

MINING THE MUSEUM:

ARTISTS LOOK AT MUSEUMS,

MUSEUMS LOOK AT THEMSELVES

Lisa G. Corrin

If the love of art is the clear mark of the chosen, separating, by an invisible and insuperable barrier, those who are touched by it from those who have not received its grace, it is understandable that in the tiniest details of their morphology and their organization, museums betray their true function, which is to reinforce for some the feeling of belonging and for others the feeling of exclusion.

PIERRE BOURDIEU AND ALAIN DARBEL,
The Love of Art: European Art Museums and Their Public

History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, and if faced
With courage, need not be lived again.

MAYA ANGELOU,
On the Pulse of Morning, 1993

To speak of the ideological apparatus underlying museum practices is to speak of the relation among power, representation, and cultural identity; of how history is written and communicated; of whose history is voiced and whose is silenced. Behind their often-cavernous halls of cultural relics, museums are places where sacrosanct belief systems are confirmed on the basis of hierarchies valuing one culture over another. Art and artifact, style and period, high and low, dominant and marginal—these are the boundaries museums rely on to sustain “society’s most revered beliefs and values.”¹ This tidy formula for codifying human experience has provided museums with a comfortably

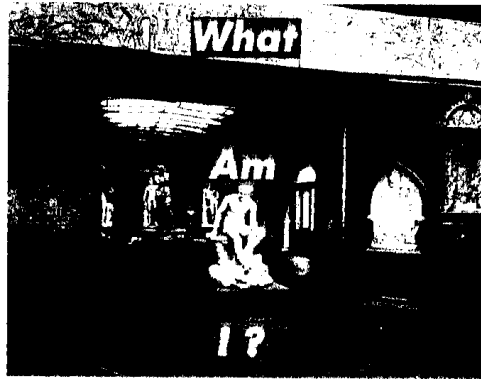
detached position from which to observe the revisionist dialogue that has reshaped art history and cultural studies over the past decade. Until recently, the museum community has been resistant to the issues raised by this dialogue, fearful, apparently, of controversies that have always arisen whenever critical art history has been translated into museum practice.²

However, it has become increasingly difficult for them to sustain this detachment because museums are in the midst of a severe crisis of identity. Shrinking resources, bouts over the First Amendment, pressures by native populations to return their cultural heritage, and calls for a renewed commitment to multi-

culturalism have raised a host of questions about the purpose of museums; the definition of "audience"; and the process by which critical decisions of acquisition, conservation, interpretation, and presentation are made.³ Under enormous pressure, the museum community has been forced to consider the relation between what it does and the historical, political, and social context in which

it operates.⁴ "What am I?" asks the museum today. "If I am not to be a metamuseum, interred within my own history, what do I do?"⁵

Thus with much breast beating, the American museum has lately performed a public purge of its past, owning up to the social inequities it reinforced through its unself-critical practices. Reinstallations of permanent collections and museological exhibitions have extended the dialogue outside the museum profession to include museum audiences, inviting them to join in a "group therapy" exercise aimed at recharting the futures of these institutions. Since 1990, the National Museum of Natural History has been involved in a seven-year effort to bring a greater degree of consciousness to the museum visitor about the ways in which our views of the natural world and the "family of man" are skewed by the language of the museum. Interim "dilemma labels" have been designed to negotiate the "outdated" displays until the collection can be reinstalled. These labels openly admit to past racist, sexist, and colonialist attitudes on the part of the museum. For example, a lioness depicted passively reclining in the shade with her cubs while the male gazes at a prospective hunt, a group of zebras in the distance, implies that only the male is the hunter in the pride. The "dilemma label" points out



Barbara Kruger, *Sportsac for A Museum Looks at Itself: Mapping Past and Present* at the Parrish Art Museum, 1992.
Courtesy of the Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, N.Y.

the contradiction between the original label, which states that the female is the primary hunter in the group, and the viewer's perception, which suggests otherwise. The project is particularly aimed at exposing and discouraging the tendency to exoticize other societies in order to maintain a colonialist domination over them.⁶

Art/Artifact (1988), at the Center for African Art in

New York, was a seminal project which argued that museum practices rather than just museum objects are a legitimate subject for an exhibition. Art/Artifact showcased typical environments created by museums to display collections and pointed out the various ways our perceptions of the "other" are governed by those environments. A smaller exhibition, *Worlds in Miniature, Worlds Apart* (1991–94), at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University, explored the use of dioramas, models, and mannequins in exhibits at the Peabody through the beginning of the twentieth century. This history of museum techniques also included a discussion of how the perceptions of the anthropologists who worked in the heyday of the museum's development guided the museum's representations of native New World cultures. Because the exhibit was mounted during the redesign and reinstallation of the Peabody's permanent galleries, one surmised it was intended to supply a counterpoint to the new presentation of the museum's permanent collections. Into the Heart of Africa focused on the history of the museum's African collection and documented the means by which particular objects found their way into the museum—in this case, primarily through missionaries and colonial officers.⁷

Other revisionist readings of collection and exhibition practices by art museums include *The Desire and the Museum* (1989) at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Downtown (1989), *Art Inside Out* (1992) organized by the Department of Education at the Art Institute of Chicago (1992), and *A Museum Looks at Itself: Mapping Past and Present* at the Parrish Art Museum, 1897–1992 (1992). *The Desire of the Museum* illuminated the subliminal subtext of the museum, exhibiting contemporary art about the institution using visual and textual devices that revealed the unconscious agendas of the curators and the audience as part of the exhibition. *Art Inside Out* introduced a contextual treatment of a concise selection of objects both as “art” and as historical artifacts. A preface to the exhibition provided a behind-the-scenes view of how objects get into collections and raised questions about how choices are made and by whom. The Parrish exhibition incorporated objects once esteemed by the museum’s founder into new, critically reflexive displays in “an attempt to examine the museum itself as a historical artifact.”⁸ The exhibition looked at the way in which the values and political stances of those in power dictated the collecting practices of the museum, which is located between an elite summer playground and a year-round rural community that is home to many Native Americans and other people of color.⁹

Whether the Museum of Man or *Art Inside Out*, the objective of these exhibitions has been to demystify the museum institution, to raise questions about the relationship among power, context, reception, and meaning. While updating labels and dioramas or historicizing the museum is no doubt valuable, are these changes enough? Museums must consider the infrastructure and value systems that generated prejudicial practices to begin with and use this self-study to change daily practices in programs, management, and governance. The “new muse-

ology,” or critical museum history, argues that we cannot separate the exhibition from the museum or the method from the meaning of the institution. It is time for a radical examination of the museum’s role in society, or else museums are likely to “find themselves dubbed ‘living fossils.’”¹⁰ This means broadening the definition of who is “qualified” to offer alternative paradigms for the museums of the future.

In their continued efforts at self-examination, museums might also consider the work of artists who have already attempted broad critiques of the institution or of the social “frame” that makes art “Art.” Since Duchamp signed an ordinary urinal, *Fountain* (1917), the uneasy relationship between art and its contextual frame has been a distinct subject matter for artists.¹¹

The early conceptual art and earthworks of the 1960s and 1970s strove to collapse the boundaries between the “white cube” and the world. Members of the Fluxus group, for example, “were bent on subverting the very notions that are central to a museum’s identity: permanence, posterity, quality, authorship.”¹² Daniel Buren also wrote substantial treatises on the function of the museum in preserving, collecting, protecting, and giving status to works of art, questioning, as did Fluxus artists, whether art can exist independently of the institutions that support it.¹³ Beginning in 1968, Buren placed his painted striped canvases in everyday contexts to consider “the gap between an art and non-art context.”¹⁴ Robert Smithson, whose *Spiral Jetty* transcended the boundaries of the museum environment, took a critical position on museums in his writings. To Smithson, the work of art must resist the aesthetic anemia induced by the antiseptic whiteness of the gallery walls. He predicted that “the investigation of the apparatus the artist is threaded through” would become a subject of art itself.¹⁵

This was indeed what transpired. During the 1970s and 1980s it became a given that the

white cube could no longer be regarded as a neutral space.¹⁶ Work by Michael Asher, Louise Lawler, Judith Barry, Andrea Fraser, and Hans Haacke, among others, have critiqued the power structures, value systems, and practices governing galleries and museums and illustrated how context is inseparable from the meaning of an art work and the meaning of the museum experience itself.

How individual choices “frame” the meaning and perceived value of objects has been the subject of work by Michael Asher and Louise Lawler. Asher’s installations in museum settings, such as projects at the Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago, 1979) and the Art Institute of Chicago (1979), have consistently questioned assumptions inherent in museum presentation, turning the museum process inside out and questioning the contradictions between art and its context. Lawler’s photographs of “icons” of modernism as well as her installations using objects from permanent museum collections also consider how the context of the museum, the private collection, or the commercial gallery confers meaning on objects and governs our relationship to art. For the exhibition *A Forest of Signs* (1989), Lawler exhibited her choices from the permanent collection of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, adding her own photographs, labels, printed cards, and paperweights. The project placed a selection of well-known modern art objects from the collection in unexpected contexts, inviting the viewer to ask questions about his or her relationship to the works.

