constructing the spectacle of culture in museums (1992)

ivan karp and fred wilson

Fred Wilson: *I'm going to set the stage for what I'm doing now, then discuss* Mining the Museum. *I'll begin with the Longwood Arts Project in the Bronx, housed in a former public school. As an artist living and working in New York, I had to support myself one way or another, and I found I enjoyed working with artists, so I worked in several alternative spaces in downtown Manhattan. Prior to that I had been working with several museums—I worked at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the American Museum of Natural History, and the American Craft Museum—and this experience, I realized later, was the basis for my way of making artwork. Working in the educational department of these three institutions simultaneously made me wonder about how the environment in which cultural production is placed affects the way the viewer feels about the artwork and the artist who made these things. Being an artist and being African-American and Native American and actually working in the museum at that time, I was in a position to notice some of the incongruities in these spaces. So with that background I worked in alternative spaces and then was offered the directorship of Longwood in the Bronx.*

At that time I decided to try some ideas that I had that had been brewing when I worked at these museums. Once I went to a dance concert with a dancer, and while I was enjoying the

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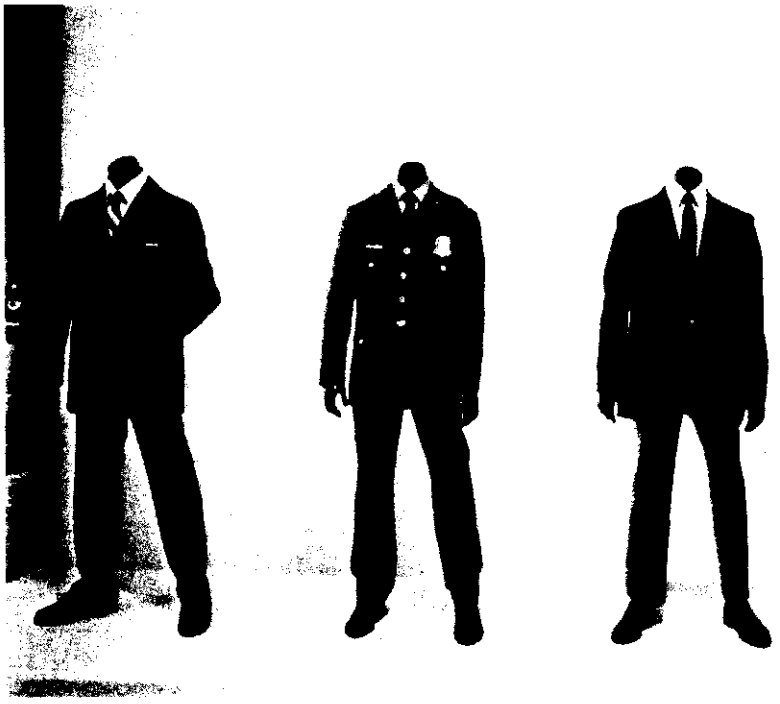

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Fred Wilson, *Guarded View,* 1991. C

general performance, the dancer I was with was constantly looking at how the person's toe was pointed. When you're in a field you notice the smaller aspects that the average person does not see. It's the same with someone working in museums and galleries—you notice when the lighting is not right, you notice when the labels are not right in a museum. As an artist who had had work on the walls and also looked at work, I had questions about what those spaces were really doing to the artwork and to artists.

So one of the first shows I did in the Bronx, in the late eighties, was called "Rooms with a View: The Struggle between Cultural Content and the Context of Art." I took three rooms; one room looked like a contemporary gallery, the white cube; one I redesigned to look like a small ethnographic museum, not very well appointed; the third I made to look like a turn-of-the-century salon space. I asked thirty artists to be a part of my experiment. All thirty had work in the white cube, half had work in the ethnographic space, and half had work in the turn-of-the-century space. I chose the work according to how it might look in those spaces. Many artists at that time were making work that seemed to fit in an ethnographic museum, because they were working on Third World cultural idioms. There were other artists who were working more with the history of Western art in their work. When I placed the work in the ethnographic space, I would have visiting curators say with surprise, "Oh, you have a collection of primitive art." And I had to tell one curator, "No, Valerie, that work you're staring at was in your gallery a month ago." The environment really changed the work; the labels just had the materials, not the names, because in most ethnographic museums—Ivan can bear me out or jump on me for saying this—the labels don't have any names because the works were collected at a time when the names of the people who made the objects were not important. The labels just gave the materials and things like "Found, Williamsburg section, Brooklyn, late 20th century." Students would walk up to the barrier around the installation by Linda Peer—and the barrier of course is mine, it's the museum's presence on the artwork—go up to the label, read it, look at the object, and think they knew what they were looking at, when actually they knew very little. I didn't say anything false, but they really had a totally different view of what that object was about. The works became exotic, they looked like something made by someone you could never know; the works in many instances were dehumanized because of the way they were installed. In the turn-of-the-century space, the works looked like they had a certain authority that the works didn't have in the white cube. The white cube also had a way of affecting you: it looked cold, it looked sort of scientific.

