

Maney Publishing Museum Education Roundtable

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Source: *The Journal of Museum Education*, Vol. 32, No. 3, Place-Based Education and the Museum (Fall, 2007), pp. 211-219

Published by: [Maney Publishing](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40479612>

Accessed: 30/07/2013 20:06

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An Interview with Artist Fred Wilson



Mark A. Graham

Abstract The medium of artist Fred Wilson is the museum. He delves deep into museum collections to expose unexamined assumptions about power, place, privilege, and history. His installations include wall labels, educational materials, lighting, and non-traditional pairings of objects. His work is not only about the objects on display, but about how the whole museum environment can generate meaningful questions about art, history, and the role of the museum in its community. In this interview, Fred Wilson discusses how he works with the objects, places, and people that are part of the museum environment

Known for his installations in both art and historical museums, Fred Wilson changes the way we look at museums and the objects they display. He works by creating new exhibition contexts for the art and artifacts found in museum collections in order to disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions about how museums exhibit and interpret their collections.¹ He often chooses objects that were ignored or hidden. His work asks us to re-examine what a museum is and what it might be teaching. The 1999 MacArthur “genius” grant-winning artist asks viewers to question how curators and museum educators shape our interpretations of historical truth and artistic value. His installations explore the hidden meanings in objects and how context changes meaning.² In many instances, his work uses the unique history of the museum’s collection to create new understanding of the museum’s relationship to the community that surrounds it.

Fred Wilson was born in the Bronx, New York in 1954 and lives and works in New York. He was trained as an artist and thinks of the museum as

his artistic medium. In the groundbreaking installation, *Mining the Museum* (1992), Wilson transformed the Maryland Historical Society's collection to highlight the history of slavery in Baltimore. This exhibit gave viewers a chance to reflect on the political and racist assumptions that often surround the practices of collecting and displaying objects in museums.³ For the 2003 Venice Biennale, Wilson created a mixed-media installation of many parts, focusing on Africans in Venice and issues and representations of black and white.

During the lecture at Dia: Chelsea in Manhattan mentioned in the interview, Mr. Wilson's remarks were interrupted first by a custodian mopping the floor and then by a delivery person with several large packages. The audience had to reconsider the artist's performance within the contexts of other relationships in galleries and museums that are often purposefully rendered invisible. His work illuminates the hidden, unusual, or forgotten dynamics of museum exhibitions.

When you work in a museum, what role does the place or surrounding community play in your thinking and artistry?

The site of the museum is very important to what I end up doing with the collection. It subtly informs the subject of my project and how I will express my feelings visually, intellectually, and spatially. I spend a great deal of time exploring and learning about the place that the museum is situated in. I am always inspired by my surroundings. If the community, city, or country is unfamiliar to me (which is usually the case), it brings new, unexpected meanings to my artwork. My projects are always understood by those who are not from that particular community, but often the deeper meanings only resonate with those who live in that particular place. I like that. As I have said before, I make exhibitions for the people who will see it, not those that won't. I imagine that since I am not from that place, my outsider viewpoint allows other outsiders to get something out of it, but it is not my primary concern. While I am working in that environment I am thinking about that place and not the New York art world. I don't consciously infuse the locale in the work, it just happens because of my immersion, my focus on the place.

Now I know this will sound like a contradiction, but of course when you create an exhibition for a museum you never really know who all the folks are that will see it. I have to be cognizant of this. I don't want anyone to feel slighted because I assumed that they would not be in my audience. I have had that experience personally when visiting museums. Assumptions are made

about who the audience is and how that audience thinks. It becomes clear after a while that I am not the intended audience. So I spend a lot of time in the city where I am making the exhibition, so I can get to know people inside and outside the museum and they can get to know me. Upon arrival, I try not to assume I know anything about anyone. I certainly don't assume who will or won't see my exhibition. I try to do what I do within the context of the place so the viewers, whoever they may be, will get the most out of my exhibition. I simply try to be affected by my surroundings enough to be sensitive to how my work with their community's collection will be received. I don't worry about it once I feel I have a handle on this. I really enjoy the great conversations I have. The questions generated by the conversations and the collections spur me on to research the history. I continually ask questions and speak to people throughout the process of creating an installation right up until the very end, before it opens to the public. However my conversations are not necessarily specific to particular issues or objects in my exhibition. I don't over think it. Once I am comfortable with my surroundings, and the local folks are comfortable with me, I feel confident I won't make major cultural blunders. However, if I feel I need to make a change in my exhibition because of a new realization, I am not afraid to do that.

In this world where cities are made up of very diverse communities, it is virtually impossible to speak (through a museum exhibition) directly to everyone all the time. I don't believe people expect a museum to be able to do that. I do think people expect to be considered viable museum-goers, and respect for difference of opinion is unspoken but acknowledged. This means museum people have to work hard at understanding the notion of difference. They don't have to completely understand every kind of person, culture, or community. They just have to understand that there will be gaps in their personal knowledge about people that they probably don't even know that they have. They need to leave their assumptions at the door and learn from visitors and non-visitors alike. That means they have to learn to listen and be willing to change. If this happens in earnest, museums will change and museums will become more diverse themselves.