The exhibition *Damaged Goods: Desire and the Economy of the Object* (1986), at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, brought together art works that examined what the critic Hal Foster called the “art/commodity dialectic.” The exhibition design was an “intervention” by artist Judith Barry, known for her highly theoretical environmental installations

that focus on the structure of the relationship between art objects and the viewer. In the case of *Damaged Goods*, Barry drew on the language of the “highly orchestrated environment” of the department store, thereby underscoring the complicitous relationship between artists/museums and the marketplace.

The silent agenda of the museum was further explored in this exhibition by Andrea Fraser, alias “docent, Jane Castleton.” Fraser provided guided “tours” not only of what one sees in the museum but also what is not readily exposed: the implications of the preoccupation with protecting works of art. Her “tour” of the museum’s security systems raised questions about the connection between protecting artifacts and destroying cultures. Fraser’s audio installation for the Austrian pavilion at the 1993 Venice Biennale considered how nationalistic agendas are expressed through a museum’s choice of objects as representative of a particular culture. The piece consisted of conversations by visitors commenting on other pavilions—not on the works of art they contained but on this hidden nationalistic agenda.

Hans Haacke’s explorations of “what the benevolent facade of cultural patronage is intended to conceal” take full advantage of the museum vocabulary: museum banners, excerpts from public relations materials, board lists, and packing crates.¹⁷ Haacke’s work traces the movement of art through the art world “system,” a system governed by social, economic, and political interests.

Recently there has been a reconciliation between artists and the museum, suggesting that, “notwithstanding its ideological characteristics,” it “might still be preferable to much else as a space for imaginative, contemplative, and critical experiences.”¹⁸ Indeed, artists have returned to the museum, no longer just looking at it as the “apparatus the artist is threaded through” but using its format to create their

own “exhibitions” and “museums,” or acting as “curators,” manipulating permanent collections to question the boundaries of the museum and its usefulness for addressing contemporary aesthetic and social issues.

Orshi Drozdik creates collections of objects reminiscent of those found in the first science museums—objects that resemble inventions, experiments, and models. Drozdik’s work has often focused on the inadequacy of scientific language and investigation to describe physical phenomena. Works such as *Natural History—Botanic, Tubuli (Naming Nature)* (1989), and *Adventure in Technos Dystopium* (1986–89) use as their basis a virtuoso display of the artist’s knowledge of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century science, including its paraphernalia. In addition, the resemblance of her objects to actual antiques gives them a sense of authenticity. Consequently, her work causes one to meditate on “the fate of all things to end up as curiosities in an unknowable future”—not unlike what happens in the average museum.¹⁹

Mike Kelley’s *The Uncanny* (1993), created for Sonsbeek ’93, included historical artifacts, photographs, art objects, toys, and film stills all linked by their oblique reference to the current vogue for exhibitions about the body. Showing blatant disregard for traditional categories of objects and taste, all of the objects, artfully arranged, were given the same value and importance. Their sheer quantity numbed the viewer to the obvious fetishistic quality of the artifacts. By extension, Kelley’s installation became an ironic metaphor for the fetishizing of curators.

If artists as curators of their own exhibition is no longer uncommon, neither is the artist-created museum or collection. Early examples include Marcel Duchamp’s *La Boîte-en-Valise* (first version, 1941), Marcel Broodthaers’s *Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (1968–1972) and the Fluxus Group’s invented museums, which existed on paper or in concept but nowhere else.

The artist-exhibition, an installation with the characteristics of a “real” exhibition, often takes museology as its theme. Barbara Bloom’s *The Reign of Narcissism* (1989) was a parody of a famous writer museum using what appeared to be a collection of furniture and miniatures belonging to a “great” author. Images of the artist herself took the form of chocolate cameos, porcelain teacups, and a leatherbound set of books with the artist’s name on their spines. This “vanitas exhibition” illustrated the complicity of the artist and the museum in perpetuating myths of authorship.

More recent artist-created museums include Christian Boltanski’s *Inventory of Objects Belonging to a Young Woman of Charleston* (1991) and *La Réserve du Carnegie International 1896–1991* (1991), Sophie Calle’s *Ghosts* (1991–92), Lawrence Gipes’s *Century of Progress Museum* (1992) and Ann Fessler’s *Art History Lesson* (1993). Judith Barry has even posited a museum entirely in the mind. As part of the 1991 Carnegie International, she created a mnemonic museum, one created within the memory, using an ancient recall system activated by the viewer.²⁰

These artists use museological practices to confront the ways in which museums rewrite history through the politics of collecting and presentation. However, their work often inadvertently reasserts the validity of the museum. A case in point is *Incident at the Museum, or Water Music* (1992) by Ilya Kabakov. Kabakov’s fictitious Barnaul Art Museum was home to the works of Stepan Yakovlevich Koshelev, an equally fictitious social realist painter. Water leaked from a damaged roof over the Barnaul’s dark, luxuriant, and deserted spaces. The viewer could not separate Koshelev’s art from the dank surroundings and the music created by the dripping water. Only in the quiet of the museum could this “orchestral event” be experienced. Kabakov’s installation questioned the

validity of painting, but it also affirmed the sanctity of the museum. Commenting on the importance of its sacred quality, Kabakov insists that this work "does not treat museums ironically. It is an apotheosis of the museum and should be considered as such."²¹

One particular artist-museum goes further than any other in resisting the critical vocabulary of either museology or museumist art. With its official nonprofit status, engraved formal letterhead, museum shop, and exhibitions with "scholarly" publications, David Wilson's storefront Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles provides all the evidence required to pass muster as a "proper" museum. In its usurpation of museological language and its defiance of the objective rationalism of the modern museum, Wilson's museum validates the contradiction, ambiguity, and idiosyncrasy found in early natural history museums, with their relics, curios, and specimens. Wilson's method is to lead the museum visitor from the familiar to the unfamiliar by presenting quasi-scientific exhibitions that redefine the concept of what knowledge is. It achieves this by caricaturing traditional scholarship and re-invoking the slightly sham oddness and exhibitionism of early museological ventures: the displays of relics and curiosities in medieval parish churches (such as the Abbey of Corbie), universities (such as Leyden), and early public collections (such as Elias Ashmole's and, of course, Mr. Peale's museums). But Wilson also subverts postmodern notions of a metmuseum. Is his curiosity collection the first serious museum of museology? An anachronistic rendering of eighteenth-century science museums? A parody of "museumism"? Wilson has shrewdly contrived to so thoroughly conflate the boundaries of his institution as a museum of science and as a postmodern art installation that the Museum of Jurassic Technology defies critical language.²²

It is now common for artists to "raid the icebox"—as Andy Warhol did at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum in 1970—curating exhibitions drawn from the museum's permanent collection and using personal criteria to determine what will be seen and how. Drawing from the museum's storage vaults, Warhol found in the inaccessible and over-stuffed closets of objects a treasure trove of endlessly fascinating bric-a-brac—the more ordinary the better. His exhibition included jars, shoes (slippers, pattens, mules, oxfords, pumps for the opera, pumps with straps, colonial pumps, wedding pumps, riding boots and ice skates, sandals and socks, storm rubbers, bathing shoes, tennis shoes, clogs), parasols, Windsor chairs, and other nearly forgotten bits and pieces that hadn't seen the light of day in decades. Warhol chose merely what he liked, his actions mimicking the subjective criteria of the curatorial staff. He was very specific about his requirements, requesting that catalogs for each item include as much data as possible. In the end, Warhol's own choices became part of the registrar's files on each object and thus "part of their ever expanding meaning."²³

The objective of *At Home with the Collection* by Simon Grennan and Christopher Sperandio (1992) was also to show that the selective criteria used by museum curators are in fact based on personal taste and judgment. The series of three projects used the permanent collection of the Lakeview Museum of Art in Peoria, Illinois. The artists asked members of the museum staff to select their favorite object from the collection and choose a site for it in their own home. In February 1992 the objects were removed from the museum to the chosen home sites and were photographed for a follow-up exhibition. In addition, the artists devised "The Lakeview Questionnaire," requesting staff to respond to personal questions about their work, tastes, habits, and emotions. Charts and graphs

of their responses were hung in the galleries.²⁴

Joseph Kosuth's pointed political installation, *The Play of the Unmentionable* (1992), resembled a traditional exhibition, juxtaposing wall texts and objects from the Brooklyn Museum's permanent collection to review the history of art censorship in the wake of the American "culture wars" over National Endowment for the Arts funding. To create this "exhibition," Kosuth culled artifacts from many departments of the museum, crossing cultures and time periods, acting as both artist and curator. The result clearly illustrated that by deploying rather than denying its position as a site of ideological contest, the museum provides an arena for engaging contemporary issues.

