

Dialogue with the Director

March/April/May 2007

In celebration of the spring opening of the Spencer's renovated 20/21 Gallery, the museum has commissioned a project from Lawrence artists Janet Davidson-Hues and Maria Velasco. As a way to engage visitors as active observers, Davidson-Hues and Velasco have created a wayfinding system based on signage that not only will guide and inform, but also challenge, surprise, and interrupt. The project, titled *Stop Look Listen*, will have external and internal components, including various types of signage and iconography, as well as a self-guided audio tour composed of mischievous, insightful, or ambiguous comments, unanticipated words and sounds. By creating a playful wayfinding system both inside and out, and providing an unpredictable audio tour, the artists intend to create a system for people to move through a space that feels unique. Chance encounters with familiar signs, symbols and sounds will provide viewers with an enhanced museum experience. Ideally, viewers will be intrigued by the signs in the parking lot, drawn into the museum out of curiosity, and engaged by the visual and auditory experiences that are available to them inside. Recently, Spencer Director Saralyn Reece Hardy discussed the project with Davidson-Hues and Velasco. An excerpt of their conversation follows.

Saralyn Reece Hardy: Can you talk a little about what it's like to collaborate with the Spencer, and also to collaborate with each other?

Maria Velasco: Collaborating with the Spencer is such a joy, because you have a fabulous team. Everybody's very inspired and inspiring, and you really make it easy for artists to go to work with the museum because you open the doors and the resources and the facilities. And I find that to be not necessarily the norm in every occasion when artists are invited to do exhibitions. I very much like participating in collaborations, and Janet and I have a history of collaborating, so I know that we are going to come up with ideas that are challenging and interesting and that open doors to my own creativity.

Saralyn Reece Hardy: Maybe you can share what some of those collaborations have been like, what some of those ideas are?

Janet Davidson-Hues: Maybe you know or maybe you don't know, but it's not always easy collaborating with another artist. But Maria and I have done some things together in the past, and we have such a nice working relationship between the two of us. Even though we have different aesthetics, there are a number of things that are similar enough that we can work well together. We each have our strengths and weaknesses, and we play to our strengths—in other words, maybe Maria is better at doing one thing than I am, or I'm better at something else, so we really dovetail our strengths. Plus, we really enjoy working together. I think we have trust in each other, and we know that everything will work out evenly in the end. So it's been really a pleasure for me. We do have a number of the same interests. We've done a number of

performances together; that's really where we started collaborating. We have an interest in space and the activation of space. Sometimes that involves the performative act—not necessarily performance art, but the performative act of making the art, which in many ways is what *Stop Look Listen* seems to be, just by the labor we're engaged in.... And another thing about this is the community dimension. It's sort of spiraled out. We've ended up working with people all over campus—the parking department, the police department, the sign shop—so it's been really interesting from that aspect. The interest and support that has been shown from everybody with whom we've had contact at the Spencer and the other departments has been terrific.

SRH: The kind of work that you two are doing is very community-involved. You need people to actually do it. You need the audience to be actively helping in the production. So what do you think it is about projects like this that are so appealing to people? What triggers this kind of interest?

MV: I think people feel honored to part of something that is creative and a little different, something that takes them out of their typical routine. I think the general perception of art and artists is that it is something unreachable. When people get an opportunity to interact and work with a real artist and they see that this is a normal person, they get excited to be a part of that. I have experienced that a lot. For me one of the biggest pleasures is to see a carpenter who helped me build a shelf come to see the show, something like that. Art is something that touches people, a gift that you always hope can transform the lives of those who experience it. If I experience that transformation in myself, then I also know that it has the potential to transform others, or at least invite transformation.

JDH: I would add that I think the process of putting all this together from the very beginning, working with and including a lot of different people in the process is what's so appealing to people who are not normally involved in making art or working in the museum. So the process of creating this project is important not only to Maria and me and to the museum, it's also part of why people on the outside are interested in becoming involved.

SRH: Janet, you mentioned the concept of activating space, and I'm curious about that because the two of you thought a lot about how you would enter into this space. How is activating the space at the Spencer unique? What are the characteristics you considered?

JDH: For me, there are multiple parts of this project that are different but yet linked together. From the creation of these signs, which will start outside, the idea from the beginning was to provide a unique experience for the viewer. Then we asked how we could do that. I don't even remember how we got started in the parking lot, but we ended up thinking about signage. From there we came up with doing signs that started outside the museum rather than inside, which would be much more predictable. We thought we would activate the space outside the museum first, in kind of a subtle, humorous way, because I think often times if you can get people to laugh and smile a little bit initially, then they're more receptive to something else that you might want to have them experience. Then the idea of using sound, that's another way

of activating the space inside one's head, as well as the actual space surrounding the pieces. And the idea of having an irreverent audio tour instead of the standard issue that is instructive and which is excellent, I liked the idea of challenging the viewer and making them part of the whole process by asking questions, by giving them some sort of nontraditional view, and maybe not being so instructive. I don't know. We know pretty much what we're doing as far as the audio, but it's not finalized.

MV: For me, the audio will add another layer that is more experiential. For example, for the *Standing Amida Buddha*, I am very interested in doing a simple reading of a meditation by a Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, who is one of the leaders of the engaged Buddhism movement. So you will be sitting in front the piece maybe expecting something historical, but you'll get this meditation instead.

JDH: And there's already a lot of valuable information listed out there about what period it is and where it's from, so we're probably not going to give that on the audio tour.

MV: We also think it's very important to make the work current, to make it contemporary and relevant to their lives.

