

#16

Fred Wilson Objects and Installations 1979–2000

Maurice Berger *with contributions by* Fred Wilson and Jennifer González

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Exhibition Schedule

• Center for Art and Visual Culture
University of Maryland
Baltimore County
Baltimore, MD
11 October 2001–12 January 2002

Tang Teaching Museum
and Art Gallery
Skidmore College
Saratoga Springs, NY
26 October 2002–7 January 2003

Berkeley Art Museum
and Pacific Film Archive
University of California
Berkeley, CA
22 January 2003–3 March 2003

Blaffer Gallery
The Art Museum
University of Houston
Houston, TX
3 May–3 August 2003

Addison Gallery of American Art
Phillips Academy
Andover, MA
3 September–8 November 2003

Santa Monica Museum
Santa Monica, CA
5 December 2003–8 February 2004

Studio Museum in Harlem
New York, NY
28 April–4 July 2004

Chicago Cultural Center
Chicago, IL
July–September, 2004

Against the Grain: The Artist as Conceptual Materialist **Jennifer González**

Curatorial Turns

Art that takes the form of curatorial practice is an invention of the twentieth century. Dadaists and Surrealists of the 1920s and 1930s often doubled as curators, arranging found objects in evocative and sometimes disorienting displays, both mimicking and mocking the traditions of collection and exhibition in mainstream museums and galleries. This curatorial turn was given an autobiographical focus when Marcel Duchamp produced *La Boîte-en-valise* (1941)—a series of suitcases containing miniature versions of his own most famous works of art. “All the functions of the museum,” writes the art historian Benjamin Buchloh, “the social institution that transforms the primary language of art into the secondary language of culture, are minutely contained in Duchamp’s case: the valorization of the object, the extraction from context and function, the preservation from decay and the dissemination of its abstracted meaning.”¹ The museum as a social institution, as an arbiter of taste, as a repository of treasures, and as a system of display has since become the focus of numerous works of art.² Some are inspired by the social or political history of museums, others are thematically structured around the idea of the archive, while still others take the form of a reinstallation or reinterpretation of an already existing museum collection.³

- Andy Warhol’s *Raid the Icebox* (1969), an exhibition he organized for the museum of the Rhode Island School of Design, is often cited as one of the first art installations to use the permanent collection of a museum to create a display within the museum itself. Given access to the museum’s storage vaults, Warhol selected and exhibited those items that most pleased him—shoes, jars, parasols, chairs—and arranged them according to personal whim. Since the early 1970s it has become more common for artists to perform such raids. Marcel Broodthaers’s conceptual project, *Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (1972), existed only in quotations, allusions, and packing cases until it took concrete form in the Düsseldorf Kunsthalle as a diverse collection of artworks and artifacts, each representing the culturally resonant icon of the majestic eagle. Creating a categorical equivalence between heterogeneous signs, Broodthaers both emphasized and undermined this icon of German nationalism. Writing about the installation, Walter Grasskamp comments: “The museum, which normally establishes a connection between, a common context for, the objects it contains, was here being quoted and parodied at the same time.”⁴ Broodthaers’s work questioned both the nationalistic impulse of museum displays and the logic of their taxonomic structure.
- If Warhol and Broodthaers revealed something of the exhibition rhetorics of museums of art, James Luna revealed a similar discourse at work for anthropology museums in *The Artifact Piece* (1987). Combining the tactics of 1960s body art with the deconstructionist impulses of postmodernism, the artist installed his own body

1. Benjamin Buchloh, “The Museum Fictions of Marcel Broodthaers,” in Peggy Gale and A. A. Bronson, eds., *Museums by Artists*, Toronto: Art Metropoli, 1983, p. 48. Examples abound. Two recent survey exhibitions, *Deep* 2. *Storage: Collecting, Storing, and Archiving in Art*, PS 1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, N.Y., 1998, and *The Museum as Muse*, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1999, both offered comprehensive analyses of the museum or archive as the conceptual ground for art practice in the twentieth century.

3. For a good summary of “museumist” art and an excellent introduction to the work of Fred Wilson, see Lisa G. Corrin, “Mining the Museum: Artists Look at Museums, Museums Look at Themselves,” in Corrin, ed., *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson*, New York: The New Press, 1994.