For Sonsbeek '93, Mark Dion worked with the collection of the Bronbeek Royal Veterans Home, a quirky repository of objects that related to Dutch colonialism. His two-part installation juxtaposed a historical re-creation of a curiosity cabinet restored to its original arrangement (using an antique lithograph of an identical cabinet as a blueprint), with another cabinet substituting objects owned and chosen by veterans still living in the home. Dion's activity transformed a fruitless effort to objectify an essentially unclassifiable group of static objects into a "living" museum in which the remaining veterans and their personal associations played a crucial role.

In 1993, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Ghent presented *Rendez(-)vous*, a series of "curated" mini-exhibitions using a collection of favorite personal objects donated by the local citizenry. In an open invitation, residents of Ghent brought their valued mementos to the museum and told the stories behind the objects. The museum, in turn, offered the objects to artists Ilya Kabakov, Henk Visch, Jimmie Durham, and Huang Yong Ping, who were asked to discover new relationships between the objects through exhibitions of their making. Like other installations using permanent collections, *Rendez(-)*

vous considers the function of the museum in structuring our relation to art and to culture.

In a slight twist on artists working with collections to create their own art, the Austrian Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna (MAK) invited ten contemporary artists to reinstall the museum's permanent collection (1986–1993). The MAK project brought these artists and its curators together in order to bring new perspectives to the objects in the collection. According to the museum's director, Peter Noever, the artists pursued personal display and interpretation strategies, while remaining mindful of their primary task—to add a contemporary dimension to the viewing experience without "self presentation."²⁵ The artists in this project achieved a parity with the curatorial staff.

What are the implications of such activities? From dissecting the museum apparatus to mastering it on its own terms, artists have not only returned to the museum as a site of activity but have also reshaped the institution in permanent ways that will affect the ways audiences see collections in the future.

Yet these types of projects and installations—*The Museum Looks at Itself* or *The Artist Looks at the Museum*—have formed a veritable movement within museums that students may well find termed "museumism" in the next edition of H. W. Janson's *History of Art*. This genre, "built on the museum's ruins," has increasingly become politically neutralized, now coexisting comfortably within the archetypal white cube it intended to critique.²⁶ In short, as a result of being called art, acquired for the collection, and exhibited like a Matisse or a Chippendale chair, artwork that laid political and ethical landmines to explode the ideological apparatus of museums is often defused.

Although critical in nature, these museum-based works have had to avoid direct discussion of the relation of a commissioning museum to issues of race, a subject that most museums

would prefer to sidestep.²⁷ This should hardly be surprising, for, as Maurice Berger has pointed out, “most art museums offer little more than lip service to the issue of racial inclusion. Art that demonstrates its ‘difference’ from the mainstream or that challenges dominant values is rarely acceptable to white curators, administrators, and patrons.”²⁸

Fred Wilson’s *Mining the Museum* attempts to address this challenge by examining the ideological apparatus of the museum in general and by exploring how one museum in particular has ignored the histories of people of color. Wilson’s method, as an artist-in-residence, was to study closely the Maryland Historical Society’s collection of art and artifacts, read extensively in the society’s archives, and then install objects of his choosing so as to raise questions about the ways museums represent (or fail to represent) African-Americans and Native Americans. The entire third floor of the society was given over to the installation, which featured well over one hundred objects.

Mining the Museum examined how the Maryland Historical Society defines itself and how this self-definition determines whose history has been included (or excluded) in its narrative of Maryland history. It also addressed how those excluded have come to view the museum. The project dealt with the power of objects to speak when the “laws” governing museum practices are expanded and the artificial boundaries museums build are removed. It considered how deconstructing the museum apparatus can transform it into a space for ongoing cultural debate.

Wilson’s exhibit represented a departure from the “museumism” genre. For it is one thing to talk about race and museums in an alternative space or a hip commercial gallery, but it is quite another to address it in an established museum by using its own collection and its own history.

Wilson’s insights into the ways museums

shape our understanding of cultural artifacts first surfaced in his *Rooms with a View: The Struggle Between Culture, Content, and Context in Art*, an exhibition he curated for the Bronx Council of the Arts in 1987–88. Each of three distinct spaces in the installation simulated display environments referring to different types of museums: ethnographic, Victorian “salon,” and the minimalist space of a contemporary gallery. In each room Wilson placed different works by thirty artists, surrounded by the accoutrements appropriate to the specialized space. The “ethnographic 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 set on ornate pedestals. The “white cube gallery” gave the works the necessary “cutting-edge” mystique to certify them as contemporary art. The new contexts so thoroughly transformed the audience perceptions of the artwork that Wilson decided to take on the museum itself in his own work. Describing his reasons for choosing the museum as his aesthetic preoccupation, Wilson said, “It is there that those of us who work toward alternative visions receive our so-called ‘inspiration.’ It is where we get hot under the collar and decide to do something about it.”²⁹

His next series of installations employed a mock exhibition format, using reproductions and artifacts that he coyly manipulated to parody curatorial practices. Wilson acquired his “museum collections” from street vendors and occasionally castoffs from the deaccessioning process through which museums cleared their basements of Victorian exhibition gear, politically incorrect dioramas, and taxidermic objects. Wilson’s working method made “use [of] the whole environment of the museum as my palette, as my vocabulary. I sort of look at everything and try to distill it and re-use it [to] squeeze it of its meaning and try to reinvent [it].”³⁰

Visitors to *The Other Museum*, (1990–91) at White Columns and the Washington Project for the Arts viewed African trade masks blindfolded with the flags of French and British colonizers. Others were labeled “stolen from the Zonge tribe,” highlighting how museum euphemisms whitewash the acquisition of such objects. These “spoils” were displayed in dramatic colored spaces with theatrical lighting, sometimes animated with the addition of video special effects.³¹ This method, according to Wilson, illustrated how the aesthetization by museums “anesthetizes their historic importance...certainly covers up the colonial history...which keeps imperial attitudes going within the museum.”³² The project also displayed “The Last Ancestor from the Last Excavation of the Last Sacred Burial Site,” “The Vertebrae of the Last Large Mammal,” and “The Last Murdered Black Youth,” created just after the murder of Yusuf K. Hawkins in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. Wilson used the face of one of the Scottsboro boys in “Murdered Black Youth” because he “was interested in the connection between abuse of African-American men over a period of years, over a history of the United States and of course now with Rodney King it’s all the more poignant.”³³

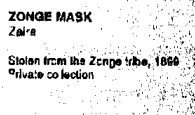
Wilson’s *Primitivism: High and Low* (1991), at Metro Pictures Gallery, parodied two controversial exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* and *High and Low*, in addressing how museums think of “the cultural other,” that is, nonwhite, non-Western peoples and their histories. A group of skele-



Fred Wilson, “Spoil #2,” detail from *The Other Museum*, 1990–91. Courtesy of the artist.



Fred Wilson, *The Other Museum*, 1990–91, detail: view of blindfolded trade masks. Courtesy of the artist.



Fred Wilson, “Zonge Mask,” label from *The Other Museum*, 1990–91. Courtesy of the artist.

tons, “friendly natives,” were labeled “Someone’s Mother,” “Someone’s Sister,” and so on to recall the controversy over returning human remains to native populations and the loss of humanity that necessarily occurs when museums exhibit them as mere objects. In “Picasso/Who Rules?” the figures in a reproduction of Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* wore tribal masks. Viewers peering into their eyes were met by eyes of two Senegalese people and Wilson on a videotape ask-

ing such questions as, “If my contemporary art is your traditional art, is my art your cliché?” and, “If your contemporary art is my traditional art, is your art my cliché?” “If the world is so small,” Wilson asked, “how can we come up with a new way of looking at art using all the philosophies and...histories about art to create something really new and vibrant?”³⁴

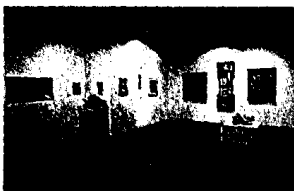
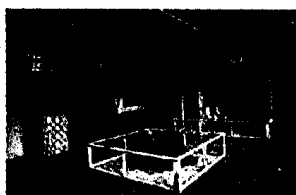
Another of Wilson’s pieces, *Guarded View*, posed black mannequins in museum security uniforms on a display platform, a reminder of the invisible role played by people of color in museums. Remarked Wilson, “The majority of museum guards...tend to be African-American....Many of the museums on the East Coast pride themselves, and get...funds...for having such large minority employment. But actually all the employment is in the guards, and the fact that they’re in that level of the museum and not on the upper [management and governance] levels, affects the kind of artwork that’s displayed and the kind of visitor that comes through the door.”³⁵ A year later, Wilson created a performance on the same theme at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Invited by the



Fred Wilson,
"The Last Murdered
Black Youth,"
detail from *The Other
Museum*, 1991.
Courtesy of the Artist.

museum to give a tour to the staff and docents, he greeted them and arranged to meet them elsewhere in the museum. Changing into a guard's uniform, Wilson took up a post in the room where the group was waiting for the artist they had met just a few minutes earlier. He was suddenly invisible to them; the docents

paced in the galleries anxiously looking for him, walking by him time and again. Wilson exposed his ploy by identifying himself to them later. This performance proved that the point of *Guarded View* was irrefutably accurate.

