

# **(in)significance: a discussion about values and valuing in heritage**

Friday 15 May 2015, Ann Harding Conference Centre, University of Canberra

Conveners: Tracy Ireland and Steve Brown

**Symposium abstract.** The notion of 'significance' is a central concept for heritage conservation in many parts of the world—it describes what the institutions of heritage choose to remember and what they choose to forget. Used in American historic preservation legislation from the late 19th century, and in the 1964 Venice Charter, in Australia the Burra Charter (Australia ICOMOS 1979) introduced the phrase 'places of cultural significance', a concept that emphasised meanings over monuments. Determining significance is a process of ascribing values—culturally constructed meanings or qualities attributed by individuals and groups to a heritage object, place or landscape. Valuing heritage has led to practices that typically list, rank and then privilege particular values—at world, national and local levels. At the symposium we hope to explore the history, theory and practical application of the concept of significance and broach the idea of insignificance.

## **NOTES ON SESSION 3: practice-led theory**

<b>Session 3</b> <b><i>Practice-led theory</i></b> 14.00 – 15.30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ What is the ongoing influence of modernist concepts of universal value?</li><li>▪ How does significance assessment intersect with concepts of ethics, social justice and sustainability?</li><li>▪ How do concepts of significance work within the digital domain?</li></ul>	
14:00 – 14.10	Case Study 1. Significance at scale - understanding the value of 150 million newspaper articles	Tim Sherratt
14.10 – 14.20	Case Study 2. Significance in the digital domain	Geoff Hinchcliffe
14.20 – 14.30	Case Study 3. Sustainable Heritage vs Sustainable Us	Veronica Bullock
14.30 – 14.40	Case Study 4. Museums as creative laboratories	Angelina Russo
14.40 – 14.50	Case Study 5. The political value of heritage	Tim Winter
14.50 – 15.00	Case Study 6. The ethics of insignificance	Tracy Ireland
15.00 – 15.30	Panel Discussion	Panel of 5 presenters Facilitator: Denis Byrne

### **Note on notes**

The following summary is not a verbatim transcript. Rather, the notes are a series of statements that seek to capture what was expressed and discussed. The notes are not intended for direct quotation in a scholarly sense, but rather they provide a flavor of the Session-2 discussion.

---

## Session 3 – *practice-led theory*

---

**Chair and Facilitator.** Denis Byrne (Senior Research Fellow, Institute for Culture and Society, University of Western Sydney).

**Speakers.** Tim Sherratt (Associate Professor of Digital Heritage, University of Canberra); Geoff Hinchcliffe (Assistant Professor in Media and Graphic Design, University of Canberra); Veronica Bullock (Significance International; PhD Candidate, The Australian National University); Angelina Russo (Associate Dean Research, Faculty of Arts and Design, University of Canberra); Tim Winter (Research Chair of Cultural Heritage, Deakin University Canberra); Tracy Ireland (Associate Professor, Heritage, Museums and Conservation, University of Canberra).

### DISCUSSION

Five speakers ascended the podium to form the session panel.

Denis Byrne. Angelina Russo has had to leave and won't be able to join us. I think it is obvious that we took a turn in this session toward the future and the virtual. We will follow the format of asking the speakers if they would put a question, either based on their paper or other concerns they have.

- Tracy Ireland. I loved Geoff's idea of DIY significance. That really rang a bell for me and in relation to some things I have been reading. I have been reading on the term disintermediation. It is about cutting out the role of the expert and is described as one of the effects of new digital modes of communication and promulgation of cultural material. So I think Geoff's idea of DIY significance is a good description of that. Where does this leave the expert? What rules should be put around cultural material? In heritage place management we talk a lot about compatible uses and how significance assessment sometimes helps us decide what uses are compatible or sympathetic to the significance that we have identified. I wonder where that will be going in the new digital networked environment?
- Geoff Hinchcliffe. Following that, I would add that curation is a powerful and important concept to keep in mind. It is something I did not address at all, but I think is huge in the domain I work in. While I was pushing the case for enabling people to make their own versions of significance and find their own way, in doing that project we also acknowledged the significance of curation. I don't think that is going to go. By enabling all that free discovery and research will underline the significance of curation, particularly in the digital sphere as the volumes of artefacts grow people will look to curators to bring value to the project.
- Tim Winter. A question. The intellectual value of the Burra Charter is typically presented in relation to policy presented in Europe several decades ago. There is now an increasingly diminishing return in presenting that. There is value in connecting in the international space with Asia, much more proactively. It is not just about exporting aid because Asia is moving beyond that. There needs to be a more balanced relationship with the region, the whole Asia-Pacific region. How do we nurture that relationship to be more than just flying people out to do consultancies? There is a big challenge there. How do we address that?