4. Walter Grasskamp, “Artists and Other Collectors” in Gale and Bronson, eds., p. 145.

and personal belongings as “artifacts” in the section devoted to the Kumeyaay Indians at the San Diego Museum of Man. Lying in a display case, covered with a deerskin loin cloth as if frozen in time, Luna enacted the ideological effect museums have on living populations when they present indigenous peoples, such as his own Luiseño tribe, as already extinct. As both performance and installation, *The Artifact Piece* articulated new boundary conditions between artist and museum, art and artifact, performer and spectator.

- Fred Wilson's gallery and museum installations are among the most provocative and innovative to emerge within this larger curatorial turn in the last two decades. As a young artist, Wilson worked part-time at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the American Museum of Natural History, and Just Above Midtown Gallery in New York. Through this experience, he became intimately aware of the role museums play in constructing systems of knowledge and in representing authoritative histories of art and culture to a broad audience. His critical views about the bias inherent in such institutions were echoed in the scholarship of museum studies at the time. Scholar George Stocking, writing about museums in an international postcolonial context, suggested in 1985 that “The emergence of new national consciousness in the aftermath of the colonial era . . . called into question the traditional relationship of objects and others in the museum environment. Both the physical ownership of objects and the right of representing their meaning became issues of contention.”⁵
- A similar critique was taking place within the United States by disenfranchised populations who felt their history had been ignored or misrepresented in mainstream culture. The museum came under scrutiny as an institution that had intentionally or unintentionally perpetuated cultural and racial stereotypes or narrow interpretations of history. As Julie Marcus observed in 1991, “It is within the museum that the basic distinctions between nature and culture are demonstrated as science; there, that taxonomies of knowledge are laid bare and objectified; and there that theories of race and gender relying upon a fundamental nature/culture dichotomy are cloaked with material proofs and scientific authenticity.”⁶
- The critical appraisal of the institution of the museum in the fine arts was in many respects a familiar project that was given a new spin in the 1980s through the merging of political activism with conceptual art's earlier rejection of the institutional “frame” of the museum in the 1960s and 1970s. Douglas Crimp's essay “On the Museum's Ruins” claimed that postmodern art practices undermined the modernist principles on which museums and their taxonomic structures were based.⁷ Claims for authenticity, originality, and aesthetic authority found in institutionalized presentations of “truth,” “history,” and “beauty” were called into question, allowing for new forms of art and museum practice to emerge.

- Wilson has contributed to this new discourse through a critical engagement with the idea of the museum as a site for ideological projection and transformation. By the late 1980s he had, in his own words, developed “a postmodernist criticality and a related resistance to standard ideas of creativity and innovation.” “This is why,” the artist states, “I appropriate, reuse, and combine things that already exist. I am guided by concerns that preclude painting, sculpture, and drawing as they are usually known.”⁸ Turning away from the creation of new objects to focus on the reinterpretation of sign systems already in place, Wilson offers a critical perspective on the history of museums, artifacts, and evidence as they represent cultural difference, colonialism, and race.

Rooms with a View

Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate.

According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror.

Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”⁹

- *Rooms with a View: The Struggle Between Culture, Content, and the Context of Art* was the first of Wilson's projects to interrogate the architectural forms of museum display. In an exhibition held at the Longwood Art Gallery in the Bronx in 1987, the artist created three distinct exhibition spaces for a group show of contemporary artworks by other artists. One room was prepared as a modernist “white cube,” another was designed as a late nineteenth-century domestic interior, and the third took the form of an ethnographic museum display. In each space the contemporary works of art were seen differently—as fine art, as decorative art, or as artifact. The artist's goal was to highlight the artifice of display styles, to expose the exhibition's visual and spatial rhetoric. Like other forms of public discourse, museums produce their own rhetorical arguments and their own emphatic narratives organized according to social and political imperatives of the present. In this first experimental installation Wilson demonstrated how museums of ethnography and of art actively participate in shaping what Homi Bhabha might call a “fixed reality” for their viewers. Bhabha writes, “Colonial power produces the colonized as a fixed reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible. It resembles a form of narrative in which the productivity and circulation of subjects and signs are bound in a reformed and recog-

nizable totality.”¹⁰ Though the form of these arguments may be material or visual, as well as linguistic, museum displays nonetheless bind subjects and signs into re-formed and recognizable “totalities” that are sometimes given the names “culture,” “race,” “art,” or “artifact.”¹¹