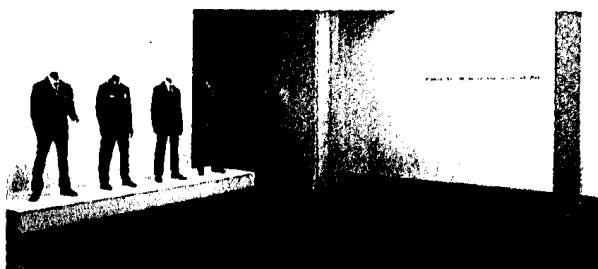


Fred Wilson, *Rooms with
a View*, (three views),
Longwood Art Gallery,
Bronx Council on the Arts,
1987–88. Courtesy of the Artist.

Mining the Museum was a departure from Wilson's working method in several ways. The project would provide him an opportunity to take his museological message into a traditional historical museum, working with actual artifacts for the first time. The participating institutions would also regard Wilson not only as an "artist" but as a project director on staff, with control over the final conception and design of his "exhibition." Nor would Wilson create a "generic" museumist installation; his product would explore the specific history of the host institution. And, finally, the project was intended to provoke dialogues *within* museums, not only *about* them.



Fred Wilson, "Picasso/Who Rules?" detail from
Primitivism: High and Low, 1991. Courtesy Metro Pictures.



Fred Wilson, "Guarded View," detail from *Primitivism:
High and Low*, 1991. Courtesy Metro Pictures.

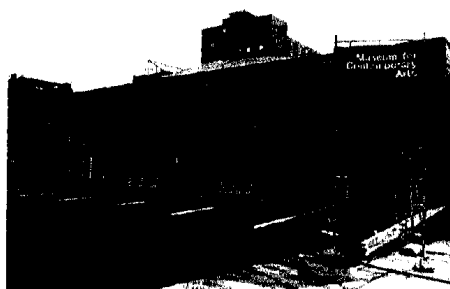
The idea for *Mining the Museum* first arose in May 1991, when *The Contemporary*, a young "roving museum," was about to open an exhibition in a former Greyhound terminal abutting the Maryland Historical Society's parking lot. Its staff had an informal meeting with the executive director of the society, who spoke openly about his desire to bring his traditional historical institution "up-to-date." He expressed the need to reflect current concerns and public interests, and he was seeking ways to develop an audience that reflected the cultural diversity of the community. He made an off-the-cuff suggestion that *The Contemporary* and the Maryland Historical Society—two very different institutions, indeed—might someday find an opportunity to work together.

Not long afterward, *The Contemporary* invited Wilson to Baltimore to create an installation using the permanent collection of one of the city's museums. This type of project ideally suited the mission of *The Contemporary*, which aims to disrupt expectations and definitions of museums with each project it undertakes. Opt-

ing to program without a collection or permanent space yet calling itself a "museum," it has mounted exhibitions in an abandoned bus garage, an old Buick dealership, a deserted dance hall, and the bed of a 1959 Chevy pickup truck.

Wilson visited many of Baltimore's museums, but he chose the historical society, remarking later that when he walked through the front door the first time he said to himself, "This is it." The Contemporary returned to the Maryland Historical Society, suggesting they jointly sponsor a year-long residency by the artist with a view toward presenting a collaborative project for the American Association of Museums conference. The Contemporary intended for *Mining the Museum* to be designed to address the "crisis of identity" facing museums in the most direct way possible and to offer a particular, localized model for change.

The "meaning" of *Mining the Museum* cannot be separated from the museum in which it took place. Incorporated in 1844, the Maryland Historical Society was founded to collect, preserve, and study objects and documents related to the state's history "in reference to any remarkable event or character, especially biographical memoirs and anecdotes of distinguished persons." This mission included histories of "colonization, slavery and abolition" and "any facts or reasoning that may illustrate the doubtful question of the origin of the North American tribes."³⁶ Yet the museum intended to tell those histories from the point of view of the society's all-male founding board. They conceived of the institution as "a club...serving their social and intellectual needs." Its first exhibitions were presented exclusively for



The Contemporary at the former Greyhound Service Terminal, 1991.

Photo: Debra Mazzoleni, courtesy of The Contemporary.

members. In keeping with "the social aspects of the original Society...membership has expanded" in this century, according to a past president writing in 1987, "to include women and children."³⁷

The Maryland Historical Society is similar to many of the nation's first historical societies, which appeared in the decade just after the American

Revolution. These institutions, founded by amateur historians and naturalists from "distinguished" families, were created as a response to the circuslike environment of dime museums.³⁸

Thus, the Maryland Historical Society's early collecting efforts reflect a "gentleman's" interests of the antebellum era, focusing first on honoring the memory of Maryland's revolutionary statesmen, since the institution's founding members were the descendants of the state's patriots and military heroes. Greek vases, models of ships, seashells, butterflies and phenomena of the natural world, coins, autographs, diaries, maps, genealogical tables, and family papers were also donated. Portraits of these statesmen, business leaders, and other members of the social, political, and cultural elite stand guard in the galleries.³⁹

Today, the collection on display strictly follows the Winterthur tradition, with furniture, silver, and other domestic objects exhibited as "decorative arts." Their preciousness is enhanced by the cosmetic assistance of lighting, fine-fabric backdrops, and various mounting devices that elevate them above and beyond the reach of visitors. Although the chief curator is committed to collecting contemporary material culture, there is little to none in evidence on a regular basis. Women are represented by handicrafts, period fashions, historical por-

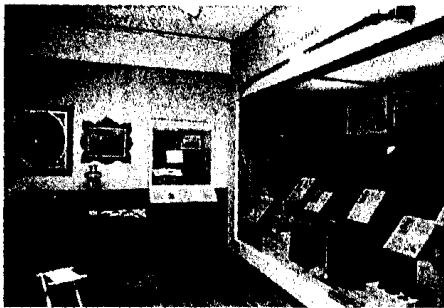


The Maryland Historical Society, Thomas & Hugg Parlour showing a musical evening in a Baltimore drawing room, ca. 1870.

Photo: Jeff Goldman, courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society.

The Maryland Historical Society, installation of objects referring to the life of Eubie Blake. Gift of the Estate of Eubie Blake.

Photo: Jeff Goldman, courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society.



The Maryland Historical Society, A House Divided: Maryland in the Civil War, detail.

Photo: Jeff Goldman, courtesy of the Maryland Historical Society.

traits, and a collection of paintings by Sarah Miriam Peale. Scant attention is paid to nonaffluent or nonwhite communities. No reference is made to the civil rights riots that devastated Baltimore in 1968–69. In fact, reference to the African-American experience comes by way of two vitrines devoted to jazz musician Eubie Blake, where an outdated push-button device plays a minute's worth of his music on cue. The slave system that divided the state in the Civil War is but briefly cited in a room entitled "Blue against Grey." The life of freed blacks is refer-

enced in a painting in the maritime collection of Isaac Myers, the first African-American owner of a Maryland shipyard. The Darnall Children's Museum, filled with dioramas and interactive puzzles for young audiences on important events in Maryland history, contains virtually the only other mention of people of color in the museum. The teaching section includes information about the underground railroad, slavery, and native populations. This, then, was the situation to be mined or "undermined" by Wilson when he began regular visits to the museum in the fall of 1991.

When staff from The Contemporary presented the idea of working with Wilson to the society's director, they sought agreement on the following ground rules. The Maryland Historical Society would not refuse Wilson access to any part of the collection and would accommodate whatever requests he made, and Wilson would become part of the project staff, wearing whichever hats were required: curator, registrar, archivist, director, or trustee. He was ultimately given the office space of the president of the board of directors as a "studio" for his residency, a symbolic gesture that did not elude him.

It was critical to the project's success that both institutions be willing to relinquish their control as part of the collaborative process. Rather than work with existing staff who already had a set vision of the collection, The Contemporary arranged that Wilson be assisted in his research by independent volunteers with expertise in African-American local and state history, astronomy, and museum history. The result was that Wilson excavated important new information about objects and, in several cases, discovered objects not known to exist by any museum staff. Close to one hundred individuals ultimately worked with the artist.

