

The Conditions of Children's Agency in Modern and Contemporary Art Museums:  
Children's Programs at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art and Tate Modern

Busra Hamzaoglu-Zafer  
s4360451  
b.hamzaoglu.zafer@umail.leidenuniv.nl

Leiden University  
MA Arts and Culture (Museum Studies)  
1st Reader: Dr. Stéphanie Noach  
2nd Reader: Dr. Arthur Crucq

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Zlb.

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## Introduction

This thesis examines how two major modern and contemporary art museums, Tate Modern in London and the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Copenhagen, negotiate children's agency, focusing specifically on children's programs for children aged 5 to 12. Agency, in this study, refers to children recognized capacity to interpret, make decisions, and act within their social and cultural environments, including the museum context. It denotes the ability to help shape the circumstances in which objects, entities, and practices gain meaning, thereby attributing to children a degree of power to effect change.<sup>1</sup> Central to the cultural politics of childhood, agency positions children as social actors who shape, and are simultaneously shaped by, their surroundings.<sup>2</sup> While the concept is sometimes articulated broadly, ranging from notions of children exerting full control over their environments to more limited forms of participation, this study adopts a grounded understanding in which children actively contribute to meaning-making rather than remaining passive recipients.<sup>3</sup> This age range is deliberately selected, as museum initiatives for children under five and those targeting adolescents over twelve typically follow different pedagogical and institutional models and are therefore excluded from this analysis.<sup>4</sup> My contribution lies in demonstrating how different programmatic and institutional models within children's programs shape, negotiate, and condition children's agency as cultural participants, while also reflecting on the broader implications for art museums seeking to balance accessibility, creativity, and the complexities of modern and contemporary art. Accordingly, this thesis asks: How do Tate Modern and the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art negotiate children's agency through children's programs designed for children aged 5 to 12? By addressing this question, the research contributes to ongoing discussions within participatory museology by critically examining the institutional and programmatic conditions under which children's agency is enabled and constrained.

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<sup>1</sup> Malone, Tesar, Arndt, *Theorising Posthuman Childhood Studies*, 238.

<sup>2</sup> Malone, Tesar, Arndt, *Theorising Posthuman Childhood Studies*, 238.

<sup>3</sup> The term 'meaning-making' describes the active process through which a visitor constructs knowledge and understanding, particularly within a museum or gallery setting. It emphasizes that learning is not simply the passive assimilation of information, but rather an engagement with experience aimed at making sense of the world. See, Alston, *Family Learning and Museum*, 11-12, 36-39.

<sup>4</sup> At Tate Modern, program for children under five focus on sensory and caregiver-led engagement, while initiatives such as Young Tate target adolescents aged 16 and above through longer-term and more autonomous formats. Due to their distinct pedagogical and institutional structures, these programs are excluded from this analysis. See, Tate, "Tate Collective Producers"; Tate. "Early Years Studio Programme at Tate Modern."

This research adopts a qualitative and comparative case study approach to examine how children's agency is negotiated within modern and contemporary art museums. Rather than seeking to measure participation or evaluate program outcomes, the study focuses on how agency is produced through institutional, spatial, and programmatic configurations. Tate Modern and the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art were selected as case studies due to their prominent roles in contemporary museum practice and their sustained engagement with children through distinct institutional models. The analysis draws on multiple qualitative sources, including institutional documents, program descriptions, digital platforms, architectural documentation, and on-site observations. Site visits were conducted to examine how children's programs are spatially embedded within each museum and how children's movement, interaction, and engagement unfold in relation to architectural affordances and institutional rhythms. These observations were complemented by an analysis of publicly available materials such as educational guides, websites, and digital platforms, which provide insight into how participation and agency are discursively framed. The methodological approach is interpretive rather than evaluative. The study does not aim to assess the effectiveness or impact of children's programs, nor does it claim to represent children's subjective experiences through interviews or surveys. Instead, it examines how institutional conditions shape the possibilities and limits of children's agency as it is enacted in practice. By combining spatial observation, document analysis, and theoretical interpretation, the research foregrounds agency as a relational and situated process emerging through the interaction of bodies, spaces, materials, and institutional structures.

Participatory museology, most prominently developed and disseminated by Nina Simon, a museum theorist, describes museum practices in which visitors and community members contribute to interpretation, content creation, and decision-making.<sup>5</sup> The concept is part of a broader scholarly field informed by authors such as professor of museum and heritage studies Elizabeth Crooke, and museum researcher Bernadette Lynch, who examine participation through perspectives on community collaboration, dialogical practice, and shifting institutional authority.<sup>6</sup> Within this literature, several scholars identify a broader participatory turn in museum practice, a movement away from traditional, expert-driven models toward approaches that emphasize shared

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<sup>5</sup> See, Simon, *The Participatory Museum*.

<sup>6</sup> See, Crooke, *Museums and Community*; Lynch, "Collaboration, Contestation, and Creative Conflict".

authority, inclusivity, and active engagement.<sup>7</sup> In this context, museums have increasingly been recognized as civic spaces for dialogue, safe places for engaging with complex ideas and for platforming diverse voices, including those of children. Once regarded as institutions for the educated and elite, museums have redefined their social role, a transformation formalized in the International Council of Museums' 2022 definition, which expands the meaning of a museum to include access for all, participation of communities, and diversity of perspectives.<sup>8</sup> By this definition, museums are no longer exclusive repositories of knowledge but spaces where everyone's ideas can be shared, discussed, and debated. Within this context, the participatory turn offers a conceptual foundation for exploring how agency operates within museum settings.

Discussions about children's place in museums have evolved considerably over the past century, reflecting broader transformations in both education and museology.<sup>9</sup> Early approaches in the mid-twentieth century emphasized observation, curiosity, and exhibition design as tools for learning, gradually giving way to constructivist and experiential models that positioned the child as an active learner.<sup>10</sup> By the late twentieth century, the emergence of hands-on and discovery museums redefined learning through play, collaboration, and exploration. These developments laid the foundation for participatory paradigms that view children not as passive visitors but as creative contributors capable of shaping cultural experiences.<sup>11</sup> In the twenty-first century, this trajectory has expanded into a more critical understanding of participation as a social and institutional principle rather than a pedagogical technique. The notion of children as collaborators in cultural production has increasingly entered contemporary museological discourse, intersecting with debates on inclusion, power, and decolonial practice. Together, these studies illustrate a consistent movement away from traditional transmission models toward approaches that emphasize play, participation, embodiment, and creativity. However, while this scholarship has substantially expanded our understanding of how museums engage children as learners and participants, less attention has been given to how institutional structures, both

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<sup>7</sup> Crooke, *Museums and Community*; Lynch, "Collaboration, Contestation, and Creative Conflict".

<sup>8</sup> "not-for-profit, permanent institutions in the service of society that research, collect, conserve, interpret, exhibit, and communicate tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing." See also, International Council of Museums (ICOM), "Museum Definition".

<sup>9</sup> Shaffer, *Museums, Children and Social Action*, 116.

<sup>10</sup> MacKay, "Nurturing Empathy between Adults and Children", 21-36.

<sup>11</sup> MacKay, "Nurturing Empathy between Adults and Children", 21-36.

spatial and pedagogical, shape the conditions through which children's agency emerges. Most studies tend to examine museum learning at a conceptual or programmatic level, often without considering how physical environments, design decisions, and institutional frameworks influence children's ability to act, interpret, and contribute meaningfully within museum settings.

This thesis responds to this gap by examining how institutional configurations shape the conditions under which children's agency emerges in practice. This thesis addresses this gap by analyzing children's agency as a relational and situated process shaped by institutional, spatial, and material conditions. This perspective allows the analysis to move beyond normative claims about participation toward a closer examination of how institutional practices structure children's opportunities to act, interpret, and contribute. Importantly, the study does not seek to evaluate participatory initiatives in terms of effectiveness or impact, but to describe how agency is produced, negotiated, and limited within contemporary and modern museum contexts. This thesis examines children's agency through three interrelated theoretical perspectives drawn from childhood studies, museum scholarship, and posthuman theory. Building on the work of sociologist and scholar Allison James, whose scholarship is foundational to the reconceptualization of childhood as a social category, instead of a developmental stage. In 'Socialising Children' (2013) children are understood as competent social actors whose agency is produced through everyday interactions, relationships, and institutional contexts.<sup>12</sup> James's work is especially important because it shifts analytical attention away from adult-centered developmental models and legitimizes children's perspectives as meaningful in the present. This understanding is extended through the work of Sharon Shaffer, a museum educator and researcher, whose book 'Museums, Children, and Social Action' (2023) foregrounds creative participation, intergenerational collaboration, and the ways in which museums invite children to contribute to meaning-making processes.<sup>13</sup> Her work is crucial for situating theories of children's agency within the concrete institutional, pedagogical, and programmatic realities of museums. Complementing these human-centered approaches, insights from posthuman childhood studies, as articulated by scholars Karen Malone, Marek Tesar, and Sonja Arndt in 'Theorising Posthuman Childhood Studies' (2020), whose work challenges human-centered and relationally limited accounts of agency, draw attention to the role of materials, spatial arrangements, and sensory environments in

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<sup>12</sup> James, *Socialising Children*.

<sup>13</sup> Shaffer, *Museums, Children, Social Action*.



shaping how agency emerges in practice.<sup>14</sup> This perspective is particularly important for museum studies, as it enables the analysis to account for the ways in which architecture, objects, and atmospheres actively participate in shaping children's experiences and capacities to act. These questions are explored through a comparative analysis of two case studies: the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art and Tate Modern. Focusing on children's programs designed for children aged 5–12, the case studies examine how each institution operationalizes participatory ideas through distinct spatial, programmatic, and institutional configurations. Louisiana and Tate offer contrasting yet complementary models, allowing for an analysis of how different approaches to space, continuity, and institutional organization shape the forms of agency available to children within modern and contemporary art museums.

One of the case studies examined in this thesis, the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, offers a particularly instructive context for exploring how children's agency is embedded within long-standing institutional practices. From its early years (1958), Louisiana Museum of Modern Art has articulated an explicit commitment to children as part of the museum's identity, positioning them not merely as an educational audience but as a presence to be accommodated within the museum's spatial and organizational framework.<sup>15</sup> As will be discussed in Chapter I, this orientation distinguishes Louisiana from many modern and contemporary art museums in which engagement with children has historically been confined to auxiliary educational programs rather than integrated into the core structure of the institution. A key moment in this trajectory was the establishment of the Children's Wing in 1994, which formalized children's presence through a dedicated yet architecturally integrated environment for creative activity.<sup>16</sup> Rather than functioning as a temporary or peripheral initiative, the Children's Wing represents a sustained institutional investment in children's engagement with art, emphasizing experimentation, making, and process-based encounters. Through open-ended workshops, studio-based practices and artist-led activities, Louisiana foregrounds creativity as a mode of engagement while maintaining a clear distinction between participatory activity and curatorial authorship. Equally significant is the museum's commitment to continuity. Long-term programs and repeated collaborations with schools, educators, and local communities allow children's engagement to unfold over time, offering

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<sup>14</sup> Malone, Tesar, Arndt, *Theorising Posthuman Children*.

<sup>15</sup> Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, "Children's Wing".

<sup>16</sup> Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, "Children's Wing".

insight into how meaning is constructed through ongoing interaction with materials, spaces, and artistic references.<sup>17</sup> For these reasons, Louisiana provides a valuable case for examining how participatory ideals can be stabilized within an institutional framework, and how children's agency is cultivated through spatial, material, and programmatic conditions that are both enabling and bounded.

