FRED WILSON’S *MIXED METAPHORS*: THE POLITICS OF MUSEUMS IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Aaron Ambroso: Fred Wilson’s Mixed Metaphors: The Politics of Museums in the Late Twentieth Century
(Under the direction of Carol Magee)

Against the background of tensions animating museum discourse of the 1980s, Mixed Metaphors challenged both art and artifact methods of display and discourses of authenticity. Instead of lamenting changes in indigenous societies, or rearticulating narratives of the redemption and preservation of indigenous culture from immanent destruction or contamination, Mixed Metaphors pushed SAM to further articulate its values of global, cross-cultural, and future oriented indigenous presents. Mixed Metaphors formed a continuation of the practices and approaches already in use at the museum, challenging characterizations of artist versus museum binaries. Through his intervention, Wilson opened the galleries up to meanings outside of the art and artifact paradigms of classification, interpretation, and display. Ultimately, the installations participated in questioning some of the organizing principles of the museum’s role as collectors and preservers of art and culture.
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INTRODUCTION: FRED WILSON’S MIXED METAPHORS

Completed shortly after his widely celebrated *Mining the Museum* (1992) at Baltimore’s Maryland Historic Society, Fred Wilson’s *The Museum: Mixed Metaphors* (1993) occurred at a moment in which the artist was becoming widely known as someone engaged in the discourses of institutional critique and the politics of race. Comprised of, among other things, a Rolex watch amid traditional Akan gold ornaments, a suit and tie displayed in front of Cameroonian textiles, and a Native American urban rock band playing on a television screen next to early twentieth century Kwagiulth potlatch masks, the installation came together at a time when museum presentations of indigenous art were fiercely contested. While Wilson’s 1992 project at the Maryland Historical Society has been seen as enacting a “rhetoric of redress,” his collaboration with the Seattle Art Museum (SAM) belies characterizations that pit the artist against the museum.¹

Scholarly discussion of Fred Wilson’s work often focuses on how the artist addresses and dismantles structures of power within the museum, especially focusing on Wilson’s deconstruction of forms of ethnographic, racial, and aesthetic essentialism. For example, Wilson’s *The Other Museum* (1991) and *Primitivism: High and Low* (1992) critiqued European scientific inventions of “race” and the use of indigenous art in the construction of modernism, respectively. Jennifer Gonzalez has argued that Wilson has been engaged in the historical

analysis of the “visibility and invisibility of race and racially marked bodies in museums.”

Like institutionally engaged artists Andrea Fraser and Hans Haacke, she writes, Wilson undermines the modernist principles on which museums and their presentations of truth, beauty, and history are based.³

While commentators have generally construed Fred Wilson’s installations in the African and Northwest Coast galleries at SAM as a critique of museum presentations of authenticity, there has been less attention to analyzing how Mixed Metaphors engages with specific dialogues and debates around authenticity vis-à-vis museum studies in general.⁴ A closer examination of these installations show that the artist’s work was not only a critique, but a continuation of the Seattle Art Museum’s own critical examinations of authenticity in the museum’s collection and display of indigenous art. Furthermore, the specific ways Wilson’s installations remap and enact notions of “authenticity” and “tradition” have gone largely unexamined. In fact, Wilson’s installations referenced tensions animating scholarly and museum dialogues on collection and display of indigenous art in the early nineties. Specifically, this meant attempts to use the terms “authenticity” and “tradition” in new ways. While these terms were argued on the one hand to be Western inventions, they also continued to have very important and often political significance as designations of real, meaningful identity for indigenous people themselves. Mixed Metaphors had an ambivalent relation to these versions of authenticity, simultaneously articulating authenticity as both real and meaningful and as a Western invention. In this thesis I argue this to demonstrate that while thinking about tradition or authenticity as a Western cultural invention is

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helpful, it ultimately had a tendency to miss the force and significance that tradition and authenticity continued to play in the lives of indigenous people. Instead, I argue that *Mixed Metaphors* reconceived “authenticity” and “tradition” as formed through cultural contact and creative activities. This version of authenticity was no longer centered on a salvaged past, but connected to larger cultural systems and circuits—such as the global market and histories of travel and diaspora—that were incorporated into but did not displace or overwhelm indigenous identity. As the western notion of authenticity was tied to placing indigenous cultures in temporal locations behind a historical modernity, this reversing of authenticity countered the tendency to place indigenous below or behind the West. Finally, I argue that aspects of *Mixed Metaphors* went beyond the polarities of art versus culture forms of museum collection and display, to employ a mixture of interpretive strategies that included politics, history, and personal narrative. In doing so, *Mixed Metaphors* was one of a variety of different ways that indigenous people, artists, and museum curators challenged art and artifact methods of display in the eighties and early nineties.

At stake was both what kind of stories and narratives were told in museums, but also the fundamental structures of power that organized those stories. Museum institutions began to grapple with *what* community and *whose* objects were on display. As Michael Ames wrote, “Indians, traditionally treated by museums as objects and clients, have now become patrons.”

Indian communities had also begun to “establish their own museums, install their own curators, hire their own anthropologists on contract, and call for the repatriation of their own collections.”

In this way, Native communities began to displace the classic model of a single Euro-American

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6 Ibid.
curator selecting objects deemed worthy of collection from a traditional culture, reworking dichotomies of center and periphery. Issues of repatriation and increased involvement of indigenous communities with collections questioned museum’s role as preservers or final resting places for cultural objects. In addition, methods of classification and interpretation were also at stake. Whereas contexts of history, politics, and indigenous religion had previously been marginalized by art and artifact categorizations, they now began to generate displays and institutional processes that recognized the more diverse contexts of Native American and African art.

**Fred Wilson and Authenticity**

Wilson described his 1988 *Rooms with a View* as a “watershed moment.” In important ways, *Rooms with a View* set up the basic conceptual parameters of Wilson’s installations at SAM. Displaying the work of New York artists in three different galleries, *Rooms with a View* signified that the museum artifices of display socially constructed both the object and viewer of the museum. Displayed simultaneously as artifact, fine art, and historical curios, the artworks used in *Rooms with a View* indirectly referenced the way indigenous cultural objects gradually made the move from halls of ethnography to the art gallery and museum. In doing so, non-Western art and material culture passed through different disciplinary systems. Instead of collecting objects in order to document an anthropological “culture,” non-Western “artworks”

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8 The artists included were: Larry List, Alexander Kosolapov, Peggie Yunque, Barton Lidice Benes, Eva Stettner, and Lise Prown.
were given meaning through the originality of their maker and “formal qualities.” Displays in ethnographic contexts tended to emphasize how objects fit within a larger cultural whole, while those displayed as fine art positioned them as isolated objects, spotlighting their individuality as transcendent products of the universal human “mind.”

