

# DREAD SCOTT

On the Impossibility of Freedom  
in a Country Founded on  
Slavery and Genocide —  
Performance, Photography  
and Reimagining History

JOHN P. BOWLES



Dread Scott

*On the Impossibility of Freedom in a Country Founded on Slavery and Genocide, Performance Still 1*  
2014, pigment print, 22 x 30". Project produced by More Art. ©Dread Scott. Photo by Mark Von Holden Photography. ©Dread Scott

TWO PHOTOGRAPHS CAPTURE THE ARTIST DREAD SCOTT IN HIS ATTEMPT TO WALK AGAINST A JET OF WATER. Scott's feat appears to require tremendous effort. He grimaces from the effort to keep his head up, breathe and push through the water's blast. He leans forward holding one arm protectively in front of him to blunt the force of the water. His hair is flung backward as water ricochets off his drenched body. In one photograph, a distant crowd watches as Scott raises his hands defiantly in the gesture of "Hands up, don't shoot," familiar from protests against police killings of black men, women and children occurring around the same time in Ferguson, Missouri, New York City, in cities across the country, and on social media. The two photographs of Scott, titled performance stills, represent Scott's October 7, 2014 performance, *On the Impossibility of Freedom in a Country Founded on Slavery and Genocide*, presented on Water Street beneath the Manhattan Bridge in the DUMBO neighborhood of Brooklyn.<sup>1</sup> They recall 1963 photographs of civil rights activists blasted with water by firefighters in Birmingham, Alabama. Why would Scott subject himself to such brutality? Why recreate such well-known scenes of police violence against peaceful black demonstrators?

Scott addresses histories of violence suffered by black men, women and children and the activism that has attempted to counter it. In his recreation of Birmingham activists' experience of being blasted with water from fire hoses, Scott reimagines the scenario, enabling us to understand history in new ways. Significantly, Scott does not stage a historically-accurate reenactment of the events of 1963. Instead, he isolates a single aspect. For the performance, Scott walks against the force of the water sprayed at him by a white firefighter (retired firefighter John Riker).<sup>2</sup> In the two photographic prints, Scott abstracts the scenario further. Stilled and isolated, he reduces his performance to the singular gesture of his struggle against the water. In effect, Scott simplifies his performance to what Bertolt Brecht called *Gestus*, which is the performance of a specific historical action or gesture abstracted from a broader narrative. Brecht instructs actors to perform gestures without trying to portray their character's "inner life" or emotions.<sup>3</sup> The point is to prevent viewers from empathizing with a character so they can instead judge his or her actions. Transformed from passive observer to historically-aware subject, the viewer cannot watch "uncritically."<sup>4</sup> Scott creates a situation in which the viewer might wonder at the choices made by the protesters in 1963 and understand them differently than we have been taught. He does not address the reasons for the Birmingham Campaign and Children's Crusade. Nor does he attempt to portray the emotions activists, police, or firefighters. A tweet Scott posted as he prepared for the performance sums up the project and its goals: "Man vs firehose. Humanity vs oppression. So it begins."<sup>5</sup> Scott's performance starts and ends with his struggle against the water sprayed from the fire hose, as the performance photographs emphasize, and the work's success depends on these limitations.

