

MUSEUM

STEDELIJK



AMSTERDAM

BLIK
OPEN
ERS
IMPACTSTUDY

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COLOPHON

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Photo: Tomek Dersu Aaron
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A NEW IMPACT STUDY



Blikopeners giving an accelerated tour of the Stedelijk on Museum Night, 2024

Photo: Maarten Nauw

A NEW IMPACT STUDY ON THE BLIKOPENERS PROGRAM

In 2008, the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam became the first cultural institution in the Netherlands to initiate an effective response to a challenge that everyone in the sector had been trying to meet for years: How do we attract young people? The catalyst for this initiative came from the U.S., where there were ongoing efforts to embed diversity, equity and inclusion in the country's institutions. The chosen response: peer education, the transmission of knowledge, experience and interest through peers. We named the program the Blikopeners ("Eye-openers"), and each year since its establishment it has provided part-time jobs to successive groups of roughly 15 young Amsterdam residents from a variety of backgrounds. These youngsters, or Blikopeners, act as tour guides, organize events, and work closely and intensively with each other and with other museum staff.

The findings of the first impact study conducted on the program were published in 2014,¹ and in addition to revealing the effectiveness of Blikopeners in appealing to young people, they also showed that the program had contributed to each Blikopener's personal development. Participants grew in confidence, learned to collaborate, and became better organizers and communicators. They felt empowered as a result of being taken seriously by other museum staff, which not only led to their lasting engagement with the arts but also informed participants' career choices. Moreover, the unforeseen benefits went both ways: The Blikopeners injected a burst of youthful energy into the day-to-day operation of the museum, served as a collective sounding board for programming and communications, and offered useful insights into the needs of a young audience.

It's been ten years since that initial study, 15 since the formation of the first group of Blikopeners, and the number of alumni has reached 200. This constituted a large enough population for a **longitudinal study**² of the effects of participation on participants, *and* to see what effect their participation has had on the world long after their time as Blikopeners. We drew inspiration for this latest study from "Room to Rise,"³ an intensive three-year research project in which four American art museums investigated the long-term impacts of their youth programs. As with Blikopeners, the main pillars of the American programs were group diversity, an intensive program of activity that ran for at least a year and involved weekly meetings, actual work, interaction with art and artists, and comprehensive support provided on the basis of mutual trust and respect.

1. Eva Klooster (2014) *The Blikopeners: Five Years On. Research findings on the impact of the Blikopeners program at the Stedelijk Museum.*

2. Anna Elffers (2024) *A pipeline for new talent? An assessment of the impact of the Stedelijk Museum's Blikopeners program.*

