[ALEXIS BOYLAN] My name is Alexis Boylan, and I am the Director of Academic Affairs at the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute, and I am a Professor of Art History and Africana Studies.

[WENDY CHUN] I am Wendy Hui Kyong Chun. I'm Canada 150 Research Chair in New Media at Simon-Fraiser University, where I also direct the Digital Democracies Institute.

[ALEXIS] Thank you so much for talking with all of us and about the Seeing Truth project. I'm going to start, Wendy, with a super small, like super easy, just like rolling you into the conversation question. So do you believe in truth? Why or why not?

[Laughter] [WENDY] I see you really are starting--

[ALEXIS] I want it to be an easy conversation, so I figured that the only the greatest question of our sort of humanity is a good place to just get to know each other.

So yeah, truth.

[WENDY] I absolutely do believe in truth. Part of it is because, as a literary scholar, I always think through etymology and truth is linked to trust.

And so I think that the question of things we trust and how we come to trust things are absolutely key.

And I believe there exist things that we trust.

The line of thought that I follow is within history of science and the ways
in which scientific truth emerged through the adoption of certain types of methodology that were supposed to be reproducible.

They weren't always reproduced.

Experiments weren't always reproduced.

But they were framed in such a way to be conceivably reproducible, and therefore set up a certain circle of trust that would coincide with truth.

So here I'm thinking of Steven Shapin's work.

I'm also thinking about work on facts and the difference between facts and truth by Mary Poovey.

And I'm also thinking of some of the work around the difference between data, which are things that are given, and truth, in fact, which Dan Rosenberg has been working with.

[ALEXIS] Science and art have long made claims about both their disciplinary, and this is just what you're referring to, and their ethical potential to deliver truth.

Do you think either can make claims to truth, or are they both always skimming —

and I think your first answer sort of suggested this -- skimming around the idea of truth without perhaps ever getting to the core of it?

[WENDY] I think my most persuasive statement, I think it was attributed to Foucault that his books will have been true after the engagement with it.

I think truth is a process again, thinking through the scientific method, et cetera.
So I do think that it's something that one reaches towards, perhaps asymptotically, it's not something that simply we land on.

I think facticity is something that we can land on.

What is correct is something we can land on.

But truth is far more because it's perceptual. It's also far more conceptual.

So one thing I would think about, say, in terms of scientific analyses, something like greenhouse gases and our understanding of greenhouse gases is true.

That isn't true.

But global climate change models are going to be correct or incorrect.

In fact, their predictions will probably not be entirely correct due to the intricacies of the atmosphere, et cetera.

But does that mean they're not true?

I would argue no.

So I think there's a gap between what's true and what's correct and what we come to accept as true or what we come to trust is a very dynamic process.

[ALEXIS] So how does art factor into that?

And I'm actually thinking of extending your sort of metaphor — not metaphor — but your example of greenhouse gases.

And I was thinking about a real sort of question that a lot
of visual culture specialists have pondered and worried about is how is it that this truth of climate change seems to be very difficult to activate in people as an artistic -- like, there's lots of "ClimArt."

There's lots of art that deals with this idea of climate change. Yet none of it seems to necessarily have coalesced people or made people see the truth. Is that because we're not there yet or the art isn't there yet, or because art fundamentally doesn't have the same power to speak to truth in either a snap way or in this Foucauldian way of a sort of more expansive view of it?

[WENDY] I think that the question for me is less art in terms of global climate change and more experience. So what I find really convincing is Jim Hansen's argument that global climate change is really difficult to understand because means are abstract.

When you talk about the increase in a mean temperature, a mean is itself a computational construct. It came with massive processing. And so what he's argued is instead, what's important is that with global climate change, we now have events which are increasing number of events, which are three standard deviations away from the norm.
So we have global weirding, and this isn't the norm.

But it's a side effect of the increasing norm and the energy that's put in the system.

But people can experience these weird weather events.

And these weird weather events are actually what are convincing people more and more that global climate change is real.

And so I think there's a level of personal experience where I think art and I would say literature is so persuasive is that people read things, people watch things, people look at things that have no claim to be factual or not factual yet feel absolutely true.

