

## **‘It’s not enough for the work of art to be great’: Children and Young People as Museum Visitors**

Katya Johanson and Hilary Glow  
Deakin University, Australia

### **Abstract**

This paper examines trends in the understanding of children as visitors to art and natural history museums. It begins by examining research into the qualities of engagement by museum visitors generally. It then addresses the specific challenges posed by children as visitors, and the responses developed by museums to enhance their engagement. Three strategies are identified: social/family-centred interactivity, immersive experiences and engagement through interpretive dialogue. The three examples of programs of children’s engagement examined in this paper represent a major departure from such models towards a profoundly social form of interaction. The paper argues that these strategies are museums’ responses to shifts in pedagogical theory, and have been developed to increase the engagement of the child-visitor with exhibitions. Such strategies represent a genuine engagement between adults (both museum staff and parents) and children, and an opportunity for children to define the experience of cultural engagement. The consequence of this is a redefinition of the cultural role of museums in relation to children.

**Keywords:** Children, young people, museum visitors, engagement.

### **Introduction**

Children make up a substantial proportion of the audiences/visitors for most of the major cultural activities and artforms. In 2006, approximately 70 per cent of Australian children attended a public library, art gallery, museum or performing arts event (Cultural Ministers Council 2006). Many of these activities are funded directly through federal, state and local government departments or through grants from arts funding agencies on the basis of their service to children as audiences. Like most publicly funded services provided for children and families, arts activities are endowed with a range of ideological or pragmatic motives. Children may be specifically sought as audiences/visitors for numerous reasons: to encourage the adult audiences for the arts of the future; to augment their social, emotional or intellectual development by providing or supplementing curriculum-based education; to

provide a form of civic education to the citizens and voters of the future; or to provide opportunities for social interaction or personal inquiry. Black (2007) suggests another, less commonly stated, reason for cultivating children as audiences: 'One of the great hidden benefits of providing art trolleys and activity backpacks for children is that they always need parental support. ... If the parents are not careful, they end up discovering things as well and thereby enhancing their own understanding' (Black 2007: 283). The current article examines trends in the provision of experiences for children as visitors to museums.

This sector is of particular interest because of the way museums around the world have explicitly addressed children visitors and have developed strategies to foster this audience base (Swartz 2008). This development represents part of a larger change within the museum sector, in which museums seek to attract diverse audiences, contribute to social, economic and cultural regeneration, be relevant to society, celebrate cultural diversity, promote social cohesion and inclusion, develop new audiences and act as a community meeting place (Black 2007: 4). With all publicly funded arts organisations, museums have assumed a significant role in increasing not only the rate and diversity of attendance, but also the depth of participation (see Falk 2009). Our article is primarily concerned with what museums now know about the needs of children or young adults as visitors, and how they set out to meet these needs. It is not concerned with the interests of teachers, parents or other guardians in bringing children to museums, although the authors acknowledge that the distinction between the needs of children and accompanying adults is often difficult to make. The article examines three trends in museum approaches to children as visitors that aim to increase children's participation through three case studies, which are described in the methodology section that follows. The article then places the discussion of children as visitors in the context of research on the museum experience. It then examines the three trends in museum approaches to children as visitors: interactivity, immersion and interpretive dialogue.

## **Methodology**

The article is based on semi-structured interviews with senior personnel from museums in Europe and Australia – the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, the Children's Museum at the National Museum of the Arts, Copenhagen, and the Melbourne Museum in Victoria. Interview subjects were selected on the basis of their positions managing education or children's programs in these three institutions. The article explores three related trends in developing participatory practices for children: the development of social or family-focused exhibits; the production of immersive experiences; and the development of engagement through interpretive dialogue.

This article emerged from a larger project in which the authors examined the influence of public cultural policy on the development of programs for children (Johanson 2010). The museums selected from the larger study for discussion here share an historical commitment to their roles as collections institutions and have, over the last thirty years, shifted their focus towards access. As a result all three have been grappling with the

problem of engaging children and young people as visitors. However, the three institutions are clearly rooted in very different cultural contexts, and the museums themselves have different purposes. The Melbourne Museum is one of three museums managed by Museum Victoria, which is responsible for the scientific and cultural collections of the state of Victoria and focused on providing public access (Museum Victoria). While the Melbourne Museum is a natural history museum catering primarily to local visitors in Australia’s second-largest city, the National Museum of the Arts holds Denmark’s national art collection in the nation’s capital. Like the Musée d’Orsay, it caters increasingly to tourists as well as local citizens. In respect to children as visitors, all three museums aim to attract school groups and families. As made evident in the discussion below, the Musée d’Orsay also works to attract young adults in social groups or as individual visitors.

