Unsafe Ideas, Public Art, and *E Pluribus Unum*

An Interview with Fred Wilson

MODUPE LABODE

Standing at the symbolic center of Indianapolis, the 1902 Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument is the dominant monument in a city that takes pride in its commemorative sculpture. It is a war memorial, a landmark, a tourist attraction, and on occasion, an oversized Christmas tree. Artist Fred Wilson recently attempted to focus attention on one aspect of the monument—the figure of an African American man, an emancipated slave—through his proposed piece of public art, *E Pluribus Unum* (Out of Many, One).[1] The freed man is part of the ornate "Peace Group" on the monument's west side, and many were unaware of the figure's existence until Wilson's project brought it to their attention.[2] However, once people noticed the figure, a multifaceted controversy slowly built about

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Modupe Labode is Assistant Professor of History and Museum Studies and public scholar of African American history and museums at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis.

[1]Wilson writes that the sculpture's title comes from the motto on the shield behind the original figure on the monument and also references the importance of the African Diaspora. Fred Wilson, "Artist's Statement: *E Pluribus Unum*," n.d. For information about the project see the website established by the Central Indiana Community Foundation, *FredWilsonIndy.Org*, online at http://www.fredwilsonindy.org.

[2]Much of the analysis of the controversy has occurred online; see Tyler Green, *Modern Art Notes* (blog), online at http://blogs.artinfo.com/modernartnotes/category/e-pluribus-unum/; Jennifer Geigel Mikulay, "Speaking of Influence: A Monument's Invisible Man," *Art21* (blog),

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Wilson's proposed artwork. How should slavery be interpreted in the public? How should the feelings of those who felt insulted or wounded by the proposed work be acknowledged? What if people mistook the public art piece for a monument commemorating slavery? Was this an appropriate subject for public art?

Fred Wilson stated that he hoped *E Pluribus Unum* would stimulate a civic conversation about a difficult aspect of U.S. history. The controversy, however, persuaded the Central Indiana Community Foundation (CICF) to terminate Wilson's commission in December 2011. Controversies about public art are a common part of civic life, yet the response of individuals and groups in Indianapolis to *E Pluribus Unum* reveals rarely articulated beliefs and assumptions about civic space, race, and history.

Fred Wilson was born in 1954 and is based in New York City. He has exhibited widely, represented the United States at the Venice Biennale and the Biennial Cairo, and received the MacArthur Foundation's "genius" grant.[3] Wilson is often described as a conceptual artist because his work engages with complex issues including race, nationality, and history. In many of his works, Wilson juxtaposes or repositions familiar objects—such as cookie jars, tombstones, or Greek statuary—in unfamiliar ways to invite viewers to engage with the art, and ask questions about what they thought they knew about history and culture. In 1993, Wilson created *The Spiral of Art History*, an installation for the Indianapolis Museum of Art. When he received the commission from the CICF, he decided to focus on the figure in the Peace Group, which is one of the city's few representations of African Americans in its monuments and public art.[4]

February 22, 2011, online at http://blog.art21.org/2011/02/22/speaking-of-influence-a-monument%E2%80%99s-invisible-man/; Paul Mullins, "Race and Materiality: The *E Pluribus Unum* Project," *Race and Materiality* (blog), May 24, 2012, online at http://paulmullins. wordpress.com/2012/05/12/race-and-materiality-the-e-pluribus-unum-project/; Kirk Savage, "E Pluribus Unum," *Kirk Savage* (blog), online at http://www.kirksavage.pitt.edu/?p=180.

[3]Doro Globus, ed., *Fred Wilson: A Critical Reader* (London, 2011).

[4]In addition to the figure on the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument, other representations of African Americans on Indianapolis's monuments include: Daniel Edwards, *Worker's Memorial Sculpture* (1995), which features an unnamed black man; Greg Perry, designer, and Daniel Edwards, sculptor, *Landmark for Peace Memorial* (1995), which features Martin Luther King Jr.; a monument to Booker T. Washington on the Glick Peace Walk (2010); and the columns dedicated to Madam C.J. Walker and Wes Montgomery on Georgia Street, both erected in 2012.

