

ART UNBOUND EPISODE 29 TRANSCRIPT



STEPHANIE PARRISH

This is Art Unbound, the official podcast for the Portland Art Museum and Northwest Film Center. My name is Stephanie Parrish and I'm the Director of Learning and Community Partnerships at the Museum, and I've been with the Learning department for over a decade. In all of these years, I've seen a lot of change at the Museum, but nothing compares to what happened in 2020. After the pandemic hit, we had to quickly pivot all we do and how we do it-- from exhibitions, public programs, and school & youth experiences, to just being a place people come to talk, meet, and engage with art and ideas. That's why I'm excited to have this talk with Heather Nielsen. Heather is the Chief Learning and Engagement Officer at the Denver Art Museum and has been with her department for almost twenty years. I'd give you her entire biography, but I'll let her speak for herself. Before we dive in, I want you to know that relevant links can be found in this episode's description, as well as at portlandartmuseum.org/podcast, where you can also find a full transcript of this episode. I should also note that this episode is brought to you by FRAME, the French American Museum Exchange, of which the Portland and Denver Art Museums are both members. FRAME has a rich history of connecting Museums in its network through exhibitions and education programs for over 20 years. FRAME provided grant funding for a series of podcast episodes and we are thrilled to be able to tell these stories with FRAME's assistance. Hi, Heather, thanks for joining us.

HEATHER NIELSEN

Hi, Stephanie. It's such a delight to be here with you,

STEPHANIE PARRISH

It's really great that we are finally having this conversation. We've been talking about wanting to do this for, gosh, I don't know, nine months or so. And it sort of felt like the new year was a real opportunity to step back, think about 2020, but then also really look ahead to what's in front of us. And here we are talking on January 8, we are eight days into the new year. My first question for you is how are you? Tell me how you're doing?

HEATHER NIELSEN

I'm doing okay. You know, I think like many of us, we were excited to get through 2020 and jump into 2021. And as we know, a lot has already happened in eight days. But you know, I always remain cautiously optimistic. So I'm doing okay. And I'm just happy to be here with you and talking, I've always so respected the work that you do, and that Portland Art Museum does and to actually be able to really talk about the role our Museums can play in our communities at this just unprecedented time is exciting to me. So thank you.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Yeah, I fully agree with all of that. So let's just sort of jump in and maybe kind of, you know, talk a little bit about ourselves

HEATHER NIELSEN

Great

STEPHANIE PARRISH

and our institutions and our organizations. So when people think about the Portland Art Museum or the Denver Art Museum, they probably think of a lot of different things, exhibitions and programs, school visits, the museum shop probably comes in there somewhere. And I just wanted to kind of stop here and talk about who we are and the roles that we have at the museum. So you're the Chief Learning and Engagement Officer. My title is not that different. I'm the Director of Learning and Community Partnerships. Tell me a little bit about that title, and what that title means for you, what your work looks like. And I'll jump in, too, just to give people a sense of what these roles mean for museums.

HEATHER NIELSEN

Yeah. It's a great question. I mean, I've always, title aside, I'm a museum educator, and I lead a department of museum educators. And the way I always describe that is, it's we're the people who really support visitors having meaningful connections with our museums, with the collections. And I've been a museum educator for, gosh, over 20 years, pretty much my entire career. I've always been in museums. I loved them since I was a child. And I just was really lucky. And my very first jobs were in museums, and I just naturally fell into the museum education world. And I think that's because it's really about making these places that are filled with objects and art that can really shed light on who we are as human beings. Our job is really to connect people to that and to hear what their perspectives are. And so that's really what's fueled me and guided me as a museum educator. Right now, as you said, I am Chief Learning and Engagement Officer at the Denver Art Museum. And I actually took on that role just a few months before the pandemic. So I've also had to learn how to be a leader at this time. And I actually think that's been a really important work, too, how to guide our staff at this time.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Right.

HEATHER NIELSEN

But what about you?

STEPHANIE PARRISH

That's, well, I'm in a similar position, you know, I took this role on just you know, shortly after the pandemic hit, and I agree that, you know, one of the great challenges has been, yeah, how, you know, everyone's feeling such different experiences. There's the personal side of us all experiencing this pandemic, and the professional like work that were asked to do. And that has been a really delicate, like balancing act. In terms of my own kind of, you know, career, same thing. It's, you talk to a museum educator, and you hear very similar, very similar stories.