## "Hands Up, Don't Shoot"

Scott invites us to consider the relationship between events of 1963 and recent years by making the "Hands up, don't shoot" gesture. "Hands up, don't shoot," developed by protesters confronting the crisis of police violence against black men, women, and children, has been so effective partly because it is perfectly suited to photography. The gesture spread nation-wide within days of Michael Brown's death at the hands of police in Ferguson, Missouri through photographs: press photographs of protesters in Ferguson making the gesture and the thousands of photographs people circulated on social media making the same gesture in solidarity with the hashtags #HandsUpDontShoot, #HandsUp, and #DontShoot. The gesture emerged from Ferguson the day after Brown's death as a reenactment based on eye-witness accounts that Brown had raised his hands in surrender before he was shot and killed by a police officer, a story that directly challenged the police narrative of Brown's death.<sup>6</sup> When Ferguson police responded to protests with an aggressive display of military tactics and equipment, including tear gas, stun grenades, rubber bullets and armored vehicles mounted with .40-caliber machine guns, the gesture also demonstrated the vulnerability and courage of protesters and local residents who stood up to what looked like military occupation. On social media, anyone who posted a "Hands up, don't shoot" photograph during the Ferguson protests effectively reenacted both the last moment before Brown's death and the actions of Ferguson protesters, openly challenging the moral authority of the police. By reimagining the narrative told by the local police department, the gesture presented the actions of the police for the sort of scrutiny it rarely receives from authorities charged with oversight. Since the start of the Ferguson protests, the gesture has come to address a long history of police violence. The nationwide response on social media is evidence of how many people understand Brown's death as one incident in a long history of injustice, of police taking the lives of black citizens.<sup>7</sup>

## Representing Agency in the Face of Police Violence

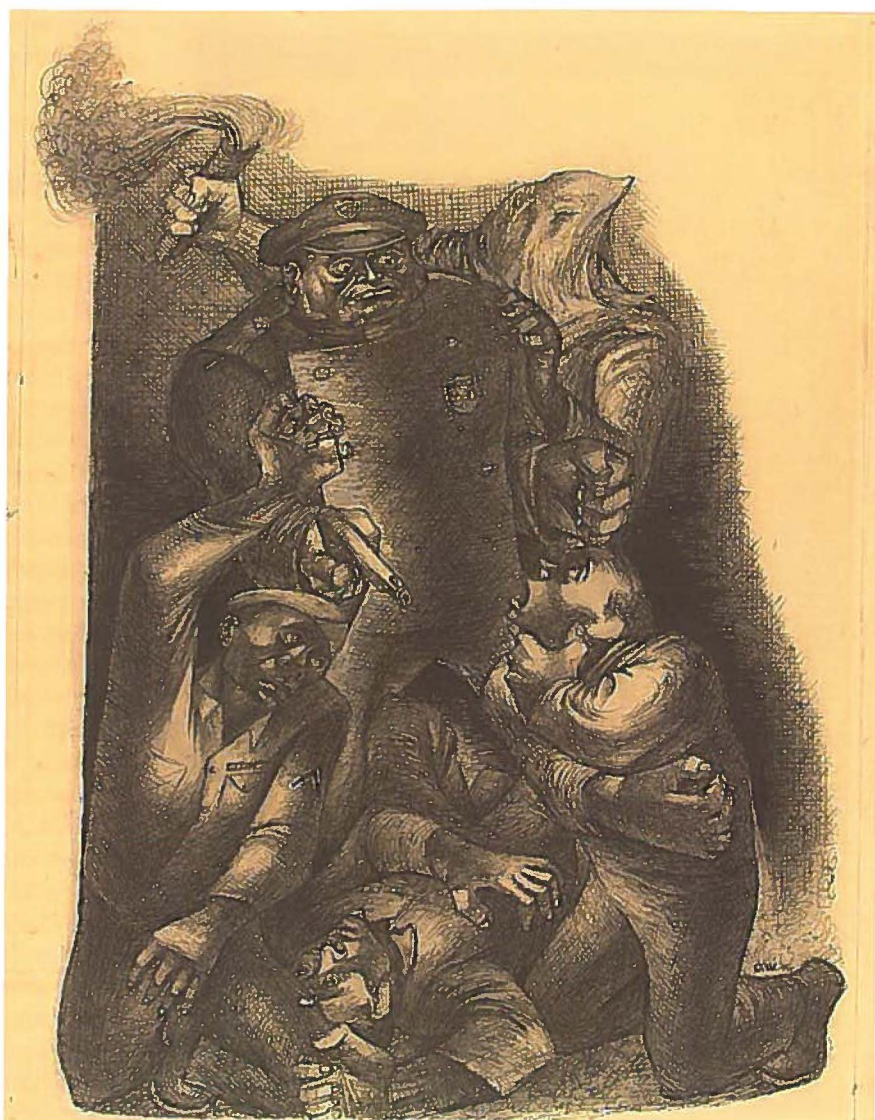
Scott's *On the Impossibility of Freedom in a Country Founded on Slavery and Genocide*, like "Hands up, don't shoot," presents the actions of protesters and police for critical re-imagination: Did the Birmingham protests or the killing of Michael Brown happen in the ways we have been told or that we assumed? The implication of *Gestus* is that by reimagining history, we empower ourselves to create new paths forward to challenge the status quo by questioning the accepted narrative. Significantly, Scott and "Hands up" protesters reference a history of black activism that challenges official accounts of police violence. Their gestures demonstrate and represent agency. Neither represents passive victimization.

