

# DREAD SCOTT

A SHARP DIVIDE



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Rowan University Art Gallery

# DREAD SCOTT: A SHARP DIVIDE

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## The Art of Bearing Witness

Obviously, the wedding of art and politics is not new. The rise of the Bourgeoisie in the late 18th century was as much a cultural revolution, as it was a political and economic one. Coming out of their struggle for cultural dominance, new genres and forms emerged in the early to mid 19th century. Amongst these were a socially oriented art meant to represent the bourgeoisie's point-of-view. The most common form was social realism, which recorded or caricatured the ills of society. This was meant to effect public opinion and policy by generating indignation and partisanship. Realism on the other hand sought to address the more complex issues growing out of the relationship between cultural values and social practices. The objectives of the realists are to extend their critique by exposing their audiences to the system of values and behaviors that sustain undesirable conditions. So, while their works appear to be concerned with some specific issue — unemployment or poverty for instance — they use these to expose the origins of these conditions in the society's collective identity e.g. its moral and intellectual conception of itself.

Dread Scott's objective is to have cultural affect — that is he would have us rethink our identity as a society. The "us" here is inclusive of all those who

populate the U.S. Unlike many artists engaged in "social practices," Scott distinguishes art from politics per se... in that politics has an actual objective — that of trying to get people to engage in some coordinated action, or enact particular strategies or policies. From Scott's perspective, art and cultural change are part of that political process — but not its means. Art's purpose is to get its audience to think about things in new, more critical, and complex ways. Therefore, while his works tend to address specific social issues, his general subjects are those of history, representation, resistance, and self-identification. To these ends, the works in this exhibition focus primarily on law-enforcement policies in the U.S. and their impact on Black and minority communities.

The system of mass incarceration, racial stereotyping, police violence, etc. for Scott stems from the collective body of traditions, beliefs, and practices that order social expectations, behaviors, and relationships in the U.S. These are the repercussions of the fact the U.S. was initially founded on an economic system dependent on slavery and racism. From that foundation, residual logics and fears have arisen that are replicated in all aspects of our society's social, economic, and political exchanges. To make this apparent, rather than offering



*American Newspeak...Please Feel Free*, silver gelatin prints, offset reproductions with text, text on signs, books, pens, shelf, and active audience, 1988. (detail)

up abstractions, idealized correctives, or accounts of past and present victimization meant to excite moral out-rage, Scott documents the less spectacular consequences of such practices and the more general struggle for emancipation, dignity, and sovereignty that is fostered by these social conditions. This later concern has led him to conceive of one of his most ambitious projects; the reenactment of the 1811 German Coast Uprising in Louisiana, the largest slave revolt in U.S. history. The focus of this reenactment will be on the fact that this rebellion was the result of the slaves' own project of self-emancipation.

The stories told in the works selected for this exhibition focus mainly on how crime prevention; “to serve and protect”, “zero tolerance” and the various “wars” declared on drugs, gangs, violence represent a concerted effort to respond to the social problems caused by extreme poverty, daily violence, frustration, and poor education. This approach to aggressive crime prevention has been the trend in law enforcement since the urban uprisings in Harlem, Newark, Watts, Detroit, among others in the late 60s – early 70s\*. In most cases ignited by an incident of police abuse or violence, these confrontations with the authorities

\* The summer of 1967 marked the apex of a cycle of ‘urban unrest’ begun July 16, 1964 with the Harlem riots, followed by Watts. During the summer of 1967 there were one hundred and sixty four “civil disorders” reported in one hundred and twenty eight American cities. Of these “disturbances” those that took place in Newark and Detroit were the most severe. While some saw these occurrences as “rebellions” or “uprisings” against economic and political oppression, authorities portrayed these events as criminal in nature, employing the terms “civil disorder”, “urban unrest” or “riots” to make them appear to be seemingly senseless acts of violence.

were an expression of the rising expectations generated in “under-served” and “under-represented” communities, and the frustration caused by the slow progress being made in terms of civil rights, and economic reform. In the most severe cases, the National Guard had to be called up to restore order. Since that period, the tendency has been to turn the police into a para-military force, who perceive themselves as occupying communities consisting of a hostile, enemy population that at all costs must be restrained.

