



By young people, for young people.

A report on the impact of GENEXT at the MCA

Museum of Contemporary Art Australia
GENEXT



PATTERNMAKERS

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This report was prepared for the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (MCA) by Jo Higgins of the MCA and Tandi Palmer Williams, Brooke Boyce and Catherine Davis of research agency Patternmakers.

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The MCA and Patternmakers acknowledge the traditional owners of the land and the contribution of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia past, present and future.

About the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia

The MCA is Australia's leading museum dedicated to exhibiting, collecting and interpreting the work of today's artists, in the belief that art is for everyone.

For any questions, please contact Jo Higgins, Young Creatives Coordinator on jo.higgins@mca.com.au or mail@mca.com.au.

About Patternmakers

Patternmakers is a research agency specialising in culture, creativity and community. It believes in the power of insight to help good causes change the world.

For any questions, please contact Tandi Palmer Williams, Managing Director on tandi@thepatternmakers.com.au.

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Cover image: Attendees viewing *Pipilotti Rist: Sip My Ocean* at GENEXT: Pipilotti Rist, 10 December 2017.
Photo: Jacquie Manning

Executive summary

Background

GENEXT is the MCA's flagship program for young people aged 12 to 18, attracting over 29,000 attendances since its first event in 2005. Taking place four to five times a year, it is an atmospheric festival-style 'museum-takeover' event delivered by young people, for young people. It features live music, performances, art-making and interactive experiences inspired by MCA exhibitions and contemporary artists. The program takes place throughout the Museum, including the galleries, and offers the young people who attend a safe, parent -and teacher-free space to connect with ideas and each other, after hours, from 6 to 9pm on a Sunday evening.

In 2018 the MCA commissioned research agency Patternmakers to work with the MCA Young Creatives Coordinator and past and present MCA Youth Committee members to co-design an evaluation framework, collect new data and co-author this report.

The key findings below are drawn from qualitative and quantitative research with past participants and stakeholders. This included interviews, focus groups, observations and a survey of 1,176 young people who had visited the MCA since 2005. The survey probed the attitudes and behaviours of young people who had participated in GENEXT, and those who hadn't, to begin to explore the impact of the program relative to other activities at the MCA.

Key findings

GENEXT is a safe space that welcomes young people from different backgrounds

Overwhelmingly, survey respondents agree that GENEXT is a safe and supportive environment for young people. With few alcohol-free events in the evening just for teens, GENEXT provides a rare opportunity for young people to come together and simply be themselves. One person shared: 'it's so important that it's for under 18s because there are so few events that we feel welcome in, or that have a reputation for being safe.'

Since 2005, GENEXT has welcomed teens from all over Sydney, from different types of high schools and from diverse backgrounds. Many respondents said they speak another language at home. It is also seen as accessible for those who experience disability, as one person shared:



'I have Cerebral Palsy, so as a young teenager, opportunities to socialise in an accessible, safe and fun environment are limited. With GENEXT I get the opportunity to do what most teenagers take for granted.'

Since 2017, the delivery of GENEXT Goes West, in partnership with cultural institutions in Western and South Western Sydney, has helped engage even more young people from diverse backgrounds. Engaging young people from Western Sydney has been a goal of GENEXT since the program launched and formalising this off-site program in 2017 was part of the MCA's ongoing commitment to this outcome.

74% of past attendees say GENEXT helped them express their identity

The research showed that it's the unique blend of contemporary art, live music, socialising and making which has helped attract so many young people through the doors of the MCA. Many of those who attend GENEXT are visiting the MCA for the first time, such as Youth Committee member Zeynep Nevzet, and the vast majority leave satisfied with their experience of GENEXT and the MVA (95%).

Away from school, teachers and parents, many attendees say GENEXT helps them to 'find themselves', with three quarters (74%) agreeing that GENEXT positively impacts their ability to express their identity. From sexuality to ethnicity to the clothes they wear, GENEXT celebrates freedom of expression in a way that few feel they experience elsewhere. One person shared:

'it is an accepting safe space for different sexualities, religions and beliefs where young people can come to hang out and be happy within themselves and the person they are.'

70% feel that GENEXT has had a positive or very positive impact on their sense of belonging and connectedness, with many finding GENEXT strengthens old friendships and helps them make new ones.

8 in 10 feel GENEXT positively impacts their overall wellbeing

According to the study's interview with youth mental health expert Associate Professor Elizabeth Scott, visual art experiences can help prevent the development of mental health conditions by improving cognitive flexibility and brain plasticity.

Survey results show that 8 in 10 young attendees feel GENEXT positively impacts their overall wellbeing, and 66% feel the program positively impacts their confidence. As one person shared:

'GENEXT was a balm during periods of high stress, and still now is just so much fun. I probably wouldn't realise the necessity of at times letting go of control and just existing and recuperating.'