The museums broke with the usual practice of having the education staff create didactic materials before the opening. Relinquishing

power also meant making no assumptions about what the audience needed or wanted to know about *Mining the Museum*. Thus, several weeks into the exhibition schedule audience “experts” were polled. Guards, volunteer guides, the receptionist, and the gift shop manager were asked to help make a list of the most commonly asked questions about the installation. From their responses, a simple photocopied handout was developed.

Wilson’s manipulation of the museum, and of the audience’s assumptions, began at the entrance to the building. The signage for *Mining the Museum* juxtaposed the expected with the unexpected through the guise of familiar museum language. A red, green, and black exhibition banner hung beside the official museum sign announced to “other” audiences that “another” history was now being told inside. Then, in a brief videotape shown in the lobby, Wilson defined the museum as a place “where anything can happen,” a space designed to “make you think, to make you question.” He asked the visitors to consider what had changed as a result of his mining the museum.

The video also functioned as a “signed curator’s statement.” The artist declared that the installation represented *his* vision of the Maryland Historical Society. In various statements, he has emphasized the need for museums to validate the personal perspective. “Whether they admit it or not, curators bring who they are to the creation of exhibitions.” It is personal history that forms the basis of a lingering engagement with the past. Objects, he argues, become “generic and lifeless” outside this context. To develop *Mining the Museum*, Wilson himself began with his own history. As he described his working process, “I go in with no script, nothing whatsoever in my head. I try to get to know the community that the museum is in, the institution, the structure of the museum, the people in the museum from the maintenance



Fred Wilson, Mining the Museum, 1992, detail, Truth Trophy and Pedestals. Photo: Mary Connor and Anna Sobaski, courtesy of The Contemporary.

crew to the executive director. I ask them about the world, the museum, and their jobs, as well as the objects themselves. I look at the relationship between what is on view and what is not on view. I never know where the process will lead me, but it often leads me back to myself, to my own experiences.”⁴⁰ Wilson’s fear of imposing a personal moral statement on others led him to use the questioning process as the organizing principle of his work so that the visitor looks at *Mining the Museum* and asks “Where am *I* in all this?” in relation to Wilson’s vision.

When the audience exited the elevator, they literally stepped into Wilson’s artwork. In the first room, a silver-and-gold “Truth Trophy awarded until 1922 for Truth in Advertising” encapsulates the issues at the heart of *Mining the Museum*. The trophy, surrounded by “acrylic mounts, maker unknown, c. 1960s,” sits between three white pedestals bearing white marble busts of Napoleon Bonaparte, Henry Clay, and Andrew Jackson (none of whom had particularly significant impact on Maryland history) and three vacant black pedestals 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? Whose truth is on exhibit at the Maryland Historical Society? Whose history is being told? Who writes it? Who owns it?

In an adjoining room, Wilson addresses his Native American heritage. Cigar store Indians turn their backs to the viewer and confront photographs of "real" Indians. A label, "Portraits of Cigar Store Owners," implies that the lumbering wooden figures tell us more about the stereotypes held by their owners than about Native Americans.⁴¹ In a case labeled "Collection of Numbers," arrowheads are used as display devices to exhibit acquisition numbers, a reversal of the usual hierarchy. The museum's compulsion to amass objects, privileging their collecting, cataloging, and classifying, says far more about the pathology and value systems of the curators than about native communities. Thus, Wilson also establishes that *Mining the Museum* will explore not *what* the objects mean but *how* they mean.⁴²

In the next room, Wilson literally gives "voice" to those left out of the museum's historical narrative and restores their identities. When a viewer steps toward four dimly lit paintings, spotlights and hidden sound effects are triggered to highlight the African-American children represented. A boy asks, "Am I your brother? Am I your friend? Am I your pet?," alluding to both the metal collar he wears and the biblical quotation, "Am I my brother's keeper?"⁴³ Two black boys tucked into the upper and lower portions of a painting of white children (a stock device for balancing the central composition in classical group portraiture) whisper, "Who am I? Where did I come from? Where did I go? What do I dream?" A girl standing at the periphery of a family portrait asks, "Who combs my hair? Who calms me when I'm afraid?" "Who is she?" the audience is compelled to ask. Like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, "Everyone knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name."⁴⁴ Seen in faint profile, her ghostly form is a mere wash of thinly applied pigment, transparent, insubstantial.⁴⁵

The fractured surface of an unknown por-

trait of a white man by Henry Bebie is lit from behind by the videotape of a black man. The video tells the story of the unknown sitter: he is the son of the white master who raped his enslaved mother who, as the voice says, "nobody knows" is inside.⁴⁶ By choosing to display this damaged picture, Wilson violates another museum taboo. Damaged goods are an institutional shame hidden in the recesses of vaults, discreetly out of public view. The exposure of this private shame functions as a metaphor for the hidden shame of the animated figure whose torn white surface can no longer conceal the black face within. Initially, museum guides wanted to avoid discussion of this object in their tours of *Mining the Museum*. However, during a training session one guide, a doctor who had been a docent for many years and whom they had taken as white, revealed that the picture also told *his* story. Thereafter, the guides included the Bebie portrait.

By seeking to "recover" the history of the individuals represented in these works, Wilson made some startling discoveries about other pieces installed in the same room. The identities of slaves depicted in a rare painting of workers in the fields of a plantation were added to the label when an inventory book listing their names along with other household items and animals owned by the plantation was retrieved from the society's archives. The same inventory book appears later in the exhibition, opened beneath a replica slave ship. Joshua and Easter, whom we can identify in the painting, are listed alongside oxen and chickens, each valued for their utility in the household. Oxen, in fact, cost more than slaves.

Enlarging a detail of a black figure in the background of a photograph, *Picnic at Wye House*, the artist discovered that the scene depicted a reunion of former slaves and their owners. One man had worked in the kitchen, established himself as a caterer, and returned to service the affair.

But despite his excavations, many of the individuals represented in the images chosen by Wilson could not be identified. Wilson saw this as an opportunity to pose unanswerable questions and to invite imaginative conjecture. Engravings of Baltimore, for example, were covered lightly with glassine, obscuring the views of the city except for a tiny circle cut out to reveal the African-American figures depicted. The viewer begins to ask the questions voiced by the “talking” paintings: Who are they? Where did they come from? Where did they go? A portrait of a well-known white family by the African-American artist Joshua Johnson is labeled in French “*Où est mon visage?*” [Where is my face?], a reference to the paucity of information known about this free man of color who painted portraits in Baltimore from 1795 to 1825 and who was believed to be from the French West Indies.⁴⁷ In watercolors depicting the daily activities of slaves by Benjamin Latrobe, Wilson uses the names “Easter” and “Joseph.” From family account books, he assigned possible identities to these individuals whom Latrobe chose to observe but not to name. An Ernst Fisher painting is given two labels, *Country Life* and “Frederick Serving Fruit.” Asking “Where am I in this painting?” Wilson inserts himself in the place of the black serving boy who is “seen” or not seen, depending on which label we choose to apply. In this way, Wilson’s process of “naming” is linked to his astute consciousness of the ways texts frame our vision of museum objects and, in the process, elide the identities of those its ideological boundary does not contain.

In subsequent areas of the installation labeled “Metalwork 1793–1880,” “Modes of



Fred Wilson, Mining the Museum, 1992, detail, painting by Joshua Johnson with label by the artist, “Où est mon visage?”

Photo: Mary Connor and Anna Sobaski, courtesy of The Contemporary.

Transport,” and “Cabinetmaking 1820–1960,” Wilson illustrates how museum classification, by hygienically separating history into clean compartments, creates a tidy structure of institutional denial. “Metalwork” juxtaposes Baltimore repoussé silver with iron slave shackles, making the point that a luxury economy was built on the system of slavery.⁴⁸ “Modes of Transport” examines who traveled

in colonial Maryland, why, and how. The room features a sedan chair displayed beside a model slave ship and a painting depicting a similar chair in use. Selective lighting on the painting highlights who carried whom in the once lavishly decorated chair. (Wilson was emphatic about leaving the dust that had gathered on the poorly conserved chair while in storage. He again makes the point that the issue of “quality...the hidden dagger of ‘my taste,’” is used as an excuse for avoiding the exhibition of such an object.) A Ku Klux Klan hood, discovered in an unknown house in nearby Towson and given by an “anonymous donor,” takes the place of pram linens in an antique baby carriage. A nearby photograph shows black nannies pushing similar prams, rearing their future oppressors.⁴⁹

Wilson also uses labels to reveal the strange historical coincidences between objects that are assumed to be unrelated. The rhetorical similarities between language used to describe tolling for ducks and tracking runaways seem hardly coincidental when placed beside a broadside that tells how one escaped slave “decoyed” another. The artist reinforces the point by surrounding a toy figure of a running black soldier in a Zouave uniform with oversized duck decoys. Within the blood-red room, placed on similarly hued damask, this

figure is "targeted" by an obscenely large punt gun. The perimeter of the space is ringed by photographic enlargements of broadsides posted for the return of runaways. Raised off the surface of the broadsides are phrases used to identify the slaves, all describing the results of physical maltreatment: "his shin occasioned by a kick," "he hesitates when spoken to." They serve as a reminder of the difficult road to freedom taken by Richard, Ned, Job, and Easter, whose life the viewer has glimpsed in the fields of Perry Hall and on the Latrobe Plantation.