1902 Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument detail: the "Peace Group." Artist Fred Wilson
based his proposed sculpture, *E Pluribus Unum*, on the figure of the newly
emancipated African American man, seated at bottom right.

Courtesy, Fred Wilson

E Pluribus Unum was commissioned to be part of the public art on
the Indianapolis Cultural Trail (ICT), an ambitious project which began
construction in 2007 and is slated to be completed in 2012.[5] The CICF is
the principal administrator of this bicycle-and-pedestrian path. The
project, which has received widespread local support and national
acclaim, has several goals: to unite neighborhoods divided by busy
streets and urban renewal; to vitalize the urban core through increased
visitation and economic development; and to encourage tourism. Its

A planned memorial to Martin Luther King Jr., which is to be part of the Glick Peace Walk, was
not erected by the time of publication; "Glick Peace Walk," Indianapolis Cultural Trail, online
at http://www.indyculturaltrail.org/Glick-Peace-Walk.html.

[5]For public art on the Indianapolis Cultural Trail, see "Public Art," Indianapolis Cultural Trail,
online at http://www.indyculturaltrail.org/publicart.html.

infrastructure was funded by a mix of public and private money, but the public art found along the way was funded through private donations.

On the monument, the freed man is on his knees, with broken shackles dangling from his outstretched arms, gazing at a goddess symbolizing peace. As art historian Kirk Savage demonstrates in his groundbreaking book *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves*, post-Civil War Americans consistently rejected depictions of emancipation that portrayed African Americans as actively pursuing liberation from slavery. Instead, monuments depicted the emancipated as passive recipients of freedom, or even eliminated representations of African Americans altogether in favor of portraying white emancipators, such as President Abraham Lincoln.[6]

Fred Wilson's proposal for *E Pluribus Unum* made significant changes to the existing figure—such as removing the shackles and having him hold a flag representing the African Diaspora—but the man would have remained similar to the original. Initial plans called for the sculpture to stand on city property in front of the City-County Building, on the northeast corner of Delaware and Washington Streets.

Wilson indicated that he wanted to meet with the Indianapolis community, particularly African Americans, to introduce himself and the art. He spoke at public meetings organized by the CICF and ICT in February 2009 and April 2010. By September 2010, however, disquiet with the proposed sculpture surfaced. A letter to the editor of the *Indianapolis Recorder* by Leroy Robinson both informed many about the planned sculpture and framed their objections to the work. Robinson argued that *E Pluribus Unum* would reinforce racist caricatures of African Americans, such as the lawn jockey, and that the figure itself was an outdated, insulting image.[7]

Some groups, the most prominent of which was Citizens Against the Slave Image, formed specifically to counter this work, while existing organizations like the Concerned Clergy of Indianapolis also joined the opposition. Many of the public spokespeople identified themselves as African American, although people of many races and ethnicities also opposed the work. Several themes emerged in their criticism. The figure

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[6]Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, N.J., 1997).

[7]Leroy Robinson, "Sculpture is Appalling," *Indianapolis Recorder*, September 16, 2010.

on both the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument and *E Pluribus Unum* was usually described as a "slave," and some expressed concern that this prominent artwork would reinforce ideas that slavery represented the most important epoch in African American history. The message of the artwork appeared to be ambiguous, and some believed that, given the paucity of African American images, any monument or artwork featuring African Americans should be unambiguously positive. Observers suggested admirable individuals who should be the subject of the artwork, such as Madam C.J. Walker or a Civil War soldier. The location of the sculpture in front of the City-County Building, which houses many of Marion County's courts, was seen as a mockery of the African Americans who were incarcerated or in shackles as they moved through the judicial system. Some critics conflated or considered irrelevant the difference between a work of art and a monument, in part because of Wilson's artistic practice of referencing familiar sculptural forms. They expressed a concern that viewers could interpret *E Pluribus Unum* as a monument to, or even celebration of, slavery. Others were distressed by the perceived lack of transparency and opportunity for public input in commissioning Wilson and approving of his concept for *E Pluribus Unum*.[8]

