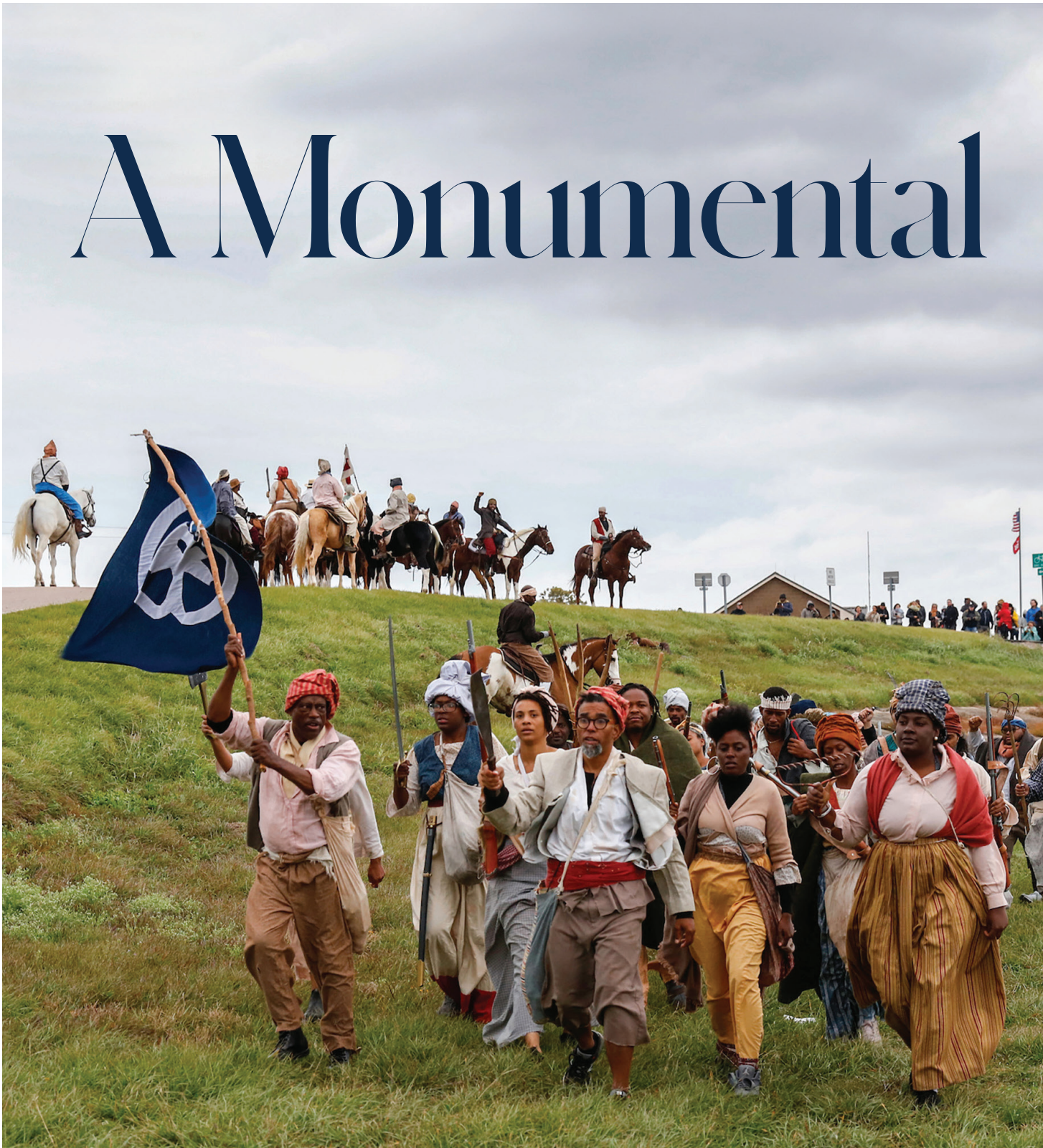


A Monumental



Uprising



Photo: Sarah Broderick

Dread Scott (front, with red belt) leading his performance *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*, 2019, outside New Orleans.

With *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*, Dread Scott brought to life a brutal chapter in American history—and sought to redeem the present.

By Noah Simblist

ONE DAY LAST FALL, THE USUAL HUBBUB OF THE

New Orleans French Quarter was interrupted by the cries of hundreds of people of color, dressed in nineteenth-century clothing, who marched through the city streets like a fired-up militia. They banged drums and shouted “Freedom or death!” and “We’re going to end slavery!” It was a potent intervention that asked onlookers to remember the horrors of slavery and to see its contemporary forms in structural racism.

