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Features

Reviews

Itinerary

[<< Back to Features](#)

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Dread Scott: Radical Conscience

by A.M. Weaver

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On the Impossibility of Freedom in a Country Founded on Slavery and Genocide, 2014.

Dread Scott's edict is make "revolutionary art—to propel history forward." Since the early 1990s, after graduating from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and completing the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program, Scott has joined the ranks of historical/political artists, following in the footsteps of John Heartfield, George Grosz, and Leon Golub, along with his activist contemporaries Ai Weiwei, Nari Ward, and Berry Bickle. By using his work to raise awareness of social injustices, Scott makes clear his intention of challenging the status quo. He employs irony and humor to make powerful statements pertaining to pressing issues, including freedom of speech on a global level, state-levied violence against citizens, class inequality, and racially motivated oppression. In Scott's lexicon, the phrase "by any means necessary" means deploying performance, installation, collage, and painting to convey his ideas and ideology. Without being didactic, he convincingly articulates the concerns of marginalized communities across America—the incarcerated, urban youth, and the 99%.

Historic Corrections, which was included in "Screenings: Public & Private" (2004) at a small museum in southern New Jersey, offers a good introduction to his thought-ful shock tactics. Scott's contribution to this exhibition exploring representations of the black body beyond stereotypes featured images of incarcerated black and Latino men juxtaposed against a photomural backdrop of the 1919 lynching of William Brown. A replica of a wooden electric chair stood in the center of the installation, surrounded by mechanized police batons mounted on wooden stands. Historic Corrections knocked a sleepy suburban community out of its somnolent state and initiated a dialogue about everyday inequities just outside the museum's doors. The batons, each striking a cast fiberglass head every 10 seconds with a hard, resounding blow, were linked to live, unedited reports from a police radio. Viewers could walk through the environment and experience it from different perspectives: sometimes seeing the "urban youth" as jailed criminals, and other times, sharing their space. Everyone who confronted the work felt its impact. Many viewers of color sympathized with the sentiment of the piece, while some white viewers cringed and questioned the relevance of mounting such at work at a museum.

Courting controversy is not new for Scott. His performance work, Money to Burn (2010), part of his "It's the Economy Stupid!" series, predated Occupy Wall Street by a year. In this case, Scott was a soothsayer, a John the Baptist crying in the wilderness about economic affairs in the United States and paving the way for organized protests. His 1988 work What is the Proper Way to Display a US Flag? generated hundreds of responses from visitors to the gallery of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a direct rebuttal from then-President Bush. In creating this controversial installation, Scott's intent was to defy compulsory patriotism. His

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efforts continued with an action in which he (together with Joey Johnson—defendant in the 1988 Supreme Court flag burning case—Dave Blalock, and Sean Eichman) burned flags on the steps of the Capitol Building to protest the Flag Protection Act of 1989. As Scott describes it, this act “would have outlawed criticism of the flag, which is one step from outlawing criticism of the government. The legislation contained specific wording that was added in response to, and which would outlaw...What is the Proper Way to Display a US Flag?” In 1990, he and his collaborators appeared before the Supreme Court in *United States v. Eichman* as a consequence of their protest.

Scott was not raised as a revolutionary, though his mother was fairly radical, her political views inspired by the ferment of the 1960s and shaped by the philosophy of the Panthers. His father, on the other hand, was politically conservative, and he believed that the way to uplift black people resided solely in hard work, though as a small businessman, his experiences with racism hindered the family's economic success.

Scott's activism began to emerge during his college years, when he was trying to make sense of the world. He was greatly influenced by the punk scene and the writings of Bob Avakian, and he eventually became a supporter of the Revolutionary Communist Party. America at that time was in the throes of an escalated Cold War. Scott cites Ronald Reagan as instrumental in the instigation of proxy wars in Nicaragua, El Salvador, South Africa, and Mozambique, not to mention the nuclear arms race. The politicization of Dread Scott commenced under this climate of instability and uncertainty, and armed with a philosophical base and time to research, he surfaced as an artist committed to sociopolitical engagement. His professional name—part reminder of the Dred Scott case and part conceptual play on fear—is an essential part of that artistic identity.



