

FOREWORD

The Contemporary and the Maryland Historical Society presented *Mining the Museum* from April 4, 1992 to February 28, 1993. The process undertaken to implement the project and its public programming reflected a rare synergy between the community's unlikeliest institutions—Baltimore's newest and most experimental art museum and its oldest and most traditional history museum. The effect of the exhibition on our institutions has been tremendous, and the response from our community has been overwhelming. Visitation reached record numbers, topping 55,000 during the eleven-month run of the exhibition. This collaboration with artist Fred Wilson enabled each participant—the artist and the museums—to realize very different but truly complementary goals that none of us could have realized alone.

Since 1989, The Contemporary has presented projects that expand the idea of "museum" and redefine museum exhibiting, collecting, and educational practices. Presenting contemporary art in unlikely, temporary spaces, The Contemporary has illustrated that a museum is more a state of mind than a piece of real estate. Each of the museum's exhibitions has included a collaboration that has crossed disciplinary barriers, bringing the museum staff together with professionals in

human resources, social services, education, and other humanities fields.

In undertaking *Mining the Museum*, The Contemporary wanted to illustrate how its new model for museum practices could be applied to any type of museum. This meant arguing strenuously for a new museology, one that began first with a critique of the decision-making processes that govern all museums. It also meant taking a fresh look at the myriad ways permanent collections can be reinterpreted from other viewpoints to tell a greater range of stories about the human experience. Most of all, The Contemporary wished to emphasize that, working together, artists and museums can play an active role in shaping the policies of cultural institutions and bringing together communities to discuss shared social concerns.

For the Maryland Historical Society, *Mining the Museum* represented an opportunity to reach a broader audience and to use its museum and archival collections in new and innovative ways. Throughout the exhibition, people who had never been to the society came to see the installation, returning a second and often a third time with families and friends. The artist's installation techniques demonstrated that creative juxtapositions can elicit emotional responses from historic artifacts

and documents and also provide more intimate and personal connections to the past. Fred Wilson opened many doors for the Maryland Historical Society and has challenged the institution to be responsive to the history of all Marylanders in the future.

At the core of the partnership was the belief that the exhibition would transform perceptions of what museums are, not only for our audience but for ourselves. Without question, this has been the case. Staff, volunteers, members, visitors, and colleagues have all attested to the personal and professional impact *Mining the Museum* has had on them. Within both institutions, it has heightened our awareness of the role museums play in presenting and interpreting culture.

The notes visitors left on the exhibition response board sent a strong, unified message to our profession: museums are a place where visitors expect to have their views challenged and where they hope the museum will listen to their histories and welcome their perspectives. If museums are to be valued as institutions in the years to come, we must be attentive to our communities and the wider social contexts in which we operate.

In May 1993, The Contemporary, the Maryland Historical Society, and Fred Wilson were honored to receive the American Association of Museums' Curator's Committee Award for Exhibition of the Year. With this recognition comes a renewed sense of responsibility. The truest measure of its success will be its potential to inspire change not only in programming but in many aspects of museum operations. For museums to meet the difficult challenges we face today, we must represent and involve the communities we are part of to accurately reflect our shared history—complex and painful though that history might be. *Mining the Museum* has been merely a reminder that there is still much work to be done. We hope *Mining the Museum* will inspire other museums to explore difficult issues that are part of our past and our present.

GEORGE CISCLE,
Director, The Contemporary

CHARLES LYLE,
*Former Director, The Maryland
Historical Society*

MINING THE PROJECT EXPERIENCES:

A DISCUSSION WITH THE DOCENTS OF THE
MARYLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Edited by Lisa G. Corrin

The following discussion with docents from the Maryland Historical Society was conducted by Lisa G. Corrin, curator/educator at The Contemporary, and Judy Van Dyke, director of education, and Nancy Martel, education assistant, of the Maryland Historical Society in May 1993, three months after *Mining the Museum* closed. The objective of the discussion was to learn more about the experiences and feelings of the thirty-nine docents who worked with the public during the exhibition.¹

The role of the docents was crucial. Some 55,000 people visited the installation. Approximately 300 tours were scheduled expressly for *Mining the Museum*, including 2,900 children and 1,800 adults. The docents interacted with the public, conducting tours, answering questions, assisting during programs, and giving the staff feedback about the audience. Their accounts tell us a great deal about the viability of new educational techniques we developed to encourage active engagement in the exhibition and about public response to them.²