SRH: And of course that's one of the ongoing challenges of dealing with historical material and existing in the university world where you're thinking about both the past and the present. So this will be an experiment in how we address those issues. I hear you talking about relevance and irreverence, which probably is catching people a little off guard. Do you think of that as part of your role as artists—to surprise?

JDH: I certainly do. I've always felt that way. I think the reason I feel that way is that as a spectator, as someone who likes to view art as well as make it, I love it when an artist makes me stop and think about something or question something or do something I wouldn't normally do. If I can translate that into my work as an artist, from the viewpoint of a spectator, that's very important.

SRH: You use the title *Stop Look Listen*. I'd like you to talk about that a little, because as I think about that title, if there were instructions about what to do in life generally when you wanted to emerge from your numbness, or have a little breakthrough in your day, it requires a certain kind of attention. And I am wondering what was in your minds as you settled on that title.

JDH: I think our original title was *Point of Departure*, or something like that. Then out of the blue, pow, it just kind of hit me that the grandest, most literal cliché that we could use that just summed up this project perfectly was *Stop Look Listen*. And it's so familiar to people because it is a cliché, but when you really examine it, it's like you say, a lesson of life, a rule to live by regardless of what you're doing. So it just seemed to work, particularly once we got so far as deciding to work outside, having people drive their cars up and stop, notice these signs and look, and they're hopefully drawn into the museum because of these fabulous, funny signs they see in the parking lot. Then they'll be given headsets and they can listen. So it just seemed

perfect.

SRH: And I love the continuity of the vocabulary of the signs and the vocabulary of the title, because you've got it all wrapped up in a very tight concept that is manageable. But you've made a fairly bold statement both about art and about signage. I don't know that we can even fully describe that, but part of what I see in it is the message that art is for everyone. The signage is out in the public, and just because it happens to picture a rare and valuable object, it's very important that it be available to all people. And that's the role of a museum—sharing our treasures with the public. So I love the fact that you've democratized these works of art and invited us in.

MV: When I think about the structure of the piece, I like very much the way it is accessible and integrated with the experience outside of the box. I can see it growing, and that would be very exciting. I see it also as a treasure hunt. I mean, as much it's very bold and obvious on one level, on another level it has a very alluring treasure-hunt aspect in which I'm also very interested. Probably we won't witness that, but we hope that people are going to be pulled by an invisible thread, that they're going to want to move around the galleries and look for certain works and want to figure out which piece is what. I think it's very...sexy.

JDH: Because on the audio tour we are overlapping some of the pieces that we used for the signs but not all of them. There are three pieces that are on the signs that we're also going to include in the audio tour, and then we have several other audio-tour pieces that are not signs. So there's a little bit of overlap, but we didn't want to just have the audio tour with the same objects that we chose for the signs.

SRH: Obviously there are objects of great importance in the museum, but there's also this desire I think for audiences to be more involved in process, which has to do with the question, "What does the art museum have to do with my life?" In the course of the project, what were the key questions you posed to yourselves in relationship to what it had to do with people's lives?

JDH: Hopefully it will enrich their lives by making them think and learn something not only about the objects but about themselves. How they respond to some of these things—maybe some people will even be offended, but at least they'll think about it.

SRH: Offended by the oversimplification of the works, or the fact that it looks somewhat like universal signage?

JDH: Well that was the intention. That was part of the idea. They're actually made of the same material and made at the same place on campus that makes the traffic signs. But they're not traffic signs. So I love that paradox, that they seem to be one thing but they're really not but then they really are. So there's that constant sort of question about "What is it?" Which of course that goes back to "Is it art?" And that's what I hope people will gain from it: a certain

enrichment to their own lives as well as learning something about the collection at the Spencer.

SRH: How did you arrive at the specific works of art that will be featured on the audio tour or on the signage?

MV: We were looking for images that could be translated in iconic ways and that would result in interesting signs. We were also interested in choosing images that would be as inclusive as possible.

SRH: So you wanted people to be walking throughout the museum?

JDH: We probably would have preferred to do 20 signs, 20 different pieces from the collection, and we probably would have preferred to do 25 different audio clips. But we were limited by budget in what we could do. So since we're only doing seven images on the signs, we had to be even more selective. But we did try to do somewhat of a cross-representation.

SRH: Well it is our hope that we will annually have some sort of modest artist's project going on in the museum because it does help us shift our thinking. One thing I'm struck about having this project start in the parking lot is the anticipation that these signs will create. Not only the curiosity, but the anticipation factor. You alluded at some reflection inside someone's head, listening, and I'm wondering if you as artists are thinking consciously about the continuum of anticipation to see, seeing, then reflecting upon seeing? Do you have that continuum in your head?

MV: When I look at something it reverberates and I enjoy that very provocative and personal experience when you come upon a smell or a color or just an appreciation of something that your looking at, and you consider how that relates to something you have either seen, experienced or heard.

JDH: Like Maria mentioned earlier about the layering of all our senses, including sound as one of the ones that we are promoting in this project helps multiply the experience. If there were no sound, it would still be a good experience, but having something extra — a voice or a sound that is either appropriate or inappropriate— I think just adds a freshness to the experience.

MV: We haven't really sat down to analyze it, but I think we see it as a holistic experience, where art has an ability to be an ideal place for integrating parts of the self, parts of the culture that you don't understand or maybe don't even want to hear about. Art can do that.

JDH: And I think we're working on this fairly intuitively rather than analyzing it and saying that this will work because of this or that intellectual reason. It's just kind of what feels right. That's just the way I work, and Maria works the same way.