

Alternative legacies: Artist projects in history museums & the importance of context

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ABSTRACT

The primary focus of this paper is to investigate why artists are drawn to working in history museums, and how an artist-driven critique of museum practices encourages dialogue about artistic and historical authority, and the role of the museum. Drawing from the fields of public history, art history, anthropology, and journalism, this study argues that artists play an important role in fostering multiple interpretations within traditional historical and academically informed museum practices. The primary theorists influencing this study include Art Historian, Douglas Crimp and his analysis of postmodernism; Professor of Art Education, Dipti Desai and her theory of ethnographic shift; Modern European Historian, Susan Crane and her theory of disruption or “excess of memory”; English Professor, Bettina Carbonell and her theory of “bearing witness”; and Patricia Romney’s analysis of Russian Philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin and his theory of dialogism. As an outgrowth of this pre-existing scholarship, this study sought to prove that artists were better positioned to intervene in and manipulate traditional museum practices, not because they helped facilitate shared authority, but because they asserted their own artistic authority in the creation of alternative narratives. Through an analysis comparing Fred Wilson’s installation Liberty/Liberte—shown first in the 2006-2007 exhibition Legacies: Contemporary Artists Reflect on Slavery at the New-York Historical Society, and then in its current placement as part of the Historical Society’s official renovations—this study instead concludes that artists are more than capable of successful interventions in non-art environments – specifically, history museums. However, the context in which the artwork is placed, as well as the conversation between the artist and the institution throughout the duration of any project, has the power to make or break the success of these artist interventions.

1. Preface

The topic of this study was first conceived of last year after hearing a lecture given by Clinical Associate Professor of Arts Administration at New York University, Melissa Racheff Burt, concerning the collaboration between Ben Katchor and the Rosenbach Museum in Philadelphia. In her lecture, Professor Racheff Burt discussed the project developed by Katchor in direct response to the Rosenbach Museum’s unique permanent collection, as well as the various ways in which the project was received by Museum’s staff and their audiences. Prior to that experience, I had never given much thought or credence to the possibility of contemporary artists producing work in collaboration with non-arts institutions, let alone using the permanent collections of these institutions as the raw material, whether inspirational or literal, for their resulting reflective and interventionist projects.

In college I studied European History and Studio Art, and had long since harbored a fascination with the ability of artists to reflect upon, and contribute to an alternative understanding of historical truth. However, my first independent investigation of the topic of artist intervention into museum display took place in the form of an investigative paper for a graduate course taught by New York University Professor Carlo Lamagna called Exhibition and Display of Art and Material Cultures. In the paper, I explored projects that contemporary artists were producing in collaboration with non-traditional arts institutions such as historical societies and science centers. The process of writing that first paper really opened my eyes to some very specific projects and artistic approaches to unique subject matter about which I had been previously unfamiliar. With this preliminary research, I moved forward in developing my thesis topic.

An original interest in looking at contemporary artistic interventions within places of traditional worship (such as churches and synagogues) evolved into an interest in contemporary artists seeking out and being invited to work in traditional history museums. There has always been something fascinating to me about the sense of excitement I’ve experienced when I am confronted by something that defies my expectations. One such experience includes the excitement from encountering a piece of contemporary artwork within a non-art setting, such as a history museum or society. This encounter asks me as the viewer to stop and reconsider some element of the display, pausing to find connections and messages I might not otherwise have seen. All the while, these experiences challenge my expectations, and evoke the question: why would artists have the interest in the first

place to seek out history museums, and why might history museums as cultural institutions seek out the inclusion of contemporary artist projects?

The official reopening of the New-York Historical Society, where (in the interest of full disclosure) I also work as a grant writer, presented an ideal opportunity to investigate some of these questions. Included at the forefront of the Society's physical new orientation and restructured image was a popular contemporary art piece by the well-known contemporary artist, Fred Wilson. The artwork, previously included in the Society's 2006-2007 landmark exhibition.

Legacies: Contemporary Artists Reflect on Slavery, had been popular and well-received in a contemporary art context, and was chosen to represent the newly-oriented, populist bent of the Society following three years of renovations to the physical spaces. No scholarship existed which offered an analysis of the piece, or a comparison of the artwork in its two separate contexts. I wanted to be the first to gather primary source information from viewers, and staff regarding the history of the piece, and the institutional involvement in the decision making process to include it in the reopening renovations.

From this new beginning, Wilson's artwork was a perfect example to investigate for a number of reasons. Chiefly, artists are better positioned to intervene in and manipulate traditional museum practices, not because they help facilitate shared authority, but because they assert their own artistic authority in the creation of alternative narratives. However, the more in depth my research became, the more I realized the issues at play were much more complex in terms of institutional goals, artist-institution relationships, and public perception than initially imagined. This comprehensive study is the result of lots of reading, many one-on-one informal interviews with visitors to the Museum, current staff, and art critics, as well as primary research about the history of Wilson's artwork at the Society. I complete the study with thoughts on how context plays a seminal role in the final outcome of institutional success.

2. Theories of Institutional Critique and the Role of the Artist in Museums

2.1 Introduction

This study argues that artists are better positioned to intervene in and manipulate traditional museum practices, not because they help facilitate shared authority, but because they assert their own artistic authority in the creation of alternative narratives. The increasing attraction of visual artists towards history museums, ethnographic museums, and other domains where public histories are represented and whereby artists may explore their own practice has been growing in relevance to the field of visual arts since the early 1990s. This period coincided with the development of post-modernist theory, radically claiming not only that there are no universal truths, but also that the public has an integral role in creative production and meaning. Douglas Crimp, professor of Art History and Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester in his book, *On the Museum's Ruins* writes: "The term *postmodernism* described a situation in which both the present and the past could be stripped of any and all historical determinations and conflicts. Art institutions widely embraced this position, using it to reestablish art—even so-called postmodernist art—as autonomous, universal, timeless."¹ Moreover, present within the museum itself was the heterogeneous nature of art that museums had fought for so long to suppress in favor of object-centric practices. In this light, Crimp discusses the redevelopment of art's "presence," or its ability to engage its audience through its inherent relationship to place, or site specificity. According to Crimp, postmodernism existed as a construct of interpretation as well as practice, and in the case of this paper, museum practice. Theorizing on how site specificity differed from its initial iteration in the 1970s, Crimp isolated the social function of site-specific art practices, as most important moving forward:

"This condition of reception, in which meaning is made a function of the work's relationship to its site of exhibition, came to be known as site specificity, whose radicalism thus lay not only in the

¹ Douglas Crimp. "Photography at the End of Modernism." *On the Museum's Ruins*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press) 1993: 18.

displacement of the artist-subject by the spectator-subject but in securing that displacement through the wedding of the artwork to a particular environment.²

Unlike modernism in which meaning was derived through an emphasis on the art object, postmodernism sought to once again empower art's inherent presence through a direct association to site, disassociation with the artist, and reengagement with the viewer.

This paper is concerned with issues deeply embedded museum practices, specifically, site-specific, installation work outside of art museums, and the dialogue such work has the potential to elicit from audiences. The question: "who possesses historical authority,"³ exists at the forefront of the study, along with the role of the audience in realizing the impact of the work on a larger scale. The primary theorists influencing this study include Art Historian, Douglas Crimp and his analysis of postmodernism; Professor of Art Education, Dipti Desai and her theory of ethnographic shift; Modern European Historian, Susan Crane and her theory of "disruption"; English Professor, Bettina Carbonell and her theory of "bearing witness"; and Patricia Romney's analysis of Russian Philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin and his theory of dialogism. Drawing from the fields of public history, art history, anthropology, and journalism, the scholarship repeatedly highlights the distinctive need for multiple interpretations within a historical and academically informed museum framework.

Ethnographic Shift

Dipti Desai, associate professor of Art Education at New York University, theorizes in her essay, "The Ethnographic Move in Contemporary Art: What Does it Mean for Art Education?" that ethnography, or the study and systematic recording of human cultures, has become the driving force behind the recent shift of artists working in site specific practices. Desai quotes Hal Foster and his theory of "artist as ethnographer,"⁴ defining ethnography as the inquiry-based process that is directly linked to the "particularities of experience" and arguing that the "turn to ethnography by artists signals the current shifts of artists as object makers to artists as 'facilitators, educators, coordinators, bureaucrats.'"⁵ Desai takes Foster's theory of ethnographic shift and looks specifically at site-specific, dialogue centric artist practices. Moreover, she positions an understanding of this shift originally in the artist practices of the 1970s in which "aesthetic concerns were no longer the primary focus, but rather...the 'discursive' took center stage...Art became a forum that opened public dialogue on issues of concern to people."⁶ Experience, both individual and communal, became paramount to these new site-specific, installation based practices, suggesting that a work's discursive possibilities surpassed the aesthetic. Moreover, the dialogue created as a result of these site specific projects had the power and potential to influence social change.⁷

Memory Theory: Historicizing Process

Susan A. Crane, professor of Modern European History at the University of Arizona in her essay, "Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum," posits her theory of "disruption", or "excess of memory," stressing the need for site-specific, installation works, and dialogue that comprise the heart of socially engaged artists' practices, thus exceeding Crimp's idea to current concerns. Crane questions the way by which society creates knowledge, and recommends that artists assert their role in the creation of a historical consciousness through their involvement in altering museum practices. Crane's main concern is the phenomenon by which "national histories and personal memories are often at odds...a distortion from the lack of congruity between personal experience and expectation, on the one hand, and the institutional representation of the past on the other."⁸ History museums in particular have favored traditional modes of interpretation rooted in dominant narratives rather than engaging in practices that elicit unique responses and multiple interpretations from their audiences. Crane posits that visitors enter museums with preconceived notions, constructed memories, and expectations that are formed by previous experiences within the museum itself. Consequently, when museums choose

² Crimp, 17.