In October 2010, the CICF convened a public meeting at Indianapolis's Madame Walker Theatre. More than three hundred people were present and, after Fred Wilson's introductory comments, the meeting became a forum in which some opponents of the sculpture forcefully requested that the project be terminated immediately. The following day, the leadership of the CICF halted *E Pluribus Unum* "until more community dialogue occurred."[9] Little public discussion of the matter took place, however, until July 2011, when Marc Lotter, a spokesman for Mayor Greg Ballard, stated that "the City-County Building was not the

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[8]For example, see Amos Brown, "Raging Emotions and Passions over Black Images on Cultural Trail," *Indianapolis Recorder*, October 1, 2010; Amy Bartner, "Artist's Image for Cultural Trail has Passionate Critics," *Indianapolis Star*, October 17, 2010; "Media Release, Statement Opposing *E Pluribus Unum*, October 19, 2010," online at http://1slave-enough.wix.com/inindy#!__media-release; David Hoppe, "Fred Wilson's 'E Pluribus Unum': Art Worth Arguing About," *Nuvo*, October 29, 2010; Concerned Clergy of Indianapolis, "Not Another Slave Monument in Indy," *Indianapolis Recorder*, February 24, 2011; Michael Saahir and Dona Stokes-Lucas, "Sculpture Doesn't Belong on Public Property," *Indianapolis Star*, August 7, 2011.

[9]Amy Bartner, "Sculptor, Crowd Face Off at Meeting," *Indianapolis Star*, October 20, 2010.

ideal place to move forward with the display."[10] The day after the city made its announcement, Citizens Against the Slave Image held its previously organized rally against placing the artwork on public land.[11] Beginning in October 2011, the CICF convened a series of public meetings about *E Pluribus Unum*, and in December, the foundation terminated its contract with Wilson. At the same time, the CICF announced its intention to work with several members of the community and the Race and Cultural Relations Leadership Network of the Greater Indianapolis Progress Committee to create another public art piece.[12]

The civic controversy sparked by *E Pluribus Unum* included many topics of concern to historians: contemporary understandings of slavery; the relevance of our nation's difficult racial past to the present; the negotiations or allowances that citizens make for those with competing views; the continuing importance of civic symbols and monuments. Those who followed or participated in discussions generated by *E Pluribus Unum* found the experiences variously invigorating, bruising, or disorienting. The interview that follows is an effort to capture one key perspective on this civic conflict—that of the artist. Fred Wilson repeatedly emphasized in his interview that he was not a historian and that he spoke from an outsider's perspective. However, his insight on race, public art, and the work he hoped the sculpture would do in the city adds further complexity to a controversy which eludes easy categorization. I interviewed Fred Wilson, via Skype, in his New York City studio on May 15, 2012. The interview lasted nearly one and one-half hours. The following is a condensed version of that interview, which both Wilson and I have reviewed for accuracy.

Modupe Labode: How were you first approached by the Central Indiana Community Foundation (CICF) about the project that became *E Pluribus Unum?*

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[10]Imam Mikal Saahir, "Is 'E Pluribus Unum' in Indy a myth?" *Indianapolis Recorder*, June 10, 2011; Heather Gillers, "Group Scraps Downtown Site for State Depicting Freed Slave," *Indianapolis Star*, July 30, 2011.

[11]"Citizens Protest Slave Image," *Indianapolis Recorder*, August 5, 2011.

[12]CICF, "Fred Wilson Public Art Project Discontinued," December 13, 2011, online at http://www.indyculturaltrail.org/epluribusunumdiscontinued.html.

Fred Wilson: Mindy Taylor Ross, the public art project manager for the Indianapolis Cultural Trail, called me in 2007. At the time, I did not want to do any more public art. I had done it for years, and while you make some things, some you just propose and they never get built. Public art is often thankless; you spend years working on the project, and if you really look at how much money you've made, it's been like two cents an hour, or two cents a day—or you actually went into hock, because it took so long to work on. When the work finally gets out, it's been so long since you've conceived it, and you've had to make so many compromises, that you've often moved on in your head. Your ideas have changed, and life has changed. By the end, you're putting out something that you might do differently, had you started it now. So I had decided: I'm just not going to make public art for at least a while, or ever again.

