

BRIEF REPORTS

Programming and Researching *With* Youth in Cultural Institutions – a Brief Reflection on a Cross-Institutional Youth Advisory Board

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Keywords: youth advisory board, participatory methods, arts-based research, cultural institutions, youth

<https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.38686>

Journal of Participatory Research Methods

Vol. 3, Issue 3, Youth-themed Special Issue, 2022

This brief report describes the operational processes and participatory methods involved in setting up, managing and mediating a cross-institutional youth advisory board. Youth advisory boards in museums give young people opportunities to co-program with and for their peers, as well as to have an active and visible role inside institutions. Framed by the research project *Youth in Museums*, the youth advisory board *Listening Lab – Youth, Culture, Participation*, was co-organized and developed with five cultural institutions in Lisbon, Portugal. These included the Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology (MAAT), BoCA – Biennial of Contemporary Art, Casa da Cerca – Contemporary Art Centre, LU.CA – Luís de Camões Theatre and the Municipal Galleries. Young people, aged 15 to 25, were invited to participate in group roundtables to discuss specific issues related to youth arts programs. In the sessions with the youth advisory board I combined a semi-structured approach with participatory methods that activated collective processes of meaning making.

Introduction

There has always existed a mutual asynchrony between museums and youth. If, on the one hand, museums have long neglected to see this sector of their audience, on the other hand, young people's sociocultural interests do not often include museums. As a group and as individuals, they have their own art and expression, a symbolic culture that can be found in alternative images, music, or fashion, and which is usually not reflected in the art world (Mason & McCarthy, 2006). Consequently, there is an apparent clash between the culture and contents exhibited in art museums and youth cultures and identities. Young people are often reluctant to choose museums as part of their cultural practices because they believe that the latter do not meet their needs (Harland & Kinder, 1999; Willis, 1990). The gap between conventional cultural systems, portrayed in museum-displayed cultural forms, and more idiosyncratic cultures, constructed by many young people, can deter young visitors from going to museums by making them feel that they do not belong.

Also, resistance toward education, usually associated with school, and resistance towards adult figures, usually associated with teachers and or parents, discourages young people from participating and engaging in museums' educational activities (LeBlanc, 1993). In an attempt to bridge these two worlds, museums have invested in different approaches to work with this age group, 15 to 25, as independent visitors. The main assumptions grounding programs for youth in museums are that they are looking for opportunities to grow and experiment with new ideas; are in search of their identity and role in society; and are becoming gradually aware of adult values, which they try to

emulate (Arias & Gray, 2007; Whitfield, 1991). It was only in the early 1990s that museums—particularly contemporary art museums—started to focus on youth, offering them programs outside of formal education (Linzer, 2014; Shelnut, 1994; Xanthoudaki, 1998). This represents an important turning point in art museum education, especially for participatory practices.

Nowadays there is a strong emphasis on peer-led practices in museums' youth programs, grounded in the idea that young people feel more connected with museums when mediated by their peers. The emphasis is therefore on programming *with* youth rather than *for* youth. The collaborative ethos of these programs has transpired into equally collaborative and participatory research methodologies, used when studying these initiatives (see, for example, Crabbe et al., 2022; Linzer & Munley, 2015; Sayers, 2014; Silva, 2017; Sim, 2018; Tzibazi, 2013). This synchrony, allied with the arts-based focus of youth programs in contemporary art museums, can blur the boundaries between practice and research. In other words, researchers are almost inherently participant researchers, and participants are almost inherently co-researchers. There are, of course, different levels of participation, expressed in the use of distinct research frameworks, from ethnography to youth participatory action research. Nevertheless, this is a unique territory to use, experiment, or create participatory research methods and mediation strategies.

When designing the research project *Youth in Museums*, I was interested in developing a participatory methodology to engage both institutional stakeholders and young people. The project aims to research the educational provisions and professional trainings available for youth in contemporary art museums, and how these programs can enhance participants' sense of agency and career opportunities in the creative sector. The focus is on the Portuguese context, in particular the work that has been developed with and for youth at the Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology (MAAT) in Lisbon for the past decade. In this brief report, I analyze the operational dimensions involved in setting up, managing, and mediating the *Listening LAB – Youth, Culture, Participation*, a cross-institutional youth advisory board organized between June 2021 and April 2022. For this purpose, I reflect on the use of advisory boards in museums to engage with youth, the context and participants of the *Listening LAB*, as well as the mediation strategies I used in the participatory research processes.