The second case study examined in this thesis, Tate Modern, provides a contrasting model through which children's agency is configured across dispersed institutional, spatial, and digital infrastructures. As will be discussed in Chapter I, many modern and contemporary art museums have historically approached children primarily through auxiliary educational initiatives rather than embedding them within the museum's core public and interpretive structures. Tate Modern diverges from this pattern by integrating family-oriented engagement into its broader learning strategy and public spaces, combining on-site programs with an extensive digital platform. Family learning at Tate is organized through short, repeatable formats within the 'Families at Tate' program, alongside the 'Tate Kids' digital platform, which together enable flexible and recurring forms of engagement.<sup>18</sup> In-gallery activities such as drop-in workshops, interactive tours and self-guided resources encourage dialogue between children and caregivers, supporting collaborative interpretation and creative decision-making within the gallery environment. Rather than operating as isolated participatory events, these formats are embedded within Tate's everyday public spaces and institutional rhythms, allowing children's engagement to unfold intermittently throughout a visit. Complementing on-site activities, 'Tate Kids' extends participation beyond the physical museum through interactive tools and creative tasks that invite children to make, explore, and share responses remotely.<sup>19</sup> This digital infrastructure broadens access to the museum's resources and enables forms of engagement that are not dependent on physical presence, while remaining institutionally framed. Together, these configurations position Tate Modern as a case in which children's agency is distributed across multiple platforms and moments, emerging through situational encounters rather than through a single, consolidated spatial or programmatic framework.

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<sup>17</sup> See also, Chayder, *Travelling with Art*.

<sup>18</sup> Tate Modern, "Visit Tate Modern: Family"; Tate Modern, "Kids".

<sup>19</sup> Tate Modern, "Kids".

This thesis is structured into five main sections. The Introduction outlines the research context, central questions, and methodological approach, situating the study within broader debates on participation, children's agency, and contemporary museum practice. Chapter I establishes the theoretical framework by bringing together perspectives from childhood studies, participatory museology, and posthuman theory, and by articulating an interpretive approach to children's agency as a situated and relational process shaped by institutional, spatial, and material conditions. Chapters II and III present the two case studies, focusing respectively on the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art and Tate Modern. These chapters examine how each institution configures opportunities for children's agency through children's programs designed for children aged 5–12, attending to spatial arrangements, program formats, and broader institutional strategies. Drawing on architectural documentation, program descriptions, institutional materials, and site observations, the analysis explores how participatory ideas are translated into practice within distinct cultural and organizational contexts. The Conclusion brings the two cases into dialogue, identifying points of convergence and divergence in how children's agency is structured, enabled, and constrained. It reflects on the implications of these findings for contemporary museum practice, particularly in relation to moving beyond rhetorical commitments to participation toward more sustained, reflexive, and ethically grounded forms of engagement with children.

## Chapter I. Theoretical Perspectives on Children's Agency in Museums

### I.1. A Historical Overview of Children in Modern and Contemporary Art Museums

The position of children within modern and contemporary art museums has been shaped by a long institutional history in which young visitors were largely absent from, or peripheral to, curatorial and educational priorities. Shaffer highlights that early collecting institutions were designed for 'the elite, the scholarly, and the powerful' with children rarely considered legitimate participants in museum spaces.<sup>20</sup> It was only toward the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly with the rise of school excursions and the influence of progressive education, that museums began to acknowledge children as a distinct audience.<sup>21</sup> This recognition expanded significantly in the late twentieth century, parallel to the emergence of new sociological approaches to childhood that conceptualized children as capable beings with agency and independent thoughts, rather than incomplete adults in the making.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, understanding how children's participation has taken shape in modern and contemporary museums first requires an examination of the historical development of the child-museum relationship and the key shifts within childhood studies. This theoretical and historical groundwork also illuminates how participatory museum practices have subsequently supported and reconfigured these transformations, setting the stage for the following discussion.

At the beginning, children were a conceptual challenge for early art museums. Children, for instance, were often considered too young, inexperienced or untutored to engage in the reflective, text-based interpretive modes that museums increasingly expected.<sup>23</sup> Their responses tend to be embodied, exploratory and affective, running through open spaces, speaking aloud, improvising gestures or role-play, modes that conflict with the quiet decorum and controlled sensory environment of traditional galleries.<sup>24</sup> From the early twentieth century onward, museums commonly addressed this perceived incompatibility by separating children into designated rooms or wings. As academics Adrian Franklin and Michelle Sansom note, in 1921 Tasmanian Examiner

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<sup>20</sup> Shaffer, *Museum Children and Social Action*, 1-3.

<sup>21</sup> Shaffer, *Museum Children and Social Action*, 17-18.

<sup>22</sup> Esser, Baader, Betz, and Hungerland, "Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood: An Introduction", 1-2.

<sup>23</sup> Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*.

<sup>24</sup> Weiner, "Empowering Young Children In Art Museums: letting them take the lead", 107.

reported a funding request for the establishment of a children's room with age-appropriate displays that would:

“...attract their attention and educate their mind... (halt) their aimless and absurd wanderings... among specimens that can have no possible meaning... (and not) distract the attention of would-be students and introduce an atmosphere of unrest.”<sup>25</sup>

These spaces often sought to manage children's behavior or guide their learning through age-specific displays. On the other hand, children and museum relation specifically influenced by progressive educational thinkers John Dewey and Maria Montessori, promoted exploration, manipulation of materials and discovery-based learning.<sup>26</sup> The situation was problematic in art museums with original artworks, which could not be touched, manipulated or physically explored.<sup>27</sup> This tension was particularly evident at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), one of the first modern art museums to experiment systematically with child-centered pedagogies. Under Victor D'Amico's leadership, MoMA developed a series of children activities most notably the Young People's Gallery (1937–1957) and the Children's Art Carnival (from 1942), that encouraged experimentation, creative participation and hands-on exploration within deliberately designed environments.<sup>28</sup> While these initiatives offered young visitors unprecedented opportunities to engage with modern art processes, they also underscored the constraints of the museum context: interaction was made possible only through carefully staged spaces, specially constructed objects or selected reproductions, rather than through open access to the museum's principal collection of original works.<sup>29</sup>

While MoMA's programs highlighted both the possibilities and limits of child-centered practice within modern art museums, they also signaled a broader reorientation taking place across cultural institutions. The mid-twentieth century marked a period in which museums increasingly consolidated their role as educational institutions oriented toward public learning.<sup>30</sup> During this period, developmental psychology and experiential learning theories assumed a prominent role,

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<sup>25</sup> Franklin and Sansom, “‘Aimless and Absurd Wanderings’?” 29.

<sup>26</sup> The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the parallel emergence of children's museums and progressive educational models, both of which took shape between the 1890s and 1930s as part of a broader shift toward experiential and child-centered learning. See, Mayfield, “Children's museums: Purposes, practices and play?”, 180.

<sup>27</sup> Franklin and Sansom, “‘Aimless and Absurd Wanderings’?” 29.

<sup>28</sup> Torres Vega, “The 21st Century Museum as a Lab”, 122-124.

<sup>29</sup> D'Amico, “archival writings in The Victor D'Amico Papers”.

<sup>30</sup> Shaffer, *Museums, Children and Social Action*, 31, 35.

especially the work of developmental psychologist Jean Piaget.<sup>31</sup> Piaget's work contributed a different emphasis to earlier progressive approaches such as those of Dewey and Montessori. Whereas these educators foregrounded the importance of experience, exploration and material encounters, Piaget provided a psychological account of 'how' children's cognitive capacities develop over time.<sup>32</sup> His framework, which described learning as an active process shaped by developmental stages and by children's own processes of organizing and reorganizing knowledge, prompted museum professionals to consider age-related differences in how children interpret objects and exhibition environments.<sup>33</sup> Rather than introducing hands-on learning itself, Piaget's influence lay in reinforcing the idea that children require opportunities to test, manipulate and reconcile information in ways appropriate to their cognitive development, a perspective that subsequently supported the adoption of more structured forms of discovery-oriented engagement in museum education.<sup>34</sup> Although influential, these early psychological models viewed childhood largely through an adult lens, positioning it as a preparatory phase on the way to rational maturity. Merleau-Ponty argued that science operating from an adult perspective can only speak 'about' children rather than from their lived experience, while Meyer-Drawe emphasized that childhood constitutes its own embodied and perceptual mode of 'being' rather than an incomplete version of adulthood.<sup>35</sup>

On a broader international scale, the political recognition of children as social actors was formally articulated in the 1989 'United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)', which granted children the status of rights-bearing subjects capable of participating in decisions affecting their lives.<sup>36</sup> By framing children as rights-bearing subjects, it challenged models that regarded childhood solely as preparation for adulthood and placed new pressure on institutions, including museums, to develop practices that facilitate children's participation and voice.<sup>37</sup> This reconceptualization of children as rights-bearing subjects was further consolidated within the emerging field of childhood studies. In their influential foreword to 'Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood' (1990), Allison James and Alan Prout advanced a central proposition:

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<sup>31</sup> MacRae, Hackett, Holmes, Jones, "Vibrancy, repetition and movement", 505-506.

<sup>32</sup> MacRae, Hackett, Holmes, Jones, "Vibrancy, repetition and movement", 505-506.

<sup>33</sup> Hein, *Learning in the Museum*, 144-145.

<sup>34</sup> Hein, *Learning in the Museum*, 94-96.

<sup>35</sup> Mey, "Martha Muchow's research on children's life space", 160.

<sup>36</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "Convention on the Rights of the Child".

<sup>37</sup> Esser, Baader, Betz, and Hungerland, "Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood: An Introduction", 4-5.

that children should be understood as active participants in producing their own social worlds, and those of others, rather than as passive recipients of developmental, institutional or familial pressures.<sup>38</sup> This shift was made even more explicit when James, Chris Jenks and Alan Prout (1998) introduced the term *childhood agency* to name and consolidate this reorientation within childhood studies.<sup>39</sup> Agency is both the conceptual foundation and the analytical lens that enabled researchers to take children's active contribution to the shaping of their social worlds and broader society.<sup>40</sup> Within this framework recognizing children not as 'becomings' but as capable beings with meaningful perspectives and the capacity to participate, interpret and act in the present.

Debates within museum studies from the 1980s onward brought a conceptual shift that parallels the transformations taking place in the new sociology of childhood. Just as childhood scholars challenged hierarchical, adult-centered models that cast children as passive recipients, figures associated with the *New Museology*, most notably art historian and museum theorist Peter Vergo, questioned the museum's reliance on institutional authority and its tendency to position visitors as spectators rather than participants. Their work reframed the museum as a social institution whose meanings arise through relationships with its publics rather than through the unilateral presentation of expert knowledge.<sup>41</sup> In the 1990s, visitor-focused research by Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, a museum education theorist, and by John Falk and Lynn Dierking, researchers in museum learning and visitor studies, reinforced this orientation.<sup>42</sup> Their work demonstrated that interpretation is not transmitted from the institution to the visitor but constructed through the interplay of personal experience, cultural frameworks and the physical and social environment of the museum.<sup>43</sup> This emphasis on interpretive plurality mirrors developments in childhood studies, where scholars showed that children are not passive learners but active interpreters whose perspectives cannot be reduced to developmental norms or adult expectations. By the 2000s, participatory museology, synthesized most visibly in the work of Simon extended these ideas by proposing that visitors be treated as contributors to institutional processes.<sup>44</sup> Participation, collaboration and co-creation became central principles.<sup>45</sup> These developments resonate with

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<sup>38</sup> Prout and James, "A New Paradigm for the Sociology of Childhood?", 8.

<sup>39</sup> Esser, Baader, Betz, and Hungerland, "Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood: An Introduction", 1-2.

<sup>40</sup> Esser, Baader, Betz, and Hungerland, "Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood: An Introduction", 1-2.

<sup>41</sup> Vergo, *New Museology*.

<sup>42</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and their visitors*; Falk, Dierking, *The Museum Experience*.

<sup>43</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and their visitors*; Falk, Dierking, *The Museum Experience*.

<sup>44</sup> Simon, *The Participatory Museum*.

<sup>45</sup> Simon, *The Participatory Museum*.

debates on childhood agency: both fields move away from deficit-based models and emphasize individuals' capacities, including those of children, to take part in shaping cultural and social worlds.

However, the convergence of participatory museology and the new sociology of childhood has not resulted in a uniform transformation of museum practice. While both fields articulate a shared critique of hierarchical authority and emphasize relational, situated forms of meaning-making, the extent to which these principles have been institutionally realized remains uneven. In many cases, participation functions more as a conceptual horizon than as an operational restructuring, with decision-making power continuing to reside largely within professional and adult-controlled frameworks. For children, this has meant that recognition as capable interpreters has often stopped short of granting sustained influence over curatorial or organizational processes. The alignment between these theoretical developments thus reveals both a shift in how museums think about their publics and the persistent limits that shape how participation, especially children's participation, is enacted in practice.