In addition to the Maryland Historical Society docents, The Contemporary engaged nine artist-docents to give gallery talks each week from their respective points of view. Both groups were encouraged to attend the course "Exhibiting Cultures," organized by The Con-

temporary and the Maryland Historical Society education departments and taught by curators from area museums through a local university. A public lecture series presented during the exhibition on issues of race and gender in history and the visual arts, was also recommended to both groups. During the closing week of the exhibition, the most effective collaboration occurred when the Maryland Historical Society docents and artist-docents worked in teams, exploring the exhibition from a multidisciplinary perspective.

The artist's role was central to the education process. Fred Wilson gave a series of guided tours of the society's collections before and after *Mining the Museum* opened. The docents were given opportunities to discuss Wilson's work and to see the museum through his eyes. They were also provided with a series of questions intended to explore critically the role of museums, curators, educators, and audiences in the interpretation of culture. Other questions considered general museological issues. Staff from the Maryland Historical Society provided the historical background of objects in the collection and of the colonial period generally. The Contemporary was responsible for lectures on contemporary art: artists in museums, installation as a medium, and art with a social/political

point of view. The African-American artist Angela Franklin was engaged by The Contemporary to give a lecture, "Reaching Beyond: Serving the Diverse Audience," and to conduct tours for the society's docents.

However, docent "training" occurred primarily on the job. Since Wilson felt strongly about the element of surprise, the docents did not know precisely what the exhibition was going to look like until it opened. Therefore, overnight, the docents had to find their own strategies for giving tours to widely differing groups, raising sensitive issues that some of them had never discussed in a public forum before. They also discovered the importance of the audience in the education process, a process that is as much about illuminating the museum as it is about informing the visitor.

JUDY VAN DYKE: Do you remember how you felt about *Mining the Museum* before it opened? Did your attitude change after that?

DOCENT 1: I remember when you told us about the exhibition schedule, because you said there was going to be an African-American artist coming to the museum. This was different and new for the historical society, and I was ready to climb on board. But when Fred came and made that brief presentation, I thought he was incredible. We struggle to find just the right words, and all of a sudden he was saying a lot with one little flick of the switch.

JUDY VAN DYKE: And he was speaking without words.

DOCENT 1: And speaking volumes.

DOCENT 2: He was saying to me, "Don't just accept as fact what you see or what someone is telling you you are seeing. Analyze it." I thought this was extremely important. We are what other people want us to be, and we see what other people want us to see.

JUDY VAN DYKE: I have to confess I wasn't as quick a study as you. It took me quite a while. Did anyone else have that reaction? What did you do?

DOCENT 3: One of the things that I used early on to prepare was one of the question sheets the staff and docents were given in the course, which asked questions like: Why is history important to you? What is art? What is the purpose of a historical society? I tried to keep in mind that *Mining the Museum* was a total environment that people were going to react to, and that it wasn't going to be just intellectual, it was going to be visceral. When I take people who are Christian to see a statue of Christ on my city tours at the Johns Hopkins Hospital, sometimes I don't talk. You can look at your group and see that they are having a very personal and strong emotional experience. So I decided that I was going to learn from my tours of *Mining the Museum* and treat every group differently, according to their response to Fred's installation.

I had experiences giving black history tours as a non-African-American which were useful. Many times I walked up to a bus and people would say, "That can't be our tour guide because she's not the right color."

I was most apprehensive about giving tours to children. How was I going to do it justice and reach young people?

DOCENT 4: How could I make this a very good experience for people who had no idea what it was all about? I was also concerned about young people because their emotions are very, very strong. I enjoyed helping them to see that there was no bitterness in the exhibit.

DOCENT 5: I disagree. I felt Fred's bitterness coming through so much in the exhibit. I really did.

DOCENT 4: I'm saying his bitterness would be mine or the bitterness of anybody who is black. Many blacks came through *Mining the Museum* and cried. I had a woman who stood at the painting where a little girl says, "Where is my mother?" and she broke down. She said, "My grandmother said that she never saw her mother; that she was always with these little white girls." I wasn't concerned about blacks understanding it because they had lived it. But I did have a problem with the whole group at the museum. I knew that you would be defensive, I would be too. How do I make you, as white people, comfortable in this setting? I did a large number of groups, and my heart was broken, but I was trying to make people understand that there is bad and there is good, and there is bad and good in every race and every people. There is no way you can get rid of the ugly. There is no way you can justify a group of people coming from England and driving all the Indians out of Maryland. There's no way you can justify it. But, I think he [Fred Wilson] handled it very well. He used what the museum had in the collection about Indians and then he put a little sign in there that said, "We shared." And that's where he left it.

