷

Yates’ history of the practice of mental paths drawn by ancient orators can be compared to more contemporary ideas of mental mapping and spatial navigation in the context of urban environs. The introduction to Kevin Lynch’s *Image of the City* argues that human experiences, particularly the experience of the city dweller, cannot be isolated, but must be conceived “in relation to surroundings, the sequences of human events leading up to an experience, and the memory of past experiences.”⁸ In the 1960s, Lynch created a study to look at how urban residents navigated their way through what might be a confusing combination of streets, buildings, bridges, hills—essentially the whole array of physical structures and geographical features that might be found in a city-- by mentally mapping certain landmarks or topographic features, and then remembering them en route. After interviewing residents of Boston, Jersey City, and Los Angeles and asking them to draw, from memory, maps of the cities they lived in, Lynch noted that, despite differences between each individual’s hand-drawn map, a large proportion recalled the layout of the city by remembering many of the same

⁷ Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 3.

⁸ Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), 1.

landmarks or features. In the same study, Lynch also asked the Boston residents to recall certain emotional associations they had with specific areas or objects in the city, hoping to promote his end-goal of revising city planning to be more “imageable”, abundant in “qualities in a physical object which give it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer...shape, color, or arrangement which facilitates the making of vividly identified, powerfully structured, highly useful mental images of the environment.”⁹ Unlike the disciplined, routinized “art of memory” practiced by the ancient orators, the residents Lynch interviewed did not have a kind of organized method for remembering locational relationships. Lynch then generalized upon this study to argue that the creation of an “environmental image” was crucial not only as a map for movement through space, but also for providing a “general frame of reference within which the individual can act, or to which he attaches his knowledge...an organizer of facts and possibilities.”¹⁰

The intersection of the creation of mental images and mapping based on recollection in Yates’ and Lynch’s studies can contextualize my examination of the interaction and communication of two groups on Flickr, “From Memory” and “Memory Maps.” Initially, individuals from both groups posted photos of maps they had created based around the idea of mapping memory. Members of both Flickr groups uploaded photographs of maps and used them to describe (using text) personal associations of specific locations on the maps. In the case of “Memory Maps”, members described recollections of familiar places by annotating satellite photos of maps. Members who joined the groups created similar maps, creating concatenations of one of two different memory mapping memes that will be described below.¹¹

⁹ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰ Ibid., 8-9.

¹¹ I would also like mention an instance where individual members upload photos to Flickr as a memory aid, without doing so in the context of a group. On the technological advice and discussion weblog LifeHacker, editor Gina Trapani writes about using one’s cameraphone or digital camera “in conjunction with Flickr as photographic memory.” Her entry, “Geek to live: Develop your (digital) photographic memory”, provides tips on how to use one’s cameraphone and text messaging service to take digital photos, e-mail them to one’s personal Flickr account

From Memory

“From Memory” (formerly “Maps From Memory”) was a Flickr group created in January 31, 2007 with 185 members and 75 photos on its photostream, with the top five contributing members posting over half of the photos. The description at the bottom of the group’s webpage on Flickr asks members to post and comment upon the following:

For maps, diagrams etc, drawn without the aid of references.

For example: can you draw a map of the world from memory, without cheating and sneaking a look at an Atlas? No? Excellent! Put it up here and give us all a laugh.

From a conversation with one of the original members of the group, I learned that the group was created “as a joke”, but quickly became sizable in member number and in the number of posted photos. A Flickr member “bollops” from England (who later became the group’s founder) described the map of Europe that he first drew:

I've decided to compete with Google Maps.

No, this is not a satellite image. This is my map of Europe drawn BY HAND on the computer FROM MEMORY.

(set to private view), and tag the photo with messages or reference notes to oneself that will be later retrieved through accessing Flickr. By looking at these photos and their accompanying tags, one remembers certain places or ideas associated with the photo. Trapani uses the example of going to a store, snapping photos of an item with her cameraphone, tagging the photos with information such as the location, name of the store, and a memo to “look price up at home”, and sending them to her Flickr account via text messaging. Later on, while logged in to her Flickr account, her previous actions have provided her with a photograph-memory object and visual-cognitive reminder to “look up the price at home.” Other suggestions by Trapani (and added to by users commenting on her blog) include snapping photos of serial numbers in one’s home inventory, store hours, URLs on signs, the names and numbers of contacts on a physical business cards that one might lose, etc.

