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# “This drawing is a tunnel for a hungry monster”

## Collaborative Curation with Young Children at the Clyfford Still Museum

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**Nicole Cromartie, Bailey H. Placzek**

In 1980, renowned American abstract expressionist artist Clyfford Still passed away at the age of 75. Still, best known for expansive canvases filled with jagged fields of bold colors and rigorous ideals about how others should experience his art, had left a will with somewhat unusual instructions. He bequeathed 3,000 paintings – about 93 percent of everything he ever created – not to a museum, but to an American *city* that would agree to build a museum dedicated exclusively to the study and display of his art. While several cities vied for the collection (including Dallas, Chicago, and Los Angeles),

Still’s widow, Patricia, ultimately selected Denver, Colorado in 2004. The city built a stunning, two-story, 28,500-square-foot building in downtown Denver’s vibrant Golden Triangle Creative District – funded entirely by private contributions.<sup>1</sup> Since its opening in 2011, the museum’s staff has cataloged the artist’s collection and complete archives, supported original scholarly research, and generated new, interdisciplinary ways of presenting the single-artist collection to the community through varied exhibitions and creative programming (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Young children explore the Clyfford Still Museum's galleries.

The mission of the Clyfford Still Museum (CSM), crafted by its founding board of directors in response to provisions in Still's will, mandated that CSM strive to "broaden the definition of a 'single-artist' museum; and be a gathering place for the exploration of innovation and individual artistic endeavor."<sup>2</sup> However, an audience evaluation CSM commissioned in 2017 showed that the museum faced several barriers to truly serving as a gathering hub for the diverse Denver community. We found that Clyfford Still, while a pioneer in his time, did not have the name recognition of colleagues like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. Plus, visitors without prior knowledge of abstract expressionist art struggled to connect or find ways to engage with his fully abstract works.<sup>3</sup> The community's unfamiliarity with Still's legacy and the misconception that one must be an art "expert" to understand or appreciate his art revealed the critical need for CSM to demonstrate through exhibitions, programming, and marketing that everyone can find meaningful connections with the collection regardless of background, level of education, or art experience.

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We believed that we could help unravel some of those challenges by centering our interpretive work around Still's artistic philosophy – that his art is universally for and about humanity itself. Still gifted his work to an American *city*, so Denver *residents* own the art. It is our job to make space for every person to have their own

experiences and interpretations of his work, as Still intended. The museum has always invited guest curators and artists to present Still's work from varied perspectives. Yet, after the 2017 evaluation, staff recognized that collaborating with the community at large aligns even more with Still's vision and fosters deeper, more meaningful connections between our collection and diverse audiences. To initiate this new, community-centric ethos, we decided to target an audience that is intuitively able to engage with art, but is often overlooked for collaborative partnerships: young children.

### Exhibition Concept

In 2019, CSM's interpretation team (Nicole Cromartie, Bailey Placzek, and Dean Sobel, CSM's founding director) began discussing opportunities to engage young children (birth to age eight). At the time, CSM's family programs were relatively new, and we only offered school experiences to students in grades four through 12.<sup>4</sup> That same year, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that children under age 10 accounted for more than 10 percent of Denver County residents. We believed that by focusing our efforts on this audience, we would not only demonstrate inclusivity but dramatically improve the health and well-being of our community by supporting the development of our youngest residents. According to the National Endowment for the Arts (a U.S. federal agency that supports artists and arts organizations), during the transformative period from birth through age eight, the arts support development in critical areas, including math, literacy, social skills, and emotional regulation.<sup>5</sup> Sobel challenged us – the authors of this article – to consider how the museum could signal to its community this new commitment to serve young children. We decided to curate an exhibition of Still's work for and with young children.

Our vision for *Clyfford Still, Art, and the Young Mind* used what we knew about visual development and aesthetic preferences in

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young children as an organizational framework. Existing research on young children's aesthetic preferences, notably the work by scholars Kathy Danko-McGhee and Michael J. Parsons,<sup>6</sup> demonstrates that early learners have an innate appreciation for abstraction (fig. 2). We wanted to take it a step further and hone in on the individual perspectives of young children in our area, specifically in regard to the work of Clyfford Still.<sup>7</sup> By using existing research as a point of departure, but working directly with young children in the area, we hoped to learn about CSM's collection and, potentially, further research in the field of aesthetic preference. This project would be a new form of research and collaboration for CSM: young children would serve as our co-curators for the show.