- The very “otherness” to which Bhabha refers became the subject of Wilson’s next installation, *The Other Museum* (1990). Simulating an ethnographic display complete with glass cabinets, curatorial text, identifying labels, and “primitive” objects, the project employed the visual tropes and taxonomic schema of the natural history and anthropology museums it sought to parody and critique. *The Other Museum* was intended neither to replicate ethnographic practice, nor to produce a “counter” ethnography, but rather to present a critical and historical view of anthropological and ethnographic discourse—and its attendant museum displays.¹² The word *other* in the title invoked both the “otherness” of cultural or racial difference (that is, the colonized other) and the “otherness” of a new ideological perspective. At the entrance to the exhibition a map of the world was hung upside down, suggesting that a symbolic transformation based on a new global perspective might obliquely demonstrate how geography is itself a result of arbitrary domination and uneven distributions of power. Wall labels were written from the viewpoint of the vanquished, presenting a subaltern perspective on colonial conquest and the subsequent international trade in material goods, aesthetic artifacts, and people. Objects were identified neither as the “gift” of a particular donor, nor as having been anonymously “acquired” by the museum, but rather as “stolen from” a particular community or sacred burial site. Naming this activity of plunder in noneuphemistic terms, Wilson unmasked the acquisitive nature of the supposedly disinterested position of the museum as repository and the anthropologist as scholar. “In general,” he writes, “the designed environment of museums is a formalist system of display rooted in the socio-cultural eras of the past; as such these spaces embody the politics, the pain, the suffering and the separateness characteristic of the time when the collections were formed.”¹³
- On one wall of the installation six wooden masks of African origin, arranged in a row, were titled *Spoils*. Each mask was gagged or blindfolded with a colonial flag, either British or French, creating an unsettling anthropomorphism of the object, as well as a metaphorical sign for the bodily effects of colonialism: starvation, blinding, execution, silencing. On one mask Wilson projected the image of a woman’s face (actress Alva Rogers), whose eyes and lips move, while behind the mask a recorded female voice was heard pleading: “Don’t just look at me, listen to me. Don’t just own me, understand me. Don’t just talk about me, talk to me. I am still alive.” Creating a conceptual parallel between the masks and the communities they represent, the words suggest the complicity of the audience in maintaining a

5. George Stocking, “Introduction,” in *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p. 11.

6. Julie Marcus, “Postmodernity and the Museum,” in *Social Analysis*, no. 3, December 1991, p. 11.

7. Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum’s Ruins*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995, p. 47.

8. Fred Wilson, in Patterson Sims, “Metamorphosing Art/Mixing the Museum,” in *The Museum: Mixed Metaphors*, exh. cat., Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 1993, p. 6.

9. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1969, p. 256.

10. Homi Bhabha, “The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism,” in F. Barker, P. Hulm, M. Iversen, D. Laxley, eds., *Literature, Politics and Theory*, New York: Methuen, 1986, p. 156.

11. For a discussion of the ways that objects become identified by museums as either art or artifact, see James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988.

12. Hal Foster’s essay “The Artist as Ethnographer” credits Wilson for his archeological method, which exposes and reframes “the institutional codings of art and artifacts,” but is too quick to presume that the artist seeks to engage in his own ethnographic practice. This reading misses the artist’s explicit critiques of ethnography as both discipline and method. See Foster, *The Return of the Real*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996, p. 191.

13. Fred Wilson, statement for the Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1993.

comfortable distance between the art object and the culture from which it has come. By giving voice to the inanimate object, the artist engages the visitor in a pseudo-dialogue while simultaneously constructing a subject position with which, or against which, the visitor is asked to identify. As Irit Rogoff and Daniel Sherman write, "The signifying processes through which museums endow objects with meaning also act, through such basic forms of social organization as gender, race and class, to privilege and exclude certain kinds of viewing and thus to construct their audiences in historically specific ways as interpretative communities."¹⁴