## **I.2. Theoretical Framework**

Contemporary childhood studies have challenged developmentalist models that cast children as incomplete or passive, instead emphasizing children's active participation in the social worlds they inhabit. As *'Socialising Children'* demonstrates, children's agency does not operate independently of context but emerges through the circumstances, expectations, and relationships that surround them.<sup>46</sup> James argues that agency is fundamentally 'situated', taking shape within particular environments, such as families, schools, and communities, that create specific constraints and possibilities for action.<sup>47</sup> It is also 'relational', because children's actions gain meaning through their interactions with adults, peers, and the normative frameworks that structure their daily encounters.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, agency is 'co-constructed', as roles, decisions, and meanings are continually negotiated within these relationships and institutional routines.<sup>49</sup> For James, agency is therefore not an inherent trait residing within the individual child, but a process embedded in

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<sup>46</sup> James, *Socialising Children*, 74–75.

<sup>47</sup> James, *Socialising Children*, 126.

<sup>48</sup> James, *Socialising Children*, 74–75; 100–103.

<sup>49</sup> James, *Socialising Children*, 100–103; 148–150.



children's "personal lives," where understandings of the social world unfold through everyday practices, emotions, and engagements with the institutions that organize childhood.<sup>50</sup>

James's account of childhood emphasizes that agency is never exercised in a vacuum but is shaped through children's ongoing responses to the institutional cues, authority structures, and cultural expectations that surround them.<sup>51</sup> In her work, institutions are not neutral settings but regulatory environments that position children in particular ways while simultaneously inviting subtle forms of interpretation, adjustment, and negotiation.<sup>52</sup> Children read these cues, whether they concern behavioral norms, spatial boundaries, or adult authority, and position themselves in relation to them, sometimes conforming to expected roles, sometimes stretching or quietly resisting them.<sup>53</sup> Extending this insight to museum settings draws analytical attention not only to what children do within programs but also to how they experience these environments: how they navigate the implicit rules of the gallery, how they engage with or reconfigure adult-defined roles, and how the institutional arrangements of museums enable, delimit, or structure the forms of agency that become possible.<sup>54</sup> This perspective shifts the focus from abstract definitions of agency to the lived, interactional processes through which children participate in, interpret, and subtly reshape the social and institutional contexts they encounter. While James's account foregrounds the relational and situated character of children's agency, it remains grounded in a human-centered framework that privileges social interaction and institutional context. This emphasis illuminates how children interpret and negotiate institutional cues, yet it leaves less room for considering the material and spatial forces that also participate in shaping agency.

Unlike historical accounts of children's shifting place in museums, Shaffer's contribution is fundamentally action-oriented: it translates theoretical commitments to children's agency into practical models that demonstrate how museums can empower young visitors as collaborators, decision-makers, and social participants. Shaffer's discussion suggests three themes that are particularly relevant for understanding how museums can support children's agency: creating learning encounters connected to wider social concerns, recognizing children as legitimate interpreters, and extending participation to children who remain outside traditional audiences.

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<sup>50</sup> James, *Socialising Children*, 74–75.

<sup>51</sup> James, *Socialising Children*, 74–75, 126.

<sup>52</sup> James, *Socialising Children*, 124–129.

<sup>53</sup> James, *Socialising Children*, 100–103.

<sup>54</sup> James, *Socialising Children*, 148–150.

First, Shaffer emphasizes ‘transformative engagement’, arguing that museums must move beyond occupying children’s attention toward offering learning encounters that connect to broader social, environmental, or ethical concerns, such as climate change, migration, or racial justice.<sup>55</sup> These engagements reflect an expanded understanding of museums as civic institutions with responsibilities to foster public dialogue and social imagination.<sup>56</sup> Second, she stresses the importance of ‘valuing children’s voices’, positioning co-curation, participatory exhibition design, and dialogic programming as methods through which museums can acknowledge children as interpreters and producers of cultural meaning.<sup>57</sup> These practices do not merely accommodate children but invite them to reshape institutional narrative, a shift that directly aligns with contemporary participatory museology. Third, Shaffer foregrounds the imperative of ‘addressing exclusion’, urging museums to recognize and include children who remain outside traditional audiences, particularly those from marginalized or underserved communities.<sup>58</sup>

For Shaffer, equitable access is a precondition for meaningful agency: children cannot act, contribute, or imagine alternatives within institutions that reproduce structural barriers to participation. Together, these principles articulate a theoretical model in which museums are understood not only as educational organizations but as ‘socially engaged, future-oriented institutions’ whose missions involve cultivating inclusive publics and supporting children’s capacity for social action.<sup>59</sup> Museums serve as catalysts for civic engagement not by transmitting predetermined interpretations but by creating conditions under which children can co-construct knowledge, question inherited assumptions, and participate in shaping cultural experience.<sup>60</sup> This institutional perspective complements James’s relational understanding of agency by showing that children’s capacities to interpret, negotiate, or resist are themselves conditioned by the organizational structures of museums, policy orientations, and cultural commitments of the museum. Shaffer thus provides the institutional layer necessary for analyzing how children’s agency is operationalized, enabled, or delimited within contemporary museum practice.

At the same time, James and Shaffer’s emphasis on institutional intentionality and the structuring of children’s opportunities for action also points to the limits of approaches that focus

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<sup>55</sup> Shaffer, *Museums, Children and Social Action*, 53–60.

<sup>56</sup> Shaffer, *Museums, Children and Social Action*, 14–17, 77–82.

<sup>57</sup> Shaffer, *Museums, Children and Social Action*, 60–72.

<sup>58</sup> Shaffer, *Museums, Children and Social Action*, 119–126.

<sup>59</sup> Shaffer, *Museums, Children and Social Action*, 6–12.

<sup>60</sup> Shaffer, *Museums, Children and Social Action*, 97–105.

primarily on human relationships and institutional arrangements. While such perspectives illuminate how museums shape children's participation through design, facilitation, and pedagogical intent, they do not directly account for the material, spatial, and nonhuman forces that participate in children's experiences. This gap is addressed by posthuman childhood studies, which reconceptualize agency as emerging not only from social interaction but from the entanglements of children, objects, environments, technologies, and other nonhuman actors.<sup>61</sup> As Malone, Tesar and Arndt argue, agency becomes a 'more-than-human' phenomenon constituted through affective, material, and ecological relations rather than exclusively through human intention or institutional design.<sup>62</sup> Introducing this perspective extends the analytical lens beyond the museum's social and pedagogical structures to consider how spatial affordances, sensory atmospheres, material invitations, and environmental forces co-produce children's agency within cultural institutions.<sup>63</sup>

Although posthuman childhood studies (like James's *Socialising Children*) do not address museums directly, they offer a conceptual orientation that productively reframes how children's agency can be analyzed in cultural institutions. Rather than asking how museums support or limit children's pre-existing capacities, a posthuman lens directs attention to how agency emerges through the encounters that take place between children and the museum's material, spatial, and atmospheric conditions.<sup>64</sup> From this perspective, installations, architectural forms, sensory environments, and technological systems do not merely support learning but actively participate in shaping what children can do, feel, and imagine within the space.<sup>65</sup> Approaching museums through relational materiality therefore shifts the analytical focus from 'how the museum affects the child' to how agency is co-produced through the entanglement of institutional arrangements, human actors, and nonhuman forces.<sup>66</sup> In this thesis, a posthuman perspective is not adopted to

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<sup>61</sup> Posthuman childhood studies refers to an interdisciplinary body of scholarship that challenges human-centered and developmentalist accounts of childhood by foregrounding the role of materiality, affect, spatiality, and more-than-human relations in shaping children's experiences and capacities to act. Drawing on posthumanist and new materialist theories (including the work of Karen Malone, Marek Tesar, and Sonja Arndt), this approach understands agency as an emergent and relational process produced through entanglements between children, environments, objects, technologies, and institutional settings, rather than as an attribute located solely within the human subject. See, Malone, Tesar, Arndt, *Theorising Posthuman Childhood Studies*, 81- 83.

<sup>62</sup> Malone, Tesar, Arndt, *Theorising Posthuman Childhood Studies*, 143-146.

<sup>63</sup> Malone, Tesar, Arndt, *Theorising Posthuman Childhood Studies*, 110–111, 151–152.

<sup>64</sup> Malone, Tesar, Arndt, *Theorising Posthuman Childhood Studies*, 81- 83.

<sup>65</sup> Malone, Tesar, Arndt, *Theorising Posthuman Childhood Studies*, 143-146.

<sup>66</sup> Malone, Tesar, Arndt, *Theorising Posthuman Childhood Studies*, 82- 83.

decentre children's experiences, but to make visible the material and spatial conditions through which those experiences are produced within museum environments. Even if museums are not explicitly theorized in the posthuman literature, this framework enables an examination of children's experiences as situated within dense assemblages of matter, infrastructures, and relations, revealing how cultural institutions mediate more-than-human forms of participation.<sup>67</sup>

Bringing these three perspectives together produces a framework that attends not only to children's interpretations and negotiations (James) and to institutional structures and pedagogical strategies (Shaffer), but also to the material-spatial entanglements foregrounded by posthumanist childhood studies, which neither relational nor institutional approaches fully account for on their own. For the present research, this integrated approach makes it possible to analyze children's programs at Tate Modern and the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art as dynamic assemblages in which agency emerges through the interaction of human and nonhuman forces, institutional aims, and children's own interpretive and affective engagements. Rather than reducing agency to either children's individual capacities or institutional intentions, this framework allows the study to explore the layered, relational, and co-produced nature of participation in contemporary museum settings. James's notion of situated, relational and co-constructed agency enables this study to examine how children interpret and navigate the expectations embedded in museum settings. In programs at Tate Modern and Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, children encounter adult-defined roles, behavioral norms, and spatial boundaries that shape their participation. James's framework helps illuminate how children respond to these cues, whether by aligning with curatorial scripts, negotiating alternative roles, or subtly stretching the limits of what is expected. This approach allows the analysis to foreground children lived interpretations: how they position themselves in group discussions, how they respond to educators' prompts, and how they navigate the tacit social order of the gallery. James therefore provides the conceptual grounding for examining children's interpretive actions and the micro-negotiations through which agency unfolds in practice.

Shaffer's institutional lens, by contrast, enables the thesis to investigate how the museums themselves structure the conditions under which children's agency becomes possible. Both Tate Modern and the Louisiana Museum design programs, physical layouts, educational materials, and facilitation strategies that implicitly define what children can do, contribute, or imagine. Shaffer's framework makes these institutional arrangements analytically visible: the pedagogical goals that

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<sup>67</sup> Malone, Tesar, Arndt, *Theorising Posthuman Childhood Studies*, 151-152.

shape program design; the forms of participatory dialogue that educators open (or foreclose); the institutional priorities embedded in object choices, spatial layouts, and themes; and the extent to which programs seek to include marginalized children or connect learning to broader social concerns. Through Shaffer, the analysis evaluates the institutional commitments that enable or delimit children's agency, revealing how museums position young visitors as learners, interpreters, or contributors. Posthuman childhood studies add a third dimension by drawing attention to elements that neither James nor Shaffer fully capture: the material, affective, and atmospheric conditions through which agency emerges in museum encounters. Both Tate Modern and Louisiana Museum of Modern Art rely heavily on multisensory installations, open-ended materials, and spatial arrangements that invite forms of bodily movement, attention, and imaginative engagement. A posthuman lens enables the study to examine how children's actions arise through their entanglements with artworks, textures, architectural arrangements, digital interfaces, and the sensory atmospheres of the galleries. This perspective foregrounds how agency is co-produced not only by institutional design and social interaction but also by the material affordances and environmental intensities of museum spaces. In this way, posthumanism complements the previous two approaches by illuminating the more-than-human dimensions of children's participation.