Historic Corrections, 1998.



Wanted, 2014.

Rather than taking objects and recoding them, Scott uses objects already charged with polarizing significance—the American flag, the electric chair, the Constitution, the Bible, the black male body—and recontextualizes them in ways that coerce reconsideration. In the performance *I Am Not a Man* (2009), Scott walked the streets of Harlem in symbolic protest. The crucially altered sign that he carried recalls the signs used in the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike, a major civil rights protest that sought equal treatment and safer working conditions for black sanitation workers. Scott's appropriation of that famous sign and his addition of the word “not” pay homage to civil rights-era struggles while underscoring the limitations of those efforts. Intentionally stumbling and losing his pants, he punctuated the hour-long walk with humiliating moments designed to elicit reactions from passersby while calling attention to the persistence of racism in American society.

Since 2000, he has increasingly addressed the issue of racial profiling, the identification of black men as criminals by the police and the American government via the justice system and policing tactics used in urban, suburban, and rural communities. This issue has come under acute public scrutiny since the death of Trayvon Martin at the hands of a vigilante and the grand jury verdicts in the cases of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, and events continue to unfold as more and more incidents are witnessed and brought to light across the country. Public opinion has viewed the deaths of black men at the hands of police in Ferguson, New York, Baltimore, and other cities as wrongful, and innumerable protests have filled the streets of towns across the U.S. since August 2014. (During “Radical Presence,” a 2014 exhibition at Minneapolis' Walker Art Center devoted to the performance art of black artists, Scott and other participants posted up-to-the-minute blogs reacting to current events.)

Postcode Criminals (2011–12) foreshadowed the rise in public consciousness concerning extreme policing tactics such as Stop and Frisk, a strategy that targets black and Latino urban youth in the U.S., and Stop and Search in England. Collaborating with Joann Krushner, a London-based artist, Scott encouraged more than 100 youths to tell their stories through photography, film, collage, and poetry, describing a world in which they are constantly under surveillance and subjected to interrogation by the police. The educational aspect of this project, which introduced participants to diverse technologies, culminated in a multimedia exhibition at the Rush Gallery in 2011. At the same show, Scott premiered *Stop*, a compelling video installation of life-size, projected images of six New York and Liverpool youths, who recite the number of times they were subjected to Stop and Frisk/ Stop and Search policing tactics. The young men ranged in age from 19 to 29.

Scott critiques American society from diverse angles and conveys its contradictions, especially in relation to the declaration of inalienable rights—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Gazing through the lens of marginalized communities, he exposes the underbelly of a capitalist system that exists within and subverts a democratic matrix. Arrested innumerable times for his protests and public performance works, Scott brings to public consciousness hidden realities within the American landscape—attitudes and practices that in recent years have ignited into clear focus.

Scott exhibits widely throughout the U.S.; his most recent works include *Dread Scott: Decision*, a performance piece built on understanding democracy's roots in slavery that was first staged at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York. In 2014, No Longer Empty sponsored *Wanted*, his community-based project addressing the criminalization of youth in America. A series of fake wanted posters, each featuring a “police sketch” of a young adult, a description, and a statement of the alleged offence, appeared throughout the streets of Harlem. The sketches, executed by former police forensic sketch artist Kevin Blythe Sampson, are simultaneously specific and meaningless, just like the “offenses”: for instance, “On Saturday May 17, 2014, at approximately 12:30 AM, a male black, 16–24 years of age was wearing a black waist length jacket and dark pants. The male was observed engaging in conversation with other males.” Earlier this year, *Historic Corrections* was re-installed in “Counterpublic” at The Luminary in St. Louis. The 1998 installation will be restaged as the performance *Historic Corrections: Slave Rebellion Reenactment* in New Orleans in 2017, reenacting the