DOCENT 6: I wasn't emotional about the exhibition because I had worked in the Urban League during college, so I had been involved in that sort of thing. Emotionally, I didn't really get involved in it. But I liked the fact that he didn't label things to death. It forced guides to do what I love for guides to do—to get the audience involved.

DOCENT 7: I was extremely emotional.

DOCENT 8: I can't imagine having no emotion.

DOCENT 7: I didn't get emotionally involved with the problem of slavery or the "black problem." When I first saw it, I felt it was manipula-

tive. He wanted you to see what he wanted you to see. For example, people on my tours were sure that blacks had been beaten on that whipping post. But it was never used for that purpose. Fred was using his particular background, sometimes substituting his emotions for fact.

DOCENT 4: I agree, there was no way I could do it [give tours] without having to feel it as well as understand it intellectually. But, it also took a lot of learning on the part of a guide to make the tours work.

NANCY MARTEL: Can I just say something about my first reaction to the exhibit? I think I was always open-minded, but the first time I went through it with Fred, I didn't really get every point. I went away for the weekend with some friends, and I found myself talking about this exhibit the whole night. My husband was really surprised because I have worked at the society so many years and I really haven't done that before. Every place I went after that I was talking about *Mining the Museum*. I was surprised myself, that I did that. I told my children, and I told my family. That in itself is so intriguing. I just think that *Mining the Museum* raises questions about a side of history that we have never addressed. It started a dialogue that was difficult but that also gave us so many insights. Well, just the story that one of you mentioned about her friend and the portrait of the little girl. I found that a very moving story and I never forgot it. If it hadn't been for this exhibit, I would never have met anybody like that. I would never have had these experiences.

LISA CORBIN: People revealed intimate parts of themselves that in everyday life they might not. How do you think *Mining the Museum* was able to do that in a way which an exhibition about the civil rights movement might not?

DOCENT 8: I think it was because the objects were seen in an unexpected context. For example, something that we see all the time, like the baby carriage, was exhibited with the Ku Klux Klan hood in it. One of the very first things a young man said—I think he was in about fifth or sixth grade—when I asked him “What does this mean to you?” was, “It means that from childhood on up, people are taught to hate.” I thought that was a very perceptive remark from someone so young.

DOCENT 6: *Mining the Museum* let's you “do your own thing,” and people then take the time to think about each detail. Once I said to Fred, “It's interesting that all of the white people on the pedestals at the beginning of the exhibition were slaveholders—and even Napoleon had slaves from Egypt. It's particularly fascinating that you put Napoleon between Henry Clay and Andrew Jackson, because they were bitter enemies.” And Fred said, “I didn't know that.” I went on about Henry Clay and how important he was for postponing the Civil War for a period of years through the Missouri Compromise. Fred replied, “Oh, I didn't know that either. If you want to read that into it, that's fine.”

LISA CORRIN: One's ideas about “factual history” had to be suspended in the poetic environment of the installation. The difference between what Fred was doing symbolically and what might have actually happened was really blurred.

DOCENT 1: Is Fred's art intended to just teach history or to give you a strong feeling and get you to act? There was manipulation, but *Mining the Museum* was also historically accurate. There were things he told us about history that he didn't even know he was telling. I did some of the research for the exhibition, but I was always afraid of being intrusive. I didn't want him to tell me what he was going to do or what

he was trying to say. That wasn't my business. We just talked sometimes about history and whatnot. Fred would ask me things, and I would look them up. Sometimes I just talked a blue streak and I didn't have any idea where it would lead. I would just get whatever I could, throw it at him, and he did with it what he wanted. I was just as excited to walk in there on the day of the opening as anybody.

DOCENT 7: Fred was not primarily a manipulator. He was an artist. And what an artist does is express his feelings. My background is in literature. When a writer creates something, it has its own identity. Once it's published, it's open for other people to feel what they feel. That's exactly what Fred did.