³ Melissa Racheff, "Peering Behind the Curtain: Artists and Questioning Historical Authority," in *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*. (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for the Arts and Heritage) 2011: 208.

⁴ Dipti Desai, 307.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 308.

⁷ Ibid., 318.

⁸ Susan A. Crane, "Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum." *History and Theory: Producing the Past: Making Histories Inside and Outside the Academy*, 36 (4) (Dec., 1997): 44.

alternative modes of representing their collections and the histories they signify, visitors encounter a situation whereby they are confronted with something that disrupts their memory of the space, the history, and their preconceived expectations; this is the distortion to which Crane alludes. Moreover, Crane argues that in these moments where disruption occurs, previously sealed avenues of interpretation and dialogue are opened, encouraging audience participation in formulating meaning. This is a responsibility she feels should lie at the heart of true museum practice. However, one can question: do museums base projects specifically within these concerns? This “excess of memory” or historical consciousness does not imply that there exists something extra to the collective historical memory, but rather points to those subjective personal responses that are not included in the dominant narratives presented by museums. Crane argues early on that this non-linear, memory-inclusive approach is characteristic of “individual experiences at museums and individual memories of ‘the museum’ that then shape the public discussion of what museums are and what they could or should be.”⁹

Personal yet publically formed memories are not included in museum settings because they deal with how things are remembered, not how they really are,¹⁰ further highlighting the tension between institutional fact and audience interpretation. The question is raised: how can museums present something intangible? This is where artists come into the picture, making the intangible tangible through their resistance to adopting traditional museum practices. Crane looks to psychologist Daniel Schacter (author of *Searching for Memory*), who argues most generally that memory “cues” can be used to engage this “excess of memory” and integrate it into the historical process of interpretation in order to create what we know as the present. When viewers are able to locate history within their present experience, objects gain the ability to bear witness in a way that encourages a “confrontation among testimonies.”¹¹ Additionally, when viewers can see the difference between a history museum framework, and when that framework is challenged by artist projects, this confrontation occurs. “‘Aesthetic’ objects became historicized [the role of the institution] and ‘historical materials’ became aestheticized [the role of the artist]”¹² thus creating a new way by which viewers can interpret works within the museum. Crane writes:

“If we assume that the nature of memory is change and distortion over time, rather than expect memory to be a distorting faculty which abuses the historical past, then memory can be seen as a historical process which is frequently interrupted by interpretation to create the present.”¹³

This understanding of how memory works mimics how history is practiced, which is also very subjective. The artist thus enters the field of history familiar with museum practices, yet approaching and challenging these practices with a fresh look. This study looks at Crane’s theory of “disruption” when applied to an history museum framework, and suggests that artists are best equipped to address incongruities between audience and practice through the use of memory “cues” to engage the those who have been traditionally left out or misrepresented in the overall dialogue. As visual artist, Susan Hiller, once stated: “I want to allow for spaces between the either-or you believe in.”¹⁴

Bearing Witness

Bettina M. Carbonell, an English professor at the City University of New York, sees the inherent ability of objects to bear witness, or to assert the unique narratives they represent, as a “crucial aspect of the museum experience.”¹⁵ In her essay, “The Syntax of Objects and the Representation of History: Speaking of Slavery in New York,” Carbonell sites several authors who attest to the importance of objects asserting a unique narrative within the museum, including Marc Bloch, author of *The Historian’s Craft*; Paul Ricoeur, author of *History, Memory, Forgetting*; and Steven Conn, professor and director of the Public History Program at Ohio State University. Carbonell looks to Bloch’s assertion of “indirect testimony” and belief that “objects are often ‘witnesses in spite of themselves’” and must be “properly questioned” through an inquiry-based dialogue.¹⁶ Crane also looks to

⁹ Ibid., 47.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Bettina M. Carbonell, “The Syntax of Objects and the Representation of History: Speaking of *Slavery in New York*.” *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 47 (May 2009): 126.

¹² Ibid., 126.

¹³ Crane, 50.

¹⁴ Lucy Lipard. *Thinking About Art: Conversations with Susan Hiller*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc.) 1996: 4.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 126.

Ricoeur and his theory of the “dialogical situation,” highlighting again the idea that dialogue can be achieved through a “confrontation among testimonies.”¹⁷ Moreover, Carbonell cites Steven Conn and the history of “object-based epistemology,” in which Conn asserts that there exists the opportunity to “read the past through objects” and that “this interpretive power could extend to the average visitor or ‘untrained observer’ who, under the right conditions, might be expected to read the object as if it were an open book.”¹⁸ All of these authors provide sub-elements of Carbonell’s main theory of “bearing witness” and subsequently strengthen it. However, if the objects alone have the ability to bear witness, then what compels the artist to work within an interpretive, non-art context?

Dialogic

The answer may be perhaps simpler than expected. Patricia Romney’s presentation of theories of art education in her essay “The Art of Dialogue” provides established theoretical foundations when analyzing the role of artists in facilitating the museum-based dialogue alluded to by both Crane and Carbonell. Romney focuses on the function of dialogue specifically within the museum and delineates the artists and practitioners offering theories relating to the role of dialogue in education. Romney states from the beginning that: “Dialogue, which has a long history among artists and cultural institutions, has also become an increasingly important concept in the arts community.”¹⁹ Thus, Romney positions artists and cultural institutions as better equipped to act as facilitators for community dialogue. In her analysis, Romney sites Russian philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin and his theory of dialogism, or the “open-ended possibilities generated by all discursive (conversational/theoretical) practices of culture.”²⁰ Bakhtin, a true postmodern theorist, argued that the goal of dialogue was not to arrive at one final truth, but at multiple, plausible understandings. “All understanding is active not understanding alone, but *responsive* understanding. In dialogue something must be said or done, not just understood.”²¹ Most powerfully, Bakhtin asserted that we are to “respond with our lives for what we understand through art.”²² In other words, Bakhtin implies that somehow, through dialogue, change must occur either in our understanding of some given subject, the broader history it implicates, or in ourselves.

3. Practices in the Field: Artists Engaging Public Discourse

3.1 Memory Theory: Disruption

The Museum of Jurassic Technology

All of the theorists influencing this study have provided examples of situations where they see their theories in action. By enumerating examples of artists working in the field, the scholars demonstrate legitimacy, showing situations where they see the possibility of the theory reflected in the practice, and vice versa. Susan A. Crane’s theory of “disruption,” or the situation whereby museum audiences are confronted with something that disrupts their memory of the space, the history, and their preconceived expectations, provides an excellent starting point. Crane provides several examples of artists working in the field. She mentions the Museum of Jurassic Technology, located in Los Angeles, California, as a unique example of an institution where “an ordinary visit to the museum produces distortion” and facilitates an inclusion of an “excess of memory.”²³ Journalist, Lawrence Weschler, supplements Crane’s analysis in his article “Inhaling the Spore.” While Weschler is a cultural reporter and not an entirely uninformed visitor, he still brings a different audience experience to an understanding of the space. For Weschler, the Museum of Jurassic Technology constitutes a perfect example of Crane’s “distortion” theory in action; however, Weschler utilizes the term “wonder” to describe the same phenomenon.

The Museum of Jurassic Technology is a man-made replica of the concept of a natural history museum. The objects on display and the way they are displayed, while in part factual and in part infused with elements of myth, have been created and manipulated by contemporary artist, David Wilson (who is also the director of the institution). Visitors to the Museum encounter unusual, somewhat fantastical objects with accompanying wall

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 125.

¹⁹ Patricia Romney, “The Art of Dialogue” *Animating Democracy*: 1.

²⁰ Ibid., 2.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 5.

