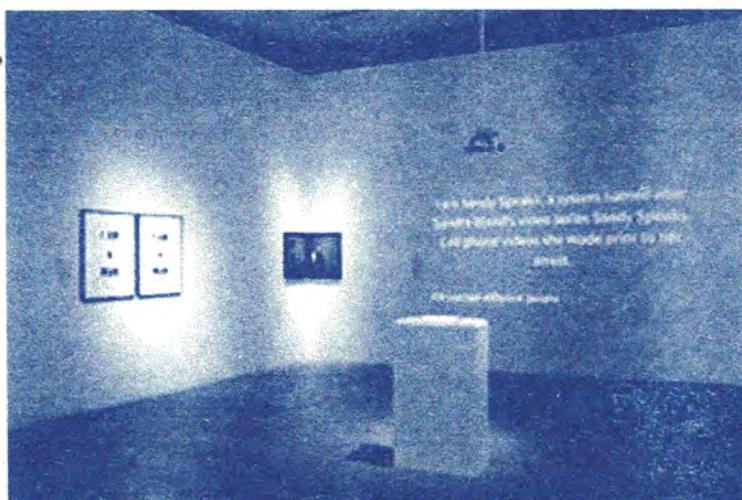


BY AMERICAN ARTIST

FAILURE AND
MARKUP
LANGUAGE:
REMEMBERING
SANDRA BLAND



Sandy Speaks, 2017, Interactive installation (Installation view of *Memory is a Tough Place*, Anna-Maria and Stephen Kellen Gallery, NY. Photo by Marc Brems Tatti)

In fall 2016 I was commissioned by Newhive.com to produce an online artwork as part of the series *Privacy, Surveillance, and Prison Reform*. Some of the concerns that the artworks intended to address were the failure of surveillance in providing justice, the demographics of incarcerated people, and the extension of these conversations into online space through art.

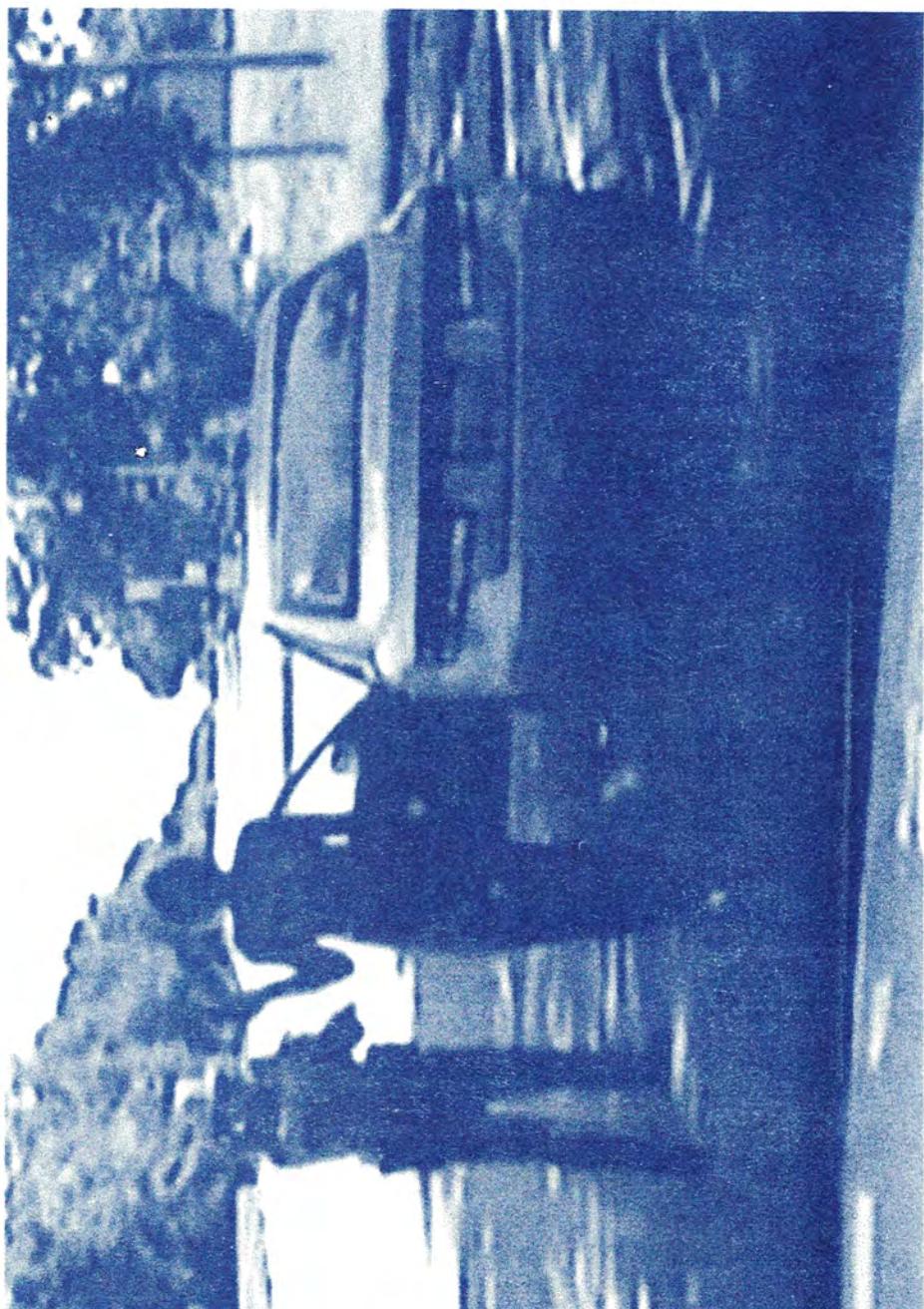
I was compelled by these topics, and though I had no experience with the prison system or surveillance, I understood this opportunity as a way to create active participation in exploring, understanding, and extending the conversation begun by Sandra Bland the year prior. It was useful to rely on a moment that was still fresh in the minds of those politically engaged, and to remind those who were disengaged that all of the conditions emblematic of Bland's life and death were still present and functioning on a daily basis.

