

The Polyphonic Object

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Museum Educator

Cas Versluijs is a museum educator working at the Amsterdam Museum since 2024. In their practice, they focus on developing new forms of co-creation with children within the museum. They work closely with young communities, empowering children to tell their own stories and claim their place in the world.

Isabelle Pidcock
Museum Studies

Isabelle Pidcock, Museum Studies masters graduate and exhibitions assistant at the Jewish Museum, Amsterdam, is interested in the museum as a place where we can find connection and build community. She works with low/no-technology interactivity and playfulness as the mediums through which to do this.

Bram Sizoo
Clinical Psychology

Bram Sizoo (1961) worked for four years as a tropical doctor in Malawi. Upon return to the Netherlands, he became a psychiatrist in 2008 and is specialized in developmental disorders. Currently he is a professor at the University of Amsterdam where his research focuses on the clinical psychology of radicalization.

Mirjam Marks
Documentary Maker

After her bachelor in Theater Studies at the University of Utrecht, Mirjam Marks worked at VPRO to make youth television programs. The series Ruilen Internationaal brought her to Suriname in 1997, where she and her family lived and worked on and off for over six years. In 2009 she founded the children's museum Villa Zapakara. Back in the Netherlands Mirjam continues her work as an independent documentary filmmaker.

Polarisaampie!

Amsterdam Museum Journal

In 'The Polyphonic Object' four analyses by experts from different perspectives and (academic) fields show the layers of complexity a single object can hold. Through their (educational, museological, psychological, and cinematic) analyses, they uncover the different stories behind *Polarisaampie!*, an artwork made by Anouschka Boswijk in co-creation with five children in 2023. *Polarisaampie!* addresses questions about connections and divisions and children's views on worldly matters.

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Anouschka van Boswijk and Lara, Malena, Sabae, Uma, and Viktor
Polarisaampie!, 2023
 Amsterdam Museum

Since 2023, the Amsterdam Museum organizes the Amsterdam Museum Camp. The camp takes place twice a year and lasts five days. During the camp, children between the ages 9 and 11 work in close collaboration with an artist to make a collective (of) artwork(s). In the process, children are treated as artists. In 2023, child artists Lara, Malena, Sabae, Uma, and Viktor co-created with visual artist Anouschka Boswijk to make *Polarisaampie!* The result is a sculpture featuring a diverse group of people demonstrating on the Dam Square in Amsterdam; *Polarisaampie!* represents what children find important and pressing matters.

Cas Versluijs (Museum Educator)



The concepts of education and co-creation can appear contradictory. Education is a teleological practice, explicitly built around pre-set learning outcomes. Learning – the transfer of knowledge, skills and ideas from a person (i.e. an adult) who possesses them to someone who does not (i.e. a child) – is the end goal. There is an inequality inherent to this concept: the process of education is built around the relatively fixed roles of teacher and student, where, as Gert Biesta puts it, *“the voice of the student and the voice of the teacher are very different voices that come with different responsibilities and expectations”* (Biesta 2015, 83). Co-creation, on the other hand, is based on equity and reciprocity, where *“each participating party is equal to the others when it comes to the decision-making process and reaching a verdict”* (Nikkessen, Yalçiner, & Bijnen 2023, 10). It is explicitly non-teleological, as the process does not set up its end goals in advance, letting the end product take shape throughout the co-creation process. How, then, to co-create with children, treating them as equal partners, without sacrificing their educational needs? I

believe that *Polarisaampie!* shows us the way forward, as not only an attractive artwork, but also as a representative of the cutting edge of arts education, where co-creation, education and creative practice can go hand-in-hand.

The creation of *Polarisaampie!*, as part of the ELJA Kindermuseumlab project by the Amsterdam Museum, was based on the Wicked Arts Assignments methodology by Emiel Heijnen and Melissa Bremmer. As they argue, centering a well-designed arts assignment as the core of an open creation process can bridge the worlds of education, arts practice and society, affording unbridled creativity within a dynamic framework (Bremmer, Heijnen, & Haanstra 2024, 11). They approach this concept of the arts assignment not exclusively from an educational perspective, but also from the perspective of art history, taking inspiration from do-it-yourself artworks by artists such as Yoko Ono and John Baldessari (Heijnen & Bremmer 2020, 11–20). Their artworks, which originated in artistic practice rather than arts education, broke through the binary division of artist and audience. In my opinion, by extending this concept of the arts

assignment as artistic practice to arts education, the Wicked Arts Assignments methodology also manages to break through the hierarchy of teacher and student, recontextualizing these roles as what I will call the 'setter' and 'performer'.