One can think of the film that one watches, the novel that one reads, visual art or an exhibition that registers a certain proof that is outside of the realm of activity.

And this is where I think art is so key.

[ALEXIS] So I'm going to pivot a little bit to the question of museums, just because our project has to do so much with museums.

But I think also, I like to think of museums as a platform.

And your work, of course, deals a lot with sort of how we are delivered our information and our truths and our facts.

So museums promised to deliver and present and advocate knowledge, data, made into a
visual or represented by visual objects.

But is that knowledge always political and nationalist and tainted?

In other words, how much faith or how much stock should we put in museums and their ability to speak to truth in this historical moment?

[WENDY] I think the role of museums is key, but for me, the work I find most convincing is Ariella Azoulay's work and her argument regarding potential history, which is that, in order to engage with truth and museums, what we need to do is move away from the idea that the archive is a source of information and that these sources that the museum draws from are the past.

We've moved away from the past, and this is progress towards understanding what the museum holds as potential history, as companions that aren't relegated to the past that continue to exist, and that these archives give us ways to reenact and understand our relationships to them.

I think one example of that work that is powerful for me, which isn't necessarily in the realm of museums. But I think gets to some of these questions is around the question of Indigenous residential schools and the ways in which students, of course, were malnourished.

They were maltreated.
It’s a huge blight on Canadian history.

But everybody knew they were malnourished,
but rather than actually feeding the kids more,

what they did was they decided to study them, and so they took their blood

and wanted to understand the effects of malnutrition

on child development and tuberculosis.

And that work became key to what's called now the Canada Food Guide,
so to our understanding of what is healthy for children. And it’s become standard

and something that we always move towards. Now,

the fact that there were now uncovering grades of children

who died in the residential schools because of tuberculosis and malnutrition

is being posited as this great uncovering, using this technology.

But as many survivors have pointed out, they've been saying that these grades have

been there for the longest time, that the act of uncovering is actually

an act of covering over in order to uncover what’s been there.

And I think that's what's so key about thinking through museums and the evidence

that it holds or the exhibits that it holds and the way it frames things is

precisely that question of companionship and standards.

To what extent can we use –

and again, a lot of the artifacts that are included,
of course, we're not considered to be art.

There's a whole process in which people's artifacts then become art and thinking through, again, the relationality of them and not simply to the quote,

unquote original populations, but the ways in which they become embedded within our habits and standards, I think, is crucial to opening up this kind of dialogue and understanding what the museum can open up.

[ALEXIS] This is a little sort of off-topic, but I just wanted to ask you, you make this sort of really convincing case about people, the general public, like we could have a dialogue that would be different about truth around Azoulay and the sort of idea of potential history.

If we thought about archives as not stable, but as activists, and that we have to deal with them almost as if they are a tenacious, capacious, alive entity to which different things will become apparent in different moments, there'll be a push and pull.

But what I see in our political climate right now is actually a much more a refusal of ambiguity, a hatred of liminality. And how do we change that? How do we as people who want to see museums and archives and our computers and the internet as places in which truth can be reinvigorated and reimagined? How do we do that? How do we make it happen?
I think one thing I do in the book is just go to the concepts that are fundamental to network science and social media and say, if we go to them, we go to the historical examples, right? The biracial housing project. We understand that there was so much more there than homophily, than similarity breeds connection. So I think that part of the reason to go back to these and to think through the populations that we touch is for me, key to understanding and questioning what it is that remains. So again, for me, what a network is isn’t simply the clean lines, the node and the lines, but the gaps, the things that have been erased without which there would be no connection to begin with. And if we think through these gaps, then what opens up is an entire richness of human experience. I think that one thing that I find troubling or interesting about this current time isn’t that people are afraid of liminality, but everyone is claiming liminality. And so the ways in which – if you think through the ways in which stigma has now become a certain politics of recognition. So think about the incels and the ways in which what could have been once stigma fact – that you’re incel a bit – has now become a point of pride and also a point of community.
And it's through embracing of certain forms of liminality and insisting on this form of liminality as exceptional, but at the same time linking it to other groups, and they're all together around hatred of X, to me, is the important point.