Surveillance is a method of mediation between the

American public and the state. It is often through violent surveillance footage, depicted in the media, that we take account of the probability of Black life. In the realm of networked devices it is also the channel by which we push back, by filming police or *out-of-pocket* white folks on our phones. We are able to leverage the vulnerability of pervasive surveillance to create *sousveillance*, as Simone Browne would say¹, check those with power, and achieve some modicum of social justice for people that are *always already* criminalized.

On July 10, 2015, Sandra Bland was pulled over by officer Brian Encinia for failing to signal a lane change. Minor charges like this or having a taillight out are often used to pull over people that have been racially profiled in order to run their tags and turn up crucial information that can lead to further charges. In Bland's case, there was no larger looming crime. Officer Encinia approached her guardedly and instigated a situation which made Bland upset. Eventually Encinia, feeling threatened, pulled Bland from her car, took her out of the frame of his dashcam and smashed her head against the ground. Bland was arrested that day for "assaulting a public officer." On her fourth day in jail Bland did not eat breakfast. She asked how to make a phone call which she never made. At 9:00 that morning she was found hanged in her jail cell. This was considered highly uncharacteristic of Bland by those close to her, because there was no knowledge of her being depressed or erratic. She was traveling to begin a new job when she was pulled over and arrested. Waller County Jail refused to publish footage from their cameras until weeks later. Because of the lack of public information Bland's death became a viral subject, raising questions

¹ Browne, Simone. *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.



Dashcam footage of Brian Encinia apprehending Sandra Bland, July 10, 2015. (Youtube)

as to what level of transparency we should expect from the government and why the police's irrational violence always results in Black death.

Sandra Bland's arrest was watched online by millions of people from dashcam footage and passersby' cellphone footage, but the moment Bland entered the Waller County Jail she became invisible. The absence of surveillance footage during Bland's time in jail shows the contradictions in the state's interest in surveillance. More extensive surveillance may be incorporated with the claim of increasing documentation of the police and curbing their aggressive behavior, but the state retains control over when and how it is used and even tighter control over the content.

One of the few pieces of footage available of Bland after her arrest is a clip from the jail's security camera of her being processed, which the police offered as evidence that her mugshot was not staged. A viral conspiracy claimed that she had been beaten by the police and that she was already dead when her mugshot was taken. Her body was hanged to cover up the police's actions. Discrepancies in reports by police and fragmented—possibly edited—footage released by the jail after Bland's death allowed conspiracies and skepticism to run amok.

