

Tree of Life™: A Performance Event by William Davies King

On June 20, 2019, in a dance studio at UC Santa Barbara, I laid out my entire cereal box collection—2300 boxes, over 2000 unique—as a huge Tree of Life™. Life cereal boxes formed the tree trunk, Honey Smacks a flower, Frosted Flakes the sky, Cheerios the sun. Hundreds of people, drawn by curiosity and a little awe, came to watch me construct this giant mosaic, box by box, and to wander through its branches. Then, the next day, it was gone.

A celebration of what nourishes us, what jacks us up with sugar, what dazzles our eyes with graphic appeal, what triggers our nostalgia for a time when we were young and at breakfast and facing the day: all of that went into the tree. And it poured out in the responses from the viewers, most of whom told me they rarely eat cereal nowadays. But cereal stuck in their memory and associations, and they recognized in the tree the Life they had lived—and eaten—in a culture overseen by the supermarket.

We have our Life, and then it is gone. That is the essence of ephemera. My art lies in the collecting of that transient experience, collecting degree zero. My collecting is not about price guides and trading fairs, auction houses and rare book libraries. The book I wrote about my behavior, my obsession, my art is called *Collections of Nothing* because the sort of collecting I do puts a lens on the vanishing point of existence, the way time passes through late capitalist culture and then is spent.

I am also a professor of Theater at UC Santa Barbara where I teach students about the power of story to make experience meaningful. Tree of Life™ works as an interactive performance, engaging the viewer in dialogue as the collection emerges, box by box, in new and different forms. At the end, we have a party to talk about the final product, which stays in place for a time to be determined—as little as overnight—and then it gets packed up again. It's like one of those Zen mandalas, made of sand, which is then swept up, except that the cereal boxes persist in their stubborn materiality. They adhere to the material world as a kind of trash. And they look for new Life.

The Proposal

I would like to recreate Tree of Life™ in your museum so that a wider public could have access to its wonders. All it requires is a large, empty floor (approx. 2000 sq. ft.) and, at minimum, three days—one to load in, one to create the Tree (and celebrate and discuss), and one to disassemble. This could occur between your major exhibitions—a one-off—or it could be extended, with additional events, for a longer period. The basic event slots in easily in a small time frame with little fuss. Your part is to create the buzz in your community to draw patrons to the event, also to discern in the work some of the provocative themes of art and materialism in the modern world.

In this packet you will find:

a. A 105 pg. catalogue created for Tree of Life™. It combines writings by me and cereal historian William Walsh Crawford, Jr. (co-author of *Cerealizing America: The Unsweetened History of American Breakfast Cereal*, 1995), along with cereal box collages, in a book that is itself a wonderful riff on cereal box design. I have copies of this catalogue that could be sold. The book could also be reissued in a new and larger edition, potentially with curatorial essays. There are revenue-producing opportunities for you in this.

b. Publicity package and links. In my experience, reporters love to work with this story, which has novelty and popular appeal yet is grounded in serious thought. In addition to

print coverage, the event generated a wonderfully well-produced radio segment on KCLU (an NPR station), which can be accessed in their archives. <https://www.kclu.org/term/cereal#stream/0>

c. Photographs of the June 2019 event. The visual impression of the finished work can hardly be overstated, although camera images hardly capture it. The work was compared to a stained glass window, a Florentine mosaic, and a phantasmagoria of consumer life. The photographs show how the work fit this particular space; it would fit other spaces in other ways.

d. A video clip from a film currently in production, created by Mark Moskowitz (*The Stone Reader*) with the working title *Art Stops Here*. He and his crew filmed the performance, including this staggering 20-second time-lapse of the whole creation.

In its recreation in your space, Tree of Life™ would take on a new form, one that captures the dimensions and configuration of your space and the creative impulses of that moment and your community. I would return to the tree symbol, but the final picture and the pathway through it would answer to that time and place. The point always is to take a collection—an accumulation—of objects and use them to make, or seek, meaning, form, and connection.

But the event is also about the process of making the Tree. In the course of the construction on June 20, I stopped numerous times to converse with spectators. At the UCSB event I was assisted by my daughters, Ruthie and Eva, who, after all, helped me eat the cereal. Potentially they could again assist me, though at this point they have their own lives and jobs in Northern California. Alternatively, I could collaborate with someone(s) selected by your institution.

About Me

As mentioned, I am currently Distinguished Professor of Theater and Dance at UC Santa Barbara, where for three decades I have been a theater historian with research specialization in American drama, particularly Eugene O'Neill. I have written and edited numerous books in that area. But I have a long history of fascination with the diversity of arts. I have written plays (including one called *Collections of Nothing More or Less*), worked as a dramaturg at such theaters as the Kennedy Center and the Geffen, exhibited my work in collage (see below), and represented the creative possibilities of collecting in talks, writings, and exhibitions. My book *Collections of Nothing* (University of Chicago Press, 2008) is part memoir, part essay about how collecting can become an integral part of one's life. It was named by [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) as one of the best books of 2008, excerpted in *Harper's*, and favorably reviewed in *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*.

