

Maisie Skidmore, “Martine Syms, artist, on Andrea Lawlor’s *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl*”, *Another Magazine*, September 20, 2018, 120.

# AnOther Magazine

ANOTHER THING I WANTED TO TELL YOU ... 120



MARTINE  
SYMS,

artist,  
on ANDREA LAWLOR'S  
*Paul Takes the Form of a  
Mortal Girl*

"I recently read a book called *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl*, by Andrea Lawlor. It's an epic, but set in Nineties alternative communities from Iowa to San Francisco, with a brief detour via Chicago. A lot of the book is a commentary on the minutiae of subcultures. It's a mythic structure – Paul is this seducer who has the ability to switch genders, so Paul can become Polly. It's an insane and amazing book – it references queer literature and theory, but it's super-funny and sexy. In my work I'm using imagery as well as words, but I'm interested in that layering – of one image with a million different associations, all tied to a literary history – as a texture. I tend to take strategies from fiction – it's a helpful way of thinking about ideas that's not didactic or theoretical. I've got back into reading novels this year. I was pretty heavy on non-fiction, essays and theory, but I'm back, baby."

That Martine Syms is a prolific reader should come as no surprise. The Los Angeles-born 'conceptual entrepreneur' – a title she coined for herself, to many journalists' delight – synthesises internet culture with cultural theory to illuminating effect. Knitting together narratives and media – from graphic design, lectures and video to printed pieces and performance – she creates an endlessly refracted perspective through which to view the world. She also founded *Dominica*, a small press dedicated to examining blackness "as a topic, reference, marker and audience in visual culture", unpicking identity through essays, art projects and fiction, by herself and others. This autumn she opens exhibitions at Bridget Donahue in New York, Sadie Coles HQ in London, Graham Foundation in Chicago, and the Art Institute of Chicago.

WORDS MAISIE SKIDMORE

MARTINE IS WEARING A NYLON AND COTTON TENT JACKET BY CRAIG GREEN. COTTON T-SHIRT BY MARTINE ROSE. AND HER OWN TROUSERS AND EARRINGS

HAIR: PAWEŁ SOLIS AT ARTLIST PARIS USING ORIBE. MAKE-UP: ADRIEN PINAULT AT MANAGEMENT ARTISTS USING MAC. PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANT: CHARLOTTE KRIEGER. STYLING ASSISTANTS: REBECCA PERLMUTAR, CAMILA PAIVA AND GEORGINA CRAIG. MAKE-UP ASSISTANT: MARIE TRITSCH

Dylan Jones, “Martine Syms: Don’t be afraid to be narcissistic”, *GQ London*, September 9, 2018, <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/martine-syms-artist-interview-2018>.



# Martine Syms: Grand Calme review

Art **Sadie Coles Kingly St** Soho Until Saturday October 20 2018



Copyright Martine Syms, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London Photography: Robert Glowacki



Life is hard, work is exhausting and love is confusing. It's the same for all of us. If you're looking for art as some sort of escape from the ceaseless neurotic mundanities of your terrible life, Martine Syms's new show isn't it. But if you're ok with an artist perfectly and neatly reflecting all of that business, then boy are you in for a treat.

Coursing across the walls of the gallery is a 'threat map', the kind of thing that shows the vulnerabilities in a computer system. Except the system here is Syms herself, or at least some version of her brain.

One statement says 'Am I fat?', with arrows scurrying across to 'yes', 'no', 'I can't tell anymore' and 'I'M FIIINE'. Another reads 'Who's going to grab my booty?'; could it be 'some anon d?' or maybe 'some friendly d?'. There are sections about money, about race, about friends not texting you back, about football. The whole thing is essentially a flowchart of negative bullshit, of fears and worries, notes to self, compulsions and obsessions: the kinds of things that constantly sprint through all of our brains, condensed down into a series of programming triggers.

In the middle of the space, a digital version of Syms's face looms menacingly large. It's an AI that you can text and interact with. Digi-Syms texts you back, the face on the screen talks about the sex she had last night, how much work she's got to do, wonders if she can quit her day job yet. Like the rest of the show, it's the mean, negative side of existence laid bare.

The whole show ends up as a neatly succinct portrait of modern, connected living. The texts, the selfies, the self-doubt, the racism, the surveillance of our social media feeds: all the things we tuck away but that keep us ticking through our everyday lives. It's brilliantly horrible.