## Chapter II. The Case of the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art's Children's Wing

Founded in 1958 in Humlebæk, Denmark, Louisiana positioned children as part of its identity from the beginning.<sup>68</sup> This approach was informed by its modernist architecture, its close relationship with the surrounding landscape, and the vision of its founder, Knud W. Jensen. Jensen's frequently repeated statement, "children are the future of the museum" shows that children were seen not just as an educational target group but as social actors essential to the museum's cultural continuity.<sup>69</sup> As outlined in the historical overview of children's position in modern and contemporary art museums, engagement with children throughout much of the twentieth century was largely organized through educational departments, special programs, or designated rooms, rather than being integrated into the core architectural or curatorial structure of the museum.<sup>70</sup> Against this backdrop, Louisiana can be regarded as one of the earlier examples of a modern art museum that explicitly considered children within its institutional and architectural framework, rather than positioning them solely through auxiliary or educational initiatives.<sup>71</sup> On the other hand, Louisiana's articulation of children as central to the museum's future positions them as integral to the museum's long-term continuity, while leaving open questions about how this orientation translates into children's agency in the present. By framing the child as 'the adult of the future' it reflects the developmentalist paradigm that James critiques that values children for their future potential rather than their present subjectivities.<sup>72</sup> This chapter approaches Louisiana not as a case of institutional transformation, but as an example of how children's participation and agency were progressively articulated and spatially formalized within an otherwise stable museum structure. Rather than redistributing curatorial or institutional authority, Louisiana's approach reveals how children's agency is cultivated through spatial, material, and environmental conditions, producing forms of participation that are sustained yet institutionally bounded.

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<sup>68</sup> Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, "Children's Wing".

<sup>69</sup> Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, "Children's Wing".

<sup>70</sup> For example; beginning with MoMA's Young People's Gallery in the 1930s in New York, which offered a designated space for children's exhibitions but remained modest in scale and peripheral to the museum's main program; followed by the hands-on workshop initiatives at Moderna Museet in Stockholm and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam during the 1960s and 1970s, which encouraged creative experimentation yet did not constitute fully integrated child-oriented environments; and later by purpose-designed but predominantly exhibition-based spaces such as the Centre Pompidou's *Galerie des enfants* in Paris in 1977.

<sup>71</sup> Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, "Children's Wing".

<sup>72</sup> James, *Socialising Children*, 9.

## II.1. Children at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art: A Historical Overview

The Louisiana Museum of Modern Art was established around a nineteenth-century villa and shaped by the vision of its founder and first director, Knud W. Jensen.<sup>73</sup> Conceived as an alternative to monumental ‘temples of art,’ the museum sought to integrate art into everyday life through a close alignment of architecture, landscape, and movement.<sup>74</sup> Designed by architects Jørgen Bo and Vilhelm Wohlert between 1956 and 1991, Louisiana emerged as a modernist spatial system defined by linked pavilions, glazed connectors, and fluid thresholds that dissolve rigid distinctions between interior and exterior (*Figure 1*).<sup>75</sup> By privileging movement over monumentality, the museum resists hierarchical spatial organization and instead produces a horizontal field of experience.<sup>76</sup> Within this setting, visitors are not guided along a singular, authoritative path but are invited to navigate the museum through informal encounters, moments of pause, and self-directed trajectories. As Hooper-Greenhill argues, the shift away from hierarchical and didactic forms of display positions visitors as active participants in meaning-making, enabling more exploratory and self-directed modes of engagement rather than prescribing a single, authoritative route through the museum.<sup>77</sup> Even before Louisiana developed child-focused initiatives, its architectural configuration offered affordances consistent with relational and situated forms of agency, laying the groundwork for later approaches to children’s engagement within the museum.<sup>78</sup> It generated a set of spatial, environmental, organizational and ideological conditions that later shaped the rationale for an entire wing dedicated to exploratory and creative practices for children.

The initial roles dedicated to children at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, introduced at the museum’s opening in 1958, can be understood as part of the early emergence of ‘children’s room’ models in museums. Rather than integrating children into the main exhibition spaces, this approach positioned their activities within a small, separate room in the original nineteenth-century villa, informally known as the ‘children’s museum’.<sup>79</sup> Located beneath the villa’s staircase, the

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<sup>73</sup> Sheridan, *A Qualified Utopia*, i, ix.

<sup>74</sup> The notion of museums as ‘temples of art’ is grounded in an institutional belief that art should be separated from everyday life and experienced within spaces of reverent contemplation, where visitors admire artistic genius in silence and restraint. This model reflects an ideology that isolates art from social practice and reinforces the museum as a site of aesthetic distance rather than lived experience. See, Seling, “The Genesis of the Museum,” 103–114.

<sup>75</sup> Sheridan, *A Qualified Utopia*, 76–77.

<sup>76</sup> Sheridan, *A Qualified Utopia*, 22–291.

<sup>77</sup> Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, 22–24.

<sup>78</sup> Sheridan, *A Qualified Utopia*, 190–191.

<sup>79</sup> Sheridan, *A Qualified Utopia*, 190.

room enabled hands-on engagement, allowing children to work with materials and decorate the walls, yet its marginal and provisional placement effectively kept children's practices at the periphery of the museum's primary spatial and narrative structure. Children's agency was thus acknowledged, but only within a contained and somewhat sidelined framework.<sup>80</sup> A more explicit and experimental articulation of children's agency emerged with the exhibition *Children Are A People* (1978), organized at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in celebration of the International Year of the Child.<sup>81</sup> The exhibition temporarily reconfigured the museum itself around children's presence, positioning them as active cultural subjects rather than peripheral visitors. The exhibition was grounded in the premise of presenting "real art by real artists for real children," a statement that foregrounded children as legitimate recipients and interpreters of contemporary art.<sup>82</sup> Agency was enacted through direct bodily, imaginative, and spatial engagement. Large parts of the museum's one building (58-Building) and surrounding park were transformed into interactive environments that invited climbing, role-play, exploration, and physical manipulation of artworks.<sup>83</sup> Beyond the galleries, the exhibition extended children's spatial autonomy into the landscape through the creation of the Lake Garden, an outdoor adventure environment featuring self-operated elements. According to a visitor's recollections, this exhibition marked the first time they felt addressed 'at eye level' as a museum visitor at the age of ten; not through condescending notions of 'child-friendly art' but rather as an 'art-friendly child'.<sup>84</sup>

While 'Children Are a People' demonstrated the transformative potential of children's embodied engagement, it simultaneously revealed the absence of a permanent spatial framework capable of sustaining such practices. In this sense, the exhibition functioned less as a solution than as a diagnostic moment, making visible the need for a more durable architectural and institutional response. These discussions, involving educators, curators, and architects, sought to create a facility that aligned with Louisiana's established architectural language while offering flexible, activity-oriented spaces. The resulting three-level Children's Wing, completed in 1994, was

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<sup>80</sup> Sheridan, *A Qualified Utopia*, 190.

<sup>81</sup> Baggesen, "Children Are People"

<sup>82</sup> Baggesen, "Children Are People"

<sup>83</sup> Works such as Susanne Ussing's *2 Svaner*, which allowed children to climb wooden structures and animate oversized wings, shifted the child's role from observer to co-producer of experience. Similarly, immersive installations that encouraged fantasy and embodied play activated emotional and imaginative forms of agency. See, Sheridan, *A Qualified Utopia*, 189-190.

<sup>84</sup> According to Lise Haller Baggesen's memories. See also, Baggesen "Children Are People".



conceived as an extension of the museum's circulation and landscape system rather than as a separate annex, providing a more durable spatial framework for children and their works.<sup>85</sup>

Although the Children's Wing at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art appears as a distinct spatial unit, it is not positioned as a marginal or secondary zone within the museum's hierarchy. On the contrary, the Wing is integrated into the same circulation system as the main galleries and encountered along the visitor route in a deliberate and visible manner.<sup>86</sup> This spatial placement complicates common critiques of dedicated children's spaces as inherently segregating. Rather than removing children from the museum's core narrative, Louisiana embeds the Children's Wing within the shared architectural flow, allowing it to exist in dialogue with the exhibition spaces frequented by adult visitors. The visibility of the Wing along the visitor route further challenges the notion of institutional silence by making children's presence, activity, and forms of participation publicly perceptible rather than concealed. It formalized a model in which children became identifiable actors whose engagement would be shaped through dedicated spatial, material, and pedagogical arrangements. Rather than signaling unqualified freedom, the Wing consolidated earlier experiments into an architectural framework that both enabled children's participation and structured the forms that such agency could take. In this sense, it marked the result of a decades-long trajectory; from dispersed, implicit affordances to an explicit institutional apparatus through which the museum sought to organize, support, and regulate children's modes of inhabiting and transforming the museum.



*Figure 1. View of the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art galleries from the landscape. (Source: Author)*

<sup>85</sup> Because it is positioned on a sloped site with a change in ground level, the three-storey structure appears at the similar height as the surrounding main buildings within the landscape. See also, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, "Children's Wing".

<sup>86</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the observations are based on the author's own field notes from 5 October 2025.

## II.2. Making, Space, and Agency in the Children's Wing

On the museum's website, the Children's Wing is presented as "three floors of creative studios" offering daily workshops in which children aged 4–16 is invited to "draw, paint, build and explore how artists and architects work," with all activities explicitly "linked to the museum's rich exhibition program".<sup>87</sup> Activities in the Children's Wing operate through an open studio model, allowing children and accompanying adults to enter freely and participate at their own pace, without fixed schedules or predetermined outcomes. Materials and instructions are openly accessible, supporting independent engagement while maintaining a loose connection to the museum's current exhibitions.<sup>88</sup> This emphasis on making, experimentation, and creative process positions children not merely as viewers or recipients of knowledge, but as active participants in artistic practice. Such a framing resonates with a broader shift in the sociology of childhood which challenges traditional conceptions of children as incomplete beings passively absorbing adult knowledge.<sup>89</sup> Instead, this paradigm understands children as social actors whose agency emerges through situated practices, interactions, and material engagements. The figure of the child as an 'active maker' reflects a reconfiguration of children's role in cultural institutions, from consumers or learners to agents capable of producing meaning.<sup>90</sup> Yet the language also reveals a carefully delimited framework: creativity is encouraged, but always within predefined themes, material choices, and interpretive trajectories aligned with the museum's curatorial agenda. The Children's Wing at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art can be examined through the relationship between structure and agency, as described by sociologist Anthony Giddens in sociological theory as two sides of the same coin.<sup>91</sup> Children's activities take place within clearly defined institutional, spatial,

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<sup>87</sup> Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, "Children's Wing".

<sup>88</sup> This section also draws on the author's field notes from conversations with Tara and her colleagues at the Children's Wing, conducted on 5 October 2025.

<sup>89</sup> James, Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, 3-4.

<sup>90</sup> Shaffer, *Museums, Children and Social Action*, 3-4, 156.

<sup>91</sup> Giddens, *The Central Problems of Social Theory*, 69.

and programmatic boundaries; however, these structures also create conditions in which agency is enacted through negotiation, interpretation, and creative adaptation.<sup>92</sup>



Figure 2. View from the route leading to the Children's Wing. (Source: Author)

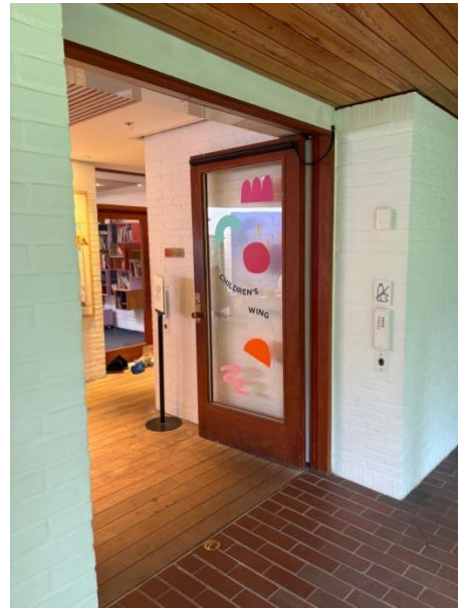


Figure 3. Entrance of the Children's Wing. (Source: Author)

In the Children's Wing, in addition to curatorial frameworks, agency takes shape through a combination of spatial arrangement, material availability, and everyday interactions between children, adults, and objects. Entry into the Children's Wing is gradual and has the potential to occur incidentally: visitors move through the museum galleries and find themselves inside (Figure 2-3). During field observations, children frequently navigated the space by watching peers before engaging themselves, shifting between tables, or abandoning one activity in favor of another. Within this setting, children are free to draw, build, and produce according to their own ideas, and to display these productions in a space that remains open to other visitors. Making is not confined to prescribed tasks; instead, children adapt their own ideas to a space that is simultaneously a site of production and public encounter. Agency emerges precisely through this adaptation: in deciding what to make, how long to stay, where to position oneself, and how one's work enters the shared environment of the museum. Read through contemporary sociological and posthuman approaches to childhood, the forms of participation observed in the Children's Wing can be understood as expressions of situated and negotiated agency. As James emphasizes, children are not merely shaped by socialization processes but actively participate in them, shaping their own

<sup>92</sup> James, Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, 24-25.

understandings of the world and their place within it.<sup>93</sup> Children's decisions are shaped through relationships with others; peers, adults, and institutional cues, which are themselves dynamic and continually negotiated over time.<sup>94</sup> Children do not act as autonomous creators detached from their surroundings, nor as passive recipients of institutional intent. Instead, agency unfolds through their ongoing responses to the spatial layout, the visibility of others, and the material affordances made available.<sup>95</sup> Decisions about whether to join, observe, move on, adapt an idea, or abandon an activity altogether reflect agency as something enacted in context rather than possessed in advance.



