

[ALEXIS] Hello, everybody.
My name is Alexis Boylan.

I am the Director of Academic Affairs
at the University

of Connecticut's Humanities Institute,
and it is my great pleasure today to be

interviewing Jane Wildgoose,
artist and scholar.

And I'll actually let
her introduce herself.

But I did also want to mention that this

is an interview that is being produced
for the Seeing Truth exhibition and has

been generously funded
by the Luce Foundation

as well by support from the
University of Connecticut.

So, Jane, Hello.
Welcome.

It is lovely to see you.

And I did want to actually foreground all

of this before you even introduce yourself
by saying that I owe Amy Meyers a great

debt because she is the one who --
the great Amy Meyers,

former Director of the Yale British Museum
and just a fabulous scholar and friend.

And I feel very lucky that she introduced
me to you and that now I get this

opportunity to further introduce
you and your work to the world.

So big props to Amy Meyers, and Jane,
would you introduce yourself?

[JANE] Likewise for me, too, to Amy,
for introducing me to Alexis,

but also for introducing me
to the collections at Yale University some

years ago, which I was going
to mention in my introduction.

So, yes, I am an artist and writer,
researcher, and I work to commission

with museums and historic
collections and historic sites.

So in America,
I have worked with Amy Meyers

at the Yale Center for British Art,
with the Yale Collections

of Natural History at the Peabody
and the Yale University Art Gallery

and the rare books at the
Yale Center for British Art.

And that was all about collecting
in the 18th century. In this country,

I've worked with Sir John Soane's Museum,
with the Rothschild Collection

at Waddesdon, with historic Royal
Palaces at South Kensington,

but also I have my own collection.

You can see tiny fragments of it behind
me. My own collection,

which is central to my practice, to my
thinking, to my practice-based research,

although I do academic research,
historical research as well.

And I have a great interest in the history
of collecting. My research interests

combine an interest in death studies,
the history of memory and remembrance,

and the history of collecting
and where those things intersect.

And my own collection is
[inaudible] collection.

It's called
the Wildgoose Memorial Library,

and I infiltrate objects

from my collection into my historic

installations, working
with historic collections.

But I also work with my collection very
closely, and it informs much

of my thinking about more
established collections.

That probably sums it up for now.
[ALEXIS] Perfect.

So I'm already going to warn you that I'm

going to pick on you to further sort
of pull apart the differences between

the collector and the artist
and the scholar,

because those were different terms
that you used in describing yourself.

[JANE] I never described myself as a scholar.

I'm always very flattered when other
people describe me as a scholar.

I do describe myself as
a researcher and writer.

[ALEXIS] Researcher. Yeah.

See, I think it's an American
slippage that I will just --

[JANE] I don't bestow it on myself.

[ALEXIS] That's interesting.

Do you not like the word scholar?

Does that feel --

[JANE] I think it's something to aspire to.

[ALEXIS] Okay.

[JANE] I'm not primarily an academic.

I am a practitioner who does academic
research. I mean, I got

my doctorate in the School of Art and Design
History, but as a practice-based student,

and that is quite an important

distinction for me because

much of my historical and archival
research is informed by my sensibilities

as an artist. Or rather, the conclusions
and the things that I draw from it,

I've made that distinction, actually, yes.

[ALEXIS] Do you think that if you were a scholar,

they wouldn't be? That they would
be motivated by something else?

[JANE] Well, when I started,

I used to have arguments with scholars
about the way that I approached history,

but I was interested in the
emotional lives of objects.

And I can remember being told years ago
by a graduate from Oxbridge that [affected voice] you can't

do history like that,
whereas now it is much more integrated,

and I think that's been quite a revolution
in the way that people think,

particularly about material culture
today, and are more prepared to look

into the subjective world
that surrounds material culture.

But that's been very central
to my thinking from kind of day one.

I trained as a textile designer,

and I worked in theater
as a costume designer predominantly,

but I also work making
installation for performance.

And I used to teach textile art
students as well as textile designers,

and the conversation specifically

for textile art students about
materiality were always very interesting.

