

Museum Therapist: an interview with Fred Wilson

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AB / AG In your research work within museums, you are used to having a pretty unusual position, working amidst several layers of relationships. You were once a museum guard yourself, and now commonly approach the guard staff during your research, as well as the cleaning staff, communication staff, curators, committees, etc. How do you see yourself at the intersection of these relationships? What role(s) does it make you play?

Fred Wilson First of all, when I'm in a museum, part of the success of my intervention relies on the fact that I don't have a specific role. Sometimes it unnerves people, or makes them feel uncomfortable, especially at first because they don't know what to do with me. For example, I specifically say that I'm not a curator, because lots of people – especially curators – want to call me one. I have done curating in the past, and I certainly know that our jobs differ.

Also, there are two reasons for me to avoid that role. First, if I say that I'm a curator, then they can evaluate what I do with their own set of rules, and they will have the opportunity to discount what I do if they think that it's not the right way. The second reason is that the status of artist gives me more freedom to intervene. Everyone has a vague notion of what artists are like, and everybody has their stereotypes about artists, curators included. So, I know what they're thinking when I first come in, to some degree. It actually gives me a freer space, let's say, in terms of the role I can play in this kind of organization, because people in museums know that artists are unpredictable. This is also part of what makes them nervous; museums are all about control, so they fear that I might disrupt the whole institution! But surely I enjoy the fact that what I do, and who I am, is something that you cannot easily pin down. This allows me to talk to everyone, as I'm not part of the hierarchy. There's less of a barrier with certain people within the staff, like the people cleaning the floor, because they know that an artist is just someone that can be rich or poor, smart or stupid. So I could be any of those things and they won't know until they get to know me.

AB / AG Would you say that this position is more transversal, not totally remote from the existing hierarchy, but crossing all of its grades?

FW Yes, except maybe for the top level, the "trustees", who really know that they're more influential and powerful than everybody else. I interact with them to varying degrees, depending on the museum and the project – sometimes a lot, sometimes very, very little. Wealth is a huge divide. I don't know if it needs to be, but it is.

AB / AG So, you talk to all of these people, and they talk back to you. How do these dialogues develop?

FW Yes, in the beginning they are very polite conversations. After I'm there for a while, I begin to talk with more people and more people start to talk to me. It's a slow process of gaining trust, because the more I'm there, the more I know how things are organized, and what the hierarchies are in that particular museum. Once there's a level of trust, the conversation can then shift to more internal personal things between staff, between departments. Because I have no one to tell, they trust that I'm not going to talk. Obviously, the curators usually don't want whatever is going on in the museum to be known in other museums. Basically, these institutions are like dysfunctional families! Everyone thinks their own museum is dysfunctional, that everyone else has got it together, and that they're the only ones with all these weird issues. So they don't want anybody else to know. Eventually I find out about all of these dysfunctions, and they trust that I'm not going to tell everybody else what's going on in their family...

AB / AG You mentioned in your presentation yesterday that sometimes you turn out to be like a museum therapist, because of your outsider position and the confidence you inspire. But we guess that it isn't really the role that was planned at first.

FW It's not planned at all, and I didn't even make up that term. Someone in a museum once told me I was like a museum therapist, but truly I'm not looking to find out the gossip and intrigue, I don't need it for my projects. Still, it does happen that people talk to me about, for example, their view of the museum, their collection, the history of the place, relationships between some of the staff, and why certain objects are in the collection and some are not. As I will be there for a short period and then leave, I'm just someone that they can talk to. It's not part of my practice, but it certainly helps the projects I do. The more trust they have in me,

the deeper the conversations I can have about my work, and the more open and honest they can be about what I'm doing. If they like it or dislike it, we can have a good dialogue about our differences of opinion. But anyway, I will do what I have to do for the project.

AB / AG Could this informal role of «museum therapist» perhaps be extended to the whole institution? When you intervene in a museum, you tend to highlight what is usually hidden in the institutional discourse, in terms of representation and the writing of history. So you could be considered as a therapist to the museum itself, digging into repressed memories...

FW ...into repressed memories of the institution, yes. You know, if you are doing historical research, you do come across these issues. If we can extend this analogy, we should say that it's not necessarily a question of repressed issues, but rather issues that museum people usually don't consider meaningful, or useful. Still, there are clearly situations of institutional denial. Like when long-time professional staff and trustees collectively hold onto notions about the museum without questioning whether they are unwittingly affecting contemporary decisions. If there is an unexplained resistance to change, then there is something that is being repressed. As I mentioned, museums need to have control. They are controlling the meaning; they are controlling who comes in – even if they like to think they are not. And finally, they also want to control the meaning of the museum itself.

Another central aspect is that museums will usually say that they want to reach all of the people, gather different parts of the public. But at the same time they also want to please the elite, because that's how they get the money to keep the museum going. So there's a definite split there: the elite wants to remain elite, which means there's only a few people that are knowledgeable, but if you want to reach the whole population, that would mean everybody has the same knowledge, the same opportunity, the same interests. These are two very different goals, and they don't work together. All museums are somehow in denial about that situation – art museums anyway. I don't try to break this down, because it's how the museum functions, but every once in a while there's a situation where it becomes really obvious that they're working cross-purposes, and it becomes very difficult – at least in the United States, since the museums are not funded by the state in any meaningful way. There are wealthy people on the board of trustees who raise money from their wealthy friends. But then the public comes and they're paying, they're buying things in the shops. Then the foundations and corporations also come in and are looking to see how many people are walking in the doors before they give money.

So the museum needs those two groups, and they have to speak to them in very different ways. I'm getting off the topic a little, but at the Metropolitan in New York, the former director used to say: "Yes we are an elite museum, but everybody can be elite." Meaning you're coming in, and you're gaining this kind of knowledge, and you too can become the elite. This is how, in his mind, he's dealt with the issue...