²³ Crane, 49.

text asserting itself as fact. As stated on the official website, "The Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles, California is an educational institution dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and the public appreciation of the Lower Jurassic."²⁴ Moreover, the website goes on to explain that:

"On the one hand the Museum provides the academic community with a specialized repository of relics and artifacts from the Lower Jurassic, with an emphasis on those that demonstrate unusual or curious technological qualities. On the other hand the Museum serves the general public by providing the visitor a hands-on experience of "life in the Jurassic" ...²⁵"



Document illustrating "The Horn of Mary Davis of Saughall" on display at The Museum of Jurassic Technology.²⁶

Exhibitions from the permanent collections include oddities such as "The Horn of Mary Davis of Saughall," "Megloaponera Foetens/ The Stink Ant of the Cameroon," and the "Fruit Stone Carving." Importantly, each exhibition includes elements of fact juxtaposed with elements of fiction, leaving the viewer to hover on the precipice of understanding what he or she is seeing. Weschler's discussion of his own experience at the Museum of Jurassic Technology reinforced the idea that it is when our expectations are disrupted somehow that we as the viewers are changed. Through experiences such as this, Crane's "disruption" theory can be seen as the unexpected elements provided by artists allow ourselves the liberty not only to make new observations about what we are seeing, but also to respond and incorporate our own unique memories into the overall experience.

Haas-Lillienthal House and the Karl-Ernst-Osthaus Museum

Crane provides several additional examples of practices in the field reflecting her "disruption" theory, including the exhibit in 1993 at the Haas-Lillienthal House in San Francisco by Fred Wilson entitled "An Invisible Life: A View Into the World of a 120-Year-Old Man," and the exhibit "Before the Silence: A Collective Memory" at the Karl-Ernst-Osthaus Museum in Hagen, Germany by artist Sigrid Sigurdsson. In Wilson's exhibit in Los Angeles, the artist created a fictional family member, "Baldy," and his accompanying artifacts within the historical context of the museum in order to "create the effect of historical presence."²⁷ The key to Wilson's exhibit, as analyzed by Crane, was that although he had created a fictional presence within a historical setting, he combined actual historical elements with fabricated elements (the idea being that the conversation taking place between the historical and fabricated elements would serve as the memory "cues" for visitors to the space, and that the "cues" would then serve to bolster the fabricated memory). The purpose of Wilson's exhibit was to

²⁴ Museum of Jurassic Technology Website, "Introduction and Background." <<http://www.mjt.org/themainpage/main2.html>>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 50.

simultaneously utilize and subvert the format and language of traditional museum presentation to “raise questions about how history gets told, what gets left out, and how we as audience members interact with institutions such as art and history museums.”²⁸



Images from Fred Wilson’s exhibition, “An Invisible Life: A View Into the World of a 120-Year-Old Man” at the Haas-Lillienthal House in San Francisco, 1993.²⁹

Moreover, in the Karl-Ernst-Osthaus Museum example, Sigurdsson created a floor-to-ceiling archive of sorts within the Museum that included a variety of bound books and glass holding containers that were fabricated by the artist for the exhibit. Inside these volumes, Sigurdsson placed a variety of historical artifacts and found objects from the 1920s-1950s as well as her own responses to these objects. The volumes were then made available to visitors to select and investigate. Through Sigurdsson’s installation, the artist functions as a discussant within the larger dialogue their work seeks to facilitate with the public.



Details from Sigrid Sigurdsson’s installation “Before the Silence: A Collective Memory” at the Karl-Ernst-Osthaus Museum in Hagen, Germany.³⁰

3.2 Memory Theory: Bearing Witness

New-York Historical Society and Slavery in New York

In analyzing an artist-as-curator approach from a slightly different angle, Bettina M. Carbonell provides one primary example of her “bearing witness” theory through an assessment of the New-York Historical Society’s exhibition *Slavery in New York*. The exhibition was intended at the time to be a landmark, multimedia look at the institution of slavery in New York, and employed a mixture of contemporary art and historical artifacts, “mined out of their long-standing and historically reductive taxonomic captivity, and allowed to bear witness.”³¹ Artifacts of varying materials and use were placed side by side to encourage an object-based-dialogue with “their categorically far-distant neighbors.”³² Part of the exhibition took place in the Luce Center for visible storage due to curatorial decisions made by conceptual artists, Fred Wilson and Kara Walker, with the intention of giving voice to certain objects that had become lost within the clutter of too many artifacts with unrelated meanings. By placing labels with certain objects within the Luce Center storage that not only identified them as part of the

²⁸ Ibid., 51.

²⁹ Capp Street Project Archive Website, <http://libraries.cca.edu/capp/fred_wilson.html>.

³⁰ Image Detail, “Sigrid Sigurdsson – Vor der Stille. Ein kollektives Gedachnis. Teil 1.”

<<http://angelasturm.blogspot.com/2008/03/sigridsigurdsson-vor-der-stille-ein.html?m=1>>

³¹ Carbonell 127.

³² Ibid.

Slavery in New York exhibit, but did so without completely isolating them outside of the visible storage cases, the artist curators created an environment by which visitors would have to strain to focus on the selected objects and thus, interact with them more intensely than if they had been isolated completely. Carbonell describes this phenomenon as follows: “One of the inherent paradoxes (and perhaps contradictions) here is that while the visitor’s distance from the object may have increased with each curatorial move, the visitor’s depth-of-field regarding the object’s life (in history) may have increased due to the force of the curatorial mediation.”³³

3.3 Concluding Thoughts on Theory and Practice

The examples above provide only a glimpse into the types of projects being explored by artists that reflect the theories described in this study. Some core ideas that resonate within each separate project include that: 1) objects and artifacts are comprised of more than their individual histories, and thus, must be investigated as such (additionally, that there is more to an object than its aesthetic value); and 2) an element of the dialogic is crucial to the successful transformation of these objects by artists, and their reception by audiences. While briefly mentioned above, contemporary artist, Fred Wilson has completed numerous projects in non-arts institutions that adhere to these core principles. The following chapters take a closer look at contemporary artist Fred Wilson's installation as part of the New-York Historical Society's landmark exhibition, *Legacies: Contemporary Artists Reflect on Slavery*, and the changing context of the piece over time, in order to better understand the impetus of artists working in the above theoretical framework within a non-arts environment.

4. How Context Changes Everything: Fred Wilson's *Liberty/Liberte* at the New-York Historical Society

4.1 *Legacies: Contemporary Artists Reflect on Slavery*

Reality, revisited and rethought, can be a source of power rather than depletion.³⁴

– Holland Cotter, *The New York Times*

In 2005, the New-York Historical Society mounted three exhibitions examining the role of slavery in New York: *Slavery in New York*; *Civil Wars: New York and Slavery 1815-1870*; and *Legacies: Contemporary Artists Reflect on Slavery*. Running from June 16, 2006 to January 7, 2007, *Legacies* was the last of the three exhibitions, and highlighted the experiences and memories of living contemporary artists reflecting on the topic of slavery. The exhibition was organized by Lowry Stokes Sims—then, the president of The Studio Museum of Harlem—and curated by the New-York Historical Society's public historian, Kathleen Hulser, and American Revolution project director, Cynthia R. Copeland. President and CEO of the New-York Historical Society, Louise Mirrer, reflected on the exhibition series in the *Legacies* catalogue stating: “*Legacies* brings into the present the issues raised in these two [previous] exhibitions by demonstrating how a generation of eminent contemporary artists has contemplated the way in which the history of racially-based slavery has shaped our society.”³⁵ The exhibition comprised the collective works of thirty-two contemporary artists including Fred Wilson, Kara Walker, Glen Ligon, Whitfield Lovell, Renee Cox, and others, and was meant to embody “provocative interpretations that capture the tension between the reprehensible past and the emotions of the present.”³⁶ Fred Wilson, in particular, was one of 6 artists—of which also included Kara Walker and Betty Saar—who was commissioned by the New-York Historical to conceive of a piece for the exhibition using elements of the New-York Historical's collections. Reflecting on the artistic process and results, Sims writes: “In some cases, historical objects from the Society's collection speak directly to modern artworks in the galleries. As a result, the visitor is invited to experience history as art, while meditating on art as history.”³⁷ Effectively blurring the boundaries between the academic disciplines of history and contemporary art, the artists involved in the exhibition were able to evaluate historical issues of slavery in new, inspiring ways. Clarity of discipline disappeared, allowing a dialogue to emerge that flushed out relationships between historical issues and contemporary times. Five years later, Wilson's piece would be chosen alone to carry on this interdisciplinary “legacy” coinciding with the New-York Historical Society's \$70 million renovation.

Legacies received favorable reviews. The exhibition included a myriad of artists projects reflecting on the historical legacy of slavery, featuring works such as Renee Cox's “mesmerizing self-portrait as a machete-wielding

³³ Ibid., 130.

³⁴ Holland Cotter, “At Historical Society, Emancipation Remains Work in Progress,” *The New York Times*.

