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Wilmer Wilson IV and the Body Surface: Intersubjectivity and a Call to Decenter the Decentered

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If you had been in Washington, D.C. between April 5 and April 13, 2012, you might have seen a tall, spare figure covered in postage stamps and looking as insubstantial as a slip of paper, cutting determinedly down the sidewalk. Had you joined the entourage of photographers, curators, and happenstance spectators following him to his destination, you would have witnessed the figure enter a post office, peel a few stamps back from his mouth, and ask to be mailed. You might have heard the postal clerk tell him, "Baby, I can't mail you. You're a body!" and you would have seen the young man retreat to the post office lobby and carefully shed his stamp skin, leaving a neat, forlorn crumple on the floor.[1] The art piece you might have witnessed was called *Henry "Box" Brown: FOREVER*, and the artist who performed it was Wilmer Wilson IV, a twenty-six-year-old M.B.A. based in the nation's capital. Delicate workings at the body surface pervade not just this piece but much of Wilson's practice, like in a piece called *From My Paper Bag Colored Heart*, where the artist inflates small brown paper bags (a reference to the "paper bag test" used historically in black communities to exclude those with darker skin), and ties them with rough twine to his naked body until he is completely subsumed (Fig. 1).

Given Wilson's youth, no critical interpretations of his work have been written yet, except for two essays in a book produced by the artist to document *Henry "Box" Brown: FOREVER* and a few newspaper and magazine articles concerning the openings of his shows and the timing of his performances. Body art involves making an art object of the human subject and injecting subjectivity and its complications into the object, where object means material thing/being and subject means experiencing, living being. The subject-object distinction strictly delimits what we can know of ourselves and others, and its implications are violent, allowing as they did American chattel slavery. But Wilson, patching with postage stamps the chasm between subject and object, overcomes. In the West, as described by philosopher René Descartes, we locate our subjectivity in the act of thinking[2], and conceive it as discrete, not accessible to or knowable by others. This subject, the "Cartesian subject," is centered in the mind and in the world through which it moves. Wilson enacts the subject-object transformations of body art and thereby goes to work on the Cartesian subject: he carefully coaxes both the object (art object, thingified human, and material being) and the subject (his self, the selves of his spectators, and the spectral Cartesian self) to the surface of his body, where they meet and fuse. By relocating his subjectivity at the boundary of his body instead of leaving it in the usual abstract recess of his interior, Wilson coheres object and subject, the first no longer racialized and the second no longer relegated to an inaccessible interior.

Three iterations of *Henry "Box" Brown: FOREVER* were performed, using first 4-, 5-, and 10-cent stamps with arts and crafts motifs, then 20-cent George Washington stamps, then 45-cent Forever stamps to cover the artist's body, which moved respectively through Cleveland Park, a rich white neighborhood, the historically black Shaw neighborhood, and the National Mall (Figs. 2, 3, 4).[3] Each walk was photographed extensively, and although Wilson never was mailed, the piece's namesake was. Henry "Box" Brown was a slave in Virginia who mailed himself to freedom in Philadelphia in 1848 "in a box 3 feet long and 2 feet wide," per the title of the autobiography he wrote afterward.[4] The journey was over 24 hours long and Brown nearly suffocated several times when the box was upended and jostled.[5] Once he emerged, Brown reveled in telling his story. He gave lectures at abolitionist gatherings, often arriving in his box and leaping out of it, resurrecting again and again at the start of each performance.[6] He painted a giant panorama of his journey and

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toured the northern United States and Britain.[7] The tale of his liberation has maintained a transatlantic fascination for over a century and a half.[8] The staying power of Brown's story is in its neat allegory, as scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. suggests in the introduction to a 2002 reprinting of Brown's autobiography: by cramming himself into a tiny container reminiscent of both the conditions of the middle passage and a coffin, "Brown made literal much that was implicit in the symbolism of enslavement." [9] Brown capitalized on his brilliant symbolism and enacted in his career as a showman a practice not too different from that of the modern performance artist. In her essay in *Henry "Box" Brown: FOREVER*, Jessica Bell writes, "In the case of Brown, to abscond away as property was the only way to achieve freedom, and in turn, a sense of an unquestionable self;" a performed transformation between object and subject was Brown's salvation, and is Wilson's project too.[10] Wilson's performance and its titular FOREVER evoke the endurance of Brown's story and the living legacy of slavery and imparts to the subject the same hypervisibility as the culturally thingified[11] and actually material body.