- Wilson's reference to ownership can be read both as a critique of the way African masks become consumer objects stripped of history or cultural context, as well as a metonymic sign for the historical enslavement of Africans. Each of the admonitions also addresses the social and institutional position of the *Spoils* themselves. They are "looked at," "owned," and "talked about," rather than understood. The equation Wilson constructs between the human subject and the art object as commodities in contemporary metropolitan and industrial contexts enlarges the possible connotations of ownership that colonialism entails. The aesthetic transformation of such *Spoils* into collectable art objects marks a shift in the way objects are perceived by the museum elite: what was once a debased sign of a "primitive" culture has become an object of desire. Yet, this transformation does not necessarily change the balance of power between the colonizer and the colonized or its representation in the museum.¹⁵ bell hooks observes that "When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other."¹⁶
- To what degree, Wilson asks, have museums provided a playground for their audiences to explore and affirm their cultural difference from and cultural superiority over others? Homi Bhabha suggests that

In fact the sign of the "cultured" or the "civilized" attitude is the ability to appreciate cultures in a kind of *musée imaginaire*; as though one should be able to collect and appreciate them. Western connoisseurship is the capacity to understand and locate cultures in a universal timeframe that acknowledges their various historical and social contexts only eventually to transcend them and render them transparent.

A transparent norm is constituted, a norm given by the host society or dominant culture, which says that "these other cultures are fine, but we must be able to locate them within our own grid." This is what I mean by a *creation* of cultural diversity and a *containment* of cultural difference.¹⁷

In *The Other Museum* those “transparent” norms that rule the rhetoric of display in ethnographic museums are made visible. Relations of power that are the condition for the possibility of such museums are thus the underlying structure in Wilson’s own critical *musée imaginaire*.

- *The Other Museum* became the model for several of Wilson’s subsequent installations, both formally and conceptually. In works such as *Primitivism: High and Low* (1991) and *Panta Rhei: A Gallery of Ancient Classical Art* (1992), he explored the construction and use of concepts such as “primitive” and “classical” in the history of art and its exhibition. Both installations transformed gallery spaces into pseudo-museum environments, staging critical views of the ways material objects (paintings, sculptures, masks, costumes) have been read within a narrow conception of culture based on racial and cultural hierarchies.

Interrogative Archeology

He who wishes to approach his own buried past must act like a man who digs. . . . Because facts of the matter are only deposits, layers which deliver only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes the true assets hidden within the inner earth: the images which, torn from all former contexts, stand—like ruins or torsos in the collector’s gallery—as treasures in the sober chambers of our bleated insights.

Walter Benjamin, “A Berlin Chronicle”¹⁸

- In *Mining the Museum* (1992) Wilson addressed the creation of cultural diversity and the containment of cultural difference in public institutions through a critical reinstallation of artifacts from the permanent collection of the Maryland Historical Society. The word *mining*, as Judith Stein observes, functioned for the artist as a three-way pun: “excavating the collections to extract the buried presence of racial minorities, planting emotionally explosive historical material to raise consciousness and effect institutional change, and finding reflections of himself within the museum.”¹⁹ This was the first of Wilson’s projects to be exhibited in a traditional museum space rather than a gallery of contemporary art. Reminding viewers that curators always bring “who they are” into the exhibitions they organize, Wilson announced in an introductory video that this installation would reflect his own vision of the Maryland Historical Society, a vision that was by definition personal, historically specific, and not “objective.” By implication, of course, the “objectivity” of all museum installations was brought into question. Indeed, the exhibition engaged an interrogative mode throughout. Visitors were invited to pose questions rather than seek answers, guided by posters in

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

- The question “Who is doing the telling?” reveals that there is never a neutral position from which histories are recounted. “What can you touch?” invites reflection on the limited range of behaviors traditionally allowed in institutional contexts such as museums, and “Where are you?” brings the focus of analysis back to the Maryland Historical Society. Wilson commented that

Mining the Museum was really about African American and Native American culture—that was the first thing that was important to me. But as I would say to all the different groups and the docents, this was about African American history specifically—but what are all the other histories that are missing? I could have done other histories in that exhibition, such as women’s history, Jewish history, immigrant history, and that became clear to the curators.²⁰