HEATHER NIELSEN

That is true.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

My first museum job, I was 20 years old, worked at the Smithsonian as a summer intern in the education department. And I just remember walking through these museums and talking to people about art, right. And it was that there was a human connection between object and people that really stuck with me. And that, you know, I got the bug, and I have sort of never looked back. And I think that museum education and museum learning - these titles that we have have changed a lot over time, too. We recently changed the name of our department, from Department of Education, to Department of Learning and Community Partnerships. And I think that reflects how much community, how much these ideas of connection, you know, really are central to what a museum does these days, and thinks about its work.

HEATHER NIELSEN

Yeah, thank you for actually bringing that up, Stephanie. I think that's, I think it's a really interesting point, because the words we use only reveal so much about what we do. And so we also changed our name from a Department of Education, to Learning and Engagement, probably maybe now five or six years ago, but precisely because what of what you're saying is that, you know, while museums play a really important role in educating and providing knowledge and information, it really- I think what we've learned over the many years, is that actually, it's the engagement. It's the social connection. It's the perspective giving, as well as the perspective taking. And so yeah, I think that's a really important point.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Yeah, I mean, I can, I can't think of another department inside of a museum that changes its name. You don't hear that happening, you know, very often, I think that we're very adaptable kind of bunch.

HEATHER NIELSEN

Actually, that is so funny. I don't know about you, but definitely, there is a stereotype of the Learning and Engagement team of like, wait, you just changed your name again? So anyway, I think I love your point about the adaptability. And I think that actually speaks to the qualities that we bring,

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Yup.

HEATHER NIELSEN

is this quality of reflection, and iteration, and dynamism? And so yeah, I think that's a really interesting point.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

And then just so folks know, some of the positions that you know, live in our department, are, you know, our Head of Educator and Youth Programs, our Public Programs Lead and our Head of Accessibility. So those are some of the kinds of things that come out of you know, Learning and Community Partnership work. Is that similar in your in your museum, too?

HEATHER NIELSEN

Yeah, we just reorganized ourselves about a year ago when I took over. And we are divided into four different departments within the learning and engagement team. So we have Lifelong Learning and Accessibility. So that's the way in which we want to engage and be relevant to our adult community and thinking about access is really important to that. We also then have a division of youth and community programs. So you know, how we care and show up for our young people, whether they're in schools or whether they're in families. We have a division of creative and public engagement. So I think very similar to Portland, Denver just has this vibrant, creative community. And, you know, again, I think there are a couple of us- our museums in the last couple of years have really focused on how are museums resources for our creative community? So we have all sorts of creative in residence programs, artists in residence programs, our Friday night programming, so that all lives in creative and public engagement. And then we have a division of interpretive engagement. So a group of educators who really think about the stories we tell in our exhibitions and really act as partners with the curatorial team. So that's that's kind of how we're organized.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

The Denver Art Museum has always been such a model and sort of a beacon for doing really innovative work in this space. So kudos to all of you for really building a great, a great team and great models for us all for all of us in the field.

HEATHER NIELSEN

Thank you.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Well, so let's kind of pivot here to talking about 2020. Because that's why we're sort of here. And because we've learned a lot in the last 9, 10 months. And it's hard to believe we're headed into, yeah, 12 months of this reality.

HEATHER NIELSEN

Yeah.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

So take me back to March, and kind of where you were at the Museum, what was happening? And how the closure, how the news of COVID-19 kind of was being processed internally at the Museum, what that looked like and felt like.

HEATHER NIELSEN

Yeah, I mean, the first thing I will say is, I just think there was a shock to the system. I mean, I don't know about you, but I've been working in museums for more than 20 years. And I guess I never really thought museums closed, right. I've always said that I and nor have I actually ever necessarily seen them close, except for big, huge snowstorms and on particular holidays. And so just this notion that something so unprecedented was happening that, you know, we needed to close our doors, I actually think for me, personally, I just had to wrap my head around that, because it wasn't an experience I had had before. And so I think that was also you know, closing a museum, meant for us, you know, I'm trying to get myself back into March. But like all of us, you know, we had several exhibitions up and running. We were actually, that weekend, we were just about to open up a exhibition featuring the work of Remington and Winslow Homer, and you know, we were going to have a, an event in the evening. And so our team really worked collaboratively together at all levels to really make the decision that the safest thing to do was, you know, we needed to close and we needed to cancel programming, and we needed to get people home safely. And I will be honest, the first couple weeks, we kind of had to wrap our heads around what that all meant, you know, and I think for many of us, maybe it was like, Okay, this is a, this is a temporary thing, and we'll be back in two or three weeks. So I also think in the beginning, it was kind of a, what should I say, more of a crisis management type of energy, where it was just like day to day regrouping to figure out what we kind of looking one week or two or three weeks ahead.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Right, right.