³⁵ Louise Mirrer, *Legacies: Contemporary Artists Reflect on Slavery*.

³⁶ “Legacies: Contemporary Artists Reflect on Slavery,” New-York Historical Society Website.

³⁷ Lowry Stokes Sims, *Legacies: Contemporary Artists Reflect on Slavery*.

rebel slave,”³⁸ Kara Walker’s silkscreen prints about the Old South, Lorenzo Pace’s wall collage suggesting the evolution of his family’s history from slavery to the present, and Bradley McCallum’s and Jacqueline Tarry’s unique video installation filmed at the Historical Society, among others. Holland Cotter, art critic for *The New York Times* lauded the exhibition in his review “At Historical Society, Emancipation Remains a Work in Progress,” writing candidly:

“I came to it with doubts. Topical art, like occasional poetry, is hard to pull off. It can be fleet and fervent, sharpened by its thematic parameters. It can just as easily feel rigged, over pitched, speechifying. *Legacies* solve the potential problems by creating a large, textured exhibition experience, a kind of aesthetic support system. If a given piece is too thin or too arcane, it’s O.K. It’s part of the argument. It keeps you looking and rethinking.”³⁹”

According to Cotter, the exhibition transcended its inclination towards the kitsch, and was strengthened by the inclusion of so many topical works in one show by contemporary artists who approached their themes “obliquely” rather than head on.⁴⁰ Cotter, taking direction from Sims’ own description of the show⁴¹, categorized the exhibition as decidedly political, as its transformative qualities surpassed its role to solely convey information.⁴² The exhibition itself – rather than being one dimensional – asserted the idea that revisiting hard issues can be empowering for both the artists involved as well as the audiences who experienced the exhibition. However, for all the positive attention the show received, Fred Wilson’s piece—at the time untitled—only received major mention in one review, “The Influence of Slavery, Through Contemporary Art” by Felicia R. Lee, a cultural critic for the *New York Times*, known traditionally for her writing on African American subjects.



Detail view of *Untitled (Liberty/Liberte)* by Fred Wilson, in *Legacies: Contemporary Artists Reflect on Slavery*, 2006-2007.⁴³

Wilson’s piece was originally comprised of painted white plywood stands of varying heights upon which were placed objects from the New-York Historical Society’s collections, including: three marble portrait busts, one free-standing figure, the wrought-iron balustrade of Federal Hall, slave shackles, slave tags, and coins. When approaching the piece from the front, on the lowest tiered level closest to the viewer stood a free standing cigar store figure about four feet tall, holding a red liberty cap in his outstretched hand. Wilson was struck by this piece, not only because he had never seen one like it, but also more importantly, because it was the only free standing African American figure in the New-York Historical’s collections – despite the Society’s otherwise rich

³⁸ Cotter.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Lowery Stokes Sims, *Legacies: Contemporary Artists Reflect on Slavery*. Sims writes: “Motivated by the dehumanizing story of slavery, some artists have been posing provocative questions about how history affects our world today, unleashing critical commentary on the black experience.”

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Cotter, Image Detail.

holdings documenting the history of slavery. The figure stood gazing upward at two portrait busts positioned on the highest tier of the display stand. Directly in the middle was positioned a portrait bust of George Washington, gazing outward, and to his right (the viewer's left) was a portrait bust of Napoleon Bonaparte, the well-known military and political leader of the French Revolution—who had also been inspired by the American Revolution—gazing off to the right (also the viewer's left). Separating the free standing figure on the lowest tier from the two marble portrait busts on the highest tier was the wrought-iron balustrade of Federal Hall, the historic City Hall building on Wall Street where behind the balustrade George Washington was sworn in as president of the United States in 1789.⁴⁴ On a mid-level tier to the right of the visible bust of George Washington was another portrait bust of George Washington, concealed behind the balustrade and at eye level with the free standing African American figure. This bust of George Washington also looked outward, but wore a more strained expression from that of its visible counterpart. Unlike the confident, poised portrait bust of Washington visible upon the highest tier—portrayed wearing a toga—the portrait bust of Washington that peered through the balustrade—dressed in standard 18th century costume—appeared serious and troubled, tired, and boding of a less socially acceptable version of America's involvement in the history of slavery. Present in the work was the palpable suggestion—through Wilson's explicit placement of the two busts—that perhaps what the public associates today with Washington's legacy, i.e., the promotion of democracy and freedom as demonstrated in the visible portrait bust on the highest tier, was more morally complex than previously considered.

On the reverse side of Wilson's installation, affixed to the backs of each of the portrait busts were slave shackles and slave tags. On the reverse side of the lower tier, directly behind the portrait bust of Napoleon, was a small watercolor portrait of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the leader of the Haitian Revolution. The Haitian Revolution, which had taken place during the period of the French Revolution, is considered by many historians to be one of the most important slave rebellions against a powerful European country. Wilson described his chosen juxtaposition as challenging viewers to think about the notion of freedom: what kind of freedom, and freedom for whom? By inserting traditional symbols of African American history and culture into traditional Americana, Wilson sought to both highlight the tension and force the relation between the two previously separate historical accounts.

Describing the physical construction of the piece and the singular meanings of the separate objects included in it, (i.e., looking at each object from a predominantly art historical point of view) Lee wove into her review the story of Wilson's process in constructing his installation. Unlike the process used by Wilson in many of his other well-known installations—which had historically involved the re-contextualization of entire museums or galleries (such as his intervention at the Maryland Historical Society)—the process of constructing his piece for the *Legacies* exhibition represented “a truncated version of how he usually worked, months in advance. And usually...without a preconceived theme.”⁴⁵ Lee quotes Wilson on museums in general saying:

“It's not what you have in your collection, but your point of view about what you have. It's what you choose to display and where you place it...Museums are good at *making* you forget the context...I want people to be blindsided by it and caught off-guard. I really hope the Historical Society will use this exhibition as a jumping off point. As much as African-American artists like to talk about slavery, we don't want to leave it there.”⁴⁶

Wilson had no qualms in asserting from the start that his goal was to blindside viewers with the racial complexities that existed in his work, providing viewers with the comparison of how the objects he appropriated had previously been encountered in their traditional museum-given contexts. Sims echoes Wilson's sentiment in her own goals for the *Legacies* exhibition, stating: “Art can give expressive form to history, bridging past and present with explorations of emotions and experience.”⁴⁷ According to Sims, there exists the implication that museums have a responsibility to keep visitors thinking about and engaged with issues raised in certain art historical and historical contexts. Specifically, Sims writes: “It [*Legacies*] provides a contemporary perspective on slavery while reminding us that slavery still affects the lives of millions of human beings from all races around the globe today.”⁴⁸ In essence, Wilson extended Sims' curatorial ideas through his installation in the *Legacies*

⁴⁴ Felicia R. Lee, “The Influence of Slavery, Through Contemporary Art.” *The New York Times*.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Sims, 9.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

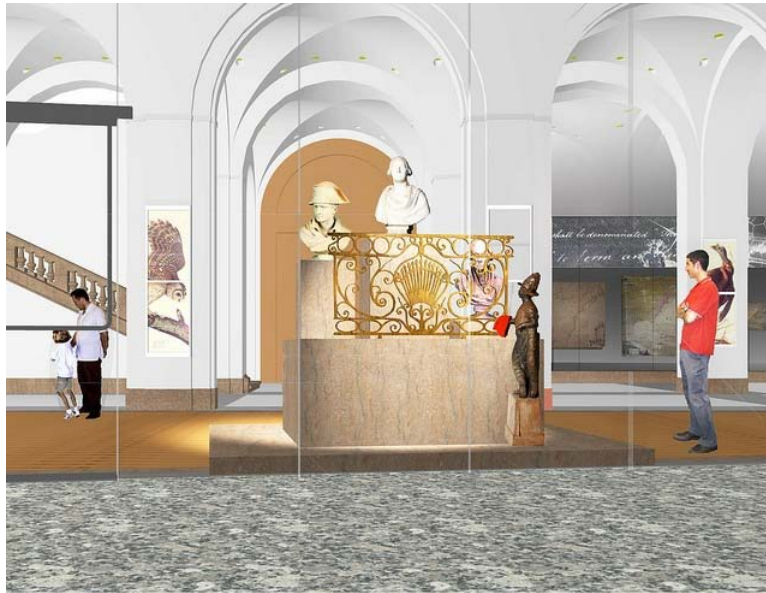
exhibition using an exploration of slavery's past in a way that poses questions of how that past relates to issues still at large in contemporary times.

4.2 Four Years Later: *Liberty/Liberte* and Its Critical Response

A Discordant Note in a New Institutional Vision?