This was the work of artist Dread Scott, who staged his *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* on November 8 and 9. Produced by Antenna, a local nonprofit arts organization, the project reenacted the 1811 German Coast Uprising, in which more than five hundred enslaved people rose up in armed rebellion against multiple plantations in the farmland just west of New Orleans. The performance, which was filmed by John Akomfrah, involved hundreds of participants who walked twenty-six miles, retracing the route of the original uprising, starting in St. John the Baptist Parish and ending in New Orleans’s Congo Square.

Slave Rebellion Reenactment was as much an artwork as it was a civic project. In some ways it drew on the traditions of historical Civil War reenactments; in others, it was more in line with socially engaged, participatory practices that have become increasingly prevalent in contemporary art over the past few decades. It was a form of mourning and memorialization, as well as a historiographical intervention, giving visibility to a repressed history of self-determination. It was also a performance, drawing from traditions of theater, dance, and music. And through this combination of elements, *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* produced a new form of civic imagination.

Since May, protesters marching in defense of Black lives have taken to the streets in the United States and around the world. Sparked by the killings of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Breonna Taylor in Louisville, and Ahmaud Arbery near Atlanta, among



Left, a slave reenactor, and right, a reenactor playing plantation owner Manuel Aubrey, performing during *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*, 2019.

Below, Dread Scott's flag *A Man Was Lynched By Police Yesterday*, 2015, installed outside Jack Shainman Gallery in New York.

countless other incidents of violence against BIPOC, this tremendous surge of activism has highlighted the history of racism in the US. One result of this reckoning has been the official and unofficial removal of monuments to Confederate, colonial, and racist figures. While *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* took place before this moment, the work's subject matter and methodology highlight the contemporary stakes of historical remembrance. Many of Scott's previous works, such as his iconic flag bearing the text *A MAN WAS LYNCHED BY POLICE YESTERDAY*, draw attention to the recurring cycle of violence against Black people in America. Created in 2015 in response to the killing of Walter Scott, the flag is based on a Jim Crow-era

anti-lynching campaign organized by the NAACP. Akomfrah, a key member of the UK-based Black Audio Film Collective, has directed numerous films about how imperialism and the slave trade have shaped contemporary Black experience. His gallery recently streamed for free his *Handsworth Songs* (1986), an experimental documentary about 1985 uprisings in London and Handsworth, in acknowledgment of its prescience. For both artists, reenactment of a rebellion was as much about memorializing history as it was intervening in the present.

BEGINNINGS AND RE-BEGINNINGS

Scott relied heavily on the work of local historian Albert Thrasher, whose 1995 book, *On to New Orleans!*, provides a rich account of the uprising.¹ To contextualize the 1811 slave revolt, Thrasher reminds us that in 1804, Haiti gained its independence from France as a result of a slave rebellion. A number of white refugees escaped Haiti along with their slaves, and some settled in Louisiana.² Word spread about the Haitian revolution, and these accounts influenced and empowered the leaders of the 1811 rebellion.

Charles Deslondes was the principal planner and leader of the German Coast Uprising. He called for it to start on January 8, 1811, just after sundown, at the Woodland plantation. Deslondes and his compatriots attacked the slave drivers and the family of the plantation's owner, Manuel Andry, who was wounded but escaped, and crossed the Mississippi River to gather forces to repel the revolt. Thrasher suggests that the slaves were expecting more weapons at this plantation, because Andry had once housed a small arsenal at his house. But he had apparently moved the guns elsewhere, and the rebels instead gathered makeshift weapons like pitchforks, hoes, and machetes. They marched along the river toward the city, some on horseback, beating drums and carrying flags.

At the start of the reenactment, on the cloudy morning of November 8, the mood was one of tense



Top: AP Photo/Gerald Herbert. Bottom: Courtesy Dread Scott.

anticipation. Dozens of journalists packed the side of the road facing the Woodland plantation, toting all shapes and sizes of cameras, boom mics, and notebooks. Curious neighbors stood on their front lawns, Akomfrah's crew set up a vehicle outfitted with a crane, and a camera-equipped drone flew overhead. Numerous members of Antenna's crew, wearing bright yellow safety vests, bustled around and tried to corral people.

