‘On Truth’

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Behind me is a list of possible facts about my life so far. How many seem true to you?

[ *I have an implanted memory of flying as a child. My feet lifted off the ground and I hovered over a distance of six or so feet, to the swings. I keep it as true even though I know it can’t be.*

*‘400 Women’ was a work that grew, in part, out of my own feelings of shame.*

*When I lived in Budapest I spat at a guy’s crotch when he exposed himself on a bridge to myself and a friend to prevent his ‘happy ending’.*

*My grandmother made Winston Churchill’s dress uniforms.*

*I had a five year love affair with a married comedian.*

*My grandfather was one of the first people to publish Arthur C. Clarke.*

*When I was eleven I went into hospital to have my tonsils taken out. I ran a temperature and the doctor told us that I would have to come back if my temperature didn’t go down. So, I thought about only cold things. My temperature went down.*

*I cried at the Ariana Grande concert for Manchester.*

*One of my sculptures helped to save my family during a serious crash with a lorry in 2010.*

*All of the hyperbolic text version of my biography that accompanies the work ‘Hyper Bowl’ is based on fact.*

*My dad played support to David Bowie during his Ziggy Stardust tour.*

*My mum had Quentin Crisp as a life model.*

*My sister is a writer and poet.*

*I am a fan of gaming.*

*I still don’t know my left from my right.*

*I am fascinated by quantum mechanics.*

*I have been lied to, to the point of abuse.*

*I used to want to change the world but I’m now no longer sure that is feasible due to bulging population figures.*

*My grandfather used to supply L. Ron Hubbard with obscure science fiction books pre his creation of Scientology.*

*I am thinking about having a child alone.*

*My father worked on the Extremely Large Telescope.* ]

With a show of hands can I ask you all if you think that only a few are true?

How many of you think that more than half are true?

And finally how many of you think that every potential fact is true?

Let me leave that there for a moment and ask you all to think about yourself as an individual; think of something about yourself that people wouldn’t know, or wouldn’t possibly perceive as an element of who you are. Perhaps it’s something embarrassing, something even deviant, something darker still or just simply something a bit niche that you wouldn’t disclose readily. Please just hold that in your mind whilst I talk for a bit about what I understand of truth.

**The initial spur that prompted the decision to give this lecture about veracity was my own deeply personal relationship with a liar.** **The lies told have left an invisible brand as scorched into me as a birthmark.** My wider concerns on the current state of global politics, the internet, and the exposure of gender related abuse all collided with an intimate issue I faced and in essence that is why I wanted to talk about Truth; my suggestion being that we make better work with truth at its core, that we are stronger as individuals and that honesty serves the public good in a way that deception never will be able to. And I believe that now more than ever before in human history, we need to start seriously addressing our **culture of deception**.

As an artist, first and foremost, Art, for me, serves a purpose as one of the final bastions of truth-saying. That, at the very least, we glean an essential truth from the art object and the hand of its maker, when and only when, that is, the maker’s hand is proven.

It has become normalised, perhaps fashionable to view testimony as just perspective; simply a point of view and that truth is somewhere in between two counterpoints, or that there is another version that better represents a more whole truth. There is even an inherent suggestion that to believe in truth you are somehow a bit simple or more naive, an innocent.

The name Machiavelli, although it has negative connotations and has been morphed into its own adjective with ‘unscrupulous’ as one of its given meanings, is still held in admiration; where cunning at the expense of someone else is seen as a cleverness.

The idea of intelligence itself is therefore wedded to lying. And we perpetuate this idea when creating studies to measure a toddler’s ability to lie and relate that to intelligence.

Are we so far gone? Perhaps we should just give up and not seek the truth anywhere. After all it’s well recorded that it’s fundamentally a much more difficult road to walk. A road often paved with madness, imprisonment, mockery and isolation. So maybe we shouldn’t even try, especially as we’ll be seen as smarter if we don’t...

I think there is an urgency now for us to try to practise honesty as a choice.