- Veronica Bullock. The point about curation as a form of selection that we can refine more. What has occurred to me after listening to the talks in this session is, as Denis suggested, there is a divide. My message was very serious. When I contrast that with the fun that the digital world presents, I wonder how can we make these two work together for this imaginary that we apparently need to build?
- Tim Sherratt. Interestingly I want to critique my own aspect of fun and pick up on Tracy and Tim's points on ethics. I didn't really show the positive side of significance in terms of the uses of something like Trove. I want to issue a challenge. How should I feel about another case? I showed you my QueryPic database. If you look in there it doesn't take you long to find some pretty vile racist stuff. Also, if you look on Twitter you will see one of the groups most active in sharing links to newspaper articles on Trove – climate change deniers. They find examples of past weather events and try to put them as evidence that climate change doesn't exist. So it is not all fun. There are challenges. People's ideas of significance can make us uncomfortable. My question is how should we feel about that?

***Audience questions in response to the panel's comments or any of the session papers.***

- **Name?** With all the advances in technology, and the ways people can be immersed in new experiences at their homes in their pajamas, is there a value in digitizing our collections, in digitizing our heritage, so that we are no longer putting resources into the physical thing? Rather, if we capture heritage digitally does it matter that the physical thing does not exist?
- Tim Sherratt. I think for those of us who work in the digital sphere, we try to avoid the binary between the real world and the digital; that it is one or the other. We see them as very much complementary. The sorts of thing that Geoff and I are talking about is that in digitizing this material, it does not detract from its expressions or the experience of being in the presence of something that is important. By digitizing, and with large-scale digital collections, we can do different things. I think it is difference that is important.
- Geoff Hinchcliffe. I think there are cases where the digital can preserve the physical. It is a site that is delicate, and that a digital record could help diminish traffic through a site. There are probably sacred sites, which Tracy could talk about, where custodians don't want the public to know about them. It would be great to document these sites digitally and let people experience them in some way. There is the **?** Hub in Hong Kong where, due to space, they collect but they don't take works. They digitize them and leave them on site. Yes, interesting examples where it is not a binary, as Tim said. It is a convenience of the digital.
- Tracy Ireland. I am lucky to work with all these digital folk at the University of Canberra. It has opened my eyes to this interesting dynamic that is developing. What has been most interesting for me is that it is putting more emphasis in this institution on the cultural sphere and the importance of collections and notions of authenticity and curation, etc. It is building new forms of collaboration and I think the digital is also building new forms of significance.
- **Robyn?** I am just reminded of how video was going to kill off cinema and rebirthing it. Once people have had a taste of something they want to go and get the full experience.
- Kelly Wiltshire (Flinders University, Adelaide). I am just wondering about the ethical implications of digital imprints of particular cultural things that may be held in

museums. What happens when those items get repatriated? Are the digital imprints kept in the museum? I am thinking of the particular case of Aboriginal human remains. I am wondering if the panel would like to comment to this issue?

- Tracy Ireland. I am going to sidestep your question a little. I work with a number of people who study photographs from the past, often of Indigenous people. It has been interesting to see how the researchers have been trying to develop a more nuanced approach to ethics and the way in which ethics are managed in cultural institutions. One of the arguments is that ethics managed as sets of hard and fast rules have unintended consequences in terms of shutting collections down and stymieing research. In some case this is preventing families from having free access to rummage and look for things. I am suggesting these kinds of ethical situations can be different in different circumstances and I would be wary of broad ethical codes put in place across different kinds of collections.
- Geoff Hinchcliffe. Certainly in digital collections there is the capacity to write and manage artefacts. There have been attempts made and projects done where particular artefacts have been flagged so that you can identify yourself as being from a particular group and those items will not come up in the particular search, for example. The Museum of Australia has done that for the very reasons Kelly talks about – there are certain items that some groups do not want seen. It is a small step. So it is possible, as Tracy said, to operationalise a notion of ethics in a mechanistic sense using computers. There could be gains, but it is fairly limited in how it is applied. Any other thoughts from the panel?
- Kristal Buckley. This is an intellectually agile room and I am a little overwhelmed by the discussions today. Tracy flagged a question to the panel: if we are taking the expert out of the equation – the notion of disintermediation – then what is the role of experts? And if we do not like the word ‘experts’, we can use ‘practitioners’ and still have the same problem. It also goes to the work Veronica talked of – the future of the sustainability framing. We are imagining that in the near future things will be super-different. Tim and others have mentioned this in different ways, including in digital contexts. I am interested in the question of how we see the role of ‘folks like us’ in the future because we are aiming to be in a different space, aiming to work on different things, in a different way and with different methods and considerations. I am very excited about that. I would like to hear people’s comments.
- Tim Winter. I would say that expertise is needed now more than ever. The problem with the digital economy is the amount of noise ‘out there’ of mashed information. So slow learning, slow knowledge, and slow reflection is now more important than it ever was. To answer your question, you don’t ban the premise of expertise. Perhaps there is a whole different way of looking at how expertise is practiced. In forums like this, how many conferences do we go along to where we listen to the same thing – we must listen to the community; we must engage with the community. And yet conferences and symposiums usually consist of experts in the room and nobody else. How do we change that? I am really bored with the call that says that over and over. Yet we don’t do anything about it. How do we change the whole dynamic of what we do? Of course, this is not to say that there is not a raft of activities outside the expert gatherings. The way to address the ways that knowledge circulates, moves, and communicates is the biggest challenge – what we talked about this morning. That is the biggest challenge. How do you embed it in other contexts? How do you speak to