There is no hierarchy present in a well-set Wicked Arts Assignment: the setter and performer of the assignment fulfil complementary roles. There is room for unfettered creative expression in both, albeit in different ways. The setter experiences freedom in the design of the assignment, while the performer is stimulated by what Heijnen and Bremmer call 'enabling constraints': *"a set of limiting conditions that paradoxically open possibilities by narrowing down choices"* (Heijnen and Bremmer 2020a). Although this may imply that the setter does in fact constrain the creativity of the performer, it is within these constraints that creativity can flourish, as counterintuitively, creativity without constraints can leave one uninspired. Unlimited options often lead to limited results, as many have experienced when staring at a blank sheet of paper. Instead, Heijnen and Bremmer argue, and I agree, that by constraining our creativity we can truly allow ourselves to be creative, whether we are putting these constraints on ourselves or, in this case, on others. The Wicked Arts Assignments methodology therefore lets the setter creatively design a framework within which the creativity of the performers can flourish. Neither can work without the other in the process of creation, and neither has the final say: it is a truly collaborative process.

I believe that this methodology forms an excellent basis for co-creation with children within the museum. By setting a well-formed Wicked Arts Assignment, the setter, which in this case would be a professional artist, and the performers, in this case the children, can work on an artwork together without falling

back into the traditional teacher-student hierarchy. The setter does not have education as their end goal – there are no stated curricular goals present in the process of creation. Instead, setter and performer make the artwork together. Learning outcomes do arise, but they have not been set up in advance: they have arisen naturally from the co-creation process.

Polarisaampie! is an excellent example of the power of this methodology in action. Artist Anouschka Boswijk set the assignment to *"make a 3D scene, where all sorts of figures fighting for various forms of freedom walk in the same direction"* [translation by the author], accompanied by several images of real-world protests and various artworks that could serve as inspiration (Boswijk 2023, 2). The only other constraint put upon the kids was the medium of papier-mâché. All other aspects of the work were left up to the children, who developed this concept together with the artist. The concept of showing polarization in today's society was strengthened throughout the process, while also engaging the children in these debates on current affairs. I believe that the result of this process is not only an attractive artwork, but also provides invaluable insight into how children view these societal issues, expressed in an artistic form that has been developed by the children and the artist in true co-creation.

It must be noted that the Wicked Arts Assignments methodology alone may not be enough to ensure successful co-creation in the museum space. While, when applied well, it can lead to a co-created artwork, the museum itself is not a neutral participant in this process, and the choices it makes in exhibiting the artwork could reintroduce a hierarchy in which the children are reduced to the role of audience or student. The Amsterdam Museum has taken steps to rectify this with the introduction of a children's sounding board,

but these new forms of curatorial practice will have to be developed further to truly co-create with children as a museum. Nevertheless, *Polarisaampie!* stands as a powerful example of the potential of eschewing the hierarchy of teacher and student, and letting children tell their own stories.

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Isabelle Pidcock (Museum Studies)



We are perhaps never more immersed in co-creation than we are as children. It is a crucial part of the very fabric of childhood; inviting others into the imaginary worlds we have built and then expanding and enlivening them together. It is fitting then, that the polyphonic object to celebrate and discuss co-creation has been made by Anouschka Boswijk in collaboration with five children named Lara, Malena, Sabae, Uma, and Viktor.

I approach the polyphonic object from a museum studies background, with a particular interest in museum education and a research focus on the museum as a Third Place (Oldenburg, 1989) which can ease loneliness and build community. In much of my research and my own working practice I eschew technology and investigate the ways in which we can return to childishness and play in the museum context. *Polarisaampie!* spoke to me as an object that encapsulated this effort, and celebrated what it means to be, to know, to work with, and to respect children.