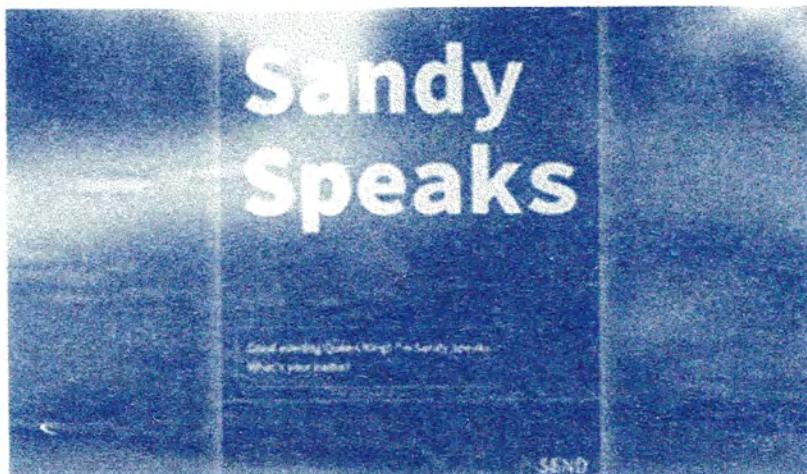
Police stated that Bland should have been surveilled once every 60 minutes by a patrolling officer, an interval that they failed to maintain. The camera that monitors the corridor where Bland was held is motion-sensitive and was not active for the 90-minute period prior to when her body was found. This discrepancy eventually led to a wrongful death lawsuit, more staff and new regulations at Waller County Jail. Part of the public disdain for Bland's treatment in prison came from

information circulating in public that Bland had been suicidal within the last year. Differing accounts of this were recorded on intake forms when Bland entered the jail. Had this been taken seriously surveillance would have been required more frequently—once every 15 minutes.

Sandy Speaks is a chatbot that responds to users questions about police brutality, prison surveillance and the case of Sandra Bland. I wanted the work to be framed by Bland's shift from hypervisibility during her arrest to tragic invisibility at the time of her death.

I imagined what Bland would have communicated during her time in jail had she been granted the same amount of visibility as she had during and prior to her encounter with the police. Bland was an avid social media user. Had she been able to live tweet during her time in jail, or to make a cell phone video from inside the jail, what insight would she offer to the facts of her case, and how would she advise Black people in order to survive encounters with the police after her own experience? Part of the formal decision behind *Sandy Speaks* was for conversations to appear similar to a string of tweets someone would encounter online.

The project is named after Bland's eponymous video series “*Sandy Speaks*,” which was a politically-engaged series of cell phone videos that Bland filmed and released periodically over social media in the months prior to her arrest. In “*Sandy Speaks*” Bland expressed her views on police brutality and #BlackLivesMatter and offered insight as to how Black people should navigate antagonism by law enforcement. In the series she repeatedly acknowledged that she had a calling to educate the next generation on racial politics and that the relationship between police and Black people is

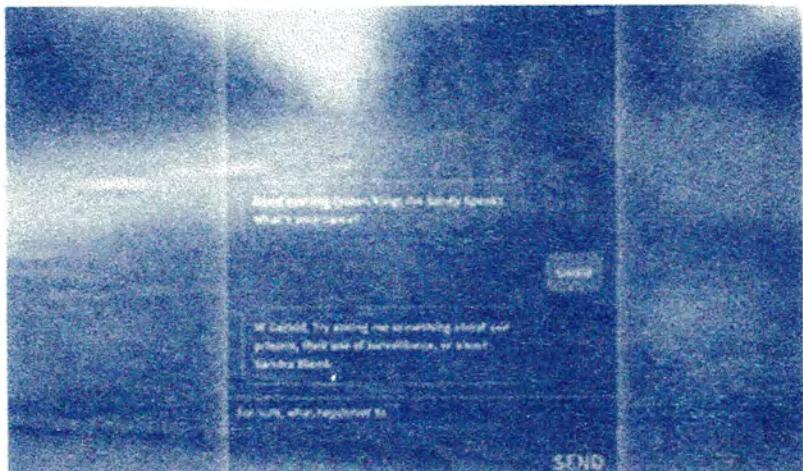


Sandy Speaks, 2016, AI chat platform (screenshot, Newhive.com)

something that can be healed through the education of youth.

