

Making Old New: Creativity and Aging

Prime Time at MoMA

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The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York is committed to contributing to a fulfilling aging process, one defined by curiosity, connectedness, creativity, and continued growth. With the worldwide population aging at a staggering pace, it is incumbent upon art institutions to address the interests and needs of people who are 65 and older.

By 2050, the global older adult population will reach 2 billion. At that time, older adults will outnumber children under the age of 14.¹ In France, by 2030, 1 in 4 will be age 65+. By 2030, the 85+ population will reach 2.5 million.² By 2050, 1 in 4 Americans will be age 60 or over.³

MoMA has a long history of providing targeted on- and off-site programs for older New Yorkers with programming dating back to 1992. In recognition of the increasing prevalence of Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia, MoMA piloted programming for individuals with Alzheimer's disease in collaboration with assisted-living facilities and support groups beginning in 2003. In 2006 MoMA launched Meet Me at MoMA, a gallery-based discussion program for individuals with early- to mid-stage Alzheimer's disease and their family and/or professional care partners. The program allows all participants to engage socially and intellectually, exploring a shared interest in art within a supportive group of their peers. Similarly, our continued work with individuals living in skilled-nursing facilities fosters opportunities for creativity and social connection within an institutional care setting. The broader MoMA Alzheimer's Project was a multi-year nationwide expansion of the Museum's commitment to this audience. From 2007-2014, MoMA staff facilitated over 150 workshops in 25 states and 17 countries, and connected with over 380 museums and 13,000 people. There are now 125+ museum programs for people with Alzheimer's disease and the number continues to grow.⁴ Through this large-scale outreach effort we became embedded within the larger field of creativity and aging. We were introduced to important research on the benefits of lifelong learning and engaging with art in later life, and connected with colleagues who offer arts programs for older adults more broadly across the United States and internationally.

It was a strategic next step for MoMA to channel our growing expertise into programming for a broader swath of the older adult population in New York City. Prior to developing new programming, however, we undertook a comprehensive research effort to learn more about this dynamic group, challenges they face, programs and services available to them, and the current and potential role art

can play in their lives. Our investigation drew not only on the expertise of local, national, and international arts practitioners, but more importantly, foregrounded the perspectives of local older adults, including MoMA volunteers and visitors, as well as colleagues in the field of aging services. We adopted a three-pronged approach, including: a review of existing scientific research on older New Yorkers and older Americans more broadly; meetings with colleagues from aging services and cultural organizations around New York City who work with older adults of varying backgrounds; and finally, an action research project with a select group of older New Yorkers, called the Prime Time Collective.

The Prime Time Collective, an advisory group of independent older New Yorkers ages 62-93, was instrumental in the development Prime Time. These individuals took part in existing educational offerings at the museum and provided feedback on their experiences. Some important things that we learned from the Collective and from further research:

- Older adults have the time and opportunity to engage with arts in later life, but can feel excluded by institutions that concentrate their resources and attention on younger patrons
- Older adults are looking for opportunities to meet new people and enjoy engaging socially during programs, particularly with other adults
- Older adults appreciate an environment that prompts them to try new things and experiment with new ideas and materials
- Older adults prefer regularly-scheduled programs, rather than spontaneous, drop-in events
- Older adults appreciate educators/facilitators who validate their ideas, opinions and creative output
- As most older adults live on a fixed income, regular Museum attendance and many Museum programs can be cost-prohibitive
- A number of physical barriers negatively affect older adults' experiences in the Museum, including lack of seating, poor acoustics, and large crowds
- Older adults rely on non-digital forms of media (flyers, pamphlets, radio, print newspapers) to learn about cultural offerings in the city

Another important research finding is that the majority of older adults in the United States live independently in their homes-- only 3.5% of people 65+ live in care settings, and only 10% of people 85+.⁵ The New York Academy of Medicine, who steer the Age-Friendly New York City initiative, found that only 3% of older adults in New York City regularly visit senior centers. Historically, if museums have offered programming for older adults they've done so by offering tours or lectures at senior centers. Knowing this information compelled the staff at MoMA to think more creatively and broadly about how to reach independent older audiences rather than solely relying on connections to care facilities and senior centers for programs. Given these statistics, it was essential that MoMA's outreach not be limited to long-term care settings.

The research that MoMA conducted in partnership with NYU Center for Excellence for Brain Aging and Dementia as part of the MoMA Alzheimer's Project illustrated how engagement with art can have a positive impact on wellbeing and combat social isolation, which could be expanded to apply to older adults more broadly.⁶ Our conversations with colleagues in aging services further contributed to our understanding of this diverse and diffuse population, including, but not limited to, older immigrants, who make up 46% of the older adult population in New York City.⁷ These colleagues represent varying senior service organizations, including settlement homes; peer-to-peer senior companion programs; naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCS); and single-room occupancy organizations (SROs)—the majority of these organizations serve older adults with significant financial constraints and/or mobility issues. Their clients might have difficulty using public transportation (particularly if they have to travel long distances to get to Manhattan or are traveling after dark), often do not have internet access and/or a computer at home, depend on social security and other entitlement programs or government assistance, and are potentially at risk for social isolation as a result of physical limitations and/or loss of friends and family.