While *Rooms with a View* highlighted the cultural construction of museum environments, Wilson’s installations in SAM’s African and Northwest Coast galleries focused on how these institutional contexts interacted with a system of “authenticity.” In this thesis, I use “authenticity” to designate a pervasive Western ideology that could be found in museum collections, connoisseurship, anthropology, and popular culture throughout the twentieth century. I argue that authenticity is not an intrinsic property of objects, but comes from specific assumptions about origins, organic connections, and wholeness built into the discourses of fine art and anthropology. In Western art historical and museological practice, the paradigm of authenticity emerged fully with the large influx of indigenous cultural objects into the art and museum markets of the late nineteenth century, and the hierarchy of “genuine” or “real” objects that organized and accompanied this development. My use of the term denotes “authenticity” as a Western cultural invention, and as gradually contested by artists, scholars, and museum professionals during the 1970s and 1980s.

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Practices and signifiers of authenticity could often verify an object’s “traditional” status, as those terms were understood by art historians and anthropologists of the mid-twentieth century. I use the term “tradition” and “traditional” to refer to art that is primarily rural, typically made for functional purposes or contexts outside of the museum or gallery. That being said, making a watertight definition of “tradition” is extremely difficult, and examples of art that slip through usual definitions is abundant. For example, one might argue that tourist pieces made by a Native person trading in upstate New York be considered “traditional”\(^\text{12}\). This is true especially if the trade has been going on since the nineteenth century. While “tradition” has historically been used to denote indigenous cultures prior to the arrival of whites, I recognize that practices of trade and cross-cultural influence can constitute “traditional art” just as any other.

**Systems of Authenticity**

Since the turn of the twentieth century, indigenous art in the West found itself contextualized in two complementary systems of classification: as ethnographic artifact or aesthetic masterpiece. As was common to late nineteenth century narratives of the “vanishing race,” both of these disciplinary organizations presumed an Other that was in need of salvage, preservation, and study.\(^\text{13}\) In the Northwest Coast, late nineteenth century collectors were motivated to gather material from Native cultures before it became “too late,” assuming the immanent destruction of traditional culture.\(^\text{14}\) While anthropologists of the first half of the twentieth century had shed earlier evolutionary assumptions, the continuation of a story of a


\(^{13}\) James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 200.

native world in ruin, incompatible with modernity, and closer to nature held sway. The genuine or authentic lives of indigenous objects were understood to exist always prior to their collection.\textsuperscript{15} Both anthropological and art historical collections tended to privilege objects (taken from complex historical situations) that gave form, structure, and continuity to social life, seeing it as whole rather than disputed, torn, or cross-cultural.\textsuperscript{16}

Anthropological descriptions often ignored the present historical circumstances of both their “subjects” and their own involvement with colonial regimes of power, downplaying the cross-cultural, and improvisational aspects of the cultures they studied and collected. For example, in his classic ethnography \textit{The Nuer} (1940), Evans Pritchard relegated description of the impact of colonialism to the introduction, while describing the “social structure” of the Nuer as if existing in a timeless present. In New Guinea, Margaret Mead chose not to study groups that were “badly missionized.”\textsuperscript{17} Art historical accounts often reproduced common ethnographic practices and categories. “Authentic” or “traditional” works of art were defined hierarchically, with those that were made and used by a culture for its own purposes considered most authentic. Lower down on the scale were those works made for traditional use but sold before use, and below those, works that were made for outsiders.\textsuperscript{18} Tourist or “airport” art was not only deemed unworthy of serious collection or scholarly reflection, it was degraded as impure, contaminated, and not a true, “authentic” expression of native culture. As one author wrote: “If tourists want masks and sculptures, then they shall have them … But what is produced is of most questionable


\textsuperscript{17} Margaret Mead, \textit{Letters From the Field, 1925-1975} (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 123.

value: works without any cultural roots or artistic content; elegant, perhaps, and ingenious, but at
the same time plain, mannered, and empty.\textsuperscript{19} The actual ongoing life of indigenous people and
the cross-cultural inventions of cross cultural encounter and colonialism was erased or ignored in
the name of cultural or artistic authenticity.\textsuperscript{20}

The 1980s were an incredibly rich time for the display of African and Native American
art in American museums. In 1982, Nelson Rockefeller’s collection of African, Oceanic, and
pre-Hispanic art was installed in a permanent wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Two
years later, Susan Vogel opened the Center for African Art later renamed the Museum for
African Art. In 1987, the National Museum for African Art was moved to a place of prominence
from behind the Capitol building to on the Mall.\textsuperscript{21} During the 1980s, exhibitions of indigenous
art reinforced the notion that they existed in a vague, ahistorical temporal location loosely
identified with the “tribal” or “primitive.”\textsuperscript{22} The Museum of Modern Art’s “Primitivism” in the
Twentieth Century (1984) located non-Western artifacts in a vague past or purely conceptual
space associated with various “tribal” qualities: magic, ritual, nature, or myth.\textsuperscript{23} In celebrating
modernism’s ability to transcend cultural boundaries, the show reinforced the notion that
“authentic” indigenous art was that untouched by Western influence.\textsuperscript{24} In the American Museum

from the Fourth World (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 306.

\textsuperscript{20} James Clifford, The Predicament of Culture, 202.

\textsuperscript{21} Carol Magee, Re-presenting Africa? American Displays of African Visual Culture in the 1990s (Ph.D. Diss.,
2001) 9.

\textsuperscript{22} James Clifford, The Predicament of Culture, 205, 206. “Location” is here understood to mean the sense of where,
to whom, and in what time and object belongs.

of Modern Art, 1984), 10, 661-689. See also critiques of the 1984 show by Sally Price, Primitive Art in Civilized
Places (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989), Hal Foster, Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics (Port
Townsend, WA.: Bay Press, 1985), among others.

\textsuperscript{24} Errington, The Death of Primitive Art, 73.
of Natural History, Margaret Mead’s Hall of Pacific People showed few signs of the contemporary life of Melanesian society and placed Samoan society in a vague temporal zone through the mixing of present and past tenses in cultural descriptions. By the late 1980s, the practice of locating indigenous culture in ambiguous time zones and ignoring or down playing culture change had become acutely problematic. In the early nineties, these practices – while having undergone extensive critique and contested in many museum spaces – still formed the backdrop against which Wilson’s installations operated.

Displays of indigenous art also spurred widespread critical attention. In Canada, the shows Into the Heart of Africa (1989) and The Spirit Sings (1987) presented African and Native American art and were both picketed by communities over the museum’s presentation of colonial narratives and use of corporate funding. Several important publications also brought the ethics and politics of exhibitions to the fore. George Stocking’s Objects and Others (1985) looked at the history of contexts and travels undergone by indigenous art in Western museums. Symposiums held at the Smithsonian Institution in the late eighties resulted in the volumes Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Displays (1991) and Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Cultures (1992). Wilson engaged and contributed to this new discourse through his critical engagement of the museum as a site of cultural difference and colonization.