Wilson remembers learning the story of Henry "Box" Brown in school, and notes that they are both from Richmond,[12] connected not just by their home but by their parallel experiences. *Henry "Box" Brown: FOREVER* has elicited emotional responses, as when a viewer "for whom," according to his curator Laura Routlet, "Wilson's embodiment of slavery was real," tried to rescue Wilson from his entourage because she worried Wilson was being coerced into the performance and humiliated.[13] He does illuminate how contemporary oppression and alienation force the great-grandchildren of the African slaves into a new bondage. Black Americans are repeatedly incarcerated and forced into unpaid or hardly-paid labor, when they are not the victims of state-sanctioned murder by police. Wilson addresses this complex and diffuse materialized injustice in operation today, and follows with a revelation. In *Henry "Box" Brown: FOREVER* he embodies slavery and subjectivity at once: by encouraging objecthood to envelope his body, he frees himself to personhood as Brown did in a box. But black people have been asserting their Cartesian rationality for centuries. Wilson does not bring blackness to the Cartesian subject, but draws the subject to the surface where it mingles with the object and with blackness. He enables this interaction and by carrying it *on*, rather than *in*, his body, he asserts its truth and legibility, and challenges the validity of an unintelligible, enclosed self.

To see how he does this, we must consider how Wilson exploits and extends the tools of his genre, particularly an implement called *intersubjectivity*. In *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, poststructuralist Amelia Jones describes body art's inherently postmodern nature and its radical potential "as a set of performative practices that, through... intersubjective engagement, instantiate the dislocating or decentering of the Cartesian subject of modernism." [14] Intersubjectivity injects itself between subject and world, insists that the subject is not discrete and *original* but rather one of many malleable subjectivities that flow into each other and create meaning outside of (and only outside of) themselves. In other words, the only (meaningful) subject is the socially accessible subject. Knowing this, Wilson wrenches the Cartesian subject from the unintelligibility of his interior and smooths onto his skin on a spring day in D.C. His work is of the sort that Jones would say "insistently [poses] the subject as *intersubjective* (contingent on the other) rather than complete within itself (the Cartesian subject who is fully centered and fully self-knowing in his cognition)." [15] If most art is concerned with the construction of objects—paintings, sculptures, photographs—for the subject-viewer to interpret, body art requires a different and more vulnerable role for the spectator. Especially in the instance that the artist is the performer of their own piece, as in all of Wilson's performance work, the art object is now also embodied subject, and this compels the viewer to engage both with their own subjectivity and that of the artist-performer: "As the artist is marked as contingent, so is the interpreter," says Jones.[16] The result is a continual interchange of understanding and power that entails extreme vulnerability. A space of transformation – of intersubjectivity – opens between subject-and-object performer and subject-and-object viewer into which both participants can step. Jones also invokes Vivian Sobchack's definition of the *interobjective*, "an insistence on the interrelatedness of subjects and objects, our inevitable

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simultaneous existence as subject and object, and our interdependence with our environments."^[17] Wilson insists on such simultaneity in a spatial sense, acquainting his material and experiencing selves at his surface, where they are finally able to meet with those of others. However, Wilson does not abandon the Cartesian self as poststructuralism prescribes, but frees it to interact with other selves.

The art object of *Henry "Box" Brown: FOREVER* is dispersed. It is not only in the sparse materials of some stamps and Wilson's own body. By iterating the piece over three sets of carefully-chosen starting locations, walking spaces, and post offices, Wilson incorporates the neighborhoods of Chocolate City (Washington, D.C.) and their inhabitants, histories, and economic-cultural relations into his piece as well. With him on the walk was a cortege of curators, photographers, people who helped him apply the stamps, friends, and spectators, all of whom became part of the substance of the piece. His soft insistence on being mailed drew into the performance postal workers as well as the regulations, bureaucracy, and bewilderment that prevented Wilson from mailing himself. The photographs of the piece and the accompanying book containing them and three essays, which was printed in only 85 copies, further enact the dispersal of the art object. The book exists also in the strange liminal space of *issuu.com*, where it can be viewed but not downloaded, accessed but not possessed.

The object nestles near the overlapping perforations of Wilson's suit of stamps, skin of stamps, rushing over the artist's body like scales or chain mail or tiny tongues lapping and healing. In a 2013 interview with the artist, Deborah Anzinger of New Local Space Kingston notes of Wilson's work, "I find that you have a very emergent approach to sculpture and the performance that you do in that you take a lot of these really tiny repeating elements and then you just build them up, build them up, build them up, until they start to take on a whole different meaning."^[18] Wilson says his task is "constructing things out of other things that already have meaning and trying to shift their contexts in that way," creating an object that is irreducible and emergent – hardly object at all.^[19] Wilson's object is the same as his subject and it is highly specific: it is not just "the stamps" or even "the performance," but the surface of his body. It is not the whole body or the skin or the stamp skin, but the *surface*, a non-object coercively made object long ago by the invention of race and then again, intentionally, by the adherence of hundreds of FOREVER stamps.

