

Connecting Young People and Cultural Institutions

**October 14 – 15, 2010
Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam**



What role can the museum play in the lives of young people? How can cultural institutions make connections with young people in a positive and meaningful way? These were the central questions of the international Blikopeners Symposium.

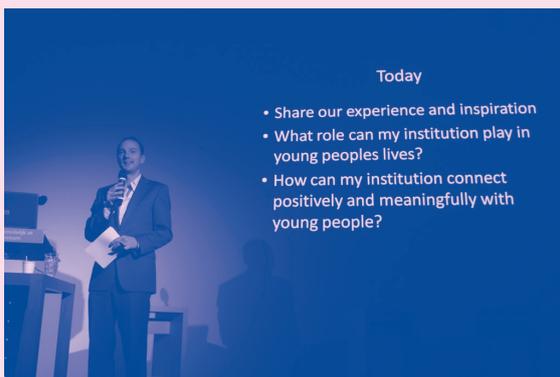
The symposium owes its name to the Blikopeners, young ambassadors employed by the Stedelijk Museum since 2008 to encourage other young people to become enthusiastic about art and museums. In his opening speech, Patrick van Mil, business director of the Stedelijk Museum, stressed the importance of young people for the museum, not so much as a target group or to make the museum appear more legitimate to government funding bodies, but for the genuine value that they add to the museum. He emphasized how young people keep museums and their staff fresh and ensure that they think about exploring new paths.



Patrick van Mil

Day 1: Presentations Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, October 14, 2010

On the first day, speakers from various museums in Europe and the United States presented a number of successful initiatives.



Thomas van Luyn



Rixt Hulshoff Pol and Marlous van Gastel

Over a hundred participants gathered in the auditorium to hear more about youth projects in European and American museums. Thomas van Luyn, chair of the day's events, introduced Rixt Hulshoff Pol and Marlous van Gastel from the Stedelijk's education department. The two had organized the symposium with the aim of learning from other institutions at a time when the Stedelijk's own youth program is coming to fruition, so as to share knowledge and inspire other institutions. The invited participants were speakers who contributed to the creation of the Blikopeners project: the Whitney Museum (New York) as its source of inspiration, and the Tate Modern (London) and the Statens Museum

for Kunst (Copenhagen) as exchange partners. The Stedelijk hoped that the other museums participating in the symposium would help to provide building blocks for the further development of the project and the creation of a space for young people. Marit Dewhurst of City College New York was invited to present a theoretical foundation for the project. Youth expert André Platteel and CJP director Walter Groenen provided their insights into communicating with young people.

The Stedelijk Museum: Blikopeners

Rixt Hulshoff Pol and Marlous van Gastel first presented background information about the Blikopeners project. The first team of Blikopeners started work in September 2008; it was a group of 15 young people between the ages of 15 and 20, from a variety of different backgrounds. Van Gastel pointed out that these Blikopeners have two things in common: they have an open mind about art and they dare to express their opinions. The first group of Blikopeners worked part-time at the Stedelijk Museum for 18 months, giving guided tours and advice and organizing activities for other young people. However, it was not only young people who learned from the Blikopeners, as curator Martijn van Nieuwenhuyzen's reaction proves: "It shows that looking and talking together about art really helps you to get to the core of an artwork quite quickly. It was exciting for me to hear the adult insights of a young generation." Hulshoff Pol said that she believed the Blikopeners project had achieved good results, particularly in terms of diversity. She explained that, with the help of Diversion consultancy, the Stedelijk had succeeded in reaching out to all areas of Amsterdam. Van Gastel then explained that there had been a few hurdles to overcome, including the Stedelijk's lengthy closure for renovation; the museum had also expected that the Blikopeners would appeal more to their own networks. However, enthusiasm about the Blikopeners project is still strong, both at the museum and elsewhere, and the second group started in September 2010. The Stedelijk has a great deal of confidence about the future and is ready to take on the challenging objectives accompanying the new museum.