This thesis builds on approaches to art history pioneered by museum studies. In particular, the work of Susan Vogel (1988), James Clifford (1988, 1991), Sally Price (1991), and Ruth Phillips (1988) on art and artifact methods of display has informed my argument that Mixed Metaphors challenged these forms of museum classification and collection. I build off their work

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to argue that *Mixed Metaphors* articulated meanings outside of the art-artifact paradigm, and that this was a significant step in giving greater agency to Native people in museum displays and in redefining the role of the museum and indigenous collections.

In addition, critiques of authenticity in art history and anthropology by writers such as Rosaldo (1985), Clifford (1988, 1985), Kasfir (1992), Vogel (1989), Bascom (1976), and Joanitis (1991) have been useful for analyzing the ways *Mixed Metaphors* and SAM’s permanent collection challenged older discourses of display and authenticity. I build off of McClusky (1987) and Kasfir’s (1992) discussions of authenticity in relation to African art collections to argue that the installations in the African gallery expanded on what could be considered traditional or authentic African art. I also situate Wilson’s installations against the background of narratives of cultural wholeness and redemption analyzed by Rosaldo (1985) and Clifford (1988).

In Chapter One, I argue that Wilson’s installations in the African gallery were not a critique, but a continuation of practices already established at SAM. In this way, I show how characterizations of *Mixed Metaphors* as a critique of unreflective museum presentations of authenticity misses an important part of the context of the installation and belies binary characterization of the artist and museum. Wilson did depart from the previous orientation of the gallery, however, in how far he pushed the curatorial principles already in place there. Against the background of scholarly and museological debate on authenticity in the early nineties, Wilson’s work can been understood to enact “authenticity” as a Western invention, as well as a real, meaningful aspect of African identity. Through the juxtapositions and additions to the gallery display, the installation encoded a cross-cultural version of authenticity no longer centered on a salvaged past, but connected to larger diasporic processes. To make this argument,
I examine the African galleries at SAM and the museum’s catalogue publications. Then, I turn to the artist’s installation in the African gallery and discussions around authenticity in African art history in the early nineties.

Chapter two analyzes the artist’s installations in the Northwest Coast gallery. Like the installations in the African gallery, Wilson’s additions to the Northwest Coast gallery enacted definitions of authenticity and tradition that located these terms as both disciplinary inventions and sites of real, political, and meaningful identity for indigenous peoples. The installations also challenged traditional forms of art and artifact collection and display practices in Western museums – methods that, by the early nineties, had become acutely problematic. I argue that in doing so, Mixed Metaphors offered one possible alternative to art and artifact display among others during the eighties and nineties.

In the Conclusion, I bring the discussions of both of the galleries together in order to suggest one further way in which Mixed Metaphors formed an important contribution to the rethinking of the function and role of museums and their indigenous collections in the early nineties. Through highlighting the local objects used in Mixed Metaphors, we can understand the installation as a critique of the Enlightenment foundations of modern museums and the way they assumed a homogenous public and positioned their collections as “national patrimony” or property of the nation. Viewing Mixed Metaphors through this lens, we can see it as part of an effort by indigenous people, artists, and museum professionals to redefine the role of the museum in the late twentieth century.
CHAPTER ONE: AN AFRICAN SUIT AND TIE

At what point will suits and ties, or the medium of oil on canvas, for example, cease to be seen as borrowed – even stolen – expressions?26

Susan Vogel, *Africa Explores*

Susan Vogel’s remarks serve as an apt if pithy characterization of the general sentiment that framed Wilson’s installations in one African gallery at the Seattle Art Museum (SAM) [Fig.1]. Instead of corrupting, Vogel argued that African assimilations of Western cultural objects were insightful, grounded in pre-existing cultural forms, and contributed to a “continuous renovation of culture.”27 In a similar vein, in this chapter I am concerned to frame Wilson’s work against the background of the dialogue around authenticity and African art at SAM prior to 1993. I argue that Wilson’s installations in the African gallery were both a critique and a continuation of practices already established at the museum. In this way, I show how *Mixed Metaphors* belies binary characterizations of the artist and museum. Against the background of scholarly and museological debate on authenticity in the early nineties, Wilson’s work can been understood to enact authenticity as a Western invention, as well as a real, meaningful aspect of African identity. Through the juxtapositions and additions to the gallery display, the installation encoded a cross-cultural version of authenticity no longer centered on a salvaged past, but connected to larger cultural systems of African diaspora.


27 Ibid.
The African Galleries

SAM expanded its 500-piece African collection in the early 1980s with the acquisition of over 2,000 artworks collected by Katherine White.\textsuperscript{28} Moved to a new downtown Seattle building in 1991, the exhibit comprised of three galleries, where approximately one fifth of the collection was on display. A first small room contained shrine art and objects for spiritual use, the main room displayed arts of the masquerade, and a final small room contained personal, textile, and household items. Using architectural space to suggest social environment, masks and artworks were displayed in ways that referenced their public or private uses.\textsuperscript{29} In the room devoted to shrine arts, for example, a small semi-circular display platform supported sculptural figures, while other works were displayed recessed in to the wall around them in order to recreate some the piece’s original viewing conditions.\textsuperscript{30} The second, larger room contained a curvilinear, protruding platform that extended into the middle of the gallery. Unenclosed masks were continuously visible as one walked around the platform and placed at eye level, suggesting the original context of performance. Video footage from several different African masquerades played on monitors in the wall, in which masks were shown performing in contemporary contexts.\textsuperscript{31} In the final room, a circular platform displayed textiles from Cameroon, with a Fon throne in the center.

SAM’s displays of African art sought to question connotations of “traditional” art and authenticity through labels, wall text, and the inclusion of objects that went against the grain of classic notions of “authenticity.” Object labels strived to relate the mostly “traditional” material


\textsuperscript{29} Past tense is used in this section to describe the galleries as they looked prior to Wilson’s installations in 1993.

