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That guy walking the streets of Philly with a TV? He's art. Others will follow

by **Stephan Salisbury**, Posted: April 4, 2017

He's found them on the streets of Kingsessing and Mantua and Grays Ferry, all over the city: Broken and beat old television sets, cathode ray tubes long gone, many consisting only of angular shells.

They are survivors of a sort -- and some even function.

It actually makes no difference to Wilmer Wilson IV if the televisions he has found, usually in early-morning wanderings about the city, still play. They all work as art.

Wilson traveled around Philadelphia last month gathering TVs and cases, bringing them back to the gallery of the Barnes Foundation on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway as part of the exhibition *Person of the Crowd: The Contemporary Art of Flânerie*, a show of perambulators and performers, scavengers and sculptors that runs until May 22.

For the Barnes exhibition, Wilson has constructed a jagged mound of urban television residue, rising from a platform within a Barnes gallery interior garden. And this week, he's venturing out from the Barnes, carrying one of his working TVs, the screen showing an X-ray image of his own ribs.

Wilson is one of more than 50 artists represented in *Person of the Crowd*, and one of several performance artists whose work spills out onto the city streets, plying their aesthetic amid the concrete and bustle of Philadelphia. So for the next month and a half, what you see on the way to lunch may not be just an ordinary instance of Philadelphia oddness; it could be art!

Wilson's wanderings with the televised X-ray of his ribs are an allusion to the forgotten practice of "turf dropping" by the Philadelphia police. In 1968, the Philadelphia Tribune reported the police were taking African American suspects to hostile neighborhoods and dropping them -- a practice, the Tribune reported, that had ended in the death of one young man said to be "good at repairing television sets."

"A lot of my work is kind of about trying to draw together the ephemeral aspects of social life and the raw material of social life, so I do that through performative gestures and through sculptural material gatherings of things," Wilson said recently. "This piece is ... maybe an attempt to be a sort of monument or memorial."

Whatever else they may be, in Wilson's vision, the broken TVs call to mind the cast-off and forgotten denizens of the city in general, and the TV-repairing, turf-dropping victim in particular.

Wilson is from Richmond, Va. He earned his master's degree in fine arts from the University of Pennsylvania, now lives in Philadelphia, and is familiar with at least some of the city's byways, although he said his search for cast-off TVs had taken him into some less-familiar territory. A lot of people want to help him gather TVs, and some even want him to come into their basements to get their old sets. Wilson has declined.

On every sunny day until Thursday, he'll continue his treks through the city bearing the X-ray TV.

"I'm definitely invested in exploring the altering ways in which specific bodies can inhabit certain types of public space," he said.

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DAVE MAIALETTI / Staff Photographer

Artist Wilmer Wilson (left), one of the flanerite practitioners in the current show at the Barnes, talks with Nate Thompson.

The same can be said for Ayana Evans, who attended the Tyler School of Art and now lives in New York City.

Evans, who is participating in the *Person of the Crowd* show via outdoor performance, offers her own jarring racial and cultural experience. In May, wearing a bright bodysuit and heels, she will present high-octane performances around town, performances that "express what's going on in my life or how I feel as a black woman or how I feel as a feminist."

"It's all about claiming territory," she says. "It's all about being seen. It's all about taking up space in a man's world."

Sanford Biggers, another artist in the Barnes exhibition, is creating objects that may, or may not, allude to African traditions, but they will definitely allude to a 1999 piece he performed in Chicago. In that performance, the dreadlocked Biggers carried two objects -- a book and a briefcase -- inspired by Congo spirit figures, or *nkisi*, on a commuter train and into the city.

Most other besuited commuters ignored him. But one well-dressed woman was quite taken by the objects.

"They're like *nkisi*," she said, before returning to her newspaper.

Biggers has some photographs in the gallery exhibition and two sculptural works -- the nail-studded book (*Hangman's House*) and the nail-encrusted, leather-and-twine-wrapped "briefcase" (*Duchamp in the Congo*) he used in his 1999 performance.

On May 17, Biggers and two artist friends will re-invent the 1999 Chicago performance in Philadelphia.

"I don't know what to expect," he said from his New York studio.

Person of the Crowd, through May 22 at the Barnes Foundation. Museum admission \$10-\$25. Information: 215-278-7000 or www.barnesfoundation.org. The website has a full schedule of April and May performances.