I've had it checked by cartographers and it is accurate to 1 millionth of a millimetre.¹²

After a comment posted by visitor requesting that more maps from memory be created, bollocks responded with

“Now there's an idea! Maybe we should have a competition to see who can do the best one from memory. In fact, I'm gonna start a group for it.”¹³

Members draw maps “from memory”, without the aid of maps drawn by professional cartographers or consulting official sources of data. They photograph the drawings, post and name them, and use the accompanying discussion areas of each photo to admire each other's work. With these maps (or rather photographed drawings of maps), members satirize specific cities, countries and continents of the world by drawing exaggerated geographical features, landmarks national symbols or images associated with cultural stereotypes. The maps also include hyperbolic short captions of locations on the map, and many of these captions and notes refer to personal or cultural associations with a specific location.

Memory Maps

'Memory Maps' is a Flickr group founded in 2005 with 623 members, 726 photos in its photostream. The group was created by Matt Katsner and became quite popular in a short amount of time, due in part to the large publicity it received in web logs and print media. Instead of drawing maps from memory and photographing them, as members do in the abovementioned group 'From Memory', members of the Flickr group 'Memory Maps' take satellite images of cities from the database of GoogleEarth or other websites with similar visual

content and annotate them with personal accounts of the past, short personal reflections of specific places, buildings, roads—anything that they are able to locate in grainy satellite images. Much of the content expresses nostalgia for a place where certain childhood memories might have taken place, or where the urban landscape may have changed, and often takes on a kind of strange, displaced narrative quality. For example, one map might have several annotated locations, events or time periods taking place over many years.

The satellite “memory” maps are then uploaded to the Flickr group and shared with other members, creating an interactive experience where anyone looking at the map can use a computer mouse, roll over a boxed area, and read the location’s annotation. In some instances, members share familiarity with the annotated events and locations of a specific memory map, and use the group’s discussion thread to elaborate upon an annotation, or to respond to a previously posted comment. For example, when a group member named Season Moore uploaded a ‘Memory Map’ of Smyrna, Georgia some members from the same area offered up comments on past experiences in the same locale. She described the map as :

“I lived here from birth until December 31, 1997 when we decided on New Years Eve to move. And just like that, the next day we did... Wow, this was hard. Anyone familiar with the area can probably find lots of mistakes! It’s a work in progress, I’ll add more as I think of them.”

Throughout Season Moore’s memory map, one can click on the sites tagged corresponding to their locations, and read such notes as:

“I slid through a red light here in a rain storm by complete miracle no one hit me”

“285 Atlanta Perimeter- where I learned to drive like a maniac”

“The mall when I worked at B Dalton high school”

“to the west is six flags where I worked at age 15. It was an awful job where I was paid next to nothing to wear a black poodle skirt in Ga summer heat while people bitched about the games being rigged so no one could win”

“the old library was here. It was small, dark and smelled funny.”

“There used to be a little mall here with a theater and a Rich’s. We hung out, there was a good bit. There was also a woolworth’s here when I was young

“galleria mall, where lisa and I met some boys one night. Talked to my guy on the phone and then one day I get a call from the police because he has run away and was threatening suicide and gave them my name as a contact.”

“we lived here”

“ellen lived here, she was older and my ride until I turned 16”

Several members of the group posted comments indicating familiarity with the locales in SeasonMoore’s memory map:

nsmom03 Pro User says:

Richway?? I haven't heard that name in forever :-) I remember going to those when I was little!

Amber B McN Pro User says:

That library DID smell funny!! This is great, what a good idea... (Funny too, I decided to move from GA on New Year's 1997)

Season Moore says:

Ha! I hated when I had to go to the library! Have you been to the new "downtown" area? It's so pretty. I wish we would have had that back in the day!

I know there is more that I am forgetting, but I am drawing a blank. Feel free to add notes!

Owen B. Pro User says:

For some reason reading this map and your notes, and a few of the comments here, reminds me STRONGLY of the feeling I get when I read Douglas Coupland books...

Such an exchange between members is typical and frequently occurs on the discussion thread below each map uploaded to the Flickr Memory Maps photostream. After posting, members comment upon the experiences, events and locations on a given map. In some instances, the map is collaborative and members may add tags to each other's memory maps; otherwise, the map may be considered collaborative in terms of feeding the creator ideas. Like Season Moore, the creator of a map may add more tags and annotations based on member comments that conjure up forgotten memories of an event or place.