For me, this was a watershed event. If the work was being manipulated that much, that was the area I wanted to work in. From that point on, I didn't want to ask artists to be involved

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...hed event. If the work was being manipulated that much, that ...om that point on, I didn't want to ask artists to be involved with this, since I was actually manipulating their work. I figured I'd just do it with my own work. I made an installation called The Other Museum—in one part, The Colonial Collection, I wrapped French and British flags around African masks. These were all trade pieces, but when you put something under that beautiful lighting, it looks, whatever the word means, "authentic." I had this vitrine made which looks somewhat like a turn-of-the-century vitrine, in which I placed Harper's lithographs from the turn of the century of the punitive expeditions between the Zulus and the British and the Ashanti and the British. I wrapped the masks because they're sort of hostages to the museum. If they had been in the museum since the turn of the century—and many of the collections do date from this time—they were taken out during these wars. So I consider them hostages in these institutions. There are a lot of questions surrounding this—should they go back, shouldn't they go back—but I like to bring history to the museum, because I feel that the aesthetic anesthetizes the historic and keeps this imperial view within the museum and continues the dislocation of what these objects are about. One object I didn't change except for the label: "Stolen from the Zonge tribe, 1899. Private collection." This got a lot of collectors upset, but indeed, if it came out of the African country in 1899, more than likely it had been just swiped. In a newly installed space in one museum, a label next to an object read, "Acquired by Colonel So-and-so in 1898." How does a colonel acquire something? He goes up there and says, "Give that to me or I'll shoot you."

So I use the museum as my palette. 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." Everything in the exhibition environment is mine, whenever I organize the space. I painted one contemporary gallery a dark color, and it felt like The Truth, like "well, this has got to be serious." My exhibition at Metro Pictures, Panta Rhei, was a gallery of classical and ancient art. What it consisted of were plaster casts. I painted the walls a light-blue color that I saw over and over again in many museums that still had plaster casts. Rooms of plaster casts were common in American museums at the turn of the century; though they couldn't get the actual objects from Europe, they wanted the people of the United States to experience these objects. Since they're not getting the same aesthetic experience from plaster they would get from the original objects if they traveled to Greece or Rome or what have you, to my mind what they were actually getting was the symbolism of having these objects. In many museums, you begin with the room of ancient art, then you go from there to early European art, and from there to late modern art, then to contemporary art. So what the museum tries to do is attach our culture to this ancient culture in a way that goes beyond influence. It really tries to say that this is our culture and this is why our culture is great, because

of the relationship with this ancient important culture. This is not a new phenomenon. Hitler did this as well. If you go to any state capital or to Washington, D.C., you will find references to ancient Greece, which is about democracy but also about attachment to a culture and about presenting our culture as above other cultures on the planet because of its relationship with this ancient culture. In my travels, I've studied in West Africa, I've been in Peru, I've been to Egypt, and I do a lot of research around my exhibitions. One of the things I learned was that most of the ancient Greek gods had Egyptian predecessors. There was a lot of trade going on between the two countries, and this is written in all the scholarly texts, but it's not generally known. So what I did was give the Greek statues their Egyptian names: Hermes was Anubis, Dionysus was Osiris, Artemis was Bast, and so on. In addition, I made forced combinations of the two: Bast was exploding from the head of Artemis, and Hathor was coming out of the head of Artemis also. In addition to combining objects by smashing them, I like to place things side by side, because objects speak to one another and speak to you about their relation to one another just by placing them next to one another.