In other pieces Wilson makes us interrogate the surface further: in *Voted* and *Legalized* (2012), he covers himself, respectively, in I Voted stickers (Fig. 5) and un-imprinted notary seals (Fig. 6), iterating the same second skin, the same unrealized liberation (for neither by a trip to the post office, nor by a successfully submitted ballot, nor by a notarized mortgage is the black subject yet freed), and the contingency of object and subject. Wilson removes the object from the material composition of his performance: he has displayed shed sticker skins on plain box pedestals in the gallery at Theaster Gates' black artists retreat, and, most instructively, worked the same concept in band-aids in 2011's *Bandage* (Fig. 7) and black post-it notes in *Black Mask* in 2012 (Fig. 8).^[20] The shed skins, which lie forlorn and crumpled in the gallery space, evoke more strongly the negative space of their emptiness than the positive of their presence. They are antiobjects, degenerate surfaces of nothing, representatives of a body no longer present. A residue of subject remains in the implied act of their discard, but subjects do not inhabit non-objects. In contrast, the applied band-aids and black notes form complex interobjective systems with the skin under them, the flesh under that, the performer-subject, and the viewer. The band-aids have, as Wilson notes in the New Local Space interview, a "really direct relationship to flesh, and to healing flesh," which, along with "the particularities of my own body, particularly my skin tone and the historical contexts of America and its racial relationships... ends up loading the bandage with much different meaning than what's expected," and ends up looping the object continually between the embodied subject, the first skin, and the second.^[21] We witness the band-aids and their relationship to Wilson's darker-than-them skin, and the post-its whose deep black becomes dense with significance against Wilson's lighter-

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than-them skin, locating object and subject too in the enacted adherence, the sticking of a skin to a skin, the melding and writing of the body surface.

As Wilson walks to the post office, his alien appearance in the second skin becomes both weirder and more easily assimilated as the stamps begin to slough off of him at the back of his head and at the joints of his limbs, and his applied and actual skins vie for validity and significance. It is not in the stamp skin, nor just in Wilson's body, nor in the varied surroundings and lush documentation where the object and subject of *Henry "Box" Brown: FOREVER* and its satellite and sibling pieces are most concentrated, though all of these critically constitute it. Rather the object is in the space Wilson says he is most interested in, the "in-between space between... recognizable and unrecognizable."^[22] And the subject is there too. Carefully, we find it there at the body surface: it may be that the Western post-postmodern "millennial" (Wilson is 26) subject is necessarily decentered, a little fragmented, a little alienated, but the black subject is always already decentered in America, thrown to the periphery while the black body is hypervisible. Anti-black conceptions of black being relegate it to the skin, to relative darkness and lightness and violence, and to nowhere like a brain-centered Cartesian interiority. Wilson isn't doing decentering work in *Henry "Box" Brown: FOREVER* by the fact of his blackness, but by actively making himself object, he is seizing the subject on its way out, emulsifying it and applying it to his surface. He bears there at once slave narrative and forceful subjectivity, placing, as he has stated, "identities or contexts that are in opposition, together."^[23] That surface space, where the self meets the world, is the only place that self is relevant or intelligible anyway, the only place where intersubjectivity can occur certainly, but also the only place where we can make sense of our own being and its histories.

The extreme vulnerability Wilson allows by making his subjectivity intelligible, by layering skins and moving through public space, is both ahead of his time and still a member of a long lineage of shifting subjectivity that runs through the history of the West. It is of the celebratory political narcissism of those long oppressed, but also of a deeper and more worried interior space, coaxed to the body surface and into intersubjective exchange through careful construction of a flaky faux skin that references as it falls apart the fragility of the human skin beneath it.^[24] It is again in the interesting lumen between skins that Wilson locates the subject and the object of his art piece, and it is there that he creates an authentic and meaningful space of transformation. Wilson's revolution is an embrace of Enlightenment solipsism in his confident engagement with "the experience of the individual that I understand most deeply . . . my own."^[25] His works involve a singular, not necessarily universalized but certainly de-particularized body, and emphasize not fragmentation but connection with the creole past of America (in the story of Henry "Box" Brown, with light brown band-aids and dark black post-it notes, and in *From My Paper Bag Colored Heart*, which links the pervasiveness of shadism and the personal nature of anxiety) and the fraught past of Western ontology.^[26] By locating the self and subject at the body surface, Wilson does the radical work of disengaging the object from blackness (which is left ecstatically intact), and with his free hand modulates Descartes' notion of self away from its centeredness into something coherent with material being. Postmodernism would have us abandon the Cartesian subject (easier said than done) to decolonize our selves and live in community, but Wilson's idea is better. By moving the subject to the surface through iterative disappearance and revelation from beneath second skins built up and sloughed off, he creates a decentered subject that is intelligible and interactive, primed for intersubjectivity with other people but also for self-understanding. The transatlantic slave trade and Cartesian ontology kicked off at near the same time. Wilson's is a project four hundred years in the making, and he is only twenty six.

