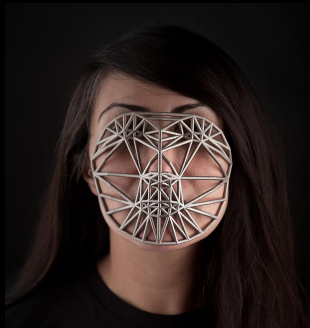# *MIRROR WITH A MEMORY*

Kevin Clancy
MAT255: Techniques, History & Aesthetics of the Computational Photographic Image
Professor George Legrady
June 3, 2021

Image: Zach Blas, *Face Cages* (2014-16)

Martine Syms, *Grand Calme* (2018), Installation View

Episode 1: Biometrics
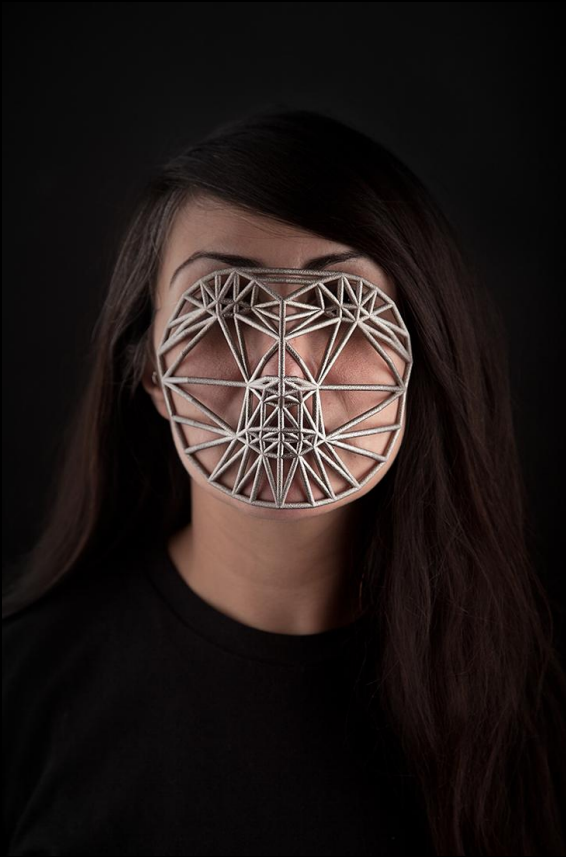
Episode 2: (In)Visibility

Episode 3: Evidence

Episode 4: Storytelling

Episode 5: Land

Episode 6: Power

EPISODE ONE: BIOMETRICS

Zach Blas, *Face Cages* (2014-16)

"I think a lot about how computers see, but more how they change how we see. An image is constructed, and it's always constructed even when it's a kind of documentary image, and I think it's kind of like how you parse what's in the image that has a lot of parallels to the way that artificial intelligence works. In terms of authenticity, I don't think: 'that one's real, that one's not real, because from the earliest experiments with the medium there were always interventions, and in fact in the earliest experiments it was so much more complicated to produce the image, so most of the time it was constructed. I think that representation always has problems, and that's a big part of my research, that in some ways it failed, or fails, I think that's when it's most interesting to me."

-Martine Syms, *Mirror with a Memory* podcast

Zach Blas

Facial Weaponization Suite
(2012-14)


Face Cages
(2014-16)

Contra-Internet
(2015-19)

Martha Rosler *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977)

