

Finding Ourselves in Collections:

A Comparative Book Report on
White Gloves by John Kotre and
Flow by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

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Introduction

What is going on here? This is the central question posed in our Cultural Institutions class when evaluating a collection. Collectors must ask themselves questions, like this, in order to best relate their exhibit to the audience. The answers to these questions should allow the audience to find a piece of themselves when viewing a collection, as that is the essence of why they are there. Also, as part of the development, an interpretation of space and layout that allows the attendee to fully experience the exhibit should be included. By considering these elements, the greatest impact can be made in connecting with all who attend.

In *Flow*, Csikszentmihalyi explains his theory of optimal experience. He states that if we learn to control our mind through engaging in fulfilling activities, we can better experience our entire lives. "... flow [is] the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it." (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4). Creating a space that allows flow to occur should be the goal of all collectors.

Kotre explains, in *White Gloves*, how we define ourselves through our memories. He begins through the opening example of a story of a pair of white gloves that brought forth strong memories of his father, the time and himself. He further elucidates that "An extraordinary sense of continuity can be created through the use of remembrance, and an extraordinary sureness about the self." (Kotre, 1996, p. 187)

Questions in Collection Development

Kotre poses many questions in his book which sent me down a similar path of self inquiry in relation to memory. Some of these questions included:

“If you could tell the story of your life by taking someone to half a dozen places, where would you go?” (Kotre, 1996, p. 16)

“Could you build your life story around a few significant autobiographical objects? ... could you pick half a dozen key moments?” (Kotre, 1996, p. 106)

“Can you think of a moment when you were most truly yourself?” (Kotre, 1996, p. 103).

These questions translate well into collection development and the types of things that collectors should consider, in relation to their intended message, when developing an exhibit.

In particular regard to Kotre’s question of choosing several locations to show someone to tell the story of your life, I am reminded of the movie *After Life*. In this Japanese film, the characters arrive at a way station after they have died. They are instructed that they must choose one memory from their lives, which will be filmed and consecutively shown to them for all of eternity. Although, in Western terms, this would be considered a form of punishment, it is presented as a Zen paradise. I see this as analogous to the role of the collector, in that they must choose a few things to represent the whole.

The tension in this choice is ensuring that the items chosen reach all factions of potential viewers. Just as in building a collection, as individuals collect memories “Every piece of information we process gets evaluated for its bearing on the self. Does it threaten our goals, does it support them, or is it neutral?” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 39)

Looking for Ourselves

While reading *White Gloves*, I was often brought to the statement of the historian at the North Carolina Museum of History in that we walk through exhibits looking for ourselves. His statement rang true as I had done exactly as he explained, in viewing the Civil War exhibit, randomly scanning until I found *my* story. In the Sports exhibit, although interesting to see this portion of North Carolina history, I was frustrated in not feeling connected to any particular subject matter.

Memory can be evoked by the senses. A certain smell, taste, touch or sound can bring you not only to a particular place in your mind, but viscerally. “You must touch old objects, they say, smell old aromas, hear old sounds, stoop down to the level of a little person to recapture the experience of childhood.” (Kotre, 1996, p. 17) In this manner, to reach a wider array of the senses, and potentially a greater number of patrons, collectors can consider adding sound recordings, background noises of the historical period, smells of the era or other sensory elements.

One of the most memorable exhibits I’ve attended was an Andy Warhol retrospective in the early 1990’s at the Art Institute of Chicago. Although I enjoyed seeing a chronological display of the evolution of Mr. Warhol’s work, what I most remember is a room containing helium filled Mylar balloons. They immediately sent me into a childlike state of delight at the surprise of something so whimsical. It was an aspect of his work that I was not familiar with and deepened my appreciation for the institution and the artist. A good collection should leave you with a sense of connection to a piece of yourself.

Space Determining Experience

Flow brought to mind our many discussions, in class and on the listserv, on the space at the Ackland Museum and at the North Carolina Botanical Garden. The design of these cultural institutions greatly affected our experience and the way we saw and felt the exhibits. In many ways, *Flow*, to me seemed to be about an internal architecture, or process that we create for ourselves in order to better appreciate our lives.

As the author states, “The best moments usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 3) If a space is created that pushes the viewer into an emotional area that allows them to better take in what is being experienced, there is a greater chance that an intended message will be received. By creating an engaging space, it is more likely that the participant will be in flow.

An example of this might be the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC. Having only visited it once, I remember that the space as being layed out so that only portions can be experienced at any one time. The participant is very deliberately led through as if they were being brought into a concentration camp during World War II. The effect is a feeling of dread and sadness, knowing the outcome of those who truly lived through this experience. Although not a positive feeling, a sense of flow is achieved in this space as it engages the senses and draws together historical knowledge and potentially memories of related experiences.

Conclusion

The questions that collections developers ask when creating their collection will determine the overall exhibit. It is important to take into consideration the intended audience and the goal of attempting to reach a wide range of people. This can be accomplished through sensory cues, such as objects on view, sounds, smells, items to touch, even temperature or overall climate within the display. Through these types of additional factors, there is a greater likelihood that the exhibit will be evocative to the viewers. The ‘a ha’ moment can be reached, which will potentially leave the audience seeking to learn more about what they have seen.

White Gloves illustrates that we define ourselves through our memories. We can use this information in collection development in seeking to evoke memories of those who view the collections. *Flow* tells us that if we challenge ourselves continuously, that we will be in a state of optimal experience. And when we are in this state, we will learn more, appreciate more and enjoy the every day content of our lives.

I have learned a great deal about myself in reading both of these books and contemplating their connections to collection development and cultural institutions. Exhibits that have engaged me due to their space considerations, such as The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, or due to their content, such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, have left a lasting impression. Through these experiences, I am enticed to continue learning and to continue to attempt to achieve optimal experiences. I am also encouraged, as a nascent collection developer, to attempt to incorporate these factors when serving my patrons.

References

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