

Mining the Museum: An Installation Confronting History

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What is a museum anyway? Or a curator for that matter? And what is an “audience”? Do museums have the corner on historical “Truths”? *Mining the Museum*, an installation by Fred Wilson, provided an opportunity to reflect on these questions. Presented from April 2, 1992, to February 28, 1993, Wilson’s installation was made possible through a unique collaboration between The Contemporary and the Maryland Historical Society (MHS), two Baltimore-based museums.

Founded in 1989, The Contemporary’s mission is to explore the connections between the art of our time and the world we live in. The museum encourages interaction between artists and audiences and directly involves communities in the development, implementation, and evaluation of its programs. The Contemporary works out of a permanent administrative facility but presents exhibitions in temporary locations; its concept of a “collection” consists of placing art in community settings on long-term loan.

The MHS is a 150-year-old institution with an important collection housed in a permanent museum. Its fifty-plus staff members oversee many thousands of objects ranging from decorative arts, paintings, and sculpture to extensive archives and a library of Maryland history. It is in many ways typical of large, established state historical museums across the country.

In May 1991, The Contemporary opened its first international exhibition in the former Greyhound Service Terminal, located near the MHS. George Ciscle, The Contemporary’s director, and I paid a social call on the society’s director, Charles Lyle, to introduce

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ourselves. We talked at length about the differences between the ways our respective institutions operate. Lyle expressed his desire to have his institution deal with current concerns and public interests and to develop an audience more representative of the community's cultural diversity.

Coincidentally, The Contemporary had been considering a project with Fred Wilson and had invited him to Baltimore to visit many of the city's museums to choose a permanent collection he would like to work with. Wilson's first choice was the MHS.

The Contemporary returned to the MHS with a suggestion: a three-way collaboration with Fred Wilson in which he would create an installation artwork during a one-year residency period. Our staffs would use the experience as an opportunity for a self-study to help us identify new approaches to interpreting collections, shaping future acquisition policies and programs, and expanding our audiences. Wilson would have access to the MHS collection as a "gold mine" of ideas and reinstall it from his own point of view. Then *Mining the Museum* began to take shape. We agreed that whatever objects Wilson chose would be made available to him for use in the installation.

The exhibition was designed to address problems we felt were of concern to many museums, regardless of their discipline. The aim would be to confront the difficulty of putting theories of diversity and historical revisionism into practice and to offer a model for change responsive to our particular community. The directors of the two organizations felt strongly that presenting the exhibition concurrently with the 1992 American Association of Museums annual conference in Baltimore might catalyze provocative dialogue within the profession.

ABOUT WILSON'S WORK

Fred Wilson is an installation artist of African-American and Carib descent. His entry into the museum world began with free-lance assignments in the education departments of a number of museums, including the American Museum of Natural History, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the American Crafts Museum. More recently, he has been involved with arts organizations as a museum educator, a gallery director, and a practicing artist.

Until *Mining the Museum*, Wilson's installations had used reproductions and fabricated artifacts in "mock museums" that had drawn attention to the ways in which curatorial practices affect our interpretation and understanding of museum collections. Wilson's

“museums” underscored the fact that history is an act of interpretation and that contemporary events are part of its flux. His work has provided a savvy and thought-provoking critique of the museum environment.

His insights first surfaced in *Rooms with a View: The Struggle Between Culture, Content and Context in Art*, a project he curated for the Bronx Council of the Arts in 1987. Three distinct spaces simulated different display environments: ethnographic and Victorian museums and a contemporary gallery. In each room, Wilson placed different works of art by thirty artists, surrounded by the accouterments appropriate to the space. The ethnography museum grouped objects according to type, with vague labels identifying the artistic medium but not the maker. The Victorian museum gave the objects a rarefied disposition, suggesting precious antique *objets d'art* through selective lighting and ornate pedestals. The “white cube” gallery gave the works the necessary cutting-edge mystique to certify them as works of contemporary art.

The new contexts so thoroughly transformed the audience perceptions of the artworks that Wilson decided to take on “the museum.” Describing his reasons, Wilson said, “It is there that those of us who work toward alternative visions . . . get hot under the collar and decide to do something about it.”