- Of both Carib and African descent, Wilson generally refuses to reduce his critical analyses to a simple binary of “black” or “white” positions, but rather insists on the historical complexity through which ethnic identities and cultural ideologies are formed. Thus, while many of his installations use a polemical visual rhetoric, rarely is it in the service of ascribing fixed roles to racial types. Instead, Wilson questions the ways racist histories are told with material culture signs, in order to reveal different *ideologies of seeing* that operate within a tradition of institutional display.
- In one of his more powerful juxtapositions, *Metalwork 1793–1880* (p. 68), Wilson grouped together Baltimore repoussé-style silver vessels and slave shackles to suggest the interdependence of slavery and a luxury economy. The visual contrast of fine silver craftsmanship and crude ironwork, as well as the position of the abject slave shackles amid the tall goblets and elegant decanters, functions as an allegory of class relations. Museum collections have typically been composed of the objects belonging to the ruling class and the wealthy elite, who have traditionally comprised the museum’s audience as well. The material culture of the working class, and certainly of the slave class, would never, indeed had never, been shown side by side with such signs of privilege in the context of the museum. Through this simple juxtaposition, Wilson calls attention to the ideological function of an institution that has traditionally kept such objects apart. “As I see it,” he comments, “juxtaposition is one way of unlocking [history] without a didactic tone—allowing the objects to speak to each other. I feel that there is a dialogue between objects—sometimes subtle dialogue, sometimes pronounced

14. Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff, “Introduction,” in *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, p. 6.
 15. James Clifford comments, “The fact that rather abruptly, in the space of a few decades, a large class of non-Western artifacts came to be redefined as art is a taxonomic shift that requires critical historical discussion, not celebration. That this construction of a generous category of art pitched at a global scale occurred just as the planet’s tribal people came massively under European political, economic, and evangelical domination cannot be irrelevant.” See Clifford, “Histories of the Tribal and Modern,” in Russell Ferguson, William Olander, Marcia Tucker, and Karen Fiss, eds., *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990, p. 412.

16. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Boston: South End Press, 1992, pp. 23–24.

17. Homi Bhabha, “The Third Space: Interview with Jonathan Rutherford,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, p. 208.

18. Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott, New York: Schocken, 1978, pp. 25–26.

19. Judith E. Stein, “Sins of Omission,” *Art in America*, vol. 81, no. 10, October 1993, p. 112.

20. Fred Wilson, interview with the author, September 1, 1995.

dialogue, depending on how diverse the objects are and depending on who is seeing them, too.”²¹ When a museum decides to display one object as decorative art and another as historical evidence, it does not merely establish a hierarchy of aesthetic values. It also limits contact between such objects and thereby restricts the stories such objects tell together. If, as Gaston Bachelard has suggested, “the hidden in men and the hidden in things belong in the same topoanalysis,” then any archive also serves as a topological map of human/thing relations, producing its own geography of concealment as well as preservation.²²

- In several of the Maryland Historical Society’s eighteenth-century group portraits of children, a parallel social topography emerges. White children of the landed class are pictured with black children—their slaves. Often barely visible because of the dark tone of the pigments used to paint their skin, the African American children are also depicted in the margins, literally pushed to the edges of the picture frame. To focus attention on these hidden figures, Wilson used a motion sensor, triggered by passing museum visitors, to activate a spotlight and audiotape. For the young black girl who stands at the edge of *The Alexander Contee Hanson Family* portrait (Robert Edge Pine, c. 1787) a voice asks, “Where is my mother? Who washes my back? Who combs my hair? Who calms me when I’m afraid?” For a portrait of *Henry Darnall III* (Justus Engelhardt Kuhn, c. 1710), pictured with his estate and a nameless slave retained by a metal collar around his neck, a voice asks, “Am I your brother? Am I your friend? Am I your pet?” These interrogative interjections addressing the familial, emotional, and hierarchical relations between children in a slave economy also carry a contemporary resonance.
- In many of Wilson’s installations, pronouns such as “I” and “my,” “you” and “yours” produce Brechtian disruptions of a passive art appreciation. By directly addressing museum visitors, the installations foreground the often unconscious processes of identification—or discomfort—visitors experience in front of works of art. An internal dialogue is interrupted or inspired by external prompts. This rhetorical use of direct address is not uncommon in the works of other contemporary artists such as Barbara Kruger, Daniel Martinez, or Edgar Heap of Birds, who use the words *I* and *you* as forms of ideological interpellation. In Wilson’s installations these pronouns are attached to voices scripted by the artist. Emanating from material objects they have an animistic quality. A literal and conceptual ventriloquism is at play. Both the artist’s point of view and that which he imagines for historically silenced subjects are broadcast through artifacts that are, in turn, transformed into “speaking” rather than mute witnesses of past events. Instead of a narcissistic gesture, the use of “I” and “mine” in *Mining the Museum* and other installations demonstrates an important process of identification between the artist and those subjects whose



