

## The new Whitney wows!



The Whitney Museum  
Wednesday March 4th, 2015: pm

### Meeting with:

Kathryn Potts, Associate Director

Helena Rubinstein Chair of Education

Hannah Swihart, Education Program Manager

Danielle Linzer, Director of Community and Access Programs

Heather Maxson, Director of School, Youth, and Family Programs

“Our goal is to surprise people and to make art accessible” - Kathryn Potts

The history of the collection goes back to the artist Gertrude Vanderbilt (1875-1942). She was the daughter of a wealthy railway engineer. After her studies in Paris she opened a studio in Greenwich village and started collecting American art. She also formed the Whitney Studio Club, which became a gallery and hang out for artists at the time. The collections have grown since the 1930's, but the museum has kept a similar focus on contemporary artists. Famous since the 1970's are the Whitney Biennials for young upcoming artists.

<http://whitney.org/About/History>

### What makes the Whitney unique?

Through collaborations with Artists and their legacies the Whitney is really trying to be the artist museum.

The Whitney education team decided to work with “the real thing” as much as possible: staying close to the gallery and the artwork.



In all of their programs the Whitney educators aim to keep a balance between complexity and accessibility.

Moving to a new location implied re-orienting towards a new audience: the Whitney wants to be there for tourism as well as the new local community.

### **Light spilling out**

The Whitney is moving into a brand new building by renowned architect Renzo Piano. When we visit the site, the first thing that strikes us are the tall glass walls. There is no art inside - yet - but already there is light spilling out of the building and it is easy to imagine how this building will radiate once it is in full operation.

### **Away with the white box**



Once Inside, the glass walls allow views of both the river and the city. This transparency both inward and outward is deliberate and hails a shift in the way the museums wants to profile itself: away with the white box image of its former location downtown. The Whitney wants to connect with NY and the world -

and how!

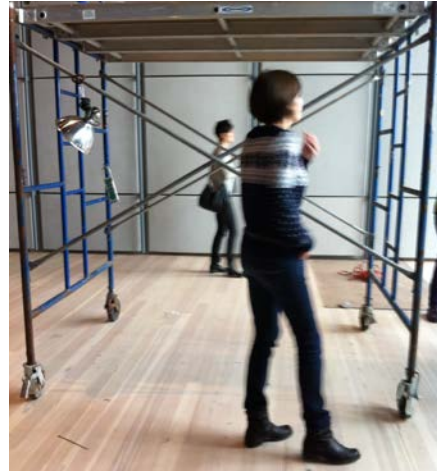
### **Eight floors to the skye**

50 thousand square feet exhibition space and outside galleries. A free entrance zone and lobby that make up the 1st and 2nd floor. Elevators designed by Richard Artschwager go up to the rest of the museum. The entire 3rd floor is devoted to education and a high ceiling modular theatre taking up part of the 4th floor. On the 5th floor is an 18 thousand square feet large column free exhibition space: ideal for installations. The permanent collections will be housed on the 6th floor. The cafe and some outside galleries are found on the 7th floor: free entrance via outdoor staircase. On the 8th floor there are smaller spaces for

contemporary art projects and a skylight and view of the city!

### **Education at the heart of the museum**

To have a dedicated space for education in this building is new and exciting. The education department staff thought hard about the new possibilities and also about the values that they want to take with them to the new space. In order to do this strategically they articulated their educational values as well as their day to day routines. The transparent meeting room was one of the outcomes: it gives the department great visibility.



In

The new theatre will also allow the educational department to include film, dance, performance and participatory art making in their programming.

### **Community as a strategy**

A fabulous list of educational programs appear on the Whitney's website, many innovative ones and some even experimental. We can not list them all, but took note of a few of the underlying strategies. The money for all these programs comes from private foundations, the federal government and the department of cultural affairs of the City of NY all vow to be in support of education and community.