You have spoken about the idea that objects are imbued with memory. What do you mean by this?

Objects have histories of their making, of their purpose, and their use. This is what I mean by "memory." Objects have multiple layers of meaning over time and as the object moves from place to place. As the context changes,



The Museum: Mixed Metaphors (1993) installation by Fred Wilson in the African Art Gallery at the Seattle Art Museum in Washington. Photo by Susan Dirk, courtesy of Pace Wildenstein and Fred Wilson.

memories fade and new ones emerge. Sometimes meanings and memories morph or mix to become a new amalgam. The viewer adds his or her own meanings to the objects based on their knowledge of the object, their imagination, and cultural or historical attributions and anecdotes that may or may not be true. Some objects have cultural attributions connected with the object that are specific to particular groups. Some have personal connotations in addition to the others that I mentioned. Museums privilege one particular meaning over another, usually over all others. Museums ignore and often deny the other meanings. In my experience it is because if an alternate meaning is not the subject of the exhibition or the focus of the museum, it is considered unimportant by the museum, or the museum is simply unaware that there is another meaning, or is too afraid to acknowledge a particular meaning.

I try to bring out the meanings that I see in the objects, often the ones that, for one reason or another, are hidden in plain sight. This is not to replace the museum's view of the object's meaning with my own, but to let both meanings or multiple meanings be present at the same time. I am interested in at least acknowledging that the object can be understood from

many different vantage points. I think the average person has difficulty with the idea that what they believe to be true about a thing is completely negated (silently) by the museum. I think it is particularly painful because there is no acknowledgment on the part of the museum that there could be other notions about the object. Also I think, on a subliminal level, casual visitors are confused by the partitioning of meaning. We are human beings; we experience things with all of our senses, our knowledge, our memories, etc. Museums ask the viewer to forget that way of understanding the world and focus on just one aspect of the object, in denial of all others. This is especially true of art museums, but all museums do this to one degree or another.

Some kinds of museums, like art museums, don't alert the viewer to the fact that while they are there in the museum, only one aspect of the object will be allowed to be thought about. In the case of the art museum it is the visual aspect that is primary, in history museums or anthropology museums visual aesthetics may play a lesser role, etc. This is where I have a problem with museums. Not that museums focus on one aspect of an object, but that they don't tell the viewer that they will do this and they don't tell the viewer why. Educators have to play catch-up to bring the viewer up to speed so they can relax and enjoy the collection. If museums just would be up-front about the fact that the specificity is artificial, but necessary in this context and for what reason, I think visitors would gain a great deal more from the exhibitions, and not feel that they are missing something or not being told something. I actually would love to see a more holistic approach to museums. I'd like to see each museum still have a specific focus, but not ignore the other things we know to be true about the objects—the history, visual aesthetics, scientific aspects, and cultural importance (from various cultural perspectives), etc. I think the viewers would gain from this, because this is how we all experience the world day-to-day. We don't see the world only visually one day, and only historically the next. We mix it up.

Meanings, like memories, don't go away. They can be suppressed, but they remain within, waiting for someone to reveal them. Of course there are many objects where the memories have been suppressed for so long no one knows them. Multiple meanings are lost and the complexity of the object and of those who remembered them is lost with it. Museum people are mistaken when they believe museums collect "things." They collect memories, meanings, emotions, and experiences. Without the "things," the collections would not exist, but without the memories, meanings, emotions, and experiences, museums would not exist.

What do you hope happens to a museum visitor who sees your work?

I hope they slow down. I think many people go through museums like it is a fast-food drive-through. Check the menu, grab the product, and go. I hope my installations are unusual experiences that make you want to take a second look, think about what you are seeing, reading, and experiencing, and re-think what you thought you already knew. My best installations make the viewer want to revisit aspects of the exhibition to squeeze more information from it and garner greater knowledge about the subject from analyzing the relationships between displays. I am always thrilled when visitors tell me that my installation made them think differently about the whole museum and all museums, for that matter. I hope they realize that they are an active participant in gaining knowledge from a museum, and their thoughts and ideas often can be as valid as the information they read on the wall texts. I want them to come away from my installations believing that an exhibition can be a catalyst for change. But, ultimately, I hope they come away feeling that museums express a point of view. A scholarly, well-informed point of view, but a point of view all the same.

In your on-going meta-narrative about museums, do you ever talk with the museum educators about their roles or about how they might consider their work?

