

The curious museum

The Van Abbemuseum in conversation with its visitors

Who says you have to keep quiet in the museum? And who says you need to have some kind of knowledge about art already, before expressing your own interpretation? Or that a good museum must spell out exact meanings for artworks on display?

Even though these "rules" have never been written down, the roles existing between the museum and its visitors seem to have been set in stone; the museum teaches and the visitor absorbs. Although museums have gone through many changes, the relationship between visitor and artwork remains quite traditional. The question is to what extent, and for whom, these traditional roles are still relevant? In *Play Van Abbe*, the Van Abbemuseum takes a close and critical look at what defines the museum in the twenty-first century and experiments with new ways in which the visitor engages and participates.

Contemporary art often aims for a dialogue, asks questions and invites debate. The Van Abbemuseum encourages this tendency. In *Play Van Abbe* visitors are offered multiple ways for entering into conversation with the museum. One of these ways is inviting visitors to share their own interpretation of the displayed works by 'tagging' them - adding a relevant keyword. The title card then becomes a platform for enthusiastic exchange between artists, curators and visitors. In one case, the exhibition curator chose the tag 'supermarket' for the Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup*, which was later replied with a visitor's tag 'icon'. The multitude of personal, intelligent, and often amusing interpretations enriches every visitor's experience, whether he chooses to tag actively or merely remain as an observer. The bank of meanings and keywords accumulated is meant to be incorporated into the museum's 'collection online' system, and serve as a unique search engine.



Visitor places his own tag on the label for a work of art. Photo: Hadas Zemer

Verbal information

Another way to approach the artworks is by interacting with the museum staff: the hosts, hostesses and the cicerone (who answers visitors' questions). They are not only there to give practical information, but are happy to point out ambiguities and alternative ways of

approaching art and the museum – attempting to connect these with the visitor's own personal interests and associations. This often holds the key to unexpected and revealing points of view.

During the transitions of the exhibitions visitors to *Play Van Abbe* have the opportunity to talk with the staff members and have a look behind the scenes. In one of the tours the collections manager shares professional secrets of art conservation, storing and transport. Visitors who have questions for the museum director are invited to submit them on the museum website. The director will reply with a recorded video response on YouTube.



A wooden panel with personal questions. Photo: Peter Cox

Walking through the museum, visitors are likely to be asked about their personal background and motivations - the traditional wall texts have been replaced with wooden modules that provide questions as access points to the featured exhibitions: 'Where were you in 1989?' 'What's your idea of the perfect museum?' These evoke personal associations with the artworks and form a useful and personal guide through the museum. The questions are linked to the *Play Van Abbe* tours, which allow individual visitors to choose their own path through the museum. And of course, there is also an attractive, easy-to-read exhibition guide with all the information that visitors need. For those who want to learn more, there are

plenty of possibilities – for instance, they can collect the information cards in the museum rooms.



The Studio during the opening of the exhibition Juxtaposition, Strabrecht College, Geldrop, 2010. Photo: Van Abbemuseum

Studio

The Van Abbemuseum's new approach has led to a major expansion in visitor activities. For instance over the past five years, the number of schoolchildren and students visiting the museum and taking part in museum classes has tripled. And as the museum has expanded its network in Eindhoven, it has managed to set up projects for neighbourhoods, schools, and youth groups, as well as workshops for businesspeople. Events like these are hosted in its new project area, the Studio, an open space where visitors are welcome to come and draw inspiration from a full programme of activities.



In conversation at the museum. Photo: Bram Saeys

The museum as a meeting place

'A museum and works of art communicate ideas, but it is the visitors who give them meaning,' says Charles Esche, director of the museum. Or as one visitor put it, 'For me, a visit to the museum is a relaxing day out. I was worried, at first, that it would be too demanding for me, but it's not the tags are inspiring and the tour of the museum with the cicerone offered all kinds of new insights.'

Sponsors

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Rabobank

The Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven is one of the first public museums for contemporary art to be established in Europe. The museum's collection of around 2700 works of art includes key works and archives by Lissitzky, Picasso, Kokoschka, Chagall, Beuys, McCarthy, Daniëls and Körmeling. The museum has an experimental approach towards art's role in society. Openness, hospitality and knowledge exchange are important. We challenge ourselves and our visitors to think about art and its place in the world, covering a range of subjects, including the role of the collection as a cultural 'memory' and the museum as a public site. International collaboration and exchange have made the Van Abbemuseum a place for creative cross-fertilisation and a source of surprise, inspiration and imagination for its visitors and participants.

Van Abbemuseum

Bilderrijcklaan 10
Eindhoven, The Netherlands

Opening hours

Tuesday to Sunday 11:00 – 17:00
Thursday 11:00 - 21:00
On Thursdays, entrance to the museum is free from 17:00

Entrance

Adults: € 9,00
Groups of 15 persons or more, senior citizens: € 6,50
Students; holders of the Dutch young people's cultural pass (CJP): € 4
Thursdays from 17:00 - 21:00: free entrance

For more information please look at our website www.vanabbemuseum.nl

For the editors

More information and images can be downloaded from:
www.vanabbemuseum.nl/en/press.

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