

You Can Now Tour the Barnes Collection with a Shamanic Guide in Your Ear

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If you take an audio tour of the Barnes Collection in Philadelphia this month and get the feeling you may have accidentally ingested some peyote, don't worry, it's not you. The artist Andrea Hornick is staging a radical site-specific sound intervention in the guise of a conventional audio tour, running from January 6th through February 19th. At first, the experience seems quite normal: visitors pick up headphones and stream the recordings through any web-enabled device, but the "tours"

are subtle enough in their preposterousness to make you think you might be losing it.

A milestone for the Barnes's fabled collection, "Andrea Hornick: Unbounded Histories" is almost certainly the institution's most unorthodox intervention to date. It entailed Hornick spending several hours lying on the floor of different galleries at the Barnes listening to recordings of drums on headphones and writing down the visions that came to her. (Live drums, the preferred method, were determined too vibrational for the fragile works, although she did use a rattle and a quiet drum at times.) She then wove the visions into coherent compositions, realized as audio tracks, that are part narrative and part visual analysis.

The project feels particularly unusual for a collection that is known for its rigid regulations. As is well-established by now, Albert C. Barnes, the eccentric art lover, philanthropist, educator, and collector, was fiercely opinionated about museum pedagogy and the handling of his massive holdings—a wonderfully motley assortment of post-impressionist and modern paintings, Old Masters, Americana, metalwork, tribal art, and other exotic and domestic artifacts and wares. Barnes asserted that not a single work in the collection could be loaned, stored, or even rearranged. And those restrictions, which he set in place before his untimely death in a car accident in 1951, still govern the institution. "We want to have artists doing creative things with the collection, but we can't because we're not allowed to change anything physically or add to it," says Martha Lucy, curator and deputy director for education and public programs. Lucy is part of a team, headed by executive director Thom Collins, that is eager to flesh out connections between the vast permanent collection and art being made today. "Using sound is a way to bring contemporary art into the galleries," says Lucy.

The one (rather major) exception to Barnes’s decree, of course, was the controversial transfer of his collection from its stately limestone mansion in leafy Merion, Pennsylvania, to a sleek new purpose-built location in downtown Philadelphia, in 2012. After the move, the collection was painstakingly rehung exactly as it was in Merion: in a tidy-yet-jam-packed, salon-style mix of cultures, periods, and objects—ensembles that Barnes lovingly conceived in the early 1900s. Even the repositioning of the smallest wooden spoon remains forbidden—a situation that poses something of a dilemma for an institution interested in repositioning itself.

In its urban location, the institution is taking strides to cement its role as a major research and educational center, as well as to contextualize all of its gems for a broader public. As Collins told the *Philadelphia Daily News*, in 2015, shortly after his appointment, “We have hundreds of iconic works of art on view. In our history, we’ve taught people how to see them, and how to talk about what they see. What we haven’t done is taught them to unpack their meanings...the larger social, cultural, historical stories they tell.”



Left: Vincent van Gogh, *The Smoker (Le Fumeur)*, 1888. Right: Édouard Manet, *Young Girl on a Bench (Fille sur un banc)*, 1880. Images © 2016 The Barnes Foundation.

Hornick's piece helps to do just that—except the stories it tells are ones she has partly fabricated. The artist, who is also a lecturer in the School of Design at the University of Pennsylvania—and currently teaching a graduate seminar called *Museum as Site: Critique, Intervention, and Production*—has written a series of “poems” based on the visions that came to her during her drum journeys, or shamanistic trances. In Room 23, for instance, she describes the encounter between a bear, a nude woman, and a hunter in Henri Rousseau's *Unpleasant Surprise* (1901), one of the first works that caught her eye for the project. The woman, she says, is courting the bear as a possible spirit guide and playing with it when the hunter intrudes.

In order to select the works, says Hornick, she both studied them in the collection's catalog and examined them in person. “I familiarized myself with all of the works that had animals in them, and all the works with landscapes that intrigued me, and those that seemed like they would be useful in a practical way in terms of getting around in an alternate reality.” She also chose characters and historical figures she was drawn to. Among them are Vincent van Gogh's *Smoker* (1888) and Edouard Manet's *Young Girl on a Bench* (1880), which are displayed close by in Room 13.

“Young girl is 11 years old. Van Gogh's *Smoker* is her father...,” Hornick states on the recording. She then goes on to mention van Gogh's role as a lay minister (which is true) and the bouillabaisse dinner party (fiction) that the young girl, the Smoker, and other sitters in Barnes's portraits will attend “at a farm table under shade of tree in Renoir's *Bois de la Chaise* (1892), directly to the left of Manet's *Young Girl on a Bench*.” The artist draws connections between works throughout all the galleries, noting, for instance, all the bulls that appear throughout collection.

Hornick orates in a highly controlled, almost robotic voice that is somewhat trance-inducing, but also seemingly at odds with the kind of uninhibited experience we might associate with shamanism. The artist first learned about shamanism at the age of 9 from a close family friend, a Harvard-trained anthropologist who returned from the Amazon and “wanted to share this medicine with the West,” she says. He taught her family about shamanic practices, and while Hornick can follow a drum beat into a trance and meet her “spirit guide” animal, she uses the visions both for spiritual purposes and intellectual ones, including institutional critique.

“I’m looking at authority, and art history, the museum—the way stories are written down, then the way the art historian tells them, and the way the curator installs them, and what the viewer projects upon it,” she explains. “So when I do the shamanic journey, I’m asking for transformative information, but I’m also layering another story on these heavily laden works. So it’s ironic, a bit.” According to Lucy, Hornick isn’t reinterpreting the works, but enhancing the viewer’s experience of them, “and definitely poking fun at the conventional audio tour,” she says.



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Hornick first started using drum journeys to untangle art history in 1997, and has made collages and paintings inspired by her visions, sometimes depicting women with their animal spirit guides. At the Barnes, Hornick's primary purpose isn't necessarily to draw attention to her personal experiences or visions, but simply to get visitors to take their time, look at the work, and think about it. "The ensembles at the Barnes are so over-packed, you don't know which works to spend time with unless you've been there a bunch. And then you just think you should like the masterpieces the most," she explains. "But this really slows you down and cuts out the overstimulation."

Dr. Barnes himself would likely have approved of such an objective. He mistrusted museums, particularly the socialites they attracted and the stilted way curators presented art—he once called the Philadelphia Museum of Art a "house of intellectual and artistic prostitution"—and was all for finding alternative methods for fostering an understanding of art. "He was a progressive thinker," says Lucy. "He liked to push against conventional ways of doing things and he was interested in the relationship between art and sound."

—Meredith Mendelsohn