

Statement from the Director and Associate Directors of the CSULB School of Art regarding *American Monument* and the Dismissal of University Art Museum Director Kimberli Meyer

October 16, 2018

In response to the recent dismissal of CSULB University Art Museum Director Kimberli Meyer and the resultant disruption of the *American Monument* project by artist lauren woods [lower case “l” and “w” are preferred by the artist], and in the context of ongoing dialogue and concern among School of Art students, staff, and faculty, and the steady stream of comments from parties to the situation, we feel compelled to issue a public statement. As the Director and Associate Directors of SOA, we have decided to issue this statement with only our names attached because we cannot assert that it reflects the sentiments of all within our learning community or that all have “signed off” on it. However, based on multiple discussions and meetings, we are confident that what follows reflects the concerns and hopes of many. This statement has been sent to President Jane Conoley, with copies to Brian Jersky, Provost; Scott Apel, Vice President of Administration and Finance; Terri Carbaugh, Associate Vice President, Office of Public Affairs; Larisa Hamada, Director, Office of Equity and Diversity; Cyrus Parker-Jeannette, Dean of the College of the Arts; Jennifer Moran, President of the California State University Employees Union Chapter 315; and Kimberli Meyer.

On Tuesday, September 11, 2018, faculty of the College of the Arts received an announcement from COTA Dean Cyrus Parker-Jeannette indicating that as of that day Kimberli Meyer would no longer be serving as the Director of the UAM. Press accounts soon made clear that Meyer had not resigned but had been dismissed. This action came just days before the scheduled launch of the *American Monument* project, which over time was to bring together archival material concerning police brutality against African-Americans. At the September 16 UAM launch event, woods explained why she accepted Meyer’s invitation to produce *American Monument* at CSULB, conveyed her dismay over Meyer’s dismissal six days earlier, and announced her decision to “pause” *American Monument*, which to this day remains on “pause.” At her Visiting Artist lecture on Tuesday, September 18, before a large audience of CSULB students, staff, and faculty, woods provided an overview of her practice and an impassioned explanation of what she was trying to achieve with *American Monument*. Many stayed beyond the scheduled 105-minute presentation for the on-stage interview of woods by a *Daily 49er* correspondent and the question and answer session that followed, which lasted for more than two hours.

Discussion continues in and outside classrooms throughout the School of Art. Students are paying attention. They were shocked by the sequence of events, want to know more about what happened, and wish to know where faculty stand. A considerable number of faculty and staff likewise remain profoundly disturbed by the firing of the UAM Director. To many, it appeared that Meyer was doing an effective job. In her first two years, she had overseen the mounting of multiple exhibitions that carried over from the previous UAM Director; was initiating innovative programming, including engagement of the campus and broader community in aspects of the UAM mission; and was a key resource to the museum studies program, as well as student interns and volunteers. She played an instrumental, indeed collaborative, role in initiating wood’s ground-breaking *American Monument*. It is

therefore not surprising that the timing of her firing and the manner in which she was dismissed, as well as the minimal and fragmented manner in which the university confirmed Meyer's dismissal, have confounded and disturbed rather than informed and assured constituencies on and off campus.

School of Art faculty, staff, and students who are engaged in ongoing dialogue about what transpired have limited information to go on. While an increasing number of comments and observations are circulating privately among individuals and groups, at times shared on social media, fewer statements by parties close to the situation have been afforded broad public distribution. At issue in these varied public articulations are the nature and degree of Meyer's contributions as UAM director; circumstances related to her dismissal; the significance of *American Monument*; needs and considerations of UAM staff and interns; union concerns regarding safety, preparedness, and the need for non-discriminatory actions; and the university's handling of matters relating to equity and diversity.

To the best of our knowledge, as of the posting of this statement, publicly disseminated comments and official statements include:

- Statements by Lauren Woods both at the UAM opening and since she "paused" *American Monument*, which she posted on a [website](#) dedicated to the project;
- A statement by COTA Dean Parker-Jeannette emailed on September 11 to COTA employees, and [other comments posted on September 17 on the Office of Public Affairs website](#);
- Statements by Meyer to the press (including [Long Beach Post](#) on September 17, [Hyperallergic](#) on September 18 and [Daily49er](#) on September 19);
- [A statement by Terri Carbaugh](#), CSULB Associate Vice President for Public Affairs, circulated via email and posted on the Office of Public Affairs website on September 19;
- [A statement by Jennifer Moran](#), President of the California State University Employees Union Chapter 315, published in the *Long Beach Post* on October 1;
- Further statements from Meyer regarding the circumstances surrounding her dismissal included in follow-up reporting in *Long Beach Post* on October 1 and *Hyperallergic* on October 9; and
- An open letter to multiple CSULB administrators and division offices published in [Hyperallergic](#) on October 9 by Melissa Raybon, a CSULB graduate who worked as a Getty Multicultural Intern at the UAM the summer of 2017.

While statements by several parties indicate that longer-term management issues factored into Meyer's dismissal, comments variously offered in campus meetings and social media leave some wondering if problems warranted her dismissal and its unfortunate timing. Might matters have been resolved via other means? We personally are mindful that the UAM has for years operated under the stresses of fluctuating and inadequate budgets,

overworked staff, and shifting plans and priorities from higher administration as to the museum's disposition, location, potential expansion, and needed improvements. Our sense is that these stresses have negatively impacted workplace dynamics and hindered operational efficiency. Furthermore, UAM staff, interns, and volunteers past and present—for whom we have great respect and empathy—appear to have faced significant challenges and stresses since the inception of the project. We recognize that the present situation is exceptionally difficult for them.