In the ever weakening economy of the 1980s, the demands for the budgetary and material resources needed for policing have most often been drawn away from the social and economic programs meant to alleviate the conditions that give rise to crime and

violence in poor neighborhoods. The irony of course, is that this only increases these communities’ sense of desperation and anger. Scott would have us understand that to end this cycle, we need not only resist such policies, but also reject transforming the existential and systemic nature of these social conditions into issues awaiting a cure-all solution such as; creating more opportunities, more jobs, more education, more training, more laws, or more community-based initiatives. By supplying a platform for prisoners and youth subject to profiling to speak for themselves, Scott makes explicit that part of the struggle for racial equality lies in establishing a dialogue not just about policies and injustices but how we come to see, understand, and relate to one another.

The inclusion of the work, *American Newspeak... Please Feel Free*, (1988) establishes Scott’s baseline. In this work he initiates many of the strategies and stances that he will develop and deploy over the course of his career. The 12 stations that make up this suite of works consist of 12 black and white photomontages. These address issues of state violence and control. Each has a text printed onto it. Below each montage is a shelf with instructions and questions to which the viewer is asked to respond. There are also stacks of offset reproductions of each photograph on the shelf. The instruction at each station informs the participants that if they agree with the political statement accompanying the photomontage, they are free to take one of the offset prints. Unlike the prints hanging on the wall, the text on these prints state that the person who owns it agrees with its “political” statement. The audience is also invited to record their views in the book that is on each shelf.



*Be All That You Can Be*, from the series *American Newspeak... Please Feel Free*, silver gelatin prints, offset reproductions with text, text on signs, books, pens, shelf, and active audience, 1988.



*What is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?*, from the series, *American Newspeak... Please Feel Free*, silver gelatin print, U.S. flag, book, pen, shelf, audience, 1988.

# WAR ON GANGS



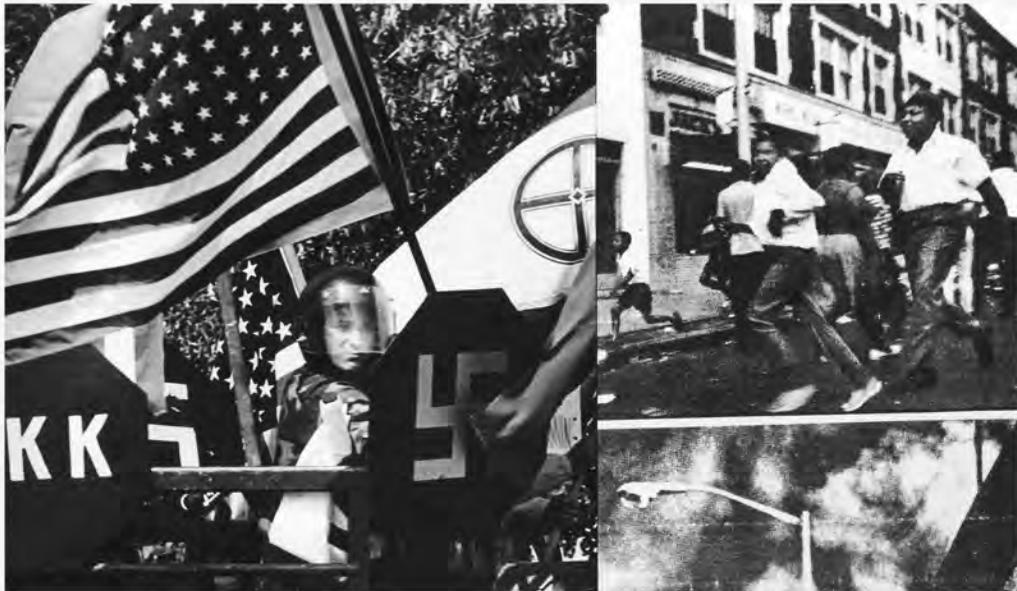
Sometimes a government can perpetrate a crime so large that the people just don't see it or don't believe that it can happen here. The person who owns this print believes that it could happen here.