The three museums researched here all have popular and/or innovative children’s programs or dedicated spaces predicated on their obligation to provide life-long learning and visitor engagement. The researchers selected museum programs from three different countries, in order to establish international trends in museums’ cultural engagement with children, and in the hope that documenting these examples may prove useful to curators and program managers around the world. Museum Victoria, which manages the Melbourne Museum, aims ‘to challenge, excite and involve our visitors’ (Museum Victoria 2008). The Musée d’Orsay’s educational objectives are to introduce museography and to create ‘an artistic and cultural context’ for museum visitors and in particular to ‘stimulate young people’s interest in their aesthetic heritage’ (D’jaod interview July 2009). The National Museum for Art in Copenhagen aims ‘to stimulate the inquisitiveness of children and young people, their sense of wonder, their creativity and fantasy’. The Museum regards its collections as an important means to help visitors to ‘think, understand, interpret and communicate’: ‘We bring words to centuries of graphic art, and bring images to that for which there are no words’ (National Museum for Art 2010).

<b>Museum</b>	Musée d’Orsay (France)	National Museum of the Arts, Copenhagen (Denmark)	Melbourne Museum (Australia)
<b>Program/gallery</b>	Ranc’ Art	Children’s Museum	Children’s Gallery
<b>Interviewee</b>	Senior educator	Art educator	Public Programs manager

***Table of interviews***

**Research on museum visitor engagement**

There has recently been a substantial body of research that has called for museums to become more engaged with individuals, communities and society as a whole. Black (2007), for example, notes the fact that by the turn of the twenty-first century, audiences for museums around the world had reached a plateau or begun to fall. The key to reversing this

trend is to engage better with audiences, and with broader audiences than those that have traditionally visited, 'to gain visitor attention, to hold it and to encourage reflection (Black 2007: 271).

While little research has been conducted on what children seek or value from their experience of museums, there is increasing research on the qualities that museum visitors value more generally. For example, the 'What did you learn at the museum today?' report (Hooper-Greenhill et al 2006) surveyed the opinions of over 1,600 teachers and 26,000 students about 69 museums in the UK, demonstrating that museums can assist children to make connections and think critically. Australian research on family visitations indicate that the main motivation for visiting is social interaction and learning, or learning together (Kelly et al. 2004: 15). In the interests of keeping the focus of this article on museum strategies to maximise children's experiences as audiences rather than students, we turn to the literature on museum audience development, rather than the literature on museums and pedagogy. Our aim is specifically to locate a discussion of children as museum visitors in the literature on the qualities of museum attendance, rather than the more conventional practice of considering children and museums through a pedagogical framework. While it is true that the principal function of the museum is learning, the literature on adult museum attendance does not apply a pedagogic framework around the visitor experience.

To regard the visitation of children as having *experience* rather than *learning* as its central goal can, we argue, provide a less instrumental focus. Informed by a contemporary concern for the rights of children, there is a growing campaign for arts and collection and heritage organisations along with government funding agencies to be sensitive to the needs of children as audiences/visitors. In part, this is a result of a broader growing social awareness of and concern with the rights of children. Coupled with growing awareness of children's rights in policy generally, the substantial rise in arts audience research has also contributed to a heightened interest in children as audiences. This is particularly the case in nations in which our case studies are located (Australia, Denmark and France), where arts and collection and heritage organisations are publicly funded at a national level. Public funding necessitates public accountability, and this often motivates research into audiences with the ultimate aim of developing strategies to increase audiences.

Research on museum attendance generally tends to emphasise that visitors seek numerous aspects of the experience. Nusser Raajpoot, Khoon Koh and Anita Jackson's (2010) research established a scale to measure service quality in museums, with the aim of assisting museums to 'deliver high-quality experiences that result in higher levels of loyalty and profitability' (2010: 54). Their study of museum visitors gave rise to ten domains of museum evaluation by audiences, some of which relate specifically to service quality, such as 'courtesy' or the politeness, willingness or generosity provided by museum employees. Others, however, relate to the quality of the audience experience, including *Pleasure*, 'defined as the joy one feels when viewing beautiful or aesthetically pleasing objects that add value to the museum experience'; *Relaxation* or the relief of stress as visitors to the museum 'get away from the usual demands of life'; *Learning*, including challenge or the

satisfaction of curiosity and a sense of discovery; *Entertainment* or the enjoyment of a social outing; *Solitude*, as many visitors seek to get away from others and to ‘internalize and meditate on the visit’; *Self-actualisation* or a way for individuals to seek solace and secure images of the self; and *Aesthetics*, or the appreciation of beauty and good taste (Raajpoot, Koh & Jackson 2010: 58–59). As we shall see, many of these qualities are achieved for children and young adult visitors by the strategies discussed in the case studies that follow.