3. <https://whitney.org/education/teens/room-to-rise>

THE EFFECT ON PARTICIPANTS

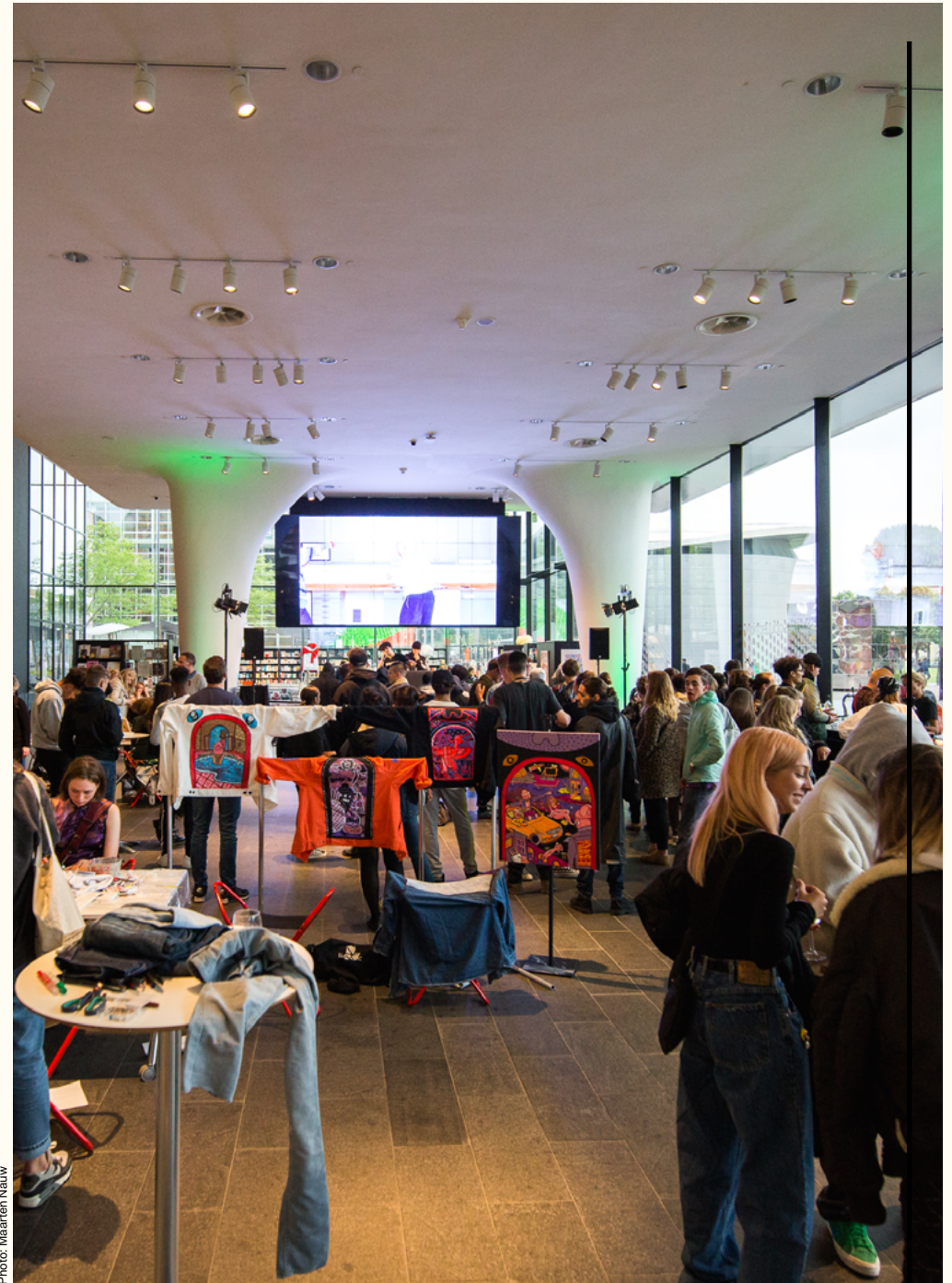
The study showed that many of the participants continued to benefit from their experience at the Stedelijk years after their time as Blikopeners. For instance, they continued **to grow in confidence**, were more outgoing, thought better of themselves and had clearer ideas of what they found important. These effects were often traced back to specific aspects of the program, including having been part of a group that was much more diverse than those the participants had been part of at school, the immense trust placed in participants to execute their plans as they saw fit, and the experience of managing the responsibilities given to them.

Many former Blikopeners had been engaged in one creative activity or another before joining the program, but their participation had allowed them to further develop their creative skills. These included things such as idea development, planning, performance-related confidence development, team skills, network development and goal orientation. All the benefits identified in the earlier study continued to pay dividends years later. Being taken seriously at such a young age appears to have solidified the belief that their ideas had merit and were worth sharing, and that said ideas could actually be realized. This belief was further nurtured by continued membership of a network of fellow former Blikopeners. The continued fellowship of other Blikopeners was a source of enrichment for many alumni. It spawned close friendships and relationships, led some to become flatmates, and resulted in several working together at the Stedelijk or elsewhere in the cultural sector.

The experience gained during the program had also shaped the career paths of several participants and influenced their ongoing relationships with museums and the cultural sector as a whole. Few former Blikopeners had joined the program with the intention of pursuing a career in a museum or in the arts, but the program had certainly left them with a much clearer idea, and often

more favorable view, of what museums actually did and what working in one was actually like. Consequently, several former Blikopeners who'd subsequently gone down other routes later enrolled in museum training programs or art school or made other career switches that could be traced back to their experience as Blikopeners. The experience of leading tours, organizing events and working with artists had allowed them to discover what they enjoyed or were good at, such as teaching, producing or working with art. And even those who hadn't ended up in the arts found that their time as Blikopeners had strengthened their relationship with museums, and in particular with the Stedelijk Museum. This is not to say, however, that everyone was left a lifelong fan of contemporary art or a frequent museum visitor.