The CJP Foundation: Research



Walter Groenen

The CJP Foundation provides over a million young people in the Netherlands with a Cultuurkaart (Culture Card) or a Cultureel Jongeren Paspoort (CJP, Cultural Youth Passport). These cultural passes offer generous discounts on visits to museums, theatrical performances, and other cultural activities. CJP director Walter Groenen presented a short film to illustrate the users' experiences of the pass. In the film, a young person from Amsterdam explains, "When you don't have to spend your own money, it's easier to try something that you normally wouldn't."

These cultural passes enable schools and young people to become acquainted with museums. Groenen pointed out that many institutions often neglect research, but his organization has developed an increasing number of research activities in recent years. The CJP Foundation's studies have demonstrated that culture is a "must" for young people but also that museums need to attune themselves to the lives and experiences of this target group. Young people want to be taken seriously. They need structure and support; signposting and communication have to be clear. Young people may feel uncomfortable about visiting museums, so they appreciate guidelines about how to behave. They also expect to encounter other young people in the museum, both visitors and staff.

The Whitney Museum: A Source of Inspiration



Danielle Linzer

The presence of young people in New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, has long been viewed as a matter of course. The Youth Insights program, which has been in operation since 1997, served as a source of inspiration for the Blikopeners project. High-school students work at the museum as guides and develop programs for their peers. Coordinator Danielle Linzer explained that the Whitney Museum started restructuring this program in 2006. The museum wanted to increase capacity and connect more closely with the needs of the new generation. The aim was also to bring the program more into line with the values of the Whitney Museum as an artists' museum, while retaining the strength and energy of the Youth Insights program. The Whitney Museum now makes a distinction between three Youth Insights groups: Artists, Writers and Leaders. The museum brings the first two groups into contact with artists and they work together on projects. The Leaders take part in an extensive internship program at the Whitney. The aim is for them to grow with the museum and eventually to function as ambassadors within their own communities. As Linzer explained, the summer program introduces participants to the opportunities of a career in the art world.



Diane Exavier

Diane Exavier, a former Youth Insights participant, now works as Linzer's assistant at the Whitney Museum. She spoke at the symposium about what the program had meant for her, saying that it was a fantastic way to learn more about art in New York, a subject that there's not enough time for at school. She enjoyed the opportunity to meet art-lovers of her own age. Meeting real artists behind the scenes isn't only educational, she explained, but convinces young people that they are really part of the museum. Exavier said that her new position allows her to experience every day how much fun it is to work with young people.

MOCA: 900 Young People



Fabrizio Flores

Coordinator Fabrizio Flores said that the revitalization of the youth program at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles, was also in full swing. Two years ago, the museum was hit by cutbacks and the number of staff went from 152 to 100. In spite of this, the MOCA Apprenticeship Program (MAP), which started in 1992, is more successful than ever. 17 participants take part in a range of activities, including collaborating on projects with artists and organizing events. In April 2010, MOCA welcomed over 900 young people from all over southern California to the Concepticon teen night at the museum. Flores said that the participants in the program have such a great time that they want to share it with everyone.

MOCA receives hundreds of applications every year from young people who want to become apprentices, and at the end of every program Flores has great difficulty getting the participants to return their badges. He believes the success factors are authenticity and the creation of long-term commitments and in-depth experiences. He also pointed out that young people themselves are the best source of information you can have, so you need to talk to them. MAP acknowledges and values the individual efforts of promising student artists and citizens, Flores said. The museum must facilitate lifelong learning.

MoMA: Outreach and Community Building

The New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) runs youth programs that are similar to those at the Whitney Museum and MOCA, but youth coordinator Nathan Sensel's presentation placed the emphasis on outreach and community building. He opened with a picture of the inhabitants of Middle Earth from *The Lord of the Rings*, showing wizard Gandalf as a unifying element between all of the different communities. Sensel advised taking youth programs outside, into schools and libraries, which is how to create meaningful interaction with society. MoMA's free weekly evenings for young people (with pizza!), which started five years ago, have been successful in reaching new groups. Sensel explained that they had created a unique community of young people who come from all walks



Nathan SENSEL

of life and feel connected to the museum. MoMA also has a youth advisory council, which advises the museum on all issues affecting young people. This has resulted in a valuable exchange of ideas.

