

# Activism and Preservation

## Fred Wilson's *E Pluribus Unum*

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The variety of perspectives that people have brought to Fred Wilson's proposed sculpture *E Pluribus Unum* sustains William Faulkner's adage, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."<sup>1</sup> This truth is particularly poignant as we discuss the image of a freed slave during the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. What follows is my own perspective on Wilson's unrealized work: what the cancellation of the commission means within the context of black visibility at our current moment of race relations in America; and what warnings the cancellation may offer for the future of public art. I am particularly interested in thinking about activism and preservation as they have been variously interpreted by Wilson, by the ad hoc group Citizens Against the Slave Image (CASI), and by the organizations involved in constructing the Indianapolis Cultural Trail.

Although I am not sure if Fred Wilson considers himself an activist, I certainly do. In fact, I think that all black artists must be. As image

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<sup>1</sup>William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (1950; New York, 2011), 73.

makers, each fights the good fight to be visible, acknowledged, and even understood. As a viewer and art historian, I find Wilson's repositionings brilliantly astute and nuanced in mobilizing what we already see in everyday life. Wilson asks us, his viewers, to participate in making meaning of his art by thinking about and reconsidering what we know and what we see. Through his ability both to activate our everyday surroundings and to compel viewers to act, Fred Wilson is indeed an activist.

I also see the members of CASI as activists. These men and women organized around the common and immediate goal of preventing Wilson's *E Pluribus Unum* from being created and installed for the public in downtown Indianapolis. Gathering for what they termed an "anti-slave rally," they picketed in front of the state capitol to bring public awareness to their concerns. They also released a statement clearly articulating their position regarding the sculpture, and invited art historian Kirk Savage to speak about the Soldiers and Sailors Monument.<sup>2</sup> While this kind of emergency activist group is not unprecedented in the history of African Americans' engagement with the mainstream art world, theirs is the only case I have found of a group of people who successfully prevented the civically approved execution of an artist's work.<sup>3</sup>

The original State Soldiers and Sailors Monument, designed in the neoclassical style characteristic of late nineteenth-century American sculpture, commemorates American military conflicts through the Spanish-American War. The monument features sculptural groupings on both its east and west sides—one depicting war and the other peace. Wilson's design for his commission focused on the monument's single black man, who is neither a soldier nor sailor, on the peace side of the monument. The man sits at the feet of an allegorical figure of Victory or Liberty, mouth parted, one arm raised clutching the chain of his manacle. He grips the edge of the platform to maintain his place and support the weight of his body. Using Indiana limestone, Wilson proposed to sculpt a replica of the

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<sup>2</sup>See CASI's statement at <http://1slave-enough.wix.com/inindy>.

<sup>3</sup>Benny Andrews co-founded the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition in 1969, which protested the exclusion of black artists in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition, *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America*. In 1971, Faith Ringgold co-founded the organization Where We At (WWA) to protest the absence of women in mainstream art galleries and museums. In a more recent example of organization and activism, African American women artists Betye Saar and Howardena Pindell began a campaign in 1997 against mainstream museums for exhibiting art by African American artist Kara Walker, on the grounds that Walker was perpetuating racial stereotypes in her fantasy images of slavery. See Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham, N.C., 2004). Although these examples provide a precedent for black protest, none of them are identical to the discourse around Wilson's work in Indianapolis.



With his proposed project, *E Pluribus Unum*, sculptor and activist Fred Wilson sought to create a new image of the freedman that appears on the original Soldiers and Sailors Monument in Indianapolis.

Courtesy, Fred Wilson

freedman, sitting up without his chains, looking and reaching forward instead of trying to engage with the allegorical figure that, in the original ensemble, hovers over him, ignoring his upward gaze.

I read Wilson's proposed work as a Sankofa image, a symbol—traditionally depicted as a bird that looks over its back toward what has passed—from the Akan and Asante people of Ghana and the Ivory Coast, that means “You can undo or correct your mistakes from the past.” *E Pluribus Unum* embodies this desire to embrace black history in order to produce a knowledgeable future. Re-presented separately from the group of figures in the monument, Wilson's freedman would sit alone,



Wilson's re-imagined likeness of the freedman figure in *E Pluribus Unum*, now isolated from the other figures on the Soldiers and Sailors Monument, has lost the manacles of slavery and extends a flag representing the countries of the African Diaspora.

Courtesy, Fred Wilson

holding a flag representing the countries of the African Diaspora. In this new position, the freedman would therefore be associated with a much larger group of people who are part of his past, but whom he also seems to signal through the raising of the flag. This gesture lends itself to different interpretations. He could, for instance, be telling Africans to join him in the United States. Alternately, he might be warning other Africans not to make the journey, as if to suggest that true freedom and equality have yet to be realized.

The phrase *E Pluribus Unum* ("Out of Many, One"), engraved on a shield beside the cheek of the freedman in Wilson's monument, is itself subject to multiple interpretations. It might refer to the man as one freed slave of many—a human type who stands in for others like him. However, in Wilson's proposed sculpture the phrase takes on another significance. The phrase, stamped on all U.S. coinage since the passage of the Fourth Coinage Act of 1873, was a national declaration of unity in diversity. Wil-

son's proposed flag brings the promise of unity back to the phrase, and asks viewers to contemplate the hope of strength in numbers for blacks in Indianapolis and throughout the Diaspora.

