

# mining the museum fred wilson

Mining the Museum Fred Wilson: Unveiling Hidden Narratives in Museum Spaces

mining the museum fred wilson is more than just an art exhibition; it is a groundbreaking project that challenges how we perceive and interpret history, culture, and representation within museum walls. Created by artist Fred Wilson in 1992, this installation at the Maryland Historical Society radically reimagined the museum experience by recontextualizing objects in ways that exposed overlooked stories and questioned institutional narratives. For anyone interested in museum studies, contemporary art, or cultural critique, “Mining the Museum” offers a compelling case study in how art can disrupt tradition and provoke critical thinking.

## The Genesis of Mining the Museum Fred Wilson

Fred Wilson, an African American conceptual artist, is renowned for his ability to use display techniques to interrogate historical and cultural assumptions. “Mining the Museum” was commissioned by the Maryland Historical Society, a repository traditionally focused on celebrating American history with a Eurocentric lens. Wilson’s task was to curate an exhibition using the museum’s own collection, but with a twist: instead of showcasing objects in their usual, unchallenged contexts, he rearranged them to reveal hidden histories and racial injustices.

The title itself, “Mining the Museum,” metaphorically suggests digging beneath the surface to uncover what has been buried or erased. Wilson’s approach was to mine the museum’s collection not just for artifacts but for the stories and silences that surrounded them. This process revealed how museums, often seen as neutral spaces, can actually perpetuate selective histories.

# Fred Wilson's Innovative Use of Display Techniques

One of the most striking aspects of “Mining the Museum” is Wilson’s use of display strategies to subvert traditional museum narratives. Instead of simply presenting objects with straightforward captions, he grouped artifacts in ways that forced viewers to reconsider their meanings.

## Juxtaposition as a Tool for Critique

Wilson famously paired objects that highlighted racial tensions and historical contradictions. For example, he displayed ornate silverware alongside slave shackles, reminding visitors that the wealth and refinement represented by the silver were often built on the backs of enslaved people. This kind of juxtaposition creates a dialogue between the objects, prompting viewers to question the sanitized versions of history often presented in museums.

## Empty Pedestals and Negative Space

Another powerful technique Wilson employed was the use of empty pedestals and empty frames, symbolizing the absence or erasure of marginalized groups from mainstream historical narratives. These voids invited visitors to reflect on who and what is missing from the museum’s collections, encouraging a more critical engagement with the institution itself.

## Impact on Museum Practices and Cultural Discourse

“Mining the Museum Fred Wilson” didn’t just shake up one institution; it sparked a broader conversation about museums’ roles in society. Since the exhibition, many museums have begun re-evaluating how they present their collections, striving to include diverse perspectives that reflect the

complexities of history.

## **Encouraging Inclusive Storytelling**

Wilson's project underscored the importance of representing multiple narratives, especially those of marginalized communities. His work has inspired curators and educators to seek out and showcase stories that challenge dominant cultural paradigms, making museums more inclusive spaces that acknowledge historical injustices.

## **Influencing Contemporary Artists and Curators**

The exhibition also influenced a generation of artists and curators who use institutional critique as a form of activism. By demonstrating how display choices can alter meaning, Wilson opened the door for others to use museums as platforms for social commentary and change.

## **Exploring the Themes Behind Mining the Museum Fred Wilson**

At its core, "Mining the Museum" grapples with themes of race, power, memory, and representation. Understanding these themes can enrich the visitor's experience and appreciation of the work.

## **Race and Historical Memory**

Wilson confronts the ways in which museums have historically marginalized African American histories and contributions. By bringing objects related to slavery and systemic racism into view, he challenges visitors to confront uncomfortable truths about America's past.

## Power and Institutional Authority

The exhibition also critiques the authority museums wield in shaping collective memory. Museums have the power to decide which stories are told and which are omitted, influencing public understanding of history. Wilson's work exposes this power dynamic and calls for transparency and accountability.

## The Role of Material Culture

Objects are not neutral; they carry meanings shaped by social and historical contexts. Wilson's recontextualization of material culture reveals how artifacts can be used to tell different stories depending on how they are displayed.