I rarely talk to museum people about their roles or how they might consider their work. As I am sure you know, everyone is very busy, so conversations tend to be about the work at hand and not philosophical questions. Given that, though, I have wonderful conversations that touch on the root of their roles, because in order to make my exhibition happen the museum folks have to do things slightly differently. I am very appreciative of the fact that they have to change their normal routines to accommodate my working method, so I don't press them for more time than they want to give me. What I do is so different. I have many, many museum friends around the country and around the world with whom I have talked about museums in general, but the conversations never get personal, unless they become personal friends. When I am making an exhibition at a museum I interact with whoever will interact with me. Sometimes it is the curator, sometimes it is the conservator, sometimes it is the museum guard, sometimes it is the registrar, and, yes, sometimes it is the museum's education staff—but not always. Which is often a surprise to me as I feel the educator and I should have much in common. In fact, of all the museum professionals, some of my best, most interesting, frank, and informative conversations have been with museum directors.



Metalwork: 1793-1880 (1992) installation by Fred Wilson, featuring silver vessels and slave shackles, from the "Mining the Museum" exhibition at the Baltimore Historical Society in Maryland. Photo by Jeff Goldman, courtesy of Pace Wildenstein and Fred Wilson.

You consider many aspects of the museum as a constructed space and the many roles that people play in museums, including guards, educators, preparators, and curators. I remember distinctly the dissonance and surprise created by the person mopping the floor during your lecture at Dia: Chelsea in New York City last fall. I recognized that it was kind of a risky experiment with the audience and their expectations. If you were a museum educator what might you do with a group of visitors to one of your installations?

That's funny that you thought it might be a "risky experiment." I felt if I didn't do the performative aspects at Dia my lecture would have been a risky experiment! I envisioned the Dia "lecture" as a total performance from the start. The lecture, slides, video, cleaning guy, Fed Ex guy, books, boxes, and peanuts were all integral to my presentation. I think that is the key. Whatever the unusual thing is that you do, it needs to be the most important thing that you can do at the moment. Then whatever happens, happens.

I always suggest that educators and docents allow visitors to experience my exhibition without discussion first, and then gather them to give them a

tour and discuss their first reactions to it. That's how I give tours of my own installations. Artists like when people experience their work on their own, without commentary, before someone tells the viewer what to think about the work. I am no different. The experience of art is a personal one. It can be ruined by well-meaning translations. Of course many people don't know how to experience art, especially if it is an art form that is unfamiliar to them. And museums don't help matters much (or make it worse). Outside of the education staff, they are not set up to explain what contemporary art is all about to people who are inexperienced at looking at new art. But whether it be an art museum or any other kind of museum, it still is important for the viewer to experience art first by themselves, without mediation, and then with someone who knows a bit more about it, and perhaps, then again by themselves. With my work, it is exceedingly important to let people view my work on their own because surprise has always been a part of my installations (and performances). Confusion in small and calculated doses is a good thing. It makes the viewer think, it makes them look again. It makes them talk to other visitors, it causes them to have emotions, and then (and this may be my wishful thinking) reflect on their responses to the work, and hopefully to the rest of the museum.

You have spoken about how museums are rarified environments where those in the know are made to feel comfortable. You said "the level of comfort is often determined by education and the viewers' ability to ignore class backgrounds: denial is a must in the museum." How does your work confront this particular reality of the museum?

I should state I was particularly speaking about art museums, but other types of museums have something to learn about this, too. As I mentioned before, I work by destabilizing the viewer. Surprise can be a wonderful thing. My installations look like standard exhibitions, but they are not. Surprise can make you stop and notice your immediate and uncontrolled response to a given situation and perhaps question that response.

My projects ask very different things of the viewer than are normally asked in the museum. I hope by putting myself out there, not as the voice of authority but as another voice, it puts the shoe on the other foot for some people. Most enjoy the experience, but some don't; they would rather not feel that the tables have been turned on them, even for one exhibit. However, some people feel that the questions that I ask are more akin to what they would ask, and so it empowers them to ask their own questions, even if only to themselves, of the entire museum enterprise.

Are there any projects you wish to do that you have not done yet?

Oh yes, I get excited and inspired when I have a very different kind of collection, museum, city, or country to work with. At this point, an art museum is an art museum is an art museum—very few surprises there . . .

I am presently working at the Institute of Jamaica with their botanical specimens, 18th-century prints, 19th-century furniture, and items connected to the slave trade. In addition, I'm creating a garden! I was invited to do this project to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the end of the slave trade in the British Empire. The analogy between the natural history of Jamaica and their history of slavery is very exciting for me. There's a deep well of unmined metaphors in their collections. I would love to do a project in a zoo, or a planetarium, or an archeological ruin site. I have lots of sculpture I'm working on in my studio to keep me occupied, so I think I'll wait until I'm offered a museum project that really takes me way outside my familiar terrain.

NOTES

1. Lisa G. Corrin, "Mining the Museum: Artists Look at Museums, Museums Look at Themselves" in *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson* ed. Lisa G. Corrin (New York: The New Press, 1994), 1-22.
2. Susan Sollins, *Art: 21: Art in the Twenty-first Century* 3 (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005).
3. Ibid.

Fred Wilson lives in New York, where he is currently engaged in a number of artistic projects.