Through this research we came to appreciate the incredible diversity of New York's older adult population. We identified ways that our work could support various aging services programs and forged important connections that have evolved into in-depth partnership programming (more on that later). Most importantly, it became clear that a successful programming initiative could not take a one-size-fits-all approach; rather, in collaboration with community-based organizations, case managers, artists, physicians, and social workers, we needed to develop different kinds of experiences that catered to older adults' varying needs, interests, and circumstances. Accordingly, we formulated three programming areas: one) regularly-scheduled public programs open to any New Yorker age sixty-five and up; two) tailor-made partnerships with select aging services organizations that are offered on a long-term basis; and three) opportunities for museum visits and short-term off-site programs available upon request to any aging services organization across the five boroughs.

Since its official launch in May 2015, Prime Time has grown to become an integral component of the Museum's commitment to serving New Yorkers. Monthly public programs and robust partnerships with community-based organizations reach the diverse and often underserved demographic of older New Yorkers. Regularly scheduled offerings include public programs-- which include gallery conversations, film screenings, studio workshops-- in-depth partnerships with community-based organizations across the five boroughs, by-request group visits and off-site programs for any aging services organization in the city, an annual summer camp, and special events. For instance, MoMA has an annual celebration event on May 1 and offers discounted membership (\$25 off) to NYC residents 65+ throughout the month of May which is Older Americans

Month. These events and promotions emphasize the museum's continued commitment to this audience and help introduce Prime Timers to other things to do at the museum. This is extremely important, as we do not want to silo older adults within Prime Time programming but instead see engagement through Prime Time as a means of piquing people's interests and informing them of other MoMA offerings, ideally leading to a long-lasting relationship with the museum.

In addition to our regularly scheduled public Prime Time events, we have grown our partnership programming in order to connect with a broader swath of the older adult population and to support the work of our colleagues in aging services. Through our partnership work with community-based organizations, we are able to reach underserved and marginalized older adult communities, including older immigrants, LGBTQ elders, older adults with a history of homelessness and or who are living with chronic conditions or mental health issues. Another new area of partnership programming is modeled, in part, on social prescription programming developed in the United Kingdom. There, General Practitioners refer individuals to cultural and/or other recreational programs, as a formal component of their medical care, just as they might write a prescription for a certain medication.⁸ Social prescription programming is based on research that shows that social connection can have a major impact on one's mental and physical health. In fact, research has shown that lacking social connections is comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.⁹

Social isolation is particularly prevalent among older adults. Shirley Fried first participated in a partnership program for recently bereaved older adults that MoMA offers in collaboration with Visiting Nurse Service of New York. She was referred by one of their bereavement counselors to take part in a weekly conversation program in the MoMA galleries with other New Yorkers who had recently lost a loved one. In reflecting on her experience Ms. Fried said, "I was introduced to MoMA Prime Time at the time husband passed away. The program lifted me out of despair as no other program did."

Overall, by working with a range of aging services organizations across the city we are able to connect with independent older New Yorkers of varying circumstances, and when possible, connect them with other opportunities the museum has to offer. In the last three years we have tapped into a hungry audience of curious and engaged older New Yorker and offered them experiences that are participatory, social in nature and inclusive of people of different generations, levels of experience with art, backgrounds, and abilities. Older adults still face substantial barriers to cultural participation-- including physical, financial, informational, and attitudinal barriers-- that cannot and should not be addressed solely through education programs. Accordingly, we partner with our colleagues from departments across the museum to work together to eliminate barriers to participation in other MoMA offerings. It is truly a team effort.

Through Prime Time we are able to highlight the vitality and dynamism of older adults, elevate the voice of older adults by valuing their experiences, ideas, and creative contributions, and challenge myths and stereotypes about aging and what older people are capable of. As Irene Porges, Prime Time attendee said, “I always heard that one needs a passion in life to be fulfilled. Now I am on a personal voyage to see, create, and learn as much as I can in my later years.”

¹ United Nations Population Fund, *Ageing in the Twenty-First Century: A Celebration and A Challenge*, 2012.

² The Gerontologist, *Aging in France: Population Trends, Policy Issues, and Research Institutions*, 2012.

³ US Census Bureau, *An Aging Nation: The Older Population in the United States: Population Estimates and Projections*, 2014.

⁴ *Meet Me: Making Art Accessible to People with Dementia*, <https://www.moma.org/meetme/>

⁵ US Census Bureau, *65+ in the United States: 2010*, 2014.

⁶ Francesca Rosenberg, Amir Parsa, Laurel Humble, and Carrie McGee, *Meet Me: Making Art Accessible to People with Dementia* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 87-105.

⁷ Christian González-Rivera, *The New Face of New York's Seniors* (New York: Center for an Urban Future, 2013), 3.

⁸ Katharine Langford, Peter Baeck and Martha Hampson, *More than Medicine: New Services for People Powered Health* (London: Nesta, 2013). See pages 8-13 for more information on social prescription models developed in the United Kingdom.

⁹ Julianne Holt-Lunstad et al, *Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review*, 2010.