Figure 4: 3rd (entrance) floor of Children's Wing. (Source: Author)

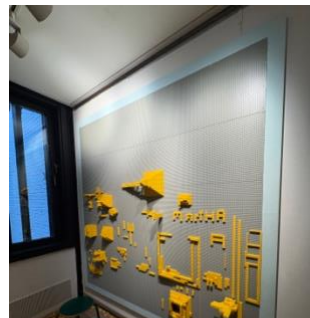


Figure 5: 2nd floor of Children's Wing. (Source: Author)



Figure 6: Ground floor of Children's Wing. (Source: Author)

While agency in the Children's Wing first becomes visible through patterns of entry, movement, and situational choice, it is further articulated through practices of making and material engagement. It is in the moment of production, where spatial cues, materials, and social relations intersect, that agency takes on a more tangible form, shifting from navigation to transformation. Making is not simply a vehicle for self-expression, but a relational process shaped by human and nonhuman elements alike.<sup>96</sup> The spatial differentiation of the Wing further shapes these practices by offering varying degrees of thematic framing and openness. On the upper floor, worktables related to specific exhibitions provide a loose interpretive reference, yet children engage with these cues selectively and at their own pace (*Figure 4*). The middle floor loosens this relationship, allowing activities to drift between building, performing, and role-play through open-ended materials such as LEGO and costumes, often resulting in improvised scenarios rather than resolved outputs (*Figure 5*). On the ground floor, large communal tables positioned near the café and

<sup>93</sup> James, *Socialising Childhood*, 10.

<sup>94</sup> James, *Socialising Childhood*, 18, 23.

<sup>95</sup> James, *Socialising Childhood*, 11, 15.

<sup>96</sup> Malone, Tesar, Arndt, *Theorising Posthuman Childhood Studies*, 82-83.



surrounding landscape invite collective making that blends into the everyday rhythms of the museum, blurring the boundary between focused activity and casual presence (*Figure 6*). Shared tables render individual processes visible to others, encouraging imitation, adaptation, or divergence. Educators circulate within the space in a supportive yet non-directive manner, intervening primarily through questions rather than instruction, while parents adopt varied roles, sometimes participating alongside their children, sometimes remaining nearby as observers. Children's works, displayed within the same spaces in which they are produced, further reinforce the sense that these actions are acknowledged and valued, even as they remain distinct from the museum's main exhibition structure. Materials, tables, displays, and the presence of peers actively participate in directing attention, sustaining interest, or prompting change. Agency emerges through these negotiations, between intention and affordance, structure and improvisation, revealing children's creative actions as embedded within a shared ecological field of space, objects, and social relations.<sup>97</sup> What becomes visible is not unrestricted freedom, but a form of agency produced through adaptation, responsiveness, and material engagement.

During observations in the Children's Wing, for example, children rarely remained fixed in one place while making. Production unfolded alongside movement: children would leave their materials on the table, walk to the windows to look out at the surrounding landscape, observe other children working at nearby tables, and then return to continue their activity. This oscillation between making, moving, and observing suggests that engagement is sustained not through



Figure 7. Flowers produced and displayed by children, inspired by Shara Hughes's POP. (Source: Author)

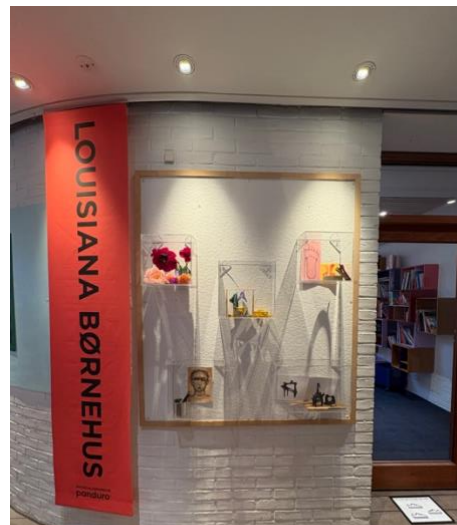


Figure 8. Workshop-produced works on display. (Source: Author)

<sup>97</sup> Malone, Tesar, Arndt, *Theorising Posthuman Childhood Studies*, 86.

continuous focus on an object, but through circulation across space. Agency here is shaped by the relational pull of architectural elements, visibility, and the landscape beyond the glass, which actively modulate attention and rhythm rather than serving as a neutral backdrop. A similar entanglement of material, reference, and decision-making emerged during an activity inspired by Shara Hughes's *POP* (2021), in which children produced floral forms (*Figure 7*). One child made two flowers and made a deliberate distinction between them: one was hung on the wall as part of the shared display, while the other was kept being taken home. This moment reflects agency not as a single expressive act, but as a negotiation between public visibility and private attachment. The work itself becomes multiple; its meaning distributed across different futures and locations. Agency emerges through this material differentiation, where objects, display surfaces, and institutional conventions participate in shaping what is shared, what is kept, and how children situate their making within the museum's social and spatial surrounding.

The Children's Wing can be understood as part of a wider ecology of encounters unfolding across the museum, rather than as a self-contained zone of activity. Children typically enter the Wing having already encountered artworks in the main galleries, whether through brief glances, partial attention, or more sustained viewing. These encounters continue to resonate once children begin making, shaping how ideas are recalled, adapted, or transformed through material practice. Reproduction in this context operates as a continuation of perception, allowing earlier impressions to circulate through drawing, modelling, and construction. Agency emerges through this movement between viewing and making, as artworks, memories, materials, and spatial transitions remain in play across different parts of the museum. Children's engagement is therefore sustained through a network of relations that exceeds the boundaries of any single room or program, encompassing architectural thresholds, material affordances, social interaction, and the sensory presence of the museum environment. Within this 'assemblage', the Children's Wing functions as a node, an intensification point where these encounters are gathered, negotiated, and temporarily stabilized through practices of making and display.<sup>98</sup> This dynamic becomes visible in workshop stations that are directly connected to current exhibitions. During field observations, the 'Shape a Friend' activity invited children to imagine and create small companions inspired by artist Sonja

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<sup>98</sup> Although the concept of 'assemblage' originates with Deleuze and Guattari, Bennett describes it as an ad hoc constellation of diverse, vibrant elements that remain operative despite internal tensions. Deleuze and Guattari similarly stress that events within an assemblage emerge through the relations among its elements. See, Malone, Tesar, Arndt, *Theorising Posthuman Childhood Studies*, 239.

Ferlov's bronze sculptures. Children did not replicate specific sculptural forms; instead, they responded to broader sculptural qualities such as bodily presence, abstraction, and material density, translating these impressions into imagined figures through drawing and modelling. Entry into the Wing often involved a brief pause at the threshold, followed by immediate engagement once interest was sparked, reinforcing the sense that the space operates as a continuation of the museum visit rather than as a distinctly separated educational zone. Some children entered the Wing without having visited the galleries beforehand, engaging with the activity through spoken explanations or by observing others at work. Even in these cases, participation remained embedded within the museum's overall spatial logic. After completing their work, children typically moved back into the gallery spaces as part of their ongoing visit, encountering artworks again in different states of attention. This recurrent movement highlights how agency is sustained through circulation rather than linear progression. Making does not conclude an encounter with art but feeds into further viewing, repositioning the Children's Wing as part of a continuous experiential loop within the museum.

### **III.3. Synthesis: Forms and Limits of Agency in the Children's Wing at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art**

The Children's Wing at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art does not represent a fundamental shift in institutional authority or curatorial structure, yet it constitutes a carefully articulated framework through which children's agency is made visible, sustained, and regulated. Rather than positioning children as peripheral visitors or as co-authors of institutional narratives, Louisiana situates them as active participants within a stable museum ecology. Agency, in this context, is neither fully autonomous nor purely instrumental; it unfolds through spatial, material, and relational conditions that shape how children inhabit, interpret, and act within the museum. One of the defining characteristics of Louisiana's approach lies in the spatial integration of the Children's Wing into the museum's circulation system. Children's activities are not hidden or separated from the main galleries but encountered along the visitor route, rendering participation publicly perceptible. This visibility complicates common assumptions that dedicated children's spaces necessarily function as sites of exclusion. At the same time, integration does not imply equivalence. The Wing remains a distinct zone in which children's engagement is oriented toward making and experimentation, rather than toward the production of institutional meaning. Through this arrangement, the museum acknowledges children's presence while maintaining clear distinctions between curatorial authority and participatory activity.

Agency within the Children's Wing takes shape through negotiation rather than command. Children encounter a setting that offers freedom of movement and open-ended engagement yet operates within a clearly defined institutional framework. Activities are linked to exhibitions, materials are selected in advance, and spatial cues guide attention without dictating outcomes. Children respond to these conditions in varied ways: observing before acting, moving between tables, adapting ideas from peers, or disengaging and returning later. Such actions reveal agency as something enacted through choice and responsiveness, but always in relation to environmental and social cues. Participation emerges not through resistance or disruption, but through subtle adjustments that allow children to situate themselves within the museum's rhythms. Material practices play a central role in this process. Making functions as a mode of engagement that extends rather than concludes encounters with art. Objects produced in the Wing are shaped through interactions with materials, surfaces, and the presence of others, and often carry ambiguous statuses between personal possession and public display. Decisions about whether to exhibit, keep, or abandon a work reflect agency as distributed across institutional conventions, spatial arrangements, and affective attachments. These moments demonstrate that agency is not confined to expressive intention, but emerges through ongoing negotiations between bodies, objects, and settings. The spatial qualities of the Wing further modulate these practices. Movement between making, observing, and wandering is not incidental but fundamental to how engagement is sustained. Architectural openness, visual access to the landscape, and the proximity of communal areas encourage oscillation rather than linear progression. Attention shifts between task and environment, between focused activity and peripheral awareness, producing a form of participation that is rhythmic and adaptive. In this sense, agency unfolds through circulation and variation rather than continuous immersion, shaped by the museum's architectural and atmospheric conditions. At the same time, the Children's Wing establishes clear boundaries around the forms agency may take. While children are encouraged to explore, experiment, and invent, their participation remains framed as process-oriented and educational. The museum does not invite children to intervene in exhibition narratives, challenge interpretive frameworks, or participate in institutional decision-making. Instead, agency is cultivated within a domain that values creativity, learning, and engagement without unsettling curatorial authority. This arrangement reflects a broader orientation in which children are recognized as capable actors in the present, yet primarily through roles that support their development rather than through



positions that enable institutional influence. The significance of Louisiana's model lies in this balance between openness and containment. The Children's Wing absorbs children's embodied, affective, and exploratory modes of engagement into a space where such practices are not only permitted but expected. In doing so, it stabilizes children's presence within the museum while channeling their agency into recognizable and manageable forms. Participation becomes durable, repeatable, and institutionally legible, even as it remains shaped by constraints that limit its scope.