On the one hand, it's comforting to know that someone on the other side of the world has the same neuroses as you. But on the other, it's uncomfortably unnerving to realise how un-unique you are. Syms has puked all of her mental tics into her art, mapped them all out, and in the process mapped most of the rest of ours too. If you need reminding of just how nuts you are, this is the place to be.

@eddyfrankel

**BY: EDDY FRANKEL**

B. Ingrid Olson, “B. Ingrid Olson on Martine Syms”, *Art in America*, August 1, 2018,  
<https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/b-ingrid-olson-martine-syms/>.

# Art in America

MAGAZINE Aug 1, 2018

## B. Ingrid Olson on Martine Syms

by B. Ingrid Olson



*As part of the Annual Guide to Galleries, Museums and Artists (A.i.A.'s August issue), we preview the 2018-19 season of museum exhibitions worldwide. In addition to offering their own top picks, our editors asked select artists, curators, and other experts to identify the shows they are looking forward to. Here, B. Ingrid Olson talks about Martine Syms.*

Martine Syms: *Incense Sweaters & Ice*, 2017, video, 1 hour, 9 minutes.

“I saw Martine Syms’s feature-length video *Incense Sweaters & Ice* when it was first shown as part of an installation at the Museum of Modern Art in 2017. The work consists of interwoven footage: text messages interrupt naturalistic scenes featuring a young black woman named Girl as she departs from Los Angeles on a journey to Missouri and



Mississippi; selections of *Her 37th Year, an Index*, a semiautobiographical novella by Suzanne Scanlon, are read out loud; the young woman's great-aunt uses cue cards to perform a histrionic monologue about etiquette; and *Girl*, along with her friends, sings at a karaoke bar. Each segment explores the use of language as a command. In the installation, Syms encouraged viewers to move by having the video migrate across three screens positioned in a triangular column. As one screen went dark, another just out of sight came on. Viewers had to get up, if sitting, and walk partway around the space in order to see the next segment.

“In the MoMA installation, Syms employed an augmented reality app to further direct the viewing experience of photographic prints hanging on the walls around the monitors. Like Duchamp, who suggested providing flashlights to viewers at the 1938 International Surrealist Exhibition so they could illuminate artworks in a darkened room, Syms has created a system for individualized, highly orchestrated viewing. The app used facial recognition technology to identify faces on the prints and add another layer of images to them as they were seen on the viewer's phone screen—images taken from personal archives, social media, and reality TV. Syms's precisely designed exhibition implicated viewers, empowering them to make decisions, to move and be moved within a controlled and limited system.

“Syms has her first solo institutional show in Chicago this fall at the Graham Foundation, whose programming centers on the relationship between art and the built environment. The exhibition will feature *Incense Sweaters & Ice*, embedding it in a new installation spanning multiple floors of the foundation's 1902 Prairie-style mansion. I'm looking forward to watching the piece again, and to seeing how Syms negotiates, reconstructs, and controls the experience of her work in this multifaceted, formerly domestic building.”

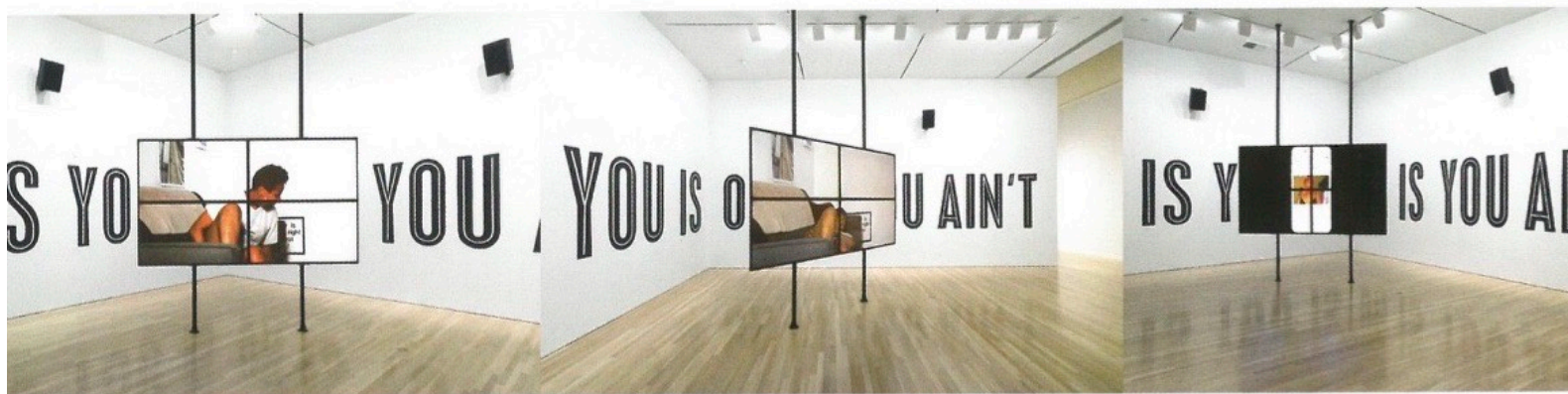
*“Martine Syms: Incense Sweaters & Ice,” Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, Chicago, Sept. 26, 2018–Jan. 12, 2018.*