Part of *American Newspeak...*, is the piece *What is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?* This highly provocative work, which is not included in this exhibition, is a slight departure from the narrative created by the other stations that make up this work. It consists of a real U.S. flag spread on the floor below the shelf so one must walk on it to view the photomontage, which consists of pictures of South Korean students burning U.S. flags and holding signs that read 'Yankee go home son of bitch' and flag draped coffins in a troop transport. Unlike the other stations, there is no print for people to take away with them, in that each viewer enacts their position by either walking or not walking on the flag. In 1989, while on display at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, *What is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?* became the center of national controversy over its use of the American flag. President G.H.W. Bush declared it "disgraceful" and

the U.S. Congress denounced this work, and passed legislation to "protect the flag." Following on this, Scott and others performed a flag burning, violating the very law that also included wording that outlawed his work. The ensuing court case would eventually lead to a Supreme Court decision concerning the freedom of such symbolic acts of expression.

Among the image/texts included in *American Newspeak...* that directly connects to the dominant theme of Scott's works that make-up this exhibit are; *We Serve and Protect*, *War on Drugs*, *War on Gangs*, *War on Crime*, and *the Simpson Rodino Amnesty Act* (this refers to the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986). Through these images and texts, Scott focuses on the force and resistance, and the fear and intimidation generated by the presence of the police as a para-military force. Chain-link fences with their

## WE SERVE AND PROTECT



When they kick out your front door, how you gonna come; With your hands on your head, or on the trigger of your gun?  
 When the law break in, how you gonna go; Shot down on the pavement, or awaiting a death row?  
 —The Clash  
 The person who owns this print is not going to "come-out silently with your hands up." It is in this spirit that they were given this print.

*We Serve and Protect*, from *American Newspeak...* Please Feel Free, offset reproductions with text, 1988.



*Harmed & Dangerous*, Cibachrome prints, soundtrack, phones, Plexiglas, wood, masonite, 1993. (installation detail)

implication of separation and containment play a dominant visual role in many of these montages. Style-wise, the stark black and white imagery and its fragmentation pay homage to the agit-prop graphics of the Russian Constructivist. Viewing these images now in the context of events since the demonstrations in Ferguson, Mo., make it seem as if little or nothing has changed in the U.S., leaving us asking, Why?

Though *American Newspeak...* is participatory in the sense that the audience is invited to insert themselves into the work by leaving comments and taking prints, a more important aspect of this work is each participant who takes a print, becomes part of the system by which the works' political messages is disseminated beyond the gallery's walls. Among these prints, one certifies that "The person who owns this print believes that the

United States of America should be overthrown through armed revolution and is currently participating in an activity to do so. It is because of this that they were given this print.” A similar theme is at the heart of *Harmed and Dangerous* (1993), which focuses on the cycle of violence within the Black and Hispanic communities. *Harmed and Dangerous* consists of four Cibachrome prints of armed Black and Latino men and a woman. There is some irony in this work, all the photos look as if they might be advertisements for a clothing chain because everyone is posed as if they were a fashion model. In this, Scott seems to point to how advertising and mass media are part of a system that circulates

and romanticizes the “criminal” look. Across from these pictures sits the kind of “prison booth” where the visitor is separated from the prisoner by a wall and a thick Plexiglas window. When you pick up the phone in the booth, you hear a continuous monolog advocating that gang and criminal violence be redirected back onto the system in the form of revolutionary violence.

Unlike *American Newspeak...*, with its imagery of Klan and a militarized police, the other works in this exhibition present no “bad guys” in the form of a stereotypical greedy capitalist, indifferent politician, racist cop, or white supremacists to triumph over.



*Harmed & Dangerous*, Cibachrome prints, soundtrack, phones, Plexiglas, wood, masonite, 1993.