The Alexander Contee Hanson
c. 1787
Robert Edge Pine
oil on canvas
Maryland Historical Society
Baltimore, MD



Henry Cas Darnall III as a Child
c. 1710
Justus Engelhardt Kuhn
oil on canvas
Maryland Historical Society
Baltimore, MD

history has been summarily ignored or institutionally erased.²³

- Wilson continued his interrogative mode in *Reclaiming Egypt*, presented at the 1993 Whitney Biennial. Inspired in part by Martin Bernal's controversial study *Black Athena*, the installation questioned traditional conceptions of racial difference that continue to divide the history of ancient Egypt from that of other African cultures. In a staged display of ancient artifacts and contemporary Egyptian tourist souvenirs, the artist included a reproduction effigy of the Pharaoh Ankenaten (p. 83). When one approaches the statue, a voice asks, "What race am I?" After a short pause the voice replies, "Wrong." "What race are you?" the voice continues. Then after another short pause, "Hmmm." Finally the voice asks, "What is race?" By posing these questions the work both undermines the idea that the concept of race is self-evident and also underscores the way that works of art and historical artifacts are read through discourses of race and valued accordingly.
- Seeking to find the forgotten, the omitted, or the invisible elements in history, Wilson has also infiltrated the intimate spaces of domestic museums. *An Invisible Life: A View into the World of a 120 Year Old Man* (1993), produced in conjunction with Capp Street Project in San Francisco, was situated in an historic house, one of several in the city that had been recently restored to its Victorian-era splendor. The installation re-created in meticulous detail the life of the house's previous inhabitant—one Baldwin Antinous Stein. Rooms were filled with objects that mapped a life history as complex and subtle as it was incredible. Docents informed visitors of the extraordinary life of this unique individual, who was born in the Caribbean and became a world traveler, professional portrait photographer, polyglot, friend to the photographer Eadweard Muybridge, and acquaintance of Marcel Proust in Paris.
- On the first floor, as docents led visitors from room to room explaining the architectural and historical details, voices could occasionally be heard. From an armchair in the living room the voice of a young man whispered, "Am I alone? Is it only me? Is there no one else?" while across the dining room table two older men's voices praised the merits of Socratic dialogue. On the second floor of the house, in the library and bedrooms, hundreds of photographs—portraits of men of different ethnicities—cluttered the shelves and table tops (p. 100). There were pictures from the turn of the century of sailors, athletes, gentlemen in business suits, and other men lounging outdoors. The house was also filled with memorabilia, statuettes of men wrestling, and other art objects from around the world. Books sitting on table tops, such as *Love in Ancient Greece*, *Of Human Bondage*, *Nijinsky*, and *Proust and the Art of Love*, were interleaved with yellowed bookmarks that read: "a mystery created, page 104," "a history denied, page 117." Although never explicitly stated, an observant

visitor could piece together the visual and textual evidence of Stein's gay desire—a desire that may have been "closeted" all of his life. To bring the point home, Wilson installed a silent video image of two eyes (the artist's and others') looking out from the back of the bedroom closet, barely visible among the clothes. When visitors looked into the closet, each saw a different pair of eyes, and thus formed a different image of the racial or ethnic identity of the "closeted" man. Stein was, of course, an entirely fictional character. The artist produced a suggestive script for the docents to read that highlighted the "faux finishes" and "hidden" architectural details of the house, as well as conflicting evidence about Stein, to suggest to visitors that "all was not what it seemed."²⁴ Yet visitors were mostly surprised and sometimes dismayed to learn at the end of their tour that Stein was not a real person.²⁵ *An Invisible Life* enabled the artist to make evident both the degree to which visitors invest museums and their docents with an unquestioned authority, and the degree to which life histories of men like Stein—educated, cosmopolitan, gay men of the last century—have generally been rendered invisible. As in Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), Wilson creates a fictional character to tell the story of actual lives that have yet to enter the archives.