HEATHER NIELSEN

I don't know about for you.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

That was, yeah - very, very similar I remember, the it was it was a Friday afternoon, when you know, we were talking as a leadership team about what the responsible thing to do was, what needed to happen. And I thought to myself, okay, well, maybe we'll be closed for a couple weeks, maybe I can clean my office, maybe I can, you know, organize my computer. And I just, I laugh at that now, I just sort of think, wow, how naive and how unprepared we sort of were and myself just personally, and then you know, having quickly that next, you know, Monday jumping on our first video call. And thank goodness, our Museum had just recently shifted from Outlook to Google, we had the Google suite, although I'd never used Google Meet at the time. But we had our first Google Meet, you know, meetings and calls, and it was like, I had no idea that was going to become my life for the foreseeable future. And within a couple weeks, it was very clear, it's like, nope, this is this is the long term like, how are we really going to have to change and think and what does this mean for not just programming, but for our whole institution? Right, like this whole shutdown of the country? And what can we do? What is our role here? So like that moment of kind of awareness-

HEATHER NIELSEN

Then there's a couple of things you're making me think about, is that your comment about just almost how unprepared we were, and so I think that we can now reflect back on last March. And I think that's actually something

I've taken away is how do we need to build skills of you know, resilience, of crisis management of, you know, even these new ways of working, because in many ways, I feel like that closure, even those first couple of months forced us into new behaviors, right? Just into new ways of trying to collaborate, new ways of trying to communicate. So there's something in there.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Absolutely, absolutely. I noticed right away the collaboration that was all of a sudden, so easy. And so necessary, you know, not that we weren't collaborating before we absolutely, you know, were but it was a different kind of problem solving that was happening, and a different kind of camaraderie, I think, you know, trying to kind of support each other, trying to envision, you know, what the, what the next steps were, like, what were some of the early things that you did in terms of pivoting your work and, you know, thinking as a team about what your role was, what our role was?

HEATHER NIELSEN

Yeah. So I mean, I think like, so many, obviously, we turned to virtual programming. But I was really clear with the team, I had a little bit of maybe it was gut instinct or foresight, I don't know which one, to just say, we're not gonna just like now take everything we ever did and figure out how to be virtual.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Right.

HEATHER NIELSEN

That's unsustainable, nor is it wise. But can we try and take some time to listen, connect with, you know, some of our partners if they're in a space of being able to connect, and kind of figure out where people are at so that we can make the best decisions with the programs and resources that we have. And so it became pretty clear that in the adult realm, it made sense for us to go virtual. So you know, like, like I was saying, We closed that Friday. And I think we were supposed to launch an art history course that Saturday, we of course, cancelled that, but over a four week, five week period, we then kind of regrouped and decided, let's just go for it. Let's be entrepreneurial, and experimental. And let's just try our first ever virtual course.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Right.

HEATHER NIELSEN

And so I think it was five weeks after closure, we were able to launch that course. And it wasn't perfect. But I will say, I'm glad we did it. And you know, nine months later, it is the kind of adult programming where we've seen some of the greatest successes with the virtual programming. And then for other programs, it really was more about, you know, everyone's in crisis, you know, our city, our country, and you know, us as a museum. So let's sort of see if we can listen and figure out especially with schools, I think that was a big one for all of us.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Yeah, that was going to be my next question.

HEATHER NIELSEN

You go from day one to day two not doing school programs. And then all of a sudden, you know, kids are at home, we have over the last five or six years built a pretty robust set of online resources for teachers. But we really went in and actually shifted a lot of our language to make sure it felt accessible to families, you know, we talked about rather than teachers kind of caregivers, instead of students youth, like we actually went in and tweaked our language so that we could get some of these resources out to teachers and parents who may be struggling.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Yeah, right.