The first object the visitor sees is a very large and enigmatic installation...But what is it about? Slavery? Tyranny? The Constitution? No clear answer is given to the puzzled onlooker.⁴⁹

– Bruce Cole, *Wall Street Journal*



Rendering of *Liberty/Liberte* by Fred Wilson, the New-York Historical Society.⁵⁰

On November 11, 2011 the New-York Historical Society Museum and Library officially reopened after three years and nearly \$70 million worth of renovations to its physical spaces. With an overall emphasis on re-engaging a wide audience of visitors and providing innovative ways for individuals to interact with objects and their histories, the New-York Historical's physical building and permanent collections took a much needed breath of fresh air. This included more successful engagement with visitors through new juxtapositions of objects from the Society's collections, as well as different ways of incorporating more elements of contemporary history and art into the mix. In addition, the renovations opened up the interior spaces of the New-York Historical – previously a labyrinth of enclosed galleries and dark corridors. Valerie Paley, Historian for Special Projects at the New-York Historical Society elaborated further in a one-on-one interview with me about the renovations specifically to the Robert H. and Clarice Smith Gallery of American History – the first gallery visitors encounter upon entering the newly-renovated Museum, and the space in which Wilson's installation now resides. According to Paley—who was brought on specifically to conceptualize and curate the new layout of Smith Gallery (the entrance of which can be seen in the photo rendition with Wilson's piece above), a collections-driven approach with an emphasis on primary sources as witnesses to larger narratives was the impetus behind her design strategy and implementation.⁵¹ She described the process of creating *New York Rising*, the large salon-style wall with a contemporary spin on the far side of Smith Gallery, as “piecing or fleshing out the narrative” through a juxtaposition of individual objects not unlike Wilson's own artistic process, though perhaps visibly less guided by racial concerns. Paley also stressed the existence of many external forces at play throughout the renovation of Smith Gallery. For example, the Gallery's primary donors were animated by the possibility of using the Society's

⁴⁹ Bruce Cole, “Historical Resurrection.” *The Wall Street Journal*.

⁵⁰ New-York Historical Society Flickr Page, <<http://www.flickr.com/groups/nyhistory/>> 16 Feb. 2012.

⁵¹ Valerie Paley, Historian for Special Projects, the New-York Historical Society. Interview with Lyndsey Boekenkamp. New York. 6 March 2012.

rich collection of American Revolution and founding era objects, artifacts, and documents.⁵² This situated Wilson's installation and Paley's re-conceptualization from the start within a larger, political, theme-driven narrative framework.

Moreover, the façade of the building along Central Park West was reconstructed to include additional, wider entrances that would allow visitors and street traffic to see into the Museum itself, something which had been previously unheard of. Considering the theme limitation of the objects in Smith Gallery, Paley explained that finding a centerpiece to tie everything together, while heralding the New-York Historical into a new, contemporary age, was not an easy task. By the fall of 2008, the space still remained empty – a reality Paley described as troubling to President and CEO of the Historical Society, Louise Mirrer, and the rest of the project team.⁵³ More external considerations included that the central area of Smith Gallery had to remain predominantly open for space rental use, therefore limiting the placement of a large centerpiece object or installation to the periphery of the gallery. It was eventually decided by Mirrer that Wilson's piece not only fit well with the theme of the new gallery, but also had been the "one standout work in the *Legacies* exhibition."⁵⁴ Because the New-York Historical Society owned the individual pieces in the collection that comprised Wilson's installation while Wilson owned the conceptual idea, Wilson was contacted to obtain permission for use of his installation, and agreed.

Newly titled *Liberty/Liberte*, and facing outwards toward Central Park West, Wilson's installation was reconstructed to reflect its original iteration—complete with a new marble base to replace the original painted plywood one, placards offering explanations to viewers regarding the message of the piece, and information on the individual objects included in the installation. Mirrer elaborated on the decision to include Wilson's installation as the centerpiece of the renovated Smith Gallery in her blog, stating:

"Conceived of especially for the New-York Historical Society, Wilson's *Liberty/Liberte* was our unquestioned choice to be the first thing visitors would see when they came into our renovated building. Our ground floor would now offer the first overview we have ever presented, in more than 200 years in operation, of the themes and collections of our Museum. Our building would now reveal these new galleries immediately to visitors, thanks to a glass-walled entrance lobby. And facing the visitors through the glass wall, as soon as they came in the door, would be this large, complex installation by Wilson, made entirely with objects from the New-York Historical Society.⁵⁵"

Mirrer's comments regarding the inclusion of Wilson's piece focus on the increased visibility of the New-York Historical's collections to its visitors, but fail to address the logistical concerns and realities voiced by Paley. In addition, while Wilson's piece may indeed be physically complex, generalizing it as such creates a virtual barrier of entry for visitors trying to interact with the meaning behind the piece, raising expectations regarding the work's reception, and complicating how the piece fits into the larger narrative at play in Smith Gallery as well as the renovations on the whole. When asked about some of the positive outcomes from using Wilson's installation as the centerpiece for the reopening, Paley offered the following thoughts:

"I think Fred did a great job with his piece. When Louise first suggested we put it front and center, I thought it was a stroke of genius to mix our historical metaphors, so to speak, with our historic, classical-referencing objects re-imagined in a contemporary way by a contemporary artist. Where the piece fails is in its placement, and perhaps in the expectations visitors have when entering the gallery. To wit, when *Liberty/Liberte* was in the *Legacies* show, people were approaching it with the proper expectation: it was by a "contemporary artist reflecting on slavery." People coming to the N-YHS's main hall think they are seeing an installation of busts much like the one in *New York Rising* and do not initially (or ever) realize that Fred's work is a contemporary reflection on historical fact.⁵⁶"

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Louise Mirrer, "What 'Liberty/Liberte' Tells Us About Slavery, Black History, and Raw Nerves." *The Huffington Post*.

⁵⁶ Valery Paley, Historian for Special Projects, the New-York Historical Society. Email interview with Lyndsey Boekenkamp. 9 March 2012.

Unlike the New-York Historical's permanent exhibition *New York Rising*—which was also a part of larger renovations to Smith Gallery, and was specifically installed with information oriented towards the viewer—the placement of Wilson's installation within the same space, using similar methods of juxtaposing mixed media objects from the Society's collections was less successful specifically because it was placed with factors in mind other than its reception by visitors to the Museum. For Paley, despite the inherent strengths of Wilson's working methodology, message, and overall installation, something as simple as how the piece was displayed in Smith Gallery had the power to make or break its final success. Moreover, the removal of Wilson's piece from its original context in the *Legacies* exhibition in 2006-2007, a contemporary art exhibition first and foremost, changed the way visitors interacted with and came to understand it. Echoing Paley's sentiments regarding the expectations brought by visitors to an understanding of Wilson's installation, critics covering the reopening more or less lauded the renovated spaces, but uniformly disagreed with the inclusion of Wilson's piece.



Detail view, *Liberty/Liberte* by Fred Wilson, the New-York Historical Society, November 2011⁵⁷.

Bruce Cole, former chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities under former President George W. Bush, and a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute⁵⁸—a conservative policy research organization that “combines a blend of skepticism of conventional wisdom with optimism and a strong belief in the power of free peoples, free markets, and the role of technologies as a driver of economic progress”⁵⁹—began his review in *The Wall Street Journal* by agreeing that not only are most Americans “woefully ignorant of their country’s past,” but also that the newly renovated New-York Historical Society had now asserted itself as one of the institutions that had stepped forward to fill that “knowledge gap.”⁶⁰ Having only previously contributed interviews and articles to the website for the National Endowment for the Humanities during his term as chairman, Cole is not a frequent writer for *The Wall Street Journal*. In an interview from 2006 with Tom Wolfe—one of the “leading figures in the literary experiments in nonfiction that became known as New Journalism”—Cole discusses with Wolfe the

⁵⁷ *Mirror*, “What ‘Liberty/Liberte’ Tells Us About Slavery, Black History, and Raw Nerves.”

⁵⁸ Hudson Institute, “Mission Statement.” <http://www.hudson.org/learn/index.cfm?fuseaction=mission_statement> As stated in their mission statement: “Hudson Institute is a nonpartisan policy research organization dedicated to innovated research and analysis that promotes global security, prosperity, and freedom...Hudson Institute challenges conventional thinking and helps manage strategic transitions to the future through interdisciplinary studies in defense, international relations, economics, and health care, technology, culture, and law.”

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Cole.

concept of “diversity” and lack of universal truth within contemporary undergraduate education, stating: “I can’t quite remember where I heard the slogan ‘unity in diversity.’ I could never quite figure that out.”⁶¹ In his article about the New-York Historical Society’s official re-opening, Cole refers to the Museum as a new “intellectual power house,” yet is quick to critique Wilson’s installation at the entrance, asking readers: “Wouldn’t it have been better to begin the visitor’s experience with the clear message of a major work from the N-YHS’s collection, rather than this enigmatic, awkward and anachronistic construction, the single discordant note in the new building?”⁶² According to Cole, Wilson’s piece is chronologically out of place with the rest of the Smith Gallery renovations—which focus on predominantly white, European historical conflicts—offering little to the overriding narrative. It is interesting to note that Cole, a historian, fails to see the narrative value of Wilson’s piece, or where its voice fits into the larger story.