JUDY VAN DYKE: Because it's a complicated piece of art, that doesn't mean that all parts are meaningful. I learned about *Mining the Museum* as I took groups through. I learned what many parts of it meant as I asked people, “What does this mean to you?” or “Why do you think the artist did this or that?” I found that I had not understood the many ways that you could interpret parts of the installation. I also felt at the beginning, and much less so now, that the blue corridor and the end of the exhibit [where the objects made by enslaved Africans were displayed with those made by Africans from Liberia] were an emotional let-down and were the weakest part of the installation because they lacked the dynamism of the other parts. There was, obviously, a purposeful easing of the tensions that had been presented early on, but I didn't think it worked. I didn't like having everything so highly charged and then having the end so passive. After talking to groups, I had people telling me that they thought the blue corridor was a metaphor for the passage across the ocean. Even I understood that there was a connection between

the African art and the enslaved African-Americans here in Maryland. I found Banneker puzzling—interesting, but puzzling. But people on the tours spoke about Banneker as a man who followed his dream, who looked to the stars and accomplished what he did under the conditions you learned about in the first part of the installation. These were things that I didn't understand when I first looked at the exhibit. For me, the audience taught the teacher. I was taught by the people in my groups to understand what was going on in *Mining the Museum*.

DOCENT 9: In the very beginning, I didn't understand it at all. I didn't like it. I didn't have any feelings about Fred. My tours were primarily young people. I was afraid that, for children, *Mining the Museum* was going to be divisive, given what we've been through with the civil rights movement and the terrible riots in Los Angeles. But it got better as I went along. You had to get emotional when you heard the voices of children in the paintings say, "Who's going to braid my hair?"

One group of high school students I took through were all black. They had an entirely different outlook on *Mining the Museum*. I also had friends visit the exhibition with me. My friend's daughter works in a museum in New York, and she made the trip to Baltimore with a professor from a local college. I thought, well, if they're coming to see it there's something more than I'm seeing.

I was a little upset about the Native American section because my mother was one-quarter Indian and I thought they were given short shrift by just using the cigar store Indians. I didn't even see the pictures behind the wooden Indians at first. Then I asked the children about the pictures. "Who do they look like? What are they like?" One said, "Well, they're just people like us." That really hit me. Because we don't really know what happened to the

Maryland Indians, whether they drifted away or were driven away—or were killed. We know they lost all that land.

DOCENT 6: I agree that the Native Americans really were given short shrift.

DOCENT 4: The museum had done that. Fred only had what was available.

DOCENT 6: That was an embarrassment to me.

DOCENT 4: It should have been.

LISA CORRIN: Can you remember any anecdotes where a child or one of these young adults responded in a way that made a strong impression on you?

DOCENT 9: One fourth-grader asked me [in reference to the painting of Henry Darnall by Justus Engelhardt Kuhn], "Why does he have the silver band around his neck?" I said (because that's the way we used to say it), "That's his little friend." He said, "You don't put a collar around your friend's neck."

DOCENT 9: Benjamin Banneker really impressed the children. They saw his almanac and they couldn't understand it, but they realized what Benjamin Banneker had accomplished. They just couldn't believe what he saw in his head. But he saw a great deal, didn't he?

DOCENT 3: When another docent told a personal anecdote to me, I would share it with my tour groups. You could use these stories to encourage people to share their own feelings in the exhibition.

I also tried to use the interests of the audience as a way to talk about other issues. When I pointed out the map of the Chesapeake to one group of children, they replied, "They were good stewards of the land." I obviously thought this was very funny. Yes, the Native Americans were good stewards of the land. That was

something the children could relate to because they learned about this in school. Their interest in the environment provided me a whole new entry into my discussion of the Native American room.

JUDY VAN DYKE: Did any of you have groups where people disagreed or had very different interpretations of the installation? That happened on only one of my tours.

NANCY MARTEL: The first group I ever took to the exhibition was elderly. I was really worried about them. However, it turned out that they were quite receptive, except for one man who said that it was a racist exhibit and just stormed out. He stayed with me for a while, but then he just had it. I didn't mind that he had stormed out. Later the group had a calm, rational discussion about their experiences. One woman raised the question about the potential for the exhibition being divisive, for upsetting people. She asked, "Why bring racism up again?" Another woman replied, "Well, isn't it better to bring these things out in the open?" I got that response many, many times.