I worked in a tapestry department that was
within fine art department,
and I remember students coming back
laughing when they've been
to a seminar with sculpture students
and saying, "I was saying things like,
I think I'll work with wood now,
or I think it's time that I worked
in bronze," and this was some years ago.

But their thing was always that you choose
the material because the way that it
speaks about the subject
that you're working on.

[ALEXIS] Right.

[JANE] It's not a material that you pluck
because that's in the canon.

You use it because of the way that we've
worn textiles all their life.

I mean, these are classic conversations,
material culture, but they weren't
when I was starting out.

This idea that we've all worn textiles
since day one, that they are incredibly
evocative, that they can hold memories,
they can hold lots of associations --

and this way of thinking is very
particular to my practice as an artist
who then combines it with really, hopefully
very careful and rigorous academic
and historical research as well.

[ALEXIS] I love this idea of the practitioner.
In some ways,

it does seem like that a practitioner
obliterates the possibility of being

a scholar or there seems
to be a little tension there,

though, that I think -- [JANE] There's tension.

[ALEXIS] Yeah.

[JANE] Something that I certainly see
in the world of academia, where,

particularly in this country, more artists are doing
postdoctorates and PhDs, particularly.

Where the interface with
the academic structure,

and if you like, academic formula

frameworks, it's a constant
kind of conversation for practitioners.

And I do think you're using quite
different parts of yourself.

But that doesn't mean to say you can't

bring them together and you
can't be rigorous with both.

That's something I'm very concerned

with, is being rigorous with both
parts of my operation well.

[ALEXIS] It's fascinating, because
I think that, in terms of my field

and the scholarship that I involved
with and my own identity,

I'm now sort of feeling very awkward
about identifying myself as a scholar.

But.

[JANE] I said—

[Alexis]No, no no, it was great.

But I think that the sort of idea of--
There is a real push within academia to be

....more of a practitioner.

And I think certainly some great works

by Sadiya Hartman and others have suggested
this imagination of not being

a practitioner has actually done
a great deal of damage to academia

and to imagine this division between

a self that could ever somehow be apart
from that which we produce is actually

a deeply embedded problem
in knowledge production and something

that I know you and I both engage
with in our own sort of dialogues.

I wanted to come back to something just

because I want our audience
to understand exactly what you mean.

You said that you are
interested in death studies.

Can you explain a little bit what you mean
by that and how that has evolved in your

work, or if that was something
that was always present?

[JANE] I would say there probably wasn't much

in the way of death studies when I
was starting out this years ago.

And in fact, it started when I was
a student on a very commercial textile

design print course with a wonderfully
John Crane -- if you're out there,

thank you --
my tutor, wonderfully supportive and just encouraged

me to go with a really quite idiosyncratic
flow, which was not commercial textiles,

which is why I
ended up in theater.

I became really fascinated with Miss

Havisham in Great Expectations.

And when the small boy, Pip,
who is the narrator, is summoned Ms.

Havisham's house, Ms.

Havisham -- for those who don't know,
I'm sure everyone knows the story,

but this is
Charles Dickens's Great Expectations --

Ms.
Havisham is a woman advanced in years

who has been jilted on her
wedding day as a young woman.

And she was very wealthy and privileged
woman and very cross about this.

And she refused to take
off her wedding dress.

She left her banquet all around her

and lived in decay, this terrible decaying
splendor for the rest of her life.

So this small boy, Pip,
is summoned to play at her house,

and the description of her when he first

sees her is that she looks like
a wax work that he'd seen at the fair,

but she also looks like
a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress

that had been dug up from the pavement
in a church on the marshes.

And then it goes on to say
that but wax work and skeletons seem

to have dark eyes that moved
and followed him.

And this idea of this sort of walking

corpse, this woman who is her dress,
her surroundings all

speak of her emotional and physical and
psychic disintegration over the years.

And these are really central
themes in my work now.

So that's where it began.

Then I became very interested as costume
designer in the history of mourning costume

and then associated material
culture to do with mourning.