Suddenly, the reenactors came into view and surrounded the old plantation house. Soon they stormed it with muskets and machetes. From outside, spectators could hear muffled shouts. Rebels on horseback circled anxiously in the front yard, accompanied by the buzz of the hovering drone. Then a group of reenactors came abruptly into view at the front doorway. After a few minutes of argument – the plantation owner seemed to be voicing impassioned protest – the rebels beat the Andry family, threw them to the ground, and hacked them with machetes. The rebels yelled cries of victory before they descended the front porch stairs and gathered with a larger group of insurrectionists at the back of the house. After another few minutes, this group of some seventy-five rebels, led by others on horseback, came from behind the house

Dread Scott's *Sign of the Time*, 2001, installed near Barclay's Center in New York during a George Floyd protest.

and approached the spectators. Some reenactors had rifles, some had machetes or scythes raised. Dread Scott was at the front, walking next to a man in a turban who held a blue-and-white flag. The group marched down the road shouting "On to New Orleans!"

Press photographers yelled angrily at colleagues, the film crew, and Antenna staff members to get out of the way. The reporters apparently hoped their shots would serve as a pure portal to the past, unencumbered by signs of the contemporary. Later that day, Akomfrah asked Antenna staffers to keep press and other nonparticipants at a distance as the reenactors marched along the levees bordering the Mississippi River. He, too, shared the desire to capture a pure representation of the past – or at least to control the appearance of anachronism, as he did in previous works that incorporate reenactments of British colonial history such as *Vertigo Sea* (2015) and *Tropikos* (2016).

Scott and Akomfrah had agreed from the start of their collaboration that the filmmaker would not interrupt the performance itself. He couldn't stop to do multiple takes, he had to follow the performance as it unfolded. Although he couldn't alter the action,



Courtesy Dread Scott.

Right, a battle scene during *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*, 2019.

Middle, participating former miners and their sons during the filming of Jeremy Deller's video *The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001.

Bottom, Artur Zmijewski: *Repetition*, 2005, video, 39 minutes.



Akomfrah attempted to control the entourage that surrounded it. This raises two questions relating to the performance and its representation: How important was it for the performance to evoke a suspension of disbelief, linked to the concept of a fourth wall that could protect fiction from fact? And second, was this performance a representation of the past or a representation of the past in the present?

Hundreds of reenactment performers convened on River Road and marched past the steaming Shell oil refinery in the village of Norco, as well as other industrial installations. The uncanny juxtaposition of the specter of nineteenth-century rebels against the hulking symbols of the twenty-first-century extraction economy was jarring. But this collision of time was exactly what Scott had intended.³ He wanted to show the relevance of this history to current struggles over issues such as environmental justice and income inequity. The artist views these injustices as a product of white supremacy—a present-day condition whose roots extend back to the era of slavery. Scott wanted to embrace both historical truth and contemporary everyday life. In this regard, he differed from Akomfrah and many of the photojournalists covering the event. Scott deliberately aimed for a Brechtian dissolution of the fourth wall, allowing the performance to be infected by its seemingly anachronistic surroundings. In this sense, *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* was intended as a representation of the past in the present.

The use of reenactment can be a very effective performative strategy for political art. Consider Jeremy

Top: Photo Scott Brother; Zmijewski: Courtesy Galerie Peter Kildemann, Zurich and Ebsaal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw. Deller: Photo Parash; Pignazzelli: Galerie Peter Kildemann, Zurich and Ebsaal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw.

Deller's *Battle of Orgreave* (2011), which replicated a 1984 miners' strike in Britain; Artur Zmijewski's *Repetition* (2005), a reenactment of the 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment; or Sharon Hayes's *In the Near Future* (2009), in which she restaged protests by carrying signs with historical slogans like I AM A MAN. Performance studies scholar Rebecca Schneider has argued that "reenactment troubles linear temporality by offering at least the suggestion of recurrence, or return, even if the practice is peppered with its own ongoing completion."⁴ Artists like Scott use reenactment to ask what has changed between the seemingly distant past and our current reality.

A PERFORMANCE OF MOURNING

Late in the day on November 8, as a cold front started to move in, the skies darkened and it began to rain. A large group of onlookers that included press and members of the local and national art communities arrived at a viewing point at the Bonnet Carré Spillway in Norco. Standing on an incline to watch the reenactment move across a wide field, we could see the reenacting rebels confronting militia members. Faint puffs of smoke paired with muted explosions signaled the firing of shots that killed a number of rebels. At the end of this scene, a group of insurgents escaped up the hill on horseback, past the spectators, shouting "On to New Orleans!"