We embraced a multivocal approach to creating a community-museum collaboration in order to challenge traditional hierarchical museum practices.<sup>8</sup> How could we authentically share power and expertise with our young co-curators? We did not want audiences to say, "How *cute*; babies picked the art!" Instead, we hoped visitors would think critically about museum practice and leave the exhibition with a new understanding of young children as engaged community members capable of constructing the world around them. This aim – inspired by the philosophy of the Reggio Emilia Approach – aligns with our belief that young children are expressive, central to their own learning, and rich with curiosity and knowledge.<sup>9</sup> We believe that there is much for us to learn about art and museum experiences from children.



**Fig. 2.** In *How We Understand Art: A Cognitive Developmental Account of Aesthetic Experience*, author Michael Parsons unequivocally declares, "Young children rarely find fault with paintings... they relish color, the more, the better."

With young children as both exhibition collaborators and the key audience, we saw an opportunity to invert the traditional model of the museum as a repository of knowledge where people (particularly children) are exposed to culture in favor of a place where culture and meaning are generated in partnership with members of a community. We hoped to spark a newfound love for art and participation in cultural life to last a lifetime, establishing an entirely new generation of museumgoers and art lovers. More importantly, the project gave a new purpose to our collection as a resource to facilitate the development of creative, expressive, empowered, and emotionally healthy humans. According to the National Art Education Association, through a quality arts education (which includes aesthetic responses to works of art, not just making art), children:

learn to develop, express, and evaluate ideas; to produce, read, and interpret visual images in an increasingly visually-oriented world.... These basic skills in art develop the intellect and increase visual sensitivity. They enable the individual to identify and solve problems more effectively through the manipulation of visual, as well as verbal and numeric symbols; to discriminate among the mass of conflicting visual messages in day-to-day life; and to increase the possibility of communicating with visual images and thus make positive contributions to society.<sup>10</sup>

Working with young children on organizing an exhibition isn't about developing future artists, art historians, or museum workers, but rather engaged citizens of the world. We recognized this exhibition as a pivotal opportunity to serve

the next generation by fostering valuable skills in all areas of their lives.<sup>11</sup>

### Historical Precedents

It was challenging to find historical precedents of museums collaborating with children to develop exhibitions. Many wonderful examples of exhibitions created *for* children exist, dating back at least to 1901 in the United States with the opening of the Smithsonian Institution's Children's Room.<sup>12</sup> Then-Smithsonian Secretary Samuel Pierpont Langley envisioned a space that included natural history specimens displayed at a child's-eye level and object labels with poetic interpretations to inspire curiosity (previous object labels at the Smithsonian merely included Latin identifiers and scientific language).<sup>13</sup> Recent international examples include *Anything Goes* (National Museum in Warsaw, 2016), a temporary exhibition curated by 69 "junior curators" ages six to 14,<sup>14</sup> and London's Young V&A (formerly the V&A Museum of Childhood) work with a local architecture and design firm, AOC Architecture Ltd., to reimagine the museum by collaborating with children, families, and teachers.<sup>15</sup> The scale and commitment of these ambitious projects filled us with optimism about what was possible.

We also found inspiration in Harrell Fletcher, a contemporary artist known for social practice who has collaborated with children on many projects, such as *Interviews with Children* (2011) and *KSMoCA* (2014–ongoing).<sup>16</sup> One of his public art projects in particular expanded our thinking about the level at which we could involve children in our exhibition. During an artist residency at the Domaine de Kerguéhennec in Bignan, France, staff commissioned Fletcher to create a piece for

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a sculpture park. He solicited proposals from the Bignan community. One, from an eight-year-old named Corentin Sénéchal, stood out to him. Sénéchal proposed casting a solid gold turtle and painting it green.<sup>17</sup>

Sénéchal and Fletcher worked together for three years on every phase of the project, including design, administrative meetings, site selection, fabrication, and installation. Witnessing this level of collaboration prompted us to adopt a more holistic approach to working with young co-curators beyond just selecting artwork (which is what we had seen in historical precedents). We discovered that including children in all aspects of exhibition development, including design, interpretation, programming, marketing, and evaluation, would make for a richer exhibition and learning experience for all involved.