- other arenas where heritage is very low on the priority list of what we need to sort out today? It is about how heritage contributes to bigger ticket issues. That is what I think is one of the biggest challenges and finding the vocabulary to do that. That means working across sectors, working into other spaces of policy and practice.
- Sharon Sullivan. Something I have been talking about for a long time is the role of the expert. I think the role of the expert, both in the Indigenous heritage sphere and with communities, is crucial these days. One thing is that is very noticeable about the community is that the community is coming together to protect its heritage, both natural and cultural. It doesn't see a difference. But there is a wider context of 'corrupt' governments across Australia – 'corrupt' in the sense of thinking that pulling coal and metals out of the ground and flogging it as fast as we can because it is not viewed as being valuable in the future – has led to a great renaissance, in my view, in community understanding of what they have and what they want to keep. And the most amazing alliances, for example, with farmers. That's all very significant. But these people, communities in general, do not just discover their significant heritage with a bolt from on high. They are very, very capable, intelligent people and they need expertise. You can go into a community. You can give to a community an enrichment of what they thought. You can listen respectfully. You can take into account all the different sorts of significance we have spoken about this morning. You can enrich the situation. The role of the expert is to step aside from our previous hierarchical thing and to become a facilitator. It is somebody who simply shows their passion locally or to people on-line. If the expert does that then the response from the community, in my experience, is truly remarkable.
  - Veronica Bullock. I would like to say something in response, but there is another member of the audience who might wish to comment.
  - Nerrida Moredout. I have travelled across the continent to be here today. I am from Western Australia. [Applause] The discussions today have been engaging. One of the things that has come throughout today is the role of heritage in constructing a future. I think, as Tracy and others have mentioned, that that is where heritage and sustainability will come together. That is, when people understand that heritage is not just about protecting the past, its about constructing the future. On another matter, I take issue with the notion that we are all experts here today. We are a community. There are all sorts of different communities. Finally, in respect to expertise, and there is some debate on this point, it takes between 10,000 to 19,000 hours to become an expert in any one particular thing. To have expertise is something I think is important. It is a way in which we are able to collaborate with one another. I have really appreciated hearing from the experts today. These are not questions, but rather some responses to today's discussions.
  - Veronica Bullock. There is another person here today from WA – that is Jo Thompson. In response to what Kristal was saying, and other discussions, I thought I might turn conversation to the academy. Alison Wain provided commentary on the 'inter-disciplinary turn'. Some of our recent literature makes calls for heritage to become a discipline. This is a question I would like to throw back to the audience. Perhaps we can have a show of hands. To what extent do you think heritage would be served by being upgraded to a discipline? One-hand (raised by an audience member). To what extent might the sustainability agenda be served by heritage becoming a discipline? The same person! Interesting. Perhaps my message here, to pick up to a certain

extent on a point made by Sharon, is that to share the expertise in a broad sense, including within academia, is to recognize that Heritage Studies is an apt structure for us to be doing what we do and for dealing with a number of different disciplines. I leave you with that thought. I want to respond to Nerrida's point about heritage as future. I did say I would not talk about time, but what I have done with my background research is bump into it. I have been shocked at how little we go into time. We refer to it all the time. Certainly the past for a future. Laurajane Smith would say that is part of the 'authorised heritage discourse'; that is, appealing to the future. Does the future exist? These are big questions that we could take by the horns. Geographers have covered this through notions of space and time, but heritage can add something different – not only time, but generations and place. This is an area for research.

- Denis Byrne. We are 'eating', as it were, into afternoon tea time [ripples of laughter]. I will end the questions and discussion there. Please thank the panel. [Rapturous applause]

[A number of attendees who are employed by government heritage agencies got together over afternoon tea].

---

## Session 3 - *Practice-led theory*

Facilitator: Denis Byrne

---

### **Tim Sherratt** - *Significance at scale: understanding the value of 150 million newspaper articles*

What happens when you make millions of newspaper articles, documenting 150 years of Australian history, freely available online? It's not just a matter of convenience — scale and access change the questions we can ask, the relationships we can form with the past. How do we understand significance in the context of abundance?