Many of those who attended GENEXT once report that the program has had a positive impact on their wellbeing (77%). Further, there appears to be a link between positive wellbeing and frequency of attendance at GENEXT, with those who attend GENEXT six or more times being even more likely to experience positive impacts (90%). Survey respondents from the earlier years in the program frequently said things like, 'I wouldn't be where I am today without it'.

Some participants want to see the MCA diversify the format of GENEXT so that there could be more frequent opportunities to participate. Others are interested in more ways to participate outside the main Sunday night event, for example workshops or meet-ups.

GENEXT is creating a new generation of art lovers

MCA Director Elizabeth Ann Macgregor maintains that the role of the MCA collection for young people has never been more important 'because their visual literacy is massive, and because of the way young people consume visual culture'.

GENEXT attendees believe that it's important to experience the work of contemporary artists (90%), and the findings suggest that the program is impacting on arts engagement later in life. GENEXT has positively impacted young people's ability to get creative (85% agree), their inspiration and motivation (80%) and hobbies (72%).

Importantly, GENEXT attendees creatively participate in visual arts and craft much more than the average for Sydney residents (71% versus 27%). GENEXT attendees are also more likely to pursue a career in the arts and culture sector – with half (51%) saying that their experiences with the MCA have inspired this pursuit.

Comparing GENEXT attendees with other young MCA visitors, who have not attended GENEXT, also reveals some interesting findings: GENEXT attendees are more likely to agree that the MCA inspires an appreciation for contemporary art, and more likely to say they would buy a work of art in the future (54% versus 41% of other young MCA visitors). Further, they are substantially more likely to say they would donate to an arts organisation (48% versus 30%) in the future, suggesting that GENEXT may be playing a formative role in building the next generation of arts patrons and philanthropists.

Peer-led programming is critical, and could be expanded

MCA support for the Youth Committee to lead the program is the key ingredient of its success, and 93% feel that it's important that GENEXT continues to be made by young people for young people. Although not everyone who attends is aware of the Youth Committee's role in delivering the event, one past attendee shared, '[It's] the atmosphere - you can tell that it's made by young people, for young people.'



Past and present committee members particularly acknowledge the support and mentorship of the Young Creatives Coordinator and MCA Artist Educators. They help the Youth Committee unpack cultural sensitivities, deeply engage with exhibitions and bring their ideas to life for attendees, as with the 2018 exhibition of Aboriginal artist John Mawurndjul, which enabled significant learnings for all roles.

All involved acknowledge the importance of open communication and transparency between MCA staff and the Youth Committee, which is key in establishing trust and building the capacity of young people to lead. As UNICEF calls for young people to have greater input into decisions affecting their future, there is an opportunity for museums to look at more ways for young people to contribute to decision-making. This report outlines a number of learnings that may be applicable at other museums.

GENEXT is playing a role in developing diverse arts audiences

The MCA has worked hard to recruit Youth Committee members from a range of different backgrounds, and over the last several years, the diversity of members has increased to include young people from across the wider Sydney region of different ages, and with members that identify as having different access needs, sexual orientation, cultural heritage, religion and schooling. This effort to celebrate diverse perspectives is being recognised among attendees, with GENEXT attendees more likely to agree that the MCA is accessible to young people from a diverse range of backgrounds, compared to general MCA visitors (90% versus 84%).

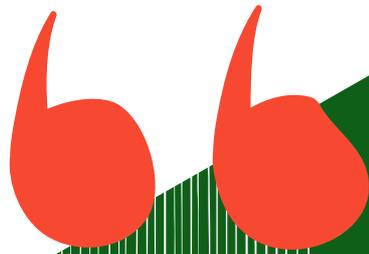
As a result, maintaining and expanding the accessibility of the program, and of the Youth Committee, is critical so that young people from all walks of life have the opportunity to experience visual art and follow creative career paths, if they choose to.

Another key opportunity identified through this evaluation is to develop a program specifically for 18–25 year olds, to grow connections between GENEXT and the MCA's ARTBAR for audiences 18+, which also takes place four to five times a year, on a Friday evening.

Conclusion

With GENEXT attendees more likely to participate in the arts, and experiencing positive impacts on their well-being, access to such programs must be a priority for the Australian art sector.

There is a role for the MCA to play in sharing its learning with the visual arts museum sector more widely, and in particular the key success factors driving positive impacts.



At GENEXT I can freely express myself without the worry or judgement from other teenagers.

As someone who suffers from rather bad anxiety, I felt like I finally got to come out of my shell in a safe space.

GENEXT attendee (2012-2017)





All images: GENEXT: David Goldblatt, 9 December 2018. Photo: Maja Baska



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