Read as a case study, the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art demonstrates how children's agency can be cultivated without reconfiguring the museum's fundamental structures. The Children's Wing operates as a mediating device, translating children's ways of moving, making, and attending into forms compatible with the museum's spatial and organizational logic. Agency emerges here as embedded, negotiated, and relational: sustained through design and practice, yet bounded by institutional priorities. This synthesis highlights the importance of examining not only whether children are invited to participate, but how the environments in which they act shape the forms, meanings, and limits of that participation.

### Chapter III. The Case of Tate Modern's Family Programs and Tate Kids

London Tate Modern is one of four galleries in the United Kingdom that together form the Tate institutional network, alongside Tate Britain, Tate Liverpool + RIBA North, and Tate St Ives.<sup>99</sup> Opened in 2000 in the former Bankside Power Station, Tate Modern emerged within a museum landscape shaped by large-scale public institutions and increasingly heterogeneous audiences.<sup>100</sup> From the outset, the museum framed the visit as a personalized experience, placing less emphasis on the transfer of knowledge from curator to visitor and more on individual interpretation.<sup>101</sup> Also, it has identified young people as a significant audience segment and has developed initiatives aimed at attracting broader and more diverse publics who do not regularly visit galleries.<sup>102</sup>

Tate's engagement with children has a long history that precedes more recent organizational and policy-driven shifts.<sup>103</sup> Early family-oriented strategies were largely pragmatic, emphasizing accessibility and care through the provision of family-friendly facilities, rest areas, or free meals.<sup>104</sup> While these measures facilitated inclusion, encounters with art itself were often framed as secondary to logistical support, reinforcing conventional hierarchies between institutional authority and young visitors. Over time, Tate's and Tate Modern's discourse evolved to foreground children's creative autonomy more explicitly. The museum visit came to be positioned as an open-ended process in which visitors could relate artworks to their own emotions, experiences, and social contexts.<sup>105</sup> Children's agency was further consolidated through both physical and digital infrastructures. For instance, Families are encouraged to use gallery-based games such as 'Strike a Pose', which invite children to mimic gestures and postures found in artworks, normalizing movement, conversation, and sound within the gallery space.<sup>106</sup> Interactive tools such as 'Tate Draw' further extend this approach by allowing visitors to see their drawings animated in the museum in real time. Beyond the physical visit, the 'Tate Kids' online platform offers games, videos, and tools such as 'My Gallery', enabling children to assemble virtual collections and upload their own artworks, thereby extending interpretive agency into digital

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<sup>99</sup> Tate, "Tate".

<sup>100</sup> Tate, "History of Tate Modern".

<sup>101</sup> This orientation was closely associated with the directorship of Nicholas Serota (Director of the Tate, 1988–2017), whose advocacy of limited curatorial intervention positioned the visitor as a primary interpreter of the artwork. See also, Serota, *The Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art*.

<sup>102</sup> Briggs, "Fresh Eyes", 5-9; Rodney, *Discourse, and Visitors*, 98-99.

<sup>103</sup> Briggs, "Fresh Eyes", 5-9.

<sup>104</sup> Briggs, "Fresh Eyes", 5-6.

<sup>105</sup> Briggs, "Fresh Eyes", 5-9.

<sup>106</sup> Tate, "Visit Tate Modern with Your Family".

space.<sup>107</sup> This reframing marked a shift away from models that position children primarily as recipients of knowledge, and toward an understanding of children as active participants in the interpretation of art.<sup>108</sup>

This chapter approaches Tate Modern not as a museum where children occupy a fixed or privileged position within an otherwise stable institutional identity, but as a site in which children's agency is assembled through dispersed spatial practices, coordinated programming, and the museum's operational scale. Children's participation is not tied to a single architectural or symbolic locus; it materializes intermittently through temporary configurations, mediated forms of engagement, and the institution's ability to host overlapping publics at once.<sup>109</sup> In this sense, Tate Modern presents a model that diverges from Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. Children's presence is integrated into the everyday functioning of a global contemporary art museum, yet their agency remains situational, distributed across multiple platforms, and carefully structured through institutional frameworks.

### III.1. Children and Participation at Tate Modern: A Historical Overview

Since its opening in 2000, Tate Modern's approach to children audiences has been shaped by a broader institutional and epistemological transformation in museology.<sup>110</sup> This shift marked a clear departure from the early twentieth-century model in which the curator functioned as the primary authority and the visitor was positioned as a passive recipient of expert knowledge.<sup>111</sup> Emerging in parallel with the principles of new museology, this transformation reframed the museum visit as an interpretive encounter, one grounded in individual meaning-making, participation, and experiential engagement. The adoption of a visitor-centered and participatory approach at Tate Modern emerged related to through institutional experimentation and knowledge transfer across the wider Tate network. Other Tate institutions played a critical role in testing strategies, refining interpretive frameworks, and consolidating participation as a core institutional value. This shared institutional learning created the conditions under which children could be recognized as active

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<sup>107</sup> Charitonos, *Promoting Positive Attitudes in Children Towards Museums and Art*.

<sup>108</sup> While this thesis examines children's agency within Tate Modern's children's programs, it is also important to acknowledge that the redefinition of the museum visit as a customizable experience addressing visitors' individual needs and preferences forms part of broader consumer-oriented and marketing strategies. See, Rodney, *Museums, Discourse, and Visitors*, 27.

<sup>109</sup> Unless otherwise stated, observations are based on the author's field notes, Tate Modern, April 21, 2025.

<sup>110</sup> Rodney, *Museums, Discourse, and Visitors*, 8.

<sup>111</sup> Rodney, *Museums, Discourse, and Visitors*, 8.

agents within the museum experience. For instance, opened prior to Tate Modern, Tate Liverpool functioned as an important experimental site for the Tate organization.<sup>112</sup> As the first Tate gallery established outside London, it faced the challenge of developing a sustained local audience and redefining the relationship between the museum and its visitors.<sup>113</sup> In this context, Tate Liverpool became a testing ground for strategies that would later inform Tate Modern's approach to visitor engagement, including its work with children and young people. One of the most significant developments at Tate Liverpool was the institutionalization of visitor participation. Former security staff were trained as 'information assistants' transforming frontline roles into positions centered on dialogue and interaction.<sup>114</sup> This shift altered the dynamics of the gallery space by encouraging conversation and questioning. Visitors, included children, were no longer positioned as passive observers but as interlocutors whose responses and inquiries were integral to the museum experience.

On the other hand, children and families were identified as audiences of relevance.<sup>115</sup> Their engagement was approached not solely in terms of access or inclusion, but as part of a longer-term strategy responding to institutional continuity within a competitive cultural field.<sup>116</sup> Early responses combined practical considerations with an emerging emphasis on participation. Measures such as free admission, clear visitor guidance, and family-oriented facilities addressed immediate accessibility, while broader institutional shifts foregrounded visitor involvement as a core value. Children were increasingly approached as participants whose perspectives and creative practices were acknowledged within the museum. Initiatives developed during this period sought to validate children's interpretive capacities by situating their experiences within institutional space. The project 'Art Now in the Classroom' (2000), developed in collaboration with schools, concluded with the public presentation of children's artworks at Tate Modern.<sup>117</sup> The inclusion of these works within the gallery context affirmed children's creative production as meaningful and institutionally relevant. Agency has been further articulated through spatial and digital configurations, including environments such as the Turbine Hall and platforms like 'Tate Kids', that allow children to engage with the museum beyond prescribed modes of viewing. These sites

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<sup>112</sup> Dewdney, Dibosa, Walsh, *Post Critical Museology*, 23-25.

<sup>113</sup> Dewdney, Dibosa, Walsh, *Post Critical Museology*, 23-25.

<sup>114</sup> Dewdney, Dibosa, Walsh, *Post Critical Museology*, 108.

<sup>115</sup> Briggs, "Fresh Eyes", 5-9.

<sup>116</sup> Briggs, "Fresh Eyes", 5-9.

<sup>117</sup> Dear, "Motivation and Meaning in Contemporary Art", 274.

do not grant autonomous control but provide structured conditions under which children can engage in interpretation, creative response, and selective forms of contribution.

Within this institutional context, these practices indicate that children's agency at Tate Modern operates through forms of participation that allow limited but meaningful intervention within curatorial and institutional frameworks. While decision-making authority remains institutionally defined, children are positioned as contributors whose actions, interpretations, and creative outputs can shape aspects of the museum experience. Agency is exercised through moments of inclusion, negotiation and reinterpretation, in which children engage with, and occasionally reconfigure, curated structures. Within this model, the museum functions as a space where children participate not only as visitors, but as actors embedded within interpretive and organizational processes, albeit under conditions that are mediated and institutionally managed.



Figure 4: Tate Modern. (Source: Author)

## III.2. Framing and Enacting Children's Agency at Tate Modern

### III.2.1. Digital and Discursive Frameworks of Children's Participation

An analysis of Tate Modern's online communication provides an initial point of entry for understanding how children's and 'family programs' are positioned within the institution.<sup>118</sup> Even before families enter the museum space, Tate Modern's online platforms play a role in shaping their prospective experience by providing practical guidance, interpretive frameworks, and suggested modes of behavior that implicitly encourage particular forms of engagement with art. The 'Families at Tate' page, for instance, sets an open and participatory tone for visits by

<sup>118</sup>Children aged 5-12 are primarily addressed within the framework of family programs at Tate Modern.

encouraging families to interact dynamically with the galleries.<sup>119</sup> It not only provides logistical information about access and facilities, but also explicitly invites visitors to “make noise in our galleries”, signaling a departure from expectations of quiet, passive observation and instead positioning Tate Modern as a space where lively exploration is welcomed and anticipated. The ‘family visit guide’ presents Tate Modern as a space to be explored collaboratively and at an individual pace.<sup>120</sup> Instead of prescribing fixed routes, interpretive outcomes, or educational objectives, the guide emphasizes exploration, choice, and shared discovery. Families are encouraged to “look for clues,” “make marks,” and respond to artworks through observation and imagination.<sup>121</sup> Tate Modern’s family programs descriptions consistently frame participation as an active and sensory process, rather than a passive one. For example, the Family Tours page emphasizes a hands-on approach, stating that “each tour is different and unpacks 2–3 artworks through a multisensory experience”, including responses to “textures, shapes, colors and sounds” language that foregrounds embodied engagement with specific works on display.<sup>122</sup>

Building on Shaffer’s discussion of the gallery as a space historically shaped by expectations of stillness and silence, children’s movement, sound, and physical engagement can be understood as central to processes of active learning and meaning-making.<sup>123</sup> Practices such as touching, speaking or moving through space are not disruptions of the museum experience but reflect children’s natural ways of learning and interacting with their environment.<sup>124</sup> As discussed in the first chapter, historically, sensory experience of children was addressed as being spatially separated and often confined to designated areas within museums. From this perspective, the museum visit becomes a site of knowledge construction through objects, grounded in first-hand, sensory-based and experiential discovery. Meaning is not transmitted through passive observation but emerges through hands-on encounters that allow children to explore, test, and interpret artworks in relation to their lived experience.<sup>125</sup> Children’s actions and voices also function as expressions of agency and contribution. This moves away from the early traditional view that marginalized children were often relegated to a ‘muted group’ within the modern and

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<sup>119</sup> Tate, *Families at Tate*.

<sup>120</sup> Tate. “Visit Tate Modern with Your Family”.

<sup>121</sup> Tate. “Visit Tate Modern with Your Family”.

<sup>122</sup> Tate, *Tate Modern Family Tours*.

<sup>123</sup> Shaffer, *Museums, Children and Social Action*, 1-3.

<sup>124</sup> Shaffer, *Museums, Children and Social Action*, 30-31.