- Both historian Irene J. Winter and I have suggested independently that Wilson operates as a Foucauldian archeologist, unearthing objects that reveal hidden histories and, more importantly, the internal workings and ideological paradigms of archives and museum collections.²⁶ For Michel Foucault, an archeology of knowledge "does not imply the search for a beginning.... It designates the general theme of a description that questions the already-said at the level of its existence: of the enunciative function that operates within it, of the discursive formation, and the general archive system to which it belongs. Archeology describes discourses as practices specified in the element of the archive."²⁷ In addition to questioning the "already-said" in discourse, a Foucauldian archeological method supplies that which is *not* coherent, *not* general, *not* part of a totalizing theory or a seamless historical narrative. Rather, it finds that which has heretofore escaped systematic analysis within a particular discursive domain. As Hayden White observes, "The aim of the [Foucauldian] 'archeology of ideas' is to enter into the interior of any given mode of discourse in order to determine the point at which it consigns a certain area of experience to the limbo of things about which one cannot speak."²⁸ As a museum archeologist Wilson seeks to discover and display that which has been lost in the limbo of the archive or repressed in discourses about race in public institutions. Rather than a search for origins, his work vocalizes that which has previously remained unspoken while simultaneously demonstrating forms of institutional silence.

21. Ibid.

22. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969, p. 89.

23. See Lyle Ashton Harris's discussion of "redemptive narcissism" in *Inside Out: Psychological Self-Portraiture*, exh. cat., Ridgefield, Conn.: Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995.

24. Interview with the artist.

25. "Fred Wilson: Art in Context," exh. broch., New York: Metro Pictures, 1995.

26. For discussions of Fred Wilson as a Foucauldian archeologist, see Jennifer González, "Siting Histories: Material Culture and the Politics of Display in the Work of Fred Wilson, Pepón Osorio, and Amalia Mesa-Bains," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 1996. See also Irene J. Winter, "Exhibit/Inhibit: Archaeology, Value, History in the Work of Fred Wilson," in Lia Gangitano and Steven Nelson, eds., *New Histories*, Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1996, pp. 181–90.

27. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, New York: Pantheon Books, 1972, p. 131.

28. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, pp. 239–40.

- Wilson's archeological impulse was again directed toward the ideology and history of display in *The Museum: Mixed Metaphors* (1993) at the Seattle Art Museum. In a calculated deconstruction, Wilson performed a series of tactical reversals to expose what might be called the "discursive formations" of exhibition styles. In the gallery devoted to modern European and U.S. art from 1910 to 1950, the artist transformed the "white-cube" environment of the gallery by painting two adjoining walls the same dark green found on the walls of the museum's largest gallery of African art. He also included a raised sculpture platform, a copy of those found in the museum's galleries of African and Native American art. Crowded together on the small platform were works by Alberto Giacometti, Willem De Kooning, Francis Picabia, and others—seven sculptures and five paintings by different artists placed one in front of another (p. 90). At the base of the platform was an explanatory illustration: a carefully drawn outline of each object numerically coded to match an accompanying list of names and titles. One visitor commented: "Marvelous! I was walking around very proud of myself that I got the joke and didn't have to be enlightened until I got to where all the modern European art was bunched up in the corner the way the art of other cultures always is, and I got irritated. These idiots squished the Picabia back in the corner where I can't see it! Touché."²⁹
- Wilson also enhanced the display of the museum's large collection of African textiles and sculpture with the addition of a mannequin in a gray flannel suit, crisp white shirt, and silk tie (p. 92). The caption read: "Certain elements of dress were used to designate one's rank in Africa's status-conscious capitals. A gray suit with conservatively patterned tie denotes a businessman or member of government. Costumes such as this are designed and tailored in Africa and worn throughout the continent."³⁰ Adopting the explanatory tone of many museum labels, he exposed the museum's tendency to situate the cultural artifacts of Africans entirely in the past tense. To further disrupt this tendency he also included a television monitor with contemporary African music videos, as well as footage of a contemporary Nigerian fashion show. The final touch was a rare photographic survey of innovative architecture from five African countries, photographed by architect Jerry Eysaman.