And at that time in London, there were
still one or two very Victorian funeral

parlors with their extraordinary window
dressings with black feathers and fabulous

Victorian signage, big black drapes.
All of that's been swept away now,

but these things really fascinated me.

So I started collecting all things to do
with this and also became really

interested in -- through my interest in wanting
to do more research into the idea of what

the skeleton in the ashes of a rich
dress that was Ms Havisham might be,

I went to the British Museum and was

drawing in the Egyptian Department where
there is a naturally mummified body

that had been dug out of the sand,
presented as if it was in the sand.

I did drawings of that.

I was drawing from photographs
of the mummies in Palermo,

which literally are skeletons
in the ashes of rich dresses in a crib.

And I became very interested in mourning

jewelry and especially mourning jewelry
containing hair, which would -- I had no idea

at the time but would become a very
significant part of my work.

So those are just some of the things
that I think of as my death study.

It's the history of anatomy as well.

I'm just looking around here
actually. Mexican Day of the Dead.

I'm looking at some of the things I

couldn't [inaudible] what these things were that really started me off.

[ALEXIS] So I'm going to pull you back now and ask you to tell us a little bit about

the Wildgoose Memorial Library and when your collecting began and if you

could talk to us a little bit about what you see now is the mission of the library.

[JANE] I probably started collecting completely

unconsciously as a small child growing up on the South Coast of England right

by the sea and making regular trips onto the beach and being really bit of a beach

comber and always taking something home with me.

And then as I grew up and left home, I went to Winchester School of Art

in Hampshire at a time when there were lots of places where you could buy

the most amazing vintage clothing, 1920s ball gowns, Victorian things, corsets.

And I was buying and collecting these

things, all sorts of things just appealed to me.

And gradually my collecting really became

much more focused on, as so many artists do,

collecting things that are resources for the projects that you are engaged

in and even the wider thinking out of which those projects come.

And gradually, as I became more and more

interested in the history of mourning and death and remembrance,

it took a swerve to being much more about those subjects.

And also I began playing.

I got really then interested

in the history of collecting, but it
was always a beach comber's collection.

This is a really important thing.

The things that I was collecting

and my interest in mourning and Victorians
all those years ago, nobody was interested

or very few people were
interested in that.

That's not the case now.

There's great interest in this subject.

So one thing that's really important is
that this is a beach comber's collection.

So it's not about objects of virtue.

It's not about things that are worth a lot

of money, certainly not
when I pick them up.

They were not popular.

In fact, I was really interested in things
that were discarded and things that were

sort of on the ground in a box underneath
the table that was a market stall

in the street. Literally picking
things up in the street.

And I started playing with this idea
of producing a collection that wasn't just

about feeding my work, although it
was doing that at the same time.

But it was actually kind of somehow

by these rather dubious means of just
picking up anything that washed up

at the margins of the world
that might look as though it was part

of a natural history and fine
and decorative arts collection.

So I was just being very
playful and very ignorant.

I had no idea about the implications of
the history of those kind of collections.

So when you ask me about a mission
statement, that is really important,
because the mission statement is really
much more, a much more recent thing,
but also the question of a library.

For me, it was a library and not a museum,
because I was interested in the way
that objects can be read
and the narratives that become
associated with objects.

When the library really got launched,
soon after I launched it and gave it
that name, I had a fellowship in this
country where I was investigating what
my collection meant and what it meant
to be the keeper, because I've just
been kind of playing with this idea.

And one of the things that I did over
quite a long period, about a year,
was to invite people here to be
photographed with objects
from the collection to tell me what they
wanted. I have a very large cabinet here.

I emptied it out.

I was making installation for them before
they arrived, thinking
a lot about the person.

And then I also asked them to bring
an object which they would not tell me
about in advance, but they were going to
have the portrait taken photographically.

And once they sat their portrait,

I would ask them to get all stood for it
or whatever they were going to do.

I asked them to get their objects out
and to tell me about it and had the most
profound conversations
with people – really extraordinary.