While Raajpoot, Koh and Jackson’s study aims to provide advice to improve service quality, their domains, or elements of the domains, are similar to the qualities that Throsby and Bakhshi identify as being conducive to visitor engagement: visitors ‘might expect to improve their knowledge of contemporary art, to have an immersive experience and escape from the everyday or, perhaps, to have an emotionally uplifting experience’ (Throsby & Bakhshi 2010: 47–8). Falk (2009) distinguished between types of museum visitors rather than elements of their experience. These types include explorers, facilitators (accompanying others), experience seekers, professional/hobbyists and rechargers. These efforts attempt to define visitor engagement and to understand what engagement in a museum might entail.

Both sets of research identify the internal qualities (‘immersive experience’, ‘emotionally uplifting experience’, ‘internalize and meditate on the visit’, ‘seek solace and secure images of the self’), as core values. Likewise, the Hooper-Greenhill et al. (2006) report identifies emotional engagement as a core value for teachers and students at the museum. While both Raajpoot et al (2010) and Throsby and Bakshi (2010) discuss the importance of social aspects of the museum experience, amongst others, this article argues that for children and young people, the social aspects of the visit have primacy.

The remaining sections of this article examine how museums attempt to foster experiences for children and young people.

## **Debates about children as audiences**

Informed by a contemporary concern for the rights of children, there is a growing campaign for arts and collection and heritage organisations along with government funding agencies to be sensitive to the needs of children as audiences/visitors. In part, this is a result of a broader growing social awareness of and concern with the rights of children. As Livingstone argues, ‘it is no more acceptable to ask adults alone to speak for children than it is to ask husbands to speak for wives. Children’s voices are increasingly being heard in public, policy and commercial fora’ (Livingstone 2002: 4). In 1995, Bazalgette and Buckingham noted that even those who professed to be concerned about children’s well-being in discussions of what they were exposed to as audiences had a surprising habit of overlooking the need for children’s input: ‘there has been hardly any investigation into what children themselves might define as “quality”, and very little sense in which they have been able to participate in the debate: they are, in this sense, an invisible audience’ (Bazalgette & Buckingham 1995: 9). As a result, there is a call to promote children not as passive audiences but as active, critical judges of quality. Swartz carries this debate into children’s theatre, critiquing the

belief that ‘children do not know the difference between a “good” and a “poor” performance and their reactions to the entire production sometimes lack any artistic or aesthetic justification’. In response Swartz asks: ‘How do we define what is good and what is poor? And who is the judge – the adult who accompanies the children to the theatre or the children themselves? Are “good” and “poor” even the right terms to use when discussing theatre for young audiences?’ (Swartz 2008: 48)

Coupled with growing awareness of children’s rights in policy generally, the substantial rise in arts audience research has also contributed to a heightened interest in children as audiences. This is particularly the case in nations such as Australia, Denmark and France in which arts and collection and heritage organisations are publicly funded at a national level. Public funding necessitates public accountability, and this often motivates research into audiences with the ultimate aim of developing strategies to increase audiences. In a period in which Australian audiences for the live performing arts were declining, the Australia Council’s 2003 *Review of Theatre for Young People in Australia*, for instance, noted that ‘early exposure to positive arts experiences correlates to later interest in and engagement with the arts’ (2003: 5). The same point is noted about museum attendance, as adults credit their regular visits as children as a major influence in their level of attendance as a child (Jensen 1994: 69).

## **Interactivity**

One of the key contextual issues that precedes these trends is the implicit suggestion in much discussion of children as audiences that children are not natural audience members for most conventional western artforms, because the etiquette established in traditions of audience behaviour requires physical restraint or aural discipline that is either undesirable or impossible for children, and that such artforms do not provide a conducive environment for families. The knowledge that some artforms often exclude children and families has led to reviews by arts and collection and heritage organisations and funding agencies of the way the arts are presented to make them more appealing to and accommodating of children.

One of the most significant outcomes has been the adaption of the presentation of the arts – exhibitions, performances, concerts and even visual art works – in order to allow and facilitate audience/visitor interaction. Often based on the principles of development psychology, the practice of interactivity has been an aspect of certain museum exhibitions since the late nineteenth century (Witcomb 2007: 353). In the late twentieth century, it became evident in most publicly funded museums and more recently it is incorporated into art gallery activities and concerts targeted at families. It would be difficult to find a large museum today that did not include opportunities for interactivity.