As the philosopher Sissela Bok points out **‘To claim that “since telling the truth is impossible, there can be no sharp distinction between what is true and what is false”, is to try to defeat objections to lying before even discussing them.’**

So, what happens when the use of the term ‘perspective’ becomes ballast to support a liar’s counter-defense, or to work on people’s sympathies and sell a completely fabricated story to them?

If facts are portrayed in a way that is clearly biased, how then do they continue to serve as facts?

In late 2015 after ending the relationship with the liar that I loved I went looking for answers, raw truths, and sadly discovered lie upon lie. I then had to come to terms with the very real impact of deception. His, my own as a result of his, and other parties so muddled and caught up in an escalation of this man’s lies.

I found solace in my work. And even in the immediate aftermath I had to acknowledge in myself that the abuse and damage left behind had begun to meld with my creative inquiries.

For some time I’d been looking into the impact of social media on the psyche, the Leveson Inquiry, the rise of the term ‘post truth’, the age of advertising, excessive hyperbole and **President Donald Trump**.

**However, like Voldemort, I fear if you say the name Trump more than three times he will manifest before us. So I will try and keep his name to a minimum during this talk.**

This all translated into me making the Hyper Bowl last year. It became a walk-in sculpture designed to bombard the viewer with a soup of exaggerated text, to encircle visitors in an echo chamber of deliberately faux ark-like construction. I set out to challenge our over-reliance and over-usage of hyperbole and whilst I had had a similar idea in my twenties it seemed all the more pressing to create it now.

In my experience of researching and working with hyperbole I found that it always evokes strong feelings. Mostly excitable, but it also has the capacity to confound.

The suggestion, however, of “truthful hyperbole”, coined by Mr. Trump in 1987 is, in my view, a misnomer.

Amid the ad slogans, critics’ reviews, political propaganda (from all quarters) and celebrity statements, I placed around the walls of the Bowl equal amounts of hyperbole from the Remain campaign as I did from the Leave campaign and, added to this, I mixed in slogans from the Scottish Independence Referendum.

A curious thing happened; depending on which way an audience member had voted they fixed on the idea that I must have voted that way too, regardless of the referenda.

This suggests that the ‘framing’ of hyperbole if not specifically attached to one team or the other can be applied to any or both. Which begs the question as to whether or not there is any difference at all, or if instead we are just being handled in exactly the same way by both sides trying to achieve power; that hyperbole is now continuously being deployed as a companion to paternalised lies; or rather, the supposed lies told for a greater good.

Are you sitting comfortably? -

‘amazing lustre for infinite, mirror-like shine’

‘Every service imaginable’

‘So polished it defies belief.’

‘SIMPLY UNMISSABLE’

‘A once in a generation decision’

‘Beyond brave’

‘LEGENDARY’

‘ULTIMATE LOOK-AT-ME’

‘Acutely invigorating’

‘genuine power’

‘utterly unique’

‘It doesn’t get much better than this’

‘DREAM HAIR’

‘beach worthy body’

‘The greatest Briton of all’

“greatest living rock star on the planet”

“I’m pretty fucking awesome”

‘effortlessly profound’

‘BORN TO BE ADMIRED ALL OVER THE WORLD’

‘sun-dried deliverance for the masses’

“He’s a genius.”

‘Endless ways to make lips pop’

“Best President ever!”

‘I will literally die’

‘Strong hair can handle anything'

‘I’ve never felt this good’

‘you’re witnessing a dream’

‘unstoppable moments’

‘RADIANCE ILLUMINATOR’

‘BORN TO GO FURTHER’

‘It’ll blow your mind’

‘open happiness’

‘PERFECT BODY’

‘LIVE IN EUPHORIA’

‘Unique and supremely talented’

‘presented as never before’

‘obscenely entertaining’

‘The Most Powerful Woman on the Planet’

‘A SONIC PHENOMENON’

‘Power List Game Changers Top 10’

‘A Unique Blast’

‘fitfully fizzy dramedy’

‘Exquisitely, horrifically, hilarious’

‘freakin divine line-up’

‘STRONG IS BEAUTIFUL’

‘Leave reality at the gate...’