\textsuperscript{30} Smith, “The Permanent African Collection,” 90.

presented in the galleries to contemporary African art and life, thus taking the objects out of an ethnographically presented tribal past. A label describing shrine art and referencing nature and the ancestors, for example, showed a copy of Zairian artist Cheri Samba’s 1990 *Les capotes utilises*, a painting that appealed to the public use of condoms to prevent the spread of AIDS. Indeed, SAM’s African curator Pamela McClusky consciously strove to present up-to-date information on labels and wall text so that African cultures were not seen as static or timeless. For example, some labels described the cross-cultural connections between African and European life. In a label accompanying a *nimba* headdress of the Baga people, the text noted: “Picasso adopted nimba to create an image of his wife in 1925, and an artist in Brooklyn put together a nimba costume for carnival in 1988.” A photo of a man wearing a cardboard version of a *nimba* headdress at a 1988 Brooklyn Carnival accompanied the description. Additionally, Yoruba masks and staffs were discussed in ways that emphasized contemporary Yoruba involvement with both African religion, Islam, and Christianity. For example, one label cited contemporary religious syncretism: “A Yoruba may sacrifice to an *orisa*, pray to Allah, or attend Christian services and not see these actions as mutually exclusive.” This kind of emphasis worked to challenge received notions of authenticity that downplayed cultural syncretism in the search for a traditional context. Finally, the third gallery also contained Yoruba *aso-ake* cloth, both hand and machine made. A label encouraged viewers to see if they could tell the difference between the machine made and the hand made, and raised questions about the stylistic difference

32 Ibid.


34 Ibid., 36.


between the two. With the inclusion of the cloth, SAM not only challenged the absence of contemporary African culture in museum display, but modernist notions of aesthetic meaningfulness.

While the exhibits in the three African galleries give insight into the ways that SAM was grappling with the display of African art, museum publications and catalogues offer a further sense of how valences of authenticity played out in relation to the museum’s African collection. A distinct turn towards the critical re-evaluation of authenticity is evident in curator Pamela McClusky’s *African Art: From Crocodiles to Convertibles* (1987). The text discusses objects relegated to the study collection because they were created for a tourist market, as well as works that show contemporary influences but retain authentic ties to indigenous culture.

McClusky argued that traditional art and what she calls “acculturated” art cannot be “rigidly typecast;” they exist alongside each other, defying complete compartmentalization. Authentic, traditional works usually date from the turn of the twentieth century, and were created to serve a religious or functional need, while acculturated artworks reflect the impact of colonialism, new technologies, and urban culture. Her argument opens the collection to the consideration of works of tourist art and the souvenir trade as meaningful, authentic, and even traditional. In some cases, old forms are reworked with contemporary references. For example, a twentieth century Guro mask from the Ivory Coast is updated with a blue convertible carrying the president and a Chinese advisor. In others, traditional objects are incorporated into quite different contexts. The Bamana antelope headdress known as Tyi Wara functioned originally as a


39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.
part of religious performance, gradually becoming a mass-produced replica and a form of urban street theatre in Mali. Tyi Wara today is “not only an antelope headdress to honor a mythological culture hero but also a popular souvenir and an urban symbol of identity.” McClusky calls these “exciting evolutions” and “cross-cultural inventions,” referring to the mixing of African interests, culture, and forms with European ones.41

**Mixed Metaphors**

Wilson’s installations in the African gallery at SAM consisted of additions to the existing permanent installations. For example, in a display of nineteenth and early twentieth century Cameroonian art, Wilson placed a model of an African nursing school, photos of modern African architecture, and a television set playing Nigerian soap operas and music videos collected from Nigerian emigres in Seattle [Fig. 1]. A suit and tie, borrowed from a Liberian visitor services officer at the museum, was displayed in front of Cameroonian textiles. Nearby, Wilson inserted a gold Rolex watch owned by a museum security guard into a display that included a Ghanaian Soul Watcher’s badge and other items of Akan regalia in front of a hanging piece of Kente cloth [Fig. 2]. Wilson’s caption to the Western suit read:

> Certain elements of dress were used to designate one’s rank in Africa’s status-conscious capitals. A gray suit with conservatively patterned tie denotes a businessman or member of government. Costumes such as this are designed and tailored in Africa and worn throughout the continent.42

The label parodied the scholarly use of the “ethnographic present” in the description of African culture by both anthropologists and art historians. Here the phrase “were used” contrasted with

41 Ibid., 3.

the later “are designed” to create an ambiguous time zone, ultimately placing Africa out of history or in the present. Like the disciplinary and practical habits of “authenticity” which taught scholars to seek objects and contexts that were ideally prior to the intervention of Western culture, the “ethnographic present” temporally distanced the object or culture described to assure no “contaminating” presence would interfere. The insertion of the gold Rolex watch, the Nigerian music videos and soap operas, and the suit and tie continued McClusky’s concern with challenging the categories of collection of African art. As commodities, the watch and the suit fell outside of the categories of objects historically deemed worthy of aesthetic attention through the modernist paradigms of authenticity. Against the background of Western traditions of aesthetics, particularly modernism, mass produced items could be powerful signifiers of alienation, negating an assumed “direct,” essential, spiritual link between the hand of the artist or individual and one’s mysterious, inner essence.

_Mixed Metaphors_ pointed to how earlier conventions of the ethnographic present, of collecting, and narratives of salvage or redemption established tradition as something that was ideally untouched by Western influence. In this way, _Mixed Metaphors_ was a critique of the way cultural contact, travel, and movement were less often presented as systems of authenticity. Western collectors privileged objects that emphasized wholeness and organic connection, not cross-cultural mixing, displacement, and fragmentary existence. Yet Western objects have been absorbed and changed by African people. Borrowed objects can be authentically African, both through use and through incorporation and change. As Susan Vogel writes, borrowing is not merely taking in unchanged.

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43 See James Clifford, _The Predicament of Culture_, 198.

Figure 1. Fred Wilson, Mixed Metaphors, 1992, Installation including Suit and Tie, Nigerian Soap Operas, Photos of Contemporary African Architecture. Seattle, Seattle Art Museum.

Figure 2. Fred Wilson, The Museum: Mixed Metaphors, 1992, Installation with Gold Rolex watch. Seattle, Seattle Art Museum.
*Mixed Metaphors* referenced how African traditions were navigating modernity in complex ways that included adapting forms of Western influence. For example, during the 1980s, Makonde youth underwent initiation in suburban houses.\(^{45}\) New Guro masks featured soccer players, presidents, and airplanes; and Bobo masks celebrated the opening of the Pan-African Film festival in 1989. Traditions were updated, revived, and lost. The catalogue for *Mixed Metaphors* itself provided an example of the ongoing negotiation of African and Western culture. Describing the cross-cultural functions of the suit and tie donated to the installation, museum services officer and Liberian emigre Saye Kinnay intimated that wearing the suit in his native village “can have a negative impact on the person wearing it.”\(^{46}\) Travelling home, “I would wear my traditional attire, the gown. By doing so I prove to them I have not lost my identity…. Wearing a Western style suit would say that I am a big *quee*: a highly educated man who has lost touch with his culture.”\(^{47}\) Here, African culture incorporates but is not overwhelmed by Western influences. *Mixed Metaphors* enacted in display form what McClusky, Vogel, and Kasfir argued for in terms authenticity and tradition, a blurring of the lines between what is considered traditional and what is cross-cultural and invented.

