

Proposal Conference *Participatory Practices in Arts and Heritage*  
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## **Title: Why participate? The effects of two participatory museumprograms explained**

### Abstract:

Not only have museumaudiences decreased over the last twenty years, they also remain older and whiter than the overall population. More and more people have turned to other sources for entertainment, learning, and dialogue. Especially young people share their artwork, music, and stories with each other on the Web. They participate in politics, volunteer and even read more. But they don't attend museum exhibits and performances like they used to. For museum director and author of *The Participatory Museum* Nina Simon, the solution is very clear: "if cultural institutions want to reconnect with the public and demonstrate their value and relevance in contemporary life, they need to invite people to actively engage as cultural participants, not passive consumers. Using participatory techniques will make cultural institutions more dynamic, relevant, essential places argues Simon.

But is this actually the case? What are the (long- term) effects of museumprograms using participatory techniques? Are cultural institutions indeed relevant to the lives of these participants? Do they return after one visit? Is the cultural institution a place where they can express themselves and contribute to history, science and art? Do they feel at home? These questions will be adressed in discussing two participatory museumprograms using the outcomes of the scientific research conducted on the effects of these programs.

The first program explained is a special program for people with dementia and their carers, called *Unforgettable* (Onvergetelijk), initiated by the author in 2013 in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and the Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven. This program consists of interactive tours and participatory workshops in the museum and is modelled after the Alzheimer program of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The program was accompanied by scientific research, which focused on how the program is appreciated by participants, on its impact on a user, organisational and societal level, and on factors influencing the implementation.

The second program presented is *Young Office*, the youth department of the Bonnefantenmuseum. Although recently launched, this program is inspired by similar programs as *Blikopeners* (Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, founded in 2008) and *Youth Insights* (Whitney Museum, founded in 1997) that have demonstrated to be succesful in reaching out to a younger crowd using peer- education. Turning visitors into staffmembers might be one of the most radical participatory techniques cultural institutions are able to use. Both the Whitney and the Stedelijk have done research investigating the lasting impact of their intensive teen programs. The most important learnings from these reports will be discussed.

Both programs are examples of participatory approaches that prove to have a lengthy and in-depth effect on the participants. Still, the programs are very costly and time-consuming and the question remains how to make them sustainable. Also not taken into account is what the effects are on the general audience and if indeed they attract more visitors in an engaging way. (471 words)