Tim Sherratt is a historian and hacker who researches the possibilities and politics of digital cultural collections. He's been creating online resources relating to archives, museums and history since 1993, including Bright Sparcs, Mapping our Anzacs, QueryPic, and The Real Face of White Australia. Tim is half of the Trove management team at the National Library of Australia, and Associate Professor of Digital Heritage at the University of Canberra. He's a member of the THATCamp Council, an organiser of THATCamp Canberra, and a member of the committee of the Australasian Association for the Digital Humanities. Tim blogs at [discontents.com.au](http://discontents.com.au) and is known as @wragge on Twitter.

### **Geoff Hinchcliffe** - *Significance in the digital domain*

Traditionally significance has been used as a criterion for preservation but mass digitisation reduces the significance judgment from the process - digitise and save it all! While individual digital records may hold little historical value the large-scale collections to which they belong can become significant sites for new forms of access, exploration and representation.

Geoff Hinchcliffe is Assistant Professor in Media and Graphic Design at the University of Canberra. An active curiosity and a creative mind led Geoff to embark on a PhD on the use of data as creative material to design beautiful things. His practice-based research focused on web-based applications that capture people's relationship with data in the everyday cultural context, including re-modeling Twitter feeds into paperback novels and using data to light up lamps.

### **Veronica Bullock** - *Sustainable Heritage vs Sustainable Us'*

This presentation asks what heritage theorists and practitioners can contribute to societies dealing with the seven interlocking crises of sustainability. After visiting recent thinking on sustainability it suggests that cultural heritage selection experience (i.e. significance assessment) can helpfully shape the conversation we are 'aching for'.

Veronica holds degrees in prehistory and materials conservation and has worked as both curator and conservator in Australian collecting institutions. While with the peak body for all Australian collecting organisations, the Collections Council of Australia (2005-2010), she designed and led a number of research projects, including in the areas of sustainable collections and the significance assessment of collections. In 2010 Veronica explored cultural heritage significance and risk assessment models, and their pedagogy, as an ICCROM Fellow. After establishing a consultancy in these and other cultural heritage fields in the same year named Significance International, Veronica became a doctoral candidate at the Australian National University. Her doctoral research investigates the value of a heritage perspective for Australian Government sustainability policymaking. She looks forward to expanding her cultural heritage publishing record into the field of sustainability studies.

**Angelina Russo - *Museums as creative laboratories***

Increasingly, creative production is recognised as both the result of skilled practitioners and their connection to and participation in a networked society. Museums offer trusted authoritative environments through which to explore these new collaborations between creators and producers: to gather culturally diverse experiences and propose new models for co-creation and knowledge production. In this talk we explore how creative communities connect with museums to achieve innovative solutions by viewing museums as a laboratory for both conservation and new knowledge production.

Angelina Russo is the Associate Dean Research in the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra. Prior to this she was Director, Higher Degrees Research in the School of Media and Communications (RMIT) (2010 - 2013) and a Chief Investigator in the ARC Centre of Excellence in Creative Industries and Innovation (2005 - 2011). Her research practice explores the intersections between cultural collections, media, and design. She is recognised for the research and practice she has undertaken in social media for museums and innovative participatory practices. She is currently developing a new stream of research which draws together design and making communities with museums.

**Tim Winter - *The political values of heritage***

This short presentation focuses on the different ways in which we might think about the political values that enmesh heritage. Within that broad theme some questions will be posed about how we might better conceptualise the political, where we look for it, and how we should think through understanding what constitutes a politics of heritage today.

Tim is Research Professor of Cultural Heritage at the Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific, Deakin University, Melbourne. Most of his working day is spent trying to figure out how cultural heritage features in issues like nationalism, diplomacy, sustainability, postcolonial identities and urban development. He has published widely on these themes and conducted research projects in a variety of contexts, including Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Kashmir, Qatar and China. Tim has been a Visiting Scholar at the University of Cambridge, The Getty Conservation Institute and University College London, Qatar. His recent books include *The Routledge Handbook of Heritage in Asia* and *Shanghai Expo: An International Forum on the Future of Cities*. He is currently working on a book on Heritage Diplomacy.

**Tracy Ireland - *The ethics of insignificance***

Heritage conservation is usually portrayed as inherently ethical. Recent discussions have questioned the uncritical acceptance of this position however, how exactly might we enact an ethical form of forgetting in the context of the cultural politics of heritage, identity and social justice. This chat explores the relationship between ethics, forgetting and (in)significance.

Tracy Ireland is Associate Professor of Cultural Heritage at the University of Canberra. She has worked as an archaeologist and heritage practitioner for a significantly long time, for government, in private practice and most recently as an academic. Her most recent book, co-edited with John Schofield, is *The Ethics of Cultural Heritage*, Springer 2015.