DOCENT 4: I had the same experience with another man, who also left. I was particularly struck by the attitude of people at the beginning of the exhibit. You could sense their feeling that "this doesn't belong in here." Certainly in the museum, we're in a rich person's domain.

But what hit me so very hard were the comments that were made to me during the exhibition by other docents [because she was African-American]. Some said to me, "My God, you've worked hard putting in so many hours. You must be the token." I wasn't going to say this, but it's true. It doesn't bother me as a person because I've lived long enough to understand things, but I've had three docents say that. I did work hard, and I thoroughly enjoyed it—but their comments were painful and diffi-

cult. I thought it was essential that someone show the good and the bad in the exhibit.

LISA CORRIN: Could you tell us how you did that?

DOCENT 4: Take "Cabinetmaking," for example. Before a group would discuss that arrangement, I would suggest people examine how the objects were set up. We looked at the chairs and the whipping post, and I asked, "What do you think it is?" And children would say without hesitation, "It's a cross." They saw the chairs and related the whipping post to the church. Somebody would say, "Slavery beat people." Now that's one thing that is in Frederick Douglass's autobiography. Do you remember when he was sent to the slavebreaker who was a black man? I know. [She acknowledges the group's disbelief.] A black man overseeing a black man.

JUDY VAN DYKE: The negative comment that I heard most frequently from guides, and sometimes from audiences, was that these issues [of race] have been put to rest. They said, "This is part of our past. What good does it do to bring it up again?"

DOCENT 9: I worried about the children. Even when it didn't bother them, it did bother me. It didn't make the white children divisive, but they looked at me and asked, "Did we do that?" I said, "I didn't and you didn't, but, yes, others did." But they didn't go against each other. I don't know what I thought they were going to do.

DOCENT 7: It bothered me, particularly after all the African-American children who came, that for the majority of the children, black and white, it was just history. It wasn't that deep.

One middle school group I particularly remember. These kids were mostly black, but there were a few white children too. The kids were wearing chains and black leather—the whole bit. Right away, three boys, one white

and two black, stood in the doorway. I couldn't even get into the room. They're standing there and I'm thinking about how I can possibly get these kids involved. Somewhere along the line I obviously did. As they were getting ready to leave, they were seeing things and saying, "Oh, that's cool." Then, this one boy shook his head and said, "That was awful, that was really terrible—the way some people treated other people." The children didn't think *Mining the Museum* was only about slavery.

DOCENT 9: I had one adult group. I described installation art and encouraged them to consider for themselves whether *Mining the Museum* was an exhibit or a form of art. They disagreed with each other. Some liked it, some didn't. It made them feel uncomfortable, it didn't make them feel uncomfortable. There was interest, there was impatience. People went through the whole gallery. But I believe that it was a good experience for them, no matter which way each person felt.

DOCENT 1: I got hostility. There were many African-Americans who came to me after tours who said they were very angry. No matter what, they felt the hostility of whites to blacks. They were offended by the attempt to pretend that whites know our history better than we do. That was a reaction that I got from some people that white docents might not have heard. Sometimes they would come to me and say, "I was here before, but I'm glad I got you today as a guide."

DOCENT 3: I did two black history tours. One was with an all-black teenage group with kids who were financially well-off. But, don't think these kids weren't culturally deprived, because I think they were even though their families had money. How did I find this out? The teacher was so embarrassed at the end of the tour. It was absolutely my worst tour. I couldn't get the kids to respond to anything. I always

started my tours with: "This is a learning experience for me. If you want to share your ideas, I would like to hear them," and then I would share what others had told me when they went through the exhibition. Nothing. Not even comments on the prejudice that people have suffered. The teacher said, "These children have never suffered for anything. Materially, they have everything...but culturally..."

NANCY MARTEL: I had a high school group like that. The girls talked about it, and the boys said nothing. The guidance counselor who was with them came up to me later and he said he thought the reason the boys said nothing was because a lot of the exhibition also dealt with sexism, and they were very uncomfortable.

DOCENT 8: It was amazing to me with one group, that the women understood *Mining the Museum* far better than the men did. The men were very confused. As they left the door, a man and his wife were arguing about it. He was saying to her, "I didn't see any reason for something like that to be there." She replied, "You didn't even get the half of it."