Visitors to *The Colonial Collection* (1991) at the Gracie Mansion Gallery (no longer in existence) viewed African masks blindfolded with the flags of their French and British colonizers and others labeled “Stolen from the Zonga tribe,” highlighting how museum euphemisms whitewash the acquisition of such objects. These “spoils” were displayed in dramatically-colored spaces with theatrical lighting, sometimes animated with the addition of video special effects. This, according to Wilson, illustrated how a museum display “anesthetizes their historic importance . . . [it] certainly covers up the colonial history.”

The proposed collaboration offered Wilson an opportunity to work with real museum objects and occupy the curatorial “hot seat,” putting his theories into practice in the environment curators operate in every day and with similar limitations.

DEVELOPING THE EXHIBITION

Principals on the project from the two collaborating institutions were the directors, the chief curator and the director of education at the MHS, and the curator/educator and an intern at The Contemporary. The Contemporary raised the necessary funds

(\$25,000) and managed the budget. Public programming, public relations, and development of educational materials were implemented cooperatively. The Contemporary provided orientation to the topic of installation art and the process of creating it for MHS staff and docents.

Wilson made all artistic decisions and set the project's philosophical, aesthetic, and historical trajectory. He participated in all aspects of the project's development and implementation, including education. He visited the society frequently over a one-year period, and for two months prior to the opening, he remained on site. He came to know the collections and other resources as well as the society's curatorial, registrarial, educational, and governance practices.

Mining the Museum was not the first museum collaboration or the first time an artist "curated" a collection or created a museum-critical work for a specific institution. But a self-study process implicit in the installation made the project not only different as an exhibition but an intervention. Throughout the project, an ongoing evaluation of the collaborative process and the impact of the installation was carried on. It examined commonly-held definitions of "museum," "history," "exhibition," "curator," "artist," "audience," "community," and "collaboration." The curators created a "think sheet," a series of topics developed to measure changes in the way individuals saw themselves, the artist, and their institutions during the development of the installation. Wilson was assisted in his research by independent volunteers who had expertise in African-American local and state history, astronomy, and museum history. The curators gave Wilson entry into the less-well-known parts of the museum and shared historical information about the objects.

A WALK THROUGH THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition investigated both the African-American and Native-American experiences in Maryland, using art and artifacts from the MHS collection that either had never been seen before or had never been viewed in this context.

Personal history forms the basis of Wilson's engagement with the past. Objects, he believes, become "generic and lifeless" outside the context of personal experience. "I look at the relationship between what is on view and what is not on view." Wilson's fear of imposing a personal morality on others led him to use the questioning process as the organizing principle of his work.

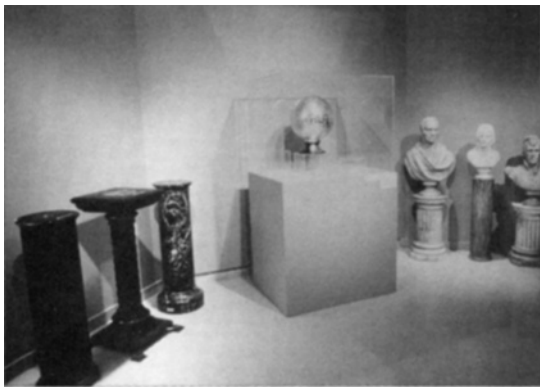
To encourage visitors to begin questioning immediately, the curators created a handout that was posted in the elevator. It read:

What is it?
Where is it? Why?
What is it saying?
How is it used?
For whom was it created?
For whom does it exist?
Who is represented?
How are they represented?
Who is doing the telling? The hearing?
What do you see?
What do you hear?
What can you touch?
What do you feel?
What do you think?
Where are you?

Mining the Museum employed display techniques that are second nature to most curators: artifacts, labels, selective lighting, slide projections, and sound effects. But they were used to explore our “reading” of historical truth through sometimes startling juxtapositions of objects representing vastly different historical “facts,” revealing stereotypes and contrasting power and powerlessness. (Highlights from the installation follow.)