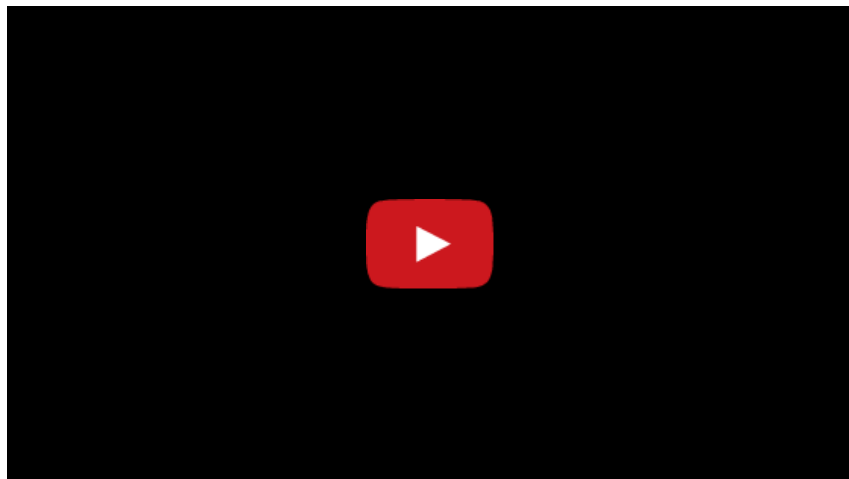
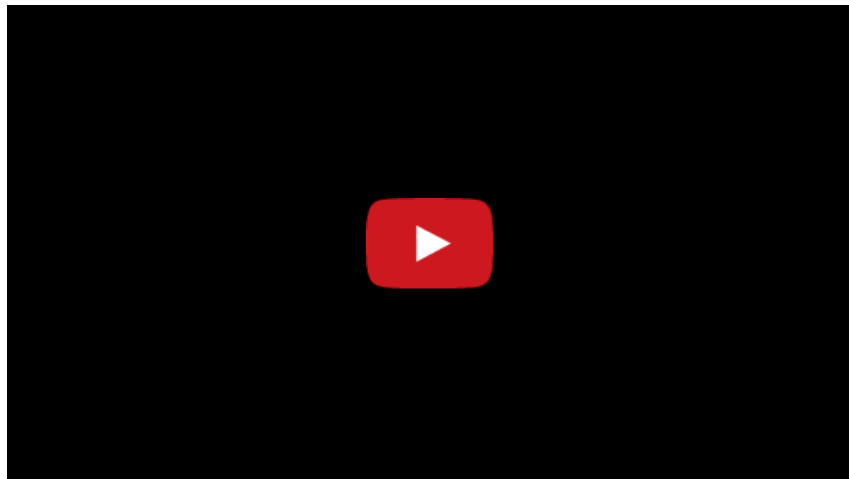
largest slave rebellion in American history, the German Coast Uprising, near New Orleans in 1811.

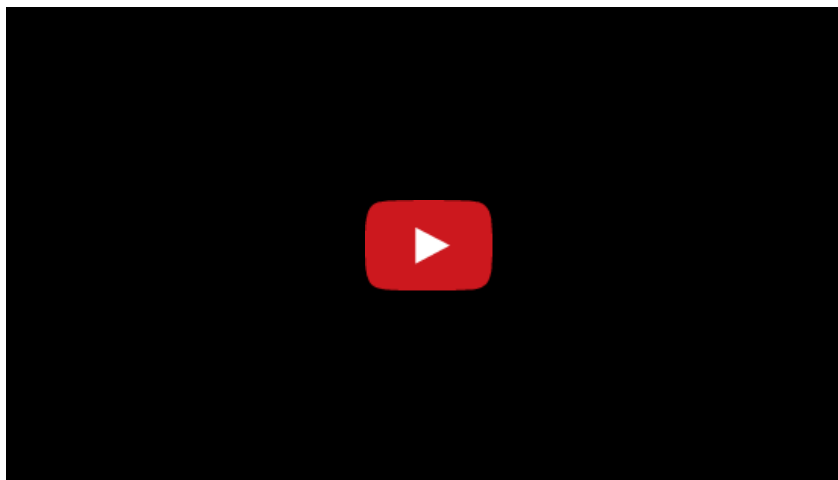
A.M. Weaver is a writer based in Philadelphia.



Let 100 Flowers Blossom, Let 100 Schools of Thought Contend, 2007.

Watch these videos on Dread Scott and his work





Listen to audio from the piece ...*Or Does it Explode?* here.
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