Then Mindy came along. When she came to the studio with her husband, Jim, I saw that she really understood what the art world was about—which can be unusual for someone in public art. She was also well versed in what I do and was willing for me to use all my interests and ideas in whatever fashion I wanted. Now, I just work with people who I think are like minded—or at least understand what I do—which means I can do my best in whatever endeavor. It all boils down to interpersonal relationships with the client—the better they are, the better the work is. And so I broke my own rule and said, "Yes." I had been to Indianapolis and had had an exhibition there, so I felt I was not going in cold; I had an image, an idea, which was also important to me, and I could hit the ground running.

And that's how it started. I looked around at the public sites. It was a laudable project. It wasn't going to be hidden away in some corner somewhere. I had a lot of opportunities to choose sites, and other interesting artists were involved. The whole thing seemed like a great idea to me.

ML: Your previous experience in Indianapolis was in 1993, with *The Spiral of Art History* at the Indianapolis Museum of Art. What was that like?

FW: That show was really about the museum, not about Indianapolis. It was about how the museum separates out the various disciplines. They had separated out their galleries by colors, according to particular kinds of work. The spiral consisted of all the gallery colors placed in one room, with the objects that would be in those galleries placed in front of their particular color. And so some interesting adjacencies would happen.

The controversies were minor, given my experiences, but the project raised questions about aesthetics and notions of quality, and, behind the scenes, it highlighted the turf battles between departments within an institution. No one thought it was not a valuable conversation to have in the end; it just wasn't one that people wanted to have during an exhibition. Who has the ultimate authority over different collections? Here I was, coming in and borrowing from different curators' collections and putting all the works in one room. Who has authority over these objects: the contemporary art curator who invited me, or the person whose collection I'm borrowing from? The museum's curators had different ideas about connoisseurship and context, and about what's valued within their collection. Do objects maintain a particular curator's ideas wherever they go, or are other curators able to shift the dialogue? They had never dealt with that before.

But everything worked out fine. In every project I do, there's some little thing that I stumble on because it has never been done before. Within a museum context, it's usually internal; the public doesn't know, and we work it out before the opening. In museums, the director or the chief curator is usually the one who invites me, and the individual curators all have to buy in. Sometimes they buy in because they're buying in, sometimes because they have their own agendas. But sometimes they don't understand what's going to happen. So I've had situations where it comes down to right before the opening that we find out we have a problem. The curators have been trying to be nice, be nice, be nice. And then I put up the exhibition, and they're like, "I can't handle this!" And it blows up—but it gets resolved before the opening.

When something like that happens in a city, it's a far cry from when it's happening in a museum. [Laughter] With *E Pluribus Unum*, I saw an opportunity to meld my studio and museum artistic practice with my interest in public art. When I was there working on the IMA project, I had felt that Indianapolis has this incredible visual culture because of all its monuments—that stood out for me. If the city was a museum, the monuments would be the art in the museum. That was its particular character, and I felt really good about coming back and being able to engage with that. Everything seemed to make sense.

ML: Could you expand a little bit more on your idea of the "public," and what that meant in the case of this project?

FW: My interest in public involvement with art goes back both to the public art pieces I've done and to my museum installations. When museums say they're "for the public," I try to peel back what that means: For what public? What kind of messages are they sending out in their displays? I had worked in museums, been an educator, and I had seen many different sides of that issue. To this day, the issues that underpin my work are based on general cultural knowledge—issues that in some way fly under people's radar. That's what I do. Flip something you think you know so well, and put it in a context in which you learn something new about that subject, and about other subjects. It's because you have a basic understanding of the essential subject that it engages you, brings you in. That goes throughout all my practice.

ML: Obviously, with Indianapolis, people think that they know the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument. It's a Christmas tree, it's a rallying point, it's where people gather. I thought it was interesting that the recent shooting of Trayvon Martin, the Florida teenager, provoked a protest at the monument. Everyone knows that's where you go for a protest. Or to celebrate. When the city hosted the 2012 Super Bowl, the monument was decorated with big Roman letters. Drawing on what you were saying about people thinking they "know" something, will you talk about the absence of African American figures in Indianapolis's memorial culture, and how that came together with your ideas for the figure of the freeman?