DOCENT 3: I had a group of all African-Americans from inner-city schools. It was the most rewarding tour. However, I got my strongest negative comment from one of the young women in the group. She came up to me when we got to the front door at the end of their visit and said, "I really don't think you should do this with younger children. Our age group can handle it. All day, I have had to tell people that you [white people] aren't all bad." She was comforting me at the end. She thought I should share this with other docents. She was really trying to help. Thank heavens, I never projected myself as someone who knew all of black history.

NANCY MARTEL: I often asked teenagers if they thought *Mining the Museum* was a good

idea. Were there painful details which shouldn't have been included? Usually they said that they should be, although they agreed that it was still painful.

DOCENT 8: In "Modes of Transport," there was an inventory in which the ages and prices of slaves were listed. I pointed out to one group of children [both black and white students] the price of an older man. I had one of the young boys read it. I asked him about one of the women, and he said that at twenty-four years old, she was worth four times as much. "Why?" I asked. This clever eighth-grader said, "Because she could have more babies." I thought, out of the mouths of babes comes something like this. Many of the African-American adults who followed my tours were interested in hearing what the little folks had to say.

DOCENT 5: I grew up out West. There, you create a circle to protect yourselves. All for one and one for all. When I first came to the Maryland Historical Society and took my black groups through, I remember saying either to Judy or Nancy, "What do I do when I get to the black boy with the collar in the Darnall portrait?" You see, I wasn't raised in the South around plantations. Out West, when somebody needed help, you gave help. You didn't care whether they were black, white, or Indian.

So I found it difficult. The thing that saved me in giving tours to the African-American children was that it [slavery] is a fact. History is a fact even if it can be interpreted differently. My son once said to me, "It's in the book." I asked him, "Who wrote the book?" I know that history can be twisted and misleading.

But, we need something positive for the black children to identify with. I have always taken pride in showing the history of good people—Eubie Blake, Cab Calloway, Billie Holiday, Benjamin Banneker, Harriet Tubman. I

stand in front of pictures of Harriet Tubman and battlefields of the Civil War and I say, "This is what they were fleeing from, but on the other hand, people died to make them free. They gave their lives for their beliefs, for what they felt." I use history to find the positive, because I hope things can be changed.

DOCENT 9: I always tried to teach my groups about Benjamin Banneker. I met children who were in eighth grade who didn't know anything about him or about the Civil War. We have to let them know that these people and these experiences are part of our history.

DOCENT 3: I think children can handle anything bad, as long as you let them know at the end: "You have the power to change. The world can be better, and we don't do those things anymore." They leave uplifted, and that's the ending I used in *Mining the Museum* when I talked about the Banneker room. I related it to Martin Luther King and his dream to make a better society.

DOCENT 2: But many people were asking, "Well, can't we bury it?" If you look around the world you can't bury it because it is all over—it never stopped.

NANCY MARTEL: Right after it opened, we had the Los Angeles riots.

JUDY VAN DYKE: I hear such interesting things going on here. I hear people who are saying they wanted the tours to end positively. I hear people saying that these things never change, they are still going on. The Los Angeles riots happened after the exhibit opened. Ethnic cleansing is going on in Bosnia, even as the Holocaust Museum is opening in Washington.

DOCENT 7: And the Irish are still fighting.

JUDY VAN DYKE: Yes, and the Irish are still fighting. I think that there is no right or wrong

answer here. But it is possible to find in Fred's installation all the things we want to see. If we want to see the bad, it's there. If you want to see the good, you could find that, too. It's very interesting that different groups that we took around got such different things from it.

DOCENT 8: I think Fred's message came through loud and clear. I think it was that everyone has to learn to get along together and to understand a little better, and together we can do this.

JUDY VAN DYKE: One day I had a relatively small group, I think twelve to fifteen teachers, some African-American, some white. We got to the Klan hood in the carriage, which for me was the most powerful part of the exhibit. One black man said to me that it was almost humorous. I was blown away. Nobody in any of my other groups had thought it was humorous. And another black man said, "Well, I don't see anything funny about it. To me it's not funny at all. I've had personal experience with the Klan in Louisiana and I can hardly look at this. I am sweating right now, just looking at it." There was more of a general discussion, and a white woman in the group moved on toward the decoys and said, "I think we've been here long enough. I think it's time to move on." And so, in one group, mixed racially, by gender, by age, drawn together just because they were all teachers, I had that range of reactions and responses. One woman was made uncomfortable about it in a defensive way. One man was just overwhelmed with fear and anxiety in seeing it. And one man, I suppose, was doing some kind of denial thing. I don't know. I don't know what was motivating this man. But it was so incredible in one group of twelve people.