The brutality of the decoy room, with its curious shift in scale, dominating diagonal positioning of the punt gun, and dramatic red walls, signals an abrupt change in pitch from the cool grays and colonial greens in the first third of the installation. Wilson now brings the violence of forced servitude into close focus. Just beyond the decoy room a modest arrangement depicts a woman field hand toiling under the whip of an *Overseer Doing His Duty*. Beneath, the original broadside offering a reward for Easter's return rests beside an iron bootjack used to scrape and remove dirty boots before entering the home. Cast in the form of a woman on her back with legs splayed, arms outstretched, and an unpainted black metal face, Wilson reminds us how Easter's body bore the heel of her master, both literally and figuratively.

Within the same space, a whipping post, used until 1938 in front of the Baltimore city jail, is raised on a platform, surrounded by period chairs of different styles. Each chair was chosen to suggest a distinct social class: clergy, middle class, blue blood, businessman. The chairs gaze voyeuristically at the crucifix-like shape on a raised platform.⁵⁰ Many visitors commented on the strange resemblance of its austere form and rugged texture to contemporary assemblages. Read in this way, Wilson illustrates again how aestheticizing objects represses the pain and complexity dwelling

within them. By labeling the room "Cabinet-making 1820-1960," he uses this section of the installation, with the whipping post that had been in storage for years alongside fine antique cabinets, to remind us how truly perverse the museum classification system can be.

In a sense, the whipping post acts as a threshold between the first red passage and a second. The second passage inverts the hierarchy of power, shedding light on active resistance by blacks to the slave system. Slide projections, flashing like rapid gunfire, spray the names of these rebellious slaves over the red walls, exaggerating the violent tenor of the room. An arcadian view of Harper's Ferry abuts John Brown's pikes. The room depicts an inversion of the power relations between slave and master described on the other side of the wall. To emphasize this inversion, Wilson again juxtaposes disproportionately large and small objects. Another black toy, this time a crudely made, gigantic figure of a shrunken old black man, is placed within the tiny domestic setting of a dollhouse.⁵¹ Around him, small white dolls appear to have been the subjects of a massacre. Another black figure stands watch in a doorway. Our relationship to dollhouse figures is usually one in which the viewer has a sense of dominance and control over the arrangement of rooms and the fictive activities within them. However, in Wilson's dollhouse, the outsized figure disrupts that control and becomes a container for apprehension and fear.⁵² Here, the small running figure targeted by the punt gun takes on the grotesque proportions of a nightmare in a scene reminiscent of Nat Turner's rebellion. Panic over a "negro uprising," chronicled in a diary on display, provides insight into the mythological proportions the rebellious slave took on in the white imagination.⁵³

By 1831, word of Nat Turner's rebellion in the Dismal Swamp area of Virginia had spread throughout Maryland. Fearful of the conse-

quences of the uprisings, a state-appointed commission recommended the forced repatriation of Maryland blacks to Liberia. The decision was rejected by free-black leadership, who stated in 1831 that they believed "the land in which we were born is our only 'true and appropriate home' and when we desire to remove we will apprise the public of the same in due season." The commission's recommendation was never implemented successfully. Six years later, Liberia had a settlement of only two hundred repatriated blacks.⁵⁴

The next room is a blue corridor displaying a basket, a jug, and a rocking chair made by enslaved African-Americans with objects made by Africans from Liberia. The blue suggests water, perhaps the passage over the ocean of enslaved blacks from Africa and back again.

Before *Mining the Museum*, only the jug, made by the slave Melinda, had been exhibited, and few had seen the Liberian objects until Wilson inadvertently discovered them after finding registrar's cards suggesting the society owned objects from Africa. In fact, when Wilson stumbled on them, it was virtually the first time the wooden tourist box with its ticket of passage to Africa had been seen by the museum staff since being given to the society in the mid-nineteenth century. Yet, given the paucity of objects in the collection that were representative of the African-American experience, let alone the diaspora, one must ask, Why did these items pass into the collection at all?

It is not widely known that the Maryland Historical Society had close ties to the Colonization Society, the group responsible for establishing a colony in Liberia for the return of freed slaves. According to the society's curator Mary Ellen Hayward:

The Colonization Society movement suggested a new life in Africa as a solution to the growing problem of free blacks. Founded on a national level in 1817 and vigorously sup-

ported by many prominent Baltimoreans, colonization wrapped racist sentiments in a moral package that was always doomed to failure. Until 1832, Maryland had a part in the national effort, sending manumitted slaves and free black volunteers to the new settlement of Monrovia in Liberia on the west coast of Africa. In that year, the state chartered a separate Maryland colony to be known as "Maryland in Liberia" and set aside \$20,000 for 1832 and up to \$200,000 over the next twenty years to facilitate the "removal of coloured people" to Africa.⁵⁵

In fact, many of the founders of the historical society were members of the Colonization Society, a fact that goes unmentioned in much historical society literature. The question must be raised: What was the connection between the early collecting policies of the society and the political position of its founding board with regard to the "problem of freed blacks"? Why was the historical society actually founded?⁵⁶

At the end of the corridor hangs a painting of *Maryland in Liberia* by John H. B. Latrobe, "the prime mover in the organization of the society" and president for more than twenty years.⁵⁷ What function might this bucolic piece of exotica, with its frilly palm fronds, friendly natives, and landscape we might call "Africa on the Chesapeake," have served? What does his representation of the colony tell us about the Colonization Society's "vision" for Liberia and its vision for the Maryland Historical Society? Did the society's founders intend for the museum to function as a space in which they might persuade others of their politics on matters of race?⁵⁸

The blue corridor is in some ways the most conventional space in *Mining the Museum*. Wilson has neither employed theatrical effects nor parodied museum techniques as he has elsewhere in the installation. And yet it is one of the most affecting in the exhibition. The woven shawl, straw basket, and cane seat of a chair used to rock another woman's children all give

voice to a shared history born in Africa, but they also speak to the unbridgeable divide that persisted between native Africans and those born of enslaved Africans in America.⁵⁹

The final section focuses on the “aspirations and dreams and achievements of African Americans in and outside of slavery.”⁶⁰ The centerpiece, an astronomical journal kept by Benjamin Banneker, is one of the few objects in the collection made by a well-known African-American. Banneker was hired by Thomas Jefferson to help survey Washington, D.C. His journal contains a letter sent by Banneker to Jefferson urging him to abolish slavery and stating that his life’s work was not only about mathematics but also about trying to save his people. “Sir I freely and Chearfully acknowledge, that I am of the African race.”

Assisted by an astronomer from the Hubble Space Telescope Center at the Johns Hopkins University, Wilson studied the journal and located software that could generate images of the night sky as Banneker saw it. This was loaded into an IBM computer, a dutifully labeled relic. Wilson employed slide projections of the astronomer’s drawings of the evening skies so that other pages from Banneker’s journal could be read. This otherworldly environment emphasizes the second function of the journal as a diary in which Banneker could keep track of his dreams. His tormented apparitions, placed in wall texts around the projections, tell the story of how a distinguished free black was no less immune to the oppression of the slavery system than were his enslaved brothers and sisters. The exhibition ends with a globe used in Banneker’s time: by formally and metaphorically echoing the opening Truth Trophy, the installation comes full circle.

An eight-year-old child visiting the exhibition said of *Mining the Museum*, “I like Fred Wilson, he asks more questions than he answers.” Put another way, by questioning how omissions

from cultural and historical narratives occur, Wilson provides a strategy for the audience to reclaim the terrain of the museum for itself. His placement of the Truth Trophy argues, as cultural critic Dick Hebdige has stated, “The intellectual, the critic, the artist can no longer claim to have privileged access to the Truth or even to knowledge, at least to the knowledge that counts.”⁶¹ What remains is the possibility of “mining” knowledge, prospecting for precious, invisible details, exploding historical myths and undermining the ideological foundations that support them, in order to make cultural experiences “mine” by participating in the process of writing and presenting history.

But an ethics of questioning should lead to *further* questioning, and especially to self-questioning. To conclude, one must ask, What is next? Where will *Mining the Museum* lead?⁶² Will the project now spawn a series of exhibitions that lack the ethical or epistemological imperative of the original? Often the admission of a dysfunctional past is used to disarm adversarial criticism. If reform is only skin deep, it can be easily co-opted by a recalcitrant establishment. If this should happen, what does it imply for real reform of museum practice, for real ideological change?