AB / AG In a way, it reinforces the phenomenon that you often describe: when you go into a museum, you try to identify with whomever you think the exhibition is addressed to. By doing so you leave behind your own identity, background, and so on; you don't claim to represent a member of a specific community, you tend to forget that precisely because you are trying to fit in.

FW That's right, it reinforces this mythical elite.

AB / AG In your work you use the mimetic faculty by imitating the museum's display language. In this sense you arrange the museum's many different objects for another purpose: for disclosure, giving a voice to unheard minority voices. What does it mean for you to use the language of the institution in this way?

FW I'm sort of repressing, or limiting, my own creative instincts of display for the larger project, the larger idea. I really don't want people to think that I'm presenting new ideas through a fancy artistic display. To the contrary, I'm really just trying to reflect the museum back on itself for everyone to see.

AB / AG How would you describe these larger ideas?

FW I'm generally trying to reveal what's not being spoken about in the museum, whatever that is. That's why I always say I'm coming in tabula rasa. I don't know where it's going to lead, because if I knew when I first walked in the door, then obviously a lot of people would know it too, and there would be nothing to reveal! Basically, on one side there's the subject of the project I am doing, which the public can really grasp, and which the museum can get behind. But outside of that or within that, it's also a way of looking at the larger issues that the museum has, and I'm not sure in which direction it's going to go. Is it going to be about the museum and its public, about the museum and its own history, about the museum and the city, about the

country and how it's amplified by the museum, or about class relationships, or something else? I don't know at first what is the going to be the strongest topic, I just know that there's something there that is very particular to this institution.

AB / AG In a way, the effects of your interventions are not only occurring within the project itself, but also on the transformation of the perception that you can propose to the public. For example, in "Mining the Museum" at the Historical Society in Baltimore (2), you intervened on one floor while other floors presented the same objects as usually displayed. You regularly mention that after seeing a project of yours, the public can really have a different view of the institution itself. Maybe here the mimesis aspect is important, because you use the language of the museum in a really subjective way by inserting different forms of subjective discourse in a manner that is so obvious that it's not possible anymore to believe that the museum display is something objective, neutral.

FW Exactly. It holds a mirror to it, a mirror slightly different, and you're able to see what this is by looking in the mirror. That's the thing that really excites me. In the United States, unfortunately, they make it all wrapped up with slavery or whatever topic I'm using, but it's really not just focused on that. It works more as a great vehicle to reveal the museum, what the museum is talking about, what it's not talking about.

AB / AG Walter Benjamin described this mimetic faculty as a way «to read what was never written»,⁽³⁾ which also evokes a relationship between what is not visible but yet is still present.

FW Yes, it's very true, and it's a process that requires some time. When people want me to come for a quick intervention, then it doesn't really work. All I can do is a cute display. I think that the reason why I do good work is because I really respect the people who work in museums: I respect their scholarship; I respect their labor. You know, they love what they're doing, and I love what they do. So I need to give them respect and take time to really try to understand how this works beyond very immediate thoughts and off-handed ideas. Otherwise, it's not respectful to them, and it really just becomes the ego, my ego, saying, "I know what you're about." As a matter of fact, I don't know, and it really takes a while to sort out and reveal these things.

AB / AG Something that strikes us is that you don't seem to be planning the exact effects of your intervention before being on site, before talking to the people. If there has to be an effect, if there can be a change, for example an institutional change about the way of seeing the museum and using the museum, then the people working there have to be part of it, to be part of this process. Otherwise it's not meant to last.

FW I should say that I have made projects in a short space of time, but then there is really no change in institutions. I can see things that don't work and reveal them, but that doesn't change people's thinking of what they did. I don't want the place to shut down, or to make them embarrassed. They're often really worried at the beginning that I might want to make fun out of them. They don't know what I might do. Perhaps they fear I might disrespect their scholarship, or not have the scholarship they have and put something in the public that has the wrong meaning. Or they may be concerned that I might present something that contradicts them to such a degree that it becomes embarrassing for them to have this kind of discussion.

So those kinds of things happen when I haven't had the time to work my ideas through with the professionals. So I'm trying to go in knowing that I have my own ideas and my own prejudices. It's like travelling: if you travel to another country, you always think you know things based on what you may have read, but you never really get to know where you are. You can go there and say, OK, I've read that in my guidebook and then leave, but in the end you really don't know the place at all. So, my desire is not to have that kind of tourist experience. Rather, I try to make myself available, to open myself up, to make myself vulnerable, and people respect that. Sometimes they will open up too, while others just won't, no matter what, and I respect that too. But I have to be willing to do that in order to get further into this work, and come up with some theses.

AB / AG In order to have this kind of specific position, then it has to be an invitation, you cannot force the site of your intervention. It has to be wanted.

FW That's right, it has to be the top people, the director, the trustees, or the chief curator. They have to invite me, because that means they understand what I do, to some degree, and that they will stand behind me in the process. But you know, I mentioned that there are people who will look at the artist as somehow suspicious in a museum, but there are also others who just think the artist is a kind of messiah, a master, a

superstar, a magician or whatever, and I really need to avoid that too because then it creates a separation between me and the others. It also makes me very uncomfortable; it's not how I perceive myself.

Notes

1. This interview has been recorded on March 30, 2010, by Alejandra Ballón and Aurélien Gamboni, transcribed by Aurélien Gamboni, and corrected by Hannah Entwisle.
2. "Mining the Museum", an installation by Fred Wilson at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore, 1992-1993.
3. Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty", in *Reflections, Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, Peter Demetz éd., Schocken Books, New York 1986, p. 336