LISA CORRIN: Some of you have mentioned how you used your experiences with *Mining the Museum* in your tours of other places in the

museum. Did *Mining the Museum* change the way you give tours, the way in which you relate to white and black children, or the way you talk in the historical society about issues that have to do with African-American history?

DOCENT 3: I recently looked at the Henry Darnall portrait with a group of fourth-graders and asked, "If this were a talking picture, what do you think the African-American child in the picture would say?" One boy said, "Why he's looking at that bird and he's saying, 'I'm going to be free like that bird.'" I never noticed the bird in the picture after twenty tours. Afterward, I used that to get other people to talk about the content of the painting.

JUDY VAN DYKE: I thought what Fred did with the country-life picture was extremely interesting. I wondered if anyone had looked at paintings in the museum and asked their groups, "What would you call this picture if you were going to give it a title?"

DOCENT 2: I have always let the children do the talking in *Mining the Museum*, and I have continued to do this. I asked, "Well, why doesn't that child know where her mother is, like other black children do? Why are those people all laid out in that dollhouse? Why is that man in the middle of all those ducks in that gun case?" I said, "We have a pedestal here and it is empty. What do we do with a pedestal? Why, we put people who are great on it. Okay, so who in your case would you put on a pedestal?" Then, I let them answer for themselves, so they could feel something. I urged them to look at something through their own eyes and see what it really is, not to let someone else tell them what it is. I emphasized that any questions that they asked, and any answers that they put forth, were right.

JUDY VAN DYKE: I think that Fred was trying

to bring pictures to life, to give black people names and a description of who they were. He used drama to bring these things to life, although sometimes in a way that we couldn't justify historically. If you're going to be very literal, you're going to have trouble with that. But the idea of bringing the object to life in some way is so important.

LISA CORRIN: I remember when I went on the very first tour with Fred and the docents at the society, before *Mining the Museum* even opened. One of the arguments that erupted between some of the docents was about the identity of the Maryland Historical Society. Some of them felt emphatically that it was an art museum, and some of them viewed it as a history museum. I've been in traditional historical museums that are run either way; however, often it's as though one precludes the other. For example, if a silver teapot is exhibited as a beautiful object, you aren't encouraged to ask historical questions. Well, Fred's installation does something interesting. He erases the line between history and art. For him, art and history are always knocking up against one another. Perhaps he is saying something very important to the docent's argument, that the institution must see itself as both simultaneously, that these collections exist in a broader context. Yet, *Mining the Museum* happened at a very specific moment in American history and in the history of the museum. I wonder if we went back through the years, or if we went forward thirty years, whether *Mining the Museum* would have had the same impact on the museum community and museum audiences? How has *Mining the Museum* changed your definition of the Maryland Historical Society and its mission? Has it caused you to feel the way you felt before more strongly?

NANCY MARTEL: I think that silver was such a good example of what you are saying. The fact that we always present only beautiful silver objects and we are supposed to admire them and the people that owned them. Now I think that I get it. Why did we admire them so much? So, they bought silver. But they had slaves, and they didn't pay their workers. Leaving that out is rather typical of a historical society.

DOCENT 1: The main issue is to give the object and the people depicted a real identity. The identities were there. All the names were in manuscripts in the archives. When we looked at the inventories we found names, and [after that] they weren't just the slaves in the field. We've got to look at these paintings and say, "This is not just art. This is history."

LISA CORRIN: So many of the audience participation forms stated, "This is what a museum experience should be. Can't you do more of this? Oh, I hate museums, I hate historical societies, but this was wonderful." Why do you think they felt that way? What about the appropriateness of this project for the Maryland Historical Society?

DOCENT 2: Every museum has its own prejudices. No matter what the museum is, no matter what story it is trying to tell. Museums insist, "This is what history is." It started with the Peales, at least in Baltimore. Throughout history you can't stop people from trying to influence other people. That is exactly what we, as docents, are going to do. If you influence them in a positive way that encourages them to think for themselves, I think we're doing a lot more than if we tell them what to think.

