

Six Memos

In Six Memos for the Next Millennium Italo Calvino proposes six principles for writers of the 21st century. Although Calvino focused on writing, the memos can be applicable to any creative endeavour, including futuring. The six memos include:

- Lightness · Lighten, remove weight, enliven
- Quickness · Find the right pace and the right path no matter how convoluted
- Exactitude · Be clear, prepared, incisive, memorable, as precise as possible
- Visibility · Bring visions into focus, stimulate imagination
- Multiplicity · Weave together the various branches of knowledge, use rules as boundaries
- Consistency · (Unfortunately, Calvino died before writing this memo. As with many of his works, he leaves space for his readers to fill in the blanks...)

At FoAM we use the Six Memos as guiding principles, inspirations or tests through which we can scrutinise our creative process. We strive for Lightness as a counterbalance to the weight of life and work, attempting to distil the light essence that isn't burdened by unnecessary details and formalities. Quickness we interpret as finding the right speed that creation needs, from swift responses to slow pondering, taking as much time as necessary. We understand Exactitude as a need for clarity and meticulous preparation, especially when designing participatory experiences; the more exactitude is present in the preparatory stages, the more effortless and spontaneous the process. Visibility encourages us to find words, materials and media that can spark imagination and create rich mental and visceral images; it's about a transmutation from experience to vision and back again. Multiplicity relates to making connections between everything and everything else; it intertwines different branches of knowledge into a meaningful whole, yet it is also about rules which function as boundaries preventing us from getting lost in the vastness of possibility. The last memo, Consistency, remains ambiguous as it was never completed. We interpret it as a consistency of process, a determination to leave the creative work open, inviting additions, interpretations and improvements:

A work that would let us escape the limited perspective of the individual ego, not only to enter into selves like our own but to give speech to that which has no language, to the bird perching on the edge of the gutter, to the tree in spring and the tree in fall, to stone, to cement, to plastic...

—Italo Calvino

A Six Memos Mindset

Lightness

...My working method has more often than not involved the subtraction of weight. I have tried to remove weight, sometimes from people, sometimes from heavenly bodies, sometimes from cities; above all I have tried to remove weight from the structure of stories and from language.

—Italo Calvino

- Study formal methods, then distil their essence in an attempt to make them as light as possible
- Create informal, playful atmospheres
- Design futuring processes so light that you could conduct them in a bar, or over a coffee.
- Laugh and encourage others to laugh
- Lift the weight off the past and present by seeing them through the lens of possible futures
- Rational thinking is only one of many approaches: acknowledge and encourage alternate states of consciousness
- Allow the breeze of possibility to blow through a stale situation

Any useful idea about the future should appear to be ridiculous.

—Jim Dator

Quickness

Festina lente...

Quickness of style and thought means above all agility, mobility, and ease, all qualities that go with writing where it is natural to digress, to jump from one subject to another, to lose the thread a hundred times and find it again after a hundred more twists and turns.

—Italo Calvino

- Practice manipulating time: wrangle and wrestle it, delay it, cycle it or render it motionless

- Direct the pace and the flow of the process towards the 'long now'
- Create quick mental images, with sufficient detail to be evocative of a whole world
- Be alert and capture mental images of the participants to fold them swiftly into the narrative
- Take as much time as needed to make sure that what you say is the only thing that needs to be said...

Exactitude

To my mind exactitude means three things above all:

- (1) a well-defined and well-calculated plan for the work in question;
- (2) an evocation of clear, incisive, memorable visual images;
- (3) a language as precise as possible both in choice of words and in expression of the subtleties of thought and imagination.

–Italo Calvino

- In order to make the process feel effortless, subject your design to careful planning and testing. Fine-tune the flow and each component of the process iteratively. When the process begins, hold the plans loosely and be responsive to the situation at hand.
- Harvest and summarise conversations: find patterns in the chaos of words and concepts floating through in a participatory process.
- Craft every word you record carefully. Make sure everyone agrees on its meaning and intent.
- Edit your process and images of the future for clarity. This will minimise confusion and intensify the experience. Gradually reduce tangential elements and discussions. There has to be just enough context and shared experience to bring out the most memorable stories.

Visibility

If I have included visibility in my list of values to be saved, it is to give warning of the danger we run in losing a basic human faculty: the power of bringing visions into focus with our eyes shut, of bringing forth forms and colours from the lines of black letters on a white page, and in fact of thinking in terms of images.

–Italo Calvino

- Use well crafted media (words, images, sounds, tastes, scents...) to evoke a world, so it can appear as if looking at it directly, as if a possible future were unfolding in front of you right now.
- Find a single image that alludes to the general atmosphere of a future, then gradually associate it with other images and words. Create a field of analogies, synchronicities and confrontations, that over time allows you to organise the material into a coherent story.
- Make the process open and visible. Let others learn from, scrutinise or build on your ideas.

Multiplicity

Literature remains alive only if we set ourselves immeasurable goals, far beyond all hope of achievement... The grand challenge for literature is to be capable of weaving together the various branches of knowledge, the various "codes" into a manifold and multifaceted vision of the world.

–Italo Calvino

- Train to be a generalist, with wide in-breadth interests
- Use and modify transdisciplinary methods
- Use rules in your creative process as boundaries to work within, a set space to explore. Be prepared to change and work between them.
- Never assume anything is singular.
- Find meaningful connections between everything that's at stake.
- Keep multiple futures open for as long as possible.

Consistency

The title Consistency appears at the bottom of the list of Six Memos. His wife Esther notes that Italo planned to write it when he arrived in Cambridge to give the lectures. Since many of Calvino's tales seem to leave something for the reader to finish, perhaps this book provides an example of his consistency in process, an unwritten but hinted at sixth memo for the new millennium for us as his readers to flesh out for ourselves after reading the first five memos.

–Bobby Matherne

- Provide a framework, but allow the participants create the 'world'
 - Create situations that continue for some time after the formal process is finished, thereby subtly transforming their present.
 - Free foresight from the bounds of the utilitarian, functional, goal oriented projects
 - Take futures in more speculative and whimsical directions
 - Create simple daily rituals that allow their practitioners to create alternative presents and imagine how things could be otherwise.
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Full text of the Six Memos for the Next Millennium: http://www.stanford.edu/~protass/files/Calvino_Six%20Memos%20of