Photo: Maarten Nauw



A Blikopener event: *Go Classic*

THE IMPACT OF FORMER BLIKOPENERS ON THE WORLD BEYOND THE PROGRAM

Many of the former Blikopeners who participated in the study are now engaged as professionals in something to do with art, culture or creativity, and are thus, by definition, able to contribute to the development of their sector. Among them are several who are dedicated to making the arts more accessible to various demographic groups, often specifically regarding young people. These individuals often trace their commitment directly back to their own experience as Blikopeners. It's not a stretch to interpret this as a form of "giving something back": granting to others what they experienced themselves. They further credit the program for the means by which they pursue their commitment. Some of them were doing so within the museum or cultural institution at which they were employed, but several others were doing this indirectly by teaching within the cultural sector or making and/or producing something related to the field, often as freelancers or through smaller initiatives. Several well-established alumni said they found institutions like the Stedelijk too rigid and/or insufficiently inclusive and therefore weren't inclined to work there permanently.

Among the findings was that former Blikopeners were often more committed than their contemporaries to providing opportunities to those who are typically denied them. They were similarly more committed to promoting diversity, equity and inclusion at their workplace, regardless of their field. Some, in pursuing these commitments, had had to explicitly defend their aims and verbalize related criticisms where necessary; others were trying to effect change through a process of dialogue and relationship building.

Photo: Maarten Nauw



Blikopeners performing at the opening of the Marina Abramović exhibition

It's hard to say with absolute certainty whether this stems directly from their participation in the Blikopeners program and how this led to their current pursuits. However, participation in the program certainly developed the participants' ability to express themselves freely and have the confidence to do so. In addition, former Blikopeners credited the diversity of their group for their continued willingness to verbalize their commitment to providing opportunities to those who would otherwise be denied them. Thus, it is reasonable to suppose the program at least contributed to their current efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YOUTH PROGRAMS IN THE CULTURAL SECTOR

The Blikopeners was a novelty when it began, and was thus something of a pilot project. Since then, youth programs and peer education have become increasingly commonplace in the Dutch museum sector and beyond. Our findings show the impact of the program to be far-reaching and reveal the elements responsible for this. In many cases, the study confirmed what we already suspected was key to the success of programs such as this. It's with great pleasure that we now share the following recommendations with our colleagues in the cultural sector.



A Blikopener event at Club Trouw in 2011

Photo: Maarten Jungten

1. VIEW YOUR PROGRAM AS A LONG-TERM COMMITMENT

Youth programs demand long-term commitment. Such commitment allows you to build your program around a set of structurally fixed duties and employ a permanent program coordinator to act as a communication link between the program's participants and the rest of the organization. According to our findings, the reasons for having someone permanent in this role included clarity of lines of communication and the function of the coordinator as a role model. In fact, for some alumni, their group coordinator remained their point of contact with the Stedelijk to this day. Fixed duties that require the visible deployment of young participants helps position the program within the framework of your organization and generate necessary support from the rest of your staff. A youth program set up on a temporary basis will be treated as such and is likely to fail. A sense of permanence is required for programs of this nature to find their place within an organization and operate effectively.

2. GIVE YOUNG PARTICIPANTS A SENSE OF OWNERSHIP

An absolute requirement of an effective youth program is that participants are given the freedom to execute their duties in their own way and have a sense of ownership of their work. This can be achieved in multiple ways, including allowing participants to organize their own events and manage the organization's social media accounts. You should, however, provide some guidance and frameworks for the execution of these tasks. Also give participants enough encouragement to execute their tasks with the confidence required to keep going should their initial attempts not go as smoothly as planned.

3. GENERATE SUPPORT FROM ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION

Ensure the program is structured in a way that facilitates contact between the program's participants and the various departments within your organization. This will not only help embed the program within your organization but also create a bond between the participants and the rest of your staff. According to our findings, being seen as legitimate members of the organization was instrumental in the program participants' development of self-confidence. Thus, ensure regular meetings with other departments and encourage your program's participants to talk to other members of staff, pitch ideas, voice their criticisms without fear of censure and mix with everyone.