Museums researchers have identified varying degrees of interactivity. Witcomb (2007: 354) notes that ‘interactivity’ is broadly understood as a ‘process that can be added to an already existing display and that most often involves some form of computerized technology’. She argues that this is a limited definition of interactivity that encourages museums to regard only certain of their exhibition areas as ‘interactive’ (Witcomb 2007:

354). In contrast, Witcomb identifies the 'discovery model' of interactivity, informed by constructivist learning theory which promotes the making of meaning, 'takes account of what the learner or visitor brings to the experience', and is informed by a 'nuanced understanding of the nature of communication in which the production of knowledge is embedded in the process of communication' (Witcomb 2007: 357).

Existing arguments in favour of interactivity generally see a two-fold benefit. Firstly, interactive exhibits are seen to engage with children's interests, so that as Jensen (1994), for instance, notes: 'A key factor for fun museum experiences seemed to be opportunities for active participation'. The interests that interactivity in museums chiefly address is children's apparently innate interest in technology, through what one of our interviewees referred to as the 'buttons and levers' activity supplements to museum exhibits (Griffith interview, June 2009). Such techniques to promote interactivity reflect the aim of increasing— in Raajpoot, Koh and Jackson's (2010) terms – the *entertainment* qualities of engagement. Secondly, interactivity is seen as empowering the audience/visitor to participate in the museum and thus making the experience of the art more democratic. Witcomb (2007: 355) notes that in such arguments, 'interactivity, choice and democracy' can come 'to be thought of as going together – and as being interchangeable'.

There are numerous critiques of an uncritical faith in interactivity as a principle in museums. Anderson et al (2008) noted the importance of recognising what the visitor brings to the experience in their study of young children's museum field trips, which showed that children have 'personal agendas of what they want to see and do prior to their visits' (2008:255). Not only do the agendas of individuals within each family group vary, but the agendas of young children may not be consistent with the mission of the organising group – usually a school group (Lucas 2000). Lucas' study shows that museum educators' aims for school visits may impact on learning outcomes: in his case study example, the museum educator's agenda was to ensure that the students' interactions with the exhibit followed a correct procedure, and this agenda was in conflict with that of the teacher and the students (Lucas 2000). Such analysis suggests that interactive museum exhibits are useful when they reflect an understanding of different stakeholders' agendas, and the 'situated nature of learning' (Anderson et al: 256)

Further concerns about the nature of interactivity also relate to the museum's pedagogical objectives. Opportunities for interaction are often seen to represent an attractive distraction from the exhibit that it is meant to showcase, or an impediment to achieving improved knowledge, in Throsby and Bakhshi's (2010) terms. Debenedetti, Caro and Krebs (2009) studied the behaviour of children at an interactive exhibition hosted by the Louvre Museum and the George Pompidou Centre in Paris. 'On average, the children interacted with 9 of the 14 interactive devices (64%) but looked at only 18 of the 63 art works (29%). The children's interest was aroused much more by interacting with the devices than by looking at the art works (65% and 11% respectively of the total visit) with, on average, 17 minutes given over to the interactive devices and 3 minutes to the art works' (Debenedetti et. Al, 2009: 50). Blud's earlier study of opportunities for interactivity in

museums did not provide ‘very clear evidence that interactive museum exhibits are more effective than more traditional exhibits’ in promoting learning amongst children (Blud 1990: 49). Interactivity of this kind relies on behavioural psychology, while a constructivist approach ‘argues that knowledge is socially or culturally mediated’ (Witcomb 2007: 355).

Museums and galleries are responding to changing pedagogical theory of the kind highlighted by Witcomb and documented in various reports of museum practice. The Musée en Herbe in Paris used the theme of a Bruegel painting, *Children’s games*, to create an immersive, game-like activity in which children, dressed in costume, played out the medieval games portrayed in the painting (Debenedetti et. al, 2009). The Chicago History Museum (CHM) used ‘whole body sensory experiences’ to engage with visitors ‘own personal toolkit’. The CHM presented sensory experiences relevant to Chicago’s history, such as ‘the smell of hotdogs and pizza ... [and] the sound of horses’ hoofs on wooden street pavers’ (McRainey & Russick 2009: 185). The Tate Gallery in London explored ways to engage children as audiences through sensual stimulus, such as by asking them to hold a block of ice while viewing a painting of a snowscape. Reflecting on that initiative, MacRae noted that by ‘working back from the object represented [the painting] to the object as felt [a block of ice], minds are unsettled and it is this unsettling which provokes us to think. Moving and touching, or even smelling or tasting, materials are ways to (re)compose your perception of them’ (MacRae 2007:166). As Debenedetti, Caro and Krebs described, the Musée en Herbe’s Bruegel activity ‘presupposes an exhibition space dedicated to children with a museological approach that removes the art work from its traditional sacrosanct position and leads it to the child (not the other way around)’ (Debenedetti, Caro & Krebs 2009: 56).