The impact of Meyer's dismissal and the disruption of *American Monument* have been felt directly by SOA. A number of artists booked for the SOA Visiting Artist lecture series are now saying they are inclined to cancel in protest of Meyer's firing. Communications with colleagues in the field, as well as discussions on social media, indicate obvious damage to the credibility and standing of SOA and, by extension, the university. We anticipate these adverse repercussions will hinder our efforts to recruit promising students and faculty and impede the growth of a diverse campus environment. Importantly, the actions have also dealt a palpable blow to student morale, with student dissatisfaction continuing to rise in the weeks since Meyer's dismissal.

We have the impression that the university administration has underestimated the symbolic power of its handling of this incident. Its public-relations efforts have not and will not in the future adequately justify the timing of the dismissal or the university's failure to anticipate and grasp the impact on the artist, the creative project, students, staff, faculty, and the community at large.

At a COTA open meeting on September 25, [Parker-Jeannette affirmed](#) the value of Meyer's approach to programming. [In her October 1 public statement, Moran](#) indicated UAM staff support for Meyer's "artistic vision" concerning "social justice" issues and affirmed "the importance of understanding and exploring the bias in police violence"; she declared that *American Monument* "is an opportunity to come together and have meaningful dialogue around systemic oppression." Though [Carbaugh's statement](#) of September 19 acknowledged that "Ms. Meyer's artistic vision is supported by the College of the Arts," there has been no direct statement as to the position of the university administration on the matter of Meyer's vision or specifically on the *American Monument* project.

Many students, staff, and faculty share the belief that *American Monument* is groundbreaking and will have a long trajectory. They are concerned that its history will forever be marked by what happened at CSULB—the magnitude of the university's disturbance of the *Monument's* inception. As many examples in the history of art demonstrate, the histories of administrative actions live on; they are perpetually revisited in discussions of the art and the communities they impact. The same will be true for *American Monument*.

[The artist has stated](#) that the actions taken by the university administration constitute "institutional violence." She maintains that the "stewards of Cal State Long Beach have attempted to suffocate THE WORK"—have countered the "emergent," "process-based and responsive" nature of the project, which "moves to end anti-blackness." woods

nevertheless generously “paused” rather than “pulled” *American Monument* with the intent to initiate a “restorative process.” We in SOA believe that the artistic intent and broader aims of *American Monument* are crucial and emphasize that the short and long-term processes that constitute the project should be brought to completion.

We therefore recommend that the university take the following actions:

- Ensure Meyer a fair appeals process that fully takes into account her prior evaluations, the extent of forewarnings and opportunities for corrective action, the complexities of *American Monument*, and the multiple and ongoing challenges that impact the UAM’s operations and workplace dynamics.
- Acknowledge the “collective authorship” of the project and woods’ identification of Meyer as a “key partner” and “collaborator” by supporting Meyer’s continued participation in aspects of *American Monument*—the processes of research and university/community involvement that are foundational to the “emergent” and “responsive” nature of the project; do everything possible to assist with implementation of the CSULB component of *American Monument* in accordance with university safety and preparedness standards; initiate a campus-wide cross-disciplinary educational program focusing on issues relating to race; and facilitate efforts to implement *American Monument* at other venues.
- Ensure that UAM staff are supported in their efforts to continue with innovative and inclusive museum programming in accordance with the unique operational needs of university art museums.
- Several SOA graduate students who teach undergraduate courses, and thus have a unique view of student experience on our campus, have stated that if the university truly aims to address the emotional impact of recent events or the content of *American Monument*, then the administration should not only invest in counseling staff but institute mandatory unconscious-bias training campus-wide. This would honor woods’ work and Meyer’s vision and also reassure students, specifically students of color, that CSULB is committed to inclusionary practices.
- Articulate a clear, specific, and transparent plan for CSULB support of the UAM in the years to come, and publicly commit to it.

Importantly, every party to the UAM situation has affirmed the need for substantive dialogue concerning racial oppression and barriers to equity. At the time of the 2016 controversies over the re-contracting of *N*W*C** for a performance at the Carpenter Performing Arts Center, the cancelling of this event, and the CPAC Director’s subsequent resignation, Provost Brian Jersky expressed interest in the possibility of multi-disciplinary symposia and programming to facilitate discussions concerning issues relating to race. The actions we outline would help achieve this objective. They also would attest to the university’s support for *American Monument* and, importantly, ensure the long-term viability and visibility of the project—a distinctive and historically significant creative endeavor concerning crucial and timely social issues. Collectively we at the university have an important and unique opportunity on this campus to acknowledge and address issues of

race. As has been emphasized by many faculty and students, we must all take ownership of the environment and help to shape it—act in ways that testify to our desire to confront continuing problems and thereby make evident our commitment to diversity, inclusion, and social justice.

Sincerely,

Aubry Mintz, SOA Director

Karen Kleinfelder, SOA Associate Director

Chris Miles, SOA Associate Director