“The question of color,” wrote James Baldwin, “takes up much space in these pages, but the question of color, especially in this country, operates to hide the graver question of the self.”⁶³ Museums, by implication, need not only mine the history they have repressed but also explore their own roles in that repression. The first step is for museums to look within themselves, to explore their own histories, and to ask, as Fred Wilson did, “Where am I here?” But if they are to hear the answers, they must also begin to listen to voices other than their own, voices that continue to demand their own answers to the question “Where am I in the museum?”

NOTES

- ¹ Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, "The Universal Survey Museum," *Art History* 3, no. 4 (December 1980), pp. 448–69.
- ² See Alan Wallach, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 1992, pp. B2–B3.
- ³ In a curious way, Jesse Helms probably succeeded better than museologists, curators, and theorists in drawing public attention to the museum as a politically charged space of contention.
- ⁴ As Louis Althusser argued, it is the ideological apparatus of cultural institutions that "may be not only the stake, but also the site of class struggle, and often of bitter forms of class struggle." See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in his *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review, 1971), pp. 127–86.
- ⁵ Mieke Bal has brought this perspective to bear on museums. Remarking on the tone of self-congratulation evident in the *Official Guide to the American Museum of Natural History* (1984), for example, she theorizes, "The emphatic and repeated representation of the extent of the institution's ambition signals a certain unease about itself, a lack of self-evidence that harbors the conflicts out of which it emerged and within which it stands, an 'unsettlement.' There is nothing surprising about this anxiety: the museum is a product of colonialism in a postcolonial era." This unsettlement bespeaks the museum's fear of being "an endangered self," frantically engaging in "the museal preservation of a project ruthlessly dated and belonging to an age long gone whose ideological goals have been subjected to extensive critique." The museum is being forced to undergo intensive self-reflection "on and of its own ideological position and history." See Mieke Bal, "Telling, Showing, Showing Off," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 3 (Spring 1992), p. 558.
- ⁶ For a description of the project see, e.g., Jerry Adler, "The Great Hall of Bacteria," *Newsweek*, December 12, 1992, p. 84.
- ⁷ However, such projects are not without their critics. Ironically the impassioned debate that followed the exhibit's opening created strange bedfellows: one group of protesters was angered over the derogatory representation of the colonials, while others felt slighted by the omission of any African response to imperialism. For an extended discussion of the exhibition and the ensuing controversy, see Simon Ottenberg, "Into the Heart of Africa," *African Arts*, July 1991, pp. 79–82.
- ⁸ Kenneth E. Silver, "Past Imperfect," *Art in America*, January 1993, p. 43.
- ⁹ In an as-yet-unpublished essay about the history of the Parrish Art Museum, Alan Wallach discusses the relationship among Samuel Parrish's political aspirations, his agenda for the development of the town of Southampton, and the charter of the museum.
- ¹⁰ Peter Vergo, *The New Museology* (London: Reaktion, 1989), pp. 3–4.
- ¹¹ The first extensive publication to take up the issue of the artist in the museum was *Museums by Artists*, ed. A. A. Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983). The *Desire of the Museum* (New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art, 1989), an exhibition organized by Catsou Roberts, Timothy Landers, Jackie McAllister, Benjamin Weil, and Marek Wieczorek, also included a broad range of artists whose work imputes an "unconscious" to the museum, where different desires and struggles for meaning compete. The Carnegie International 1991, organized by Lynne Cooke and Mark Francis, invited artists, many of whom had created museum-related works in the past, to take as their subject the International itself or the Carnegie Museum and its collections. A three-volume publication that includes an anthology of "museumist" writings is currently in preparation. The set, *Values on Display: Contemporary Art Exhibitions in a Postmodern Age*; *Values on Display: Thinking About Exhibitions*; and *Values on Display: Art About Exhibitions*, is being edited by Bruce Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg, and Sandy Nairn. The number of artist-looks-at-museum projects has continued to increase. My discussion here is intended to provide only a cursory review of the range of these projects over the past several years. Since accounts of many of these are discussed at length elsewhere, I have attempted to provide examples of less well known projects by Wilson's contemporaries whenever possible.
- ¹² Roberta Smith, "Paying Homage to Irreverence," *New York Times*, July 16, 1993, p. C1.
- ¹³ See, e.g., Daniel Buren, "Function of the Museum," and "Function of the Studio," in *Museums by Artists*, ed. A. A. Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983).
- ¹⁴ See Ann Rorimer, *A Forest of Signs* (Los Angeles: Museum for Contemporary Arts, 1989), p. 147.
- ¹⁵ Bruce Kurtz, ed., "Conversation with Robert Smithson on April 22, 1972," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: University Press, 1979), p. 200.

- ¹⁶ See Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Lapis Press, 1976).
- ¹⁷ Craig Owens, "From Work to Frame," in his *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), p. 132.
- ¹⁸ Lynne Cooke and Mark Francis, *Carnegie International 1991*, vol. 1 (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 1991), p. 14.
- ¹⁹ See Gary Indiana, "Orshi Drozdik's 'Adventure in Technos Dystopium,'" in Orshi Drozdik, *Adventure in Technos Dystopium* (Budapest: Ernst Museum, 1990), p. 17.
- ²⁰ See Judith Barry in *Carnegie International 1991* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Museum of Art, 1991), pp. 54–55. In fact, the entire Carnegie International commissioned artists to consider the exhibition museologically. Christian Boltanski actually created a museum of the Carnegie International.
- ²¹ Alan G. Artner, "Beginning Again: A Soviet Artist Finds Painting Is No Longer Enough," *Chicago Tribune*, July 25, 1993, p. 21.
- ²² See Ralph Rugoff, "Inside the White Clinic," *Parkett* 32, 1992, pp. 150–53; Ralph Rugoff, "Planned Obliscence," *L.A. Weekly*, June 21, 1991, pp. 39–40; and the brochure of the Museum of Jurassic Technology, Los Angeles, California.
- ²³ Statement by Daniel Robbins in *Raid the Icebox. 1* (Providence: Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, 1970), p. 15.
- ²⁴ Statement by the artists in the catalog *At Home with the Collection: Simon Grennan and Christopher Sperandio* (Peoria, Ill.: Lakeview Museum of the Arts and Sciences, 1991), p. 9.
- ²⁵ See *MAK—Austrian Museum of Applied Arts* (Vienna and Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1993), p. 19.
- ²⁶ See Douglas Crimp, "On the Museum's Ruins," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983).
- ²⁷ Although some "museumist" artwork has dealt with issues of race, most artists have not been given the latitude to explicitly tie the issue to the presenting museum's policies. Hans Haacke's study of the social structures of the Guggenheim, caused his Guggenheim retrospective to be canceled. *The Year of the White Bear* (1992), a performance piece by Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña for the National Museum of Natural History, dealt with the exhibition of Latin American cultures in ethnographic and natural history museums in general. It is worth noting that the curators of *The Desire of the Museum* were limited by the Whitney Administration in their self-reflexive design for this highly politicized "museumist" exhibition. See Roberta Smith, "The Whitney Interprets Museum's Dreams," *The New York Times*, Sunday, July 23, 1989, Arts & Leisure Section, pp. 31+.
- ²⁸ Maurice Berger, "Are Art Museums Racist?," in *How Art Becomes History* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 149.
- ²⁹ From "Sites of Criticism, a Symposium," *Acme Journal* 1, no. 2 (1992), p. 27.
- ³⁰ From an unpublished lecture by the artist at the Seattle Art Museum, January 1993, p. 5.
- ³¹ One mask urged viewers to "don't just look at me, speak to me. I am alive."
- ³² Fred Wilson, unpublished and undated notebooks.
- ³³ Unpublished lecture by the artist at the Seattle Art Museum, January 1993, p. 8.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ³⁶ *Maryland Historical Society Annual Report*, 1850. Extract from the society's circular letter, pp. 15–17.
- ³⁷ Brian Topping, "President's Report," *Annual Report of the Maryland Historical Society, 1986–87*, p. 347.
- ³⁸ These makeshift sideshows—cum—vaudeville amusements featured cabinets of curiosities, scientific oddities, wax dummies, freaks, and "rational amusements" masquerading as scientific lectures, which "offered the visiting countryman and the pious city dweller a curious form of theatrical entertainment beneath a transparently thin veneer of culture and learning." Set up in vacant shops and fair booths, the "easily comprehended entertainment" of the dime museum proliferated in rural and urban towns across the country. More serious venues such as Charles Wilson Peale's Museum and Gallery in Baltimore, John Scudder's American Museum, and Daniel Drake's Western Museum were "forced to introduce more and more sensational novelties" to compete for audiences. By 1850, Peale's museum, unsuccessful in its efforts to keep aloft, had been sold to P. T. Barnum. See Brooks McNamara, "'A Congress of Wonders': The Rise and Fall of the Dime Museum," *Emerson Society Quarterly* 20, 3rd quarter (1974), pp. 216–32.
- ³⁹ The Maryland Historical Society is located just off Mount Vernon Place, a French-inspired town square with monuments and allegorical sculptures ringed by the now-restored former residences of the city's nineteenth-century elite. The society also straddles the Howard Street corridor, the city's former commercial district. The street linking these two quarters of "Old Baltimore" is the main conduit to west Baltimore, the historically black section of the city. In effect, the society is on axis with the "two Baltimores," placing

it in a challenging position from which to reconcile its mission with regard to its definitions of history and audience.