Finally, Wilson’s installations in the African gallery also pointed to Africa as a modern, global society, again challenging earlier ethnographic practices and museum display that ignored contemporary African culture or located Africa in a timeless present associated with mythical or spiritual qualities. The suit and Rolex juxtaposed against “traditional” cloths and gold ornaments referenced the global market that encompassed the exchange of “traditional” art and artifacts and Western goods. The display recalled a story of trading in an Abidjan market in Cote d’Ivoire,

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 41.


\(^{47}\) Ibid.
where a Dan mask was exchanged for a Seiko wrist watch between a Hausa art trader and a young European tourist.48 While the shelves in one part of the Abidjan marketplace were lined with “replicas of so-called ‘traditional’ artistic forms,” shelves in another part of the marketplace just across the street were stocked with “imperfect imitations of modernity: counterfeit Levi jeans, fake Christian Dior belts, and pirated scratchy recording of Michael Jackson and Madonna.”49

That Wilson’s installations in the African gallery were in many ways a continuation of practices already in use at SAM shows how claims that the installation was a critique of an unreflective display of authenticity miss both what the museum was already doing and how Wilson’s role at the museum was collaborative. For example, Jennifer Gonzalez construes Mixed Metaphors as primarily an intervention by the artist to insert objects of contemporary African life into displays that focused exclusively on their past.50 In addition, the catalogue for Mixed Metaphors also noted that Wilson sought to “counter the notion that African culture is only historic, an extinct and frozen flowering bound to pastoral, village life,” yet does not examine how Wilson’s work formed an extension of principles and practices already at play in the museum.51 A closer look at the context of the artist’s installations also challenges the paradigmatic role that Wilson’s 1992 Mining the Museum and the predominant construal of the artist as working against, or in contrast to, existing museum displays.52

49 Ibid., 20.

50 Jennifer Gonzalez, Subject to Display, 94.


Wilson’s displays in the African gallery was also a pushing of the principles underlying the galleries further than what had been already done. Some of the types of objects and contexts Wilson juxtaposed in the gallery were included in the display before his installations. Yet, the artist’s direct inclusion of these objects into the displays went further, no longer relegating signs of African contemporary life to labels and wall text. Wilson’s juxtapositions legitimated contemporary commodities as viable objects for museum display and preservation. Taking these objects from context to center stage as part of the collection itself, the artist challenged art and artifact forms of collection that excluded commodities and cross-cultural objects in the name of aesthetic quality or authentic “culture.” As wall labels and contextual material, the information used by McClusky to challenge stereotypes in the collection could have easily been overlooked by museum visitors who often spend little time looking at them.53

Authenticity in African Art

Through the artist’s juxtapositions, Mixed Metaphors enacted “authenticity” as Western museological and disciplinary inventions. The juxtapositions of the Rolex watch and the suit and tie along side the museum’s conventional African objects raised questions about what was “contemporary” and what was “traditional” among the objects in the display. Were the watch and the suit as “authentic” as the Cameroonian textiles or the Akan ornaments? By suggesting that the answer to this question is yes, Wilson then suggests that the very notion of authenticity is invented? The artist’s installation was guided by critiques of authenticity during the eighties that argued that collections of African art were constituted through methods of filtering, and claimed that tradition and authenticity themselves were western fictions.

In his important essays on collecting non-Western art in 1988, James Clifford argued that authenticity was not a given, but a result of Western assumptions about temporality, wholeness, and continuity. Likewise, Christopher Steiner posited authenticity as cultural invention of the West: “we come to realize that it [authenticity] too does not exist in advance of human history, thought, or action. Most important, we learn that authenticity is the product of art historical evaluation, not its determinant.” And in her 1992 discussion of authenticity in African art, Sidney Kasfir argued that “traditional art” was a legacy of our nineteenth century Victorian past. Authenticity, she claimed, was created through Western taste. She argued that if “authentic” African art is understood as art made prior to Western or outside influence, then there is no point in time that we can speak of “traditional culture.” Wilson’s installations in the African gallery were an extension of this critique and located authenticity as a construct of Western taste. Through its juxtapositions, the installation implicitly questioned the notions of tradition that organized the collecting of African art throughout the twentieth century. Wilson’s installations located authenticity as a fiction, a construct that excluded certain objects and forms of African culture.

In 1988, Susan Vogel argued that what had become known as “traditional African art” in Western museums and scholarship was simply whatever happened to be made in Africa between 1880 and 1920. What museum’s held as “African art,” she claimed, was really a small segment

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54 Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 188.


57 Kasfir (1992), 93.

of the vastly different kinds of objects made on the continent. Collections of African art, for example, tended to ignore objects and cultures of northern Africa. While recognizing authenticity as a western fiction can be useful, it should not be taken to mean that traditions were merely fictions. More productive is recognizing how traditions navigate a modern present, changing and morphing. I explore this next through Wilson’s intervention in the Native American Galleries at SAM.
CHAPTER TWO: THE NORTHWEST COAST GALLERY

In this chapter, I analyze Wilson’s installations in the Northwest Coast gallery of the museum against the backdrop of the ways popular and ethnographic practices searched for wholeness, origin, and organic connection in the traditions and cultures of Native people during the beginning of the twentieth century. These practices were part of a larger narrative about recovering a lost authenticity that ran through ethnographic writing during the twentieth century. Both SAM’s permanent collection and Wilson’s installations added contexts that challenged these practices to the Northwest Coast gallery. In doing so, Mixed Metaphors represented Native culture as cross-cultural, changing, and useful for mediating the worlds its makers inhabited.

The artist’s installation reversed typical ethnographic desires and presented movement and change as a viable system of authenticity. In addition, Wilson’s work responded to criticism of art and artifact methods of museum display in the 1980s. Specifically, Mixed Metaphors echoed the variety of ways that the resurgence and reinvention of Native culture and politics began to trouble art and artifact paradigms, emphasizing meanings and institutional structures marginalized by typical disciplinary practices. Within these variety of approaches, Mixed Metaphors appeared as one possible way of working through these disciplinary methods in order to provide greater agency to Native people in the collection, exhibition, and repatriation of their material culture.
Collecting Traditional Culture

Two prominent collectors crafted versions of traditional Northwest Coast cultures at the beginning of the twentieth century. The work of Edward Curtis (b.1868) was considered variously as art, popular culture, and bonafide ethnographic documents. In 1900, Curtis began work on his photographic collection *The North American Indian*. Throughout the making of the collection, Curtis used props and wigs to portray the Native peoples he photographed as if isolated from western life. Curtis removed objects of European and American manufacture – such as product labels, hats, suspenders, irrigation ditches, and tourists – through the staging and retouching of his photographs. Later in the 1960s, his work received widespread popularity in coffee table books, dormitory posters, and calendars, ensuring these tropes maintained in the popular imagination.