For a decade now I have taught a freshman seminar called "Collectors and Collecting," and I have become an expert in that field, indeed a collector of books and articles about collecting. I was featured in a film called *Obsessive Possessives*, produced by Radio Free Alice, also twice on a show called *The Creative Community* in Santa Barbara. Over the years I have broadened my interest in collecting to take in the wide variety of types of collector out there. My aim at this stage of my career is to bring my insights as a collector and student of collecting to a wide public and encourage innovative ways of thinking about the practice. A particular interest is in promoting the connection of collecting and collage, both of which give unity and meaning to a multiplicity of elements. It is no mystery why many people in the arts are also collectors. I explore these ideas in the catalogue of Tree of Life™, but the performance better testifies to the significance of this way of thinking and connects with audiences at all levels of sophistication. What I am seeking is an appropriate venue to demonstrate that.

Alternative or Supplemental Proposals

If you do not have a space of sufficient size for Tree of Life™, then consider an alternative event along the same lines. My “collections of nothing” are multiple, and other elements might make for a smaller but also impressive display. For example, I have four or five hundred cracker boxes, most notably about 90 Cheez-It boxes. (Another floor-covering concept. Total display area, ca. 500 sq. ft.)

I also have close to 1000 soup can labels. These are in plastic sleeves and could be mounted to a wall. Many Campbell's, many Progresso, many “boutique” soups (Wolfgang Puck, etc.), and many store brands. (Total display area, ca. 700 sq. ft.)

At the lowest end of my already lowly collections I have what I call my Kitchen Collection. These are sheets of paper filled with random bits of the ephemeral world, like the stickers you find on pieces of fruit, tea bag tags, odd bits from junk mail, and so on. It's “string too short to save” in two dimensions—the most trivial of utmost glorious things. Each 8.5x11 page offers too-much-to-take-in, a crazy scattershot to the eye, but to hang all the leaves of this collection—nearly 300—in a tight grid would be like abstract expressionism of the random materiality of our era. Since each leaf (in plastic sleeve) has array on both recto and verso, a special moment could come when each page could be “turned.” That would produce an entirely different grid, equally dazzling. (Total display area: 200 sq. ft.)

A portion of my envelope lining collection (also called security seal envelopes) was recently part of an exhibit at the downtown Los Angeles Public Library as part of a show called “21 Collections: Every Object Tells a Story.” My collection consists of some 70 leaves, each holding 16 different 2.5” x 3.5” samples of envelope linings. I was featured in a story about that exhibit produced by The Kitchen Sisters—<http://www.kitchensisters.org/category/podcast/page/2/> The story was broadcast on NPR. (Total display area: ca. 110 sq. ft.)

Other collections: business cards (ca. 10,000); hotel door cards and gift cards (ca. 700); crinkle-top bottle caps (ca. 1400), and so on.

Another vein of my work as an artist is in the art of bibliolage, a form I devised in which I hyper-illuminate books by conventional scissor-and-glue collage techniques, transforming a book into something entirely reconceived. The best way to get an idea of this work is to look at my website, Ruined Books, which is at williamdaviesking.com, where images from many of the books are shown. Look for the page called “The Creaky Shelf” to get a sense of the array of bibilolages. Some of these works were recently shown at the 2019 Kolaj International Festival in New Orleans. These works could be shown alongside any of the above displays of nothing-collected—or by themselves.

Terms

To be negotiated. The main expense is transportation of the cereal box (or other) collection to your institution, as well as travel expenses for me and my wife. Some of this I might be able to cover with research money. I could also be available to give a public lecture or class or other public events. What would be most exciting to me would be to coordinate with your curatorial staff, perhaps in conjunction with other exhibitions and artists. I am open to the idea of reopening the catalogue to include additional writings and imagery. My aim is to locate this work—collecting—in the world and to discover where and how it resonates with others.

Contact

I would be happy to discuss any aspect of this proposal and work out a plan that would work for you. I also invite you to come to Santa Barbara to see the collections, the bibliolages, and me. We could learn a lot from each other.

My personal website gives a good idea of my bibliographies, and there are also some images from the collections. [**williamdaviesking.com**](http://williamdaviesking.com)

My university website gives a profile of me as a scholar and teacher, including a full academic c.v. [**https://www.theaterdance.ucsb.edu/people/william-davies-king**](https://www.theaterdance.ucsb.edu/people/william-davies-king)

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