⁴⁰ Donald Garfield, "Making the Museum Mine: An Interview with Fred Wilson," *Museum News*, May/June 1993, p. 49.

⁴¹ This use of photographs "of ourselves, by ourselves," was a strategy Wilson first began experimenting with in *The Other Museum* at Gracie Mansion. In that exhibition, photographs of Native Americans and African-Americans from the turn of the century taken by members of their own communities were placed side by side with those taken by anthropologists.

⁴² The "orientation" map in the Native American space was originally part of a temporary decoy exhibition on the third floor when Wilson began his residency. He asked that the map, labeled with the names of Maryland gunning clubs, remain in place for his installation. The labels identifying the location of Native American tribes living in colonial Maryland were added by the artist. This arrangement foreshadows the violent tenor of the later red rooms that also make use of artifacts from the same decoy exhibit.

⁴³ *Eleanor Darnall*, a pendant painting in the collection of the boy's sister and her mastiff by Justus Engelhardt Kuhn, remained on view in the colonial galleries of the historical society during *Mining the Museum*. Beside it, Wilson left a "clue"—an actual dog collar mounted high on the wall, in a space corresponding to that worn by the enslaved boy in the painting Wilson chose for his installation. A registrar's tag noted that the painting had been removed by Wilson. This and other clues related to the "talking paintings" encouraged viewers to go back and forth between the installation and the permanent collection on the first and second floors to consider how the two different contexts shaped the meaning of the works.

⁴⁴ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1988), p. 274.

⁴⁵ On the second floor, next to the portrait of the Danells children, Wilson's clues replace the labels that name the white children with those naming the African-American children, Thomas and Manuel Paez. Archival documents show that the tuition of two African-American boys from South America was paid by Commodore Danells. The boys mentioned in the documents were dismissed from Saint Mary's College after one year because of their race. It is a fair conjecture, although not yet confirmed, that these are the boys represented in the painting.

⁴⁶ Wilson's experimentation with talking images began with a room in *The Colonial Collection*, which he called

the "Bwana Memorial Gallery of African Art." A spotlight over a trade mask triggered blinking eyes and moving lips, as Wilson has described it, "sort of semi-Disney-like but I like to think of it as sort of ghostlike.... A voice would start to speak... 'Don't just look at me; speak to me. I'm still alive.'" Similarly the use of video behind an object was used in the same room, in which Wilson "spliced together many films of Africa of various words between the Zulu and the British—so you'd get right up and see sort of a history of that mask," through its own eyes.

⁴⁷ The French quote is also a reference to "Where am I in all this?" the question that determined the trajectory of *Mining the Museum*. The most complete catalog of Johnson's work is *Joshua Johnson: Freeman and Early American Portrait Painter* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society and the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1987).

⁴⁸ Blacks in Baltimore worked primarily in "service" jobs and in the crafts, although a small percentage of freemen performed skilled jobs. It is feasible that either the silver or the shackles could have been made by a freed black. See Leroy Graham, "Joshua Johnson's Baltimore," in *ibid.* Beside the "metalwork" vitrine, a circular cabinet contained a mannequin's hand holding a Civil War-period postcard with a stock likeness of George Washington. Printing on the card forms a halo around the image stating, "One of the Rebels... Southern Gentleman and Slaveholder." The Confederate version of American history had been quick to justify the slave system by co-opting the patriotic residents of Mount Vernon and Monticello, suggesting that, like the owners of the silver factories, they were or would have been sympathetic to the Southern cause.

⁴⁹ Wilson recalled in his lecture at the Seattle Art Museum that the staff of the Maryland Historical Society had been unable to locate the Klan hood that was documented in the registrar's files. "It had sort of disappeared in the collection. So finally by looking for something else, they found the hood.... I was always finding things like that, and they said, 'Well, we just don't know what to do with things like that.' I said, 'I know what to do with that.'" At this point in the installation the viewer has already become accustomed to Wilson's vision. When he creates a beautiful display of elegant arrangements on damask surfaces, visitors said they found it difficult not to "read" other, nonaesthetic meanings into them. Installation details that are supposed to be "invisible" are suddenly full of significance. Wilson was thoroughly amused when a blinking faux security device attached by the registrar to the Klan hood to discourage vandalism was

interpreted by some visitors as part of the artist's arrangement. Later, it was removed.

⁵⁰ Although stored with "cabinetry" since it was acquired in 1960, the whipping post had never been exhibited. One of the society's building staff could recall stories of it being used and was visibly upset by Wilson's decision to bring it up from storage.

⁵¹ The figure was acquired as part of a set of two, one male and one female, sitting opposite each other on a piece of wood with a basket between them. Little is known about their history, function, or fabrication.

⁵² For a fuller metaphorical analysis of disruption in scale, see Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993).

⁵³ For a provocative investigation of this subject, see bell hooks, "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination," *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 338–46. hooks notes that, "socialized [conversely] to believe the fantasy, that whiteness represents goodness and all that is benign and non-threatening, many white people assume this is the way black people conceptualize whiteness. They do not imagine that the way whiteness makes its presence felt in black life, most often as terrorizing imposition, a power that wounds, hurts, tortures, is a reality that disrupts the fantasy of whiteness as representing goodness."

⁵⁴ Quoted in Mary Ellen Hayward, "Baltimore 1795–1825," in *Joshua Johnson, Freeman and Early American Portrait Painter*, p. 31.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁸ According to sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel, museums are founded because "sanctification of art... fulfills a vital function by contributing to the consecration of the social order. So that cultured people can believe in barbarism and persuade the barbarians of their own barbarity, it is necessary and sufficient for them to succeed in hiding both from themselves and from others the social conditions which make possible not only culture as a second nature, in which society locates human excellence, and which is experienced as a privilege of birth, but also the legitimated hegemony (or the legitimacy) of a particular definition of culture. Finally, for the ideological circle to be complete, it is sufficient that they derive the justification for their monopoly of the instruments of appropriation of cultural goods from an essentialist representation of the division of their society into

barbarians and civilized people." See Alain Darbel and Pierre Bourdieu, *The Love of Art* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992), pp. 111–12.

⁵⁷ Harold R. Manakee, "A Quarter-Century of Growth at the Maryland Historical Society," *Maryland Historical Magazine*, March 1965, p. 57.

⁵⁸ In fact, the first meetings of the board were held in the Pratt House in rooms used by the Colonization Society. The Pratt House was donated to the historical society in 1919. This is a subject that demands further scholarly investigation elsewhere.

⁵⁹ According to the registrar's records, the attributions of the woven basket and the rocking chair to enslaved persons are based on oral histories that were passed down in the families of their former owners.

⁶⁰ Fred Wilson, unpublished lecture at the Seattle Art Museum, April 1992, p. 18.

⁶¹ Dick Hebdige, "A Report on the Western Front," in *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts*, ed. Francis Frascina and Jonathan Harris (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 340.

⁶² Wilson has gone on to create installations using permanent collections in museums as diverse as the Seattle and Indianapolis Art Museums, in Warsaw, and in Cairo. On April 21, 1993, The Contemporary opened *Catfish Dreamin'* by Alison Saar, a traveling sculpture on wheels that was installed on the bed of a pickup truck. The project is touring more than eighty sites in urban and rural neighborhoods in four mid-Atlantic states over five months. The Contemporary has undergone its own self-study to identify specific means to include the "findings" of *Mining the Museum* in its long-range plans. In April 1993, immediately after *Mining the Museum* closed, the Maryland Historical Society opened the decorative arts exhibition *Classical Taste in Maryland*. From January 14 to August 14, 1994, the society presents *You Make History*, an exhibition celebrating its 150-year anniversary. The exhibition invites the audience to decide the future of the museum's collecting policies and practices through a series of participatory exercises. In May 1993, Charles Lyle resigned his directorship, saying he "felt it was a good time for the institution to look in new directions and for me to pursue other interests." See "Charles Lyle Leaves State Historical Society after 3 Years as Director," *Baltimore Sun*, May 6, 1993, p. 10E.

⁶³ Quoted in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 131.