Sins of Omission: Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum*

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**Introduction**

It's a rare honor to represent one's country at the Venice Biennale, one of the most prestigious venues in the world for showing contemporary art. This year the United States gave the nod to Fred Wilson, who addressed the visual history of Africans in Venice by assembling a group of old master Italian paintings and wooden figurines of blackamoors. The artist even hired a Senegalese tourist to dress up as a street vendor and stand in front of the US Pavilion, flogging knock-off 'Prada' bags that Wilson designed.

An artist of African, American Indian, and European descent, Fred Wilson catapulted to national and international attention a decade ago when his watershed exhibition *Mining the Museum* debuted at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore. The idea for the show came from Lisa Corrin, a curator at the newly founded Museum of Contemporary Arts, who initiated the collaboration between Wilson and the Historical Society. Given the run of the venerable museum, Wilson acted as an artist/curator, using the collection's historical artifacts as his raw materials. His purpose was to raise our awareness of institutionalized racism, making visible the subtle and insidious ways these attitudes affect the decisions museums make about what to collect and how to display it. The field of museology was forever transformed for the better.

It's been ten years since I wrote about *Mining the Museum* for *Art in America*. In the intervening time, much has changed. The MacArthur Foundation named Fred Wilson a Fellow in 1999. The 160 year old Maryland Historical Society is today poised to re-open its greatly expanded and renovated facilities. Director Dennis Fiori looks back with pride at the broad legacy of Wilson's exhibition, which prodded his museum to become a more open and board-based institution. Their current show, What's it to You?: Black History is American History, grew directly from their experience of working with Wilson. Today the Society has five minorities and 10 women on their board, a significantly higher proportion than a decade ago.

The creative, experimental museum known as The Contemporary went on to sponsor other innovative exhibitions. Presently it is in a transitional state, as its board ponders its mission
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With his tongue only partly in his cheek, High Museum director Ned Rifkin once likened the historical role of museums in our culture to that of the word processor which offered the user two main options: "save" and "display." Some social critics are going beyond those two functions and fostering introspective examinations of the value judgments encoded in what and how museums preserve and present. That task can be as daunting as trying to program computers to "reflect." Yet not all institutions are bound by the status quo. Recently, some have welcomed critiquing artists and have been rewarded but by an invigorating breath of fresh air.

Such was the case with "Mining the Museum," Fred Wilson's popular and influential installation at Baltimore's Maryland Historical Society (MdHS). A political activist and installation artist, Wilson takes social justice as his subject and museology as his medium. In the 1970s, he supported himself as a free-lance museum educator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the American Museum of Natural History and the American Crafts Museum. Building on his insider's skills, Wilson later created a series of "mock museums" in a variety of non-museum venues in the second half of the 80s. Using fabricated objects together with museum-style labels, lighting, wall color and display cases, he addressed the issue of how museums consciously or unwittingly reinforce racist beliefs and behavior.

At MdHS, Wilson had the opportunity for the first time to use an actual museum as his subject and site. This enabled him to expand his "palette," as he calls his museological materials, beyond the visual language of display to include a real institution's acquisition history and collections management. Opened during the annual conference of the American Association of Museums, which met in Baltimore in April 1992, "Mining the Museum" was seen by thousands of museum professionals within its first few weeks. Both locally and nationally, the show elicited an overwhelming show of interest and its duration was extended through February 28, 1993, for a total of eleven months. It has been the most popular show in the 150 year history of the venerable MdHS. Regardless of whether visitors to the show came prepped or wandered in by chance, they
experienced a frisson of surprise when encountering Wilson's contemporary critique within the stereotypically fusty context of an historical society.

The show was the result of a unique collaboration between Baltimore's oldest and youngest museums. Lisa Corrin, assistant director of the Museum for Contemporary Arts, which is called The Contemporary, had long followed Wilson's work. She proposed a Wilson installation after MdHS director Charles Lyle posed the question of how to make "Chippendale relevant to a child in the projects," a reference to nearby public housing that had never previously been regarded as part of their audience. Corrin set up a framework for institutional self-study which included lengthy residencies for Wilson who met with everyone from the director to the docents.

In the three years since its founding, The Contemporary, which is dedicated to redefining the concept of the museum, has turned to its advantage the fact that it is without a permanent home. Like a hermit crab, it has moved around the city of Baltimore, sponsoring exhibitions in a variety of borrowed exoskeletons such as warehouses, car dealerships and bus stations. MdHS chief curator Jennifer Goldsborough co-curated the show with Corrin, and she and Lyle agreed to Wilson's request that he be granted free access to all holdings, in and out of storage.

By titling his installation "Mining the Museum," the artist sowed a three-way pun: excavating the collections to extract the covert presence of racial minorities; planting emotionally explosive historical material to raise consciousness and effect institutional change; and, finding reflections of himself within the museum. "Ou est mon visage?," reads Wilson's label accompanying nineteenth century painter Joshua Johnson's portrait of a white family. An artist of African-American and Carib Indian ancestry, Wilson identified with Johnson, who was black, and of whom there are no known portraits.