<sup>125</sup> Shaffer, *Museums, Children and Social Action*, 19.

contemporary art museum context.<sup>126</sup> By recognizing children's expressive actions as legitimate forms of engagement, the museum acknowledges them as active contributors rather than as incomplete or subordinate audiences. Moreover, rather than positioning adults as instructors or regulators of children's behavior, the guide frames them as facilitators and co-explorers who support children's self-directed engagement. This facilitative role is evident in the language of the Tate Modern family guide, which consistently encourages adults to explore, talk, and reflect 'together' with children more than instructing them.<sup>127</sup> By inviting adults to follow children's curiosity, ask open-ended questions, and share observations instead of providing explanations, the guide positions learning as a child-led and relational process, supported, but not controlled, by adults. According to James's perspective, this situation demonstrates that learning is not a passive process of transmission but an active and relational practice of social agency, one that foregrounds children's autonomy and participation rather than imposing adults' predefined interpretations.<sup>128</sup>

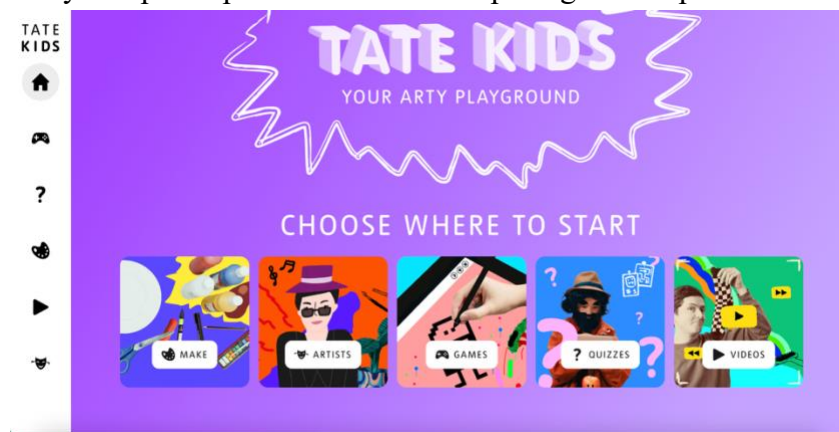


Figure 5: Home Page of Tate Kids. (Source: Tate Kids)

Just as children's bodily presence is normalized within Tate Modern's physical spaces, Tate Kids extends this visibility into a transnational digital field (Figure 10).<sup>129</sup> It is a specialized virtual platform and online art resource intended primarily for children, generally between five and twelve years old. The Tate Kids website offers games, videos, and interactive tools that invite children to explore the collection beyond the physical museum. The site allows children to download their artworks and upload creative responses. The core feature, 'Tate Kids Gallery' is a

<sup>126</sup> 'Muted groups' is a term used in sociological research to describe social categories, such as children and women, that are often regarded as unperceived or elusive in the study of society, as their voices and experiences tend to remain marginal or insufficiently recognized. See, James, Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, 6.

<sup>127</sup> Tate, "Visit Tate Modern with Your Family."

<sup>128</sup> James, *Socialising Children*, vii, 9.

<sup>129</sup> Tate, "Tate Kids".

virtual art gallery where the children users can find the other artworks of children from different countries and importantly upload their own artworks created by tools like ‘Tate Draw’ and ‘Tate Paint’ also prioritize creative expression and artmaking.<sup>130</sup> The platform’s transnational structure expands children’s agency by situating their creative contributions within an international field of visibility. By enabling children’s works to circulate beyond local contexts, it frames their expressions as socially meaningful and open to recognition by a wider audience. This configuration resonates with Shaffer’s emphasis on museums as sites that support children’s engagement with diverse perspectives and contemporary issues, while reinforcing children’s status as capable social actors whose voices merit attention.<sup>131</sup> Agency here emerges through visibility and recognition within a globally interconnected cultural space, rather than through isolated or locally bounded participation (*Figure 11*). Nevertheless, children’s participation in this digitally mediated space remains conditioned by access to devices, connectivity, and digital competencies, indicating that the platform’s configuration of agency is shaped by structural conditions that may limit its reach and inclusivity. At the same time, children’s contributions are moderated prior to publication, suggesting that their participation is shaped through selective processes.

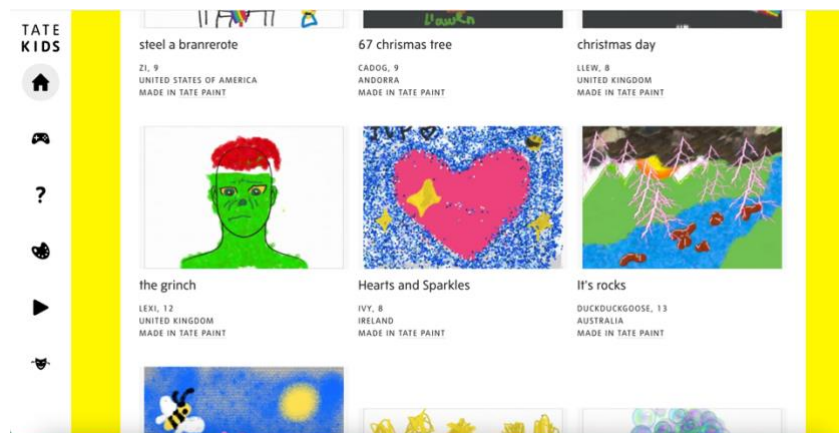


Figure 6: Gallery of Tate Kids. (Source: Tate Kids)

### III.2.2. Spatial Configurations of Children’s Agency

Tate Modern embeds children’s engagement across multiple, porous, and often transitional environments. These include large-scale public spaces such as the Turbine Hall, the subterranean

<sup>130</sup> The website’s ‘Terms and Conditions’ specify that uploaded drawings must comply with ethical guidelines and must not contain inappropriate or offensive content; submissions are reviewed prior to being published on the platform.

<sup>131</sup> Shaffer, *Museums, Children and Social Action*, 14.



performance chambers of The Tanks, flexible learning spaces like the Clore Hub. Tate Modern distributes opportunities for children's action across different spaces and moments of the museum visit, without concentrating engagement in a single, clearly defined program or location. Children's agency emerges intermittently as they move through galleries, public areas, and transitional zones, responding to artworks, spatial cues, and social interactions as these encounters unfold. Understanding how children act within Tate Modern therefore requires attention to these shifting conditions, where agency is shaped by spatial flexibility, variable encounters, and an institutional culture that accommodates diverse modes of visitor behavior through an open, visitor-centered ethos. While earlier section foreground children's agency through choice and expression, field observations suggest that agency at Tate Modern also operates beyond intentional action, emerging through children's entanglement with architectural scale, material affordances, and institutional rhythms.

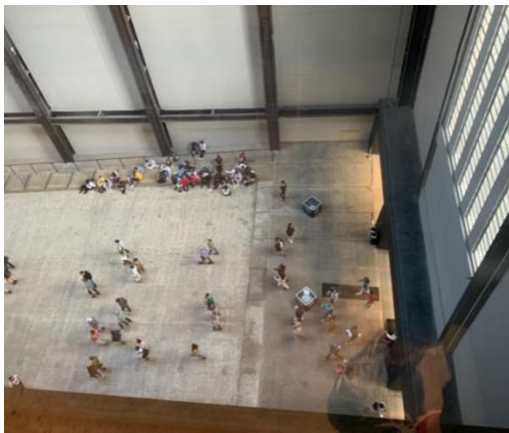


Figure 8: Tate Modern, Turbine Hall. (Source: Author)



Figure 7: Children at Turbine Hall. (Source: Rikard Österlund)

From a broader perspective, field observations point first to the visibility of children within the museum. Children are consistently present across Tate Modern's galleries, circulation areas, and public spaces, appearing as an ordinary and recognizable part of the museum's daily life rather than as a marginal or exceptional audience (*Figure 13*). They move through the building in different configurations, alone, with caregivers, or in small groups, and shift between activity and rest, sound and silence, without attracting particular attention. This everyday visibility is reinforced by the museum's spatial scale and open circulation, which accommodate children's bodily movement as part of the general flow of visitors. Actions such as running, stopping, sitting on the floor, or lingering in transitional spaces occur without visible interruption or correction, suggesting that children's presence is institutionally anticipated rather than merely tolerated. The constant

presence of families further stabilizes this condition, establishing children's movement and occupation of space as a normalized aspect of the museum environment, prior to and independent of any structured activities or programs. Seen through this lens, children's everyday presence at Tate Modern aligns with posthuman accounts of childhood as a process of becoming-with, in which agency is distributed across human and non-human elements that together perform the museum's lived reality.<sup>132</sup> Children's accepted bodily occupations -such as sitting on the floor, moving freely, or pausing in transitional spaces- point to agency as an emergent, relational condition rather than a capacity located solely within individual intention or decision-making.<sup>133</sup> These practices unfold through children's ongoing intra-relations with the museum's spatial, material, and social environment, positioning agency as something enacted 'with' space rather than exercised 'within' it.<sup>134</sup> The architectural openness, visibility, and permeability of Tate Modern's public spaces actively participate in these encounters, co-producing the experience alongside children's movements and responses. From this perspective, agency does not belong exclusively to human actors but emerges through the entanglement of bodies, spaces, materials, and institutional rhythms. Such intra-relational configurations blur distinctions between who acts and what acts within the museum, foregrounding a shared, more-than-human performance of the museum's everyday reality.<sup>135</sup>

While these observations highlight how children's agency at Tate Modern is co-produced through architectural openness, material affordances, and everyday spatial rhythms, agency is not shaped by spatial conditions alone. Institutional frameworks, programmatic structures, and modes of organization further configure how, where, and under what conditions children can act. Examining specific activity formats within Tate Modern therefore allows for a closer understanding of how agency is negotiated across differently bounded environments, where degrees of openness, structure, and access vary. Within this context, A comparison between 'UNIQLO Tate Play' activities and those taking place in the 'Clare Learning Hub' highlights how children's agency is configured through different spatial and organizational conditions.<sup>136</sup> UNIQLO Tate Play sessions are most often situated within studio-based environments and

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<sup>132</sup> Malone, Tesar, Arndt, *Theorising Posthuman Childhood Studies*, 89.

<sup>133</sup> Malone, Tesar, Arndt, *Theorising Posthuman Childhood Studies*, 194-197.

<sup>134</sup> Malone, Tesar, Arndt, *Theorising Posthuman Childhood Studies*, 195.

<sup>135</sup> Malone, Tesar, Arndt, *Theorising Posthuman Childhood Studies*, 81-82.

<sup>136</sup> Tate, "UNIQLO Tate Play"; Tate, "Clare Hub".

frequently structured through advance booking. These settings introduce a degree of spatial containment and temporal framing, shaping participation within defined boundaries. Nevertheless, within these constraints, children retain significant autonomy over how they engage: deciding when to participate, how to approach making, and whether to move between observation, conversation, and production. Agency here is enacted through self-directed action within a collectively shared studio space rather than through public visibility. Activities in the Clore Learning Hub, by contrast, operate through a more open and continuously accessible format (*Figure 15*). Although the Hub is spatially separated from the museum's primary circulation routes and does not function as a fully public arena, its openness allows children to enter and exit freely and to engage at their own pace. Participation unfolds without fixed entry points or outcomes, supporting longer and more process-oriented forms of engagement. Read together, these two configurations demonstrate that children's agency at Tate Modern is not dependent on degrees of public exposure, but emerges through the negotiation of structure, access, and spatial affordances across differently bounded environments.

Alongside studio-based and hub-oriented activity formats, Tate Draw offers a hybrid configuration that brings together embodied making, digital production, and public visibility. (*Figure 14*)<sup>137</sup> Tate Draw operates both as a designated on-site drawing space within the museum and as an online drawing tool accessible through the Tate Kids platform. In its physical installation, children draw directly on digital interfaces within a shared room, where their images are immediately projected onto surrounding walls. This real-time projection transforms drawing into a collective and performative act, situating children's creative processes within a shared visual environment rather than isolating them as private outcomes. At the same time, Tate Draw extends beyond the museum through its online version, allowing children to create, save, and upload drawings remotely. This dual structure enables children to move fluidly between physical and digital modes of participation, linking embodied acts of drawing with digitally mediated circulation. Agency in this context emerges not only through the act of making, but through children's decisions about visibility, sharing, and contribution. By offering children the possibility

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<sup>137</sup> Tate, "Tate Draw".

to both produce and publicly situate their drawings, Tate Draw foregrounds them as active cultural actors whose expressions operate across spatial, institutional, and technological boundaries.<sup>138</sup>



Figure 9: Tate Draw in Tate Modern. (Source: Tate Modern)



Figure 10: Clore welcome room. (Source: Olivia Hemmingway)

### II.3. Synthesis: Patterns of Children's Agency at Tate Modern

At Tate Modern, children's agency takes shape through a combination of sustained institutional practices and situational forms of engagement encountered across the museum. While some initiatives, such as designated learning spaces, recurring workshops, and the Tate Kids platform, provide continuity over time, children's participation is not organized around a single, consolidated spatial framework. Instead, agency emerges through how children move between different environments, return to familiar formats, and respond to changing conditions during a visit. Children's engagement at Tate is rarely marked by clear thresholds. Learning spaces and participatory elements are often encountered while moving through galleries rather than accessed through formal entry points. As a result, participation tends to begin gradually. Children may pause at a making table while passing through, observe others before joining, or engage briefly before continuing elsewhere. These patterns suggest that agency is exercised through moment-to-moment decisions shaped by proximity, curiosity, and comfort, rather than through prior commitment to a defined activity.