## Tips for Experiencing Mining the Museum Fred Wilson and Similar Exhibits

If you have the chance to visit "Mining the Museum" or engage with similar exhibitions, here are some tips to deepen your experience:

- **Take your time:** Observe how Wilson places objects and consider the relationships between them.
- **Read labels carefully:** The captions often provide crucial context that challenges conventional interpretations.
- **Reflect on absences:** Notice what is not displayed or what is represented by empty frames or

pedestals.

- **Engage critically:** Ask yourself what stories are being told and whose voices might be missing.
- **Explore related literature:** Reading about institutional critique and museum studies can enhance your understanding.

## The Legacy of Mining the Museum Fred Wilson in Contemporary Art

Fred Wilson's "Mining the Museum" remains a seminal work in the field of institutional critique and contemporary art. Its legacy can be seen in ongoing efforts to diversify museum collections and reinterpret historical narratives. The exhibition has paved the way for artists who seek to challenge cultural orthodoxies and use museums as sites of resistance and dialogue.

Today, many museums adopt more inclusive practices, offering exhibitions that examine difficult histories and amplify marginalized voices. Wilson's work is a reminder that art is not just about aesthetics but can be a powerful tool for social change.

By exploring "Mining the Museum Fred Wilson," viewers are invited to reconsider the museum not simply as a space of preservation but as a dynamic arena where history, memory, and identity are actively constructed and contested. This perspective encourages visitors to engage museums with curiosity, skepticism, and empathy—qualities essential for a deeper understanding of our shared past and present.

# Frequently Asked Questions

## What is 'Mining the Museum' by Fred Wilson?

'Mining the Museum' is a groundbreaking 1992 art installation by Fred Wilson that critically reinterprets the collections of the Maryland Historical Society by rearranging artifacts to reveal hidden racial and cultural histories.

## Who is Fred Wilson?

Fred Wilson is an African American artist known for his conceptual art and installations that challenge historical narratives and museum representations, notably through his work 'Mining the Museum.'

## What was the main goal of 'Mining the Museum'?

The main goal of 'Mining the Museum' was to expose and critique the biases and omissions in museum displays, particularly regarding race, history, and representation, by recontextualizing artifacts.

## How did Fred Wilson arrange the artifacts in 'Mining the Museum'?

Wilson rearranged existing artifacts from the Maryland Historical Society in unconventional groupings, pairing objects to highlight racial stereotypes, historical injustices, and ignored narratives.

## What themes does 'Mining the Museum' explore?

The installation explores themes of race, history, power dynamics, cultural memory, and the role of museums in shaping public understanding.

## Why is 'Mining the Museum' considered influential in contemporary art?

It is influential because it challenged traditional museum practices, encouraging institutions to confront their own histories and biases, and inspired a new wave of socially engaged art.

## **Where was 'Mining the Museum' first exhibited?**

'Mining the Museum' was first exhibited at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore in 1992.

## **What impact did 'Mining the Museum' have on museum curation?**

The project prompted museums to reconsider how they present collections, leading to more inclusive and critical approaches to curation and interpretation.

## **Can you give an example of a notable installation from 'Mining the Museum'?**

One notable installation involved placing slave shackles alongside fine silverware, creating a powerful commentary on the contradictions in American history and wealth.

## **Is 'Mining the Museum' still relevant today?**

Yes, it remains relevant as it addresses ongoing conversations about representation, historical narratives, and social justice within cultural institutions.

## **Additional Resources**

Mining the Museum Fred Wilson: An Analytical Exploration of Curatorial Critique and Cultural Dialogue

mining the museum fred wilson is not merely an exhibition title; it represents a pivotal moment in contemporary museum practice and critical art discourse. Conceived and executed by African-American artist Fred Wilson in 1992 at the Maryland Historical Society, "Mining the Museum" challenged traditional narratives within museum spaces by interrogating the ways history is curated, displayed, and interpreted. By recontextualizing objects and highlighting the often-unseen racial and cultural biases embedded in institutional collections, Wilson's work remains a touchstone for conversations about representation, memory, and power in cultural institutions.

# Context and Conceptual Framework of Mining the Museum

## Fred Wilson

At its core, "Mining the Museum Fred Wilson" is a curatorial intervention that exposes the silences and omissions within the historical storytelling of museums. Wilson, trained as a sculptor and conceptual artist, approached the Maryland Historical Society's collection not through the creation of new objects but through the strategic rearrangement of existing artifacts. The project's title metaphorically suggests the act of extracting hidden or overlooked "gems" from the museum's vast holdings, mining beneath the surface to reveal alternative histories.