So there seems to be this bizarre actually inhabitation of these borderlands, and it's not what it was supposed to be. And so I think that thinking through the limitations of methodology, the limitations of thinking through the ideas of liminality as the way forward towards certain forms of conceptualizing the world for the better.

I think it's something we're being faced with. I would say that I don't know if it's optimism, but it's more like, what else can we do? There's a moment where you say, Well, you can just sit there and say, this is all going to hell in a hand basket or you can say, Well, what is it that we can do?

And for me, I spent 20 years at Brown. I loved modern culture, media. It was great.

But for me it became important to say, look, there is knowledge that we're producing, and there are limitations to what we're doing, and we're profoundly aware of both of them. And so maybe we should start working with others in order to take on these issues that we say we care about.
ALEXIS: I wanted to pull back a little bit to the Instigator items.

I was wondering if you had an item.

So the Instigator items are from the American Museum of Natural History, and it's from their archive collection.

The Museum is divided up, of course, into departments.

But the archives is a collection of what they pull from all of these departments, and what gets saved and what gets lost and all that sort of thing.

And the Instigator items are brought together in this sort of attempt to reframe what even an exhibition would be.

And so I was wondering if any of the Instigator items provoked you or instigated you to think about truth and science and art in new ways?

WENDY: Definitely the sketch of the gorilla musculature.

And for me, that was that moment of realizing not only the sort of violence that comes with certain forms of scientific investigation, but also the ways in which this violence is addressed to so many animals that are our kin and also, of course, that this was not just directed towards primates but also other humans, the sort of anatomy and the drawing of cadavers, but also the objectification in terms of these really beautiful drawings of musculature.
were premised on certain forms of colonial and racial hierarchies.

I think, as well,

though, there is this sort of moment of like, well, but it's not so different.

So even as it makes these claims like you really have to look to say, oh, no, it is a primate.

It’s not a human, right?

So I think it undermines that our exceptionalism as well in really interesting ways and brings up all sorts of questions of kinship and relationality as well as some of the issues of why we’re so fascinated by these.

I think of the body part exhibition, of course, which I find completely creepy.

But there is this sort of fascination with the details of understanding what is under the skin and to what extent is revealing what is under the skin, a way to relate ourselves to others. And what does it say that we have to dissect in order to get there as well?

[ALEXIS] Well, I love the layers, too.

I mean, that always fascinates me, because that is a total visual construction.

That is the work of sort of deciding the layers don't sit that neatly and the way that they're presented.

But, yeah, that piece is fascinating.

It's also almost life-size.

It's not life-size, but in real life, it is quite large and
the detail is stunning.

And again, it brings out exactly that tension.

And it’s always interesting to me to have people look at it.

I find that there are two immediate reactions, and one is like, oh, that is gross.

You’re not going to show that.

And the other one is people fall into it and just can’t stop looking at it.

I do think that it is also for exactly what you said.

It brings together all the various parts of the Museum’s enterprise,

which is a scientific knowledge and visualizing that,

but also this much longer history of where that knowledge pushes us to think about

ourselves as humans and how we have used this information to discriminate,

to justify genocide, all of the other sort of things that have-- how closely those

are twinned because they’re the same in that object.

All right.
Final question.

And thank you so much.

It’s been really fun talking with you.

So final question again, a super easy one.

Tell me, Wendy Chun, the one thing that you know in the world that is true.

[WENDY] There are many.

But if I had to choose one,

I would say that the love that my partner and I have for each other
is what I know is true.

And again, it's true,

not because it simply exists, but because it's a process to which we've been committed through many ups and downs for over half my life.

[ALEXIS] I love that answer.

And I will say that is a fabulous way to say goodbye.

Everybody should go out

and read Discriminating Data and all of Professor Chun's work.

It is phenomenal and inspirational,

and it gives us a path forward, which we really could use at this moment.

So thank you, Wendy.

[WENDY] Thank you so much.