## Exhibition Goals

We designed *Young Mind* to show that young children are equal stakeholders and competent collaborators who bring valuable perspectives to our museum, helping to reframe our collections, exhibitions, and the overall museum experience. Since CSM had never planned programs, school experiences, or interpretation for very young children,

we hoped this exhibition would serve as an invitation for our community to reevaluate us as a place for people of all ages.

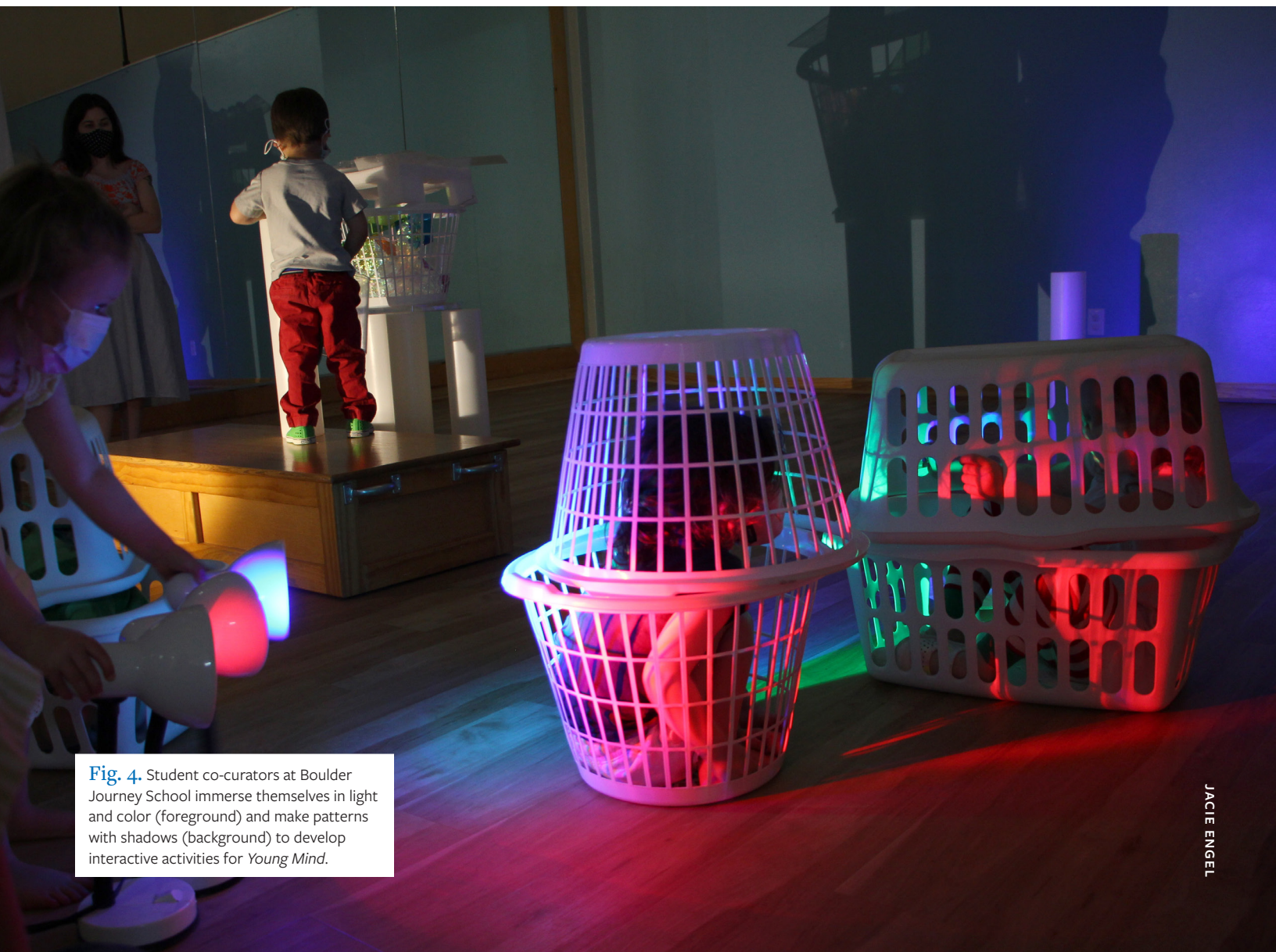
We also aspired to make visitors aware of the accessibility and relevancy of Still's abstract art to young children. As we know from current research, children from birth to age eight are uniquely suited to appreciate and respond to bold, abstract artworks with large expanses of color like those found in CSM's collection, and they greatly benefit from these experiences.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, as our evaluation studies showed, many adult visitors have difficulty appreciating and engaging with Still's abstract art.<sup>19</sup> Adults often seek definitive meaning in Still's work despite the artist's expressed desire that viewers apply their own interpretations instead of relying on the opinions of art "experts." By contrast, children have an intuitive grasp of abstraction unencumbered by self-consciousness and find joy in the simple act of looking. We hoped that by seeing young children's responses to Still's work in the galleries (in both wall text and an audio guide), adults would feel empowered to interpret the art from their individual perspectives, underscoring that his work doesn't have prescribed meaning that one can only recognize with prior, specialized knowledge. *Young Mind*, we believed, would provide a rare opportunity for us to model this approach to all visitors.