4. ENSURE GROUP DIVERSITY

Try to ensure the program team reflects the diversity of the city in which you operate. Make the application process as accessible as possible and avoid creating unnecessary barriers to participation. Actively encourage applications from youngsters you suspect might believe they're not "good enough" for your institution, and don't simply solicit applications from youngsters who already have an affinity with the arts. Group diversity is, among other things, necessary for fostering healthy group dynamics, which begins as soon as you've established the group. Invest time in building mutual trust within the group, between the group and the rest of the organization, and in everyone getting to know one another.

5. INVOLVE THE ALUMNI COMMUNITY

A youth program is a "gift that keeps on giving," provided you maintain contact with the alumni community. Remember: You're establishing something whose effects will be felt by both the participants and the institution for years to come. Thus, find ways to retain the engagement of your alumni. For instance, you could create structures for the solicitation and development of news ideas by alumni. Or you could involve them in the recruitment and selection of new participants, or engage them in programs that could benefit from their specialist knowledge. Contact them whenever you have a vacancy they might be suited to. Doing so has allowed the Stedelijk to employ several former Blikopeners on a permanent basis or as freelance PR officers, photographers, moderators, floor managers, researchers, curators, and even as Blikopener coordinators, as is the case with the current coordinator. You are creating a network, whether you intend to or not. According to our study, several alumni have stayed in touch with the people they met during the program.

CONCLUSION

Our determination to be more welcoming and inclusive is widely shared across the cultural sector today, and a key part of achieving this goal is each organization's success in appealing to a younger generation in all its diversity. But simply "organizing something for young people" won't get you any closer to achieving this. Such one-off efforts may briefly draw a young crowd, but they won't be properly embedded in your organization and will do little to make the sector more inclusive or diverse. Conversely, an intensive, properly embedded, continuous, long-term and inclusive youth program can make all the difference, according to our findings. A significant number of former Blikopeners are now employed as creators, educators, producers, etc. in the arts and culture sector, the cultural sector or the creative industries, and are contributing to the development of these sectors by, among other things, promoting diversity and inclusion. A properly established youth program is thus an investment on behalf of both the younger generation and the establishing institution, but also, and perhaps more importantly, on behalf of the above-mentioned sectors as a whole.

We hope that the results of our study will bring into sharper focus the importance of investing and continuing to invest in these programs to the extent required for their success. Effective youth programs are a crucial part of the foundation of cultural sectors with an in-built capacity to represent and inspire future generations in all their diversity. Art is for everyone and essential to society, and youth programs are an obvious and effective way to encourage successive generations to make a lifelong commitment to art and culture.



Photo: Maarten Nauw

Blikopeners x Abramovic event.

DAMY RAIMUNDO, CLASS OF 2014

Damy had never even visited a museum before becoming a Blikopener. Growing up in the Bijlmer (a neighborhood previously associated with non-Western immigrants and the urban underclass) had led him to believe such environments weren't for people like him. The program not only gave him access to this hitherto alien environment but also a huge dose of self-confidence. He has since become a successful hip-hop artist whose journey and achievements were chronicled in a 2023 documentary that was screened at the Dutch Film Festival.



Photo: Tomek Dersu Aaron

Damy Raimundo, 2014

MARTIJNTJE BAARDA, CLASS OF 2017

Martijntje, one of two alumni who participated in this study, currently works as educator, illustrator and artist. She was initially bent on a career in science, but changed course once she realized how much art meant to her. Martijntje remains closely involved in the Blikopener program and completed an internship in the museum's education department, where she was able to further develop her passion for art and education.



Photo: Tomek Dersu Aaron

Martijntje Baarda, 2017

AIKE JANSEN, CLASS OF 2014

It dawned on Aike during her time as a Blikopener that she was more interested in art history than she's previously imagined. She promptly enrolled on the art history and theatre studies program at the University of Glasgow in Scotland, in fulfillment of a long-cherished dream. It was also during the Blikopeners program that Aike discovered her talent for producing and her joy in doing so. She has since pursued this interest by serving as a creative producer on behalf of institutions and venues such as the DEGASTEN performing arts theater in Amsterdam. Aike is among the alumni who have remained in the cultural sector, though outside the museum world.



Photo: Tomek Dersu Aaron

Aike Jansen, 2014