FW: When I got to Indianapolis the first time, and we went by the Monument, that figure jumped out at me. While I was at the museum, I got to know at least one African American artist from Indianapolis very well, and through him and his family I saw another side of the city. I felt a definite separation of state culture, city culture, and African American culture—psychologically as well as physically and historically. I knew that the Monument was one of the first things that outsiders see—it represents Indianapolis for a lot of people, certainly for visitors like myself. But I also learned about the large African American community that was absent from my perception downtown. And it seemed to me that there was an analogy to be made between the city's visual culture and reality. That was a strong image and idea for me.

ML: If we could talk a little about *E Pluribus Unum* itself. I felt that because of the nature of the controversy, many of the formal elements of

Wilson beside the "Peace Group," August 2010. The artist and his crew scanned and measured the freed slave figure in order to recreate its dimensions for *E Pluribus Unum*.

Courtesy, Fred Wilson

E Pluribus Unum were not discussed. I wonder if you could say something about your design: the figure of the man, the site itself, the changes you made, and what those mean.

FW: I've been interested for a long time in the history of monuments and the symbolism of African Americans within them. I'm interested in denial—in these visual symbols that we don't see, but that affect our lives. This project gave me an opportunity to shift the meanings and make completely visible what was really going on with the Monument.

First, moving the so-called slave figure out of the context of the others was the major event for me. In a lot of these monuments, the context of an individual figure tells a larger story that people don't realize. He is not with a family; he is alone. He is below the white figures, even though the statue engages with freedom and African Americans. He becomes an image more than a person—a symbol of freedom, of the end

of the Civil War. The other people within that group, on the same side of the monument that he's on, represent Family, Industry, and all these things. You understand that by the clothing they're wearing, but also by their relationships with one another. He is alone, just like Lady Peace above him. They are symbols of large themes; they are not meant to have a name or be a person. I strongly wanted to move him out of that context—which, for me, made him an object rather than a person.

Removing the chains, for me, was an obvious thing, if you were to disengage him from the symbols of slavery. And shifting his stance, so that rather than looking up at someone, he is self-possessed and looking forward. I didn't want to change his clothing or other details to the degree that he was so different from the original that the reference would be too distant. And I thought that perhaps nobody would even notice— maybe someday they might—that it's the same character.

In addition, anything that I would have done to him would have been my projection on him and what his meaning should be for Indianapolis. People thought he should be holding a gun, people thought he should be with a family, he should be in a suit, he should be in a Civil War uniform—they had a lot of different ideas. And I thought, "All these ideas are great, but I'm not going to make those decisions." The fact that everybody was coming up with ideas for how he should be dressed means that people were actively engaging with this historical question—"Who is this man for today, or yesterday?" Artists make things as open questions. I have my thoughts, but I'm asking this question about what's important for Indianapolis today, and there will not be one answer.

What disturbed me about what happened with the discussion was when people began talking about "the community." Well, there are many communities, and it's a very simple act to say "the community." People— both black and white—fall back on these things. Basically, whoever says it is trying to control the conversation, claiming to have a handle on who "the community" is. There will not be only one answer because there are many communities, even within a community there are many points of view. Part of the problem with artwork is that it doesn't have simple answers, and that complexity unnerves people. I might answer some questions, but, for example, if I had put him in a man's suit, it would have been a suit for today. In one hundred years, two hundred years, what would that mean? It would have been there for a long time.

There should be other artworks—or more specifically other monuments, because unlike artworks, monuments usually have a fixed mean-

ing. There should be other works in the city that answer these questions that come from various communities, so the dialogue would go on. You would see more of people's ideas of what African American images represent Indianapolis. To my mind, it wouldn't be just one—there should be many. I wanted to put the proposal out there, to open it up but to make minimal changes. And if I had changed his image entirely, then I would have been saying that that man over there is, or was, a slave. I'm really trying not to say that. I was trying to say that this was created on him, this was put on him, by the environment, by his stance, by the chains, and by the clothing of the other people on the monument in contrast to his. I wanted to take him away from that context, make minimal changes to him—so that you can see that without all that, he is a black man, with the potential and power that we all possess. To me it was very obvious. I didn't realize that the power of the history of that monument—where it is and what it is—trumped for some, its possibility for regeneration, reanimation.