‘rock gods swooping in from on high’

‘SHE SHOULD PREPARE FOR WORLD DOMINATION’

“Bravest/ most heroic performance you’ve ever seen’

“Extremely virtuosic and beyond dazzling”

‘GRAVITY-DEFYING’

‘TASTE ADVENTURE’

‘LUNG-BUSTINGLY FUNNY’

‘Obscenely entertaining’

“The greatest song of all time”

“Did they freeze? Did they go to pieces?”

“How will English football recover from this?”

“time of unprecedented turmoil and uncertainty”

‘Believe in Britain’

‘POLITICAL SUICIDE’

“campaign hate”

“The economic argument is beyond doubt”

“You can never be too greedy”

‘Be constantly on the alert without a moment’s relaxation!’

‘smite its enemies’

It seems to me that hyperbolic emphasis in language induces a kind of spell. Whatever you may think of **Donald Trump, now President Trump**, **(I think that’s more than three times. I’m sorry)** he is perhaps the most significant example of the success deploying hyperbole can render. **Arguably, his march to the White House is as a direct result of the benefits of exaggeration.**

Our over-reliance on hyperbole to sell something, ourselves or someone else, has an adjacent correlation with an experiment conducted by researchers at Concordia University. The study run by evolutionary behavioural scientist Dr. Gad Saad measured the ‘framing effect’ i.e. what happens to decisions when information is presented in opposite ways. The researchers intentionally framed sets of questions in the negative and in the positive to ascertain the effects on people when choosing a partner. For example -

“seven out of ten people who know this person say he is kind.” (is framed in the positive)

“three out of ten people who know this person say he is unkind.” (is framed in the negative)

Despite the fact that it is exactly the same information given, in most cases, the women asked were susceptible to the trick and turned the potential partner down when confronted with the negative framing but were confident in accepting the potential mate if the framing was positive.

As with my unintentional experiment in the HyperBowl, the pre-framed questions in the social science experiment ended up leading the subjects into a trap that addressing any subject, positively and/or hyperbolically can get the desired result, whether it’s good for the person or not.

Suggesting that ‘framing’ combined with the use of hyperbole, could drive anyone with either good or bad intentions forward to the position they want to be in.

So, does how we frame information amount to covering up the truth and does embellishment or hyperbole create a lie?

“You catch more flies with honey” first appeared in print in the 17th century, but the idea that being ‘nice or positive’ in the pursuit of a selfish agenda and at the expense of someone else predates this adage... and is ingrained in the way human interaction has developed over centuries.

**In an age of excessive multi-media the ability to kill more flies is clearly manifestly accelerated.**

I’m going to suggest that what happens when we surf online is an extension of this idea of ‘framing’. Eli Pariser’s now well known reveal in 2011 of our individual online ‘filter bubble’ has been widely discussed, but little has been done to reverse the effects. In fact an interview published in May of 2017 had Pariser suggest the problem had aided media organizations to “grow autotrophically toward those bubbles.”, that now with knowledge of the filter bubble they “can target very particular niches or communities and reach a lot of those people, and do it by understanding how that algorithm works and what it lets in.”

For those unaware of the term, a ‘filter bubble’ is what happens when we look anything up via a search engine on the internet. An “algorithm selectively guesses what information we see” based on location, previous searches, clicks and even personal history. Our identities are continuously framed whilst we search the web by algorithms that make decisions for us. They decide what we see, inevitably defeating our own ability to make free choices or to discover something outside of our own wheelhouse, thus resulting in curtailing our ability to advance, or to come up with new ideas.

The counter argument to this is often - but a library is curated by a librarian, by funding, by this or that. And for the most part there is some truth here, but let’s face facts, I am unlikely to walk past a book on hieroglyphs firing something new in my mind when I’m searching for how to plumb a toilet online. I will likely be shown informative pages but also, and believe me I’ve checked this, a few links down, there will be sites I’ve already bought from, trying to sell me 60% off a bathroom suite.