Youth Advisory Boards in Museums

The format of the youth advisory board is recurrent in museums when engaging youth (see [Table 1](#)). A pioneering example is the Walker Art Center Teen Arts Council, established in 1996 and which, despite all changes, still exists today. Youth advisory boards give young people an opportunity to co-program with and for their peers, as well as to have an active and visible role inside museums. Informed by ideas of empowerment (Linzer, 2014), positive youth development (Montgomery, 2017), and peer-led pedagogies (Sayers, 2011), some of these programs are paid, reinforcing participants' responsibilities. Giving young people access to behind-the-scenes as well as

Table 1

Name	Institution	Website
Teen Advisory Council	Dallas Museum of Art	dma.org/teenadvisorycouncil
Youth Committee	Museum of Contemporary Art Australia	mca.com.au/learn/young-creatives/youth-committee/
Teen Advisory Group	Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego	mcasd.org/learn/teens
Teen Advisory Board	Noguchi Museum	noguchi.org/museum/education/teens/teen-advisory-board/
Youth Advisory Group	Newcastle Art Gallery	nag.org.au/engage/youth-advisory-group
Teen Arts Council	Walker Art Center	walkerart.org/visit/teen-program

decision-making in programming are key elements for the success of these programs, according to participants (Baum et al., 2000; Horlock, 2000; Linzer & Munley, 2015). There are other types of programming for youth in museums, from creative workshops to youth collectives or internships, which are often planned in articulation with each other. Nevertheless, the level of participation youth advisory boards gives young people is unique.

Moreno et al. (2021) reflect on the key aspects to consider when establishing a youth advisory board: purpose and values, group planning, recruitment and selection, and youth advisory board meetings. Although aimed at researchers interested in integrating youth into their work as advisors, their conclusions have many similarities with the modus operandi of youth advisory boards in museums. Youth advisory boards run yearly and engage with a group of ten to fifteen young people. Together with the museum staff, they plan, design, produce and evaluate a range of initiatives, including large-scale public events, publications, artist workshops, and guided tours. The temporality of youth advisory boards in museums is crucial for their success and highlights the relevance of a long-term commitment and investment from museums in this age group to achieve sustainable engagement. All these aspects were taken into account when planning the *Listening LAB – Youth, Culture, Participation*, a cross-institutional youth advisory board.

Listening LAB – Youth, Culture, Participation

There is little research on youth participation in museums in Portugal, despite the growing investment in non-formal education programs for this age group over the last five years. For this reason, one of the main goals of my project was to involve youth and institutional stakeholders in mapping and discussing this topic. Although the focus of my research is MAAT's youth programs, I was interested in understanding their practice in tandem with the work that is being developed by other cultural institutions, namely those that are based in the same geographical territory. This territory includes the boroughs of Belém, Ajuda, Alcântara, and Almada in Lisbon. Following a series of exploratory conversations with different institutional stakeholders, an informal cross-institutional partnership gradually took shape. These institutions include: BoCA – Biennial of Contemporary Art; Casa da Cerca –