Some studies of immersive activity note that such opportunities might undermine the museum’s place in fostering future adult visitors. The campaign to include children in arts activities is often underpinned by an expectation that their behaviour will be influenced as a result of their inclusion, in a way that will make them appropriately behaved audiences in adulthood. For instance, Jensen (1994) noted that repeated experiences as audience members or visitors improves children’s concentration and self-confidence, replacing ‘more rowdy and aimless behaviour’ (Jensen 1994; Hein 1980, 1984, 1985). Yet the Tate noted an inherent problem in the struggle to reconcile its aim to elicit art appreciation in children through interactivity with its aim to teach appropriate gallery behaviour:

Although we wanted them [children participating in gallery activity] to be ‘hands-on’ and [to] give children permission to touch objects that we directed them to, we were also aware that we needed to make it clear that, as a rule, they were not allowed to touch the art exhibited in the gallery. On the one hand, we were trying to offer an open and accessible ethos, so parents/nursery staff could feel relaxed with young children. On the other hand, there was no escaping the fact that the gallery remained in many ways a temple-like environment that is surveyed by guards whose job is to ensure that works of art are protected from physical contact (MacRae 2007: 163).



Insights such as MacRae's identify an ambivalence about the role, benefit and extent of interactivity in family and children's exhibitions. Interviews with personnel from Melbourne Museum, the Children's Museum at the Denmark's National Museum of the Arts in Copenhagen and the Musée d'Orsay indicate that museums are engaging with children by producing exhibits which highlight three aspects: social interactivity particularly relating to family engagement, immersive experiences, and engagement through interpretive dialogue.

### **Social and family-centred interactivity**

Both the Melbourne Museum and Musée d'Orsay have introduced a focus on social and family-centred interactivity, encouraging communication between child visitors/audiences, their families and staff. Over the past decade, the Melbourne Museum has introduced a 'family learning environment' which encourages communication and play between children and with their parents (Griffiths interview 2009). A family learning environment encourages informal small-group communication and interaction.

This emphasis reflects both audience research and pedagogical theory. One persistent finding of a range of research is that children and their families prefer to experience the arts in family or small social groups, outside a formal education program. Sterry and Beaumont explain that families 'prefer activities not to look like what they might do at school; they want to learn without realising it' (Sterry & Beaumont 2006: 227). Jensen (1994) found that most of the children interviewed about their museum attendance 'prefer visiting museums with family and friends' (Jensen 1994: 71). Despite this preference, Blud notes that there is little research into such 'informal learning environments' as used in museums: 'Whilst a formal educational setting may provide little opportunity for the emergence of socio-cognitive conflict processes, an informal learning environment, such as a museum, would appear to be the kind of environment where such processes might be encouraged, since people usually visit a museum in groups and engage in free discussion' (Blud 1990: 44). The model of the family-learning environment has become so important to the Melbourne Museum's understanding of its pedagogical process that, as Griffith explains, it is being used for school groups. 'Families come in [as] informal groupings and they interact in [particular] ways, and then we put children in school groups and expect them to do completely different things which may not be natural to them' (Griffith interview, June 2009). The Museum is developing strategies to 'transfer those learning behaviours from family into a school experience'. Such activities highlight the fact that, in contrast to the adult museum visitors surveyed by Raajpoot, Koh and Jackson (2010), family visitor groups benefit from and seek increased opportunities for interaction more than they look for solitude.

The emphasis on social learning also includes enhanced interaction between audiences and staff. Griffith identified the Museum's approach to interactivity that promotes social learning: 'with our Pompeii exhibition, one of the children's activities is making a helmet, making a gladiator's helmet. Now we [might] find that because we've got so many thousands of kids coming through that we're just churning out these helmets and

they're just an end in themselves: let's make a helmet, put it on and off you go. There's got to be a lot of learning involved in that, there's got to be a lot of interaction. We like to make sure there's plenty of interaction between the group and the museum staff' (Griffith interview, June 2009).

### **Immersive experiences**

As Witcomb (2007: 359) identifies, immersive experiences in museums are those which create an aesthetic 'where there is a space for poetic, affective responses'. Immersion can contribute to the child-visitor's aesthetic experience. These are exhibitions which 'use the full range of the creative arts to construct a highly immersive experiential environment' where the aim is to 'produce a dialogue' (2007: 359). In our interview, Griffith discussed some of the earlier interactive strategies of the museum which had been of the 'push button, lift flap' variety; that is, activities which the children treated as an end in themselves. Such practices have subsequently been reviewed and the strategy now emphasises 'immersive' activities; families 'play' together and interact as a part of the exhibition. Immersive interaction often includes dressing up, play acting and discussions as part of the museum exhibition.