DOCENT 2: When you saw the baby carriage and the KKK hood, you couldn't just look at that and say, "This is a KKK hood, this is a baby carriage." When you go to museums, you

MINING THE PROJECT EXPERIENCES

read the labels and you are just being spoon fed. You don't have to think. You are not forced to think. But when you see an exhibit like this, it stirs you. You just can't look at it passively.

LISA CORRIN: And yet, the evening of the American Association of Museums reception, the installation was crowded with professionals who had come to the conference. One older lady, who had been working at a historical museum for many, many years, went up to the case of the decoys. She kept walking around and looking at it for twenty minutes. She seemed so moved. I approached her, and she asked, "Tell me, do you see those plastic stands? I want to know where the museum gets them. I've been searching for that type of display mount for years." She kept saying, "Aren't they wonderful?" I stared at her in disbelief. "All you can see is the plastic holders?" She said, "Yes! Don't the ducks look lighter?"

Let's say your director came to you and asked for your shopping list for the future of the Maryland Historical Society. Based on *Mining the Museum*, is there any advice that you would give him or her?

DOCENT 5: Right off the bat, I gave tours to older people, and most of those people were grandparents, and if they're not grandparents they're certainly old enough to be. I take great pride in the fact that we take seventeen or eighteen thousand children through every year. The Maryland Historical Society is a teaching tool for children. It's not just a repository. I would say to a new director, turn your efforts toward teaching the children. Especially inner-city children.

DOCENT 3: I would say, encourage participatory learning and use multimedia.

DOCENT 1: My recommendations relate to the content of objects and their interconnections.

Obviously we've got to expand the Native American and African-American collections. In the Civil War exhibit there is ample mention of the soldiers who died for our freedom, but it doesn't mention the regiments of blacks who fought. We need to make the Maryland Historical Society accurate.

LISA CORRIN: *Mining the Museum* illustrates that it is not just the objects a museum collects but what is done with them that counts. Would it be unreasonable to say that the current collection of the Maryland Historical Society might be the basis of multiple interpretations of history even if the museum had not one penny to acquire new objects?

JUDY VAN DYKE: I would like to see us do more exhibits that are non-didactic. If you visit the museum on your own, we expect you to get "the story" from labels. The labels and the arrangements in *Mining the Museum* are not just communicating information but also different ways of understanding. I don't think a history museum can afford to take that approach all the time because part of our mission is to tell the facts the way we currently understand them, whatever this generation thinks the facts are. In earlier generations, people were taught about the great men. Now people are more interested in hearing about everyone's stories, and we are hoping this museum will tell the story of more people. I would like to see more exhibits that help other people find their own histories in the objects. But we've also got to be creative and allow people to explore other ideas.

NANCY MARTEL: I don't think that we have encouraged people to respond at a personal level to the museum.

DOCENT 1: In all museums, you might think while you're there, but once you go outside that

MINING THE MUSEUM: AN INSTALLATION BY FRED WILSON

door, you're not thinking. This installation is going to make you think forever. You are never going to close your eyes at night and see another piece of silver that won't make you see those shackles there too.

MINING THE MUSEUM-MINING THE MUSEUM-MINING THE MUSEUM-MINING THE MUSEUM

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

MINING THE MUSEUM-MINING THE MUSEUM-MINING THE MUSEUM-MINING THE MUSEUM
THESE EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS HAVE BEEN CREATED BY THE CURATORS OF THE
CONTEMPORARY AND THE MARYLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

*Education handout installed in elevators at the
Maryland Historical Society, created by project curators for use
throughout the museum during Wilson's exhibition.*

NOTES

¹ The profile of the thirty-nine Maryland Historical Society docents who volunteered for *Mining the Museum* was as follows: thirty-five white and four African-American, thirty-three women and six men, ranging in age between thirty and eighty. The discussion reproduced here included nine women docents, seven white and two African-American. They were chosen on the basis of the diverse points of view they held about the project. The questions were set in advance by the educators of both museums and were intended

to address their feelings before, during, and after the exhibition, as well as their recommendations for the future. Two further discussions with each group of docents were also held so that the curators and educators could consider their insights in the development of future programs.

² The original transcripts of the nearly three-hour discussion have been, by necessity, extensively edited to capture the tone and major points of the docents' comments.