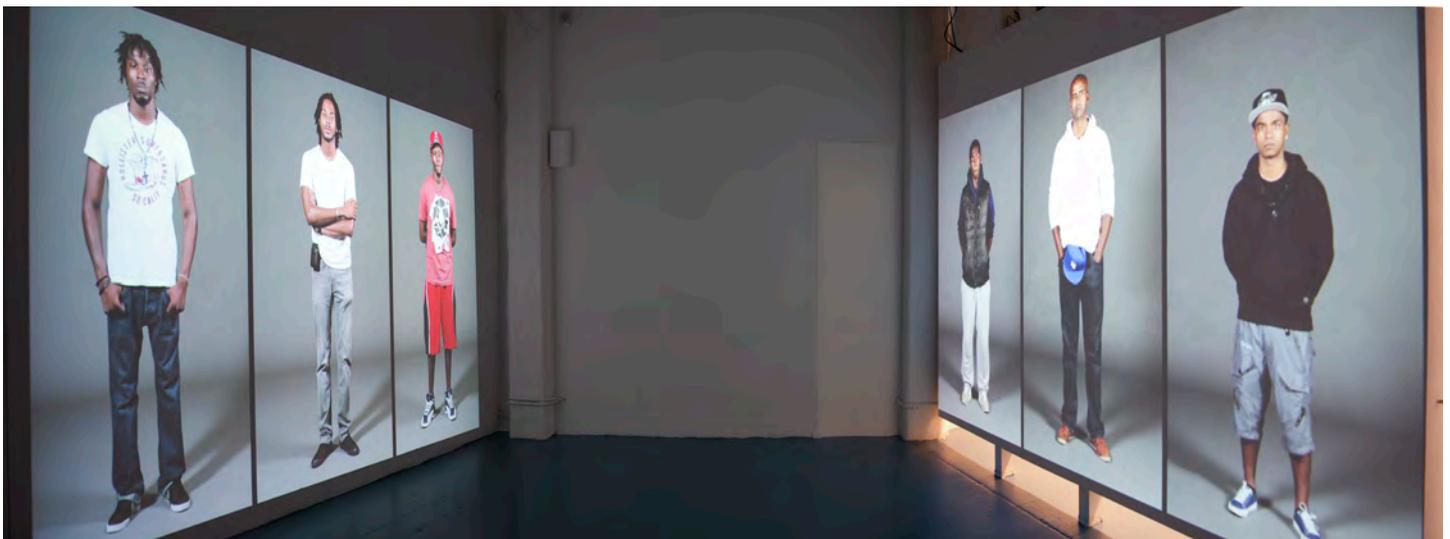
Stop, 2-channel HD projected video, running time 7:16, 2012. (video stills)

What Scott does present is the all too human consequences of a system whose inherent qualities are those of discrimination, exploitation, injustice, and subjugation. His message is this system must be exposed, rooted out, and eradicated once and for all. Implicit in this is a view that what the dismantling of Jim Crow and the gains of the civil rights movement did was to do away with the most visible aspects of racism while leaving deeply entrenched in our social and economic relations its most nefarious aspects.

It is important to note that Scott, beyond his studio practice, has worked on community based projects. Among these is *Postcode-Criminals*, a collaboration with Joanne Kushner and youth from Brooklyn, NY and Liverpool in the UK. Between 2011–2012, Kushner and Scott led a series of workshops for young adults (aged 14–22) to teach them how to record and address the effects of police intervention in their lives and their communities. Working with over 125 young people in both cities, these young adults shared their experiences and conversed by Skype video calls. The mash-up of materials generated by this process formed the content of the exhibition *Postcode Criminals*. Stemming from this is Scott's two-channel

video installation *Stop*. Projected on facing walls, so the viewer is standing between the projections, are 3 full-body images of young men from East New York, Brooklyn on one wall and on the other wall, are images of 3 young men from Liverpool, UK. Each is casual in their stance and stands mutely staring into the camera. It is obvious they have been told to do nothing. These projections are accompanied by a soundtrack from which their disembodied voices repeatedly state the number of times they have been stopped by the police. The numbers given range anywhere from twenty to a few hundred, or to being stopped daily.