The installation opened with the silver and gold “Truth Trophy Awarded Until 1922 for Truth in Advertising,” surrounded by three white pedestals bearing white marble busts of historic personages and three empty black pedestals. It encapsulated the issues at the heart of the exhibition. Whose truth is on exhibit? Whose history is being told? Wilson thus established that *Mining the Museum* would explore not *what* objects mean but *how* meaning is made when they are “framed” by the museum environment and museum practices.

Those left out of the museum’s historical narrative were literally given voice in a room where nineteenth-century paintings were on display. When a viewer stepped toward the dimly lit works of art,



The three white busts in the opening exhibit were of Napoleon, Henry Clay, and Stonewall Jackson (none of whom had particularly significant impact on Maryland history). The three empty black pedestals were labeled "Harriet Tubman," "Benjamin Banneker," and "Frederick Douglass" (all Marylanders). Where are the busts of these prominent personages? Did no one see fit to "collect" or commemorate them? The Truth Trophy exhibit set the stage for the exhibition experience.



Cigar-store Indians were carved on commission from store owners. Here they turned their backs to viewers and faced photographs of Native Americans. The label, "Portraits of Cigar Store Owners," implied that the lumbering wooden figures tell us more about the stereotypes held by their owners than about Native Americans.



This Ernst Fisher painting was given two labels, "Country Life" and "Frederick Serving Fruit." Asking, "Where am I in this painting?" Wilson inserted himself in the place of the black serving boy who was or was not "seen," depending on which label one chose to apply. (Photo: Jeff Goldman, courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society.)



In "Modes of Transport" a Ku Klux Klan hood, discovered in a house in nearby Towson and given by an anonymous donor, took the place of pram linens in an antique baby carriage. (Photo: Jeff Goldman, courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society.)



"Metalwork" juxtaposed Baltimore repoussé silverware with slave shackles, making the point that a luxury economy was built on the slavery system. (Photo: Jeff Goldman, courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society.)



In "Cabinetmaking, 1820–1960," a whipping post (until 1938 located in front of a Baltimore jail) was raised on a platform surrounded by period chairs, each suggesting a distinct social class: clergy, bourgeois, blueblood, businessman. The chairs appeared to gaze at the crucifix-like form in the center. A child responded to the exhibit with this drawing. (Courtesy of The Contemporary.)



"The rebellion room" provided insight into the mythological proportions that blacks took on in the white imagination. Here, Fred Wilson shows a doll house in the MHS permanent collection. A room of the same house in the exhibit installation tells a very different story. Disproportionately large and small objects are used to tell it. A crudely made, gigantic figure of an old black man is surrounded by tiny white dolls, apparently massacred. (Photographs by Jeff Goldman, courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society, and by Mary Connor and Anna Sobaski, courtesy of The Contemporary.)

spotlights and hidden sound effects were triggered to highlight the African-American children represented. A boy asked, "Am I your brother?" "Am I your friend?" And, alluding to his metal collar, "Am I your pet?" The names of slaves depicted in a rare painting of workers in the fields were added to the label after the plantation owner's inventory book listing them along with other household items and animals was found in the archives.

Examples of how the museum classification system inadvertently represses the layered and complex history behind objects was illustrated in "Modes of Transport," "Metalwork," and "Cabinet-making, 1820–1960." The first of these examined who traveled in colonial Maryland—why and how. A model of a slave ship was shown alongside a once-elegant sedan chair; a painting depicting a similar chair highlighted who carried whom. A Ku Klux Klan hood replaced the customary linens in an antique pram; nearby was a photograph of black "nannies" pushing similar carriages. The suggestion that children absorb their parents' racial stereotypes early on was clear. Disproportionate sizes of objects displayed together conveyed a sense of power or the lack of it. On display in a space focusing on runaway slaves were decoy ducks and a toy figure of a running black soldier "targeted" by a large punt gun used in hunting the birds in Chesapeake Bay. In "the rebellion room," Wilson inverted this relationship. Miniature white figures in a doll house were dwarfed by a black doll dominating them. A diary on display revealed panic on the part of white landowners of a "Negro uprising," reflecting the source of this nightmarish vision.

