A man in a dark hoodie is seen from the side, pulling a white sheet to the left. Behind the sheet is a large black 'U' shape on a white background. The scene is brightly lit, and the sheet has a wrinkled texture.

# IN SEARCH OF THE TRUTH

A Conversation with Will Sylvester

Words by Kyle Morais

**“There’s a commentary on what people’s truths are when we actually start to understand them.”**

**Time + Space** editor Kyle Morais recently caught up with New York based contemporary artist Will Sylvester about [The Truth Booth](#), a global art installation that is reshaping how it feels to vocalize our dreams, convictions, and ideologies. Sylvester received a BA with a concentration on Documentary Film for Social and Cultural Change from the University of Massachusetts in 2011. That same year he went on to edit, build, and tour the *Question Bridge: Black Males* exhibition, including showings at Sundance Film Festival’s New Frontiers and the Sheffield Documentary Film Festival. As a member of the [Cause Collective](#), Sylvester helped to create The Long March, a 27-monitor installation incorporating depictions of movement, migration and marching from different eras in Alabama history.

**Heavily intrigued by my personal experience, I wanted to accrue more information about the artists behind the project and discover the truths from groups of people who are living completely different lives from myself and my colleagues.**

...

**What was the spark of inspiration for the Truth Booth, and how many artists are a part of the project?**

There are four artists a part of the Truth project: myself, Hank Willis Thomas, Ryan Alexiav, and Jim Ricks. The spark really came from Hank, who had an idea for an installation that was a speech bubble that was inflated with helium so you have these speech bubbles flying high overhead. One was in Hebrew and the other was in Arabic. They said, “The truth is: I see you” and “The truth is: I love you”. It was a commentary on how we perceive, and it was actually during the Israeli war.

**Between Palestine?**

Yes, that’s right.

**This was when? How many years ago?**

This was what... 2006, I want to say? 6 or 7—I have to look that up. But it’s this idea that we watch TV and we see people screaming at each other, right? I personally don’t speak Hebrew, nor do I speak Arabic.

**Neither do I, but I’ve always been fascinated by the language and alphabet.**

But who knows, they could be saying these really beautiful things to one another—granted they have guns in their hands—but we don’t know. There’s a commentary on that and what people’s truths are when we actually start to understand them. That spiraled into trying to examine and ask people what their truths are.



United States



Ireland



South Africa

It's interesting hearing the background of it because you all went into an unfamiliar territory not understanding the commanded language between Arabic and Hebrew. As a result, you all created this Truth Booth to understand their voices, and it became this detailed examination of other people's truths.

So the project's been going on since 2006—was it going on consistently, or where there any stopping points? Yeah, there've been several stopping points either because of a lack of funding or time. The idea for the booth has been around for a while but it wasn't fully built until 2011. We did this Ireland tour in summer of 2010, and after that it just sat around for a year. In 2011, it was taken back up for the Look3 Photo Festival. There were the Hofstra debates for 2012, the inauguration in 2013, the Afghanistan tour in 2013, and finally a stop in Cleveland.

It's been like a skip-stop. We'll go do something, and then we'll stop for a while. And then we'll do something, and then we'll stop for a while. It's a huge undertaking, and we have to really get out there and do it. Being on the road for four months and some change is needed, you know, I'm ready to take a nap for a minute! [Chuckles] I'm still super excited to get back out there.

**But you are all individual artists coming together and collaborating on this one initiative. One, I guess, because you all believe in it and understand the social impact that it carries. In the times that you all were stopping, were you still working on some of your own work?**

Yeah! So Hank and I have been working together for some time now on several other projects. The Cause Collective itself has sort of been my focus for the last couple of years, along with collaborating with people of various backgrounds to create Truth Booth-scale work. Hank has this insane solo career. Ryan's like a tech lead in Silicon Valley.

**Wow, that's like the fusion of different fields and perspectives into this as well.**

Yeah, and that's the cool thing about being able to do it on that sort of level. It's not just having myself and having my one perspective with my one way of doing things, but allowing these people to bring their strong points into the project.