ML: You were in the extraordinary position of having your work attacked—not just critiqued, but people saying it should be taken down. Eventually it was cancelled. What was your understanding of the nature of the protests? Because you're right, there wasn't just one community, there were lots of different voices weighing in.

FW: Initially, I didn't know. When I first unveiled the proposal, there were people who had issues with it—which happens with public art—but I didn't know how deep it was. I had talked about my work to a lot of different people, but I think that there were many who had not really thought about that monument before. Not really. But there were also some who had thought about the Monument quite a bit. It became clear, when I spoke about the project at the Madame Walker Theatre, that this project—how do I put this?—gave some folks an opportunity to talk about their feelings about that particular figure on the Monument, whereas prior to this there was no opportunity. I have been told that for some people the figure itself caused deep pain. I just sort of "channeled" the meaning of the Monument and the image of the man; they seemed to become reference points for race relations in Indianapolis. The sad thing is that all of these issues are put onto the black figure on the Monument, which is always going to be there. Now there won't be this other kind of conversation.

I'm a complete outsider, so please take my comments as just that. I really don't profess to deeply understand Indianapolis, but when I touched on these subjects in the context of the CICF grant, I think many people saw it as something being put on them once again. I think people shut down, because they felt like they had not been involved with the conversation—which, it sounds like to me, from a lot of the people I have spoken to, fell in line with how things are done in Indianapolis, beyond art. So the project itself, at that point, could not be seen; there was no way to have a discussion, because it became emblematic of relations in Indianapolis. Unfortunately, I don't know if that could ever have been sidestepped. Instead of coming towards it, people went into battle mode: "How do we deal with something that we weren't involved in?" They had smaller conversations amongst friends, and came out with an idea of how to deal with it. So, I think the project was swept up in the history of Indianapolis politics and culture—political culture, not art culture.

It's not Mindy's fault—she made a valiant effort to involve people. But it was art, and for a lot of people art is something pretty, not something for which you have to stop everything you're doing and say, "All right, let me see what's going on." People were not necessarily ready—and this is true in every city—to drop everything to look at something that usually is just there and looks nice. I was putting forth a new concept of what an artwork could be, but people were not coming to the table early on because they just thought, "I've got my life, I'm not really involved with art, I'll come to it when I come to it." I did speak to lots of people, but again, I don't know what the foundation's relationship with the various communities is. These are my conjectures—I get the sense that this kind of work that I was making is not something usual for Indianapolis, or actually for most cities, let's face it. Conversations between the art world and various communities, particularly various black communities—it's not a usual path.

I know that Mindy has worked with other black artists and engaged with black communities, and she knew a lot of people involved, but the art world is a different field that very much talks to itself in every city, because it is about aesthetics and it's about art, which the majority of people are not thoroughly involved with. The project was discussed separately, in smaller groups—without my presence—not in art terms, but in terms of the political environment and history of Indianapolis.

I think all this kind of conversation is good, and I didn't want to be put out in front, protecting and pushing for my artwork. I could have

just made the piece, it would have been put there, and then, to everyone's surprise, the fireworks would have happened. But it's not my personality. In hindsight, I don't know what I would have done differently. But at least I would have understood the situation differently. I had thought that perhaps the white community and the newspapers would take this in one direction—because the Monument was a sacred cow—and my voice would be lost in the conversation. So I wanted to make sure that the various black communities at least knew why I was doing it, knew who I was and that I was coming in from the outside. I didn't want who I was to be hijacked by the press and by some folks. And so I put myself out there, so at least the black community would know who I was and so that, if the mainstream community decided to talk about the project in ways that I didn't see it, at least people would know how I saw it.