B. INGRID OLSON is a Chicago-based artist. Her work is included in “Being: New Photography,” at the Museum of Modern Art in New York through Aug. 19, 2018, and “Lost Without Your Rhythm,” at the Aspen Art Museum, Nov. 16, 2018–Feb. 24, 2019.

Dylan Jones, "Martine Syms: Don't be afraid to be narcissistic", *GQ London*, September 9, 2018, <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/martine-syms-artist-interview-2018>.







'Made In LA, 2016: A, The, Though, Only' (2016); (opposite) Martine Syms in her LA studio, 2017



Sativa Football Club play every Sunday on a tiny five-a-side pitch on the fringes of Cypress Park, a largely Latino area of northeast LA. This is where I found the artist Martine Syms one hot Sunday in late April, as she went through her stretches on the touchline. She plays in midfield and has done since the mixed-sex Sativa team (a reference to the cannabis plant) came into being a few years ago. They're about to start competing in a local league, an inevitable formalisation of the team's seemingly innate competitiveness.

Syms herself is certainly competitive. Home-schooled by her parents, she realised from a relatively early age that she wanted to be an artist, that she needed to make things, to make a difference. Critics call her work mischievous and when you meet her you know why, as she has a precociousness and an intellect that is full-on. She's not arrogant, but she's already in your face.

More importantly, in the art world, she is hot – white-hot cool – and the name to drop in

private view circles right now. If you thought Jordan Wolfson was cool, then think again, as Martine Syms is cooler. Her work has been exhibited and screened extensively, in the Museum Of Modern Art in New York, the ICA and the Studio Museum in Harlem, and next month it's coming to London.

Born in 1988 in Los Angeles, she uses the city's obsession with image delivery as a way to frame her work, primarily using video and performance to examine representations of blackness. Her work confronts identity, voyeurism, feminism and heritage, with slogans, manifestos and advertising tropes, exploring the gulf between lived experience and its representation, and the way in which black identity is constantly being shaped through the experience of surveillance, and how technology mediates perceptions of race. For instance, the press release for one of her shows mentions one particular riff she had been inspired by: "Everybody wanna be a black woman but nobody wanna be a black woman," which was adapted from a Dave Chappelle sketch and contrasted wanting to "be" (as in appropriating) with "being" (as in living it, and all that entails). Another piece imagines what an average day might look like for a young black woman in Los Angeles in 2050. She uses all kinds of touch points, all kinds of prosthetic memories, and her work is genuinely multimedia – using photography, performance, billboards, triptychs, found material, pop ephemera, films, avatars and audio to create "imperfect tapestries of moments in other people's lives".

Disruption in the art world is not exactly a new seam. In fact, for the best part of a century it's actually been viewed with some suspicion, as contextualisation soon became just another discipline, like sculpture or film. Agitprop now rules supreme, though, as artists ride the wave

of woke, measuring their work by an algorithm that plays havoc with tradition. This is a world created by Barbara Kruger, by Jenny Holzer and by a million smartarses on Instagram. It's art that forces you to evaluate yourself before being allowed to appreciate it. But Syms does it better than most.