I am being sold something.

The world wide web was supposed to be a phenomenal free educational resource, an online 360 library with unlimited capability for equal learning, however in practice we all know now that sources are unreliable, that our information is being filtered, that anyone can appear to be an authority, and that the environment is fraught with lies and misinformation; in fact, I was listening to the radio on driving to the University to deliver ‘The Empty Nest’ sculpture, and heard a report on a new campaign by a leading cancer charity which has now appointed a ‘digital nurse’ to combat various fake news headlines. Sadly, some patients are having to confront not only swallowing chemotherapy, but also websites that claim it is a bigger killer than cancer itself. I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t have to suffer that at a library.

I want to turn my attention to reputation and the prevailing current tide of scandal. The rise of the abused calling out men of power and/or fame has a fascinating linkage with the emboldening we see online on social media sites. And whilst as I’ve just highlighted it’s by no means a wholly positive thing that everyone has a public platform or voice of authority online because, after all, along with those women and others that have felt able to come forward to hold their abusers to account, there are also great swathes of people out there that are finding a platform for spreading fear and misinformation, malevolent and dangerous views that we have seen incite violence and radicalization.

However, it has to be looked at as an interesting correlation. Perhaps a silver lining, leading to fewer places to hide for abusers if the positive trend to speak up and call them out continues.

I have watched with interest as I'm sure many have here, the turbulence as men of distinction, power, unblemished reputation, 'right-on' men, have been exposed one by one for manipulation, corruption, sexual and emotional abuse.

Rumours have been rife for a long time with rumblings of paedophile rings, the casting couch and other abuses of power. Perhaps it has always been so. We have myriad examples from Caligula, to Henry the VIII to Profumo.

The latest and most high profile being the Harvey Weinstein sexual harassment scandal which has in turn opened up the seedy previously silenced underbelly of abuses from Westminster to Hollywood. In all these cases from Jimmy Saville to Rolf Harris, to Weinstein, to Michael Fallon the questions asked are always; why did he get away with it for so long? How did it go unreported? People must have known.

And they did, of course. People knew, people were told. I, myself, had heard a very specific rumour about one of the personalities involved more than a decade before it has come out. It’s interesting isn’t it, that the truth is only revealed when there's a groundswell of numbers involved and/or the abuser dies.

What sparks someone finally to speak up? Why not reveal the truth sooner? After all, it seems obvious that the rights to privacy and confidentiality are waived when a breach of a perpetrator’s trust might save the abuse of others or, in the case of a violent partner, being silent may endanger a life.

And yet, we keep quiet. With all our modes of communication, our fast paced to-ing and fro-ing of ideas and information. We still keep quiet.

Whilst it is possible that the internet helps in creating a platform and community for an individual finally to break their silence, with it comes an immediate countering; the PR machine, the cynicism, goes into overdrive. The first comment I saw Weinstein make post the allegations was “I’m getting the help I need.” I also saw a report with a quote that he was “not doing okay”... whilst at the same time, Weinstein’s representative Sallie Hofmeister has repeatedly said that Weinstein “unequivocally denies allegations of non-consensual sex.”

In his letter printed in the New York Times, there was a brief statement of apology but little to address the damage to the numbers of women he is accused of harming, instead a play on our sympathy, a suggestion he somehow had diminished responsibility and whilst writing this lecture his defence is being prepared. So, the truth is further muddied by a clever ability to cast doubt. To frame the story. To preserve a reputation. And that framing of the story is sadly so often at the expense of a woman’s own.

**I think it could be possible that some of the most pernicious lies are those disclaiming responsibility.**

Nietzsche suggested that “It is easier to cope with a bad conscience than a bad reputation.” Once again this idea seems to prevail keeping the darkest corners quiet. And the people that know about them hidden or, often, hiding in plain sight.