**Was Ryan heavily involved with the tech attributes of the project?**

Actually, he's the designer the whole thing. If there was anything graphically or visually about the booth itself, any of the things we've ever put out, it really comes from him [laughs] Surprisingly, the two visual people definitely had less influence. If anyone had the tech of it, it would be me.

**Yeah, it's funny how certain jobs or positions shift when you're placed in a shared work space.**

It's just being able to figure out what people enjoy doing and what their passions are. Also, that's sometimes the stuff you excel at.

**“Here is this object. It doesn’t go either way, and you record a video that is your own. Whatever comes out of that is up to the people that go in there.”**

**Yeah! You know, you have somebody that works in retail, but behind closed doors they’re an incredible graphic designer. People who work in the tech industry might not want to deal only with data analysis; they might want to explore graphic design or web development, yet they’re stuck performing data analytics.**

**You know the idea on understanding the languages—Arabic and Hebrew—and how they are intertwined. Right now, a lot of the art is being directed towards social change. How can you describe any political agenda behind the booth?**

[Chuckles] The best way to describe it is that there is none. That’s kind of what makes it able to go to places like the last project we did, which was Question Bridge: Black Males. A place like Alliance, Nebraska would probably put that out, being this object that is null and void of a political agenda like it is non-partisan. Although like myself, I have my own political views but the booth itself doesn’t.

**Is the booth neutral?**

Will: Very. It’s like, here is this object. It doesn’t go either way, and you record a video that is your own. Whatever comes out of that is up to the people that go in there. If everybody goes in there and says “The truth is: I love Donald Trump”, that would just apparently be—

**It would be okay in that environment!**

That’s what’s going on.

**[Laughs] When that screens at the Cranbrook [Art Museum], there’ll be some problems. But the whole truth, like you said, is this open door policy just to express yourself. You’re behind closed doors, so it gives you a way where privacy is invited.**

I will say that I recently did this thing for Kickstarter about [social issues], and they were looking for projects that were on Kickstarter to like chime in on something that people could sort of interact with. I mean, it’s kinda weird because I don’t want to put any sort of political speech, but it was a really glaring issue about water rights.

I really thought about that when we were traveling around a lot, like, this idea that access to clean drinking water is a challenge right now. There are places like North Dakota where they’re digging in and building camps to make sure that future generations have clean drinking water, and places like Flint where kids can’t take baths without having rashes because of what’s going down. It’s like taking things that people say and displaying that as an issue. Not necessarily saying that the booth has a political agenda, but I think the access to clean water is probably just something we should all have.





Afghanistan

**“But the idea that people may not be interested in what they have to say is crazy and revealing in some ways to a bigger problem in the world: that people don’t feel like they should ever be heard.”**

**And that brings me to this question: How many communities has the Truth Booth set foot in?**

We hit 36 cities and 32 states, which is the most we’ve ever done as far as tours have gone, like, by far. Once we got past like 10 cities, it was a wrap after that. Everything was just like, “Oh man, we are officially going well beyond any other tour I’ve ever been on!”

**That’s incredible! I know it’s probably causing you a lot of mental and physical fatigue, but is it socially rewarding?**

For me, it’s great to be able to speak about the country we live in a lot better. And that is probably one of the most rewarding things, because seeing and being in these places allows me to talk about it with—this will probably sound a little pompous—a little bit of authority now, I would think.

**I mean, people tend to live in the States for a bit of time to travel here and there, but their first goal is to get out of the States without even venturing into the country they live in. So that’s a good perspective, having an informed view of a place that you may not have thought visiting before. When you hit these places—and you don’t hit these places as a tourist—you’re here to provide an opportunity for people to express themselves.**

**This is kind of an uncommon thing to see a live, macro speech bubble in the middle of a park or wherever you are. What’s the community’s response? What’s kind of the average response you see when you’re there?**

It depends. One of the really cool things is going to a place like South Side Chicago and having people say, “Wait, you want to hear what I have to say?”, and you’re like, “Yeah, that’s why we’re here.” [Laughs] But the idea that people may not be interested in what they have to say is crazy and revealing in some ways to a bigger problem in the world: that people don’t feel like they should ever be heard. But then there are other times where we’ve been in places where people say, “Why would you ever do that? Why would you be here?”