Collective Memory on Flickr and the Gates Memory Project

The associative trails of Institute for the Future of the Book's Flickr group allowed me to connect their photographic project with another set of historic ideas of memory, namely collective memory, public memory, and memorialization. In 1952 Maurice Halbwachs famously theorized about collective memory as a conscious phenomenon with temporal and social contingency, distinct from the images of dreams. In *On Collective Memory*, memory, as shared ritual, belief system, social activity or widely accepted thought, was both an action and a condition that Halbwachs believed could be integrated into a functional, coherent "society" and its various family or religious groups. Through the passage of time, memory would become constitutive of the group and inseparable from their identity. More recently, Kelvin Lee Klein notes that the term "collective memory" has been associated with traumatic experiences (or a

specific shared experience) of an ethnic, religious, or other form of social organization and identity, perhaps moving away from Halbwach's idea of a collective memory based on rituals, common ideologies and shared practices of everyday living toward a collective memory around a shared history of rupture. Collective memory permeates discourses of memorialization and the commemoration of events or locations with objects, sites, documents and stories.

Ekaterina Hansen writes that the participation of the public in creating online memorials on World Wide Web have put into question the roles of professional archivists and historians, traditionally guardians of "memory", in constructing stable monuments or documents commemorating certain events. To note a recent example, scholars from a number of fields have discussed the creation of vernacular memorials in the form of interactive and collaborative websites on the World Wide Web, such as memorials dedicated to those who experienced loss on September 11, 2001 (firefighters, or more generally to those that perished in the attacks.) Just as visitors to Ground Zero remembered the victims of the attack by leaving ephemera around the site, so users posted a whole array of photos, text, and multimedia content on the websites of such online memorials.¹⁴ Some of these online memorials, such as the September 11 Digital Archive, were part of institutional efforts to create a vernacular memorial open to public contribution. Although the September 11th Digital Archive was more formalized in its online structure and was primarily conceived and publicized by an organization of professional curators at the American Social History Project at City University of New York and the Center for History and New Media at George Mason university, it "[did] not promote a univocal, self-aggrandizing narrative...the archive epitomize[d] inclusiveness and welcomes submissions in multiple forms and media."¹⁵ Visitors to the archive were encouraged to submit stories, images, and text to create polyphonic media narratives about their experiences on September 11, and share with others how

¹⁴ Ekaterina Haskins, *Between Archive and Participation: Public Memory in a Digital Age*, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 27 (2007): 404

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 410.

the event had changed their lives. Haskins' idea of collaboration is echoed in Jose Van Dijk's idea of "collective memory" as multiplicities that are changing but can be socially agreed upon: "Of course we can never speak of a unified collective memory; instead there are numerous networks, platforms and sites for constructing versions of a communal past. Collective memories are achieved through negotiation and consensus building among a variety of remembering subjects. It is in the public spaces between individuals, technologies, and communities that memory is shaped and negotiated."

Using Flickr's massive user base and its photo sharing platform, New York City-based online think tank The Institute on the Future of the Book (IFB) explored similar ideas of collective memory and public participation. Before focusing on the changing of the book in networked culture, IFB experimented with projects involving social media and investigating the creation of collaborative discursive environments online. One such endeavor was the 2005 Gates Memory Project, also called "The Gates: An Experiment in Collective Memory". Editors, including present day editorial director Ben Vershbow, were inspired by the claim that the Gates, an multimillion dollar and sixteen day art installation in Central Park, spearheaded by artists Jeanne Claude and Christo, would be "the most photographed art event ever." They envisioned a project in search of "collective memory" that would allow those who had visited the Gates to share photographs of their experiences with one another and with the general public. Bob Stein, founder of IFB, posted the following optimistic entry on the official Gates Memory Project blog:

"We are aiming to harness the creativity and insight of thousands to build a kind of collective memory machine — one that is designed not just for the moment, but as a definitive document of the Gates and our experience of them.

The blog encouraged visitors of the Gates to post their photos on an IFB-created "Gates Memory" Flickr group that would also be linked back to the official IFB

Gates Memory blog. IFB editors publicized the project on its blog during the last few days of The Gates' installation in Central Park, and also connected with the administrators of Flickr to have the official Flickr blog announce the project and seek the participation of Flickr users. Over 3,000 photos were posted by members that joined the Gates Memory group over two days in March 2005. During this time, IFB editors posted entries on the Gates Memory blog expressing their hopes that members of the Gates Memory group would participate in the discussion of taking the massive collection of photos in the Flickr Gates Memory group and organizing them into some kind of "collective memory" of the event.

As Ben Vershbow writes in the press release announcing the project,

"The photographs are a jumping off point for further exploration. Ultimately, we are interested in collecting anything that can be shared over the web – film, audio, text – parodies and remixes. While the photos and stories are being collected, the institute will encourage discussion and debate on how best to present the archives in hopes of finding new, unexpected ways to view and bring meaning to the content.