Wilson's methodology involved pairing objects that, when placed side by side, created jarring or thought-provoking juxtapositions. He highlighted how museums often sanitize or whitewash histories, particularly those involving race, slavery, and colonialism. For example, one of the exhibition's most iconic installations, "Metalwork," paired ornate silverware with slave shackles, forcing viewers to confront the uncomfortable reality of wealth and refinement built on the exploitation of enslaved people.

## Recontextualization as a Curatorial Strategy

Mining the Museum Fred Wilson exemplifies how recontextualization serves as an effective curatorial strategy to challenge dominant historical narratives. By placing objects in unexpected dialogues, Wilson destabilized the presumed neutrality of museum displays and underscored the subjectivity inherent in curating history.

This approach also invited visitors to critically assess the museum as an institution. Rather than presenting a seamless narrative, Wilson's exhibition highlighted fractures and contradictions, encouraging a more nuanced understanding of American history and culture. His work anticipated broader shifts in museology toward inclusivity, transparency, and reflexivity.



# Impact on Museum Practices and Cultural Discourse

Since its debut, "Mining the Museum Fred Wilson" has had a significant influence on both museum practices and cultural discourse surrounding representation and institutional critique. The exhibition foregrounded the need for museums to examine their own complicity in maintaining exclusionary narratives and to embrace more critical and inclusive curatorial models.

Wilson's work has been widely studied in museum studies programs and has inspired subsequent exhibitions and projects that interrogate power dynamics within cultural institutions. His intervention underscored that museums are not neutral spaces but are imbued with cultural politics that shape collective memory.

## Comparisons with Other Institutional Critiques

Mining the Museum Fred Wilson can be contextualized alongside other influential institutional critiques in contemporary art and museology. For example, Hans Haacke's politically charged installations and Andrea Fraser's performative works similarly challenge museum authority and question the socio-political frameworks that underpin cultural institutions.

However, Wilson's approach is distinct in its subtlety and use of the museum's own collection as a medium. Rather than creating entirely new works, he mined existing artifacts, thereby making visible the latent biases and histories embedded within the museum itself. This tactic of using the institution's own resources to critique it from within has been particularly influential and has opened pathways for artists and curators to explore institutional self-reflexivity.

## Key Features of Mining the Museum Fred Wilson

- **Use of Juxtaposition:** Wilson strategically pairs objects to create new, often unsettling meanings.
- **Highlighting Racial and Colonial Histories:** The exhibition foregrounds marginalized narratives, especially those related to slavery and racial injustice.
- **Engagement with Institutional Critique:** The work interrogates the museum's role in shaping public memory and identity.
- **Minimal Alteration of Objects:** Wilson does not modify artifacts but repositions them to challenge viewers' perceptions.
- **Visitor Interaction:** The exhibition encourages critical engagement and reflection rather than passive consumption.

## Pros and Cons of Wilson's Approach

While *Mining the Museum* by Fred Wilson has been widely lauded for its innovative curatorial critique, it is important to acknowledge both its strengths and limitations.

### Pros:

- Effectively exposes institutional biases and silences.
- Encourages critical thinking among museum visitors.
- Uses existing collections creatively, requiring no new acquisitions.
- Has a lasting impact on museology and cultural discourse.

## Cons:

- Its subtlety may be lost on visitors unfamiliar with institutional critique.
- Relies heavily on the museum's existing collection, which may limit the scope of narratives presented.
- Some critics argue it disrupts rather than reconstructs narratives, potentially leaving unresolved tensions.

## Legacy and Continued Relevance

More than three decades after its debut, *Mining the Museum* Fred Wilson remains a seminal work that continues to resonate in discussions about race, history, and representation in museums worldwide. The exhibition's pioneering interrogation of how objects are displayed and interpreted has become increasingly relevant in the context of debates over decolonization of museums and calls for greater diversity and equity in cultural institutions.

Wilson's work has inspired a new generation of artists and curators to adopt more critical and inclusive approaches to exhibition-making. Museums today increasingly acknowledge the importance of transparency about their collections' histories and the need to present multifaceted narratives that reflect a broader spectrum of experiences.