But what about a woman’s reputation then.

I was recently sent a copy of Edward Godwin's memoir that was written shortly after Mary Wollstonecraft, his wife of seven months, died post childbirth. Over the past few decades, after years of neglect, Wollstonecraft, the author of 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women' has been reclaimed, and her history, her place at the table of those women that have given everything to shore up a safer, more equal society for the future, has been restored. But why was she so forgotten and shunned for the best part of a century?

In a word it comes down to her REPUTATION. She was put on a ducking stool by her own husband after death.

The Wikipedia entry for Wollstonecraft suggests that Godwin's book "inadvertently destroyed her reputation". I wanted to include Wikipedia in this lecture and with this incursive use of 'inadvertently' I have found a way. **This is framing once again.**

Because Godwin did ruin Wollstonecraft's reputation for a century with his tell-all memoir, and my suspicion would be that he was well aware of the mud he was throwing.

Hers is an example of a woman who sought her own destiny, fought for her independence of mind and spirit, travelled, wrote a seminal text on women's rights, was a pioneer feminist philosopher, had affairs with artists and it seems lived as true to herself as was possible in the age she was born into. An age where it would have been implausible for her to define herself as a man might have at that time.

The account of her death, glorified in the final pages of Godwin's memoir, are some of the most lively passages in his writing. He 'inadvertently' wrote a warts and all book about a woman he'd not long buried. And it scandalized the society Mary had left behind, scorching over her name in the earth. A woman who had not long given birth to not only Mary Shelley but a testimony for equal rights for women.

I want to be clear that this is my opinion on Godwin's book, my opinion, having not long read this memoir, but it impacted on me personally and it felt close to home.

(‘Look What You Made Me Do’, Taylor Swift video)

Whatever you think of singer/songwriter Taylor Swift, or her music, I have found it interesting that with her new album entitled ‘REPUTATION’, it seems to me, there is a brave attempt to reclaim herself through her work, by pouring scorn on those she sees as defining her reputation with competitive or malicious intent. Or maybe she simply wishes to devour her past performative personas and make it clear, as the late, great, David Bowie did before her, that they are just that, personas.

Looking more closely at reputation, versions of events, perception, there seems always to be an inequality between the fortunes of women and men. In Mary's case, the memoir is laced with truth, but we will never know whether she would have owned it, or indeed whether Godwin would have written a tell all had she lived. Would she ever have sanctioned it? And I have to question who he was writing it for anyway.

Perhaps, as Swift has, Mary would have written an answer. If nothing else, it’s gutsy and angry of Taylor Swift, who has a history of the confessional or narrative song, to burn, mock and reclaim the very meaning of the term ‘reputation’.

I am alive to feel the anguish of someone putting a spin on my reputation with a version of events that bears no truth to the reality, so I feel keenly these questions. And as a result I have sought to own my history, to open up about my affair, to be honest and let the chips fall as they may upon my own reputation. **Reputation means very little if it’s not who you really are.**

I watched Monica Lewinsky through a little screen on my ipad finally responding to what she, in her own words defined as “the first great internet shaming”.

We all know her story, she has secured her footnote in history, unknowingly, or by guile. It’s difficult to be sure, but I believe that she did love President Bill Clinton and certainly was dazzled by him. And I also believe that his barely blemished record is unjust next to the bile she had to endure. The statement she made during this particular talk, that it was “time to take back her narrative” struck a chord with me and is a defining notion for anyone who has been caught between lies and truth, and in particular caught in someone else’s lie.

After all, it was Clinton who had the wife, Clinton who had the power, Clinton who told the most significant lie of the affair “I did not have relations with that woman”, perhaps he was choosing to use a psychological advantage. It is often used by those who lie under oath, and is known as ‘the mental reservation’. Silently, in your mind only, you place a qualifying addition to a sentence; to turn the lie into a truth for yourself. So, Bill Clinton’s statement might become, “I did not have relations with that woman”, in Cuba.

