Commissions
In keeping with Whitman’s multidisciplinary reach and underscoring the relevance of his work for artists today, we are commissioning several artworks for *Whitman at 200*. The participating artists represent a range of ideas, approaches, and methods. Several projects will focus on the Delaware River waterfront, drawing attention to Whitman’s direct connection to that locale. Others will extend into the neighborhoods. All will be easily accessible to a broad audience in public locations.

**Spencer Finch**, a New York-based artist known for sculpture, installations, and drawings that capture fleeting natural phenomena and sensory experience, will create an interactive work on the RiverLink ferry that operates between Philadelphia and Camden. In Whitman’s day, a number of ferries connected the two cities, but today only one ferry runs, from May to September. Finch’s piece will directly link Whitman’s journey in the late 19th century to today’s visitors’ experience of the river. Ferry-goers will match the color of the sky and water by spinning two color wheels of pantone swatches Finch selected after observing the ever-changing tones of the Delaware. Finch has created a number of works inspired by writers including Emily Dickinson, Henry David Thoreau, and Whitman. He is the only artist to create a work for the National September 11 Memorial Museum in New York. *Trying to Remember the Color of the Sky on That September Morning* covers a central wall with 2,983 individual squares of paper, one for every person killed in the September 11 attacks, and each hand-painted a different shade of blue. Finch also created an installation for the High Line in New York titled *The River that Flows Both Ways*, inspired by the color and movement of the Hudson River.

**Carolyn Healy** and **John Phillips** will collaborate on a multimedia installation based on Whitman’s poetry, also located at the Delaware River waterfront. Incorporating video, sculpture, lighting, and electronic sound, the work features the entire text of Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road.” It will take place on a large industrial barge approximately 40 feet wide by 110 feet long. A tugboat will guide the barge along the Delaware River, starting at Penn’s Landing, where the audience will board. Bass baritone James Osby Gwathney, who performs frequently with Opera Philadelphia, is working with Healy and Phillips to develop the soundscape/score and will recite Whitman’s text. The artists wish to create a jewel-like experience with lighting and video panels that are visible from afar as well as by the audience on board the barge. Healy and Phillips have previously designed settings for sections of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (at Symphony Space and LaMaMa in New York and the Cini Foundation, Venice) and *Finnegan’s Wake*.

Inspired by Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road,” interdisciplinary artist **Homer Jackson** will organize four walks in different neighborhoods ranging from the
Strawberry Mansion reservoir in North Philadelphia, and Germantown in the Northwest part of the city, to Whitman Plaza and Whitman Park in South Philadelphia. [Whitman Park was the site of ongoing racial tension and demonstrations related to a housing project proposed in the 1960s that finally opened in 1982.] Drawing on the history of civil rights protests and freedom songs as well as particular poems by Langston Hughes and Whitman, the walks will be accompanied by new compositions written by the musicologist Guthrie Ramsey (UPenn) and by Waverly Alston whose gospel ensemble, In the Company of Friends, will lead the walkers.

The Bearded Ladies Cabaret, an experimental group led by John Jarboe, will create an outdoor performance that explores both the human and heroic sides of Whitman. Using the forms of pageant, birthday party, and trial, the Beards will highlight the dangers of blind hero worship and the challenges of holding up our ancestors to contemporary ideals. Inspired by an actual spontaneous trial of Whitman held in a Radical Faerie camp in Vermont last summer that questioned his role as a queer hero, Jarboe will assemble a team of poets, singers, dancers, and composers. In 2013, the Beards staged Wide Awake, A Civil War Cabaret at the Kimmel Center, in which Whitman's poetry was featured. Proposed location: Independence Seaport Museum, Penn's Landing.