An integral part of the Gates Memory Project is a public space for discussion of these meta issues...We'll also examine the process of building a work of collective memory in digital space, using the Gates as a pivot point for larger contemplations.

An obvious example is a book, painting, photograph, or film. Similarly, in public space, we have museums, memorials, and monuments. Certainly, there was something monumental about the Gates. But while some monuments fix a spike in the earth, as if to say "here it was," others establish a frame, or space, in which memories can move and reverberate. This second sort of monument, much more like the Gates, is a good place to start thinking about what we are trying to build with this project: a work with defined dimensions that still allows for unpredictable movement within, and which, like a great acoustical structure, is designed to resonate.

And of course, the blog will also serve as a forum for discussion of the Gates themselves – their design, their politics, their message, their role in the life of the city, their place in the larger mediascape. And it will be a place to offer stories and personal meditations on those sixteen days when the Gates stood.

Ben also proposed some ideas to move the project beyond its form as a massive collection of images of the Gates that people had posted (or “dumped”, as he called it) in the IFB Flickr group and to organize them into a more interactive experience. One of the idea included creating an advanced programming interface with a slideshow where users could look at the entire collection of photos and choose on a sliding meter whether or not to “remember” or /’forget” a specific photo. Based on the selection, users could see the photos on a grid with the most memorable photos highlighted, down to the least memorable photos that would eventually disappear from the archive. Ben also proposed another interactive idea he called “Half Life”, where the archive of photos would decay as less and less users interacted with it, and involved turning the photos in the archive into a collective art project, where users could drag and drop photos into a string of photos connected like dominos, based on similar visual connections:

Despite the editors’ posted intentions to go further with the project, IFB and the Gates Memory Project failed to create any sort of interest amongst those posting photos. In an interview, Vershbow noted that Flickr was limited as a “media ghetto” where people dumped photographs and he found that it would have been impossible to create any meaningful documentation of an event or discourse beyond a short period of time, in this case beyond the month or so after the Gates stood in Central Park. On the Collective Memory Gates photostream, people posted over 3,000 photographs of The Gates over several days, but they did not contribute ideas to the furthering of the project. Nor did they comment upon any of the ideas suggested by the editors as to creating a collective memory on the official IFB blog- the total responses to blog entries when Ben asked “Where do we go from here” was zero. Compared to the other Flickr groups in the paper, the Gates Memory project ultimately failed because the official IFB blog never became a truly discursive environment with visitors that returned to it. Users did not communicate with each other on the Gates Memory group on Flickr, and there were limitations with Flickr’s interface that prohibited further experimentation with the Gates photographs that might move the project

towards some of the ideas that Ben had suggested. Vershbow informed me that there was never enough effort on IFB's part to create a sense of community among users posting on the blog, and also not enough technical expertise among IFB editors at that time to develop a computer program with the kind of interactive capabilities that might have moved the Gates Memory Project into a new expression of, or attempt to show "collective memory" on the Web.

Despite the dissipation of the Gates Memory Project, the Gates Memory group's photos and related commentary are preserved as hypertext documents on Flickr, and may be queried and retrieved on any World Wide Web search engine. Even if the project was not as participative or as distinct from the structure of Flickr as IFB had hoped, perhaps the Gates Memory Project is a digital "monument" to the many visitors of the Gates and photo archive of a past effort to strategize and conceptualize "collective memory". Three years later, users continue to add photographs to the Gates Memory group, although not at the pace of activity as to be expected during the last few days of its tenure in Central Park.

Flickr as Memory Archive

Finally, it would be impossible to write about Flickr, ideas of memory and photography without discussing theories of the archive, of accumulating information and images, and of opportunities for interpretation and reinterpretation a collection of objects, images, and documents. Like the associative trails and records that serve as physical memory objects in Bush's memex machine, the fear of forgetting and the desire to preserve thoughts and ideas through recording inform theories of the archive. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates lamented the degeneration of memory by arguing that its importance in argumentation, telling stories, and articulating ideas through speech (as aids to the rhetorician) would be lost with the influence of writing as a means of recording and preserving. This argument was modulated and extended in Walter Ong's idea of cultures that went through stages of "orality" and "literacy". To Ong,

cultures lost mnemonic-based knowledge and oral art forms when language was mediated, expressed and documented by the technologies of the alphabet, written symbols, and later in inventions such as the printing press and the book. More specifically, French philosopher Jacques Derrida states that the archive, a locus where an ordered knowledge “commences” and “commands”, is characterized by a tension he calls “archive fever”: it simultaneously desires to preserve itself, but must suffer its own forgetting each time it is subject to a new memory, a new inscription upon itself. Inspired by Freud’s Mystic Writing Pad, the Derridean archive is a topos and a psychic entity characterized by a death drive, a continuous impression and repression that is worked through in its “jealous” logic of completeness and its need for order and for legitimization. Again, this subject is reminiscent of Vannevar Bush’s idea of the memex memory machine and the problems of an overly positivistic desire to record and store everything, coupled with the possibility (and reality) of human forgetting.