I was asked by the Contemporary [Museum] to organize an exhibition anywhere in Baltimore, and I chose the Maryland Historical Society, which has got to be the most conservative environment in the city. I needed a studio, so I took up residence in the president's office. I was there for a concentrated period of six weeks, though I kept on coming and going for a year. That alone opened up the staff of the Historical Society, who had worked with art objects but had never met a real artist and really didn't know what that was about. They would keep walking by the studio and ask, "Is it art yet?" I didn't curate the show—this is my artwork. I make that distinction. Although people looked at the exhibition and saw it as a curated exhibition, which is fine, for me it's something else entirely, it's my work. Going through the museum, I saw it as a very alien environment. Prior to this project I would never even go into a place like this, let alone look at anything for very long. I had to ask myself, "Where am I in this space, what is this space about, and why am I having this reaction to it?" After spending some time there, I realized it wasn't so much the objects as the way the things were placed that really offended me. The process that I go through in creating my installation is to speak with everybody in the museum, from the maintenance people through the executive director, and find out what they feel about the institution, what they feel about the city they're in, and what the relationship is between the two. I looked at every object in the Historical Society collection, which is a vast one. They've been collecting since 1840, and it was a men's club in the early days, so they really have some odd objects in the collection. But those things aren't on view. And those are many of the things that I have put on view, because what they put on view says a lot about the museum, but what they don't put on view sa was going to do, but I really wanted the objects to speak to me, a the Museum because it could mean "mining" as in gold mine, mean blowing up something, or it could mean making it mine. S tried to pull from the objects what they were about, what they about the museum. They gave me the entire third floor to do this. I had to have complete autonomy to do whatever I wanted, or el what I got, and I'm still amazed that they allowed me to do it.

The first thing you saw when you walked into the thi silver storage that says "TRUTH" on it. It was something mad contemporary; Barbara Kruger could have made it if she wante a truth in advertising globe; they stopped making it in 1938, wl believing there was any truth in advertising! With the truth tro The label speaks of the truth trophy and when and where it mounts, first made in the 1960s," where they were made, and so every object will have some historical significance. I wanted to vironment had meaning, though it may be so much a part of ou aware of it. By having the truth be the first thing you saw, it u and if there is truth, and whose truth. So on either side of thi one set with busts and another set with no busts. The three bus Society of people who apparently had a great impact on Maryl by the way—Napoleon, Henry Clay, and Andrew Jackson. The p Harriet Tubman, Benjamin Banneker, and Frederick Douglass- Maryland, and there's nothing in the Historical Society collecti

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The first thing you saw when you walked into the third floor was a globe that I found in silver storage that says "TRUTH" on it. It was something made in the 1870s, but it seemed very contemporary; Barbara Kruger could have made it if she wanted to work in silver. It was actually a truth in advertising globe; they stopped making it in 1938, which I guess is when people stopped believing there was any truth in advertising! With the truth trophy, I placed empty plastic mounts. The label speaks of the truth trophy and when and where it was made, and then says, "Plastic mounts, first made in the 1960s," where they were made, and so on, because for a historical society, every object will have some historical significance. I wanted to point out that everything in our environment had meaning, though it may be so much a part of our environment that we're not really aware of it. By having the truth be the first thing you saw, it was speaking to the notion of truth, and if there is truth, and whose truth. So on either side of this vitrine are two sets of pedestals, one set with busts and another set with no busts. The three busts are ones I found in the Historical Society of people who apparently had a great impact on Maryland—none of them from Maryland, by the way—Napoleon, Henry Clay, and Andrew Jackson. The pedestals without busts were labeled Harriet Tubman, Benjamin Banneker, and Frederick Douglass—three very important people from Maryland, and there's nothing in the Historical Society collection about them at all.

The whole exhibition was about looking at objects found in the museums, just taking them out and putting them on view. The so-called cigar-store Indians were really compelling objects, really beautiful, but I couldn't face having them face me, because my mother's Native American, and they don't look like any Indians I ever knew. In actuality, these Indians represent the society's idea of what an Indian is. In many cases, the models were other Americans. One sculpture is actually of the daughter of the German immigrant who made the statue—her physique, her stance, and her face have no connection to a Native American. So what I did was make them give you their backs, so you couldn't look in their faces and accept the stereotype. What they were facing was a

wall of photographs of contemporary Native Americans in Maryland, one of the few things that are not from the institution. I brought them in, because when I asked at the Historical Society, I was told, "There are no Indians in Maryland."

I chose a good many paintings for the third floor; in one painting, there are five children, and two black children are clearly there only for the sake of being part of the composition. Given the time frame, these children were slaves, but I actually found out their names and who they were. So in this installation, you would walk up to the painting, and the children would light up and speak to you. They'd say things like, "Who calms me when I'm afraid? Who washes my back?" Another one said, "Am I your friend? Am I your brother? Am I your pet?" By looking up close in this painting, you can see the black child holding a bird actually has a metal collar around his neck, and he actually was the "golden retriever" for the white boy.