And then there's something that I wasn't
anticipating, which really went with this
idea of reading objects in the library,

I think, I realized that the things
that came from my collection that were
in the cabinet after they left

photographing them after people
had told me their stories,

I was getting so much more interesting
photographs of my collection than I
had ever been able to take before.

I'd always been disappointed if I tried
to photograph it from the collection,
either singly or in groups.

But as soon as I was informing
my photographs with these conversations
that I'd had with my sitters,
they just came to life.

And that genuinely practice-based research
would go on to inform a lot
of my thinking in the future.

[ALEXIS] I love the idea of a library as a place
where we go to do reading,
because it does seem like you are

very purposely perhaps separating
that from a collection or a museum where

perhaps less reading happens
and more of something else happens.

So I think I just want us to tag
that because I love this tension again,

that I see between what you're asking
of the objects and what perhaps if we put

it in another location,
the objects are forced into a different

role or a different sort
of way of existing with us.

[JANE] That's very relevant to the mission statement.

So I would say the mission statement now

is that the library really exists to
give a platform and a forum for many

things to do with the history
of collecting, but more taking very

seriously the idea that objects may be
read and that they may retain an emotional

charge and an emotional life, which,
depending on who is interacting with them,

may be felt or not felt, or
somewhere on that spectrum.

And my practice is very much about

listening to that charge
and those stories.

[ALEXIS] It's a very different idea of collecting.

I think, particularly when thinking about

collecting and thinking about capitalism,
there does seem to be sometimes a sort

of suggestion [that]
people collect as a kind of mania.

So often when people think about
collecting, there's a

self-satisfaction, that it's about
the person sort of satisfying some need

for completion or some desire
to have this collection.

But it's actually very interesting because
I do think that you sort of suggest this

way in which your library is actually,

although clearly

instigated by you, that the objects
themselves and then the conversations

that the objects have become the primary
vector of communication,

which actually really does fundamentally
change the idea of collecting from I think

one that we might be more familiar with:
the wealthy

industrialist who then has to have all
the pieces of porcelain or all

of the African masks or this sort of thing
of collecting as a kind of way of mastery.

You seem to be suggesting --

[JANE] That's
exactly.

Maybe mine is mistressy. [laughter]

I think that's a very
important point you're making.

As you were talking,

I was thinking about my concern
with the agency of the object.

Yeah, that's very important.

[ALEXIS] But it seems like you want to liberate

the object, that the library becomes
a place of liberation, not confinement.

It also produces so much agency for,

again,
the researcher: that one goes to a library

to research and to enter
into a conversation.

[JANE] Exactly.
To produce a forum in which we may give

support, credibility,
authority to aspects of thinking about

objects which are easily

discredited by some people.

And certainly I have given
a mission statement in the past.

In fact, it was in my Yale show,
which was that...

my collecting
policy was based on how an object appeals

to the senses and the imagination
and the things that it can evoke.

[ALEXIS] I wanted to pull us back

to the Seeing Truth exhibition, because so
much of what that project seeks to sort

of problematize are these
links between science and art and museums

and collecting and knowledge-making,
and how often collecting is deemed as

important for knowledge-making
and therefore has a moral imperative,

and therefore,
museums have moral imperatives and artists

and scientists,
and we all get sort of washed in this

great sort of – we're searching
for knowledge,

and I think I'm interested
in sort of what truth has to do with your

collecting and your interest in
the library as an alternative space

and objects as having perhaps alternative
voices and what you see then

as for the connections between
knowledge-making, art, science,

and collecting.
My students would balk at that.

They would say that's actually 17

questions that you've just given us,
and they're all impossible.

So I will let you do
with that what you will.

[JANE] What is truth?
What is science?

What is knowledge?

So I do believe that my collection
is looking at all kinds of truths.

But what do we mean by truth?

A lot of my research and this is an area
of my work which has a very big mission

statement of its own,
which I've done in the last 16,

15, 16 years, which is questioning the truth
that has been associated with museums

for many years
in their collection of human remains,

the way that they are interpreted
or have been interpreted.

Certainly at the point of collection,

I have been looking at definitions
of science and truth.