"Neither photography, nor science, nor data gathering were the **villains** of the piece. Rather, it was a critique of the social practices determined in the formation of the categories 'Woman' and 'Other'." -Martha Rosler on *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*
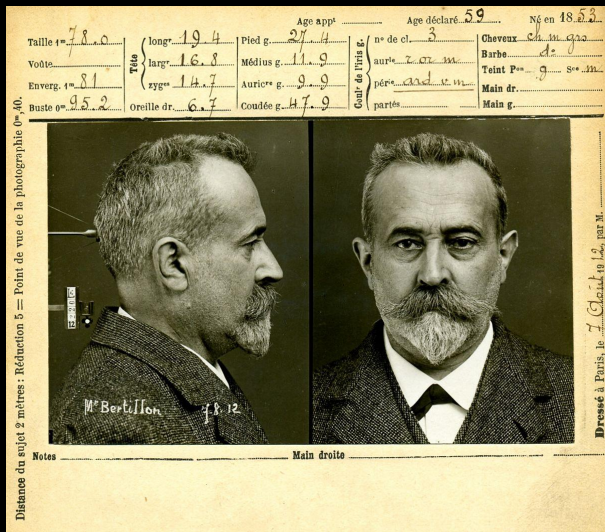
"Bertillon created a system of photography that led others to establish pseudosciences like Phrenology and Physiognomy, which assigned facial features and measurements to one's likelihood to commit a crime. It's a dangerous idea that we can trace back to the TransAtlantic Slave Trade and forward into the Nazi regime, Apartheid in South Africa, and the "predictive policing" technologies used all over the world today. But like Rosler says, we have to ask ourselves if it's Photography or data gathering that's the villain here, or if it's the corporate and sociopolitical practices and conditions in which they're made and used."

-Martine Syms, *Mirror with a Memory* Podcast
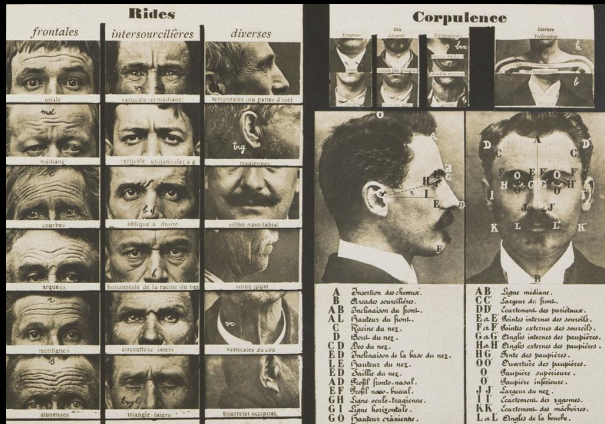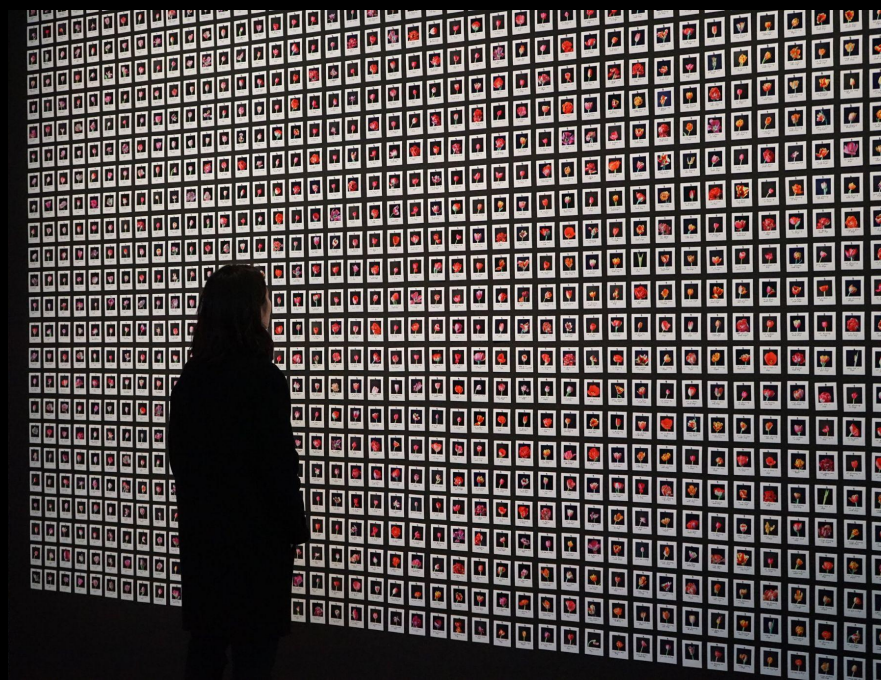
Anna Ridler, *Myriad (Tulips)* 2018

Hito Steyerl, *Power Plants* (2019)

"The iris flower dataset, created by British statistician Ronald Fisher, contains 50 samples of 3 different irises and is used as an example for many statistical classification techniques in machine learning. It is included in the package Scikit-learn so that every machine learning programme that uses this package also contains within it somewhere a hidden flower dataset. This unexpected link brings the installation into the history of machine learning. But by referencing Fisher, I am also referencing the fact that he was also heavily involved in racism and eugenics (foreshadowing perhaps some of the inherent problems with machine learning, bias and datasets). Even something as simple as a flower contains within it hidden layers and narratives."