**I guess it goes both ways. I was super psyched when I came there because I enjoy expressing myself, so I was like, “Yes! Another platform to do it!” It was also really uplifting to see you all there [as a part of] Elevate.**

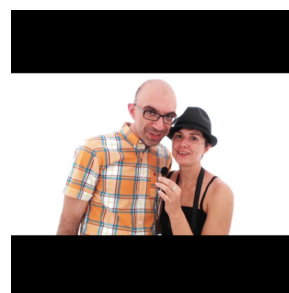
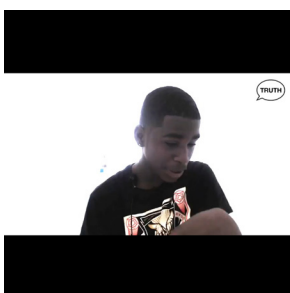
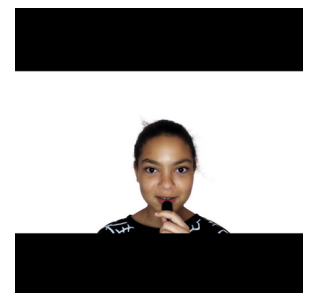
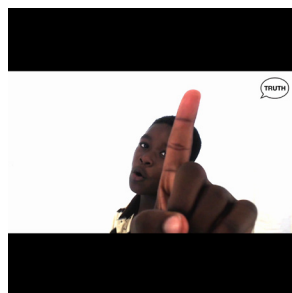
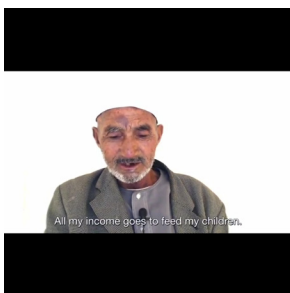
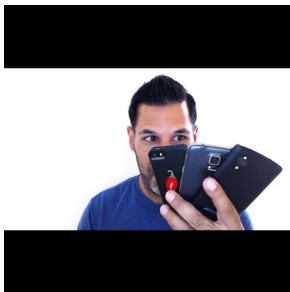
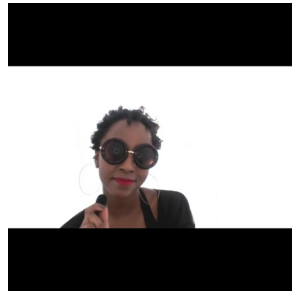
**I think Elevate is a really valuable art initiative that’s happening in the city. Atlanta’s in a really interesting spot right now; we have a burgeoning art and cultural scene that’s very DIY, but there’s not much funding that’s being streamlined from the state or city government. Yeah, they definitely have like a whole arts thing. It’s just that maybe they’re not really putting the money into the city itself.**

That's a good point, and the infrastructure of a city speaks volumes about the art and people who reside there. For example, when you visit the museums and galleries in New York, there's a completely different level of cutting-edge work that you're able to experience versus some of the galleries here [in Atlanta]. It's not bad quality work—it's still good quality—but it's not as controversial or abstract.

There's a good amount of limitations living in the South, since you get that stereotype of being a southern artist. When someone deems someone as "southern" or anything along those lines there's a backwards or slow mindset versus a northern mentality. If you're a Black artist, you might be stereotyped to only work in Black subject matter, so that's something that a lot of artists deal with here. I think it's important that Elevate is happening because we need more projects like this. We need more cutting-edge work that could give Atlanta some intensity, and that's what Time + Space along with other arts & culture organizations are looking to achieve.

To close out: What is your truth? And how has it shaped you along this journey?

[Chuckles] What is my truth? That's the number one question asked. It's so funny—I was just at the doctor's office and I told him what I've been doing, and he was just like, "What?! Alright, what's your truth?" [Laughs] But for me, my truth is evolving. It's ever-changing; who I am and what I am today may not be the same thing for what I do tomorrow, and that's something I am learning and had to come to grips with by doing this project. I think there are certain things that are constant for myself, but I think as a human being, I need to also be able to grow and learn, and know that what may be true for me today may not be true for me tomorrow.



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