Sometimes I took paintings and just renamed them. In most museums, except for the paintings done in the last thirty or forty years, the paintings were not named. So all the titles you see in museums were assigned by the curators. I figured, if they can do it, I can do it too, so for a painting of a wealthy plantation picnic, one label gave the title the museum had assigned it: Country Life. The other side of the painting had a label giving it my own title: Frederick Serving Fruit—trying to change the meaning of the work and what was important in it.

There is a lot of silver in this museum. I created one vitrine of repoussé silver with the label "Metalwork 1793–1880." But also made of metal, hidden deep in the storage rooms at the Historical Society, were slave shackles. So I placed them together, because normally you have one museum for beautiful things and one museum for horrific things. Actually, they had a lot to do with one another; the production of the one was made possible by the subjugation enforced by the other. Quite possibly, both of these could have been made by the same hand. To my mind, how things are displayed in galleries and museums makes a huge difference in how one sees the world.

I also covered many lithographs with glassine paper, exposing only the black person in the picture. The viewer became acutely aware of African-Americans in the landscape or city scene. I had a section called "Modes of Transport," with the sedan chair of the last royal governor and a painting of who was carrying it, and a model ship with account logs of various slaveholders with names of the slaves and other "livestock." I placed two old baby carriages in the space; one had, instead of the baby's bedding, a Ku Klux Klan hood. Next to it on the wall I had an early photograph on the wall of black nannies with a white baby in a baby carriage.

Under the heading "Cabinet Making" I placed baroque chairs facing a public whipping post which was still used by the city jail in the 1950s and had been hidden in the basement of the

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Maryland Historical Society since 1963. I used doll houses to depict a slave revolt; beside it is a manuscript by a young woman who was writing of her fear at the time of the slave uprisings.

The final section was about dreams and aspirations; in the crevices of the museum, totally unnoticed, I found things made by Africans and African-Americans, including American-made pottery and basketry and personal adornments that came from Liberia, circa 1867. A book by Benjamin Banneker, a mathematician and freeman who surveyed Washington, D.C., for Jefferson, and also was an amateur astronomer. He made a book of all his astronomy charts that he figured out mathematically. I made slides of these charts and projected them on the wall; in addition to his charts, he wrote about his dreams and mentioned in diary fashion who wanted to kill him.

By bringing things out of storage and shifting things already on view, I believe I created a new public persona for the Historical Society, one that they were not likely to soon forget, nor will the Baltimore community allow them to forget. To my mind, for this to happen in America, where local community residents are not empowered to chart the course of their local museum, is a huge success.

Ivan Karp: Some of my friends have told me recently that I'm in my anecdotage, so that means I can begin by telling you three stories. The first of them is about a curator who went to see Fred Wilson's exhibit The Other Museum—actually the room that had the colonial gallery, the masks with their national flags over them. I'm the curator, I had just finished signing some papers for loans, and I walked in and I said, "How the hell did he do that?" The labels said "Loan courtesy of the Musée de l'Homme," "Loan courtesy of the British Museum"—"How the hell did he do that? How did he get permission? The British Museum doesn't do that, they insist on couriers who carry everything, and then control precisely how the objects are displayed." So I think what we have here is testimony to Fred's ability to manipulate his audience, which was the word he used.

The second story I want to tell you is about the founding of the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The Metropolitan was originally founded as a museum of reproductions, plaster-of-paris reproductions most of them, put in place by the founders to elevate the taste of the working class of New York City. They ran into a little problem, however, because in deference to the religious sensibilities of the founders, the museum was not open on Sundays, which of course was the only day the working class of New York City had off. Some people might say that the Metropolitan Museum of Art hasn't changed a great deal in the interim period.

The third story is about the founding of the Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian Institution, a sister institution to my institution, the Natural History Museum. When I came aboard, as we say at the Smithsonian (we're very big on nautical terms—that's government: the

ship of state), I started going through the papers of my predecessor as curator, and found a letter from the founding director of the Museum of African Art. He wrote a very friendly letter saying that there really should be a division of labor at the Smithsonian, now that there were two museums which had exhibitions about Africa. The Museum of African Art would take all the art that was in the Museum of Natural History's collection, and in return would send over all the material culture that was in their collection, leading me to wonder whether art was made out of material or not.

The process of making, appreciating, and exhibiting art, particularly in the kind of institutions we call museums, is itself an intensely political process. This is not necessarily a process which is learned time and again when people visit museums, but is in fact understood and appreciated in terms of the accumulated knowledge and received wisdom about what museums are, and what exhibits are, and what exhibits mean.