Tate Modern: Special Groups



Esther Sayers

After the presentations by the American museums, it was the three European museums' turn to talk about their youth programs, starting with Esther Sayers, Tate Modern's curator for young people's programs. She works exclusively with groups of young people who come to the museum. These include special groups such as "looked-after children" (children in local-authority care) and young mothers. Sayers explained that some of these people are visiting a museum for the first time in their lives. They may appear to be indifferent, but then a little later she might see one of the young mothers talking to her baby about a work by Jackson Pollock, which is a fantastic experience for Sayers.

Since the opening of Tate Modern, London, in 2000, the museum has aimed to enable as many people as possible to find meaning in art. The museum's We Are All Experts program is an attempt to break through the hierarchy of experts. Everyone can be an expert, even young people. Sayers wishes to make use of the knowledge that young people already possess, because that too can help to lend meaning to art. She said that a paradox that had been occupying her lately was that museums wish to welcome young people but at the same time control them. This creates an interesting tension.

Statens Museum for Kunst: Exciting Art Projects

The Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen has had a separate space for young people since 2007: the Unges Laboratorier for Kunst, or u.l.k. for short, as coordinator Marianne Bargeman enthusiastically explained. Young *kunstpiloter* (art pilots) between the ages of 15 and 21 participate in exciting art projects and encourage their peers to become enthusiastic about the museum. In



Marianne Bargeman

spring 2010, these young guides took part in a project with an artist and an art historian, which included the study of two religious icons. At first they considered it very dull, Bargeman reported, but then one of them asked why these saints were prepared to die for their faith. Is there anything we're prepared to die for nowadays? These kinds of questions resulted in interesting new insights into the works of art.

u.l.k. often goes outside the museum to encourage young people's enthusiasm for art. The art pilots visited the Roskilde music festival, for example, where they attracted festival-goers' attention with an unusual table-tennis table. A lot of people came over to ask about the activity and so found out about u.l.k. Bargeman's conclusion was that the dialogue between young people and art requires many voices, spaces and methods. She draws inspiration from a quote by Russian philosopher Bakhtin: "To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to argue, and so forth."

Centre Pompidou: Outstanding Design



Fanny Serain and Mauricio Estrada Munoz

The Centre Pompidou in Paris has also had a separate space for young people since September 11, 2010, called Studio 13/16. This outstanding design by Mathieu Lehaneur has many interesting features, including a twisting lighting and electrical track that looks like a rollercoaster on the ceiling. Fanny Serain explained that Studio 13/16 was designed as a space to encourage young people to discover and explore modern art, with the help of an appealing program of activities. The content of this youth program reflects the program of the Centre Pompidou.

Studio 13/16 holds four exhibitions a year, with themes linked to young people's interests and experiences. The theme of Macadam, the opening exhibition, for example, was "street issues" and it featured an interactive installation that showed the differences between the language used in Paris and the suburbs. Serain's colleague Mauricio Estrada Munoz explained that some young people come along just to chill out on the unusual sofas, but after two or three visits

they might start to think about participating in one of the Centre Pompidou's workshops.

New York City College: Theoretical Knowledge



Marit Dewhurst



Discussion

During her keynote speech earlier in the day, Marit Dewhurst provided the participants with further background information about the relationship between museums and young people. Dewhurst is head of Art Education at New York's City College. So as not to scare her audience with lots of theoretical information, she showed them a photograph of a mountain landscape and asked them to imagine she was taking them for a lovely walk through the mountains. This walk took the audience to the themes of art education, youth empowerment, community development, civic engagement and critical pedagogy. Each theme featured a list of recommended experts. As Dewhurst pointed out, the problem is working out how to link theory to practice.