Despite its contemporary art status, Wilson’s installation is comprised of major works from the New-York Historical’s collections, brought into conversation with each other much in the same way that Paley conceptualized and implemented the objects and narrative themes elsewhere in Smith Gallery. Therefore, where does Cole’s issue lie? For Cole, that fact that the message embedded in Wilson’s installation piece might take some work to get at negates its value and purpose. According to Paley, both Wilson’s piece, and the history comprising it are ambiguous, teasing the visitor to address the themes.⁶³ Perhaps because Wilson’s installation addresses broader, still palpable contemporary concerns through an object history of slavery and revolution, Cole is unable to situate his understanding of the piece in either history or contemporary times. However, if this is truly the case, then why does Cole have little to no issue with the rest of the renovated Smith Gallery space, particularly, Paley’s salon-style wall installation, *New York Rising*—also a juxtaposition of major works from the Society’s collections? Cole suggests that rather than asking visitors to immediately challenge their previous notions of American history, they should instead be welcomed with comforting (and possibly, singular, stand-alone?) pieces from the collection, reassuring visitors that while everything has changed aesthetically with the renovations, the collections and what they represent, have not.

Cultural critic for *The New York Times*, Edward Rothstein similarly showed no hesitation in his disagreement of and disdain for the inclusion of Wilson’s piece in the newly renovated New-York Historical Society, despite his review of the piece before it was finished having been installed.⁶⁴ Rothstein recognizes the Society’s new impetus to situate slavery as close to the center of the American story with its newly inclusive populist bent; however, he sees Wilson’s installation as counterintuitive to the Society’s mission. Despite the assertions by Wilson, Paley, and *Mirror* that Wilson’s installation is meant to showcase the inconclusive, “messy”⁶⁵ nature of history, Rothstein deems the piece one dimensional. He writes:

“Does this really bring into focus anything distinctive about those ideals? And don’t we care about Washington because of those ideals, not their unfulfillment? In recent exhibitions the Society has explored some troubling aspects of New York’s past, but the presentations were nuanced and enlarging. Here, though, we see only a placard. We want to think highly of our once-worshiped gods? Hypocrites, slave holders, oppressors!”⁶⁶

According to Rothstein, the decision to include Wilson’s piece as the centerpiece of the New-York Historical Society’s renovated spaces was unsuccessful, because the piece itself fails to challenge viewers. Rothstein deems Wilson’s piece as “false advertising” for what is on display in the rest of the Museum, and asserts that what viewers should take away from the piece is a balanced understanding of the good and the bad surrounding the history of slavery in America, not just a view that is predominantly sinister, and in Rothstein’s view, misleading.⁶⁷ Rothstein writes:

⁶¹ Bruce Cole, Wolfe Interview. <<http://www.neh.gov/whoware/wolfe/interview.html>>.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Paley, Email Interview.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Paley.

⁶⁶ Edward Rothstein, “Museum’s New Center of Gravity.” *The New York Times*.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

“If we are to make sense of our nation’s history, then, yes, we need a thorough accounting of slavery’s place in it. But we also need to understand how democratic ideals led to a more remarkable phenomenon in world history: abolition. We need to understand the democratic impulse—the impulse toward equality, the desire to level difference. We need to understand too an aspect of the democratic impulse that sometimes seems endangered by that desire but which led to the creation of this society and to other American movements: a sense of aspiration that leads to accomplishment. How can all these strands be pulled together?”

Rothstein interprets Wilson’s installation as attempting to embody all the ideals of the newly-renovated New-York Historical Society. In reality, however, it represents only one viewpoint, only one artistic authority placed into conversation with the remainder of the galleries and objects on display. Throughout the criticisms of the piece following the reopening, president Louise Mirrer stepped into defend the Society’s decision to include Wilson’s piece at the forefront of the institution’s new image, both physically—at the Central Park West front entrance of the building—and metaphorically. Asserting that Wilson’s installation-based practice is no different than the curatorial practices upheld by the Museum staff at the Society, Mirrer writes:

“Because Wilson’s installations are in effect high-art Rorschach blots, these judgments tell us more, perhaps, about how touchy the topic of American Slavery still is than about *Liberty/Liberte*...He [Wilson] has selected; he has juxtaposed; and in doing so, he has given us one possible interpretation of what happened in history. Where Wilson differs from the others is that he leaves much of this interpretation to the viewers...It has the potential to get everyone thinking like a historian.”⁶⁸

Comparing Wilson’s process to that of other New-York Historical Society curators, while at the same time asserting that Wilson’s process is entirely different, Mirrer acknowledges the fundamental difference between the Society’s curatorial practice and Wilson’s—offering a subtle nod to Wilson’s more open-ended approach. Conversely, Paley – a historian – reflects on the question of whether or not Wilson’s process is more closely aligned to her own, stating:

“I’m not sure if Fred’s methods are more closely related to mine—we work in different mediums—but clearly his manner of thinking is closer to mine than to the Museum (art historian) curators of the N-YHS, who can’t help but think of the objects he has used as discrete objects, and in the context Fred has imagined, merely an installation and not a piece in and of itself. I do not think there is a right or wrong answer here—just different orientations.”

While Wilson’s work is meant to challenge viewers into thinking more critically about aspects of American history, his work is also decidedly confrontational, using racial complexities and lingering tension to assert his personal artistic authority in the creation of an alternative narrative. While visitors may come to take away varying levels of engagement with the piece, Wilson’s predominant goal is to encourage dialogue around his artistic practice, not to share that authority with the viewer, the curators, the president of the Society, or critics like Cole and Rothstein. In essence, Wilson’s piece has then set out to do exactly what it was intended to do—in a way, to create discussion around the inclusion of an alternative narrative and voice.

4.3 Audience Response and a Need for Facilitation

In an effort to best understand how the Museum has gone about providing information about and engaging visitors in a discussion about Wilson’s piece and its challenging message, I have observed docent-led tours, probed security guards for their observations, and actively engaged visitors about their responses to Wilson’s installation. Visitor demographics have included audiences comprised of many ethnicities, including many white and African American visitors, as well as the Hispanic, South East Asian, White, and African American security guards who watch over the gallery spaces. Additionally, I have supplemented this gathered information with my own informal observations of the way individuals interact and engage with the installation within the space. From these observations, I would argue that visitors to the New-York Historical are able to understand what the piece is about; however, they are not encouraged on an institutional level to participate in meaningful discussion outside of their own internal contemplation or understanding of the piece. This lack of engagement is two-fold—an issue of placement just as much as an issue of didactics.

⁶⁸ Mirrer, “What *Liberty/Liberte* Tells Us About Slavery, Black History, and Raw Nerves.”

Every day at the Museum, there are docent-led tours of the newly-renovated Smith Gallery at 2 pm. I shadowed one of these tours, taking notes and making my own observations, eager to see how informal, volunteer museum educators proceeded to encourage public dialogue around the Wilson installation. The docent leading my tour was an elderly Caucasian woman who was friendly yet professional, prefacing her tour with a detailed explanation that with the Society's reopening, the Museum had placed a "new emphasis on the way history is treated/handled." Upon hearing this introduction, I was enthusiastic to participate in the tour, hoping to learn more about the Wilson piece through some kind of facilitated, meaningful discussion with the individuals in my tour group.

Elliot Kai Kee, Education Specialist at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, and Rika Burnham, Head of Education at the Frick Collection in New York City, provide an important textual comparison for the role of the museum docent in their co-authored volume, *Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience*. In their chapter entitled "A Brief History of Teaching in the Art Museum," Kai Kee discusses the evolution of the docent role towards its contemporary function. With the advent of postmodernism and the new emphasis on the concept of interpretation, museum docents were expected—and still are—to encourage visitors to interact with and forge their own interpretations of various objects and works of art. Kai Kee writes that: "In this view, the museum should be seen not so much as a place where knowledge is transmitted, but rather as a place where knowledge is produced," with a particular emphasis on the visitor's participation in the production of knowledge.⁶⁹ However, during my docent-led experience of Wilson's piece, the docent quickly transitioned from her initial story-telling feel, to a strictly fact-based approach. As tour participants attempted to contribute anecdotally to the docent's explanation of various objects and artifacts in the collection, the docent listened patiently but quickly moved on rather than taking the time to address audience participation.