I'm really thinking, well,
what does truth mean to me?

I've been looking at the OED.

It doesn't quite have what I think. It says

things like something that conforms
with facts or reality.

Well, museums have been giving us facts

about
human remains or were giving us

in the late 19th and early 20th century,
human remains collected from the colonies

as truth and fact, which we certainly
don't think is the case now.

So some of what I do is winking out

those maladjustments

of truth and knowledge,

and I think this is at the heart
of your Seeing Truth project.

I think for me,

when I'm doing archival research,
I feel that truth is evidence-based.

But then, on the other hand,
the scientists who produce the racial

science surrounding human arrangements,
it was evidence-based as well.

They were measuring skulls and that looks
beautifully empirical and objective.

Not an ideology wrapped up with science,

which in fact, really it was
from where I'm standing.

So I'm digging into archives.

But then, of course,

when we're looking at the truth
of evidence, we're always having to think

again about positionality,
where's it coming from.

I was taught by somebody when I was doing
my PhD, who has been doing her research

in the ICA in London about
artists who were still alive.

And she ended up in a court case because
there was somebody who was dealing

in one of the artist's paintings,
who was putting full information

in the archives in order to boost
the value of that person's artwork.

So archives have to be
treated carefully as well.

So truth?
Yes, truth.

I'm picking evidence,

thinking about our own positionality,
and positionality of those who presented

it as truth, and trying to find
something meaningful.

[ALEXIS] What is your relationship
as an artist to truth?

Do you feel obligated to truth, or do
you feel perhaps cagey around it?

[JANE] Well, again, what is truth?

Myths, it seems to me, I'm very keen

on mythology, ancient mythology,
these stories about people who lived

thousands and thousands of years ago,
which still seem to resonate with us today,

with the most profound
psychological truth.

So as an artist,
I've sometimes thought that the greatest

truths may be myths,
sometimes the most valuable ones.

That's a different thing from pedaling
untruths for the sake of ideology.

[ALEXIS] It seems like a good time to ask about

your project
with the Natural History Museum in London.

You sort of made some oblique references

to it, but I find this project
and your work around this fascinating.

So I was wondering if you could talk
a little bit about

your time there, your time at the Museum
and how that perhaps impacted

your collecting, your relationship to your
own library, and your art practice --

and actually just to you.
It was very heavy work.

And so I'm interested in sort of your --

what was your relationship as a witness
in the archives?

[JANE] Well. [laughter]

This was a watershed for me,
and I was commissioned by

the Special Projects
at the Natural History Museum who were

working with looking at some of the more
difficult questions that were raised

by the work that went on...
the researchers in the Museum.

And in 2006 -- and I mentioned that I've been
photographing people with objects

and that piece of practice-based
research which took place over a year --

it was at the end of that year that I was

invited or commissioned to write a report
on the human remains collection

at the Natural History Museum.
Within the context of a change to the law

having occurred in this country,
which I think you may well be aware of,

or you will certainly be aware of NAGPRA
in your own Native Americans grave.

The whole question of repatriation
of Indigenous

ancestral remains from museums collected
during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

And in this country,

the National Museum--

[ALEXIS] I will interrupt you and say

that in the United States, it has gone on well
into the deep into the 21st century,

that recently we've had a very big scandal
at the University of Pennsylvania.

So, yes, this is not deep history.

This is very recent history

[JANE] [inaudible] for you to say that because

yes, and I think the kind of thinking
around it has a very enduring presence,

although great work has also been done
and is being done. So in this country,

the national museums in particular,
were actually subject

to the British Museum at 1963,
which has all sorts of caveats,

one of them is that nothing could be

removed from the collection except under its
very special circumstances,

if there were duplicates or
if it was pest-ridden and beyond redemption.

As groups of Indigenous people from around
the world were addressing museums

in the UK and asking for their ancestors
remains to be returned to their

communities and the land,
the national museums were saying, quite

rightly, legally,
that they couldn't address this.