"Mining the Museum" occupied the entire third floor at MdHS, extending through a linked sequence of eight rooms. The wall colors—successively gray, green, red and blue—were components of Wilson's "palette," as visitors moved from the "gray" area of historical truths, the "green" quarters of human emotions, the "red" environs of slavery and rebellion, and the celestial "blue" spheres of dreams and achievements.

Armed with an educational broadsheet that looked and read like concrete poetry (What is it? / Where is it? Why?/. . . .), visitors exited the elevator to confront a display case which housed a 1913 advertising trophy in the shape of a silver-plated globe, "T-r-u-t-h" emblazoned across it. Massed at its base were several empty acrylic mounts—the display stands meant to be essentially invisible as they support objects in museum cases—labeled "Artist unknown, c. 1960s." Puzzling through the assembly, I gleaned the ground rules Wilson had established for himself here: Everything on view has been found and not fabricated. The artist's sense of humor, in particular his fine-tuned instinct for irony, lay behind the central placement of this trophy used by an industry whose modis operandis is the manipulation of truth. The unburdened mounts, now historical objects themselves, focused attention on the covert methodology of museum presentation.
Three low pedestals to the right of the case supported portrait busts below eye level. Harsh lighting caused shadows to pool in their eye cavities, imparting an air of cranky melancholia to a toga-clad Henry Clay, and Napoleon Bonaparte and Andrew Jackson in uniform. None of these worthies had ever lived in Maryland; they exemplify those previously deemed deserving of sculptural representation and subsequent museum acquisition. To the left were three higher and empty pedestals that bore only small plaques proclaiming the names of celebrated African Americans who were Marylanders: Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass and Benjamin Banneker. By dramatizing the absence of their portraits, Wilson found a canny way to reveal the slights of history and to indicate major gaps in the museum's collections.

The contiguous gallery contained five cigar store Indians, labeled as portraits of cigar store owners, and audaciously placed with their backs to us. The gender of these stalwart advertisements for tobacco was not always easy to read, (pecs looked like bosoms); they appeared to embody the buxom ideals of Victorian beauty, and as such could be viewed as progenitors of the cuties in modern cigarette ads. Following the gaze of these wooden stereotypes, visitors encountered a collection of borrowed photographs of Native Americans, images of unremarkable but real people, recorded in everyday circumstances.

A nearby case of chiseled arrowheads is labeled “Collection of numbers 76.1.25 3-76. 1.67.11; white drawing ink, black India ink and lacquer, c.1976.” In these small details Wilson keeps reminding us that the content of the installation is not merely the meaning of objects, but includes how the museum deals with them. Therefore, the collection dates and not the fabrication dates are valued and recorded. In Wilson's view, the registration system has eclipsed the object registered.

Every museum has scores of wounded objects that are subject to the triage of conservation, that languish in storage while awaiting restorative treatment. Wilson ferreted out just such a painting, and installed it "as is" in the first green room. A Henry Bebie portrait of an unknown white man, it had a large rend in the area of the head which revealed the wall behind. Visitors entered the dimly lit gallery and were startled to see a blinking eye and a dark-skinned nose projected onto this spot, giving the uncanny sensation that there was someone inside or behind the canvas. A motion-activated audio loop captivated listeners by declaring

Nobody knows that I'm inside you, except Mamma. She lives far away. I promise that I won't expose myself to your wife. And if you move, your children will never know. But you will have to live with me constantly reminding you of what you've been missing and what you did until the day you die.

With a brilliant economy of means Wilson conveys the complexity of racial identity, suggesting the covert heritage of African-American blood in those persons society perceives as Caucasian.
In his presentation of several other paintings, prints and photographs, Wilson suggested fresh readings by creating labels that provided identities for hitherto anonymous black figures. For example, a Benjamin H. Latrobe watercolor previously titled "View of Welch Point and the Mouth of Backcreek" (1806) is here called "Jack Alexander in a canoe." In another painting, a gallery spotlight periodically illuminated a shadowy slave child while a taped voice asked poignantly: "Who combs my hair?" "Who calms me when I'm afraid?" "Who makes me laugh?"

Wilson effects a strong and chilling awareness of the institution of slavery through creative signage and juxtapositions. A standard exhibition case labeled "Metalwork, 1723-1880" set a series of Baltimore repousse silver goblets, urns and decanters next to a course pair of rusty slave shackles. Another sinister vignette coupled a Ku Klux Klan hood, labeled "maker unknown," and an antique perambulator. The possible meanings are multiple. Even babies can be the object of blind hatreds. Humans are born free of prejudice, which is learned behavior. Nearby vintage photographs of black nannies attending their white charges underscored this reading.

Sometimes a single artifact itself advanced Wilson's content, as in the estate inventory and appraisal of goods and chattels of Nicholas Carroll c.1812. A neat round hand recorded the value of slaves, cattle and horses in one long list, allowing us to see for example, that 65 year old Joshua would cost only $30 while 11 year old Jacob was worth $425. In another case a Naughty Nellie Boot Jack, a cast iron figurine of a black woman with legs splayed and arms clasped behind her head, provided a powerful visual testimony of the myths of loose morals and eternal availability often assigned to African-American females.