In an era when museums face heightened scrutiny over colonial legacies and cultural appropriation, the principles embodied by *Mining the Museum* Fred Wilson serve as a guiding framework for institutional reflection and reform. It challenges museums to not only preserve history but also to actively engage with its complexities, contradictions, and contested meanings.

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Mining the Museum Fred Wilson stands as a powerful example of how art and curatorial practice can intersect to provoke meaningful dialogue about history, identity, and power. By mining the depths of the museum's collection and exposing its silences, Fred Wilson invites us to reconsider the stories we tell and the ways we choose to remember.

## **Mining The Museum Fred Wilson**

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**mining the museum fred wilson: Mining the Museum** Ralph Sporay, 2017 Mining the Museum Exhibition was created by Fred Wilson and ran at the Maryland Historical Society from April 1992 to February 1993. The exhibition addressed exclusions that museums have of African American and Native American artifacts, and their historical contributions. The film takes an in-depth look at the exhibition and how it unfolded from those that were directly involved in its creation. An examination from its conception to its execution are emphasized. A comprehensive look back in time by the creators and the general public is presented through memory and archived material.

**mining the museum fred wilson: Museum Frictions** Ivan Karp, 2006-12-07 This third volume in a bestselling series on culture, society, and museums examines the effects of globalization on contemporary museum, heritage, and exhibition practices.

**mining the museum fred wilson: The Participatory Museum** Nina Simon, 2010 Offers a practical guide to working with community members and visitors to make cultural institutions more dynamic, relevant, essential places. Simon weaves together innovative design techniques and case studies to make a powerful case for participatory practice. --From publisher description.

**mining the museum fred wilson: Slaves and Other Objects** Page duBois, 2003-09-01 Page duBois, a classicist known for her daring and originality, turns in this new book to one of the most troubling subjects in the study of antiquity: the indispensability of slaves in ancient Greece. DuBois argues that every object and text in the world of ancient Greece bears the marks of slavery and the need to reiterate the distinction between slave and free. And yet the ubiquity of slaves in ancient

societies has been overlooked by scholars who idealize antiquity, misconstrued by those who view slavery through the lens of race, and obscured by the split between historical and philological approaches to the classics. DuBois begins her study by exploring the material culture of slavery, including how most museum exhibits erase the presence of slaves in the classical world. Shifting her focus to literature, she considers the place of slaves in Plato's *Meno*, Aristotle's *Politics*, Aesop's *Fables*, Aristophanes' *Wasps*, and Euripides' *Orestes*. She contends throughout that portraying the difference between slave and free as natural was pivotal to Greek concepts of selfhood and political freedom, and that scholars who idealize such concepts too often fail to recognize the role that slavery played in their articulation. Opening new lines of inquiry into ancient culture, *Slaves and Other Objects* will enlighten classicists and historians alike.

**mining the museum fred wilson: The Museum as Muse** Kynaston McShine, 1999 Published on the occasion of the exhibition of the same name held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 14 - June 1, 1999.

**mining the museum fred wilson: Bound to Appear** Huey Copeland, 2013-10-28 A smart account of a defining moment in African American contemporary art. The early 1990s were a game changer for black artists. Many rose prominently to lead the field of advanced art more generally--artists like Glenn Ligon, Renee Green, Fred Wilson, Lorna Simpson and others. It was in the early 1990s when African American artists began to produce installation and conceptual work, where previously, as an identity group, they had focused on figurative painting and craft work. Now, suddenly, artists were producing site specific installations, sound art, performance, and readymades that sought to immerse the viewer in environments that provoked the experience of slavery and raised awareness of the constructedness of blackness in this country.

**mining the museum fred wilson: Curious Lessons in the Museum** Claire Robins, 2016-05-13 Amongst recent contemporary art and museological publications, there have been relatively few which direct attention to the distinct contributions that twentieth and twenty-first century artists have made to gallery and museum interpretation practices. There are fewer still that recognise the pedagogic potential of interventionist artworks in galleries and museums. This book fills that gap and demonstrates how artists have been making curious but, none-the-less, useful contributions to museum education and curation for some time. Claire Robins investigates in depth the phenomenon of artists' interventions in museums and examines their pedagogic implications. She also brings to light and seeks to resolve many of the contradictions surrounding artists' interventions, where on the one hand contemporary artists have been accused of alienating audiences and, on the other, appear to have played a significant role in orchestrating positive developments to the way that learning is defined and configured in museums. She examines the disruptive and parodic strategies that artists have employed, and argues for that they can be understood as part of a move to re-establish the museum as a discursive forum. This valuable book will be essential reading for students and scholars of museum studies, as well as art and cultural studies.

