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Fred Wilson's Un-Natural Histories: Trauma and the Visual Production of Knowledge

In 1992, the Maryland Historical Society, in collaboration with the Contemporary Museum of Art in Baltimore, asked African-American artist Fred Wilson to rearrange their collection. The project involved a collaboration between the two institutions including docents, staff, and curators and it spread throughout eight rooms, each room containing, in effect, a different theme. Wilson rearranged objects from the museum's collection and placed them in striking juxtapositions, often excavating pieces from the Historical Society's storage that had never been on display prior to this exhibition. Since the mid 1980s, Wilson's artistic methodology shifted from sculptural works and occasional acts of performance, to almost exclusively curatorial installations that only rarely involve the creation of a new art object. His artistic practice is perhaps most aptly characterized by his use of the word "mining" in the title of his 1992 installation. "Mining the Museum" simultaneously referred to mineral mining or excavation, as in digging up the forgotten remnants of the past, to the dangerous and explosive connotations of landmines and finally, to the act of "making mine" wherein Wilson literally authors the museum, giving it his voice. The nature of what critics describe as the meanings of Wilson's installations are compound, multi-faceted, and fundamentally concerned with the relationships between objects and knowledge production.

In one section of *Mining the Museum*, in a room simply labeled "gray room #1," Wilson contrasts busts of famous historical white male figures such as Henry Clay, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Andrew Jackson with empty pedestals which he has labeled with the names of famous

African-Americans, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Benjamin Banneker. Between the two sets of pedestals Wilson positioned a silver plated copper globe inscribed with the word “Truth” in brass letters over the Americas. The globe was surrounded by empty clear acrylic mounts of the type used by museums to display objects. The “Truth trophy,” an early 20th century advertising award, immediately begs several obvious questions—who will be “awarded” a place in the museum, and thus a place in history, and further, in what ways does history rely on particular notions of truth? However, by placing the truth globe between the two sets of pedestals, Wilson produces a pointed commentary on acts of historical erasure, which are rooted in the violence of early modern slavery and colonization. Wilson does more than simply question historical truth, he articulates history and the production of knowledge in its various forms (notably ethnography and natural history), as themselves traumatic. I argue that forms of knowledge such as ethnography and natural history facilitated the violent projects of colonization and slavery in the early modern period and produced the identities of both the oppressor and the oppressed. Forms of knowledge organized and disciplined thinking itself. In this way, ethnography and natural history were not only complicit in genocide, but made it fundamentally impossible to think outside of their disciplinary frameworks, preventing the victims from articulating their own traumatic experiences.

In *Mining the Museum*, and certainly in his most recent works, Wilson reveals how cultural institutions often neutralize and efface these historical traumas through the visual, and asks how we might “think the present” through the early modern past. Wilson fundamentally critiques any notion of history as closed or contained, and instead asks us to understand history as permeable, borderless, and productively ambiguous. Fred Wilson’s installations form a much-needed visual and conceptual link between the early modern and its traces in the present.

In a 2007 article in the journal *October*, art historian Mark Godfrey discusses what he argues is one of the most significant, and recent, iterations of the artist's role in society, that of the artist as historian. Though the article itself centers on the work of contemporary artist Matthew Buckingham, Godfrey mentions several key artists whose works question not only notions of historical truth, but historical methodology itself. One of the artists he foregrounds is Fred Wilson. And though much of the writing on Wilson's work has centered on his critique of museums via visual analysis, very few of these texts have examined how Wilson's work actually articulates an historical methodology--a methodology that is characterized by juxtaposition and quotation, and is rooted in the materiality of both objects and bodies. Fred Wilson's work powerfully articulates two critical questions that my dissertation will address, through an historical methodology that is grounded in the visual: how does knowledge produce trauma and how do we bear witness to that trauma?

Since the early 1980s, there has been a sustained interest in the subject of traumatic memory and, in particular, a concentration around the problem of bearing witness to historical trauma. This literature includes books by psychoanalytic and literary scholars such as Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Cathy Caruth. Additionally, the question of how to represent traumatic experience has also been the subject of intense debate within trauma studies. However, that scholarship is devoted almost exclusively to literary, rather than visual, representations of traumatic experience. The nature of witnessing is specifically visual, and therefore the dismissal of the image within trauma studies represents both an intellectual lack and a missed opportunity. Through the work of Fred Wilson, I will assert the visual as a particularly potent and active way of knowing both the trauma of the past, as characterized by early modern slavery and European colonization in the name of capital and how those legacies are evidenced by contemporary

economic, environmental, and educational disparities between races, and the loss of cultural identities.

My dissertation is devoted to three of Wilson's installations, and in general, explores both the ways in which ordering knowledge produces trauma, and how Wilson as an artist/historian offers an historical methodology that visually articulates the ways in which contemporary modes of knowing which are, in fact, characterized by assemblage, quotation, and juxtaposition. Because Wilson's methodology is fundamentally about raising questions rather than providing definitive answers, and questioning authority rather than becoming the institutional authority, my methodological approach will attempt to mirror both Wilson's juxtapositional strategy, and to resist the tendency to presume a position of authority over Wilson's work. Furthermore, as Wilson is not interested in offering a kind of revisionist history or additive methodology, he invites the viewer to use the objects he displays to "think with," and, in so doing, asks us to contemplate the very nature of thinking itself.

Wilson's recent installations, *Speak of Me as I Am* at the 2003 Venice Biennale, *So Much Trouble in the World-Believe it or Not!* in 2005 at the Hood Museum, and *An Account of a Voyage to the Island Jamaica with the Un-Natural History of that Place* in 2007 at the Institute of Jamaica, have addressed the ways in which various forms of knowledge production--taxonomy, ethnography and natural history--are rooted in the early modern project of colonization and the European desire to order, and therefore to "know" the world through the visual. My dissertation will devote one chapter to each installation, to examine the ways in which, by focusing on early modern knowledge production, Wilson allows us both to rethink how history is told and to re-examine the present through an alternative look at the past.

Though much has been written about Wilson's exhibitions in the 1980s and 1990s, often in the form of articles or anthologies, very little has been said about his most recent exhibitions, which in my mind are some of the most powerful and nuanced articulations of Wilson's methodology. Additionally, part of the appeal of Wilson's methodology is his attention to the specificities of geography both in form and in content. Each installation that I discuss essentially stands as a geographical node (Venice, Italy; Hanover, New Hampshire; Kingston, Jamaica), and taken together, articulate a circuit, which I imagine to parallel the ways in which objects, individuals and knowledge travelled in the early modern Atlantic world.