Endnotes

[1] Wilmer Wilson IV, Laura Roulet, and Jessica Bell, *Henry "Box" Brown: FOREVER, A Narrative*. 2013, 105.

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- [2] "I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind" (René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17.). Colloquially: I think, therefore I am.
- [3] Roulet, 100, 102, 104.
- [4] Henry Box Brown and Charles Stearns, *Narrative of the Life of Henry "Box" Brown Who Escaped From Slavery, Enclosed in a Box 3 Feet Long and 2 Wide. Written From a Statement of Facts Made by Himself. With Remarks Upon the Remedy for Slavery* (Boston: Brown and Stearns, 1849) via Hollis Robbins, 'Fugitive Mail: The Deliverance of Henry 'Box' Brown and Antebellum Postal Politics.'" (*American Studies* 50: 5-25), 5.
- [5] Marcus Wood, *'ALL RIGHT!': The Narrative of Henry "Box" Brown as a Test Case for the Racial Prescription of Rhetoric and Semiotics*. (The American Antiquarian Society, 1998), 73.
- [6] Robbins, 5.
- [7] Robbins, 5.
- [8] Wood, 73; Robbins, 5.
- [9] Henry "Box" Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry "Box" Brown, Written by Himself*. Introduction by Richard Newman and Forward by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), ix-x, via Robbins, 5.
- [10] Bell, 114.
- [11] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Where Do We Go From Here?" (Speech at the 11th Annual Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Atlanta, GA, August 16th, 1967)
- [12] Wilmer Wilson IV, interviewed by Deborah Anzinger, *New Local Space*. [youtube.com/watch?v=rSVyGCs4euc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSVyGCs4euc), May 21, 2013.
- [13] Routlet, 104.
- [14] Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 1.
- [15] Jones, 10.
- [16] Jones, 9.
- [17] Jones, 18.
- [18] Wilson, 10:12.
- [19] Wilson, 10:00.
- [20] "Retreat." Curated by Theaster Gates. Valerie Carberry and Richard Gray Galleries, John Hancock Center. 875 N Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60611. August 22 – October 10, 2014.
- [21] Wilson, 10:40.
- [22] Wilson, 31:00.
- [23] Wilson, 3:10, 5:26.
- [24] Jones, 9.
- [25] Wilson, 3:57.
- [26] See also Wilson's "Faust" works: *Faust in the City*, 2013; *Priestess Faust*, 2015.

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- Wilson IV, Wilmer, interviewed by Deborah Anzinger, *New Local Space*. [youtube.com/watch?v=rSVyGCs4euc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSVyGCs4euc), May 21, 2013.
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Figures



Fig. 1 – Wilmer Wilson IV (American, 1989-present).
From My Paper Bag Colored Heart, 2014. Performance. r-e-c-u-r-r-i-n-g.info/heart.



Fig. 2 – Wilmer Wilson IV (American, 1989-present). *Henry "Box" Brown: FOREVER*, 2012.
Performance. r-e-c-u-r-r-i-n-g.info/forever.



Fig. 3 – Wilmer Wilson IV (American, 1989-present). *Henry "Box" Brown: FOREVER*, 2012.
Performance. r-e-c-u-r-r-i-n-g.info/forever.

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Fig. 4 – Wilmer Wilson IV (American, 1989-present). *Henry "Box" Brown: FOREVER*, 2012. Performance. r-e-c-u-r-r-i-n-g.info/forever.



Fig. 5 – Wilmer Wilson IV (American, 1989-present). *Voted*, 2012. Performance. ny.voltashow.com/Wilmer-Wilson-IV.7383.0.html.



Fig. 6 – Wilmer Wilson IV (American, 1989-present). *Legalize*, 2012. Performance. connersmith.us.com/exhibitions/volta-ny/installation-views?view=slider#8.

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Fig. 7 – Wilmer Wilson IV (American, 1989-present). *Bandage*, 2011. Performance. ny.voltashow.com/Wilmer-Wilson-IV.7383.0.html.



Fig. 8 – Wilmer Wilson IV (American, 1989-present). *Black Mask*, 2012. Performance. connersmith.us.com/artists/wilmer-wilson-iv/featured-works?view=slider#13.