### **Free rides!**

All school and community programs are free. Schools within walking distance receive priority, then schools in close proximity, next schools in the extended downtown community. This vicinity is simply but effectively mapped through google! The basis for all school programs is a trajectory of on- and off-site interactions always with an exhibiting artists - ex. Jeff Koons! Some of these trajectories span over one semester - and take up to 14 sessions.

<http://whitney.org/Education/K12/SchoolPrograms/Themes>

### **Friends and Family pass**

Special efforts are made for English as a second language students. They work 5 weeks, 3 days, 3 hours with an English language learning specialist. Again

this program is free - with free metro cards as an extra incentive. To top things off all students receive a *friends and family pass* to encourage them to come back after the trajectory is finished.

To get teachers on board, there are professional development programs for teachers as well as for school administrators and parents.

The museums also partners with the English language and Employment services for immigrants and refugees. Again at the end of a trajectory - usually several weeks - the participants receive free museum passes.

## **We Can**

“They help us be educated about our roles and responsibilities here” - Danielle Linzer

In the community and access programs, the goal is to try to understand the barriers for participation. Wether this be physical barriers, communication or hindering perceptions about the museum. The Whitney has started a community advisory network *We Can* that helps them zoom in on those issues. The Teens program is quit a succes in the Whitney as well.

“They have more credibility and recruit friends in the area” - Danielle Linzer

<http://whitney.org/Education/Community/NewNeighborhoodInitiatives>

## **American sign language**

Besides education and community programs there are many courses that are tailored for specific groups and needs such as American sign language tours for the hearing impaired. The Whitney prefers to work with museum educators who are deaf and can sign themselves, which makes the experience much more direct and personal.

“because things are lost in translation and slang is part of the direct experience”

## **Make people feel welcome**

Senior citizens tours; stroller tours before museum hours; conversations with artists; adult hands on programs; crash courses on contemporary art; 99 objects;



There are two family-days a year. All of these programs along with the community work are designed to make people feel welcome.

“Young and old look, sketch and craft together for a day and become life long museum lovers” - Kathryn Potts

## **Teaching Fellows**

To be able to handle all this and the expected flow of tourist coming off the newly designed High Line, the education department relies on teaching fellows to do some of the interpreting. They go through a rigorous training program which focuses on finding the right balance between complex theory and understandable speech. This is a great platform for students who do research and might end up working as museum educators themselves. The Whitney staff teaches them to reach out to audiences that are less competent in the art discourse.

## **Learnings and outcomes**

### ***How to look***

A course on sustained looking at one object per visit developed by Michael Lobel.

“They will be prompted to think about art not through complicated jargon or overly subjective personal impressions, but rather through the simple tools of observation and description” - Michael Lobel

Instead of consuming images the visitors are invited to stay with one work of art during an entire session and to approach it through careful observation and through verbal description. In this process it is important to understand how the viewer interacts with the work and vice versa.

There are valuable research implications to be gained from this project that may reach beyond the scope of empowering visitors to really look. This type of experimenting in fact investigates the very basis of educational programming: the observation. To understand this process would benefit cultural heritage institutions also in Flanders and contacts were made to initiate collaboration.

<http://whitney.org/Events/Fall2014CourseHowToLook>



**user generated content**

The Whitney education department has an important voice in terms of accessibility and they have won great battles in terms of writing labels and wall texts. Still the curatorial department seems to keep strict control over what is exhibited and how it is interpreted.

“We try to be a responsive platform, that is our brand” - Kathryn Potts

The suggestion of one of our team members to allow user generated content was brushed aside. Already it has proven to be balancing act between the authoritative voice of the institution and the many voices of the artists.

<http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/ChristianMarclay>

Although the education department does stimulate community input in interactive programs, the museum as a whole does not seem ready to embrace *every* point of view in the galleries. This is a clear and honest position, but especially in contemporary art it seems difficult to keep at bay these different layers of interpretation.

For many Flemish museums this is a purely theoretical issue as many of us are still absorbed in fighting our own label wars, but we will keep the Whitney in mind when we are faced with similar challenges in due time.

Karen Vanhercke and Greet Stappaerts