The stage-crafting of tradition was also conducted by professional anthropologists like Franz Boas. The Kwagiulth life group designed by Boas for the American Museum of Natural History in 1895 showed several Kwagiulth men and women dressed in traditional cedar bark clothing [Fig. 3]. While visitors most likely read the display as either how the Kwagiulth still

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59 Christopher Lyman, *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs of Indians by Edward Curtis* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 63. Curtis did take pictures of Native Americans that showed them as historical, changing people, although these were the minority and less popularized.

60 Ibid., 76.

61 Vine Deloria, Jr., “Introduction,” in Lyman, *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions*, 12. James Clifford, “Four Northwest Coast Museums,” in Ivan Karp, ed., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1991), 230. Despite the stereotypical portraits of Curtis, they could function differently depending on their context. In the late eighties, the stereotyping function of Curtis’ photographs was occasionally reversed through the identification of individuals, giving proper names to what were formerly depictions of “types.”

lived or as evidence of a dying race, the life group contrasted sharply with how Boas would have encountered the Kwagiulth on a day to day basis; they had been wearing western clothes for decades.\textsuperscript{63} Despite meeting many such “modern” Kwagiulth, Boas nonetheless reinforced the notion of a stereotyped Indian who lived entirely in a world extremely foreign to that of Euro-Americans, a world soon to be destroyed by the forces of progress.\textsuperscript{64}

![Figure 3. Kwakiutl Diorama, American Museum of Natural History 1895 (In Chiefly Feasts: The Enduring Kwakiutl Potlatch. By Aldona Jonaitis. American Museum of Natural History, 1991, 44.)](image-url)

While the “salvage paradigm” established in the work of these two early collectors continued to have a strong but contested influence on American and Canadian anthropology and

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 31.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
museology in the 1980s, heated controversy over the Glenbow Museum’s 1988 *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada’s First Peoples* marked the beginning of greater collaboration between museums and First Nations and fierce debate over the ethical role of museum presentations of indigenous culture. At a joint conference between First Nations and Canadian Museums held in the wake of the closing of *The Spirit Sings*, Indian speakers urged museums not to “museumify” their culture. They wanted to be shown as they lived in the present, as well as how they lived in the past. As Tom Hill, curator of the Woodland Cultural Center stated, 

> A prominent bureaucrat, here in Ottawa, was tired of Indians coming to his office with designer watches. … He did not know how to respond, he could not envision what Indians should be. And museums prevent that in a way. We like to take the past, freeze it in time and marvel at it. … The time is right, we have to move forward, we have to look to the twenty-first century.

At stake was not merely the presentation of a Native present, but how that present would classified and displayed. Histories of Native revival and reinvention had begun to impinge on the disciplinary formations of art and artifact, aesthetics and anthropology. Michael Ames, for example, argued that the contextual method of display pioneered by Franz Boas in the United States failed to access the “insider’s point of view.” He cited native complaints that museums

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65 Hosted as part of the Calgary Winter Olympics, the exhibition contained Native Canadian artifacts lent from international museums and dating from 1650 to 1930. Boycotted by the Lubicon Lake Cree over its sponsorship by Shell Oil, critics argued that the exhibit lacked a contemporary Native voice and presence, and that the museum needed to present the relationship between the historical pieces and the realities of contemporary Native life. See Moira McLoughlin, *Museums and the Representation of Native Canadians* (New York: Garland Publications, 1999). The closing of *The Spirit Sings* was accompanied by a symposium at Carleton University, “Preserving Our Heritage: A Working Conference Between Museums and First Peoples” (1988), widely attended by representatives of the Assembly of First Nations and museum institutions. See also Deborah Doxtator, “The Home of Indian Culture and Other Stories in the Museum,” in *Muse* Vol. 6, No. 4 (1988), 26-28. The product of the symposium was a Task Force jointly comprised of museum representatives and the Assembly of First Nations with the objective of developing a set of guidelines for future exhibition construction.


don’t do “a damn thing for Indians … Indian history from the Indian point of view is the added ingredient that is needed, the fifth perspective, in order to think about Indian objects in museums.”

Against this background, both Wilson’s work and the existing collection at SAM can be understood to address not only issues of representation of the Native present, but art and artifact forms of classification as well.

**The Hauberg Collection on the Third Floor**

Installed in 1991, SAM’s collection of Northwest Coast Native art participated in the movement towards greater Native participation and agency in museum collections. Consisting of a group of artworks from Native Southeast Alaska, British Columbia, and Washington State, the collection was gathered over the course of three decades. Comprised of late nineteenth and early twentieth century headdresses, button blankets, house-posts, and masks, nearly all of the objects in the collection were traditional.

Prior to *Mixed Metaphors*, the Hauberg collection was displayed at SAM in three separate galleries on the third floor of the museum. In the first gallery “Of the Spirit World,” Native headdresses and masks were accompanied by sounds of songs, stories, and dramatic lighting that suggested the fire-light performances of potlatches for which the masks were designed. In this, they resembled the anthropological dioramas of Boas. A second gallery was titled “Carved Treasures,” and the third “Woven Treasures,” although Wilson made no

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69 Michael Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes*, 44.


71 Meaning that they had been made and used by the cultures represented, and dated from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

72 Seattle Art Museum, “Virtual Tour.”
installations or alterations to these rooms. “Of the Spirit World” was composed of the ceremonial regalia of the Kwagiulth and neighboring tribes. On the far back of the gallery stood two large interior house-posts from the early twentieth century, representing a Kwagiulth thunderbird sitting atop a crouching grizzly bear. Displayed on pillars in front of the posts on a raised platform, Nuu-chah-nulth and Kwagiulth masks and headdresses looked out at waist height. In between the house-posts on the back wall hung a Bella Coola Sinxolatla (Image of the Sun) disk.


Among the headdresses and house-posts, Wilson installed six television monitors that looped videos made by Native Americans living in and near Seattle [Fig. 4]. The monitors were

73 “Kwagiulth” is a term that denotes Kwakwaka’wakw speaking people. It is used instead of the older Kwakiutl.
placed on pedestals around the gallery, with one being placed on the floor next to a house-post. Wilson asked six Seattle based artists with Native heritage to make videos on any subject. Philip Red Eagle interviewed Native American Vietnam veterans [Fig. 5]. Annie Hanson told a short story, while Glenda J. Guilmet juxtaposed contemporary native dancing with urban Indian rock-and-roll. Raymond Colby showed abstract images of an oil spill, and Ullaq Ahvankana spoke in his studio about his sculpture.