And so in 2000, I think it was,

John Howard,
who was then Australian Prime Minister,

and our own Prime Minister, Tony Blair,
made a public statement

that this country would actually look
into the number of human remains

there were in museums and address
the situation on behalf

of Australian Aboriginal people
who wanted their ancestral remains back.

And to cut a long story short,
the law was changed and a special case was

named for human remains that they could be understood as both objects of research

and study and exhibition,
but also that it must be understood

that they were also vital subjects
for many people.

And in 2006, the Natural History Museum,

after that change to the law,
were addressing their first claim

from the Tasmanian Aboriginal Center
for 17 individuals' remains that had been

taken under the worst possible
circumstances in Tasmania when virtually

everyone was eradicated due to British
colonial occupation and settlement.

And so I was brought in -- really

nothing to do with the adjudicating panel
that decided what should happen to those

remains, but really with [inaudible] of doing some groundwork

towards opening up conversations within
and outside the Museum about the issues.

And I was given three weeks,
and I wasn't allowed to look at any human

remains because only scientists were
allowed to look at human remains who were

doing research projects
that had been [inaudible].

So there was this fascinating
kind of power hierarchy going on.

As an artist, I was absolutely not
equipped to look at the human remains.

However, I didn't need to.

I was interviewing members of staff,
and I was also looking in the archives.

And one day, when I was researching around

the time that they had made the decision
that they would indeed return the 17

individuals' remains to Tasmania,
but they wanted to keep them for three
months and do testing on them, which the
Tasmanian Aboriginal Center has made
absolutely clear

they didn't want to happen. Anyway,
a very thorough press pack was given out

when this was announced,
and a copy of it was put on the table

where I'd been researching in the library.
And looking at it,

they had presented the information
that they had about all 17 individuals.

And I really just wanted -- They didn't
all come directly through the Museum.

Some of them had come from other museums,

some have come
from the Royal Cognitive Surgeons

of England, some had come
from Oxford University,

a couple have come from the Wellcome Trust.

And I just wanted to find out if there was

anyone in the Museum at the time and find
out what the correspondence has been.

And so I asked the archivist --

I could only find one name relating to the
ones to come straight into the Museum.

And that was a member
of the staff of the Museum at that time.

And so I just said, have you
got anything about this person?

And a big stack of letters was
brought out and given to me.

These letters were extraordinary.

It contained letters from people

in the colonies who were
supplying human remains.

But at the same time,
I was looking at the press pack

and reading and contrasting the way
that members of staff in the Museum had

reported on those human remains,
the ones that were going to be returned,

and their take on the history
of how they've been acquired.

And then I read the report
by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Center.

And reading that report, I almost vomited.

I was so horrified by the historic
circumstances that surrounded
the collection of those human remains

that my practice and artist,
I realized now, would change forever.

And I went away
and did a great deal of research

to try and contextualize what I have
found and presented it to the Museum.

And I've really been working

pretty much on -- that has become a constant
subject of my work.

Not the Natural History collection,
but actually the Royal Country Surgeons

collection became the focus of
my research for my doctoral practice.

And it also made me say about my practice

and my own collection.
(I'm looking up at them now.)

I have two human skulls in my collection,
which were given to me.

One came from an artist studio,
Barbara Jones, who herself was a great

collector and very interested

in all things to do with death.

And the other (I'm just looking up)
came from the family of a dentist

and amateur archaeologist who they
understood had got it on a dig at [inaudible] Abbey

sometime, probably in the
1950s and 60s, when you could take away a skull in that way.

And I had made a radio program

with the American radio artist
Gregory Whitehead about,

he bought one of a kind of split end,
one of Nelson's hairs on ebay,

and we made a little program about it.

And it was very much about how such a tiny

object could tell actually a very
big story about a very big man,

but also thinking about our

responsibilities in being
in possession of it.

And I had the opportunity to make another

radio program with Gregory and the
producer we worked with, Neil McCarthy.

And I said, look,

I want to ask some of these questions
that I'm asking of the Museum of myself.

What should I be doing
with these skulls that I have?

And I want to find out as much as
I can and pose those questions in public.

So that was a big move for me
in developing my practice and quite

a foundational one in terms
of where I then went with that one.