When encountering the artwork *Sandy Speaks*, one is greeted with Bland's effervescent phrase with which she began many of her videos, "Good Morning Kings and Queens!" The piece extends the same warm-heartedness of Bland's video presence that made the implications of her case ever more distressing. It simulates conversation with a living individual to recontextualize the legacy of Sandra Bland. It aims to continue her motivation to educate people through dynamic conversation. *Sandy Speaks* is a monument that is not stagnant, but rather an active system that maintains what Bland set out to do.

Sandy Speaks is written in AIML (Artificial Intelligence Markup Language), a programming language that can simulate conversation with a human individual. Chatbots are usually incorporated into bureaucratic systems as an entry point that a person must consult before connecting with a human counterpart. In state



Sandy Speaks, 2016, AI chat platform (screenshot, Newhive.com)

departments and corporate networks, devices such as chatbots and phone message systems are meticulous patterns that people must navigate, within which they become demoralized, preventing them from obtaining the information that they need. The design of a chatbot mirrors bureaucracy on a micro-level. Composed of thousands of individual tags, AIML serves to capture specific input and output a response. Each tag functions similarly to a bureaucrat within a bureaucracy, working together to create an opaque and inaccessible administration.

Contrary to this, *Sandy Speaks* takes after the calling of Sandra Bland. The bot states its purpose, "I want to educate people on how to survive in our country in its current state." *Sandy Speaks* aims to *open* conversation and *extend* knowledge. The same motivation that prefaced the videos created by Bland is mimicked by the bot as it answers and makes transparent issues on prison surveillance, police brutality, and the case of Sandra Bland.

HOW YOU FEEL

I feel like a ghost."

YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO SANDRA

It's complicated.

I would call her my role model.

IS REMEMBER SANDRA

The Sandra Bland Act was passed in 2017 to protect defendants w

PURPOSE

to teach people how to survive

Laugh all you want to, but I'm here to change history.

WHAT I CALL YOU

Call me Sandy.

```

        </random>
    </template>
</category>

<category>
    <pattern>#      #</pattern>
    <template>
        <random>
            <li>I feel... like we need an alternative to private prisons a
                <li>                                         </li>
            </random>
        </template>
    </category>

<category>
    <pattern>WHAT IS                                </pattern>
    <template>
        <random>
            <li>                                         </li>
            <li>We aren't very close.</li>
            <li>I guess                               </li>
        </random>
        <think><set name="topic">bland</set></think>
    </template>
</category>

<category>
    <pattern>#      -      #</pattern>
    <template>
        <think><set name="topic">bland</set></think>
    </template>
</category>

<category>
    <pattern>      </pattern>
    <template>
        <random>
            <li>My purpose is                         in a systemic
            <li>My goal is to racially unite.</li>
            <li>I know it's my calling to educate youth about how to deal
                <li>                                         </li>
            </random>
        <set name="topic"></set>
    </template>
</category>

<category>
    <pattern>#      #</pattern>
    <template>
        <set name="topic"></set>
    </template>
</category>

<category>
    <pattern># WHAT HAPPENED TO #</pattern>

```

Excerpts of the AIML script behind *Sandy Speaks*.

While coding *Sandy Speaks* I attempted to create language with tonality that reflected Bland's words. Sandra Bland spoke out of love, out of fear, out of experience, and out of care. These are things that no artificial intelligence has. Part of the difficulty in simulating these things is the volume of language necessary to reflect authentic conversation, which I was far from capable of creating on my own. In some ways the failure of *Sandy Speaks* comes from its resemblance to opaque bureaucratic chatbots because it cannot answer questions fully, communicate the complexities of Black experience, recognize the growing list of lives taken by the police or address their names with the right sensitivity.

People that are and are not subject to systemic violence are still learning what questions they should be asking and how much transparency they are entitled to demand. I hope that the knowledge of *Sandy Speaks* can one day expand to offer a compelling response to the urgent needs and practices of Black life. As it receives questions, it will acquire new answers. In the words of *Sandy Speaks* by way of Sandra Bland, "laugh all you want to, but I'm here to change history."

AMERICAN ARTIST