Dewhurst asked everyone in the room to talk to one or two other participants and share one or two connections that they had noticed between the theories and what the participants did or strived for when working with youth in museums. This prompted animated discussions throughout the room about how to connect theory and practice. Dewhurst rounded off by asking a rhetorical question about the point of the activity. She talked about how theory can make us enthusiastic about new ideas and said that the day's challenge was to share such ideas with other people, to make new friends and to expand networks. She reminded participants not to forget the wealth as experience in the room.

Rotterdam: Deprived Neighborhoods



André Platteel

As a Cultural Analyst and Youth Expert, speaker André Platteel has a great deal of experience in working with young people. For the past three years, he has been involved in a project for young people from disadvantaged neighborhoods in

Rotterdam. He explained that these teens had been labeled “problem cases,” but said that was completely unjustified, as you realize as soon as you start to focus on their unique qualities. As an example, he cited an instance where instead of talking to someone about his activities as a football hooligan, he chose to discuss his skills as a photographer, noting that that same young man had his first exhibition in Los Angeles a few years later.

Young people go through different stages of connection in developing their identity: with themselves, with others and with the world. Platteel said it is best when you succeed in connecting your identity with others. Empathy is the only way to deal with the problems that the world is now facing. If you emphasize this in your dealings with young people and connect this notion to activities, then they really start to feel that they can change the world and create something together instead of on their own. It’s better to be a “scenius,” involved in place-based collective creation, said Platteel, than a “genius.”

Conclusion



Blikopener Mirelva Berghout



Bookpresentation

Mirelva Berghout, a Blikopener and co-host for the day’s activities, gave her positive conclusion about the symposium at the end of the afternoon. She said she could identify with André Platteel’s words. She too had created something beautiful together with her young colleagues: a book about the Blikopeners project, of which all the participants received a copy to take home. She also remarked upon how good it was to see a room full of adults who wanted to give young people a space within the museum. Chair Thomas van Luyn also said he had been inspired and he stressed that young people should learn together how to appreciate art and how art can be vitally important. Marit Dewhurst saw the symposium as an opportunity to stand up and tell as many people as possible about what museums and museum staff have to offer young people.



Audience



Day 2: Experts' meeting Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, October 15, 2010

Around 30 people from the international museum world came together to participate in an experts' meeting about connecting young people and cultural institutions. The aim was to go more deeply into the themes discussed during the first day of the Blikopeners Symposium, exchanging ideas and inspiration.

Informal Learning

The meeting started with a presentation about informal learning from Ruben Smit, an academic from Reinwardt Academie, Amsterdam. Using a number of standard works, Smit sketched the development that museums have experienced in this field in recent decades. He detailed how ethnocentrism had given way to multiculturalism, with introspection and concentration on the collection shifting to a focus on the public. But, he asked, is the process going quickly enough? And how much of a threat are recent political and economic developments?



Ruben Smit

Smit said that we can also see great changes in the world of education. We have moved on from the old-fashioned term "education" to the more modern notion of "learning." This represents a more open approach to gathering information, which takes into account different learning styles and processes. However, not all institutes have reached this point, and there is even a conservative movement that appears to desire a return to the 1950s. Smit pointed at the cutbacks in the art sector as evidence of this resistance. He was happy to report that there is no way back now and he stressed that the museum space is an enormous incentive to learning.