One way in which Scott's *On the Impossibility of Freedom* represents the agency of the Birmingham protesters is by calling attention not to their feelings or suffering but to the choices they made when attacked with fire hoses. In interviews, Scott acknowledges the protesters must have been hurt, but he speaks primarily of reversing conventional interpretations of the famous photographs. For example, he explains the performance in terms of a process of rethinking the role of the protesters:

You look at the photographs and they show tremendous oppression. But then I started to really think about it and what they really were were photographs of resistance because the oppression that was concentrated in people being fire-hosed, there was all sorts of Jim Crow oppression which could lead to lynching and death, I mean other indignities, daily suffering, and these were people who courageously stood up to that. So I recreated what they did but instead of running from the force of the water hose I walked into it.<sup>8</sup>

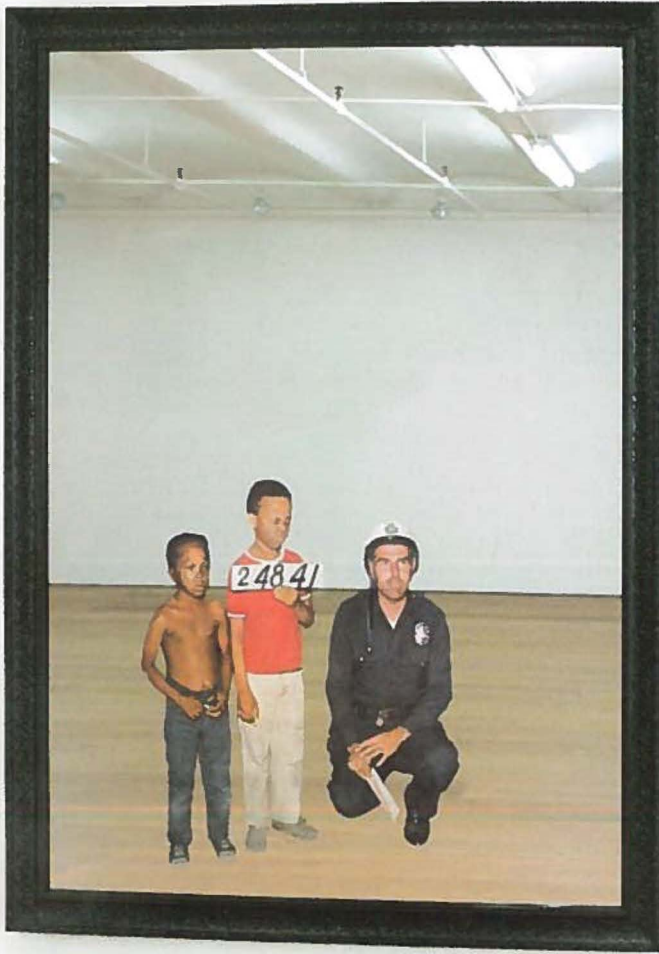
Scott describes the protesters not as passive victims but as deliberately obstinate provocateurs who refused to cede Birmingham's streets to the police. Scott walks into the water blasted at him from a fire hose to focus attention on the protesters' decision to confront the water. He did this by changing some of the circumstances of the original scenario. He instructed firefighters assisting him to set the flow of water from their hose to the lowest pressure, approximately 75-125 psi.<sup>9</sup> Judging by photographs of the performance, this pressure was enough to knock Scott to the ground but he was also able to walk against it. In contrast, the Birmingham protesters were assaulted with water blasted at higher pressure, making it more difficult to face and necessitating different tactics that the mainstream press explained as passivity or defeat. As Martin Berger explains, the press "reported on youths hit with firemen's hoses as 'flattened,' 'sent sprawling,' 'spun ... head over heels,' 'sitting passively,' 'swept along the gutter by a stream of water,' 'cut ... down like tenpins,' or 'flung ... into the air like sodded dolls,' some with their clothing 'ripped off.'"<sup>10</sup> Scott's performance, by emphasizing the protesters' defiant resilience, restores to them the agency they claimed but that the press sometimes denied them.