**mining the museum fred wilson: The Postcolonial Museum** Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona, 2016-02-17 This book examines how we can conceive of a 'postcolonial museum' in the contemporary epoch of mass migrations, the internet and digital technologies. The authors consider the museum space, practices and institutions in the light of repressed histories, sounds, voices, images, memories, bodies, expression and cultures. Focusing on the transformation of museums as cultural spaces, rather than physical places, is to propose a living archive formed through creation, participation, production and innovation. The aim is to propose a critical assessment of the museum in the light of those transcultural and global migratory movements that challenge the historical and traditional frames of Occidental thought. This involves a search for new strategies and critical approaches in the fields of museum and heritage studies which will renew and extend understandings of European citizenship and result in an inevitable re-evaluation of the concept of 'modernity' in a so-called globalised and multicultural world.

**mining the museum fred wilson: Museum Theory** Andrea Witcomb, Kylie Message,

2020-11-19 MUSEUM THEORY EDITED BY ANDREA WITCOMB AND KYLIE MESSAGE Museum Theory offers critical perspectives drawn from a broad range of disciplinary and intellectual traditions. This volume describes and challenges previous ways of understanding museums and their relationship to society. Essays written by scholars from museology and other disciplines address theoretical reflexivity in the museum, exploring the contextual, theoretical, and pragmatic ways museums work, are understood, and are experienced. Organized around three themes—Thinking about Museums, Disciplines and Politics, and Theory from Practice/Practicing Theory—the text includes discussion and analysis of different kinds of museums from various, primarily contemporary, national and local contexts. Essays consider subjects including the nature of museums as institutions and their role in the public sphere, cutting-edge museum practice and their connections with current global concerns, and the links between museum studies and disciplines such as cultural studies, anthropology, and history.

**mining the museum fred wilson: Understanding Heritage** Marie-Theres Albert, Roland Bernecker, Britta Rudolff, 2013-04-30 The publication is the first in a new series on existing and innovative paradigms in Heritage Studies. The series aims at systematising and developing the academic discourse on heritage, which has yielded a wealth and breadth of contributions over the past few years. The publication offers its own emphasis by developing heritage studies with a perspective towards and as a contribution to human development. It thus offers a vision for the construction and establishment of a new discipline. The academic mainsprings and research interests of this repositioning of heritage studies as an academic discipline are discussed by internationally renowned thinkers and heritage practitioners. The publication thus establishes first important points for discussion. Central to this publication are questions concerning the sustainable protection and use of heritage, focussing on the world cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage, but equally questions on the relation of heritage and memory and how these could mutually enrich our understanding of heritage.

**mining the museum fred wilson: The Art of Museum Exhibitions** Leslie Bedford, 2014-05-01 Leslie Bedford, former director of the highly regarded Bank Street College museum leadership program, expands the museum professional's vision of exhibitions beyond the simple goal of transmitting knowledge to the visitor. Her view of exhibitions as interactive, emotional, embodied, imaginative experiences opens a new vista for those designing them. Using examples both from her own work at the Boston Children's Museum and from other institutions around the globe, Bedford offers the museum professional a bold new vision built around narrative, imagination, and aesthetics, merging the work of the educator with that of the artist. It is important reading for all museum professionals.

**mining the museum fred wilson: Thinking About Exhibitions** Bruce W. Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg, Sandy Nairne, 2005-08-11 An anthology of writings on exhibition practice from artists, critics, curators and art historians which address the contradictions posed by museum and gallery staged exhibitions, and the challenge of staging art presentations and displays.