Another community based project is *Wanted* (2014), which consists of a series of what appears to be police wanted posters of young adults. Included on each poster is a description of the suspect and a description of their offense, which are ultimately things that are not illegal, but which the police use as suitable provocation to stop and question someone. Both the projects *Postcode Criminals* and *Wanted* were supplemented with workshops, forums, and other activities meant to extend their presence beyond the gallery space and back into the community.



*Stop*, 2-channel HD projected video, running time 7:16, 2012. (installation view)

# WANTED

## FOR UNSPECIFIED REASONS

PERPETRATOR • PROBABLE CAUSE TO STOP AND QUESTION



UNK, UNK / MALE / BLACK  
HEIGHT 5'9", WEIGHT 160 lbs., HAIR BLACK, EYES UNKNOWN  
LAST KNOWN ADDRESS: 000 UNKNOWN UNKNOWN

On Friday July 18, 2014, at approximately 1945HRS, a male black, approximately 19-23 years of age wearing a blue over-shirt and black denim pants was observed standing in front of a building at 549 West 126th. Officers allege that suspect fled to parts unknown as PO approached building. Police state they have reason to question suspect. Suspect has previously been stopped and searched numerous times and is not armed and is not dangerous.

The suspect is wanted by his family, friends and neighbors. To download copies of this poster and display it: [www.wanted-project.com](http://www.wanted-project.com)



Investigator:  
Assigned: Criminalization Task Force  
Case# 2014-93 Complaint Report# 2014-007-01134



*Wanted*, community based project: performance, meetings, video, *Wanted* posters, 2014. (artwork in situ)  
 Opposite page: *Wanted*, reproduction of *Wanted* poster, 2014

In the installation *Lockdown* (2004), those who have experienced the consequences of law enforcement policies, speak for themselves. This work consists of 11 photographs of inmates and edited interviews with the artist. Scott's intent is to reveal how one of the defining features of the lives of many youths in America is the threat of a criminal justice system committed to mass incarceration. *Lockdown* exposes how criminality has come to be projected on youth. It is important to note that of the eleven photos that make up *Lockdown*, five of them are of white men.

*Lockdown* eloquently bears witness to the cultural and psychologically damage incurred by living in an environment of daily violence, the threat of

incarceration, and the impact that a culture of drugs, repeat offenders, and criminal escalation has had on them since they were teenagers. Some speak with resignation, others speak with anger of the affect that the prison system has had on their families and their sense of self. It is apparent from their interviews that based on the age and race of the offender there are disparities in the official assessment of their criminal intent and resulting sentences. Similar issues are addressed in *Or Does It Explode* (2009). This work, not included in this exhibition, is also the result of Scott working with a community group, in this case with young adults in Philadelphia. *Or Does It Explode*, consists of life-sized photographs of 12 smiling male and female youths, mounted in light boxes, which are



*Lockdown*, silver gelatin prints, spoken word audio, 2000-2004.



*...Or Does It Explode*, night view of installation, Logan Square, Philadelphia, 2009.

exhibited in two rows, lying on the ground. The effect of looking down on them, brings to mind open coffins or graves. Accompanying these images are recordings of each of the youths voicing their dreams, and the social and economic obstacles and challenges they face in trying to achieve their aspirations.

Implicit in all of these works is that Scott's primary concern is the human and psychological costs, as these experiences are internalized by each and everyone in the Black community. Yet, though the images and voices in Scott's works are primarily of young Black and Latino males, these could be replaced with those of young working class men and women of any ethnicity — the result of this would be that they would immediately be perceived of as criminals. This raises the question as to what would be the effect on any

community if it were inundated with wanted posters and news flashes of their youth as criminals and gang members, posing with guns, or represented as being a significant portion of the prison population. Think of the psychological consequences of being constantly told that this is your fate — this is who you are destined to be — this is who you are, and therefore this is how you should expect to be treated. By addressing both the real and the imagined, Scott's works generate experiences in which the boundary between art and life is re-established, making us aware that what these works represent is distanced and symbolic; while as part of daily life the conditions they address are a matter of life and death.