Scott's decision to focus on protesters' agency rather than their suffering negotiates a dilemma artists have faced when representing racial violence: to focus on the terror, pain, and deadly consequences suffered by the victims of violence risks reiterating their victimization, as if there is no alternative to grim



Charles White  
*The Return of the Soldier*  
 1946, pen and ink on illustration board, 24 1/4 x 19" Library of  
 Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC.  
 ©1946 The Charles White Archives

acceptance. Berger argues that the mainstream press emphasized protesters' passive victimization at the hands of white authorities in order to help white readers empathize with protesters and focus their judgment on the actions of police, instead. White editors and readers were more comfortable with images of black passivity than of resistance to white authority. In contrast, black editors and publications presented readers with a broader range of imagery, including photographs of "black resistance to capricious white power."<sup>11</sup> Scott's recreation of the Birmingham protests enable us to understand the actions of the protesters blasted with



Hank Willis Thomas  
*Two Little Prisoners*  
 2014  
 glass mirror and silver  
 65 1/8 x 49 1/16 x 1 1/2" (framed)  
 Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

water from fire hoses differently than we have before, or even to imagine that images of more active resistance were possible, even if they do not exist.

Scott, by focusing on protesters' actions rather than their suffering, avoids a dilemma faced by artists who choose to focus attention on the suffering of the victims of police violence. The risk is that to prioritize suffering over action can unwittingly reinforce racist conventions of representation in American visual culture that marginalize the black subject as passive and always already objectified. For example, Charles White made an early drawing, *Return of the Soldier*, with which he establishes his own agency as an artist, empowered to represent the damaging effects of police brutality, but that inadvertently also represents police violence as a denial of agency that has no solution. White drew

a white policeman menacing three black servicemen with his gun and a fist. To indict the police for racially-motivated violence, he placed a hooded Klansman in the background, goading the policeman on with one hand on his shoulder and the other, in a touch of bitter irony, raising a torch in a gesture that resembles the Statue of Liberty. White's drawing provides powerful evidence of police brutality. However, with the three servicemen cowering in fear at the policeman's feet, one of them raising a hand in surrender, how can White sustain their agency? The artist's strategy is primarily to raise awareness of the plight black servicemen faced when they returned home from war and were treated not as heroes but oppressed by racism.

White establishes his own agency as an artist empowered to draw things as he understands them through a clever role reversal, representing white men as brutes, a prevalent stereotype applied to black men in Jim Crow visual culture, and black men as their passive victims. However, by inviting viewers to empathize with the servicemen, he forecloses the possibility of questioning their fearful submissiveness. In other words, White leaves the servicemen no possibility of acting differently. Even as he demonstrates the police have denied the servicemen agency, White risks repeating the violation. Scott's performance differs in significant ways: he establishes the subjectivity of black activists by focusing on choices made by protesters, not police. While accepting police violence as a fact might seem like cynical defeatism, it enables Scott to draw attention to the agency of those who resist white authority, making the critique of the police implicit in his artwork.