HEATHER NIELSEN

But what about you those first couple weeks?

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Well, it's funny, you mentioned like, just kind of trying to do stuff, I think, because I think museums are so we're so expert at being trying to be perfect. And I have long said in my role, like don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. And I think that one of the things we've learned here, right, is to just try things, and you know, not get so hung up on like, it being like, the perfect piece of content. So that's been an interesting conversation. And I think we too, we sort of took an audit, you know, like, what do we have? We actually did not have a ton of stuff available online. We for sure have resources for educators, and have a fantastic poster project, which reproduces works in our collection, that have wonderful prompts. And, you know, teachers hang these huge, beautiful posters up in their classrooms, and then use them in teaching. And we've always had digital versions of those. But we started to kind of like relaunch those. And then partnerships were really important. Almost immediately, Hana Layson, our Head of Educator and Youth Programs, was working with a partner called Create More, Fear Less. They're a local nonprofit here in Portland that focuses on social and emotional learning with students. And they've been around for several years, we've worked with them in the past, and they are really interested in how anxiety, how the arts can be a catalyst for dealing with our emotions, sketching and writing and using the arts as an expression and, you know, harnessing your feelings, harnessing your anxiety in a creative, productive way. So it felt really natural to be partnering with them on a series of resources that parents and teachers and counselors could access, we started a journaling series of prompts that we're all artist led. And we recently created another artist series called Create More Resilience, which is, you know, artists sharing their own coping strategies, and how the arts, you know, can, you know, help all of us, you know, whether you're a youth or a regular old adults. So I think having those partnerships has been really, really key to amplify, and using our platforms. You know, and sharing platforms have been just really powerful and strengthened our partnerships in ways I wasn't necessarily expecting.

HEATHER NIELSEN

the other thing that I think that you're referencing, Stephanie, that is really important. And I mean, hats off to you guys for actually leading the way for many of us is really that connection between what role can museums and even art museums play in mental health and well being. And, you know, I feel like these have been these kind of not fledgling conversations, but I feel that in the museum education field, we've been talking about, kind of our role in well being and kind of supporting both mentally and physically healthy people. And so I do think the pandemic has opened that door,

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Absolutely

HEATHER NIELSEN

much wider, and so the fact that you were able to embrace that, so early on, I think is really great. How do we use our collections to support that kind of coping skills? So, really cool.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Right. Yeah, I think that social emotional learning, and I mean, I think that museums, museum education, you know, has often been so aligned with curriculum, and with tying to specific standards, and you know, and that's, that's great, right? I mean, I'm not, that is something that we can do and we do well. I think I agree. It's sometimes at the expense of, you know, art as a healing, caring human connector.

HEATHER NIELSEN

Love it.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

And I think that, what we were hearing from teachers who were, you know, struggling themselves, right, like, how do I do this online distance learning? The curriculum is kind of out the window, I just want to make sure my, my kids are okay, I want to make sure they have tools and resources. And so that's where this, you know, kind of work with Create More, Fear Less felt like, okay, like, we're not going to try and tie to curriculum, teachers aren't working with curriculum necessarily right now, like they once were, because we did, we did a lot of listening too in talking to teachers, right? Like how, through our teacher Advisory Council through, you know, other relationships, and you know, sometimes it was just sitting like, like, you and I are right here talking to each other, and saying, hey, how can we help? What could be useful right now?

HEATHER NIELSEN

Well, I'll tell you that one of kind of my, one of the surprises or just, you know, learnings watching some of our program go virtual is, we have a program called Mindful Looking. So our well being work has really happened more in the creative aging and adult realm. And we have a couple of initiatives right now that are really focused on how can we contribute to healthy aging, you know, in older adults, and contribute to their sense of purpose, their sense of joy, a sense of connection to one another, which are all really central to well being. And so we have this program, Mindful Looking, that we've been doing for years in the gallery, and you know, we'd have 15, 20 people show up for a great guided meditation of a single artwork monthly. Well, I would say now we're six, seven months into offering that virtually. And we're- the last several, we actually hit our max at 100 participants.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Wow.

HEATHER NIELSEN

So now, we're increasing that Zoom account. And I want to be careful because I don't think it suggests that being in the galleries with a work of art doing mindful looking isn't important. I think that's equally as important. But there's something about what people need right now that I think this is telling us and so we even- the educator, guides people through, you know, a single work and we actually had the artist of the artwork she was talking about show up for the Mindful Looking of his artwork,

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Great.