-Anna Ridler, *Myriad (Tulips) (2018)*

Martine Syms, *Shame Space* (2019), ICA VCU

"It's good to always remind oneself that these technologies aren't perfect, they have their limitations, they break, and actually the good in that is these technologies then are up for grabs, in a sense that their futures aren't already written about how these technologies have to be used."

-Zach Blas, Mirror with a Memory Podcast

American Artist, *My Blue Window* (2019), still from video

EPISODE THREE: EVIDENCE

JUN 29 2015 05:48:18:51

06/22–06/28 2015 2014 PCT CHG
ASLT   70   52   34.6%

Bill Posters, *Partly Political Broadcasts* (2019)

"Part of the problem—the threat—is that people trust videos and they trust images, even when they know they shouldn't. Even when they know that photography has been manipulated since the earliest days of the medium.

So there's a **paradox** we want to look here at when it comes to thinking about photographic evidence. We know these problems, yet we still rely on images and videos to prove that something's real. And increasingly, corporations and governments are relying on artificial intelligence in these ways too."

-Martine Syms, Mirror with a Memory podcast

"The age of the image's **formal logic** was the age of painting, engraving and etching, architecture; it ended with the eighteenth century. The age of **dialectic logic** is the age of photography and film or, if you like, the frame of the nineteenth century. The age of **paradoxical logic** begins with the invention of video recording, holography and computer graphics . . . as though, at the close of the twentieth century the end of modernity were itself marked by the end of a logic of public representation. Now, although we may be comfortable with the reality of the formal logic of traditional pictorial representation and, to a lesser degree, the actuality of the dialectical logic governing photographic and cinematic representation, we still cannot seem to get a grip on the virtualities of the **paradoxical logic** of the videogram, the hologram or digital imagery."

-Paul Virillio, *The Vision Machine*

Lynn Hershman Leeson

Roberta Breitmore (1972-79)

Play Video (3:56-5:30)

Shadow Stalker (2019)

"Roberta was a mirror for culture and she reflected the society she lived in."

"Again you know what is fiction? What is real? I mean media creates a story and a narrative that often serves another purpose than truth. And I think sometimes you have to use these fictions in order to get to the underlying truth of what's going on."

"It's a stand-in for reality essentially. And that's what I'm interested in is that blur. You know, was she real if she represented what was going on? Maybe more real than than an actual person that didn't keep the records."

-Lynn Hershman Leeson, Mirror with a Memory podcast

American Artist

Dignity Images (2019)

My Blue Window (2019)

American Artist on _My Blue Window_ (2019)

" […] that is not objective in any way and, in fact, because of how it's developed, because of how information is fed into it, it really just reproduces and kind of creates a feedback loop of a lot of the biases and racial biases that are already expected from the police.

So thinking of this sort of algorithmic vision as really a continuation of that biological vision, or the body-born camera as it's been called. And so I just want to sort of, like, make that continuation really clear, you know, that we're not really entering into a new era of anything but really just sort of most recent and maybe the most nuanced version of something that has always been present and operated in different ways."

-American Artist, speaking about "predictive policing" on *Mirror with a Memory* podcast

"I think that I adapted the early trauma survival skills to looking at the trauma of our culture, and maybe even predicting the culture because of the patterns I could see in it. In a way turn that early trauma into an advantage in order to to survive and also to survive a shifting world.

I think it's kind of a test of where we are, you know. And what we need really as a culture is to understand when surveillance is taking place, what the evidence is, how it could be used against us and turned into something that's more liberated and could be used to defy the technology that exists by creating another one that's better.