There are two comfortable fantasies in our society—I'm sure there are more than two; perhaps there are three or four. One is that there are no classes in our society. The second comfortable fantasy is that we are a society which is becoming multicultural or has to be multicultural, as if there were such a thing as a monocultural society. Societies are composed of people from diverse backgrounds and origins, even those societies we think of as the most "primitive," which is not my word. Societies are made up of people of different ages who have different life experiences but who also have the capacity to understand one another. We are a multicultural society; there is no such thing as making it or becoming it. It's a fact of life. The problem we have to face, which is one I think much of contemporary life is attempting to face, is how to think about the nature of the multicultural life we live; how to turn our multiculturalism into something different, namely a society based on cultural pluralism—a society in which people can be different things, and sometimes can be more than one thing, without suffering censorship. The sense that art hasn't been political has emerged only recently. Art has always been political and always will be. It's a recent Western modernist fantasy that it isn't. But in 1983, at least, Hans Haacke issued a kind of clarion call to artists in his article "Museums, Managers of Consciousness":

Every museum is perforce a political institution, no matter whether it is privately run or maintained and supervised by government agencies. . . . Whether museums contend with governments, power trips of individuals, or the corporate steamroller, they are in the business of molding and channeling consciousness. Even though they may not agree with the system of beliefs dominant at the time, their options to not subscribe to them and instead to promote an alternative consciousness are limited. The survival of the institution and personal careers are often at stake. But in nondictat production of consciousness are not all in one hand.

Which indicates that societies, at least nondictatorial ones, at that.

The sophistication required to promote a particular inte tially also available to question that interpretation an need to spend enormous sums for public relations an cates, things are not frozen. . . .

It was never easy for museums to preserve or re and intellectual integrity. It takes stealth, intelligence, But a democratic society demands nothing less than th

A democratic society demands, in Hans Haacke's sense, disse tutions which should be, he says, hotbeds of dissent and cha intolerance of dissent and challenge. Those institutions which values, which are charged with preserving the canon—muse leisure activities—are part of public culture. If Haacke is rig political institutions. However, they are also institutions w babes entering into them, but by virtue of the knowledge a that knowledge and experience is not our own, it's secondha

The first rule for understanding the human condit worlds and are aware of much more than they have personal we alone experienced, we would be limited creatures indeed rect. The quality of our lives is determined by "received" me Everyone lives in a world of such meanings; no person stand solid fact. No such world is available. The closest men come people become insane. Then in a terrifying scene of meanin people are seized with a panic of near-total insecurity. In e a world of solid fact. Their experience itself is selected by ready-made interpretations, many of them exhibited in mus themselves are offered by crowds of witnesses never met an

gh the papers of my predecessor as curator, and found a letter
seum of African Art. He wrote a very friendly letter saying that
labor at the Smithsonian, now that there were two museums
The Museum of African Art would take all the art that was in
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e fantasies in our society—I'm sure there are more than two;
is that there are no classes in our society. The second comfort-
which is becoming multicultural or has to be multicultural, as
ocultural society. Societies are composed of people from diverse
e societies we think of as the most "primitive," which is not my
le of different ages who have different life experiences but who
d one another. We are a multicultural society; there is no such
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ttempting to face, is how to think about the nature of the mul-
ur multiculturalism into something different, namely a society
iety in which people can be different things, and sometimes
t suffering censorship. The sense that art hasn't been political
always been political and always will be. It's a recent Western
in 1983, at least, Hans Haacke issued a kind of clarion call to
nagers of Consciousness":

itical institution, no matter whether it is privately run
y government agencies. . . . Whether museums contend
individuals, or the corporate steamroller, they are in the
ing consciousness. Even though they may not agree with
t the time, their options to not subscribe to them and in-
nsciousness are limited. The survival of the institution

and personal careers are often at stake. But in nondictatorial societies the means for the production of consciousness are not all in one hand.

Which indicates that societies, at least nondictatorial ones, are diverse, and culturally diverse at that.

The sophistication required to promote a particular interpretation of the world is potentially also available to question that interpretation and to offer other versions. As the need to spend enormous sums for public relations and government propaganda indicates, things are not frozen. . . .

It was never easy for museums to preserve or regain a degree of maneuverability and intellectual integrity. It takes stealth, intelligence, determination—and some luck. But a democratic society demands nothing less than that.

A democratic society demands, in Hans Haacke's sense, dissent and challenge. And the very institutions which should be, he says, hotbeds of dissent and challenge are the most vulnerable to an intolerance of dissent and challenge. Those institutions which are charged with preserving cultural values, which are charged with preserving the canon—museums, schools, even entertainment and leisure activities—are part of public culture. If Haacke is right, as I think he is, they are inevitably political institutions. However, they are also institutions which we understand not as newborn babes entering into them, but by virtue of the knowledge and experience we bring to them. And that knowledge and experience is not our own, it's secondhand.