HEATHER NIELSEN

and that's super cool.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Yeah.

HEATHER NIELSEN

And Molly sort of talks about how you know what she's hearing is that just even having it available on screen, people are taking a break from their Zoom workout, you know, in the middle of the day to be able to have this 30-minute guided meditation and so I do think the pandemic in that way is, you know, like everything, it's just surfacing even more visibly for us.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Yeah

HEATHER NIELSEN

Perhaps new directions.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Yep. Yep. Well, so I know we could go on in this direction for a long time. And I feel like I want to kind of talk about other topics that have really come to the fore and 2020 that have surfaced for all of us. And that we've been thinking about for a long time, frankly, in particular racial and social justice and museums and the role that we play in making folks aware of inequities, of bringing that lens to art and to people's lives. And I know, as we headed into the summer, with the death of George Floyd and Ahmaud Aubrey and Breonna Taylor and the protests, I mean, here, I'm sitting in Portland, Oregon.

HEATHER NIELSEN

Yeah.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

And, you know, our city has felt this acutely. We know what protest looks like. And there has been a big reckoning. That's, you know, it's just sort of an understatement, to say, let's just talk a little bit about that. And I'm, I know that as the summer was unfolding, we at the Portland Art Museum, have been thinking about equity and inclusion and diversity in a lot of different ways over many, many years, I think, really, specifically the last four years when we developed an equity team in 2016. And, you know, we have a team of staff across departments with different levels of experience that meet monthly and talk and we have written an equity statement, and we've been thinking really deeply about this. It's been really hard. Really, really hard conversations have been, have been had and are ongoing, right? We entered into this work knowing it would never end and that this is- but it's essential to who we are as an institution and our values. So I just want to kind of open that door for us and talk about, you know, how the Denver Art Museum and museums in general really, you know, have been grappling with racial justice and social justice and how that's playing out inside your institution and how you think, what do you how do you think it's impacting your work? And community? And and, and that?

HEATHER NIELSEN

Yeah, I mean, I think you said it really well, inequities in museums is not anything new, you know, that just like in our country, it's existed for as long as we've existed and colonial legacies, systemic racism, I mean, it's really almost baked into the DNA of museums. And I actually think for the general public, that is somewhat surprising. I know, when I talk to, you know, friends of mine, who were outside of the museum field, they're like, Wait, what?

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Right

HEATHER NIELSEN

And so I think that's the number one thing that we all know, those of us in the museums that have been trying to do this work for a while is that first actually literally acknowledging that, and talking about it is critical. And so, you know, I've always just been so enamored with how Portland has handled these issues. And I've leaned into you, Stephanie for support over the several years, but we too, I would say, you know, about two or three years ago, really began to do the equity work in earnest and formed an equity diversity and inclusion team also about two years ago, that was actually at a leadership level, and then we morphed it into a staff and leadership team. And so that team, at the time of the pandemic, had actually been meeting for about nine months and working with a consultant in Denver, The Equity Project, to really figure out kind of where we needed to be in this work, and what our priorities needed to be. And we started developing an inclusion lens to really support the institution thinking and looking internally, and because that's- we did focus groups with our staff. And the thing we heard was that, you know, actually, where equity inclusion is working for the DAM is in its external programming, it's its stuff that does, but that internally, we have a lot of work to do. And so we've been really focused internally, you know, fast forward to the summer, the pandemic, of course, we

hadn't been meeting as a team, summer happens. And I really think all of us in museums have no option but to start seriously taking action now. And so our senior leadership team spent a lot of time kind of late summer, early fall, doing almost a listening tour with all the departments in the Museum. And out of that came a racial equity roadmap, which is a set of intentions that we have as an institution. And the equity, diversity, and inclusion committee essentially pivoted and shifted from creating an inclusion lens to creating a racial equity lens. And so we worked with our consultant to create this lens. It's tough, as you said, and sometimes it's like, well, should the plan come first and who develops the plan? But we've really chosen to have this racial equity lens, that's really a set of critical questions. And we're spending a lot of time right now introducing that to staff, having conversations that are interdepartmental, cross divisional, to really talk with one another about well, what does it mean to ask these critical questions? And how do you use them in decision making? And then from that, we'll start to develop our plan. So that's kind of how we're approaching it