Scott's *On the Impossibility of Freedom* encourages viewers to reimagine their own roles in contesting police violence by causing them to reflect on his actions during the performance and compare them to their own preconceptions regarding protests in Birmingham, Ferguson, and elsewhere. This is somewhat like the strategy of Hank Willis Thomas's *Two Little Prisoners* which engages viewers directly in a *Life* magazine photograph of a police officer booking two young boys he has detained during the 1965 Watts rebellion by using a mirror to replace the background.<sup>12</sup> The viewer sees him- or herself reflected in the mirror, becoming part of the composition and a protagonist in the simple scenario of two black boys being arrested by a white policeman. In this way, we become aware that looking at the photograph is not our only option. The startling effect provokes the viewer to consider his or her complicity: how would I act in this situation? Comfort the terrified boys, attempt to free them, confront the officer, or stand helplessly by? If I watch, am I complicit by allowing these boys to be arrested? Furthermore, seeing our own reflection in the mirror momentarily interrupts the process of empathy (with either the boys or the policeman). The startling strangeness of seeing ourselves reflected in the scene causes self-consciousness about our own judgments and actions. In this way, Thomas' use of a mirror recalls another artwork addressing police violence, Adrian Piper's *Black Box, White Box*, made after the 1992 police beating of Rodney King and the officers' subsequent trial and acquittal

and the uprising that followed. Piper's work comprises many parts, one of which is a mirror through which a widely-circulated photograph of King's battered face is projected. A chair facing the projection invites the viewer to sit while listening to a tape loop of the audio of King's televised plea, made during the uprising, "Can't we all just get along?" As the tape ends, a spotlight shines directly in the seated viewer's face and the projection is turned off, causing the viewer to suddenly see the reflection of his or her own face where King's had just been.<sup>13</sup> The startling change is liable to make viewers uncomfortable. That was my experience of the work years ago. Piper's work, like Thomas', provokes us to reflect on our own role in interpreting photographs of — and ending — police violence and oppression. Such self-consciousness prevents viewers from thinking of the photographs only in terms of the past. Instead, we face the question of our own role in either tolerating or ending police violence.

Scott references protests of 1963 and the weeks immediately preceding his performance to represent history as a repetitive cycle of oppression and activism that bears directly on the present moment. Emphasizing this point, the announcement of Scott's performance called his planned attempt to walk against the force of the water "Sisyphean," suggesting the work to end police violence and other forms of oppression will never end.<sup>14</sup> The title, *On the Impossibility of Freedom in a Country Founded on Slavery and Genocide*, also suggests futility, raising the question of activism's effectiveness. In striking contrast, Scott explained the work in more optimistic terms as the result of asking himself, "How can I make work that will help people understand that we do not have to live like this and help people comprehend and confront [the] norms and values of American society but also ... imagine how the world could be radically different and far better?"<sup>15</sup> Through two simple gestures, walking against the force of water shot from a fire hose and making the "Hands up, don't shoot" gesture, Scott pits the apparent inevitability that history will repeat itself against imagination and the possibility of reconceiving our ability to change the status quo.

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John P. Bowles is Associate Professor of African American Art History in the Art Department and Faculty Affiliate at the Institute of African American Research at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He recently curated the exhibition "Racial Violence and Resilience: Questions and Currents in African American Art" at the Ackland Art Museum, drawn from the permanent collection. He is author of *Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment* published by Duke University Press. His recent publications include "Re-stage, Recite, Repose, Regret: Clifford Owens and the Performance of History," in *Clifford Owens: Anthology* (MoMA PS1) and "New Negro on the Pacific Rim: Sargent Johnson's Afro-Asian Sculptures," in *A Long and Tumultuous Relationship: East-West Interchanges in American Art* (Smithsonian Institution Press). His research has also appeared in *American Art*, *Art Journal*, and *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, and his exhibition and book reviews have appeared in *Art Papers*, *Art Journal*, *Art in America*, and elsewhere.