## Exhibition Development Process

We opted to structure the exhibition around five themes: high contrast; scale; pattern; recognizable imagery; and bright, highly saturated colors. These concepts mark different developmental stages of young children's visual

**Fig. 3.** Eva, 15 months, selects a painting for *Young Mind's* gallery of high-contrast artworks from classroom reproductions at Denver's Catholic Charities at Mariposa Early Childhood Education Center.



**Fig. 4.** Student co-curators at Boulder Journey School immerse themselves in light and color (foreground) and make patterns with shadows (background) to develop interactive activities for *Young Mind*.

development and aesthetic preferences. They are also prominently featured in our collection, thus serving as constructive parameters within which we could effectively explore the preferences of early learners in our community.

Next, we began discussions with schools and early learning centers throughout Denver and surrounding communities with whom we had existing relationships and sought out new relationships to ensure a diverse representation of schools across the region. After identifying nine partner organizations, we presented a document listing all possible ways a teacher might collaborate with us on the project. Ordered by exhibition planning phases (artwork selection and arrangement, interpretation and interactives, marketing, and programming) and different gallery themes, this document helped our partners zero in on what aspect of the planning process best aligned with their students' interests, school schedules, and curriculum.

Guided by CSM staff, young children participated in the exhibition's development in many ways. For instance, infants in three different classrooms at two schools selected the paintings featured in our high contrast-themed gallery. We identified their selections by tracking and tallying various preference indicators, such as pointing, vocalizing, grabbing, and extended eye contact (fig. 3). To develop an interactive experience in our gallery devoted to pattern, we observed how three- to five-year-olds from a different school interacted with predetermined materials and provocations (an open-ended activity) (fig. 4). For that same gallery, five- and six-year-olds from a local elementary school virtually "placed" drawings previously selected by three- and four-year-olds into a pattern arrangement on the gallery wall using our web-based virtual planning software, Virtual Gallerie (fig. 5).



**Fig. 5.** First-grade co-curators at Montclair School of Academics and Enrichment select and arrange Clyfford Still's pastels on construction paper into a pattern for display in *Young Mind* during a Zoom session with Cromartie and Placzek.



## Reflections

We approached this project with a determination to experiment, allowing us to be surprised and adapt our strategies based on what we learned from our collaborators. Here are some of the things we've noticed in the process so far.