*Saul Ostrow*  
July, 2016, NYC

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Saul Ostrow** is an independent critic/ curator, and Art Editor at Large for Bomb Magazine. In 2011, he founded Critical Practices Inc. (CPI)<[criticalpractices.org](http://criticalpractices.org)> an organization established to promote critical discourse and collaborative practices. Ostrow also served as Co-Editor of Lusitania Press (1996-2004) and as the commissioning Editor of the book series

*Critical Voices in Art, Theory and Culture (1996- 2006)* published by Francis & Taylor, London. As a curator he has organized over 70 exhibition in the US and abroad. His critical writings have appeared in art magazines, journals, catalogues, and books in the USA and Europe.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

**Dread Scott** first received national attention in 1989 when his art became the center of controversy over its use of the American flag. President George H.W. Bush declared his artwork *What is the Proper Way to Display a U.S. Flag?* “disgraceful” and the entire U.S. Senate denounced this work and outlawed it when they passed legislation to “protect the flag.” To oppose this law and other efforts, which would effectively make patriotism compulsory, he, along with three other protesters, burned flags on the steps of the U.S. Capitol. This resulted in a Supreme Court case and a landmark First Amendment decision.

His art has been exhibited at the MoMA PS1, the Contemporary Art Museum Houston, The Walker Art Center, and at the Pori Art Museum in Pori, Finland as well as on view in *America is Hard to See*, the Whitney Museum’s inaugural exhibition in their new building. In 2012, BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music) presented his performance *Dread Scott: Decision* as part of their 30th Anniversary Next Wave Festival. In 2008, the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts presented *Dread Scott: Welcome to America*. Jack Shainman Gallery, Winkleman Gallery and Cristin Tierney in New York have exhibited recent work and his public sculptures have been installed at Logan Square in Philadelphia and Franconia Sculpture Park in Minnesota. His work is in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the New Museum of Contemporary Art (NY) and the Akron Art Museum (OH).

He is a recipient of a grants from the Creative Capital Foundation, the MAP Fund, the Pollock Krasner Foundation and has been awarded a Socially Engaged Artists Fellowship from A Blade of Grass Foundation as well as Fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts. He has been invited to numerous artists residencies, including at the McColl Center for Art & Innovation, Smack Mellon, and the Workspace Residency of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. He has been written about in *The New York Times*, *Art In America*, *Sculpture Magazine*, *ArtNews*, *ArtForum*, *Art21 Magazine*, *Time*, *The London Guardian* and several other newspapers, magazines and books. He has appeared on numerous local and national TV and radio shows including Oprah, *The Today Show*, and CBS *This Morning* speaking about his work and the controversy surrounding it.

Most recently his flag installation, *A Man Was Lynched By Police Yesterday*, was installed outside a gallery in New York City. It was met with widespread passionate



reaction—overwhelmingly supportive, though also including threats and vitriol. This piece is an updated version of the iconic *A Man Was Lynched Yesterday* flag that hung outside the New York City headquarters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the 1920s and 30s. Both are in response to violence towards African Americans by a privileged class.

His work has been integrated into academic curricula and *What is the Proper Way...* is discussed in many art history classes and is featured in Henry Sayer’s “foundations” text, *A World of Art*.

Scott works in a range of media including performance, photography, screen-printing, video, installation, and painting. His works can be hard-edged and poignant. He plays with fire—metaphorically and sometimes literally—as when he burned \$171 on Wall Street and encouraged those with money to burn to add theirs to the pyre. The breadth of media he explores is unified by the themes he addresses and how he handles them. His art illuminates the misery that this society creates for so many and it often encourages the viewer to envision how the world could be.

## ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

The United States has less than 5 percent of the world's population, yet we have almost 25 percent of the world's total prison population – the highest prison population rate in the world. Some estimates put that number at 716 per 100,000 people while more than half of the countries worldwide have rates below 150 per 100,000. Theories for this cite crime spikes in the 1960's through the 1970's. In response, the U.S. got tough on crime with policies in the 1980's and into the 1990's, such as truth in sentencing laws, mandatory minimums, mandatory drug sentences, life sentence without possibility of parole, and the three-strikes law. The key players in the country's legal system are elected positions in various levels of government, which makes the U.S. criminal justice system more politicized and more responsive to popular opinion.

African Americans are incarcerated at nearly six times the rate of Whites. The individual states that consistently had the widest prison disparities across race and ethnicity were Connecticut, Iowa, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Pennsylvania, Utah, Vermont, and Wisconsin. Philadelphia has the distinction of having the highest incarceration rate of any big city in the nation. Juvenile offenders are also at a higher rate in Philadelphia than the national average and higher than any other county in the nation. There are 214 youth serving juvenile life-without-parole sentences from Philadelphia. That's 9 percent of all juvenile lifers nationwide, though the city is home to only 5 percent of the U.S. population.

*A Sharp Divide* is a survey of Dread Scott's public engagement, performance, and multi-media based work completed from 1987 – 2014 that tackles the volatile racial and cultural disparities that exist within our criminal justice system such as: the criminalization of youth, profiling and discrimination, stop and frisk tactics, and other civil rights issues.

As an activist artist, Scott's work is intentional and pointed. The protagonist, who might be at times the artist himself, confronts the viewer through body posture, direct eye contact, and dialog. Stills and video images are tightly framed, monochromatic, and devoid of any discernable background, adding tension to an already highly charged atmosphere.

Addressing this divide head on, both in the use of his language and imagery is the foundation of Scott's practice and necessary in order to encourage dialog, action, and change.

The selected works are presented in the gallery as video, photography, installation, and audience interactions.

*Mary Salvante*  
Curator, Gallery and Exhibitions Program Director

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Rowan University Art Gallery is honored to be the venue for Dread Scott's first New Jersey based one-person exhibition. It has been a privileged for me to curate this important and timely topic and I am grateful to Mr. Scott for his input and generosity on the selection of works included.

I would like to also thank Saul Ostrow for his insightful and straightforward essay contributed for this catalogue.

I would also like to acknowledge JT Mills and Karen Susie from Rowan's Office of Social Justice, Inclusion and Conflict Resolution for working with us to organize the panel discussion as part of the exhibition program.

And special thanks to Jillian Schley for the design of this catalogue.

This exhibition is made possible in part by funds from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. All images are courtesy of the artist.

*Mary Salvante*  
Curator, Gallery and Exhibitions Program Director

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## EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

### AMERICAN NEWSPEAK...PLEASE FEEL FREE

Silver gelatin prints, offset reproductions with text, text on signs, books, pens, shelf, and active audience, 1988

### HARMED & DANGEROUS

Cibachrome prints, soundtrack, phones, Plexiglas, wood, and masonite, 1993

### LOCKDOWN

Silver gelatin prints, spoken word audio, 2000-2004

### STOP

2-channel HD projected video, running time 7:16, 2012

### WANTED

Community based project: performance, meetings, video, and *Wanted* posters, 2014

## ROWAN UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

Rowan University Art Gallery serves as a premier cultural destination for South Jersey, the Rowan community, and surrounding region. Our mission is to provide a platform for discourse on best practices in contemporary art by professional artists, curators, and scholars through the presentation of interdisciplinary art exhibitions, panel discussions, guest curatorial projects, and other public programming.

*Admission to gallery events are always free and open to the public.*

For more information about *Dread Scott: A Sharp Divide*, or to request a copy of this catalogue, contact RUAG.

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Cover Image: *Ignorance is Strength*, from *American Newspeak... Please Feel Free*, silver gelatin print, 1988. (detail)