This form of participation becomes particularly visible in large-scale spaces such as the Turbine Hall. Here, children's actions are shaped by the scale, acoustics, and openness of the environment. Running, stopping, clustering, or responding to sound and movement are common

<sup>138</sup> Shaffer, *Museums, Children and Social Action*, 14, 101.

behaviors, not as disruptions but as ways of inhabiting the space. These actions do not stem from explicit instruction, yet they are not unstructured. Architectural features, crowd density, and the nature of commissioned works influence how children move and where they linger. Agency is exercised through bodily adjustment to the space—choosing where to go, how fast to move, and when to engage or withdraw. More structured learning environments, such as making areas and workshop spaces, offer different conditions. Materials are accessible and activities are open-ended, but engagement unfolds within curated themes and spatial arrangements. Children decide how to use materials, how long to remain, and whether to complete or abandon an activity. Some return to the same space multiple times during a visit, while others engage briefly and move on. These actions show agency as a practice of selection and adaptation rather than one of authorship or control. Children work within the frameworks provided but shape their own paths through them. Making plays a central role in how agency becomes visible at Tate. Creative activities allow children to respond to artworks or spatial impressions encountered elsewhere in the museum. The objects produced are often temporary and varied in purpose. Some are displayed in shared spaces, others are taken home, and many are left behind without concern for completion. Decisions about what to do with a finished or unfinished work reflect children's negotiation of personal interest, public visibility, and institutional cues. Agency here is not expressed through the production of a finished object alone, but through choices about engagement, continuation, and letting go. Children's participation also extends beyond the physical museum through digital platforms. Tate Kids offers recurring opportunities for interaction with artworks, allowing children to explore, collect, and create responses online. These activities provide continuity between visits and support ongoing engagement. At the same time, children's actions are shaped by the design of the platform, including navigation paths, available tools, and curated content. Engagement is encouraged, but it unfolds within clearly defined boundaries. Agency is exercised through exploration and play, while remaining guided by institutional structure.

Across these settings, children's agency at Tate Modern is characterized by repetition and return rather than by sustained immersion in a single activity. Children often engage in short periods, shift attention, and re-enter activities later in the visit or on another occasion. Participation is therefore cumulative in experience rather than continuous in form. Agency builds through familiarity with spaces, recognition of formats, and confidence in navigating the museum, rather than through prolonged involvement in one location. Importantly, Tate's approach does not

position children as contributors to curatorial decision-making or exhibition narratives. Their actions take place alongside, rather than within, the museum's formal interpretive structures. Children's work is displayed in learning contexts or digital spaces but not integrated into the museum's primary exhibition program. This distinction maintains institutional coherence while still acknowledging children's participation as meaningful. Agency is supported as engagement and presence, not as institutional authority. Taken as a whole, Tate Modern demonstrates how children's agency can be cultivated through an environment that combines openness with structure. The museum provides repeated opportunities for engagement without requiring children to commit to a fixed role or pathway. Agency emerges through how children navigate spaces, respond to materials, and decide when and how to participate. These actions are shaped by architectural scale, spatial layout, social interaction, and institutional framing. Rather than offering a model of transformation through children's influence, Tate presents a model of agency grounded in everyday practice. Children act within the museum by moving, making, observing, and returning, shaping their own experiences without reshaping the institution itself. This case highlights how agency in contemporary art museums can be understood as something enacted through use, familiarity, and situated choice, revealing both the possibilities and the limits of participation within a large, visitor-oriented institution.

## Conclusion

Children's agency in modern and contemporary art museums can be understood less as a discrete attribute, capacity, or right, and more as a process that takes shape through relationships between bodies, spaces, materials, institutional rhythms, and discursive frameworks. From this perspective, agency is not located solely in individual intention but emerges through situated practices within specific museum environments. A relational and posthuman orientation foregrounds how action is shaped by material and organizational conditions, suggesting that agency is enacted during engagement rather than existing in advance of it. Across both case studies, the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art and Tate Modern, children are neither positioned as passive recipients of institutional meaning nor as actors capable of reshaping curatorial authority. Instead, children participate as relational agents whose actions are shaped by architectural affordances, programmatic structures, temporal rhythms, and institutional expectations. Agency appears not as a matter of institutional influence but as a mode of inhabitation: a way of moving, making, attending, returning, and engaging that is continuously negotiated within museum environments. This understanding complicates dominant narratives in Museum Studies that frame participation primarily in terms of empowerment, voice, or co-authorship.

The Louisiana Museum of Modern Art and Tate Modern articulate children's agency through markedly different institutional configurations yet both converge in their reliance on structured environments that channel children's participation into recognizable and manageable forms. At Louisiana, children's agency is consolidated through spatial continuity. The Children's Wing functions as a stable architectural and programmatic apparatus that absorbs children's practices into the everyday life of the museum. Agency here is durational and cumulative: it develops through repeated encounters, familiarity with materials, and the normalization of children's presence within the museum's circulation. Children's making, movement, and display practices are anticipated and institutionally supported, yet they remain oriented toward process rather than institutional intervention. The Children's Wing does not dissolve curatorial authority but coexists alongside it, operating as a parallel domain in which children's agency is rendered visible without being granted institutional authorship.

At Tate Modern, by contrast, children's agency is configured through dispersion rather than concentration. Participation is distributed across galleries, public spaces, learning environments, and digital platforms such as Tate Kids. Engagement unfolds intermittently and often without

formal thresholds, emerging through momentary decisions shaped by architectural scale, spatial openness, and discursive cues. Agency here is episodic rather than durational, enacted through acts of pausing, observing, joining, withdrawing, and returning. Rather than being anchored to a single space or sustained practice, agency accumulates through repetition across visits and formats. Children become familiar with institutional rhythms and opportunities for engagement, developing confidence in navigating the museum rather than inhabiting a designated domain. Despite these differences, both institutions share a common orientation: children's agency is framed as engagement rather than intervention. In neither case are children positioned as contributors to curatorial narratives or institutional decision-making processes. Instead, agency is consistently articulated through domains associated with learning, creativity, and making. This framing does not negate agency but situates it within boundaries that preserve institutional coherence. Children act, but their actions are oriented toward exploration, interpretation, and process, rather than toward challenging or reshaping the museum's epistemic structures.

Understanding agency in this way foregrounds the active role of museum architecture and spatial design in shaping children's participation. At both Louisiana and Tate, space is not a neutral container but an active participant in the production of agency. Architectural openness, circulation patterns, visibility, and material arrangements modulate how children move, where they pause, and how they engage. At Louisiana, the integration of the Children's Wing into the museum's circulation renders children's practices publicly visible while maintaining a clear spatial distinction between making and exhibition. At Tate, large-scale spaces such as the Turbine Hall invite bodily responsiveness and movement, allowing agency to emerge through spatial attunement rather than instruction. In both cases, spatial design contributes to the conditions under which agency becomes possible, directing attention, shaping rhythms, and delimiting forms of action.

Institutional rhythms further participate in configuring agency. The timing of activities, the openness or closure of spaces, and the repetition of programmatic formats shape how children encounter opportunities for engagement. At Louisiana, continuity over time enables agency to build through familiarity and return. At Tate, repetition across dispersed encounters allows agency to accumulate without requiring prolonged immersion. These temporal configurations highlight that agency is not simply a matter of choice but of duration, recurrence, and alignment with institutional time. Agency emerges through rhythms of engagement rather than through singular moments of participation. Discursive framing also plays a significant role in shaping children's



agency. Institutional language, particularly in digital communication and family-oriented guides establishes expectations regarding behavior, exploration, and participation. At Tate Modern, online platforms and interpretive texts invite children and families to engage dynamically with the museum, framing participation as sensory, exploratory, and collaborative. These discourses do not grant autonomy in an absolute sense but guide engagement toward particular forms of action that align with institutional values. Agency is thus framed in advance, shaped by narratives of learning and creativity that delimit the scope of acceptable participation.

A posthuman perspective further underscores that agency is not located solely within children themselves but emerges through assemblages of human and non-human actors. Materials, tools, surfaces, digital interfaces, and spatial thresholds actively participate in shaping what children can do. Making practices in Louisiana, for example, are co-produced by materials, tables, display surfaces, and the presence of others. At Tate, digital platforms mediate participation through interface design, moderation processes, and accessibility conditions. From this perspective, agency appears as an emergent property of relational configurations rather than as an individual capacity. This challenges human-centered accounts of participation by foregrounding the role of environments, objects, and institutional infrastructures in shaping action. These findings contribute to ongoing debates in Museum Studies concerning the redefinition of childhood in cultural institutions. Rather than treating children as future adults or as audiences requiring management, the cases examined here position children as present actors whose participation is integral to the museum's everyday life. However, this recognition does not translate into institutional influence. Children are acknowledged as capable participants, but primarily through roles associated with learning and creativity rather than through epistemic authority. This suggests that contemporary museums have moved away from deficit-based models of childhood without fully embracing children as institutional actors.

The analysis also contributes to discussions of participatory museology by complicating assumptions that participation necessarily entails shared authority or institutional transformation. The cases of Louisiana and Tate demonstrate that participation can be meaningful without being transformative in an institutional sense. Agency is cultivated through environments that support engagement while maintaining clear boundaries around curatorial control. This does not render participation insignificant, but it reframes it as a practice embedded in institutional continuity rather than disruption. Participation, in this sense, sustains the museum as a social space rather

than reshaping its core structures. The relationship between learning, embodiment, and space emerges as a central theme across the analysis. Children's learning in both institutions is not primarily cognitive or representational but embodied and spatial. Movement, making, observation, and interaction constitute modes of knowing that are inseparable from the environments in which they occur. Learning unfolds through bodily engagement with space and materials, shaped by architectural affordances and institutional rhythms. This perspective aligns with posthuman approaches that treat knowledge as situated and emergent rather than transmitted, emphasizing the role of environments in shaping understanding.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The research focuses on two high-profile institutions in 'Western Europe', limiting the generalizability of the findings to other cultural, geographic, or institutional contexts. The analysis is based on qualitative methods, including spatial observation and document analysis, which provide depth but not breadth. Language constraints also shaped the research, particularly in relation to engaging with local visitor experiences and institutional discourse. Furthermore, the study centers on institutional configurations rather than on children's self-reported perspectives, foregrounding enacted practices over verbal articulation. These limitations point toward directions for future research. Further studies could explore children's agency in museums across diverse cultural and institutional settings, examining how different governance models, architectural traditions, or educational systems shape participation. Longitudinal research could investigate how agency develops over time through repeated encounters with museum environments. Ethnographic approaches that engage more directly with children's perspectives could complement the relational analysis presented here, offering insight into how children themselves interpret their participation. Additionally, further engagement with non-representational and ontological approaches could deepen understanding of how agency emerges through affect, atmosphere, and materiality in cultural institutions.

In conclusion, this thesis argues that children's agency in modern and contemporary art museums is best understood as relational, situated and emergent. At the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art and Tate Modern, children participate not as visitors to be managed nor as agents of institutional change, but as relational actors whose actions are shaped by entanglements of space, material, discourse, and rhythm. Recognizing children as participants within museum assemblages requires attention not only to what children do, but to the conditions that make such action possible

and meaningful. By shifting focus from individual intention to relational configuration, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of participation in museums, one that acknowledges both the possibilities and the limits of agency within contemporary cultural institutions.

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