Some CASI members objected to the fact that Wilson's freedman was not wearing shoes or a shirt. My curiosity about this viewpoint led me to a few conclusions. First, CASI saw nothing affirming in a new representation of the moment of emancipation. Second, the group's members preferred the freedman's current invisibility in the Soldiers and Sailors Monument to the prospect of drawing attention to his struggle. Third, the anger generated by *E Pluribus Unum* was based partly on fear that the work would arouse unresolved racial issues that date back to slavery. The anger also suggested a strong desire for local black self-representation. The group's concerns, as I understand them, were about wanting a *new* black image without reference to slavery and emancipation. The selection of Wilson, an artist and activist, offered an opportunity to address the demeaning attitudes toward blacks that have been monumentalized and embedded in the city's public identity since the monument's dedication in 1902. If the rejection of Wilson's sculpture indicates the local community's desire for a voice in civic decisions about representations of black Indianapolis, then the cancellation can be seen as the result of a long history of poor race relations and dissatisfaction with black representation that did not begin or end with the city's plan for a cultural trail, where the monument was to have stood.

Because Wilson's design represents multiple time periods simultaneously, *E Pluribus Unum* seems to have inspired fear about how black Americans would be interpreted in the present day. Would the sculpture have been seen as displaying an enslaved past, an African present, and the hope of a great pan-Africanist future? Would it represent black Americans in 1865, in 1902, or in the twenty-first century? How would viewers be able to tell the difference between those moments in black American life? Indeed, if one holds on to the hope that the passing of time equals social progress, it is often hard to tell what age we live in. While social gains have doubtless been made since 1865 and 1902, a recent Associated Press poll shows that the majority of Americans harbor racist attitudes against black Americans, and that this majority has increased since we elected our first black president.<sup>4</sup> Hate crimes based on race, as well as on sexuality

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<sup>4</sup> Greg Mitchell, "AP Poll Finds 56 Percent Harbor 'Anti-Black' Views, Media Turn Page," *The Nation*, October 29, 2012, <http://www.thenation.com/blog/170884/ap-poll-finds-56-percent-harbor-anti-black-views-media-turn-page#>.

and religion, have increased since 2008. A day before the last presidential election, an effigy of President Obama was symbolically lynched from the roof of a gas station in Gloucester, Virginia.<sup>5</sup> Blackface-themed parties continue to take place on college campuses across the nation.<sup>6</sup> We are currently experiencing a backlash against multicultural gestures of progress as soon as they are made. What gains we have made toward racial and sexual equality have proven tenuous at best.

*E Pluribus Unum* would have forced such comparisons of black freedom and success between 1865 and 2008. While multiculturalist liberals embraced the notion that Obama's election revealed the obvious progress of black Americans, the project's critics seem to have realized that social change has been far from adequate. Could we imagine Wilson's freedman as our black president, grasping the edge of the national platform to get a better view of what lies before him? Or would such an analogy simply reveal the rhetorical idealism of the American dream? The cancellation of the work preempted these questions, as well as many others, from being asked through public art.

The opposition to *E Pluribus Unum* can be considered a kind of act of preservation—preservation of the acceptance of the freedman in the original Soldiers and Sailors Monument without commentary or protest. I have not come across any recent evidence of public criticism of the freedman figure in the existing monument, only criticism of Wilson's proposal to re-envision it. Had it been built, however, *E Pluribus Unum* might have preserved something altogether different: the dissatisfaction with which some critics greeted the monumental representation of the subservient freedman in the Soldiers and Sailors Monument. In 1916, the art critic Freeman Henry Morris Murray pointed out the irony in the location of the freed slave on the peace, rather than the war, side of the monument, and recognized the absence of black men and women in the commemoration of the fight for freedom. "Awake," Murray wrote to the sculptural freedman. "You deserve a place at Liberty's side, not at her feet. Assist her soberly to hold up the Flag, while others rejoice."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Charita Marsh, "Hanging Obama Doll Angers North Carolina, Hampton Roads Residents," November 3, 2012, <http://wtkr.com/2012/11/03/hanging-obama-doll-angers-north-carolina-hampton-roads-residents/>.

<sup>6</sup>Lisa Brenner, "UCI Asian-American Fraternity's Blackface Video Surfaces, Sparks Outrage," 89.3 KPCC: Southern California Public Radio. See video at <http://www.scpr.org/blogs/news/2013/04/25/13453/uci-asian-american-fraternity-s-blackface-video-su/>.

<sup>7</sup>Freeman Henry Morris Murray, *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture: A Study in Interpretation* (Washington, D.C., 1916), 128.

If the *E Pluribus Unum* controversy imparts any lasting lesson, it is that the burden of representing racial difference is alive and well. Because we have so few representations of African Americans—and all people of color—in public art, initiatives for more representation are often embattled. There are not enough representations of who we are to hint at our diversity. Perhaps the prominence of the public discourse that surrounded *E Pluribus Unum* will encourage more artist-activists to involve themselves in representing black life in the arts. Hopefully their work will bring us closer to understanding the complexity of racial representation in the arts and the depth of unresolved social issues in this young century.