View of the newly-renovated Smith gallery facing South, with Fred Wilson's *Liberty/Liberte* at left.⁷⁰

Upon reaching Wilson's installation piece, the docent did not hesitate to instruct visitors that the piece needed to be seen from the front or else it "couldn't be understood at all," suggesting a rigid meaning and interpretation, and prohibiting visitors from intellectually approaching the piece on their own. Again, instead than asking tour participants questions about the piece to get at the core ideas represented, the docent proceeded to describe the individual objects in the installation, prefacing her explanation with only a brief mention of the piece's original context in the *Legacies* exhibition.⁷¹ Overall, less than five minutes were spent looking at Wilson's

⁶⁹ Elliot Kai Kee, "A Brief History of Teaching in the Art Museum." *Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience*. (Los Angeles, California: Getty Publications) 2011: 46.

⁷⁰ New-York Historical Society Website, "Collection Highlights and New York and the American Experience." <<http://www.nyhistory.org/exhibitions/smith-gallery>>

⁷¹ The docent explained, upon beginning her discussion of Wilson's installation that: "Mr. Wilson was invited to the Historical Society, under some circumstances..." She did not address the historical context of Wilson's piece in the *Legacies* exhibition, nor did she invite any audience engagement with or questioning about the piece during her brief lecture.

installation – easily the shortest amount of time spent on any artifact highlighted in the entire tour. Upon questioning, Paley explained that the tour docents are trained by the same coordinator from the docent program at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Moreover, docents in this program are taught that rather than defining the overriding narrative and picking objects that contribute to that story, they should pick their favorite objects and tell the individual stories of those objects. Of the six tours of Smith Gallery in which I participated, every docent was Caucasian, and every docent followed this trajectory of object-centric explanation.

I also engaged some of the security guards working directly across from Wilson’s installation in Smith Gallery in conversations regarding their own observations about how visitors to the Museum interact with the piece and how it exists in the space. Much like the demographics of visitors to the Museum, the Museum guards are comprised of several ethnicities; however, the majority of guards are predominantly African American and Hispanic – not Caucasian. Several guards described inquisitive visitors as quick to approach the piece, and interested in the text panels that explain the installation. One guard observed that visitors seemed most curious about the red liberty cap being held by the free-standing African American figure in the front of the balustrade. According to this African American guard, visitors would often approach him and ask him questions about what exactly the installation was, and he would encourage them to look at it closely from all angles. This observation and experience was echoed by several of the guards. In these instances, it seemed as though the security guards were substituting for the educators in the gallery, answering the questions and encouraging the dialogue that was missing from the docent led tours.

Another guard noted that, from what he’s seen: “People just aren’t that into history. It’s the pretty pictures they enjoy the most.”⁷² According to this guard, visitors who did not enter through the main entrance on Central Park West did not seem able to understand what the piece was, or why it is included in the space. He shared his observations of watching visitors tentatively approach the piece, only to veer off to explore the southern end of Smith Gallery. “Kids try to climb around the front of it, people awkwardly avoid it, and rarely do people go up and spend the time to read the text.”⁷³ From his observations, it seemed that visitors were less interested in the story than in the visuals. However, this security guard was the only one of all the guards I spoke with who voiced these observations.

In speaking to visitors about the piece, I garnered even more observations about how audiences come to interact with and understand Wilson’s installation and the commentary it provides. One couple, in particular offered promising insight—both of whom were Caucasian, and happened to teach history to middle school students in disadvantaged school districts in the city. After observing the couple talking animatedly for several minutes about the piece, I approached them to ask how they felt about Wilson’s installation. The woman explained to me that she was initially more interested in the individual components of the installation—not recognizing they were actually parts of the whole. When she realized it was a contemporary artist’s installation, she was able to make sense of why some of the pieces had been included in the juxtaposition, but not all. The couple asked me if I could shed more light on what the piece was about, so I offered some additional information. I first shared with them a brief background on Wilson, attempting to put the piece into the context of his previous work in other historical societies throughout the nation. The couple then asked me about the certain objects that they couldn’t place, and we proceeded to have a dialogue about the individual pieces, and why the artist would have felt compelled to include them the way he did. Both individuals asserted to me after they were satisfied with the discussion that “the point isn’t about whether you agree with it or not, but that the piece itself encourages discussion.”⁷⁴ The woman explained further: “When I teach my students about American history, I always make a point to tell them that George Washington was a slave holder. Yes, he is the founder of democracy in this country, but he was also human, and it is important that they know. You have to understand your audience. All of it.”⁷⁵

My own informal observations of the piece have been continuously mixed. Some visitors readily approached the installation, spent all of 30 seconds reading the label, and then walked away without ever looking at it. This practice was not unlike the treatment of many other objects on display in Smith Gallery; however, visitors

⁷² Conversation with Security Guard, Joshua at the New-York Historical Society.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Conversation with Museum visitors on 17 February 2012 at the New-York Historical Society.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

participated for longer periods of time with the *New York Rising* installation because of the interactive touch-screen elements that facilitate engagement. Others spent the time, tried to explain to their children, walked around to the front to get the whole picture, or asked security guards “What is this?” I would argue that Wilson’s installation could certainly benefit from a museum facilitator, whether standing nearby, or leading group tours through the galleries, not necessarily to instruct, but to guide audience members into conversation about the meaning of the work.

This being said, there is a difference between an educator present to facilitate dialogue about the artwork, and one who simply instructs. Historically, Wilson’s work has sought to challenge viewers to encounter objects in new and different ways, creating innovative juxtapositions of objects that assert Wilson’s own artistic voice and alternative historical narrative. However, the element of dialogic involvement with the artwork is critical to Wilson’s goals, and the lack thereof surrounding Wilson’s *Liberty/Liberte* suggests that in this two-fold scenario, the key element of any substantial form of dialogue is missing.

5. Context is Everything: Concluding Thoughts on Fred Wilson’s *Liberty/Liberte*

An in depth analysis of Wilson’s artwork *Liberty/Liberte* in its two separate contexts at the New-York Historical Society sheds light on important issues concerning the role of contemporary artists working in history museums. The role is two-way: from the artist perspective, the work is a response to the institution, specifically in the case of Wilson, to its collection and past values. For the institution, however, the role differs. An artist helps the institution and those who work there to open up intellectual and creative property and explore interpretations outside of the traditional discipline of history. Importantly, the way in which the artist engages with the institution and the way in which the institution sets up a dialogue with the artist affect the end success of these artist projects.

This study was a comparison of the placement of Wilson’s installation—first in the 2006-2007 *Legacies* exhibition, and then in its current (2012) placement within the larger framework of the permanent collection, part of the of the New-York Historical Society’s newly-renovated Smith Gallery. Consequently, Chapter 4 demonstrated that Wilson’s *Liberty/Liberte* was in fact more successful as part of the original 2006-2007 *Legacies* exhibitions than it is in its current placement. In *Legacies*, Wilson’s *Liberty/Liberte* was one object among numerous artist commissions that reflected on the legacy of slavery. What was significant about Wilson’s original project was that a history museum (rather than an art museum) invited the creative response. My argument ultimately centers on context—for an artwork (particularly conceptual art) to “read” effectively, the viewer needs to have an art context. Wilson’s installation was seen and understood as being part of a larger, thematic art exhibition within a history museum.

To quote Paley: “when *Liberty/Liberte* was in the *Legacies* show, people were approaching it with the proper expectation: it was by a ‘contemporary artist reflecting on slavery’...”⁷⁶ Art critic Holland Cotter, agrees with Paley, noting in one of the first reviews of *Legacies* that the exhibition’s success was less about artistic achievement, and more about how all the pieces included in the exhibition worked well together, each contributing valid discourse to the overall conversation about the history of slavery and its relevance to contemporary times. In essence, Cotter suggested that the weaker pieces in the exhibition benefited from the stronger pieces, and vice versa. Cotter’s review never mentioned specific pieces that he might have considered weaker than others. In any case, Wilson’s installation was one of many “voices,” and when placed in its first context, *Liberty/Liberte* effectively became part of a larger, thematic conversation. Further, *Liberty/Liberte* was able to derive strength from his artistic contemporaries, including Betty Saar, Renee Cox, Whitfield Lovell, and Glen Ligon, among others. The artist “frame” gave the original *Legacies* exhibition an additional degree of legitimacy. Moreover, the exhibition on the whole provided what Susan Crane calls the “disruption” experience. *Legacies* existed as a contemporary art exhibition within a history museum, an experience that would have deviated (and thus “disrupted”) from the normal expectations one would have visiting the New-York Historical Society.

Without this artistic frame, Wilson’s *Liberty/Liberte* is less successful as an object among the permanent collection pieces, none of which evince “critique.” They are and remain objects, treasures of the collection

⁷⁶ Valery Paley, Email Interview.

situated traditionally within the newly-renovated Smith Gallery. Other contemporary artworks—even a portion of the ceiling preserved from Keith Haring’s So Ho Pop Shop of the 1980s—read as artifacts. Wilson’s work is the only piece that acts as commentary, a role typically reserved for the historian. And in fact, Paley assumed that role: Paley’s object labels/panels offer commentaries on the overriding themes of Smith Gallery, including that of the American Revolution, and the creation of a new nation.