I think to be an artist is to be an optimist. Because you have to believe that you could not necessarily change things but that you have a vision that can inform the world of things that you see that can't be seen in any other way. So I think that survival and being optimistic, no matter what field you're in, is heroic."
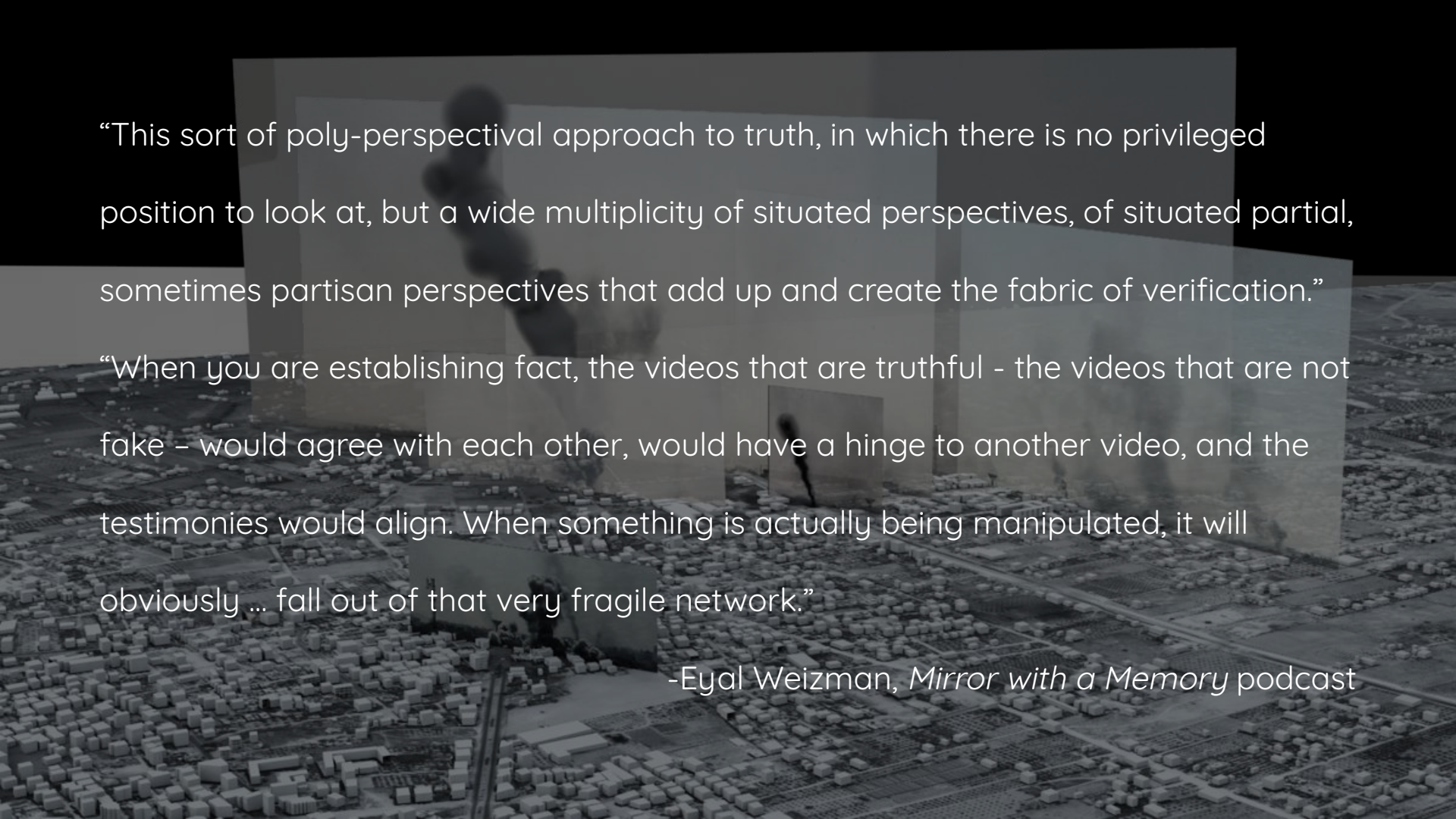
-Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Mirror with a Memory* podcast

EPISODE SIX: POWER

Eyal Weizman (Forensic Architecture)

Amnesty International video on Forensic Architecture

"This sort of poly-perspectival approach to truth, in which there is no privileged position to look at, but a wide multiplicity of situated perspectives, of situated partial, sometimes partisan perspectives that add up and create the fabric of verification."