Wilson has formidable narrative skills and a talent for fashioning installations that pack a punch more powerful than the individual components. In one instance, he aligned the barrel of a long, phallic punt gun used for game birds with a wooden doll of a black man, suggesting the connections between the sport of duck hunting and the tracking of runaway slaves. A nearby historical account related how bloodhounds were trained to track runaways. The surrounding wall was papered with reproductions of reward posters. By magnifying several phrases in the descriptions of missing slaves, such as their stuttering speech, their lameness or their scars, Wilson prompted us to meditate on the cruel circumstances that might have produced such conditions.

The most dramatic tableau of the exhibition, innocuously titled "Cabinet Making 1820-1910," consisted of a starkly constructed cruciform whipping post ringed by a variety of ornate Victorian chairs. A potent symbol of the horrors of slavery, the post had hibernated in MdHS furniture storage for decades (hence the irony of the classification "Cabinet Making"). It had last been used in 1938 to punish a wife beater at the Baltimore City Jail. As I confronted Wilson's unpeopled scenario of punishment as public spectacle, I sensed my complicity as a viewer and was discomforted, as Wilson surely intended.
The emotional temperature quickened in the adjoining small gallery. A rotating, motion-activated projector sprayed the red walls with a volley of names of African Americans who actively resisted slavery, ranging from the well-known Harriet Tubman and Nat Turner to the little-known associates of Harper's Ferry raider John Brown. In a dainty Victorian doll house Wilson enacted a fantasy of rebellion—diminutive adults and children lay scattered on the floor, cradles and chairs overturned. An outsized black man sat nonchalantly on top of the dining room table, his head grazing the delicate glass chandelier. As Wilson's "Everyslave," the figurine epitomized the slaveholder's worst nightmare of violent uprisings.

In several vitrines in the penultimate gallery, Wilson showed the handicrafts of enslaved African Americans as well as objects crafted by Africans who lived in what would become the state of Liberia, the country colonized by American abolitionists, many of whom came from Maryland. Although I am told that many visitors brightened at seeing the proud legacy of skillfully-wrought goods, I found that the sparsely labeled cases took too much for granted. I craved some "real" didactic signage to help me make sense of the diversity of objects and historical references. For example, labels would have helped viewers savor the fact, not mentioned in Wilson's tags, that John H. B. Latrobe, the artist whose 1936 canvas "Maryland in Liberia" was included in this room, had been one of the founders of both Liberia and of the Maryland Historical Society. In this gallery, the didactic goals of Wilson's installation and the educational aims of museum installation worked against each other.

Wilson regained his transformative touch in the final room, which was dedicated to Benjamin Banneker (1731-1806), a free-born black Marylander, and self-educated mathematician, surveyor and astronomer. A computer monitor (duly labeled as such) was programmed to display the night sky on October 18, 1800, a day on which Banneker had accurately predicted an eclipse, so noting in his journal which lay open on the table. Wall-mounted text panels contained other material from his diary, such as accounts of dreams and disturbing descriptions of violent assaults upon him.

Taken as a whole, "Mining the Museum" raised the historical consciousness of all visitors and revealed to people of color how they have fared in the world of museums. Empowered as a curator, Wilson exposed the racist threads that are an integral part of our historical fabric, a reality often skirted in institutional contexts. Jolted by their visit, many viewers pondered why an historical society, in a city where eight out of ten residents are African American, had never before done an exhibition about slavery and institutionalized racism. MdHS is currently seeking funds to support a permanent version of Mining the Museum. But will future exhibitions, regardless of theme, incorporate the experience of African Americans? Will MdHS appoint any more black board members to augment the sole (and ex officio) presence of the African-American mayor of Baltimore?
The run of Mining the Museum coincides with the most prolific period of Wilson's career. In the summer of 1992, working with American curator Kim Levin, Wilson installed the satiric Muzeum Impossible for the Centre for Contemporary Art, at Warsaw's Ujazdowski Castle, using socialist realist art borrowed from state storerooms and warehouses. During the winter, he opened several new projects: both Fred Wilson: The Spiral of Art History, at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, and The Museum: Mixed Metaphors, at the Seattle Art Museum, scrutinized collecting and display practices at each institution. The artist represented the United States at the Fourth Cairo Biennial with a mock museum about colonialist Egypt and contemporary African-American life, and he used related themes for installations at Beaver College Art Gallery and at the Whitney Museum of Art 1993 Biennial Exhibition. Both the Capp Street Project, San Francisco, and the Smithsonian Institution's Experimental Gallery, have Wilson projects in the works.

“Mining the Museum” dramatically expanded Wilson's audience. A book documenting the unique organizational process behind the exhibition, edited by Lisa Corrin and published by The Contemporary with the New Press, is due out in February 1994. It will include essays by Corrin and the historian Ira Berlin, and an interview with the artist by art historian Leslie King Hammond. A cultural critic now eagerly courted by the institutions he critiques, Wilson is not unaware of the irony of his new situation.