Open Space

During the afternoon session, the participants used the "open space" principle to exchange ideas. The participants themselves came up with themes for discussion and were free to choose which topic they wanted to explore and which group they wanted to join. Karien Vermeulen from Diversion explained that this was a free session without any agenda, because those taking part could decide for themselves what they wanted to talk about. She said that no one should leave with questions unasked or remarks unmade. She also encouraged participants to get up and join another discussion group if they felt that they had nothing more to learn or to contribute to the current discussion. Sheets of paper were soon full of suggestions for subjects to discuss and lively conversations were taking place all over the room, in flexible groups of changing size and participants. The largest group formed around the discussion of how



to attract diverse groups of visitors. One of the Stedelijk team talked about the time when the museum building was closed and the staff decided to take the museum “on tour” around the different neighborhoods of Amsterdam for 18 months. The museum took its mobile Bouwkeet, a construction cabin with an innovative and stimulating design, to different spots, where it stayed for two weeks to a month and was staffed by museum employees and the Blikopeners. Local residents were pleasantly surprised to find that the museum was coming to them. If you’re genuinely interested in people and their communities, then they also become interested in you. The important thing is for the museum to remain accessible to different groups. Fabrizio Flores (MOCA, Los Angeles) reacted by saying that a lot of people with whom he has had contact in the past still feel connected to MOCA. He said that libraries in particular are crucial and referred to them as his “best friends.” Youth expert André Platteel said that a “we culture” exists on the streets. If you can identify the leader, you can reach the group.

Conclusions

Finally, each of the groups gave a summary of the most important conclusions they had reached. One of the questions considered by participants was: How can we make sure that the voice of young people is heard and really hits home in cultural institutions? Freelance advisor Anna Elffers said that a good example was the Concertgebouw’s 6500 “young friends,” a number that must be taken seriously. This group ensures that many of the concerts at the Concertgebouw attract young visitors. Experiences in New York and Rotterdam have shown that small, positive experiences between museum staff and young people contribute to successful relationships. It is important to introduce young people to the organization in a calm and natural way and to facilitate encounters between young people and various members of staff.



Esther Sayers



Karien Vermeulen

Museums without walls

Esther Sayers (Tate Modern) acted as spokesperson for the diversity group. She emphasized the important role of leaders and key figures in reaching diverse groups. Personal contact is essential. As a museum, you must have confidence in and be clear about what you have to offer. We have to create museums without walls, she said, so that people from all kinds of different groups dare to go inside. Diane Exavier examined the question of what young people can give back after taking part in a program. As a former participant in a youth program, she finds it valuable for alumni to remain involved with the museum. She said she had noticed that many former participants like to keep in touch and to have the feeling that they can always come “home.” Alumni should also be able to play a role in museum fundraising, Exavier said. Karien Vermeulen agreed with Exavier’s sentiments and remarked upon how great it is when young people want to give something back.

Questions, questions

Nathan Sensel then looked at the value of making art together with young people. Is it about the process or the product? Should young people experiment or try to solve a problem? What is the aim? What is the desired outcome? And how do members of the public react when you display these results? He told the group that the discussion had not resulted in any answers, only more questions. As a museum, you have to be open about considering such questions. Finding answers is not easy, but you have to conduct discussions in the open and be transparent about the choices you make.

Marlous van Gastel (Stedelijk Museum) then presented her opinion on the use of spaces for young people. Such spaces have to offer the possibility of working with artists, but how do you achieve that? Do you work mainly with schools or with individual young people? Reaching out to larger numbers also makes it easier to sell such a space within the museum. Interestingly, there are clear similarities between young people and artists. Both groups are curious, for example, and want to push boundaries. Is that what the space should be about?

Exchanging information

Another group took a look at how museums can expand youth projects by working together with other institutions. Jessica van der Pluijm (Netherlands Museums Association) pointed out that all of the participating museums were looking for solutions, so why shouldn’t they help one another? She called for museum staff to work harder to create connections and exchange information so that they can benefit from the knowledge and experience of museum workers elsewhere. She stated that the meeting should definitely have a follow-up, so that participants could continue to share information and experiences.

During the last round, participants had the opportunity to say something about the value of the experts’ meeting. Everyone was very enthusiastic. One of the participants confessed to having heard lots of new ideas to steal. Another said that participants should continue to share knowledge with other people, both those with and without experience. The last word goes to the participant who declared that things would not end with this meeting, but that the new ideas would still be sparking enthusiasm next week—this symposium was the start of something very interesting indeed.