### **Melbourne Museum**

In the case of the Melbourne Museum, this is managed by introducing informed guides (either published texts or people) into the exhibition environment. Griffith noted:

when we had the Dinosaurs from China exhibition we had, not as an add-on anywhere else but as part of the exhibition, built an area for families where they could do the palaeontological dig, they could dress up as palaeontologists, there were rubbings, there were things they could do which were a lot more hands-on, because the rest of the exhibition was stuff that had been brought from China and it was very precious, and there was no way anybody was going to handle it, but we were able to get casts and all sorts of things. And the innovative thing was, I think, putting it in the exhibition so they can be experiencing the things that were behind glass, and then going to the next area and finding something they can have their hands on, or be listening to.' (Griffith interview, June 2009).

Griffith's account highlights the sensory and social nature of the experience, noting that 'we have a tagline here at the Museum: "come and see the real thing". So that's the focus of the museum: where people can experience things they can't experience anywhere else' (Griffith interview, June 2009). These activities are designed to emphasise both experiential and social learning.

Immersion is also an appropriate strategy for the museum's growing interest in appealing to their increasingly younger visitors. Griffith points out that at the Melbourne Museum, the Children's Gallery was originally established for three to eight-year olds, but:

‘in the last few years we’ve noticed that we’re getting a lot of children under three. It’s really Pram City down there. So one of the things we’re asking is, can we feasibly do something with the nought to three-year olds? Or do we just treat them as a bit of extra baggage and hope that they’ll be alright?’ (Griffith interview, June 2009). The Museum is turning its attention to the learning needs of pre-school children, ‘not that [the Museum] is going to be setting up classes for two year olds, just that there is an acknowledgement of the learning that happens [at that age]’ (Griffith interview, June 2009). The Museum’s focus on immersion experiences, with an emphasis on role-play, dressing up, and hands-on activities can be seen as an age-appropriate strategy for a growing market of pre-school attendees. In the period around which the interviews for this study took place, Victoria’s education department was reframing its policies around early years education for the ages 0 to 8, and the Museum was aware of the need to provide services to this age group. In comparison to the two examples discussed below, its focus is very much on an experiential exploration underpinned by materialist learning in history and science.

### ***Musée d’Orsay***

When interviewed in August 2009, Rosa D’joad, Senior Educator at the Musée d’Orsay, identified that of the three million people who visited the museum in 2008, 160,000 – or over 5 per cent – were children who visited with schools or family groups. Many of these children came to participate in the children’s programs run by D’jaod’s department. Unlike the Melbourne Museum, the d’Orsay does not have a specific children’s precinct but runs children’s tours, lectures and workshops within the museum’s general spaces. The Musée d’Orsay has children’s programs for children aged between 5 and 16 years old, with the most common age group to participate being children from 7 to 10 years old. D’jaod noted that the children’s programs were for children of the age of five and upward, and so younger children were discouraged from attending. When asked to give the goal of the children’s programs, D’jaod included (1) aesthetic challenges and education, (2) citizenship training, and (3) personal development:

The goal of these programs is to give all children ‘at one moment of his personal upbringing, (1) the opportunity to be in the art context, to be confronted with different kinds of artists, different styles and different ideas, because we think it’s the right of all children to be in contact with the art environment and also because we believe it is part of our common references and culture, as well as history, philosophy or literature. (2) Going to a museum certainly helps children in the process of better understanding the world and also to build their citizenship. ...the role of a musée, and of the educational service, is to take part in their personal construction as open-minded and curious future adults, willing to know and to understand better the society and the world they live in. Not forgetting of course (3) their personal blooming’.

## **Interpretive Dialogue**

Hubard uses the term 'interpretive inquiry' or 'dialogue' to refer to conversations, usually facilitated by museum educators, which encourage 'questioning, observation, association and speculation', as well as reflections on art works (2011: 175). Through facilitated conversations, young people visiting museums are encouraged to construct their own meaning in relation to works of art, which helps them to 'consider important human issues, make sense of themselves and their world, and imagine things as though they could be otherwise' (Hubard 2010: 42). Such an approach enfranchises young museum visitors who can otherwise feel that 'their participation is irrelevant, that other people have already defined what is important and significant' (Hubard 2007: 18). Thus the aim of interpretive dialogue is to empower and engage young people to 'collectively discover layers of meaning in works of art' (2007: 18). Two of the museums in this current project (in Copenhagen and Paris) have developed programs designed to engage young people through interpretive dialogue and collective meaning-making.