Perhaps more problematically, Wilson’s artwork is the only piece that addresses slavery in America. Situated within the American Revolutionary section, *Liberty/Liberte* not only stands alone physically, but must also speak alone, as well.

Liberty/Liberte lacks memory cues of its initial appearance, and therefore lacks sufficient means through which visitors to the Museum interact with the piece. Additionally, in the *Legacies* exhibition, *Liberty/Liberte* was in a central position in a gallery; viewers were able to experience it from all sides and perspectives. Now, as part of the permanent collection, *Liberty/Liberte*’s placement is close to a glass wall facing Central Park West, an area on the periphery of Smith Gallery. This current orientation of the artwork changes the way and degree to which visitors can engage with it; they cannot move around the piece, and they might miss the piece given its distance from the Smith Gallery proper.

Practical institutional decisions informed the placement, not necessarily politics (such as the need to keep the central spaces of Smith Gallery free of obstructions so that special events could be hosted in the space). But the practical concerns had direct, negative effect on the reception and subsequent success of *Liberty/Liberte* as a powerful commentary and educational tool.

As noted, Wilson’s installation is not successfully integrated into the overriding narrative within Smith Gallery because it misses the New York lens. Marcia Vetrocq, senior editor at Art+Auction Magazine, found the placement a disservice to the artistic and educational potential of the piece. According to Vetrocq, while Wilson’s installation piece may have contributed to the overall success of the 2006-2007 *Legacies* exhibition, its failure in Smith Gallery is really two-fold. For one, Vetrocq argues that the piece its own really misses the mark, so to speak, in large part because Wilson did not take full advantage of the New-York Historical Society’s vast collections.⁷⁷ According to Vetrocq, *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society was really what catapulted Wilson into the forefront of the art world, and in a way cemented his working practice up until the present. As a consequence, all his subsequent installations have been more or less successful in the right context. However, the New-York Historical Society’s decision to include Wilson’s installation in their official reopening was because of its previous success in a popular exhibition.⁷⁸ While historians like Paley might admire Wilson’s work and see the synergy between the conceptualization of the permanent Smith Gallery installation *New York Rising* and Wilson’s *Liberty/Liberte*, art critics such as Vetrocq consider the piece a less successful iteration as the result of both the artist eschewing control over the installation, as well as institutional decision making.

5.1 Artist As Curator: A Re-Evaluation of Wilson’s Practice from an Art Historical Perspective

Research Professor and Chief Curator at the Center for Art, Design, and Visual Culture at the University of Maryland, Maurice Berger, began his interview with Fred Wilson in 2001 by asking, pointedly:

“You have been quoted as saying, “Curators, whether they think about it or not, really create how you are to view and think about these objects, so I figured, if they can do it, I can do it too.” Are you a curator, as well as an artist, when you undertake one of your collaborative installations?⁷⁹”

Wilson’s response acknowledged his curatorial background, however stressed that he was not a curator, but rather an artist “mostly concerned with the dynamics of curating.” Distinguishing further, Wilson explained:

“Most curators are not really thinking about that [i.e., the dynamics of curating]. They’re just using the system and plugging what they do into that system. I’m not doing that. I mimic museum or exhibit display for another reason, for another effect.⁸⁰”

⁷⁷ Marcia Vetrocq, Chief Editor, Art+Auction Magazine. Interview with Lyndsey Boekenkamp. 20 March 2012.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Berger and Wilson, 33.

Wilson suggests that what curators set out to do within traditional museum practices is more neutral. What he does is utilize the same formulas and experiences, but puts ideological concerns at the forefront, thereby challenging the viewer in new ways. Wilson stated, "It has been my experience that there has to be a rupture with our assumptions in order to grow. Art can affect this rupture without causing harm."⁸¹ In other words, Wilson views traditional curatorial practices as lacking, subverting those practices in his own work in order to infuse something previously unseen into museum settings.

Berger's interview with Wilson in 2001 can be used as a measure against the curatorial practice at the New-York Historical Society. An additional curatorial lens was added to Wilson's piece at the New-York Historical Society in both exhibits, albeit on a truncated scale and each without the lengthy time frame he previously used to develop his museum-response concepts. Marcia Vetrocq aptly stated: "Wilson's piece at the New-York Historical Society was a microcosm of *Mining the Museum*."⁸²

The current placement of *Liberty/Liberte* lacks a crucial element of the dialogic, an interpretive method that this study argues is key to a successful artist intervention within a non-art space. The lack of conversational engagement draws attention away from the piece, not towards it. Compounding the problem, the Society docents spend little time discussing the piece with their tour groups in Smith Gallery, and even discourage constructive conversation about it (due to their docent training, which is informed with an object-centric focus, rather than narrative-centric focus, let alone critique-focus). The confluence of these separate factors in addition to Wilson's art historical reliance on his own established practices with little deviation, despite the inherent differences in the institutions in which he chose to work, meant that *Liberty/Liberte* currently on display at the newly-renovated New-York Historical Society falls short of its intended scope and goals.

5.2 Institutional Tensions: Art History vs. History, and What It Means for Artists

What does the example of Wilson's *Liberty/Liberte* mean for other artists who either chose, or are invited to intervene in history museums? The importance context played in the overall success of Wilson's piece in each exhibit sheds light on the inherent differences at play between the academic disciplines of art history and history, ways by which each approaches similar themes, and the impact institutional decisions have upon artist practices. Paley highlights this tension suggesting that the New-York Historical Society is simply a microcosm for these issues in the larger museum field. Paley defines the differences between art historians and historians specializing in periods before Modernism—or post Modernism—particularly, that they have a very different academic training. This influences the way they view Wilson's installation. While Paley, a classically trained historian, sees the value in Wilson's installation and supports the piece as a singular contemporary art entity, she also notes how colleagues struggle against an impulse to see Wilson's installation as flawed history, comprised of separate, unrelated objects on display. Another aspect challenging for historians is the concept of "owning" an "idea." Such an attitude would appear to an historian as censorious. The notion that the Society does not own Wilson's "concept", and therefore, cannot re-present the objects in the grouping Wilson selected without his approval/permission, despite owning the objects, would appear questionable. Accordingly, dialogue is necessary to increase understanding.

The inherent differences between the academic disciplines of art history and history may very well also play into the reasons why artists are drawn to these non-art, and specifically, history-based institutions. In an art historical context, for example, if Wilson's piece had been displayed as an individual entity within an art museum, under the tenants of art historical interpretation and study, the piece would have had to fit within an accepted art historical aesthetic to have value. In contrast, when displayed in a history museum, the piece becomes valued in terms of its ability to convey information. Artworks in history museums are used to illustrate the past, not as claims for aesthetic greatness. By inviting artists to contribute their voice within historical projects, the history museum becomes inclusive of non-dominant voices. Such inclusion is well suited for artists interested in collaborating outside of traditional venues. In other words, artists are drawn to these history-based institutions because there is more room for exploration out of a comfort zone.

Part of my struggle with *Liberty/Liberte* was its ability to be used as a model, which was my original goal. The more I examined the work and researched Wilson, the more difficult it became to consider the piece a success. I

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 34.

⁸² Vetrocq.

was anticipating my study would echo what Museum Specialist, Ivan Karp, identifies as the success of Wilson's work—its ability to “reflect upon how exhibits determine what we know,” and the site-specific component that “challenges the nature of the frame itself.”⁸³ A case can be made that these qualities were evident in *Liberty/Liberte's* appearance in the *Legacies* exhibition because it did challenge concepts of slavery in the North, still under-discussed in American society, and engaged visitors in thinking about the way museums perpetuate certain historical truths through the use of the objects Wilson selected. Conversely, *Liberty/Liberte's* current placement suffers from its isolation, losing its original multicultural message, and insightful commentary on traditional exhibition practices and institutional frameworks.

5.3 So What Does It All Mean?

In the end, this study supports the argument that artists are in fact more than capable of successful interventions in non-art environments, specifically, history museums. However, the artist must be involved in a conversation with the institution. And, the institution must not accept a truncated experience, particularly when the subject matter is so vital educationally. While Wilson himself is especially well-known for his previous, successful installations at historical societies and museums throughout the country, this study shows that the institution plays an important role as a patron/commissioning agent, and thus, has a direct influence on whether the piece is received as the artist envisions. Therefore, while artists can never really escape the overly politicized nature of museums, this study argues that artists need to mine the freedom they are given by history museums, ensuring their work is truly seen as art, apart from a traditional object installation. And that can only be done if the institution and artist commit the time necessary to ensure the institutional goals to the artist's critical goals are met.

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