### Observations

- **Enthusiastic support from senior leadership staff was critical to this project's foundation.** They pushed us to think beyond the exhibition to consider how our learnings could inform lasting changes to CSM's facility, policies, and practices.
- **Our *Young Mind* advisory group, including seven local and national early learning scholars and practitioners, provided crucial input.** They asked critical questions along the way, assisting with language for grant applications, introductions to local teachers and other early learning community stakeholders, and advised us on how the holistic museum experience could be more family-friendly.
- **Paying honoraria to our partner teachers demonstrated that we value their time and recognize their contributions.**
- **Working with children under COVID-19 restrictions had unexpected benefits.** Rather than visiting classrooms in person, we joined sessions via Zoom or Google Meet. In advance of these sessions, we obtained permission from caregivers to record sessions that we can return to, mine data, present highlights to potential donors, and use in the exhibition. Meeting with our young co-curators online made it possible for us to collaborate with schools outside of Denver, providing a larger and more diverse sample.
- **The children's responses to Clyfford Still's work were joyful.** We witnessed research on aesthetic preference come to life during our school visits, seeing children's eyes light up at brightly colored abstractions and hearing them confidently share their interpretations. For example, a three-year-old responded to an oil pastel drawing on construction paper work featuring a single, vertical white line flanked by flurries of green, blue, and black marks by stating, "This drawing is a tunnel for a hungry monster!" Their observations reminded us of the pure *joy* found in art – a simple yet profound factor to value in our everyday work.
- **Committing to ongoing collaboration is highly important.** We returned to classrooms multiple times with some of our partners, which resulted in a deepened, shared understanding of exhibition development practices.
- **Posing multiple types of provocations about the works was essential.** With some groups, the classic, "What's going on in this picture?"<sup>20</sup> did not elicit as many responses as, "How would you describe this painting to someone who couldn't see it?" or "If this painting could make a sound, what would it sound like?"
- ***Young Mind* opened the door for us to rethink CSM's policies and the way we communicate with visitors to become more family-friendly.** In short, our focus on very young visitors sparked an institutional culture shift. We are currently developing an entirely new interpretive strategy informed by this experience.

### Challenges

- **The shift in our institutional culture exposed problematic perceptions about young children** ("Won't little kids touch the paintings?")<sup>21</sup> and limitations

of our building (CSM does not have an appropriate nursing space and some of our displays are not at an accessible height for small children). While *Young Mind* has been a fitting impetus to address these barriers, they are too big for the two co-curators to dismantle without additional cross-departmental commitment and support.

- **While some aspects of the project benefited from its pandemic-era origin, COVID-19 inevitably added a few roadblocks.** The inability to be present in classrooms and engage directly with the children limited our potential for unmediated relationships with our co-curators. We also postponed the exhibition's opening date twice because of the pandemic to ensure that we could host school visits safely and incorporate tactile, interactive elements in the exhibition. While we feared this would hamper our collaborators' enthusiasm, it actually allowed for deeper engagement.
- **Since this exhibition is geared towards early learners, keeping in mind CSM's vast majority of visitors – adults – was tricky.** We established parallel exhibition through-lines and visitor goals for our adult audiences and a hierarchical gallery interpretation strategy that accounted for nonverbal pre-readers, early readers, and adults to address this challenge. We developed a child-led audio and American Sign Language experience for families, and employed one-word play-based prompts for our earliest readers. We also layered wall text to inform adult audiences about visual development and prompt looking by caregivers and their children.
- **Halfway through our planning process, we realized we faced a conceptual barrier when explaining the project's most foundational aspects** (“How do

infants *curate* a museum exhibition?”). Recorded clips from our sessions showing infants' immediate responses to particular works helped stakeholders understand and appreciate the children's roles.