Co-creation is the practice of inviting alternate voices to collaborate with the museum, not merely as participants or helpers, but

as equals (Barnes & McPherson, 2019). Often co-creation has focused on centering voices that have been silenced or made to feel unwelcome in the museum, and enabling those voices to speak to the audience the museum commands, with the authority the museum commands. What then, does it mean to co-create with children? Children are certainly welcome in museum spaces, and in fact museums often design exhibitions for children, with spaces and interactives expressly purposed for their use. But rarely do museums design with children. Too rarely are children seen as an entity to take seriously as collaborators, with insights and talents of their own that are as valuable as those of the adults in the room. *Polarisaampie!* is a fabulous example of what co-creating with children can and should look like. From the materials used, to the topics and themes centered: everything about this object takes children seriously.

Firstly, the use of papier-mâché, a material and art practice fundamental to childhood, signals to children that their working practices don't need changing, and that they can speak in their own language and be whol-

ly understood. For the viewer, papier maché evokes memories of sticky hands and school art classrooms, enabling them to feel close to their own childhoods again. The figures are playful and take on different shapes, sizes, and forms. They all stand on a textured, rolling surface that is identified as the Dam. Cheeky details such as pigeons and a small skateboard ramp bring texture and reality to this rendering. The figures hold signs, each protesting or celebrating different things. One figure, covered in bug bites, says that ‘all mosquitoes should die’, whilst another argues that ‘every animal, even mosquitoes, has the right to life.’ This brings us to the central themes of this piece; polarisation and unity.

As the object text states; “*people march for freedom, celebrate freedom, and protest the lack of freedom.*” And indeed, each sign and each person is unique, yet the people walk together, united by the commonality of their shared city and their shared passion, albeit about vastly different things! Society today is increasingly polarised, and it is essential to involve children in these discussions. It is essential too, to understand what issues feel important to them, what they perceive as polarising topics, and how they view the world around them. What I find most moving about *Polarisaampie!*, is how it captures the futility and farce of polarisation. Each protest sign has a directly opposing sign, and so there is comedy and levity in these larger, real-world disagreements. Whilst one marcher says ‘give me sunshine’ another says ‘thank you for the rain.’ One argues that ‘life is a competition’ whilst another declares that ‘health is more important than reputation.’ And to combat the marcher who declares that ‘dancing is noisy and dangerous’ there is a figure in a disco ball top claiming that ‘the best parties start after 10pm.’ For each opinion, there is an equal and opposite opinion, and thus with the clear-eyed gaze of childhood, *Polarisaamp-*

ie! invites us all to take ourselves a little less seriously. We are called to lean in to play, and to reclaim childishness - not as something to be avoided, but instead something to be celebrated.

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Bram Sizoo

(Clinial Psychology)



Why are they there?

The 3D-artwork *Polarisaampie!* (2023) shows a mixed group of people demonstrating for a wide variety of causes on the Dam Square in Amsterdam. Interestingly, they move with their placards roughly in the same direction and appear to be reasonably at ease. The exclamation mark indicates that the scene should be carefully taken note of. Indeed, it would be special if polarized views could be jointly expressed in good harmony. The reality, however, is often different. The question ‘Why are they there?’ contains three elements: motivation, collectiveness and location.

Individuals are motivated to leave home for public demonstrations when important personal values are at stake, such as safety, justice, health, or leisure. These values are reflected in the texts of their placards: ‘all mosquitos must die’, ‘black is the new white’, ‘health is more important than reputation’, and ‘more skateparks’. However, not every personal value is the same. There is a difference between ordinary values (e.g., a television program or a pizza), and sacred values (e.g., one’s faith or child) (Atran & Gómez, 2018). The

distinction between these is that when sacred values are challenged, the motivation to use violence increases, in contrast to endangered ordinary values. Yet, what makes a value sacred or ordinary is very personal and cannot be automatically deduced from a text on a placard. Therefore, everyone in *Polarisaampie!* is subjectively motivated, with an associated readiness to defend their cause.