[ALEXIS] There's a great discussion

internationally about what to do
with these museums and archives,

which seem as much
to be housing and, in their housing, almost

normalizing a genocidal push that has
dominated the 19th, 20th and 21st century,

particularly in Europe
and the United States.

What is your feeling about

what care or attention we should be giving
to these places which are, in fact,

housing not just documents of genocide,
but in fact, victims of it?

Are these places that are worth saving?

Are these institutions
that are worth reinvesting in?

Of course, there is such a push now
to -- and even the grant that you received is

this push to sort of create openness
and to mend the past,

and that museums now take great care
and sort of noting all of the people

who were patrons who might have had
connections with coal collection or oil or

this sort of -- that marking
these turns seems to be an attempt to sort

of create something
balance or some penance.

[JANE] Reparation.

[ALEXIS] Right.

Do you believe in that?

[JANE] One of the first things I'd like to say is

that I've established that I have -- which is slightly a side issue,

but I'll definitely come back to those
and prompt me if I can get carried away.

So I've established that I have

two human skulls that were

donated to my collection.

In the course of making the radio program,
I took the skulls to various experts

to find out as much as I could about
where they might have come from.

And one of them was great interest to some
archaeologists at Bradford University

with whom I had quite a heated
discussion about repatriation.

And yeah, I can discuss this because
one of them went on air and said that they

had measured one of the skulls for me,
and they said the computer is in no doubt

that this is
an Australian Aboriginal skull.

And so when I finished making the radio

program, I got in touch
with the Australian High Commission

and the repatriation officer there, and I
said, I would like to repatriate this.

And she was very pleased.

And I had to get it independently measured

at the Museum of London because they only
have a British Museum of British remains, so

a conflict of interest.

And then that data was sent to an expert
in Australia, and it would have been put

through a database in the same way
that it apparently was in this country.

And I actually went on a holiday and I

came back to many phone calls and emails
saying, have you seen the report?

And the reports concluded that the chances

of this being an Australian skull were so
vanishingly small they could be dismissed.

Science and truth.
Measurements and empiricism.

And the expert in Australia had come
to the conclusion using the same

methodology that this
skull was from Patagonia.

And I've always tried well,
I tried at the time through the person,

the repatriation officer
at the Australian High Commission,

to see if she had a counterpoint
in Patagonian embassy.

And I never got anything back on that.

But there's anyone out there

from Patagonia who would be interested
in the repatriation of the skull,

I would be very interested to hear

from you, because in some ways it sits
quite heavy on me that it is still here.

But I do feel that there's been
something of a guide to me.

The other one from Waltham Abbey,
I had an amazing conversation with.

We went to Waltham Abbey,
we talked to some experts there.

And I talked to the incumbent there,
who was a wonderful man.

When I asked him the question I was asking

everyone, which was,
what should I do with this skull?

He said, beautifully.

He said it was a very difficult question,

but he felt that as an artist,
if I could use it to help people

to understand about death today,
then I should hang onto it.

But maybe if I felt that I had
accomplished that mission sometime,

that we should bury it with due
ceremony at Waltham Abbey.

And again, I would like to do that.

I do feel it's time that these souls were

put to rest,
but meanwhile, they sit here.

So I just really wanted to explain
that before

going on to be critical about other
institutions, because

one of the really valuable things about
looking at these questions through my own

collection is to acknowledge how difficult
it might be to let go of things and

through working with curators and museums,
to recognize the pressures they're under,

the relationships of whatever kind
that they make, the kind of territorial

feelings of having
objects under your care.

So, yeah, I wanted to get that groundwork in.

[ALEXIS] I think it's very helpful to talk about

the intimacies that are of the objects
and people that these things are --

I think that's very helpful.

I think that's actually really important.

It's very easy to demonize all kinds
of people and create stock characters:

the devious curator and the scientist

who's more interested in numbers than in
truth or some complex cultural questions.