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Yep

HEATHER NIELSEN

on the internal side of things.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Yep. I mean, it's interesting, like when you- when I talk to colleagues, you know, in museums about this, there is no roadmap, right? Like every institution needs to understand itself, understand its own cultures, its own communities and contexts. You know, we worked really hard as an equity team on our equity statement. And, you know, getting that approved by the board, publishing that for the first time in January of 2020. And then we were just, I think, trying to figure out like, how do we, how do we talk about it? How do we talk about our intentions? And then the pandemic hit, and then the summer happened. And so our equity team, you know, since June has been meeting every other week, sometimes weekly, kind of depending on what's going on. And we too, are, you know, looking very closely at our equity lens, have plans to, you know, roll that out more intentionally. We don't have an equity plan, per se right now, either. It feels like we need to, as a team kind of exercise the muscle of understanding the questions we should be asking and the decisions that get made. And that every decision, not just in hiring, not just in, you know, some of the areas that people think, Oh, well, that's where you do equity. It's like, no, it's across the board. It's across all decisions, exhibitions, collections, programming, development, right? So how does this impact, you know, every, every part of our work?

HEATHER NIELSEN

But Stephanie, I have a question for you that I'm just- at this kind of- I'm curious what advice you have between this tension of action and plan and reflection, because I think, you know, museums, a lot of criticism has happened, as it should have, you know, over the last several months, and this sort of notion of performative statements. And I don't know, I'm just curious how you've grappled with the kind of, you know, I don't know.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Yeah

HEATHER NIELSEN

tension between that.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

I think that's a really, really good question. And something that I've noticed on our calls, and it's so hard, because we're doing all of this remotely, right? I mean, we're doing- we're having these really hard conversations on these little screens with like, the little Brady Bunch squares. But what I've been grateful for are the open conversations. We don't have a communications plan, right for how we are, and we shouldn't like this needs to kind of happen in the moment and through conversation internally and with, you know, community members. So I would say, I've been

grateful for just the really honest conversations, we've been having really hard conversations and that we, we've put out statements, and I can, you know, maybe they don't land with everyone. They feel performative, or they, you know, they don't resonate. For some people, I get that. I don't- I'm not asking for that. What I can say, as a staff person, is that I feel there have been honest conversations about whatever that statement is. And maybe it isn't perfect for everybody. But I, I feel like I can with confidence, say we talked about this, you know, as a group, and we agreed as an equity team, that this, you know, was how we wanted, we felt we could present, you know, our thinking. And so some of it is just so internal. And what's hard is like, how do you make that external? And should you? I think one of the things we've struggled with is, you know, we don't want to pat ourselves on the back. We had a really hard time getting our equity statement out, because it was like, we just want to do the work. But you also need to let people know that you're doing the work, and why the work is important. And I agree with you that I think a lot of folks look at museums, and it isn't really clear. Why like, what do you mean colonialism? What do you mean that the museum is a- has been an oppressive, you know, system. And so those are I think that that work is on us, you know, to do and to bring more perspectives into the museum. And of course, this is across the board. It's not just museums, it's education. It's every major, major structure that we kind of work in in this country. So I know that's very kind of like up here.

HEATHER NIELSEN

No, that's a great answer. But also, and I and I think that's maybe where, to your point about, it's on us to really surface this. And we have a role even to our general public to surface this right, I think that it has always been very internal. So I think those are the kinds of conversations at least in the learning and engagement department, we're starting to have I mean, what is our role in our curriculum to actually create, you know, anti-oppression curriculum using our collections with kids? What is our role in, you know, doing curriculum that actually looks at repatriation and the legacy of colonialism? And so, you know, I think there's the internal work that is ongoing, messy, long term, it's that deep culture work. And so, I appreciate your answer.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Right. And I think- I always use the term like just norming the conversation, that I am grateful that, that we have, we've exercised some of those muscles enough over the last few years to have hard conversations. And I think, having talked to lots of colleagues, that isn't true, that isn't true everywhere. But gosh, there's, you know, so much work ahead of us. And again, on its ongoing, never ending, never ending work. And it's so important and exciting. I mean, I think it's it's a, it's, it's something we have long needed to do. And the way that museums continue to kind of evolve and change. I think a lot of folks think museums never change, they, you know, are always kind of one thing. And I hope that that's really, you know, that's proven wrong, as we move move ahead into the future.