### ***National Museum of the Arts, Copenhagen***

In her role as Art Educator at the Children's Museum of the National Museum of the Arts, Copenhagen, Nana Bernhardt describes the historical shifts in the museum's strategic engagement with children visitors. Until the late 1990s, the National Museum of the Arts, Copenhagen attempted to engage children and families through the provision of one-hour guided tours. Bernhardt explains that museum staff noticed how difficult it was 'being a small child coming into this huge space, finding [their] way around within the big exhibition spaces, and connect[ing] with the artworks' especially since 'the works of art are hanging very high and you just feel too small'. For Bernhardt, 'if you're a small child – it is not enough for the work of art [to be] great' (Bernhardt interview November 2009).

The National Museum of the Arts, Copenhagen was closed for re-development between 1996 and 1998, and it re-opened with a new dedicated exhibition space for children. The Children's Museum began with the intention of providing opportunities for 6-12 year olds to access the collection in a more intimate and child-friendly space, 'where you could feel more comfortable being a child'. The programming in the new space offers opportunities for children and families to have both 'formalistic' experiences (engaging with and learning about the formal attributes of the art work, for example the use of perspective), and 'thematic' exhibitions where the emphasis is more experiential and less directly pedagogical.

An example of 'thematic' programming is the exhibition 'The Flower and the Bee' which addresses the themes of love, romance and sexuality. Staff at the Children's Museum were interested in developing an exhibition as a 'platform for talking about difficult things'; 'there has been a big discussion in Denmark about the problem of children and teenagers - that their first experience with sexuality is often based on seeing a porno movie'. In response, the Museum produced an exhibition of artworks to stimulate talk between

children, and between children and their families and teachers about relationships and sexuality.

While the Children's Museum develops programs specifically for families, the key idea for Bernhardt is the production of dialogue and an exchange of ideas with children visitors. The Museum's role, she explains, is to 'present art works in dialogue with the children or to create the dialogue between the artwork and the children'. This notion of the museum as a place which engages young visitors through the production of dialogue and exchange of ideas is taken further by the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.

Inspired by a similar program developed at MOMA, the Musée d'Orsay has established a strategy specifically for engaging and involving teenagers. The program is called 'Ranc' Art' – a play on the French term '*rancard*' which has connotations of both 'rendezvous' (to meet up with people) and 'renseignement' (an interesting piece of information, to inquire, ask for information). As Djoad describes it '*rancard*' means 'to go somewhere to learn something and to go somewhere to meet people' (Djoad interview July 2009).

The Ranc' Art program was developed in response to the feedback from teenagers that 'in their mind the Museum is a boring place' and 'we only go with [school] because we have to; we don't choose to go'. Since 2007, the Musée d'Orsay has provided opportunities for 11-16 year olds to participate in the program which runs during vacations and includes discussion groups, and meeting and talking with young artists. After surveying teenage visitors, Djoad found that it was important to frame Ranc' Art discussions around 'sensitive subjects' for example 'love, religion, [and] things they would love to talk about with someone; they can't do it with their family, sometimes they can't [talk about] it with their friends but coming to a museum...anything is possible'. In this way, the Ranc' Art program recognises the needs of the teenage visitor for the experience of self-actualisation in the museum. But D'jaod was also surprised by the range of their interests, which included museography, and the participants took the opportunity to ask questions such as: 'Why is this painting here and not here? Why is this painter presented next to that one? Why are the Impressionists on the 5<sup>th</sup> Floor and not on the ground floor?'

In addition to providing discussion opportunities, the Ranc' Art program facilitates meetings between young adults and young artists. The idea was developed in response to the comments of participants that 'an artist is a dead person, like Monet'; Djoad felt it was important for the teenagers to meet young practising artists 'living by their art' to 'tell them they can be artists themselves' and to learn that 'artists are not only dead people' whose work is preserved in museums.

A significant body of audience research confirms the importance of audience engagement through dialogue. Brown and Novak (2007) used questionnaires to collect information about audiences' mental and emotional preparedness for a live performing arts event. They found that captivation, intellectual stimulation, emotional resonance, spiritual value, aesthetic growth and social bonding characterise 'readiness' for a performance. They linked the audience experience of engagement in the performing arts to repeat attendance.

Brown and Novak suggest that there is a need for a 'shift in the traditional role of arts presenters from one of simply marketing and presenting, to one of drawing audiences into the experience' (p.21). The Ranc' Art program and the Copenhagen Children's Museum are exemplars of this engagement approach where the primary goal is not to market the museum (though repeat attendance by visitors is a desired outcome), but to enhance the experience of visitors and to broaden their understanding of the museum and the activity of visiting it. The United States 2004 RAND report reviewed all benefits associated with the arts through published literature to include both intrinsic and instrumental outcomes, and found cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural, health, social and economic benefits for arts participants. The RAND report noted that '(F)requent participants are those whose experiences engage them in multiple ways –mentally, emotionally, and socially. The more intense that engagement is, the more gratifying the experience. It is such experiences that make people into life-long participants in the arts' (McCarthy et al 2004). Within the performing arts, audience research also identifies factors relating to participation rates. Boorsma (2006), for example, conceptualised the link between customer value and artistic value; Jacobs' (2000) study of college student attendance at performing arts events to inquire whether and how students valued attendance found that such audiences suffered 'performance anxieties' associated with the behaviour required, or seen to be required, at such events (Jacobs 2000: 133).