In reality, this confrontation occurred early in the morning of January 10, 1811. William C.C. Claiborne, the first non-colonial governor of Louisiana, the United States War Department, and Army General Wade Hampton withdrew forces from West Florida, where they had been fighting against the Spanish, and redeployed them to Louisiana to prevent the rebels from getting to New Orleans. The rebels at this point had almost no ammunition left, and around fifty of them were massacred on the spot. The rest split up and tried to escape. Over the next few days the militia captured or killed the rest. The heads of around a hundred captured rebels were set on pikes along River Road.

This aspect of the story reminds us of a double function of the reenactment. It is at once a celebration of the defiance demonstrated by the rebels and a memorial to their deaths. In this sense, the reenactment functions much as traditional monuments do, valorizing the heroism of the dead at the same time it mourns their loss. Both function in relation to collective memory. But given that Louisiana, like many American states, is still governed by the logic of white supremacy, the majority of existing normative symbols of collective memory elide African American heroism. Confederate monuments have been the subject of great debate in recent years, leading to both official and unofficial removals. But rather than focusing on the question of monument removal, Dread Scott proposes a counter memory through *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*.

Much of the debate around monuments, specifically Confederate monuments in the US,

Kehinde Wiley: *Rumors of War*, 2019, bronze with stone pedestal, approx. 27 by 5 by 16 feet.

concerns not just the history but the ideology they represent.⁵ Artist Kehinde Wiley's sculpture, *Rumors of War* – a large bronze figure on a horse, similar in scale and pose to those of the monuments to Confederate heroes nearby – was recently unveiled in Richmond, Virginia. The subject here, however, is a contemporary African American man with dreadlocks, ripped jeans, and Nike sneakers.



"We're going to end slavery!"

The work was meant to offer alternatives to the dominant symbols of collective memory in the South. Scott's *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*, as a performative monument, offers a comparable challenge, producing counter-memories and counterpublics.⁶

But how can a representation of a tragedy, the massacre of the rebels in 1811 and the failure of their uprising, also function as an act of mourning? Jalal Toufic, who has written about the trauma of the Lebanese civil war, offers a way to understand representations of disaster. He claims that although an appropriated copy – in this case, reenacting the surpassing disaster of the uprising – may seem like a simple repetition, it is actually a resurrection of a past tradition. For Toufic, a "surpassing disaster" is one that transcends the confines of its own time, the consequences of war last longer than the war itself. Furthermore, he says, a resurrection occurs when the original is no longer available.⁷ As is the case with so many traumatic moments in history that are experienced by minoritarian and disenfranchised subjects, there is little record of the German Coast revolt. Toufic thinks of this written record, of official repositories for history, as "tradition." So, for him, if we think of tradition in an animistic sense, it withdraws in the face of disaster. The disaster in the case here is its failure, the deaths of the rebels, and their savage decapitation. So, in one sense, yes,

Two scenes from
*Slave Rebellion
Reenactment*, 2019.



the lack of written history about the revolt is the withdrawal of tradition in the face of its disastrous outcome. But Toufic goes further, using a film about postwar Japan as a touchstone.

In the 1959 film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* one character says, “you have seen nothing in Hiroshima.” This statement follows a montage of the horrific effects of a nuclear bombing on the flesh of its survivors, suggesting that this record of suffering is not an experience of the suffering itself. Or in the case of the 1811 uprising, even if there were ample documentary evidence—in photographs, documents, or drawings—attesting to the brutality of the uprising and the horrors of slavery, it would not fully represent the suffering endured. Does this mean, Toufic asks, that one should not record? He answers no, one should record this “nothing.” But because of the referent’s withdrawal, this recording can comprise merely documentary fragments. He notes that during and after the Lebanese civil war, Lebanese citizens were indifferent to the documentation of carnage in film and photography, because they had become habituated to the carnage itself. This skepticism about documentary visual evidence raises a crucial question about the representation of not only history in general but, in particular, the histories of trauma. But what’s most important in Scott’s reenactment is that it is *not* a faithful copy of the original, it diverges in more ways than one. Aside from its blurring of past and present, *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* is radically different from its original because it imagines what it would have been like if the rebels had reached the heart of New Orleans.