HEATHER NIELSEN

Mm hmm.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

So thinking about community engagement, and the role of community engagement and kind of diversifying voices and perspectives inside the museum. What has that looked like at the Denver Art Museum?

HEATHER NIELSEN

Well, you know, it was actually, I mean, it wasn't all planned. But we, when we reopened mid July, we opened with a brand new exhibition, Norman Rockwell's Four Freedoms. So, you know, on the one hand, one can sort of say, here's this, you know, white male artist and his take on Four Freedoms, how, how do we now pivot that conversation and really respond to the moment and so that was a very intentional thing we did right when we opened in July. And one of the things you know, we have such a deep relationship with our artist community, and we work really closely with them. And it was really important for us to be able to host a conversation that we really were simply offering up the space, but that our artist partners really took over as a way to imagine a future and to imagine what freedom can look like for all. And so we collaborated with a fabulous artist that we've worked with in town Brenton Weyi. And he really curated a conversation in the Four Freedoms with artists, a DU Professor, a University of Denver, constitutional law

Professor, to really imagine a world of freedom for all. And I think what that tells us about community engagement within these sort of larger racial equity discussions, particularly for museums, is that sometimes we have to get out of the way, for one, and not curate it ourselves. And I will actually tell you, that was one of the comments I got. Somebody was like, wait, what? Where was the museum and that that was so awesome. It was like, the museum just kind of handed over everything it had. And then there was kind of a there was a, a surprise and delight in that in some way. And I think that is, is some of the stuff that we will see as we move forward is that we have to be part of these conversations. And sometimes we have to get out of the way, too.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Absolutely agree. The the example that comes to my mind for us, you know, we had just closed a Hank Willis Thomas exhibition in January. And as part of that had, you know, had a really robust set of community community partnerships, including a local radio station called The Numberz FM. For those who don't know, the Numberz FM is a community-based radio station here in Portland. Their tagline is Black music curated by Black Portland, and we began working with them, thanks to the amazing work of Ella Ray, who joined us as part of our Hank Willis Thomas programming efforts. And we had an incredible like, in-gallery live streaming radio with the Numberz throughout that exhibition. And they helped, you know, kind of really, they did an fabulous interview with Hank Willis Thomas, community playlists, and the partnership was just so generative as part of that process. And we knew that we wanted to continue working together, and Ella did a great job of setting us up to think, think ahead, and to think about the future partnership with them. We didn't quite know what that could look like. And within a few months of the pandemic hitting, we came together and applied for some grant money to, to really think through like, Well, here, you've got a radio station, we have a museum, you know, could and we don't know how we're reaching different audiences right now, there's all sorts of possibility for remote and virtual experiences. Can we envision, you know, how we might collaborate to- in this moment together? And it's been a very organic process, right? It's not as if we have any kind of preconceived idea of what that will look like. And it's been interesting with with kind of funding, because I think we're seeing funders who are like, yes, like, please, you know, take some time to build your relationship, take some time to think about what something could look like, and not, you know, be so outcome oriented, right? Like, let's see what, let's see what develops. So with the Numberz, they have not had a physical space, and a studio to call their own. And we have been able to, in the pandemic, like carve out some gallery space for them to be in residence at the Museum. So they've been in residence in September, now, we're closed right now, again, and we had reopened in July. But they have, you know, so they're not they aren't there physically right now, but their gear is there. And we and when I get off this podcast with you, we're going to have a check-in, we are, you know, continuing to work through, you know, kind of what this what this relationship looks like, they've been recording content at the Museum with artists who have been working in the protests. And as part of our podcast series, we'll be publishing, you know, some of that content. So it's- to your point of kind of just getting out of the way and supporting and providing space, and providing access, you know, to, to, to space really, right and, and community. So it's been, it's been a really great partnership. And I'm excited to see where it kind of continues to go. And I would love to have a radio station in residence at the Museum all the time.

HEATHER NIELSEN

I love that idea.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

So Heather, here we are, like we said, eight days into 2021. And I think, you know, the turning of that page from 2020 to 2021, has been kind of psychically important. I know, you're open right now. We are closed currently. So I think that's really interesting. But I wonder what as you think of 2021, and a vaccine and kind of coming out of this, what have we as art museums kind of learned, like, what are the opportunities here? What are the challenges? And what are you looking forward to this year?