I was kind of blindsided by what happened, because I thought that I had done my due diligence. Even when I started hearing and seeing at the Madame Walker Theatre meeting that people were not completely convinced, I was doing my best to reach people and talk about what I had done before. I could have done something in that little edge of the city where the Trail meets the historically black community that had been erased by urban development, but I said, "No, I want to do it downtown, the black community owns the downtown, too." In my position, I had the opportunity to do something, to say that I wanted to do it downtown, and that I wanted to deal with this subject in the center of the city, rather than just have a conversation within the black community, as we always have. I had the opportunity and I was going to take it, and let other people, who haven't had as many opportunities, do other projects in the black community. In hindsight, I needed to do more, I needed to make other kinds of links; I was relying on everyone else to organize and to tell me who were the important people that I needed to talk to.

ML: It's a strange position, to ask you to be a mediator and moderator. I'm also hearing a lot of pain.

FW: I couldn't talk about it sooner than this. I really couldn't. I feel fine now, but it was like a death. It wasn't like a cancellation, it was a killing. My father had just died, and this just amplified that. I realize that now, I didn't realize it at the moment. It was rough.

ML: I know that you're moving on with your own practice. But I want-ed to circle back to what you were saying, when we started, about your initial work in museums and how issues get raised and then resolved before the public sees the opening.

FW: Interestingly, there are lots of different issues with museum proj-ects, but as I said, it's an internal process. I'm not uncomfortable with these behind-the-scenes conversations. These are not particularly racial issues, but administrative things that they've never really had to deal with.

ML: Your project raised a huge number of issues which got diverted to talking about the Monument or went into some historical track. Looking back on the controversy, some people have said, "Well, at least we had a conversation." How do you respond to that?

FW: Yes, there was a conversation. But I strongly believe that the artwork would have kept the conversation going, had it been built. That's the thing about art. It creates conversation; it doesn't disappear right away. It allows for more dialogue and for more artwork to fill the gaps and answer the questions that the artwork is asking. Someone has said that museums are safe places for unsafe ideas, and it has been my experience that that's true. Now, the street might not be that way. You choose to go to a muse-um. And within a museum there is space and time for the museum to mediate the experience of art, and for the visitors to grapple with and enjoy art's various meanings. With public art, it just takes one person to have a problem with something—because it is their street, their city—and so it is impossible to have a conversation with everybody.

Had the sculpture been built, it would have been a way to say that these questions are important and that we will continue to try to solve these issues, which are essentially civic issues. And of course, I believe that the sculpture was a positive sculpture. Its setting was ideal. The backdrop was sort of a bland building, perfect for artwork. And as it unfolded for me what this building was, it didn't diminish my sculpture; its significance amplified. The courts were there, and so many black men go through this building. I saw my sculpture as a positive story-line—initially a sculptural representation of a nineteenth-century for-mer slave changed into a twenty-first-century man representing the African Diaspora. Its location coincidentally revealed the connection between slavery and incarceration—it's so obvious! It was not my

3-D rendering of *E Pluribus Unum*. Wilson's plans called for the sculptured
figure to hold a flag representing the nations of the African Diaspora.

Courtesy, Fred Wilson

original intent, but there might have been rallies in front of my sculp-
ture, right at the seat of power. Perhaps it was the irony of the thing.
Irony is a difficult thing in art. If you don't see the irony and you view it
without the irony it can become exactly what you hate.

I just didn't have foresight to have conversations about how positive,
how focused this whole thing would have been: it's a lost opportunity to
speak truth to power. But then I didn't want to speak in those terms; I
wanted people to come to these issues on their own—or not. I have said it
many times, I am not from Indianapolis, I don't pretend to speak for any-
one. My artwork needs to inspire and get taken in whichever direction
those that live with it see fit. Like any artwork, it first has to exist and be
lived with for its various meanings to unfold. The beauty of public art is
that time plays a part in its maturation. Its meaning shifts and changes
over time, and with each generation. The whole notion of transforming
the nineteenth-century sculpture was not happening for some people who
would see it as one thing and could not get beyond it. Spending money on
it, moving it, was just an idea that made no sense to them.