The first rule for understanding the human condition is that people live in secondhand worlds and are aware of much more than they have personally experienced. If we only knew what we alone experienced, we would be limited creatures indeed. Our own experience is always indirect. The quality of our lives is determined by "received" meanings we have received from others. Everyone lives in a world of such meanings; no person stands alone directly confronting a world of solid fact. No such world is available. The closest men come to it is when they're infants, or when people become insane. Then in a terrifying scene of meaningless events and senseless confusion, people are seized with a panic of near-total insecurity. In everyday life, people do not experience a world of solid fact. Their experience itself is selected by stereotyped meanings and shaped by ready-made interpretations, many of them exhibited in museums. The images of the world and of themselves are offered by crowds of witnesses never met and never to be met. Yet for every person

these images provided by strangers, and by the dead, are the very basis of life as a human being. What we know about the world is not only conventional, it also appears to us to be natural, and not only does it appear to be natural, but think about it—if you had to question all the knowledge you had, from the moment you got out of bed to the moment you went to bed, you'd never get on with it. You'd never get to breakfast. There is a story one of my professors once told me about the centipede and the crow. The crow looked at the centipede from a crow's point of view, and asked, "How do you know which leg to move, and when to move it?" And the centipede never thought about that before, started thinking about it, and remained frozen in place.

However, the absence of self-consciousness about our categories and social processes is not always such a good thing. Let's look at some conventions and images. A cartoon appeared in the Miami Herald a couple of years ago by Don Wright, a wonderful cartoonist. It represents Ronald and Nancy Reagan performing a sacrifice, at about the time these two primitives were discovered using astrologers in the White House. Ronald says to Nancy, "What are we supposed to do now, Nancy?" and she says, "Sacrifice the goat, singe the chickens, and pound the lizard to powder." Ronald and Nancy are shown dressed in the stereotypical garb of the African savage. Their poses are very much like the drawing of a charm doctor in Five Years with the Congo Cannibals by Herbert Ward (1890), who gave the bulk of the early collection to the National Museum of Natural History, [and] who acquired it in the Congo manning a relief station for Stanley. This drawing was added to Ward's book by the publisher. Ward didn't even draw it, though he drew all the other ones. Here is yet another witch doctor in a characteristic pose, and you realize suddenly, "These people are ballet dancers!" The very way we understand otherness is through our conventions, even if in the process of understanding it we misunderstand it. At the same time someone is being made different and exotic, they're being made the same. Our understandings of different people are both different and the same, and museums are repositories of images, organized in characteristic ways that tell us something about the nature of diversity in the societies in which we find them.

The signature statue of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, the imperial museum in an imperial city, is Canova's Theseus Subduing the Centaurs. It's placed on the stairs as you go up—the entrance to the imperial collection of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. When you look in your classical dictionary, you discover that in ancient Greece, the centaurs were barbaric half-others who lived on the edge of ancient Rome. They had to be subdued by Theseus at a feast for their bad behavior—which shows that punishment isn't what it used to be—but also indicates you are entering a room which contains art, not of the centaurs, but of classical inheritors of Theseus, imperial heirs of tradition.

The conventions by which we understand object: duced, at least in part, by museums. But let us not make the are the same. There are types and genres of museums, an museums, as Fred told us earlier and I want to assert now enforce silences, both reveal and conceal, some of what muse of cultures, and of diversity is shared, but some is not. I th the differences among types of museums even if we can't ar children in an art museum and the behavior of children in a clearly they are being invited to act in very different ways.

Consider a headdress displayed in a museum of A in one sense: a work of abstract art, one in which we are inv combinations of colors and textures. But this is not necess it. A field photograph of a headdress doing what it was de modification of the head for various kinds of social purposes, are not the aesthetics of another time and place. Yet most m the Western tradition, make claims about the universality c the non-Western cultures are displayed on the ground floo the great stream culminating in Western civilization. The s the Western canon, but the story of the evolution of art an abstraction and separation. Other museums, such as the Na part, offer a hall of Western civilization. There's only one hall Museum of Natural History; it begins with a prehistoric-m goes through ancient Greece, and ends with a window that Revenue Service Building, because the IRS building has Dor cate that government functionaries have a sense of humor. as many classical allusions as I could.)