Like Mary and to a lesser extent Swift, Lewinsky had her reputation written for her by others, both women suffered inexorably by the framing of their personalities when what it really comes down to is that they both got involved with people who abused their own power for gain. Neither of their counterparts suffered by comparison.

I must admit though, Lewinsky, whilst compelling, disappointed me when she confessed to getting ‘help’ with her talk. i.e. professional help or media training perhaps. I don’t know, as she didn’t specify, but I do know that whilst media training may suggest that it offers more cosy things such as “getting you prepared for the cameras”, “helping you be more you”, it also prepares people for “avoiding awkward questions” “concealing what you need to” etc etc, you get the point. Media training disables the true voice and is, in my view, part of the problem, part of the enabling of public deception.

**No one can find your true voice but you.**

If someone interferes with your ability to be frank about your own history under the guise of ‘helping’ it then becomes PR, media trained, curated or edited by someone that isn’t you, and as a consequence is diminished by somebody else, however benevolent. If the suggestion is that your true voice could do with polishing or sections of your story concealing, that your view/interpretation might be taken badly, misunderstood or just simply not approved of, your true voice is no longer singular. **In all cases, if you are giving an account of your own history, honestly, and from your true voice, you need not look to anyone else to find it.**

From Eve onward it's been the woman's fault; she ate the apple, went to the hotel room, made a multi-million dollar selling record, took the job. Apollo gifted Kassandra the power of prophecy and then when she refused his advances, he spat in her mouth, cursing her, so that no-one would ever believe her foresight.

The prophetic guide is often blinded or driven mad by the prevailing tide of disbelief. And I realise that it is easier to accept a lie than to stand up for a truth. That is certainly what a history of human stories has told us. But what if we did stand up to the lie? And started to listen to the core of ourselves, to assess our motivations honestly, and accept our punishment if we are caught in deception.

It seems unlikely that in this age of consumptive information that truth is only truth with a consensus.

And to go back to almost the very first question I began with - Is the idea of truth in the face of a culture that mocks the very notion of truth, even possible any more?

Phone-hacking has been ruled illegal and condemned as an invasion of privacy but I want to put forward the suggestion that potentially there is a symptomatic issue here regarding veracity that we are all ignoring…

Journalists have a less than savoury reputation as a group and are often counted among lists of professions deemed untrustworthy along with car salesmen, estate agents and lawyers. In my own experience of being both interviewer and interviewee, the people involved in reporting are no different to any other walk of life, and are as disparate a set of humans with the good, bad and average all swirling around, often working for the same newspaper!

However, this mistrust of the media in all its forms has led to agents and PR intervening on behalf of the newsworthy or person of interest and consequently there are now permanently shut doors that reporters would have easily accessed in the past.

Whilst I am in no way condoning the modern methods deployed by journos to source information, I think we ought to stop for a moment and look at them as symptomatic of a society drowning in a lack of trust.

In discussing reputation, how can a reputation be taken seriously when non disclosure agreements and gagging clauses are commonplace? The trust that a politician, celebrity, movie mogul is not quite who they are portraying themselves to be is constantly tested in the face of a power that builds around itself this wall of silence.

An inquiring or journalistic mind might start to question the wholesome family man image, the champion of women, the liberal, or that the upstanding politician is capable of making fair laws to progress a more equal society.

Meanwhile, and due to various serious infringements by the press, not least, the fatal harassing of Princess Diana, a group of people whose interests are actually served by this advent of journalistic moral ambiguity have colluded with their clients; producers, agents, publicists, cabinets etcetera to create personas left and right, that are saleable and abstruse, regardless of what they might be concealing. The truer, flawed identity, is held back in order to persuade a public of their likeability. Only in the best case scenarios does this committee that has created a personality, agree to emphasize the true character of their client. Or when their hands are forced.

Is it any wonder then, that journalists have resorted to more devious and underhand methods to gain information. This tit for tat deterioration in ethics perhaps can be seen to have contributed to the eventual phone-tapping scandal. Where the adage ‘eye for an eye’ or rather a reciprocity of deceit is laid bare.