I see now that the CICF plans to give money for another monument, but I bet that'll be it. I highly doubt that the city is going to take a risk and do a lot of other monuments, because it is so difficult to raise money for these kinds of things. Someone said to me at one of the meetings, "This is the only money we're going to get and they're remaking the sculpture." Well, perhaps it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Had this gone up, had it been used and become a part of the city, it would have promoted the idea that sculptures can create connections to the city. There should be a statue of Madam C. J. Walker on the State House lawn with all those men—specifically that lawn, because the next public monuments should have been to people who are important to the city, and be in an important place. A lot of things could have happened, but are never going to happen, because it takes a lot of effort, energy, collaboration, and joint goodwill. Now you're putting a Band-Aid on it, and it can go away again. To me, that's the sad part. Everyone will feel that we have a sculpture, the city will feel that they've made amends, and there won't be the energy to do anything else—it's too scary now.

ML: In the run-up to the 2012 Super Bowl, the Super Bowl Host Committee proposed another sort of monument: a small alley with columns devoted to great Hoosiers. And they have one for Madam Walker. But so far the big one is to John Wooden, the basketball coach. These were people everyone could agree on. There's Tecumseh, the Native American leader, and other people, too. But it's very modest.

FW: Still, it's a positive thing. It would be spectacular if there were some movement afoot to do permanent projects that have aesthetic value and power. Call me a fatalist, but I doubt that the political will exists to do something great. We'll see how important it ends up being over time.

ML: So where is *E Pluribus Unum* for you now? You came up with this idea quite some time ago, and then the project was killed. Do you know if you're going to do anything similar?

FW: It was very site-specific to Indianapolis. I have no intention to rebuild it somewhere else, although I do have other ideas in which that sculpture could play a part: It would be a huge project involving a display of 3-D reproductions of sculptures of African Americans from public monuments around the country, in what I view as some kind of dialogue. But that's a big project that I don't have any funding for.

I'm very much about context, and *E Pluribus Unum* doesn't make sense elsewhere. Everything else that I would make out of this project proposal would be *in memoriam*. I'm thinking at some point of making the flag, a full-scale flag, just to have that. And then also making one that is folded up, the kind they give to widows, and placed in a glass case. That, to me, would be the memorial to the sculpture and to the idea. There are lots of other things for me to do, so I don't dwell on this. But I do want to give it some closure, so that I don't feel that I'm under that cloud, that sadness about it.

ML: For me, watching and going to these events has been very—usually people use the term "transformative" in a positive way—but I'll just say transformative. It's made me think a lot about race and place and what type of civic dialogue we can have in this country. One of the things that has intrigued but also distressed me is how difficult it has been to have a discussion. Because while I think what happened here was specific to Indianapolis, it also can't be separated from the larger political and historical moment.

FW: I feel bad for all the project's supporters in Indianapolis. I don't live there, I'm away. I can focus on other things. I feel that we were all together in this, and now it's gone, and the whole conversation has been truncated. To everybody who was behind it, engaged with it, I want to say, "Thank you, so much. I could not have made it without you and without all the supportive people with whom I could have a dialogue." I know that reasonable people are thinking about this project and about public art beyond the political.

Some of the local journalists were very helpful in this regard.[13] For me the legacy of slavery was kind of an obvious idea, but someone needed to state it. It's interesting that I wasn't thinking about slavery, specifically—it was a jumping-off point for the whole notion of race and the city—but reaction to the project came down to a basic notion about our relationship with slavery that still had not been spoken aloud, obviously. I thought that since the '70s we had all come to terms with these ideas, but apparently not. The word "slave"—we're not slaves, and our ances-

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[13]See for example, Carlton Waterhouse, "Beyond Guilt and Shame," *Indianapolis Star*, August 19, 2011.

tors were not slaves meaning "objects," meaning a "vocation," they were "enslaved," it's something put on us—but the shame brought on by that word still exists, strongly. It had a particular tenor in Indianapolis, but I don't see it as only an Indianapolis issue. It could jump off in a lot of cities, if done in their particular environment. I think that in Indianapolis, there were certain histories and issues that made it go the direction it went. But there could have been a comparable dialogue in many cities.

ML: I really appreciate your time. There are some here who are trying to keep a conversation going. We have funding for a symposium about art, race, and public space, which we plan to convene at IUPUI in January 2013.

FW: I'm glad that you and others want to continue the conversation. It did bring up a lot of issues. It's worth it not to just drop it again.

ML: Or let it go underground.

FW: That's right. Or let it go underground.