What else do natural history museums do that i dioramas. Consider a diorama from the American Museum the high point of the art of diorama-making. What's curious away has pointed out, is that they all show dominant mal and children in the rear, even when that doesn't conform to

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The conventions by which we understand objects and otherness are conventions produced, at least in part, by museums. But let us not make the mistake of thinking that all museums are the same. There are types and genres of museums, and they do different kinds of things. If museums, as Fred told us earlier and I want to assert now, are places that both instruct us and enforce silences, both reveal and conceal, some of what museums tell us about the nature of society, of cultures, and of diversity is shared, but some is not. I think we have a good understanding of the differences among types of museums even if we can't articulate it. Just look at the behavior of children in an art museum and the behavior of children in a natural history or a science museum; clearly they are being invited to act in very different ways.

Consider a headdress displayed in a museum of African art. It's displayed as what it is in one sense: a work of abstract art, one in which we are invited to appreciate and contemplate the combinations of colors and textures. But this is not necessarily how the users of the mask view it. A field photograph of a headdress doing what it was designed to do reveals it as an aesthetic modification of the head for various kinds of social purposes, so these social and cultural aesthetics are not the aesthetics of another time and place. Yet most museums, especially great museums in the Western tradition, make claims about the universality of what they're doing. In art museums the non-Western cultures are displayed on the ground floor, as kind of nebulous tributaries into the great stream culminating in Western civilization. The story this tells is not just the story of the Western canon, but the story of the evolution of art and appreciation in terms of, very often, abstraction and separation. Other museums, such as the Natural History Museum of which I am a part, offer a hall of Western civilization. There's only one hall of Western civilization in the National Museum of Natural History; it begins with a prehistoric-man diorama with Caucasian features, goes through ancient Greece, and ends with a window that looks out, deliberately, on the Internal Revenue Service Building, because the IRS building has Doric columns, which would seem to indicate that government functionaries have a sense of humor. (I promised Fred that I would bring in as many classical allusions as I could.)

What else do natural history museums do that is distinctive of the genre? They create dioramas. Consider a diorama from the American Museum of Natural History, which is probably the high point of the art of diorama-making. What's curious about these dioramas, as Donna Haraway has pointed out, is that they all show dominant male figures in the front, and shy females and children in the rear, even when that doesn't conform to animal behavior.

Now consider the Bushmen diorama at the hall for which I am responsible. It's entitled The Bushmen and depicts a San hunter (South Africa) in a desert scene with a bow and ar-

row aimed over the head of a squatting woman. This diorama reproduces the male-dominant/female-subservient posture that Donna Haraway argues is found in most animal dioramas. No one would know from looking at the diorama that Bushman kinship systems and religion are among some of the most complex in the world—and we don't call them Bushmen anymore. The very way that they're put in the diorama—the use of tones, color, pattern, trompe l'oeil sorts of devices—assimilates them to nature, and even makes the claim that we may know these people the way we know animals. This diorama is next to a human evolution display, which makes an even stronger assertion. We have had extensive debates in the museum [about] whether the juxtaposition is deliberate.

If natural history museums make these sorts of powerful but implicit comparisons, what do cultural history museums do, such as the Maryland Historical Society? They define, through assertion and silence, the changing shape of societies and what people do. They tell you, as indeed all histories do—and that's one of the reasons history is so contested in universities—who was important, and who wasn't, what experiences are important, and which aren't. Museums leave some objects in the collections while exhibiting others. But remember, as Hans Haacke also points out, that museums are places where these kinds of political messages can be countered. They are places in which not just politics is enforced, but in which politics, in the sense of the process by which people make decisions about who they are and who they will be, is played out, at least in terms of our fantasies and visions of who we are and what we may be. That's one reason there's been a reaction in recent years against museums, almost a hostility toward museums, because some people enter museums with an attitude of faith. Others enter them with an attitude of hostility and skepticism. And recently, certain kinds of art have tried to play with the very nature of those implicit attitudes.

I think we can talk about three kinds of reactions. The first of them is the multicultural exhibit. A massive Parisian show putting Western and non-Western art side by side, "Magiciens de la Terre," was to be the answer to the great "Primitivism" show at the Museum of Modern Art. The assertion of the "Magiciens" show was that all artists are magicians of the earth; it was a kind of whole-earth show, as one person called it, and tried to show that all artists were in touch with the fundamentals. One of the ways they did it was by pairing a characteristic Richard Long piece, in which he tries to illustrate the nature of certain elements in the world, and an Australian Aboriginal sand painting. The sand painting was reproduced in front of Long's piece, so you were left with the feeling that here were two artists from extraordinarily different places trying to reproduce the elements of the world. But for Long, the elements are base materials themselves, and for the Australian Aboriginal painting they're visible
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That's one kind of multicultural exhibit. A second
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The Artifact Piece where he puts himself in a coffin-like
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and for the Australian Aboriginal painting they're visible signs of the hidden world called the Dreamtime. The show obliterated the cultural specificity of artists from traditions different from those of the curators.