**mining the museum fred wilson: The International Handbooks of Museum Studies, 4 Volume Set** Sharon Macdonald, Helen Rees Leahy, 2015-07-20 The International Handbooks of Museum Studies is a multi-volume reference work that represents a state-of-the-art survey of the burgeoning field of museum studies. Featuring original essays by leading international museum experts and emerging scholars, readings cover all aspects of museum theory, practice, debates, and the impact of technologies. The four volumes in the series, divided thematically, offer in-depth treatment of all major issues relating to museum theory; historical and contemporary museum practice; mediations in art, design, and architecture; and the transformations and challenges confronting the museum. In addition to invaluable surveys of current scholarship, the entries include a rich and diverse panoply of examples and original case studies to illuminate the various perspectives. Unprecedented for its in-depth topic coverage and breadth of scholarship, the multi-volume International Handbooks of Museum Studies is an indispensable resource for the study of the development, roles, and significance of museums in contemporary society.

**mining the museum fred wilson: Progressive Museum Practice** George E Hein, 2012-07-15

Hein traces current practice in museum education to Dewey's early 20th-century ideas about education, democracy, and progress toward improving society, and in so doing provides a rare history of museum education as a profession.

**mining the museum fred wilson: The Routledge Companion to African American Art History** Eddie Chambers, 2019-11-12 This Companion authoritatively points to the main areas of enquiry within the subject of African American art history. The first section examines how African American art has been constructed over the course of a century of published scholarship. The second section studies how African American art is and has been taught and researched in academia. The third part focuses on how African American art has been reflected in art galleries and museums. The final section opens up understandings of what we mean when we speak of African American art. This book will be of interest to graduate students, researchers, and professors and may be used in American art, African American art, visual culture, and culture classes.

**mining the museum fred wilson: Challenging History in the Museum** Jenny Kidd, Sam Cairns, Alex Drago, Amy Ryall, 2016-04-08 Challenging History in the Museum explores work with difficult, contested and sensitive heritages in a range of museum contexts. It is based on the Challenging History project, which brings together a wide range of heritage professionals, practitioners and academics to explore heritage and museum learning programmes in relation to difficult and controversial subjects. The book is divided into four sections. Part I, 'The Emotional Museum' examines the balance between empathic and emotional engagement and an objective, rational understanding of 'history'. Part II, 'Challenging Collaborations' explores the opportunities and pitfalls associated with collective, inclusive representations of our heritage. Part III, 'Ethics, Ownership, Identity' questions who is best-qualified to identify, represent and 'own' these histories. It challenges the concept of ownership and personal identification as a prerequisite to understanding, and investigates the ideas and controversies surrounding this premise. Part IV, 'Teaching Challenging History' helps us to explore the ethics and complexities of how challenging histories are taught. The book draws on work countries around the world including Brazil, Cambodia, Canada, England, Germany, Japan, Northern Ireland, Norway, Scotland, South Africa, Spain and USA and crosses a number of disciplines: Museum and Heritage Studies, Cultural Policy Studies, Performance Studies, Media Studies and Critical Theory Studies. It will also be of interest to scholars of Cultural History and Art History.

**mining the museum fred wilson: Australian Artists in the Contemporary Museum**

Jennifer Barrett, Jacqueline Millner, 2016-12-05 This unique book proposes a re-reading of the relationship between artists and the contemporary museum. In Australia in particular, the museum has played a significant role in the colonial project and this has generally been considered as the predominant mode of artists' engagement with such institutions and collections. Australian Artists in the Contemporary Museum expands the post-colonial frame of reference used to interpret this work, to demonstrate the broader implications of the relationship between artists and the museum, and thus to offer an alternative way of understanding recent contemporary practices. The authors' central argument is that artists' engagement with the museum has shifted from politically motivated critique taking place in museums of fine art, towards interventions taking place in non-art museums that focus on the creation of knowledge more broadly. Such interventions assume a number of forms, including the artist acting as curator, art works that highlight the use of taxonomic modes of display and categorization, and the re-consideration of the aesthetics of collections to suggest different ways of interpreting objects and their history. Central to these interventions is the challenge to better connect the museum and its public. The book will be essential reading for scholars, professionals and students in the fields of contemporary art and museum studies, art history, and in the museum sector. These include artists, curators, museum and gallery professionals, postgraduate researchers, art historians, designers and design scholars, art and museum educators, and students of visual art, art history, and museum studies. This project has been assisted by the Australian government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts

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