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What was once an exhibition of exotic, aesthetic objects became a glimpse into the lives of modern-day Africans.

- A similar tactical reversal was performed more recently in San Francisco's De Young Museum. *Speaking in Tongues: A Look at the Language of Display* (1999) applied the stylistic tone from the introductory wall text in a display of African art to a small exhibition of European and American objects. An eclectic collection of decorative arts, furniture, painting, and sculpture was shown accompanied by disarming captions that made the paternalistic and explanatory rhetoric of more traditional ethnographic displays evident. The introductory wall text begins: "Europe and the United States are characterized by tremendous diversity. The environments in which people live vary widely, ranging from tundra to desert and from mountain to plains." The text goes on to explain that "European and Euro-American sculpture is often made of wood, fiber, hair and other organic materials that rarely survive well in extremely hot, cold or humid climates." A marble bust of Christopher Columbus is identified as "Ancestor Figure (as a Boy): Italy, 19th Century, Marble." The descriptive text reads, "It is believed by some scholars that Christopher Columbus is among the most honored mythological figures in western culture, specifically among United States devotees....As tradition dictates, one day of the year is set aside for the veneration of this ancestor. The mythological character of the man is captured in this sculpture, as the carver could not have seen an image of Columbus as a youth." Generalizations about cultural diversity, attention to climate as a condition for aesthetic practice, reduction of artistic expression to a consideration of cultural myth, and the anonymous status of the "carver" all signal the manner in which art and artifacts from "other" cultures have been traditionally framed in museums. Because the language used in the introductory text and labels mimics that found in the adjoining gallery of African art, it is all the more effective in demonstrating the wide variance in rubrics used to frame collections throughout the museum. Offering a playful if pointed response to standard museum practices, Wilson reminds the public that the history of art and artifacts not only is a history of aesthetics and material culture, but also includes a history of human lives and the epistemological networks within which those lives are understood and represented.

Conceptual Materialism

The materialist presentation of history leads the past to place the present in a critical condition.

Walter Benjamin, "N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]"³¹

- For the philosopher Walter Benjamin, history is not to be presented as a seamless, progressive, teleological narrative, but rather as a series of dialectical images or "critical constellations" juxtaposing signs from the past with those in the present to discover how both might be read differently. His unorthodox conception of historical materialism replaced abstract analyses of economic systems with a study of their concrete, material traces—as art, artifact, and architecture. For Benjamin, a materialist historian acts as one who digs, pulling signs from the past into a new confrontation with the present, placing the present in a critical condition. "To write history," he asserts, "therefore means to *quote* history. But the concept of quotation implies that any given historical object must be ripped out of its context."³² All historical discourse partakes in this necessary violence, Benjamin suggests; it is only those who seek to hide the process who fail to grasp the consequences of their actions. I have used Benjamin's writing to frame my analysis of Fred Wilson's work because Benjamin and Wilson share a critical insight: historical discourse is a form of argumentation in which the evidence of the material world participates, and the task of the artist or historian is to use this evidence to brush history against the grain.
- With its emphasis on the economic, social, and material conditions that shape subjectivity and determine circulations of power, Wilson's work participates in an important shift in contemporary art practice that combines the institutional and semiotic investigations of conceptual art with a Benjaminian historical materialism—what might be called *conceptual materialism*. By situating "critical constellations" of objects and artifacts in museum and gallery installations, Wilson demonstrates that history is itself a culturally constructed artifact, one reproduced through the collection and display of objects that stand as traces of untold stories lost in the debris of the past or repressed in the commodity-saturated present. "General art museums say they are multicultural museums," Wilson comments. "To my mind museums of this nature are about as multicultural as Great Britain in 1914. The 'empire' includes many cultures, but who decides what is important in that culture? Who speaks for that culture? Who chooses what is kept of that culture?"³³ Wilson's critical rearticulations demonstrate that a work of art may change the terms by which a new materialist history can be realized.

29. Wilson, in Sims, p. 5.

30. Ibid. p. 29.

31. Walter Benjamin, "N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]," in *Benjamin: Philosophy, History, Aesthetics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, p. 60.

32. Ibid., p. 67.

33. Wilson, in Sims, p. 9.