"When you are establishing fact, the videos that are truthful - the videos that are not fake – would agree with each other, would have a hinge to another video, and the testimonies would align. When something is actually being manipulated, it will obviously ... fall out of that very fragile network."

-Eyal Weizman, *Mirror with a Memory* podcast
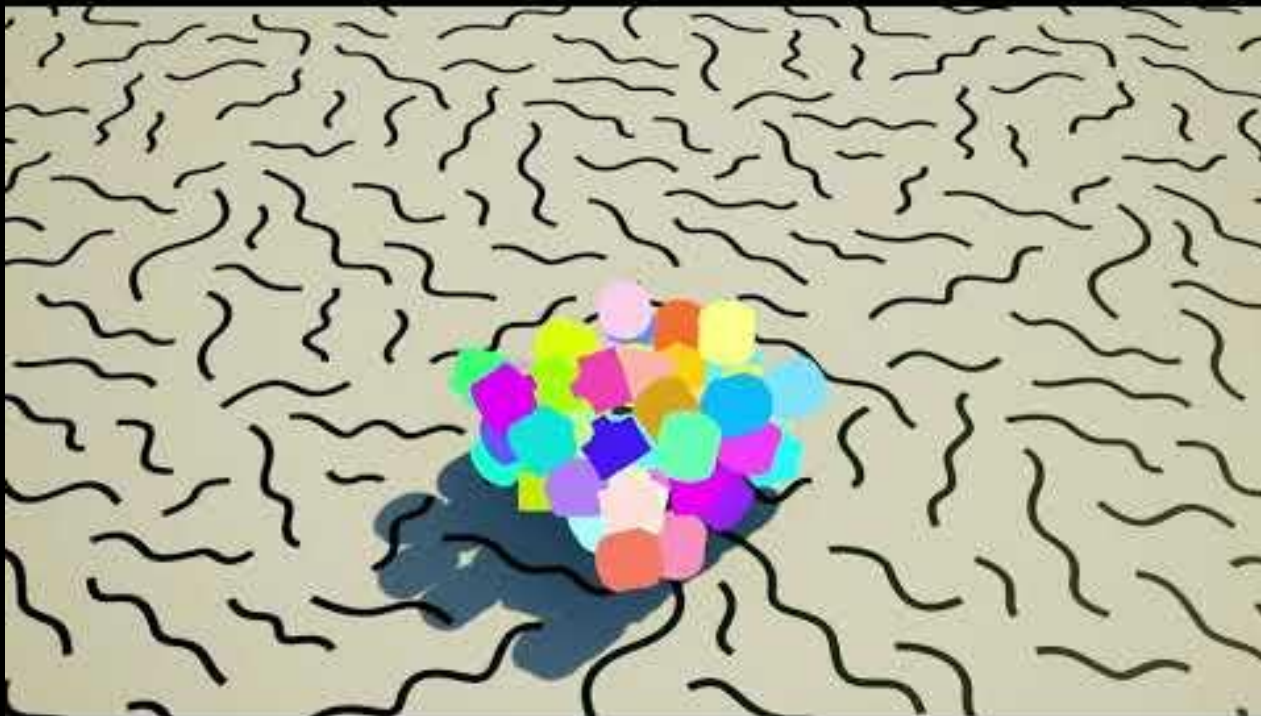
Content Warning: State Violence, Seizure Warning at 3:24
Forensic Architecture, *Triple-Chaser* (2019), Video (10:35)

"We actually establish an alternative way of truth production that is open, that is a bit more democratic, that is not relying on expertise, but relying on the hard work of demonstrating how verification works."

"To establish truth, we do not go through the main gatekeepers of truth practices, but we work directly with the communities that experience violence. Their testimony, their video, is the main thing we work with, and is the most important, and the most precious evidence that we have."