The title of *Polarisaampie!* (2023) combines polarization (‘polari’), with togetherness (‘saampie’). Polarization refers to opposing positions, for example in politics. Mild forms of polarization serve a useful purpose in healthy democracies because arguments can be brought to the attention of others by activists, which, in time, may shape public opinion in favour of their ideas. Whereas activism is defined as “the readiness to engage in legal and non-violent political action”, radicalism is “the readiness to engage in illegal and violent political action” (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009). Activism can present with different degrees of polarization but stays within legal boundaries. Due to its proneness to unlawful or violent means, radicalism is more likely to

occur in conditions of strong polarization, when the positions have drifted too far apart. In the case of two opposing, strongly polarized individuals or groups there is clearly no togetherness between the opposing parties. However, togetherness can in that case, paradoxically still be very pronounced within groups. This is because political polarization is associated with group dynamics in which individuals are drawn to a group positioned at an extreme end of the spectrum, draining the center of moderate opinions (Jost et al., 2022). This can result in affective polarization, where a strong 'us versus them' sentiment leads to the idea that anything to do with 'them' is a direct threat to 'us' and must be avoided. This personal identification with a group is referred to as identity fusion. The groups' values become sacred personal values, with an associated readiness to use violence against the perceived threat from 'them'. The togetherness ('saampi') in the title, in combination with polarization ('polari') could therefore, in theory, refer to a tightly bound, affectively polarized group. However, the cheerful faces and the obvious disparity of expressed ideas, suggests otherwise. So, how can polarised people be together in this harmonious way?

The third element of the question 'why are they there?' provides an answer to the puzzle. *Polarisaampie!* is located on Dam square, in Dutch not just any dam, but 'de Dam' (the Dam). The Dam is an open space enclosed by symbolic structures: a church signifying faith, a palace associated with civil authority, and the remembrance monument projecting historical conscience. Dam square is not merely the oldest geographical center of Amsterdam; it is also the functional centre. Around 1275 the Dam connected two settlements, which up to then had been separated by the river. Later, from different directions important streets led to the central position of the Dam, linking people from different towns,

villages and communities. In addition, the Dam has accommodated all sorts of activities throughout history: fish markets, revolutions, fairs, trials, and demonstrations. In addition to its character as geographical and functional centre, it is also a symbolic center, offering space for expressing all opinions, no matter how different, even at the same time, in the same place. In other words, because the Dam has had these roles for so many years, demonstrations for every imaginable cause are always welcome, without anyone having to fear that the Dam will thereby lose its robust centre-position.

Why are they there? The answer is that this harmonious exchange of different ideas by a group of very diverse people, in the same place is made possible by each actor's activist, instead of radical, intent, and by the virtue of a healthy democracy offering the moderate center of society as a safe, protective stage. That is what makes *Polarisaampie!* so special.

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Mirjam Marks (Documentary Maker)



It is May 2018. Thousands of children, some of them with parents or teachers, walk singing and shouting through the center of Utrecht. They color the streets of the city with their voices and banners. The message on the banners and protest signs is heavier than the energy and the mood of the crowd: “We are already cool, now it’s the climate’s turn”; “Do you care about our future?”; “Help! the earth is hotter than me”; “I have a message from the animals: Stop cutting down trees!”; “There is noPLANet B!” I walk among these young activists and feel a very positive force.



Image I. Jovanna at the protest, May 2018. Her sign reads: “We are already cool, now it’s the climate’s turn.” Author’s translation and photo.

As in the work *Polarisaampie!*, the children and youngsters in this climate protest make their voices heard for an urgent goal that concerns their own future and actual life. They celebrate it together, all pulling in the same direction, and choose their own words to express their feelings.

In *Polarisaampie!* I feel the freedom both in the theme and in the choice of the young makers of the content because it expresses their interpretation, feelings, and perspectives about the theme. The accompanying artist has given the children space and not directed them and therefore she has taken the children seriously.

Polarisaampie! conveys two important themes. First, you can have a different, even opposite opinion on a certain subject and still move in the same direction. And secondly, if you give children the space to make their voices be heard a surprising, disarming, sharp, and therefore meaningful view on a subject arises.

In *Polarisaampie!*, I recognize a lot of my own method of working with children. I am a documentary filmmaker with a focus on youth films. For me, children are the most important,