Added to which, it should never be forgotten that the agenda or opinion forged from a writer’s own view, can ride roughshod over answers they receive in interview, or work they are appraising, or, perhaps most concerningly, the 'factual' news they are reporting. As Leveson neatly put it during the inquiry, "Not only are the press powerful lobbyists in their own interests, but they wield a powerful megaphone with considerable influence."

More often than not truths born of a belief system or a vocation (in the case of journalism) have an ulterior agenda or reason for ‘framing’. Even sat in the vaulted position of being in the right, legally, and/or having reason and evidence for calling out a lie or a liar. The perspective of a journo, say, who loses income from just anybody posting online, has a drive to cast doubt on the blogger (that is not to say that the source online is a reliable one, as previously outlined) but none the less, there is objective behind the professional journalist or writer printing a piece targetting the responsibility and credibility of news from other sources. This needs always to be kept in mind.

In this example, the truth, I suspect, would be closer to a fear or anxiety of job loss and budget squeezing rather than the loftier purpose to prevent erosion of factual news.

And sadly, so much of the news we are fed now is opinion led rather than reporting on solid fact-based findings.

I would enjoy a short affidavit at the top of articles and reports that expressed why/what the basis for the story had been i.e. I fear losing my job, my status, I voted for this and haven’t got over the result that didn’t go the way I thought it would.

We once used to declare vested interests but these have become shrouded by layer upon layer of filtered spin and self-delusion.

Nevertheless, the rise of online recycled journalism referred to as "Churnalism" by BBC journalist Waseem Zakir coupled with so-called clickbait which aims at the most sensationalist tagline for maximum clicks-through and shares, on social media, has saturated an already murky environment.

I fear we are living at a time where the volume and speed of information true and false is so vast that any sense of what’s real or true is as lost to us as the habitat of the many creatures humans are driving away.

Could it be that the more communication speeds up, the more we read only the most pithy of headline or instead get drawn by sensational clickbait, that we end up losing the meat of the article, and consequently the depth, so understand less. It stands to reason that there is then more danger that we fog any sense of what’s true and what’s not in this dark, thickly-wooded forest of information.

It’s laughable now that in 1972 John Berger, who died this year, wrote in Ways of Seeing, “In no other form of society in history has there been such a concentration of images, such a density of visual message.”

The vast space allotted to information and imagery produced in the digital world has far outstripped this notion. The concentration of imagery today is mind blowing.

Riding high at the top of the leader board of online imagery, is of course, the selfie. A term that when I was creating the project ‘Monoculture’ in 2012, barely existed in online entries. To the point that I had to make a decision as to whether I’d paint the word ‘selfie’ on a sculpture using the ‘ie’ ending or ‘y’ ending. At the time there were roughly four or so articles to take reference from. In late 2013 it had become so popular that Oxford Dictionaries named it their ‘Word of the Year’.

Perhaps the selfie has in some way become the new formal portrait. No longer just the province of the wealthy, or of kings and queens who were able to buy an artist’s agenda or discretion.

Just like then, the selfie now portrays something that doesn’t exist. A blank that obscures identity or individuality. A formal and conventional portrait to beautify but reveal little else. Is this really the egalitarian dream we want? For more and more people to have the ability for deeper concealment of features, identity, for more and more opaque relationships, veiling more and more true thoughts and feelings, leaving viewers, lovers, electorates in the dark.

In that same year of 2013 the satirist Charlie Brooker flippantly suggested Twitter was a game. The one upmanship and competitive elements to the site do have a relationship with gaming, but the problem is that Twitter really isn’t a game, it really isn’t. And it’s not helpful to perceive it that way, not even for a laugh watching Christmas telly. Like Facebook, Twitter feeds a very real desire in humans to connect with others, to influence others, to say what you wouldn’t vocalise to a flesh-friend but instead are able to float out there and test on an unknown public. In short it appeals to our vanity, our desperation and our collective desire to be heard. The idea of followers, or disciples has always been an intoxicating draw in people’s minds. And often, and I would say especially in the case of Twitter, comes fraught with a false sense of power.

