





American

MONUMENT

↻ COLLABORATIVE PROJECT EXPLORES
COMPELLING ACCOUNTS OF RACE AND VIOLENCE

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 Lori Brandt
 Courtesy of American Monument



American Monument (AM) was the last exhibit at the UC Irvine Beall Center for Art + Technology before the world shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Created by conceptual artist Lauren Woods and curator Kimberli Meyer, AM examines the cultural conditions under which African Americans lose their lives at the hands of police officers. Through audio recordings and case documents, the inter-media artwork gives visitors an intimate look into the disturbing encounters.

The show drew hundreds of visitors from Oct. 2, 2019, until it closed March 16, 2020. A mere two months later, George Floyd was killed and the country erupted in social protests supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. The subject matter addressed in AM was being discussed by people of all races across the country and in other parts of the world. Still today, people are engaging in conversations, examinations and increased understanding of systemic racism and violence against Black people.

Woods and Meyer intended AM to serve as a vehicle for students, scholars and the public to analyze the complex relationships that exist among race, material violence, structural power and monumentality itself. The exhibit was conceived to travel and continually expand,

moving across the country year to year, "unveiled" at universities, museums, storefronts, community centers and churches. With future iterations on hold, it is fortunate that AM will be resurrected in a living digital representation, with help from a four-person team at CALIT2.

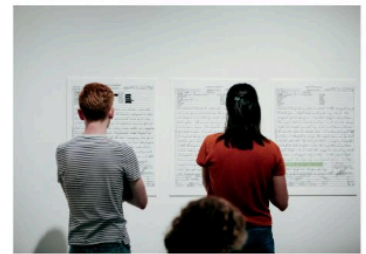
Although they are located on opposite sides of the campus, the Beall Center and CALIT2 were both founded in 2000 with a common interest in technology and its multidisciplinary intersections. They are

collaborating on this project as part of the Beall's Blackbox Projects residency program. Beall Center Artistic Director David Familian and Sergio Gago-Masague, director of CALIT2's Engaging Technology and Application Design Lab and assistant professor of teaching in information and computer science, serve as project coordinators.

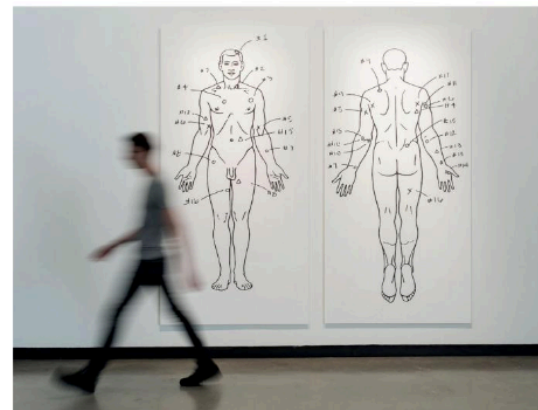
AM was initially funded by the Mike Kelley Foundation, and then additional support came from the Beall Family Foundation and Andy Warhol



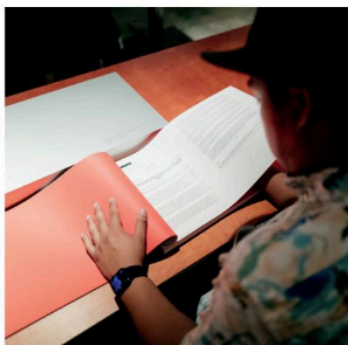
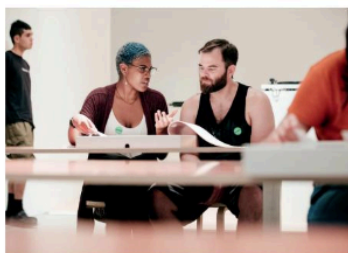
Visitors to the Beall Center's American Monument exhibit listen to audio recordings of police confrontations with Black civilians.



The exhibit includes use-of-force reports, prosecutor and autopsy reports, witness testimonies and 911-call transcripts, all documents gathered through Freedom of Information Act requests.



Visitors are able to read through all documents associated with each of the 22 cases.



Foundation for the Visual Arts. At the outset, Familian realized a catalog would be inadequate for documenting AM. He, along with woods and Meyer, pulled together a team to conceptualize and implement an interactive website and smart archive of the work. In addition to Gago-Masague, the group includes representatives from the schools of arts, humanities, information and computer sciences, and law.

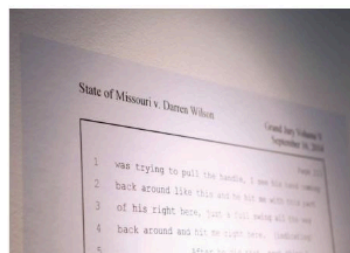
THE PHYSICAL EXHIBIT

AM featured 22 cases of police- or law enforcement-sanctioned violence against Black people. The center of the exhibit was a sound installation with turntables sitting on a grid of white pedestals. Visitors could play the records themselves to hear the audio recordings

of police confrontation with Black civilians right before the use of lethal force. Eric Garner, Philando Castile and Freddie Gray were just a few of the distressed voices heard. In the next room sat a conference table and stools, where visitors could sort through one of 22 metal boxes and read documents associated with each case. The documents were assembled through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests and include use-of-force reports, prosecutor reports, autopsy reports, witness testimonies and transcripts of 911 calls.

THE DIGITAL ITERATION

Hosted by the Beall Center, the interactive web system will include all of the case documents, offering worldwide access



to AM. Data files will be meta-tagged with keyword descriptions embedded in the code so they are easily searchable. The smart archive includes features for both adding updates to cases and allowing approved scholars to annotate documents. Future plans include incorporating artificial intelligence methods, such as natural language processing, to automatically analyze and extract relevant information based on users' needs, enabling scholars to data mine the case files.

woods and Meyer view the web system as an online gathering for people to contribute cases for investigation and provide further documentation for analysis and future exhibitions. "The digital platform aspires to be not only a public learning and information-sharing portal but also, eventually, a collaborative knowledge-production platform," says woods. "We are collaboratively building this with the idea of its full emergence serving as a tool for the public."

The web system also will contain the recorded

sessions of the March 2020 Think Tank Marathon held at the Beall Center. The two-day event brought together scholars, lawyers, community activists, students and artists who gathered to process and incubate issues and ideas raised by the artwork.

"The website will eventually be an active element of the work—providing the mechanisms for people to make FOIA requests, annotate documents, share information, and in this way support others who are pursuing the larger project of ending white supremacy, police brutality and state violence. In this sense, it is an active piece of the work, not a passive record of its existence," said Meyer.

Familian believes the project offers a unique model for scholarship and research into the issue of police treatment of Black people. "We are creating an evidence-based dataset where scholars can start to look at language and behavior and how they have changed or stayed the same over time," he said. "If you look at the Sandra Bland case, you can determine when the



situation intensified. You can hear it in the recording."

Gago-Masague hopes the first phase of the web system will be open to the public by summer 2021. A native of Spain, he has worked on art-related projects before in his homeland. "I'm happy to be involved and collaborate with artists again. As an engineer and scientist, I really enjoy learning from other disciplines, in particular learning how technology can contribute to other domains."

As the country recovers from the pandemic, AM will be able to open in other locations. But it is thanks to technology that the web system will keep the important concepts raised by the artwork accessible for visitors from around the world to critically reflect upon and inspire change. 

The digital representation of the exhibit will include recorded sessions of the two-day Think Tank Marathon at which scholars, lawyers, community activists, artists and students gathered to discuss issues and ideas raised by the artwork.