PERFORMING POLITICS

On the afternoon of November 9, a group of press and onlookers waited at the old US Mint, now the New Orleans Jazz Museum, for the procession to arrive. We began to hear some faint chanting that grew louder and louder until the reenactors turned the corner, past the French market, chanting and shouting. They poured into the courtyard of the Jazz Museum to the sound of drumming and cheers. Groups gathered and posed for pictures until the order was given for the reenactors to assemble into orderly rows to march into the French Quarter. At this point the performance reached its successful culmination, something that the original revolt never did. It became a second line, a carnivalesque celebration that cut through the heart of the city’s tourist center. Unlike the comparatively empty streets by the river in Norco, those in New Orleans were jammed with hundreds of spectators, smiling, cheering, looking on in amazement, mouths agape.

To understand the power of this moment one must give pause to its publicness. This was the moment when the reenactment fully entered the public sphere. Hannah Arendt calls the public realm the space of appearance, where to be seen is to be recognized as a political being. Furthermore, to be seen not just as an individual but as a part of a collective, gathering together in public to demand freedom gives added power to political claims.⁸ This is precisely the strategy that the placing of Confederate monuments used. They are public sculptures that intervene in the most conspicuous and public of ways in civic life, helping perpetuate white supremacy. Scott’s performance created a contemporary monument by insisting on a public space of appearance for a counter narrative, one defined by Black revolution.

Finally, the procession ended at Congo Square, and gathered around a stage where the Kumbuka African Drum and Dance Collective, Delfeayo Marsalis and his brass band, Mardi Gras Indians with elaborate purple-feathered costumes and painted faces, and the rapper Truth Universal performed. The band played Janelle Monáe’s “Hell You Talmbout” and led the crowd in a participatory call and response with each of the reenactors who stepped up to the microphone to speak the name of the actual person they were representing.

This alternative history played out like a protest that began with a march and ended with a rally. The likeness is not accidental: artists’ reenactments of protests, such as that of Sharon Hayes, are not only political acts; they are performative acts as well. Judith Butler argues that bodies gathering together in the form of strikes, vigils, or other such occupation of public spaces “take precarity as their galvanizing condition.”⁹ The body that is present asks for the public to attend to that precarity, to provide things like better health care, shelter, or food.

This is one reason for Scott’s decision to have all the insurrection reenactors be people of color, preferably African American; the choice did not simply adhere to the historical truth, it also resonated with the precarity of black and brown bodies in New Orleans and in the entire United States today. When these bodies



assembled in the streets of the French Quarter and in Congo Square, they were performing their right to appear. This, paired with the recurring chant, “We’re going to end slavery!” asks the question: what is slavery today? For Dread Scott, it is the continuing political, economic, and juridical disenfranchisement of people of color. In this sense, the *Slave Rebellion Reenactment* was part performance and part protest. Its political power lies at the intersection of the two.

The year 2019 marked the 400th anniversary of the arrival of enslaved Africans to the shores of North America. Despite the lofty proposals of representative democracy and the freedoms that it promised, this country has both freedom and its exact opposite inscribed upon its very foundation. As we work against structural racism, police brutality, an industrialized carceral logic, and other forms of state-based oppression, we must bear in mind not just the history of enslavement but also the instances of resistance to it. ●

Mardi Gras Indians performing in Congo Square at the end of *Slave Rebellion Reenactment*.

⁴ Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, London, Routledge, 2011, p. 30.

⁵ I have found two essays on the recent history of anti-monument work in New Orleans particularly useful. One is a speech that former mayor Mitch Landrieu gave when he ordered the removal of key Confederate monuments in the city, and the other is a response to this speech by one of the core organizers of Take Em Down NOLA. See “Mitch Landrieu’s Speech on the Removal of Confederate Monuments,” *New York Times*, May 23, 2017, nytimes.com, and A Scribe Called Quess, “What I told Mitch Landrieu About Co-opting Black Activists’ Work,” *Medium*, April 24, 2018.

⁶ Michael Warner describes a counterpublic as a social group that is produced in opposition to the normative or dominant modes of organization that construct a public. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, New York, Zone Books, 2005.

⁷ Jalal Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*, Forthcoming Books, 2009, p. 29.

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 199.

⁹ Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015, p. 9.

Photo Soul Brother.

¹ Albert Thrasher, *On to New Orleans! : Louisiana’s Heroic 1811 Slave Revolt*, New Orleans, Cyprus Press, 1995.

² Stanley Harrold, ed., *Antislavery Violence: Sectional, Racial, and Cultural Conflict in Antebellum America*, Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1999, p. 67.

³ Interview with the artist, New Orleans, November 11, 2019.

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