



Stop // Look // Listen



Artists Janet Davidson-Hues and Maria Velasco have created a complex intervention into the Spencer Museum of Art that they call “a way-finding system.” Through signage that they have placed outside and within the museum, and an audio tour of the museum’s permanent collection, they seek to intervene in the museum-going experience, encouraging visitors in our hyper-stimulated, media-rich world to slow down and, as the work’s title says, *stop, look, and listen*.

The system begins outside, with seven signs placed around the museum; their diamond shapes and bright yellow colors mimic the look of roadside warning markers. Imprinted on them are black silhouettes derived from figures that appear in the museum collection. These figures are transformed to look like the stylized icons of international signage, found worldwide along highways and in airports, and designed for intelligibility. A multi-figural baptism scene from the sixteenth century, for example, is reduced to a streamlined, single figure with a floating head receiving drops of water. In these signs historical images are reincarnated and speak to us in an elemental way, defying the ordinary and perhaps saying: “Warning: Art Approaching.” In their accessibility and openness, the signs interrogate the power of images and art in our society, and they humorously disrupt our expectations.

The system continues inside the museum with a self-guided audio tour keyed to a diverse set of objects in the museum’s permanent collection. Davidson-Hues and Velasco have designated each object along the tour with a stop-sign-shaped label featuring an image of the infant Jesus, again transformed into the iconic style of international signage. Part technological and part curatorial, the system comments on other works of art, reinterpreting earlier objects to bring the past into the present using unconventional and post-modern methods and materials: traffic signage and MP3 players. The choice of MP3 technology reflects the project’s accessibility: by using generic MP3 players, the artists encroach upon territory that until recently was the exclusive domain of Acoustiguide and other systems that accompany blockbuster exhibitions. The artists encourage us to re-think the authoritative texts on those soundtracks, and to instead embrace a more personal, thoughtful experience.

As we listen to the audio in front of each tour object, we are immediately transported. There are layered sounds and words, potent yet elusive, mischievous, unfolding in our heads, in terrains unexpected. The variety of resonant voices and texts—some sensual, some challenging, some almost mesmerizing—suggest the openness of each object (and the

artists) to multiple perspectives and varied meanings. The two-voice audio track for Carol Haerer’s painting *Abiquiu*, for example, includes excerpts from Haerer’s letters while also urging us to move to different viewing positions as we listen. The track for Mimi Smith’s *Steel Wool Peignoir* argues for the work’s significance as an early feminist icon, commenting on how it both attracts and repels us. The track for *Standing Amida Buddha* evokes a meditative state, incorporating a chant written by monks specifically for this Buddha.

Perhaps the most powerful audio is the one for Lesley Dill’s *Thread Man* (1992). Using beautiful binaural sound technology, it mimics the poetic quality of Dill’s sculpture and the voice in our own heads, fiercely cutting to the core of how fragile language can be, in contrast to the tangibility of voice, and skin. The audio voice calls the sculpture “a textual mummy... / A jumble of words dangling” while also posing provocative questions, such as “Is there an obligation to speak?” and “Is decoding the wire words like picking bug droppings out of pepper? / What are words for, when no one listens anymore?” The work intones a reminder that art, like life, is about experience and subjectivity, not just about objects.

Stop Look Listen was commissioned by the Spencer upon the reinstallation of its galleries of twentieth- and twenty-first century art, and is one of various laboratories through which the museum has sought to reconceptualize interac-

tion with the collection. The lab idea helped to inspire the experimental, playful qualities of the artists’ work. Velasco and Davidson-Hues are no strangers to experimentation, performance, or public art, having collaborated a number of times, most recently as participants in an International Installation Festival, *Vogelfrei 6*, in Darmstadt, Germany, for which they created *Step-by-Step Ascension to Paradise*, a work installed in a garden that reinterprets the story of the temptation and fall of Adam and Eve and connects to this project at the Spencer Museum of Art by being similarly based on historical iconic figures.

Susan Earle
Curator of European and American Art
Spencer Museum of Art

Each sign was inspired by an artwork from the Spencer Museum of Art collection. The title of each inspirational piece is listed below each sign and full credits are available online.

Photographs, left to right: KU sophomore Miyako Wakita enjoys an audio tour; Barry Newton, Maria Velasco and Janet Davidson-Hues work on the production of the audio tour; Roger Beckwith, KU Facilities and Operations Sign Shop, helps the artists fabricate the Spencer parking lot signs; and Velasco and Davidson-Hues stand with an artwork that inspired their commission.

On the cover: Velasco, Davidson-Hues, and an installed sign in the parking lot north of the Spencer. This page: KU Parking & Transit staff installed the signposts (left); the commission includes an offbeat museum audio tour, demonstrated by KU sophomore Robert Schmitt; and *Madonna and Child* inspired the audio-tour signs.



Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane



Stop // Look // Listen

An installation by Janet Davidson-Hues and Maria Velasco
Commissioned by the Spencer Museum of Art // Fall 2007

About the Artists

Maria Velasco and Janet Davidson-Hues utilize interdisciplinary approaches, both dealing extensively with female identity and exploring the relationships between personal life experiences and historical/cultural conditions. Both artists seek a balance between poetic and intellectual pursuit with particular emphasis on language. In addition to their current collaboration *Stop Look Listen*, Velasco, KU Associate Professor of Art, and Davidson-Hues, former Indiana State University Assistant Professor of Art, have collaborated on other projects over the past eight years. Prior to their project *Ascension to Paradise* for the international installation festival in Germany in 2005, they both performed with performance art group *a.k.a.* In 2003 they collaborated on *Disrupting Pharaoh's Dream*, an interactive Internet 2 project which linked KU and NYU in real time, both locations broadcasting simultaneously.

Acknowledgments

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