![Figure 5. Fred Wilson, The Museum: Mixed Metaphors, 1992, Film still, Red Eagle interviewing a Native Vietnam Veteran. Seattle, Seattle Art Museum.](image)

**Reversing the Ethnographic Gaze**

The artist’s juxtaposed videos presented Native Northwest Coast culture as changing, cross-cultural, and in between worlds. The videos – juxtaposing contemporary Native life with

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the traditional Kwagiulth regalia – encouraged reflection on questions of cultural change, contemporary Native reality, and “what has been gained, what has been maintained, and what has been lost.” The artist’s installations enacted new definitions of authenticity that located it as a creative activity that involved aspects of Euro-American culture while not being overwhelmed by it. In this version, “tradition” is no longer salvaged from the past, but is positioned as producing a viable future. While the permanent exhibition emphasized the continued importance of the potlatch, the artist’s installation looked instead at the way Native peoples had adopted and adapted aspects of American culture in the late twentieth century. Against the installations of *Mixed Metaphors*, the traditional objects in the permanent collection appeared as part of an authentic Native culture that was a syncretic patchwork, not a salvaged essence.

Like the artist’s juxtapositions, the videos themselves told stories of a cross-cultural Native present. Philip Red Eagle published a collection of short stories in 1997 as a result of his interviews with Native American Vietnam veterans and his own experience fighting in the war from 1970-72. Stories of returning home from the war to resentment, hostility, and binge drinking were told by “most everyone I had a chance to talk to,” he wrote. In *Red Earth* (1997), Red Eagle wove together stories of the pain of war with the power of traditional Native medicines and healing. Annie Hansen, of Lenape and Norwegian heritage, is a fiction writer, poet, and storyteller. Her stories from the early nineties often centered around the fictional character “Jimmy One Rock.” For example, “The Burial Mound” (1993) related the story of Jimmy One Rock crashing his ’62 Impala on the rez, getting drunk and going to jail, and building

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77 Although I do not have access to the videos themselves, educated guesses can be made about their contents by comparison with contextual material.

a sweat lodge. As in the gallery itself, these stories revealed Native individuals as negotiating life between worlds.

Both SAM’s permanent collection and Mixed Metaphors addressed the same underlying issues of authenticity and representation in different ways. Responding to calls for greater participation of Native individuals in the display of Native culture in museums, SAM worked with Tlingit elders and other Native consultants in the curation and organization of the Northwest Coast galleries. Songs and stories by elders were incorporated into an audio track that played in the “Of the Spirit World” room. In this Brown had seemingly taken up Ames’ call and was incorporating Indian perspectives in the galleries themselves prior to Wilson’s own insertions of those perspectives in more explicit ways. Additionally, names of objects in Native languages were given on object labels, and the three galleries were titled with names in Native languages as well. Finally, photographs that accompanied objects showed the works in historical and contemporary contexts. Unlike Curtis’ photographs and other types of ethnographic and art historical photography that tended to omit signs of contemporary or Western culture, these photos included contexts that revealed modern life and cross-cultural interaction. One photo,


81 At the same time, the Northwest Coast gallery’s permanent collection referenced tradition as something that had real and often political meaning for Native identity. The gallery’s photographs and displays recalled the resurgence of Northwest Coast native culture since the 1950s: specifically with the end of the prohibition and the revitalization of the potlatch. In 1922, Canadian officials confiscated over four hundred objects of potlatch regalia – consisting of headdresses, silver plates, cloths, carved chests, and masks – from the Kwagiulth as punishment for the performance of the then illegal potlatch. In 1979, the potlatch regalia was returned to the Kwagiulth from several Canadian museums, on the stipulation that it would be housed in a Native run museum. The opening of the U’mista Cultural Center in 1979 was accompanied by potlatches and traditional ceremonies. While Northwest Coast communities had continued to potlatch furtively during the first half of the twentieth century, the return of legal potlatching in the Northwest Coast indigenous communities (prohibition on the potlatch ended in the early 1950s) marked a moment cultural rejuvenation.

82 Since anthropologists and museums were guided by notions of authenticity, they sought objects that referenced the culture as it was prior to western contact. Thus, contemporary history - the history of the people adapting to and
for example, showed a group of Nuu-chah-nulth women wearing *Hinkeet’sam* masks in a clearing in front of cars and telephone lines in 1953. Another depicted a performance of a Bella Coola mask for tourists in 1976. The photos evidenced cultural change and the continuation of tradition. Standing in front of cars and telephone wires, the Nuu-chah-nulth dancers could plausibly be seen to have arrived in the automobiles and to live in modern, electrified houses. The photo included references that brought the masks and dancers out of a vague ethnographic present and located them in a particular historical moment, thus challenging the anthropological practice of describing traditional culture as it once was using the present tense.

*Mixed Metaphors and Art/Artifact*

In contrast to the permanent collection, *Mixed Metaphors* more explicitly challenged definitions of art and artifact, articulating meanings and references that showed the intrusion of politics, history, and local voices into ethnographic and aesthetic contexts. Wilson’s installations in the Northwest Coast gallery went beyond the polarities of art versus culture or context versus aesthetic contextualization, to employ a mixture of interpretive strategies such as politics, history, and personal narrative. In doing so, *Mixed Metaphors* was one of a variety of different ways that indigenous people, artists, and museum curators challenged art and artifact methods of display in the eighties and early nineties.

During the twentieth century, collected indigenous objects were typically classified as either art or artifacts. As art, they were considered for their formal properties, while as artifacts navigating the “modern” world was often ignored or seen as contaminating or impure. See also Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture.*


84 See Fabian, *Time and the Other,* on the ethnographic present and temporal distancing in anthropology.
they were meaningful in terms of their use, function, or role in illustrating a wider cultural context. While some argued for indigenous art’s universal and trans-historical meaning, others claimed that a “true” understanding of Native collections was only possible within an original cultural context. As Roy Sieber wrote in 1971, “admiration in isolation easily lends to misunderstanding,” a work of art must “finally be understood only in the light of its cultural origins.” Yet others argued for a more “immediate” response to understanding and judging works of indigenous art. As Susan Vogel wrote in the “Introduction” to *African Masterpieces* (1985), “the aesthetic-anthropological debate has been gradually stilled, and it is now accepted that among the thousands of ethnographic specimens in the *Musee de l’Homme* are many works of art, and among them a smaller number of masterpieces.” True works of art, she argued, lurked under the ethnographic “specimens” of museum collections.