-Eyal Weizman, *Mirror with a Memory* podcast
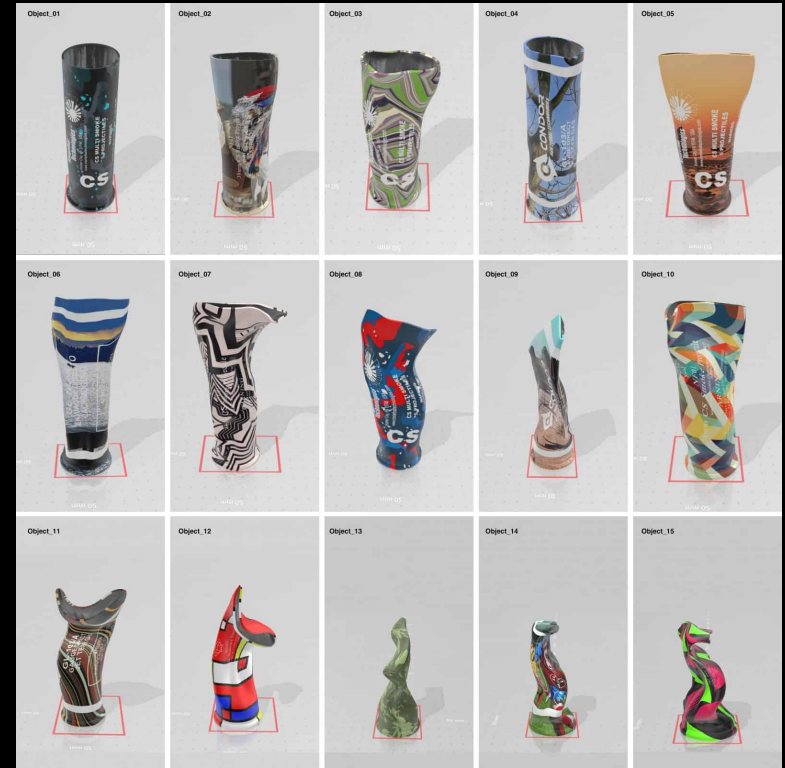
Forensic Architecture *Model Zoo* (2018-ongoing)

"Every camera has its politics. Every camera has a point of view. Every camera has its history - body cams and police dashcams and activist cameras and satellite images - each one of them you need to think in relation to the history of that practice."

"For us, we would like to think of photography as always a collective practice. That is to say, a relation between the people taking it, the people analyzing it, the people advocating with it, or the people litigating with it, and creating those kinds of commons, aesthetic commons if you like, photographic commons."

-Eyal Weizman, *Mirror with a Memory* podcast

"I've been holding onto the idea that we can dream a new future. That not being able to do that is a lack of imagination, and it just requires - a lot of work obviously and activity - but first and foremost, we have to be able to see it and envision it and dream it and imagine it, and then we can work towards that. I think this radical imagining that we talked about is inspiring to me, and is kind of keeping me alive right now."

-Martine Syms, *Mirror with a Memory* podcast

ARTISTS, RESEARCHERS, PHILOSOPHERS

American Artist

Zach Blas

Simone Browne

Joy Buolamwini

Jimena Canales

Kate Crawford

David Danks

Manthia Diawara

Stephanie Dinkins

Stan Douglas

Harun Farocki

Édouard Glissant

Lynn Hersman Leeson

Arthur Holland Michel

Richard Misrach

Mimi Onuoha

Trevor Paglen

Sondra Perry

Martha Rosler

Martine Syms

Eyal Weizman
(Forensic Architecture)

ADDITIONAL EXHIBITIONS, RESOURCES, and LINKS

Paradox: The Body in the Age of AI

Uncanny Valley: Being Human in the Age of AI

Manual Override

Lynn Hershman Leeson: Twisted

World On A Wire

AI & Affect: AMERICAN ARTIST, Stephanie Dinkins, and Legacy Russell

MIT LVAC Wasserman Forum: *Another World*

MIT *Unfolding Intelligence* Symposium

Deepfakery: Satire, Human Rights, Art, and Journalism in a time of Infodemics

Paul Virillio *The Vision Machine*

Eyal Weizman *Open Verification*