

Coming Soon to the Guggenheim: Words, Words, Words

The Manhattan museum's first poet in residence plans to fill the space with "poem signs," panels, interactive experiences and pop-up readings.

By Laurel Graeber April 27, 2022

This article is part of our latest special section on Museums, which focuses on new artists, new audiences and new ways of thinking about exhibitions.



The interior of the Guggenheim. Jen Benka, head of the Academy of American Poets, said the building itself was a poem. David Heald/Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

If you visit the Guggenheim Museum this summer, don't be surprised if some of the works you see are not paintings, sculptures, videos or any other expected forms of visual art. Starting in June, its Manhattan building will bloom with poetry, destined to sprout in places you would hardly consider lyrical: stairwells, the rotunda seating area, the columns in the cafe and eventually even the sidewalk outside.

Over time, they will be adorned with seven-line poems by authors including John Keene, Camonghne Felix, Marwa Helal and Ra/Malika Imhotep. These "poem signs," along with workshops, panels, interactive experiences and pop-up readings, which will continue through December, signal a new direction in museum programming that is being shaped by Taylor Johnson, the Guggenheim's first poet in residence.

When a poem is discovered there, it can "either lead people to find out more about the poet or to definitely reconsider, and maybe even help guide, their experience in the space," Mr. Johnson, 30, said in a recent interview at the museum. "That feels like a big thing, because museums can be overwhelming, just by the nature of their size and the amount of emotional energy that it takes to take in art."

Mr. Johnson will also develop programs connected to "Cecilia Vicuña: Spin Spin Triangulene," a Guggenheim exhibition that opens on May 27. The three-month show devoted to Ms. Vicuña, a Chilean-born poet and artist, will reflect her belief that her artworks, which engage many mediums, are poems in space.

"I come from a mind-set where an image takes the form — whether in language, in sound, in drawing, in painting — of its own accord," Ms. Vicuña said in a recent video call from Venice, where she was participating in the Venice Biennale. "So the function of the poet-artist is to listen, is to sense what the image wants."

Although many museums have presented poetry programs — the Academy of American Poets hosted readings, lectures and discussions at the Guggenheim from the mid-1960s into the 1980s — neither the academy nor the museum said it was aware of any other residency for a poet at an institution devoted to visual art. (Lincoln Center named its first poet in residence, Mahogany L. Browne, in 2021.) According to Jen Benka, the president and executive director of the academy, which partnered with the Guggenheim in creating the post, it attests to a growing interest in verse that has only increased since the young author Amanda Gorman read her work at President Biden’s inauguration last year.

That growth, Ms. Benka said in a phone interview, is “being led by young people of color.”

“Poetry is just an incredibly diverse art form today,” she said. “It’s a younger art form.”

Mr. Johnson, whose collection, “Inheritance,” received the Norma Farber First Book Award from the Poetry Society of America, was among more than 70 authors who applied for the Guggenheim residency, which pays the poet a \$20,000 honorarium. In an open call in November, the academy and the museum made it clear they were not offering a traditional writer’s residency, in which an author spends many hours sequestered, working on a new book.

Instead, this initiative will focus on visitor programming and “expanding our invitation to a broader and more diverse audience,” said Cyra Levenson, the deputy director of the Guggenheim and its director of education and public engagement.

The residency’s five-member selection committee, which included the prizewinning poets Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, Natalie G. Diaz and Claudia Rankine, evaluated the applicants’ résumés and programming proposals. Mr. Johnson, who “brought forward just an incredible and creative set of ideas,” Ms. Benka said, is also, coincidentally, the type of new visitor the museum is trying to attract. Young, Black and identifying, he said, as “trans,” he had never been inside the Guggenheim before applying, though he said he had been aware of its collection and its Frank Lloyd Wright architecture.

Mr. Johnson, who plans to highlight the building’s distinctive design during his stay, described it as a “temple of spirit,” an idea he has asked the writers composing the “poem signs” to consider. Those who devised the residency also see the Guggenheim as a space whose modernist art collection, like poetry, pares meaning down to its essence.

The “building is a poem,” Ms. Benka said. “Time in that space is so deeply, deeply poetic, that it seems like, to me, involving poetry and poets more is just a natural extension.”

Although Mr. Johnson began his yearlong residency in January, some of his projects are still gestating.

“I’m interested in the way this building is participatory,” he said.

“When I’m thinking about poetry,” he added, “I think about immersive experiences, I’m thinking about setting up a world of language in which I’m kind of shaken outside myself.”

Visitors may be shaken, too. For the pop-up readings, which will take place every two months — the first, with the poets Jenny Xie, Xan Phillips and Imani Elizabeth Jackson, is on May 21 — Mr. Johnson has suggested that the visiting writers use a bullhorn. Poems will also be available as audio recordings, and Mr. Johnson said he hoped eventually to enlist museumgoers in reading and recording various poets’ work in the former phone booths on the Guggenheim’s first floor. Participants will then “leave a prompt for another stranger to record a poem,” he said, perhaps from a database of choices.

Mr. Johnson is not, however, interested in showcasing his own work, except in a profile on the museum’s digital guide. Instead, his residency will highlight poets he admires, especially those whose work bridges more than one discipline. For instance, a Guggenheim panel on June 22, “Spirit of Movement,” will feature Harmony Holiday, jaamil olawale kosoko and Jayson P. Smith, writers who are involved in dance and performance.

Mr. Johnson will also engage aspiring poets who stroll through the Guggenheim’s doors. Having previously taught writing in public schools in Washington, D.C., his home city, he will lead workshops for teenagers at the museum.

But visitors need not be young to pick up a pencil. In December, the Guggenheim converted its Aye Simon Reading Room into an interactive poetry space. The staff filled the room, formerly an art library, with volumes of poetry, as well as notecards, colored pencils and sheets with creative prompts.

During “Jennie C. Jones: Dynamics,” a solo show, closing in early May, that incorporates sound with visual art, a prompt has invited visitors to translate what they heard into a drawing and post it. Subsequent visitors have been able to choose one of the posted sketches and respond with a few words, a poem or a story. “People leave hundreds of drawings and poems here,” Ms. Levenson said.

In the space, which will reopen for Ms. Vicuña's show, the next set of prompts will be based on her palabrarmas — works that combine words and drawings to explore language and its meanings — and the idea of poetry off the page.

“Spin Spin Triangulene” will also include Ms. Vicuña's quipus, which are knotted, weblike creations inspired by a centuries-old Inca system of communication. In addition to constructing a site-specific quipu on extinction and resurrection, Ms. Vicuña plans to invite the public to collaborate with her in “integrating the spiral form of the Guggenheim with the quipu form,” she said. The result will be a collective poem, in fiber rather than words. She will appear as well on “Poetry of the Senses,” a panel in August that Mr. Johnson is organizing.

Ms. Levenson said the museum hoped to continue the poetry residency annually. “We want to open ourselves to a new dialogue,” she said, “and we want our programming to shift from being a kind of presentation to being a conversation.”

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