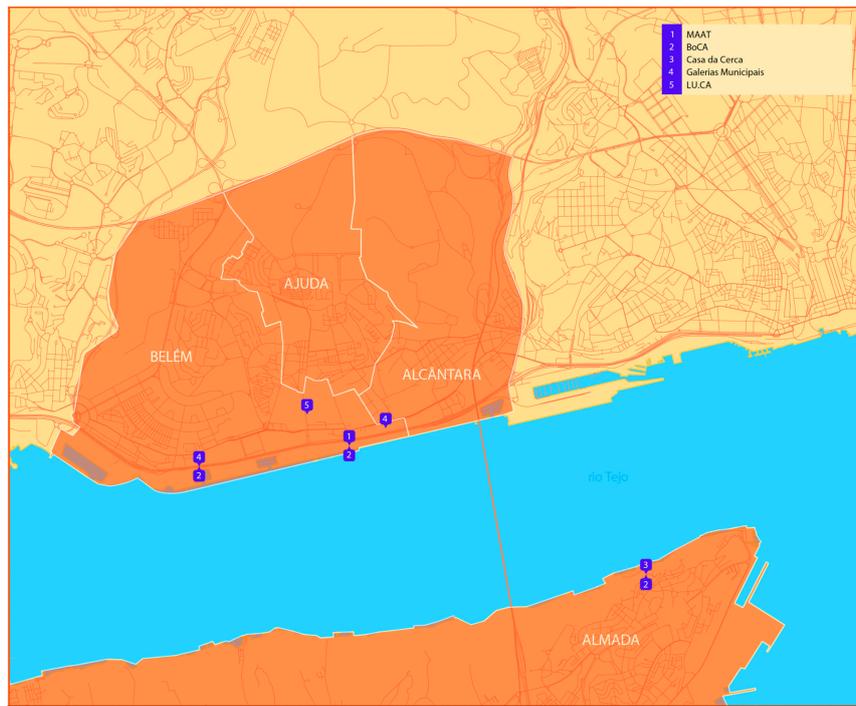


Figure 1. Map of the five participant cultural institutions in the research project Youth in Museums.

¹ BoCA is a contemporary art biennial that does not have a physical space. Its program takes place in different cultural spaces across the city, including MAAT, the Municipal Galleries, and Casa da Cerca.

² The Municipal Galleries have six exhibition spaces across the city, including Pavilhão Branco and Torreão Nascente da Cordoaria Nacional which are situated in Belém.

Contemporary Art Centre; the Municipal Galleries; LU.CA – Luís de Camões Theatre; and MAAT (see Figure 1). Although they all had youth programs, including summer art residencies, youth collectives, workshops with artists, or internships, there was little shared awareness of what they each did. The impetus to evaluate and rethink their youth programs, allied with an interest in establishing a working network, led to the creation of a cross-institutional youth advisory board.

The *Listening LAB – Youth, Culture, Participation* invited young people, aged 15 to 25, to participate in group roundtables to discuss specific issues related to arts programs developed for and with youth in five cultural institutions in Lisbon. It was established in June 2021 and included twelve two-hour sessions, delivered over ten months, with a group of around seven participants per session.¹ Young people were recruited through an open call and received a 15€ gift voucher per session for their participation.² Due to the specificity of each session and the idea of mobility implicit in the project, the group was not fixed, meaning that although most participants took part in

1 Considering the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we thoroughly discussed if the sessions should happen online. There was a unanimous agreement among the institutional stakeholders that it was crucial for these to be in-person, which was later confirmed by the young people. They acknowledged how that was a key factor when deciding to join the group. Only one session happened online (13.11.2021) because we wanted to invite young people that were based outside of Lisbon.

2 The calls for participants were opened for each round of four sessions: June–July 2021, October–November 2021, and February–April 2022. Some of the sessions aimed to evaluate specific youth programs, namely BoCA Sub-21 youth collective, the art lab *Herbário Criativo*, or MAAT’s internship program. In these cases, former participants were directly invited.

Table 2

Date	Institution	Issues discussed
23.06.2021	MAAT	The role and voice of youth in cultural spaces Personal, professional, and cultural journeys
30.06.2021	MAAT/BoCA	Youth collectives
07.07.2021	LU.CA	The role and voice of youth in cultural spaces
21.07.2021	Casa da Cerca	Co-programming with youth
07.10.2021	Municipal Galleries	Participant/Visitor
26.10.2021	LU.CA/MAAT	Communication and culture
10.11.2021	MAAT	Intergenerational programs
13.11.2021	BoCA	Evaluation of the program BoCA Sub-21 (2017-)*
12.02.2022	Casa da Cerca	Evaluation of the program <i>Herbário Criativo</i> (2009-2021)*
12.03.2022	Municipal Galleries/LU.CA	Collaborative art projects with artists Partnerships between schools and cultural institutions
21.03.2022	LU.CA	Gender issues Co-programming with youth
29.04.2022	MAAT	Evaluation of MAAT's internship program (2007 -)*

*Developed with former participants of these programs.

several sessions, some came for just one. Overall, 52 young people participated in the advisory board.³ Of these, 40 identified as female and 12 as male; 42 had previously participated in youth programs at one or more of the partner institutions; and 39 were studying arts and or working in the creative sector.

The first four sessions were co-planned by the institutional stakeholders and me, based on predefined questions or issues identified during our preliminary meetings. These included the role and voice of youth in cultural spaces; collective identities; and co-programming with youth. The following sessions were gradually informed by the discussions and questions identified by the participants, namely communication and culture; inter-institutional partnerships; and professional networks (see [Table 2](#)). The institutional interlocutors included freelance educators (BoCA and MAAT), the art director (LU.CA), as well as coordinators and staff of the education team (MAAT, Casa da Cerca, and Municipal Galleries), a total of eight people.⁴ The *Listening LAB* alternated between each of the partner institutions. This was a unique opportunity for young people to visit—some for the first time—and see behind-the-scenes of these cultural spaces.

