

# ARTFORUM

*lauren woods*

*Beall Center for Art + Technology*

*University of California, Irvine*

By Kavior Moon

February 2020

For the past several years, lauren woods has been investigating public space, historical memory, and social consciousness through what she calls “inter-media monuments.” Unlike traditional monuments, towering and seemingly permanent, woods’s are interactive and scaled to the human body. Take, for example, her *Drinking Fountain #1*, 2013, located beneath a worn “WHITE ONLY” sign in the Dallas County Records Building. The Jim Crow-era sign had



reappeared some years earlier when the metal plate covering fell off. Instead of repressing the city’s history of segregation by erasing the words, woods altered the drinking fountain beneath them to commemorate the civil rights movement and its legacy of political resistance in the present. Now, before they take a sip, visitors must view projected 1960s newsreel footage of policemen in Birmingham, Alabama, aiming water cannons at African American protestors.

*American Monument*, 2018 –, on view at the Beall Center for Art + Technology at the University of California, Irvine, is woods’s most complex inter-media monument to date. It functions as a space within which to grieve, and critically reflect on, the disproportionate number of black lives taken by police officers. At its center is *Archive I*, 2018 –, a sound sculpture composed of twenty-two records on turntables displayed on individual white pedestals. Each audio recording represents events surrounding the death of a black civilian, most at the hands—or while in the custody—of the police, in the past six or so years. Visitors can activate the work by playing one or more of the records (some of them are blank, indicating the absence of audio documentation in those cases), thus temporarily filling the low-lit gallery with sounds of indignity and violence. The audio includes that taken from a bystander’s cellphone video of Eric Garner being put in a choke hold, from Sandra Bland’s own cellphone video of being pulled over during a traffic stop,

and from the dashboard camera of the police officer who shot Terrence Crutcher. While some visitors may hesitate to publicly replay those aural testimonies (is the artist's use of them sensationalizing, and will their amplifications here revictimize the person represented?), the fact that many of the recordings were made by alarmed bystanders, the victims themselves, or police cameras intended to increase accountability suggests that to *not* listen—to not engage—might in fact symbolically represent a worse offense: the refusal to acknowledge and attend to such violence.

In an adjacent space is *Archive II*, 2018 –, twenty-two metal boxes holding copies of juridical documents pertaining to the death of each person memorialized in *Archive I* (if available—some boxes are empty). The documents were assiduously gathered through Freedom of Information Act requests and include use-of-force reports, prosecutor reports, autopsy reports, witness testimonies, and transcripts of 911 calls. Encouraged to sit by the presence of tables and stools, visitors can examine multiple cases to see, in detail, how police violence has been repeatedly rationalized and legitimized.

Intended to be inaugurated at the University Art Museum at California State University, Long Beach, in September 2018, *American Monument* remained silent during its three-month run there; six days before the opening, the university fired the museum's director, Kimberli Meyer, citing "a longer-term process" that had led to the decision, and leading woods to request, in an act of protest, that the work be "paused." (Meyer claims that university provided no clear explanation for her termination and has filed an appeal.) The Beall Center's presentation is therefore *American Monument's* first full iteration; as part of the artwork, woods and Meyer, whom the artist considers the project's coleader, have planned public events with scholars, lawyers, community activists, students, artists, and others. "This is not an exhibition of objects. This is not a show of conceptual play," woods has remarked. "*American Monument* is a transformative process that wants to tackle the culture of police brutality through cultural production." The work is intended to be nomadic, to be "unveiled" at universities, museums, community centers, and churches across the country. A pedagogical tool and a catalyst for social change, *American Monument* holds participants (who are, in a more literal gesture, given a sticker that reads "WITNESS" upon entry) accountable in this collective effort to reconsider the relationships between race, violence, structural power, and public memory.