That's one kind of multicultural exhibit. A second kind is the exhibit that reflects upon how exhibits determine what we know. A distinguished example is the exhibit "Art/Artifact," put on by the Center for African Art in New York. The same objects were shown in a "cabinet of curiosities," a Hampton University natural history museum, an art museum, and a gallery, so that viewers were forced to question what they were seeing and how the very frame of the exhibit affected it.

The third kind of art exhibit is what I call the site-specific form of art that challenges the nature of the frame itself. James Luna, a Luiseño Indian performance artist, does what he calls The Artifact Piece where he puts himself in a coffin-like structure and surrounds himself with the artifacts of his life—some plastic things and other objects. Another kind of site-specific piece is represented by the kinds of art that Fred Wilson himself creates. I regard Mining the Museum as one of the most extraordinary things that I've ever seen, even if I wasn't fooled as much as I was by The Other Museum. It is a wonderful example of art as a political challenge linked to a specific site, not only because of the specific displays but because of the way it works within the museum itself. This is an exhibit that you cannot fully appreciate unless you see the rest of the museum as well as the exhibit. Too many people only go upstairs to Mining the Museum. As you view the video, Fred quietly says, "Now I want you to go see the rest of the museum, because I put pieces in there." He has reproduced the genres and categories of the museum itself in the exhibit. One of the striking things about the museum, although you wouldn't notice it unless you'd seen Mining the Museum and then gone back, is the degree to which silver services appear in almost every room—I stopped counting after ten—and the degree to which doll houses are a compulsive form of exhibiting in the museum, cut open in an almost surgical kind of way. Fred has opened up what the museum tells us, and many of the exhibits ably tell us, about Maryland history, and conversely when the museum is silent.

Let me give you one more example. When you visit Mining the Museum, you know you're visiting something that has to do with the museum; it's framed that way. At the Museum of Natural History last September, we presented a performance piece called The Year of the White Bear: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West. The performance artists Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco put themselves into a gilded cage in the rotunda of the museum and presented themselves as two Indians whose cultures gave them a degree of familiarity with the

West, since their tribe had for one hundred years been masquerading as English pirates and raiding ships. Inside the museum, they typed on computers, they were fed Coca-Cola and bananas, and when you gave them three coins and said, "Pho-to, pho-to, pho-to," they posed for their photographs with you. Guillermo Gómez-Peña paced up and down, wearing a mask, Guatemalan shorts, and leather with spikes, and carrying a briefcase. People were utterly nonplussed. At the insistence of the artists, we did not say who they were. A Smithsonian staffperson summarizing visitor response reported that many people thought that they supposedly did not speak English. A Chilean couple were in disbelief that the artists were from Mexico; their bodies were the wrong shape. Most visitors insisted that what they saw was authentic; viewers' comments were mostly positive, but one kept insisting that this was actually a hidden video show, and wanted to know when he was going to be on TV. One anthropology professor was going to call her students up and insist that they come down to the museum. A Cherokee woman left the museum outraged before reading the chronology. Many other visitors liked the piece, but did not want to be reminded, particularly black visitors, of issues of slavery. They and many Native American visitors appeared to like the concept but were disturbed by the reality. I spoke to a dietician from Akron who spent an hour questioning people; I've never seen anyone so caught up in a display before.

These exhibits illustrate both the political nature of the artistic process and the degree to which politics can be transformed from an imposition into more of a contest. One has to challenge the secondhand worlds in which we live by focusing—as site-specific art does—on a way of seeing, which brings us back to Hans Haacke's project. Museums become sites where one not only asserts things but where there is also the possibility of questioning those very assumptions. This is the only way in which we can build a multicultural polity, one in which we not only have many cultures, but in which it is possible to be part of more than one culture.

This text is drawn from the lecture series "Art in Context: Rethinking the New World," sponsored in the Fall of 1992 by the Atlanta College of Art Gallery and Continuing Education Department. It was originally published in *Artpapers* 17, no. 3 (May–June 1993): 2–9, and republished in Reesa Greenberg et al., eds., *Thinking about Exhibitions* (London: Routledge, 1996), 251–258, from which the present version is taken.