On one level, the artist’s installation contrasted with typical ethnographic and aesthetic display techniques: the juxtaposition of video and objects close together impeded the detached aesthetic contemplation of the traditional works, as was the goal of art and gallery displays. The monitors also took the display out of the realm of ethnographic contextualization: no longer about reconstructing the original firelight context of the potlatch or the original uses and functions of the objects, the installation encouraged a back and forth dialogue between the traditional objects and contemporary videos. With the juxtapositions, the traditional objects now appeared as sites of authenticity surrounded by change and conflict.

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Completed in early nineties, *Mixed Metaphors* was part of a larger variety of ways that indigenous people, artists, and museum curators were challenging art and artifact methods of display. In doing so, they highlighted marginalized indigenous practices, gave greater agency to Native people, and even questioned some basic foundations of museum preservation and exhibition. For example, indigenous art often participated in museum and art market circles as well as traditional Native ceremonies and religious life. (ex. Coe, Kwagiulth potlatch ceremony). Museum collections that saw collected objects as either art or artifact short circuited these additional functions and meanings. The repatriation of Native objects also flipped the narratives of museum collecting: as indigenous objects were re-contextualized back to native communities, the question of whether they “belonged” in museums at all was at stake. At the same time, indigenous run museums and cultural centers told their own histories in ways that were too personal, local, and embedded within ongoing political struggle to fit cleanly within art and artifact display. For example, at the U’mista Cultural Center in the Northwest Coast, repatriated regalia was displayed as family and clan property, community treasures not works of art.\(^{88}\) Finally, native consultation for the organization of shows such as *Chiefly Feasts* (1991) also questioned how Native objects were classified. They showed how the objects could be considered as mnemonic aids to stories and issues of contemporary Native struggle.\(^{89}\) As Native consent and consultation became the norm and a variety of exhibition practices grappled with the ethics of museum collections, *Mixed Metaphors* offered one example of intervening in the legacy of authenticity and ethnographic and art historical discourses.

\(^{88}\) Clifford, “Four Northwest Coast Museums,” 241.

CONCLUSION

Against the background of tensions animating museum discourse of the 1980s, *Mixed Metaphors* challenged both art and artifact methods of display and discourses of authenticity. Instead of lamenting changes in indigenous societies, or rearticulating narratives of the redemption and preservation of indigenous culture from immanent destruction or contamination, *Mixed Metaphors* pushed SAM to further articulate its values of global, cross-cultural, and future oriented indigenous presents. While the artist’s juxtapositions did enact authenticity as a western invention, this did not mean that traditions were invented or merely arbitrary constructs. Instead, the installations referenced the ways traditions continued in the present, morphing, changing, and incorporating western culture in ways that were not mere repetitions or assimilations. Against the background of SAM’s permanent collection, *Mixed Metaphors* formed a continuation of the practices and approaches already in use at the museum. This fact belies easy characterization of artist versus museum binaries. Yet aspects of *Mixed Metaphors* went beyond than those practices, pushing the underlying principles farther than the museum had done. Doing so, Wilson opened the installation up to meanings outside of the art and artifact paradigms of classification, interpretation, and display. Ultimately, the installations participated in questioning some of the organizing principles of museum’s role as collectors and preservers of art and culture. At stake was both the stories told, and the institutional framework in which they were organized. In doing so, *Mixed Metaphors* was one of a variety of ways that challenged art-artifact collecting practices.
In conclusion, I would like to point to a couple of other ways Wilson’s installation worked to remap presentations of indigenous culture in museums also less examined in the existing literature on *Mixed Metaphors*. In his essay “Museums as Contact Zones,” James Clifford argues that the movement of indigenous objects to museums should not be confused with narratives of progress or scientific discovery. Instead, he advocates viewing museums through a “contact perspective,” borrowed from Mary Louise Pratt’s notion of a “contact zone” as

the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.\(^90\)

From a contact perspective, all collecting is viewed as responses to particular histories of dominance, resistance, and mobilization.\(^91\) He argues that we should rethink museum collections as places of passage and encounter, travel and (re)crossings.\(^92\) Objects in major museums can thus begin to seem like diasporic travelers, and museums that formerly seemed to be cultural centers become borders crossed by objects and makers.\(^93\)

Viewing museums as contact zones not only changes the meaning of “collection,” but questions the assumed homogeneity of the museum public. To the extent that museums understand themselves to be interacting with specific communities across cultural borders, they begin to operate in a contact zone. Indeed, with the rise of distinct audiences bringing differently attuned historical experiences to the museum during the 1980s, museums became inescapable

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92 Ibid., 213.

93 Ibid., 204.
While the Enlightenment heritage of the museum treated collections as the cultural property or patrimony of the nation, *whose* property exactly and which communities had a stake in it became a pressing issue.

In both galleries, the objects added to the displays by the artist carried important local connections. In the African gallery, the suit and watch belonged to museum staff who had emigrated from Africa, while the videos of Nigerian soap operas were also borrowed from Nigerian people in Seattle. In the Northwest Coast gallery, all of the videos playing were made by people in Seattle of Native heritage. *Mixed Metaphor’s* use of local objects worked to change the function of the museum from a site of cultural survey and disembodied knowledge to a place of passage and contestation. The cultural contact and conflict brought about through the artist’s juxtapositions challenged historical museum practices of collection and display.

Wilson’s use of local objects forced the museum and its curators to reckon with the fact that those objects belonged to others – even others working at the museum! In this way, collection and the museum is reworked as something temporary, a waystation between places, a site of passage. Yet the inclusion of the local objects furthered highlighted the communities who might have a stake in the museum. Whereas Enlightenment ideals of the museum and its collection as property of a nation assumed a homogenous public, here that homogeneity is problematic. Viewing *Mixed Metaphors* one would have been aware of *whose* suit and watch were on display. Finally, the objects used by Wilson cannot be aligned to typical narratives of preservation and progress. Here, collection is refigured as unfinished historical processes of

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95 James Clifford, “Museums as Contact Zones,” 204.

travel and crossing which change one’s perception of museum publics and cultural property. In this refiguring, museums become sites of struggle and communication between different communities, working within these entanglements rather than trying to transcend them.

This perspective on Mixed Metaphors adds a new avenue to explore how Wilson’s work fit into and added to the important rethinking of museums as cultural institutions in the late twentieth century. As museums became embroiled in multicultural controversy, it was evident that what was needed was not just a reconsideration of the kinds of stories that museums told, but the fundamental structures of power that organized them, structures that stemmed in part from the museum’s Enlightenment and nineteenth century heritage. Unpacking these structures was the work of artists and indigenous people as much as curators and scholars. Considering Mixed Metaphors as a museum practice in the contact zone hints at the richness, complexity, and ongoing importance that Wilson’s work has for the present.

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97 James Clifford, “Museums as Contact Zones,” 213.
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