The engagement of young visitors, as manifested through the two Museums' programs discussed here, is managed through the facilitation of both dialogue and collective activity. Eberbach and Crowley (2005) studied family learning in a botanical garden and specifically how parent-child units use explanations to engage with living plant exhibits. They show that learning in museums is socially mediated; that is 'visitors learn as they talk with, listen to, and observe other visitors' (Eberbach & Crowley 2005). This point is exemplified by the Ranc' art program which develops the teenage visitors' relationship to the museum, their sense of collective participation through 'rendezvous' and shared learning through 'renseignement'. The opportunities to discuss with each other a range of issues of concern to them, to meet museum staff and artists all heighten the sense of social inclusion and pleasure.

For D'jaod, the rationale for the Ranc' Art program is that 'museums can really help teenagers to grow better. It's a very difficult time for children. They don't know what's going in their mind. They can't talk to their parents, and there are some things they can't even say to their friends. Museums can help because in the museum there is no taboo. You can see everything, you can say anything and no-one will judge you. You are free to be yourself.'

As is arguably appropriate to the aims and focus of each museum, the Melbourne Museum – a natural history museum – interprets its obligation to provide immersive learning by providing role-playing or other experiences that try to reproduce the atmosphere of historical events – dinosaurs, the sinking of the Titanic or volcanic destruction of Pompeii. The art museums in Copenhagen and Paris also provide immersive experiences for children and young people, although here the aim is to heighten emotional

learning and 'self-actualisation' by using the museums' collections to encourage thinking about philosophical issues and their physical manifestation, such as love and sex.

## **Conclusion**

One of the aims of dedicated children's programs is to build the adult visitors of the future, and cultivate appropriate visitor behaviour in young visitors. While this may seem a functionalist approach – impervious to children's current experiences and needs – the strategies used to achieve such outcomes are in fact extremely responsive to children's experiences and needs, and programs are shaped according to such needs. Such strategies, as manifested by the three case studies examined here, represent a genuine engagement between adults (both museum staff and parents) and children, and an opportunity for children to define the experience of cultural engagement. While many of the qualities such programs foster in their visitors are the qualities identified by contemporary research on museum visitors, such as that of Raajpoot, Koh and Jackson (2010) and Throsby and Bakhshi (2010), the strategies are sensitive to and geared towards the needs of children. The strategies identified here are important for two reasons: first, they prioritise children and young people's experiences and perspectives; and second, they facilitate and highlight the intrinsically social nature of museum engagement. Whereas the 'push button' forms of interactivity effectively distract children and young people from the aesthetic and pedagogical aspects of the exhibits, new forms of visitor participation and interaction require a holistic engagement.

Public art exhibitions are seen to encourage family and social interaction (see Sterry & Beaumont 2005; Jensen 1994), as well as providing benefits 'in terms of sensory stimulation and general receptiveness to the world around the child' (Debenedetti et. al 2009: 57). Practitioners from the museum see their task as a two-way process involving the incorporation of what children bring with them to the museum or the exhibit. The reflexivity of museums as they learn about the experience of visitors and then use what they learn to create and intensify the visitor experience, suggests that these cultural institutions have an evolving *raison d'être*. From preserving artefacts and teaching their meanings, museums have transformed into public spaces for live conversations that are inspired by (but not limited to) their collections.

## **Biographical notes:**

**Dr Katya Johanson** is Senior Lecturer in the School of Communication and Creative Arts at Deakin University. Her primary research interests are Australian arts and cultural policy and cultural history. She has published articles on the history of Australian cultural policies and the relationship between cultural practice and identity.

**Dr Hilary Glow** is Associate Professor and Director of the Arts and Entertainment Management Program at Deakin University. She researches issues around cultural policy

and its impact on artists, audiences and organisations. With Katya Johanson, she has authored a book on the Indigenous performing arts, *Your Genre is Black: Indigenous Performing Arts & Policy* (2009).

**Contact:** [katya.johanson@deakin.edu.au](mailto:katya.johanson@deakin.edu.au), or [hilary.glow@deakin.edu.au](mailto:hilary.glow@deakin.edu.au).

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Margaret Griffith, Public Program Manager Melbourne Museum, Interviewed June 2009, Melbourne.

Rosa D'jaod, *Secteur Éducatif et Documentation*, Musée d'Orsay, Interviewed July 2009.

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