

[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?



[WENDY] 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.