HEATHER NIELSEN

Well, I definitely think in the short term, you know, there's just real questions about when are people going to come

back to us? I do think, and I think that that's going to look different for the different audiences. So I think that's actually gonna demand a certain level of flexibility and creativity on our parts, because it may be that certain populations don't want to come back. But other populations, you know, home schooling pods, for example, may want to come back in sort of smaller, intimate gatherings. And so how do we as a museum actually start to allow ourselves to operate on these multiple levels, right, because I don't think it's just about being closed, and everything's virtual or open and everything's on site now. I think we're going into kind of this much more hybrid,

STEPHANIE PARRISH

right

HEATHER NIELSEN

world of kind of layered levels of comfort. And so I think that's both a challenge and an opportunity, because it's not necessarily how we've worked. But I get excited about that. I do still think that access continues to always be a challenge. And I think the pandemic and all the racial equity work continues to demonstrate that for us that, you know, museums haven't been for everyone. And while we can all and I can tell great stories about how virtual led us to connect to new people, and it has, that has actually shown to me, though, that wow, those barriers of visiting us on site continue to be very strong. And so I think continuing to chip away at how we are welcoming how we, you know, can be accessible will continue to be super important.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

And I think something we're thinking about too, is like, how do you work outside your walls

HEATHER NIELSEN

beautifully said

STEPHANIE PARRISH

in a way that always understanding that the museum building is a hub is a great, you know, I don't want to lose the museum building. But I also, as we've been closed, that has just been very present, right? Like, what does being in communities feel like? And that's also where those community partnerships, I think, really, you know, need to be like, rooted and that's something that I think, as we head into 2021, that I'm thinking a lot about that our team's thinking a lot about.

HEATHER NIELSEN

Well, yeah. And we, when we close, that was actually one way we supported some of our schools and students was that you know, we just heard about the inequities of access to materials and

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Yeah

HEATHER NIELSEN

and art experiences. So we got, you know, we distributed 3,300 art kits in the community. But I think you're right, that again, is that sort of opportunity of the distributed museum.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Yeah, yeah.

HEATHER NIELSEN

How are we not just this campus place, which has such assets and value, but we're both this

STEPHANIE PARRISH

and

HEATHER NIELSEN

kind of these more hybrid distributed models in the community?

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Right. So that leads me to my very last question, because I feel like there's all these lessons that we have been learning. And we've learned them fast. And we've learned them in unexpected ways. You've been in museums for 20 years, I've been in museums for 20 years, as you think about 2030, you think about 10 years from now, like what do you- what are the lessons we've learned? What is are- What do our museums feel like, in that day 10 years from now?

HEATHER NIELSEN

Well, I think they're places that answer the questions that people have about the world, you know, so I think the stories that we tell will get richer, because we're actually probably, you know, we're co-creating them with community partners and visitors. I also think museums in 2030, I mean, I've always imagined them as these almost community hubs that meet the mental and physical needs of our community. And so we've got much more outdoor and indoor space, we are easily accessible. So I think about things like that.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Right. And I think about, yeah, sort of the dissolving of those walls between inside and outside in the same way - that would be in my mind, something that- a permeability of fluidity that feels more holistic and natural.

HEATHER NIELSEN

That's a beautiful way to say it.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

So this has been awesome. Thank you. You are amazing. I have really, really enjoyed talking to you. And I'm excited for 2021, whatever it shall bring.

HEATHER NIELSEN

Thank you, Stephanie. It's been a total treat for me too. And I just, you know, part of also, I think, coming out of 2021 is the fact that we have sort of leaned into these networks and conversations of colleagues because I think it's in that that all of us can make the work better. So, I'm excited to be in conversation with you all over the next year as well.

STEPHANIE PARRISH

Thank you for listening to Art Unbound. Be sure to subscribe to the podcast so you can be alerted when the next episode is released. I'd like to thank Heather Nielsen not only for joining me on this podcast, but also for her friendship as we navigate the waters of museum learning together. I'd also like to thank FRAME, the French American Museum Exchange, for providing the funds to make this series possible.

This podcast is produced by the wonderful Jon Richardson, with music by Mark Orton. Be sure to visit portlandartmuseum.org and nwfilm.org to learn about our exhibitions, learning and community partnership programs, film center opportunities, ways to support our organizations, and more.