Participatory and Arts-Based Mediation Strategies

Youth participatory research is a complex field, particularly considering that participation can vary in its depth and meaningfulness, as illustrated by Roger Hard's ladder of participation (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017). Effective participation is often linked to decision-making, meaning young people have an active and conscious role in the research—from the design to its focus and/

³ Participants were selected based on their order of registration, although only one session had a waiting list.

⁴ Depending on the topic of the encounters we invited guest speakers, who were also involved in the planning of the sessions. Their participation contributed significantly to the dialogue with the young people and expanded some of the themes they were interested in.

or outputs. When planning the *Listening LAB* and taking into account that little research has been done in Portugal on youth participation in museums, it was key to involve youth and institutional stakeholders from the early stages of the project. This decision was also informed by my previous experience as a participant researcher in youth programs at international contemporary art museums, which used a participatory methodology to work with youth. The naming of the youth advisory board *Listening LAB – Youth, Culture, Participation*, makes clear what its main objective is: to listen, to map. This is to say that decision-making, in terms of organizational change or future youth programming, was not at the heart of the group's purpose.

The sessions' planning was informed by the dynamics of focus groups (Morgan, 2008) and “rodas de conversa” [roundtables] (Moura & Lima, 2014). They both act as exploratory tools, suitable for the early stages of research. For this purpose, I combined a semi-structured approach with participatory methods to activate collective processes of meaning-making. In each encounter, there was an initial warm-up moment dedicated to individual presentations. The strategies used involved ice-breaking exercises that simultaneously allowed everyone to introduce themselves while sharing some initial thoughts on the topic of the session. Following this, there were two to three semi-structured moments informed by specific questions. The mediation strategies used to create a safe space for a conversational flow were informed by arts-based methods. Arts-based research can be used in different stages of the research, including data collection, analysis, interpretation, and representation (Leavy, 2008). In the case of the *Listening LAB*, I proposed brief creative exercises or actions to activate participation and unblock discursive hesitations.

Maps and Personal Narratives

Considering the geographical focus of the youth advisory board and the institutional stakeholders involved, I used maps as a starting point to talk about young people's personal, professional, and cultural journeys. The simple act of orientation, followed by drawing and pinpointing key places or paths, allowed for rich descriptions and reflections. I call these visual cartographies, which combine the utterable and the visible (see Figure 2). Practices of mapping are commonly understood as “creative, sometimes anxious, moments in coming to knowledge of the world, and the map is both the spatial embodiment of knowledge and a stimulus to further cognitive engagements” (Cosgrove, 1999, p. 2). In this case, the representation of a specific territory grounded in-depth conversations about accessibility, participation, and equality in youth's relation with cultural spaces. It led to moments of self-awareness, as well as shared conclusions on the importance of collaboration and cross-programming between the institutions. These conversations also revealed how youth participation in museums often coincides with moments of transition in their personal, academic, or professional lives, which led to a new line of research in my project.



Figure 2. Youth Advisory Board (23.06.2021), MAAT.

Photo: Diana Quintela.

The Interconnectivity of Post-Its

Post-its, small pieces of yellow paper that can be easily attached and re-attached to documents and other surfaces, were created in the 1970s. Today, there is an immediate familiarity with its function. It is a simple material that can be very helpful for brainstorming, creating concept maps, or collective decision-making. I used them abundantly during the youth advisory board sessions. First, they served as a medium for participants to individually write on, and then, gradually, to create moments of collective meaning-making. Positioning and re-positioning Post-its in the space—whether a wall, table, or the floor—allowed us to clarify, share, and discuss ideas (see [Figure 3](#)). Asking young people about abstract concepts can sometimes be a constraint to their conversational abilities (Bassett et al., 2008). To unpack these concepts, particularly those that seem obvious to institutional stakeholders, was crucial to ensure everyone's conscious participation in group discussions. The transient materiality of Post-its allows for a space of uncertainty that leads not necessarily to final answers but to new questions. Understanding and incorporating this rhythm was crucial in the mediation of the sessions.

Curating Space

The youth advisory board encounters were organized across five institutions and took place in different settings: exhibition rooms, gardens, a theater stage, and auditorium rooms. Accounting for the particularities of these spaces was key when planning the sessions and the dynamics that were projected for each conversation. During a two-hour encounter, it is important that participants change their interaction with the space, in order to generate different



Figure 3. Youth Advisory Board (10.11.2021), MAAT.