### What's Next?

Now, more than two years into exhibition development, we continue to discover new and existing sources of inspiration and collaboration strategies from the museum field and beyond. In late scholar and museum educator Elee Kirk's research, she invited four- and five-year-old children visiting the Oxford University Museum of Natural History to document and discuss their experiences with her.<sup>22</sup> Growing Up Boulder, cofounded and directed by child-led planning expert Mara Mintzer, is Boulder Colorado's youth-friendly city initiative to include children's voices in local government decisions and urban development.<sup>23</sup> Both projects have provided innovative arts-based strategies for designing and researching with children.<sup>24</sup>

The Clyfford Still Museum will work with Denver-based Oberg Research on formative and summative evaluation to determine if we met our goals and find ways for this evaluation, like the exhibition itself, to break new ground in developing child-led research strategies. We are interested in potentially expanding this initial evaluation to a multiyear longitudinal study to understand (and share with our field) how CSM can continue to be a welcoming space for young children once *Clyfford Still, Art, and the Young Mind* closes. Exhibition thought partner Akane Ogren Orlandella (a doctoral student in Educational Leadership for Change, Social Justice and Equity at Fielding Graduate University) is pursuing independent research on the exhibition's impact on the adults in young children's lives (caregivers, families, and teachers) and its disruption of traditional power structures. Kathy Danko-McGhee (previously mentioned in this article) will conduct a study at the museum

**Fig. 6.** Second-grade co-curators share their interpretations of Clyfford Still's PH-247 [no title], painted in 1951.



to understand how CSM's visitors utilize her company's Baby Art Packs.<sup>25</sup>

As CSM's relationship with our community evolves, and we experiment with effective methods for collaborating with children (both in practice and research), we will continue to refine our processes. We are currently planning another community-centric exhibition, titled *You Select: A Community-Curated Exhibition*, slated to open in the fall of 2022, informed by the experiments and findings of *Young Mind's* development.

*Clyfford Still, Art, and the Young Mind* opens in March 2022 in a museum transformed by young children's influence (fig. 6). We have a

reconceptualized, child-friendly interpretive philosophy, fresh perspectives on our collection and concept of community, and a newfound source of joy in our practices. We now understand that to truly honor Still's legacy and his belief that art is for everyone, we must identify and seek out voices in the community that CSM has not included in the past and *listen*. We invite you and your institutions to join us in considering, as Mara Mintzer so aptly asks, what innovations "are we overlooking because we aren't hearing the voices of the full community?"<sup>26</sup> And how can we be better listeners? ■