Some objects were brought into the light here for the first time. A rocking chair, a basket, and a jug made by enslaved African Americans were displayed along with objects made by Africans in the colony for freed slaves in Liberia. Only the jug, made by "Melinda," had been exhibited; few had seen the Liberian objects. Found in storage, a wooden tourist box with its ticket of passage to Africa led to the identification of the "new" objects. The box had been given to the MHS in the mid-nineteenth century by a member of the Colonization Society. At the end of the corridor hung a painting, "Maryland in Liberia," by John H.B. Latrobe, founder of the MHS and an active member of the Colonization Society.

The final section focused on the aspirations, dreams, and achievements of African Americans. The focal point was a journal kept by the astronomer and mathematician Benjamin Banneker (1731–1806). Software that could generate images of the night sky as Banneker saw it was loaded into an IBM computer. (The computer was labeled.) Drawings from the journal were projected on

the wall. Banneker was hired by Thomas Jefferson to help survey the area that became Washington, DC, and the two men corresponded. The journal contains an article that Banneker sent to Jefferson urging him to abolish slavery and saying: "Sir I freely and Chearfully acknowledge that I am of the African race." The book tells the story of a free black who was no less immune to the oppression of the slavery system than his enslaved brothers and sisters.

The installation ended with a globe used in Banneker's time; by formally and metaphorically echoing the opening Truth Trophy, the installation came full circle.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS AND OUTREACH

The museum educators reconsidered their usual approaches to interpretation and public programming. Their aim would be to stimulate debate and encourage active audience engagement with the material.

An educational handout was produced after the exhibition opened. "Do you have questions about *Mining the Museum?*" was based on questions most frequently asked of and reported by guards, docents, receptionists, and gallery-store staff. Visitors received it at the end of the installation, so that the active questioning process of their experience would not be lost. It provided background information on such topics as the lives of historical personages, information about some of the objects, and an explanation of installation art.

Programs for the public took place at the MHS. Open studio visits were held weekly just prior to the opening so that the public could gain first-hand experience of Wilson's working process and have a chance to speak with him. Workshops for the docents on contemporary art focused on the installation medium and how artists today often address social and political issues in their work. They also included tours of the MHS with the artist. Discussions about the exhibition as a work of contemporary art were conducted by nine area artist/docents each Saturday. Other public lectures included: "Contemporary Artists and Cultural Identity," "African-American Women in Maryland 1750–1860," and "Free at Last," a dramatic reading of primary documents related to slavery and abolition in Maryland.

"Exhibiting Cultures," a continuing studies course at the Johns Hopkins University, was based on the book *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Karp and Lavine,

1991). Lectures took a critical look at the challenges curators of all disciplines face when exhibiting artifacts from cultures other than (and including) their own. The final class brought together scholars in the fields of art history, anthropology, and African-American history, including Ivan Karp, to present papers on the issues raised by the installation. The artist/docents were given scholarships to attend the course.

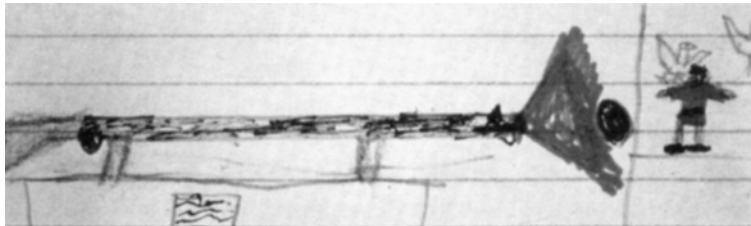
AUDIENCE RESPONSE

A community exhibit, on view for the final month of the exhibition, chronicled audience participation in the project, including drawings, essays, creative writing by children and art students as well as responses to a questionnaire asking for reactions. Visitors had been requested to hang them on the bulletin board to create a dialogue among members of the audience.

Almost every evaluation received remarked on the emotional impact of the installation. The subtleties of Wilson's work were not lost on the young.

When I go to a museum, I hope to say "Wow" but today I was thinking "Wow!" in a different way.