So what do we do if we can't believe what we read, or see, can create our own false personas online because it’s fun, can't believe what our politicians tell us and know that our celebrities are abusing the idolatry we've given them?

Berger also stated in the same text that “If the new language of images were used differently, it would through its use, confer a new kind of power. Within it we could begin to define our experiences more precisely in areas where words are inadequate.” I doubt that we can honestly say that the explosion of social media has given rise to a Truer or more Real society. Instead a homogenised and facile approach has become popular setting us further apart from revealing ourselves. Securing an even easier ability to mask and to hide motive. Or even, to create an entirely false counter defence.

Here’s my affidavit – I am an artist. I believe in art, the artist and the art object as still possessing an essential truth, even when it mocks the truth, it does this deliberately and visibly. I realise that I am saying this and like the journalists I mentioned before I have an agenda which I disclose to you now.

It is what I do.

It gives my life purpose, making work is the only place I feel genderless, it makes sense of my own mind for myself and helps me reflect on the world around me, to even sometimes understand it. So, I am biased in my view on Art. That’s my affidavit.

But here are a few sentences of supporting evidence -

The origins of the term Art first appeared in English in around 1300 meaning ‘skill in doing something, especially of practice or knowledge’. But the root is from the Latin ‘ars, artem -’ meaning ‘professional or practical skill, craftsmanship, ingenuity, etc.’ No wonder then that now the term Art prefixes any and all forms of creative endeavour giving a higher sense of authenticity to any genre.

I expose myself through my work and am defined by it. In 400 Women it’s fairly well documented that one of the precursors for the work was the shame I felt wanting to get away from an extremely poor and traumatised woman whilst she was insistently asking me to do something, to help her tell the international community about her missing, likely murdered, daughter. But I was frightened for myself in that moment, for the desperate emotion and scene that was being created and I wanted to escape it. I was in the fortunate and privileged position of being able to.

My new work is confessional and tackles sexuality in the face of emotional abuse, my own fertility, the positioning of madness in the face of truth-telling, migration and erosion of natural habitat.

Whilst ‘400 Women’ was escalated as an idea from my own shame, so ‘Monoculture’ was in part developed out of personal restriction, and ‘On Truth’ along with ‘The Empty Nest’ comes from the relationship I’ve mentioned.

All of these works reveal me to you.

What happens in the making is a kind of alchemy; as with all of my work I stretch outside of myself to evolve and relate my shame, my heartache, my gullibility, my fury, my confusion, my love, my embarrassment, to other areas of wider political, philosophical or social concern. So that my work might find meaning and a truth for others.

I set out on this daunting, complex task of trying to unpick what it means to find truth in a spiralling society kept afloat on spin, personal brand management, with a willing and often complicit acceptance of airbrushing, filter bubbles, post truth, false icons not to mention the unlikeliness of every social media profile. And I realised that once again, as with all my work the reason for choosing to write this examination on truth comes from an intimate truth of my own.

Camus said “Life is the sum of all our choices”.

Life is becoming harder and more mentally arduous, our time eroded and focus deteriorating, whilst disagreements of opinion that were once accepted and discussed, are now escalated into immediate reactive counter violence and nastiness.

The only answer I have is two-fold; **choose to question**, always continue questioning for yourself. Pick at the veneer until you can make out the structure and density of the woodchip underneath. You may still be convinced by a liar, as I was, for a time, but keep questioning and I hope you will find answers.

**Choose to be honest.** It’s my belief that the more we choose not to deceive, and the truer we are, with ourselves, about ourselves, in our work and in our dealings with others, the more society will exhale a sigh of relief, will ease and could really reverse some of the damage that a post truth society has come to accept.

By the way the statements made at the start of this lecture are all entirely true. Ask me anything.