- 1 The building was designed by Allied Works Architecture, a firm founded in Portland, Oregon in 1994 by principal Brad Cloepfl.
- 2 “About the Museum,” Clyfford Still Museum, accessed August 7, 2021, <https://clyffordstillmuseum.org/about-us/about-the-museum/>.
- 3 Slover Linett Audience Research, “Clyfford Still Museum Strategic Audience Expansion Research: Qualitative Research Report,” June 9, 2017, 12 (unpublished). This study showed that many Denver residents who were inclined to attend other area cultural institutions but who had not yet been to the Still Museum were unsure if “Clyfford Still” was a donor, a collector, or an artist.
- 4 The National Association for the Education of Young Children defines early childhood as birth to age eight. Other organizations and school districts may define early childhood as birth to five.
- 5 Melissa Menzer, *The Arts and Early Childhood: Social and Emotional Benefits of Arts Participation, A Literature Review and Gap Analysis (2000-2015)*, 7, accessed August 18, 2021, <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/arts-in-early-childhood-dec2015-rev.pdf>.
- 6 Kathy Danko-McGhee has published widely on the topic. See, for example, *The Aesthetic Preferences in Young Children* (Lampeter, Wales: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000). Danko-McGhee was also a thought partner in our exhibition development. Michael Parsons, *How We Understand Art: A Cognitive Development Account of Aesthetic Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 22.
- 7 We defined “our area” as Colorado’s Front Range Urban Corridor, which includes Denver, Boulder, Fort Collins, and other cities and suburban areas.
- 8 Marianna Pegno and Chelsea Farrar, “Multivocal, Collaborative Practices in Community-Based Art Museum Exhibitions,” in *Visitor-Centered Exhibitions and Edu-Curation in Art Museums* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 169.
- 9 Founded by Loris Malaguzzi in Reggio Emilia, Italy, following World War II, Reggio Emilia is a child-centered approach to early childhood education.
- 10 National Art Education Association, *Quality Arts Education: Goals for Schools* (Reston: NAEA, 1986).
- 11 We were influenced by the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC. Their focus on early education to prevent the formation of racist beliefs in children under eight is critical in their objective to combat racism in society. Nicole Cromartie, Kyong-Ah Kwon, and Meghan Welch, *Evaluating Early Learning in Museums: Planning for our Youngest Visitors* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 110–11.
- 12 Sharon Shaffer, *Engaging Young Children in Museums* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 29.
- 13 “The Children’s Room in the Smithsonian Institution Building: Knowledge Begins in Wonder,” Smithsonian Institution, accessed July 21, 2021, <https://www.si.edu/ahhp/childrensroomintroduction>.
- 14 “Temporary exhibitions,” National Museum in Warsaw, accessed August 7, 2021, <http://www.mnw.art.pl/en/temporary-exhibitions/the-anything-goes-museum-exhibition-curated-by-children,18.html>.
- 15 “V&A Museum of Childhood,” accessed August 7, 2021, <https://www.theaoc.co.uk/projects/v-a-museum-of-childhood>.
- 16 “Harrell Fletcher: KSMoCA,” accessed August 7, 2021, <http://www.harrellfletcher.com/projects/1648>.
- 17 Harrell Fletcher, “Harrell Fletcher: Art as a Social Force,” artist talk at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, posted November 21, 2014, YouTube, accessed July 1, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IfHtrcXDl0o&ab\\_channel=MuseumofContemporaryArtDetroit-MOCAD](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IfHtrcXDl0o&ab_channel=MuseumofContemporaryArtDetroit-MOCAD).
- 18 There are numerous resources published on the varied benefits of young children’s exposure to art. For the purposes of this article, refer to the National Art Education Association, *Quality Art Education: Goals for Schools*, 1986. For a review of the benefits of early learning experiences in museums, see “Early Learning in Museums A Review of Literature,” prepared by Mary Ellen Munley for the Smithsonian Institution’s Early Learning Collaborative Network and Smithsonian Early Enrichment Center (SEEC), April 2012, accessed August 10, 2021, <https://www.si.edu/Content/SEEC/docs/mem%20literature%20review%20early%20learning%20in%20museums%20final%204%2012%202012.pdf>.
- 19 Slover Linett Audience Research, “Clyfford Still Museum Strategic Audience Expansion Research: Qualitative Research Report,” June 9, 2017, 12 (unpublished).
- 20 This is the main question asked in Visual Thinking Strategies, a method of teaching visual literacy that asks open-ended questions about artworks.
- 21 Adrienne F. Reid, Vice President Fine Art Insurance, Huntington T. Block Insurance Agency, Inc., email communication with Frances Francis and author, January 19, 2021. Reid states, “Of museum patron-related damages, 70% are from adults and 30% are from children. This is from the past ten years of reported museum claims from the roughly 800 museums that we insure.” We began tracking the ages of patrons touching art at the Clyfford Still Museum in January 2021 and have seen a similar percentage breakdown in our incident reports since then.
- 22 Elee Kirk and Will Buckingham, *Snapshots of Museum Experience: Understanding Child Visitors Through Photography* (London: Routledge, 2018).
- 23 Growing Up Boulder’s mission is to “empower young people with opportunities for inclusion, influence, and deliberation on local issues which affect their lives,” and is headquartered about 30 miles from the Clyfford Still Museum. See: [www.growingupboulder.org](http://www.growingupboulder.org).
- 24 Victoria Derr, Louise Chawla, and Mara Mintzer, *Placemaking with Children and Youth: Participatory Practices for Planning Sustainable Communities* (New York: New Village Press/New York University Press, 2018), 86.
- 25 To learn more about Baby Art Packs, see [www.firstencounters4babies.com/baby-art-literacy-packs.html](http://www.firstencounters4babies.com/baby-art-literacy-packs.html)
- 26 Mara Mintzer, “How Kids Can Help Design Cities,” November 2017, TEDxMileHigh, 13:27, accessed August 1, 2021, [https://www.ted.com/talks/mara\\_mintzer\\_how\\_kids\\_can\\_help\\_design\\_cities?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/mara_mintzer_how_kids_can_help_design_cities?language=en).