## Endnotes

1. Dread Scott, *On the Impossibility of Freedom in a Country Founded on Slavery and Genocide, Performance Still 1 and On the Impossibility of Freedom in a Country Founded on Slavery and Genocide, Performance Still 2*, 2014, pigment prints, each 22 x 30". "Shop: Dread Scott: *On the Impossibility of Freedom in a Country Founded on Slavery and Genocide*," More Art, accessed February 4, 2016, <http://moreart.org/shop/dread-scott-on-the-impossibility-of-freedom-in-a-country-founded-on-slavery-and-genocide/>.
2. Hrag Vartanian, "Dread Scott Enacts the Images of Oppression," *Hyperallergic*, October 8, 2014, <http://hyperallergic.com/154181/dread-scott-enacts-the-images-of-oppression/>.
3. Bertold Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 48.
4. Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, 71.
5. Dread Scott (@DreadScottArt), "Man vs firehose. Humanity vs oppression. So it begins," October 7, 2014, 9:58 am., tweet.
6. Brown was shot and killed August 9, 2014. On August 10, the Ferguson police chief said Brown was unarmed but assaulted police officer who shot him. That same day, protests began at a memorial created at the site of Brown's death and protesters raised hands in the air, chanting, "Don't shoot!" The first tweets I can find with the hashtag #HandsUp in reference to Ferguson events also begin August 10. The first photographs of people making the gesture were also shared on social media beginning on August 10-11. Daniel Politi, "Police in St. Louis Suburb Shoot Unarmed Black Teenager Multiple Times," *Slate*, August 10, 2014, [http://www.slate.com/blogs/the\\_statest/2014/08/10/michael\\_brown\\_unarmed\\_black\\_teenager\\_shot\\_in\\_ferguson\\_a\\_st\\_louis\\_suburb.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_statest/2014/08/10/michael_brown_unarmed_black_teenager_shot_in_ferguson_a_st_louis_suburb.html). GLOBAL KINGZ ENT (@GlobalKingz), "Cops kill Kid over a \$1 cigar he reportedly stole. #Unarmed #HandsUp #8Shots he was going to college... Instagram.com/p/rhGQdnRaov/," August 10, 2014, 5:06 am, tweet. MarQuis Trill (@6BillionPeople), "Send me your #IAMMIKEBROWN #MikeBrownCampaign Photo I will (RETWEET) Let's Spread the Word & get #JusticeForMikeBrown," August 10, 2014, tweet.
7. Regardless of whether Brown raised his hands in surrender before being shot, the gesture remains a compelling and effective protest against police violence. Jonathan Capehart, "'Hands up, don't shoot' Was Built on a Lie," *Washington Post* 16 March 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2015/03/16/lesson-learned-from-the-shooting-of-michael-brown/>.
8. "Performance Artist Dread Scott Talks Art and Social Issues," *WBEZ Morning Shift*, February 19, 2016, *SoundCloud*, <https://soundcloud.com/morningshiftwbez/performance-artist-dread-scott-talks-art-and-social-issues>.
9. "Video: Dread Scott Performs Civil Rights Piece," *News 12 Brooklyn*, October 7, 2014, <http://brooklyn.news12.com/multimedia/video-dread-scott-performs-civil-rights-piece-1.9478289?pts=427563>.
10. Martin A. Berger, *Freedom Now! Forgotten Photographs of the Civil Rights Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 24.
11. Martin A. Berger, *Seeing through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 119.
12. Henry Grossman, "Two Little Prisoners," in Marc Crawford, "Out of a Cauldron of Hate — Arson and Death," *Life* 59, no. 9 (August 27, 1965): 30.
13. Ann Bremner, "Black Box/White Box," in *Will/Power* (Columbus, OH: Wexner Center for the Arts, the Ohio State University, 1993), 57.
14. More Art's Facebook event, accessed February 4, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/events/523461357797671/>.
15. "Video: Dread Scott Performs Civil Rights Piece."