But actually the objects themselves

and the people who engage with them, these
are all forces that pull and push at us --

[JANE] No, no, no no

I'm actually really loving hearing this,
because it's also the passion,

but it's also research grants,
it's career, it's your profession,

it's your job. You lose your
raw materials and your actual job.

So these are all profound issues
and not simple to unpick.

The good side of this, I would say,

is I've been doing some work recently with
an Art Quest in this country who began 20

years ago as an artist advocate group giving
free legal advice to artists in London

and they've really branched
out in what they do.

And in recent years,
one of the things they've been doing is

funding and facilitating small fellowships
and opportunities or other residencies

-- not fellowships -- residencies for artists
to work with Museum collections

and immediately realizing this is
not a straightforward thing to do.

I've been working with them closely
on a series of workshops, which have been

closed workshops under Trust and House
Rule, but looking at questions of

exactly these questions about the power
of institutions

and what they might do now and how artists
might be involved in that project.

And one of the things that's been

wonderful about it is some of the people
that I've met who are really doing

the most phenomenal work
trying to address these issues.

So for anyone who's interested,

I would definitely say look at the work
that is currently going on

at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford
and the work that is being done there.

There's certainly just one project.

It is called Labeling Matters,

where they are drilling down deep
into this, what is also very valuable

because it is a 19th-century collection
which does not pretend has not reworked

the collection to give it a new
context. It retains absolutely.

It's taxonomy and it's context.

And it's really,
really valuable in that respect for us

to be able to look at how
it was taxonomized originally.

But looking at the language that is used
in the accession catalogs right through

to the labels and questioning all
the presumptions that existed at the time

that those things were first put together
and how that might be addressed now.

And the other thing also that they're

doing is working very closely where they
can with the communities from whom many

of the things in their collection derive
and working with them,

aiming to work with them as equals,
rather than, again,

the power hierarchy that exists
with possession of objects and their

description and taxonomy and hierarchical
knowledge ownership regarding them.

[ALEXIS] Well, I could talk to you, Jane,

for hours and hours,
and I actually have a million more

questions, but I'm afraid
we have to wrap it up.

So I'm going to ask you the final question

that I am asking all of the interviewees,
and that is about our Instigator items.

I am asking everybody which Instigator
item from our Seeing Truth exhibition

and our online component spoke to you or
instigated you to make some connections

with your own work or with some
of the things we discussed today or

that just actually provoked you, again,
sort of in thinking about these objects as

wanting to have their own conversations
and having their own agency.

Which one spoke to you?

[JANE] The one that spoke to me is actually
a contemporary photographer.

I think it's from 1996. It's by Todd
Gray, and it is called "Don't Fade Me Out."

I have it here because I wanted to be sure
that I was correct in how I described it.

It has the subtitle,

"1 out of 4 black men under 25 are

incarcerated," and this spoke to me quite
loudly, because I haven't perhaps spoken

directly about this but, you know,
the work that I have been doing around

human remains and their collection
from colonies is on the basis of the fact

that they were collected for the purposes
of racial science to provide data

for series of the hierarchies
of the so-called races of mankind.

And it seems to me that -- I'm looking
at this photograph -- it speaks to me so

loudly, because if we're talking about
truths and museums and science and art,

I don't think we will ever unpick the kind
of racialized

world in which we live if we don't address
the foundations of so many of our museums

which are based on,
I'm going to say, pseudo-science, science

that pretends to be or that thought it was -- that really,
I'm sure, thought it was empirical --

but that really was political ideology,
which was presented as truth and fact.

This is institutional racism,
and I think until we really address

that and unpick it,
we stand very little chance of ever having

fewer than one out of four
black men under 25 incarcerated.

[ALEXIS] It's a beautiful piece.
It's stunning.

And we're lucky that the Benton Museum here
at the University of Connecticut owns it.

And Jane, I will look forward to, hopefully

soon, bringing you out to see, to meet, the
Todd Gray piece object to person live.

Thank you so much for taking your time
and sharing your

practice and your knowledge is like
a very generous gift to all of us.

So thank you.
[JANE] It's an honor.

Thank you.
Thank you so much.

Lovely talk to you.