I like that he asks questions and doesn't answer them.



Child's drawing and a comment: "When I saw the baby carriage with the mask it made me mad. When he showed the punting gun pointing to the black I was sad." (Courtesy of The Contemporary.)

And from adults:

You always have to question information presented because even if presented as "truth" it is always from a specific cultural point of view. (Attorney)

It interested me in seeing Maryland History in terms of an African American although I am white. I've never been interested in seeing this museum before this show.

I want a sense of understanding history as good or bad in order to repeat it or to discard it so as not to repeat it. (Retired police officer)

I found my history in this exhibition. My ancestors were never slave owners . . . but as a Caucasian American, I share some responsibility for the continuing state of racial strife today. (Immigrant economist)

Can you force all of Baltimore to see this? (Unemployed white male)
Never have I witnessed any form of artwork that has had such an emotional effect on me. (College student)

Not all responses were positive.

Mining the Museum has the ability to promote racism and hate in young Blacks and was offensive to me. (Retired dentist)

I found *Mining the Museum* "artsy" and pretentious. It was a waste of space that could be used to better purpose. A museum should answer questions not raise questions unrelated to the subject. (Engineer)

It snookered me.

I liked the pedestals without statues least because they were visually boring and emptiness is decidedly uninteresting, period. (Curator)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Mining the Museum examined how the MHS had defined itself and how this self-definition determines whose history has been included or excluded. It also spoke to how those excluded have come to see the museum. It was about the power of objects to speak when museum practices are expanded and the artificial boundaries museums build are removed. It was about how deconstructing the museum apparatus can transform the museum into a space for ongoing cultural debate.

It stimulated so much enthusiasm within the profession that children's museums, natural history museums, science centers, and art museums suddenly wanted "Fred Wilsons" of their own; they were encouraged to look at their own collections with a renewed sense of purpose and possibility. Two Wilson installations based on permanent collections have taken place since the installation at the MHS: *The Spiral of Art History* at the Indianapolis Museum of Art and *Museums: Mixed Metaphors* at the Seattle Art Museum. A condensed version of *Mining the Museum* is currently being developed as a permanent display at the MHS, using objects from the original installation.

Throughout the course of the collaboration, both institutions and the artist have had to deal with problems that arose because of assumptions we had about one another and our expectations for the project. One of the greatest difficulties for the participants was learning to adapt to one another's working style. As one staff member stated, "We occasionally speak a somewhat different language." Gradually, staff and docents began to realize that the way their jobs had been previously defined did not always apply to the role they had to assume for the installation. Wrote one staff member, "The insistence on secrecy and preserving the mystery of the

work of art until the last possible moment made it difficult to plan and, indeed, to schedule normal pre-exhibition activities, such as the movement of artworks from storage to the installation space. It took a great leap of faith.”

All project evaluations are being utilized to generate short- and long-term goals concerning policies, practices, and future programming at both The Contemporary and the MHS. We continue to reflect on our respective missions and on the role a museum can play in a rapidly changing world. The project offered our staffs a practical way to explore different methodologies and professional points of view and to exchange ideas valuable for future collaborations. The docents are considering how their experiences might become useful in giving tours in other parts of the museum. *Mining the Museum* also generated a critical exchange of ideas between local artists, area cultural institutions, and our community.

Finally, Wilson’s installation demonstrated dramatically that current issues are as legitimate a concern for history museums as the distant past. Our audiences told us that they want to be challenged and feel it is appropriate that cultural institutions provide a forum to discuss issues of a controversial nature. Moreover, they cautioned us that if museums are to be truly diverse, they must allow for questioning and be responsive to the questions they hear. Most important, we realized that the project would have been impossible without Fred Wilson’s residency. For, as one educator stated, “only with the perspective and creative resources of an outsider could . . . [any museum] undertake as self-critical and creative a project as *Mining the Museum*.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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All photographs are by Mary Connor and Anna Sobaski, courtesy of The Contemporary, unless otherwise indicated.

REFERENCE

Karp, Ivan, and Lavine, Stephen D. (Eds.) (1991). *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.