It should be remembered that Flickr’s photo sharing platform is, like the “media ghettos” centralized storage container with a corporate owner- Yahoo! as of 2006- Flickr-created community guidelines and the means to enforce improper and offensive content. Conceived as an organized container with rules, regulations and managers of its content, Flickr’s architecture resembles the double meaning of the word “archive” in its Greek meaning proposed by Derrida: as mentioned, Flickr is a place where archives commence, and where the custodians command and impose order upon the contents of the archive. Those who command (system administrators, coders, developers, etc.) shape the container that is Flickr through design and programming limitations, though developers are allowed to use Flickr for third-party programming uses. At the highest level of management, system administrators and programmers at Flickr possess the ability to remove entire collections of photos and eradicate traces of user activity, thereby controlling the information-objects. The group administrators of Flickr, however, actively participate in the management of their particular members’ photos and comments.

All of the activities and trails that I have studied fall within the greater archive of Flickr itself. The photographs and comments are part of a dynamic collection that continues to grow and to multiply and change form, whether it be through the continual addition of photos by members, the creation of new groups and the neglecting of older groups, and the extension of Flickr hyperlinks to external web site. Flickr members throughout the world also meet up regularly, advertising their MeetUps on the website and holding parties that are photographed, posted on Flickr and discussed on group threads. As Mike Featherstone writes, “the digital archive should not be seen as just a part of the contemporary ‘record and storage mania’ facilitated by digital technologies, but as providing a fluid, processual, dynamic archive, in which the topology of documents can be reconfigured again and again.”¹⁶ Flickr administrators and staff are currently launching video capabilities for members, further adding to the density and configurability of the archive.

Memory Work on Flickr and Its Challenges

My study has demonstrated the challenges of a researcher trying to grasp ephemeral and intersecting “memory trails” on Flickr. Like the practitioners of the ancient art of memory, I have tried to create a path based on remembered images, ideas and associations that might translate into some kind of narrative, using “mnemonic” “personal memory” and “collective memory” as a loose conceptual map that I have created to explore the metaquestions in Flickr “memory” groups. I feel that the project is in part a failure, because the ties that I tried to draw together are somewhat diffuse. My experiment has attempted to look at Flickr broadly and narrowly, and I have only been able to take a miniscule glimpse into several of Flickr’s hundreds of thousands of groups.

¹⁶ Scott Featherstone. “Archive.” *Theory, Culture & Society*. 2 (May 2006): 596.

In *Between Archive and Participation*, Ekaterina Haskins argues that “digital memory...collapses the assumed distinction between modern ‘archival’ memory and traditional ‘lived’ memory by combining the function of storage and ordering on the one hand, and of presence and interactivity on the other.” Although I am hasty to argue that something “digital memory” exists, the streams of photos on Flickr and the social relationships and activities that are associated with the photos do indeed collapse the distinction between ideas of storage and of interactivity. Through group photo sharing and commentary, discourses of memory are circulated. They are playfully challenged through imitation and narrative forms, as with the Memory Maps and From Memory groups; or remain open questions of possibility, like the failed, yet still present, Gates Memory Project.

It is impossible to say that Flickr shows us one form of memory or another (personal or collective? the distinction is blurry on the Web and on a photo sharing platform), or that Flickr, the Web and computers are kind of combined media “memory prosthetic”, a term that does not account for the nuances of imagers and the diverse interactions are enabled through such technologies, nor for the cultural practices that contextualize, for example, shared memories or collective events such as The Gates or the attacks of September 11, 2001. Researchers should look at emergent forms of “memory” practices and narratives on the Web and continue to critically examine discourses and metaphors of “memory”, as incongruous or ambiguous as they might be. I hope also to have demonstrated that Flickr is a rich environment for those who wish to explore ideas of memory in various disciplines: it must be explored for the breadth and depth of photos, commentary and documentation by members, and for the process of following memory traces. It is by no means an easy place to work or conduct research, but it is vast in its configurability, intensive and extensive, and

a place of “seduction”, as one historian describes the delight of discovery and the pleasure of weaving objects and ideas together in the archive.¹⁷

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