



Object Lessons Inside the Lab for Teen Thinkers

By Jessica Lynne

Sophie Foley is an artist. She draws. She creates collages. She is a zine maker. This, she tells me on the afternoon we speak by phone, is part of what drew her to Bard Graduate Center's Lab for Teen Thinkers.

"My mom did push me to do this," she says of the decision to apply to the program, "but that was also in addition to me being very interested in the arts."

It was an interest that blossomed throughout the summer of 2019, as Foley's research culminated in an expansive presentation on zine making, informed by the Museum of Art and Design's exhibition *Too Fast to Live, Too Young to Die: Punk Graphics, 1976–1986*. For the young artist, the Lab for Teen Thinkers placed her in the center of a dynamic institution and its brand of cultural inquiry that has guided artists, curators, critics, and historians for decades—what Foley describes as "this very interesting study of how objects and materialism form our identities."

Ravita Choudhury, currently a sophomore at University of Rochester, expresses a similar sentiment to me. "I wouldn't say I was an artist before this program, but I was definitely very much an activist, and I have been for a very long time," she says. "I remember spending a lot of time in high school in museums looking at different exhibitions, especially during the Black Lives Matter movement—there were amazing art exhibitions surrounding that all over the city. That's what got me to museums and galleries, but I didn't know what material culture was until I did the program."

Since completing the program, Choudhury was able to parlay her experience into an internship at the university's art gallery.

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Although nudged at times by friends or loved ones, both students leaned into their curiosity to spend several months immersed in research, mentorship, and intellectual exploration. The experiences they recount about their time in the Lab for Teen Thinkers capture the spirit of a much-needed initiative to open new points of entry to a rarefied world.

It is the mission of Bard Graduate Center to study what objects—those created for utilitarian purposes and those created solely for aesthetic value—can teach us about human pasts. The Lab for Teen Thinkers invites New York City's young people into this mission, beginning with a five-week summer intensive that pairs independent research with the opportunity to study alongside today's most innovative scholars, historians, and curators. It is a chance for some of the city's brightest, most creative and inquisitive students to peer behind the veil, into the workings of the art institutions that keep the cultural pulse of the place they call home. Now in its fourth year, the Lab welcomes rising juniors and seniors from Brooklyn Latin School, Marble Hill High School for International Studies, Stuyvesant High School, Manhattan Center for Science and Math, Townsend Harris High School, and both the Queens and Manhattan campuses of Bard High School Early College. This year's cycle will also welcome students from The Brearley School and St. Ann's School in partnership with the Teen Curators Program at Hill Art Foundation.

Sophie Foley. Photo: David Flores ■





If cultural institutions are to remain vital and relevant, they must rethink, redefine, even rename their relationships to the publics they serve, the artists they support, and the many individuals they employ. In cities like New York, cultural organizers and advocates have worked tirelessly to address conditions of institutional inequity that affect all three of these stakeholder communities. In that spirit, NYC's Department of Cultural Affairs embarked, in 2016, on a city-wide effort to create a snapshot of its cultural workforce in order to identify, assess, and, ideally, remedy glaring gaps in diversity and inclusion. Indeed, the resulting call to action was and remains clear: a homogenous cultural workforce serves no one—and without necessary, intervening measures, the pathways for pushing against this trend can't exist.

How can real opportunities arise for young people—across (dis)abilities, race, sexual and gender identity, and class—who want to work in the arts? The Lab for Teen Thinkers takes this provocation seriously. The program emerged from a series of planning dialogues, in 2015, between BGC's academic administrators and students galvanized by the nascent Black Lives Matter movement. After bringing their concerns of equity and inclusion to Dean Peter N. Miller, BGC's Director of Public Engagement, Emily Reilly, worked with Miller to develop a formal proposal for the program. Once approved by BGC Director Dr. Susan Weber, the Lab was further developed by developed by Reilly, arts and equity consultant Ama Codjoe, and Carla Repice, BGC's Senior Manager of Education, Engagement, and Interpretation (who also founded the Bronx Art Collective, a social justice and arts program for high school students at the DreamYard Art Center). True to

these original intentions, the Lab is ultimately meant to exist as a generative platform for young people who want to enter into the field of arts and culture.

During the summer, students gather daily, Monday through Thursday, to participate in field trips, meet with their assigned mentors, and conduct research related to that season's thematic inquiry. The summer culminates in written essays and presentations that reflect the students' voices and sensibilities. From September to January, students continue to work with their mentors on a monthly basis. However, it is the independent research component that truly drives the program.

In the 2018 theme, *Votive Objects and the Everyday*, Bard High School Early College student Daniel Lowe found a natural alignment. "It was actually the perfect theme for me because I was really interested in Catholicism and the effects of Catholicism as votive," says Lowe. "Catholic votive culture is something that I did know a little bit about. My mother is Italian, and I've seen reliquaries and baroque shrines and such. We do have a couple of Mexican and South American ex-votos in the house, and I thought this was a good jumping off point, and hopefully, I would be able to learn something more interesting about these paintings and look at them in a different way."

Focusing on an Italian ex-voto painting that his father purchased in Argentina, Lowe explored the difference between Italian-style and Mexican-style ex-voto painting. "It was an investigation into the separation between the divine and the common place, the divine and the vulgar," he says.

Daniel Lowe (opposite). Photo: David Flores
Photo (following page): Maria Baranova





This year's cohort is participating in a modified Lab program because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The thematic focus is the history of Seneca Village, the predominately African American community that the city displaced in 1857 during the construction of Central Park—a criminally under-recognized chapter in the story of New York City. (The former site, where archaeologists have excavated numerous objects, is located along what is now Central Park West, between West 82nd and West 89th Streets, and is only a short walk from BGC's West 86th Street home.) While in-person field trips and on-site research are not possible, students join a host of digital workshops, mentorship sessions, and virtual museum visits as they learn more about this once thriving community and the archaeological study, led by BGC Assistant Professor Meredith Linn, that seeks to (re)introduce Seneca Village to the larger public.

At a time when communities throughout the U.S. are mobilizing to resist structural inequities that result from institutionalized racism, sexism, xenophobia, and the like—systems that continue to disproportionately harm Black, Native, and other communities of color—the choice to study closely Seneca Village carries much weight. It is impossible to reckon with such systems without a full awareness of how they have been allowed to shape the contemporary. Cultural organizations can play an important role in this reckoning.

Indeed, this global pandemic requires us all to revise the role of public art institutions as sites of gathering, knowledge share, and cultural production. The Lab for Teen Thinkers is proof that our young people should be at the fore of this important process.

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