Photo: Diana Quintela.



Figure 4. Youth Advisory Board (30.06.2021), MAAT.

Photo: Diana Quintela.

engagement flows, from more introspective moments to group sharing and decision-making. A balance between informality and group cohesion was key when curating the space (see [Figure 4](#)). The emphasis was as much on creating the right conditions for conversational and participatory encounters as it was on defining the content—questions or issues—to be discussed. In other words, “creating the conditions means addressing how people enter into a space or experience, considering why they choose to enter, how they are invited to move through that space, who they share the experience with and what types of information they encounter along the way, among other things” (Kothe, 2016, p. 91). The image of the roundtable, or circle, was a common feature in these encounters (see [Figure 5](#)). It works almost as an optimal, democratic shape that creates equal space for sharing and discussing.



Figure 5. Youth Advisory Board (07.07.2021), [LUCA](#).

Photo: Diana Quintela.

Disjointed Temporalities, or Why Listening is Not Enough

The temporalities of research, cultural institutions, and young people are not in sync. There is a slow pace implicit in research projects due to their in-depth and long-term focus on a specific topic. On the other hand, there is the temporal pendulum that guides cultural institutions, meaning that these are simultaneously delivering a program and thinking of the future, as most programming is planned in advance. Finally, to think of youth and time is to think about transitions, a continuum of quick and unexpected changes in their ongoing personal, professional, cultural, and social journeys. In this sense, the *Listening LAB* created an “artificial encounter” where these disjointed temporalities came together. This awareness was important when organizing the youth advisory board, namely by not making participation compulsory, but to have a fluid group of participants recruited through successive open calls. This was also particularly relevant because the sessions started after the end of COVID-19 lockdowns, when there was a mix of willingness and caution to participate in in-person activities.

One of the main challenges during the sessions of the youth advisory board was finding the right balance between planned and unplanned conversational ramifications. In other words, “the essence of working with a [Youth Advisory Board] is the magic that happens in the group meetings. Thus, researchers should give careful consideration to what they hope to gain from each meeting and what they hope to give” (Moreno et al., 2021, p. 193). I had two concerns about this matter. One was to incorporate the new and divergent topics that emerged in each session into the planning of the following ones as much as possible. This allowed for the recognition of youth’s voices while also keeping

the group on track in regard to the focus of each encounter. On the other hand, considering that not all institutional interlocutors were present in every session, I organized a debrief meeting with the stakeholders after every fourth session to present, discuss, and plan the advisory board. To navigate and manage everyone's expectations, including my own, required an ongoing reassessment of the *Listening LAB* goals.

I remember one of the participants asking “Do you really want to hear what I have to say?” in the very first session. This question was echoed through other sessions, by other participants. Their initial disbelief came from a lack of opportunities to participate and have a lead role in discussions and potential decision-making in cultural spaces. Although I could reassure them that this was a space to effectively listen to what they had to say, there was an implicit—and sometimes explicit—concern in their questioning: what will you do with it? Again, although I could easily articulate how relevant this was for my research, there was still a legitimate expectation that their participation could lead to immediate change. This was also expressed and expected by institutional stakeholders, who needed to present concrete outcomes based on the time invested in the project. To place the focus on listening was a risk (one that I stand by) and a much-needed first step considering the unexplored territory of youth participation in museums in Portugal. However, this is not to say that listening is enough.

The participatory dimension of the *Listening LAB* is threefold: 1) the inclusion of institutional stakeholders and young people; 2) the participatory and arts-based mediation strategies used during the sessions; and 3) the impact on future youth co-programming. As I begin to analyze the data co-produced during the advisory board, its impact gradually became clearer. Although future youth programming was not central to the group's purpose, three new youth programs were launched in the meantime, including *Mutantes* (BoCA, 2022), *MAAT's Youth Collective* (2021–2022), and LUCA's youth advisory board for a new program on gender identities (2022–2023), all partially informed by the *Listening LAB* discussions and co-developed with some of the participants and for their peers. These unplanned outcomes stress the potential of involving young people in the early stages—and ideally in every stage—of a program or project that aims to engage them. It empowers them individually and also leads to more relevant and sustainable participation.

Funding

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie [Grant agreement No 892010].

Submitted: March 31, 2022 EDT, Accepted: September 27, 2022 EDT



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