"This is a good time to be an artist, as there's a lot going on," she says. "It's kind of crazy. I guess it's important for me to be timely, to respond to my time. I think it's odd when people are ahistorical and not with their peer group. Their desire to be in another time seems escapist to me. I understand it, yeah, for sure. A lot of things suck right now. But then again, they always have. But I just reflect on my life and my experience and try to tie that into a larger framework. That's my goal. And I guess I like technology. I'm very forward-looking in a sense. I like speculation and I like computers. And I guess that's emblematic of my generation."

Syms first became interested in art through music, her generation's version of punk – The Germs, Dead Kennedys – and skate culture. As a teenager she watched *The Decline Of Western Civilization*, Penelope Spheeris' masterful 1981 documentary about the LA punk scene, discovered John Waters, read *Please Kill Me* and started fantasising about self-expression, about becoming someone who made things rather than just consumed them. She went to a pre-college programme at >>

**'Narcissism is very important. To get somewhere you have to be a little self-indulgent'**









'Project 106' (2017) at the Museum Of Modern Art, New York

>> CalArts called CSSSA (California State Summer School For The Arts), started making 'zines, worked in the film and video department and devoured movies. Between the ages of seven and 12 she was home-schooled, which began her sense of independence. "My parents were concerned it might make me insular, so they put me in a lot of extracurricular activities, such as soccer, art and ballet," she says. "They were religious, so they made me go to church all the time too."

She first started calling herself an artist when she attended CSSSA, where she started to get a sense of what an artist was and why she wanted to be one. She devoured the work of Richard Prince, William Eggleston and Diane Arbus, gradually getting the confidence to make work herself. "There's a lot of shame associated with being an artist," she says. "It's indulgent. You have to have a high sense of yourself. Like, I have these great ideas."

Ambition got the better of her and following stints at The School Of The Art Institute Of Chicago and Bard College, she worked for a production company, then an ad agency (where, bizarrely, she wrote a VMA speech for Kanye West), before realising that she actually wanted to get her work in front of people. "I was really interested in working on stuff that was big, that a million people are going to see."

One of things you notice about Syms is her complete lack of embarrassment about the possibility of being successful. She knows she's good and she wants the world to agree with her.

"Narcissism is very important to an artist," she says. "Very important. I say this to students a lot. Don't be afraid to be narcissistic. I think that's the thing. I'm not telling everybody to be a narcissist, but I'm saying, in order

## 'A lot of things suck. Then again, they always have. I try to tie my experience to a larger framework'

for you to get somewhere you might have to be a little bit self-indulgent – you can always reel it back in – but if you don't go all the way there, it's just not going to be that interesting, for you or whoever else is looking at it. So, yeah, I don't think you can even start to be an artist if you're not somewhat narcissistic anyway! You already have to struggle with it. You have to think highly of yourself, be somewhat grandiose, to think this idea is good enough that other people will look at it."

Even though her work seems to suggest the opposite, Syms doesn't believe that "art is a very effective protest when you're trying to change legislation, for example. I think it's important to visualise things, like any kind of social movement throughout history, but I'm not interested in my work being used that way. Obviously I have politics, but me making a video isn't going to change the law."

She does, however, think it's impossible to be a black artist these days and not be involved with the black experience. "How could you not be involved in the black experience if you're a black person?" she asks. "I don't think there's one way to talk about it, but I don't see how anyone could get outside of themselves in that way. How could you? Even for a white, male artist, how is he not being a white male? And that experience, and the privileges that come with that, how is that not a part of the work on some level? Things are changing and there are many more voices

these days, but then from an economics point of view, they get paid more for their shows."

Syms also believes that the term "post-black" is a misnomer, as is "postcolonialism". "Yeah, I just mean that both are still happening," she says. "I understand the desire for the 'post'. It's more of a marker. It's a way of theorising about a certain period of time. You know people talk about a post-Civil Rights, for example, but it's still ongoing. I think many people, all around the world, are still subjected to the remnants of colonialism."

It is perhaps no surprise that even though she is an LA artist, Syms feels as if she is in something of a vacuum. While there has been a huge migration of artists from New York to LA – particularly from Williamsburg and Red Hook – she doesn't feel that they have coalesced enough to form a scene and she feels atomised. But then while she says she is a highly social person, being alone has meant she has become highly focused.

For the time being, focusing is all she needs to do, because right now Martine Syms is where it's at. Her trickster quality is what's propelling her now, her art a pivot to greater glory, on or off the football pitch. **GQ**

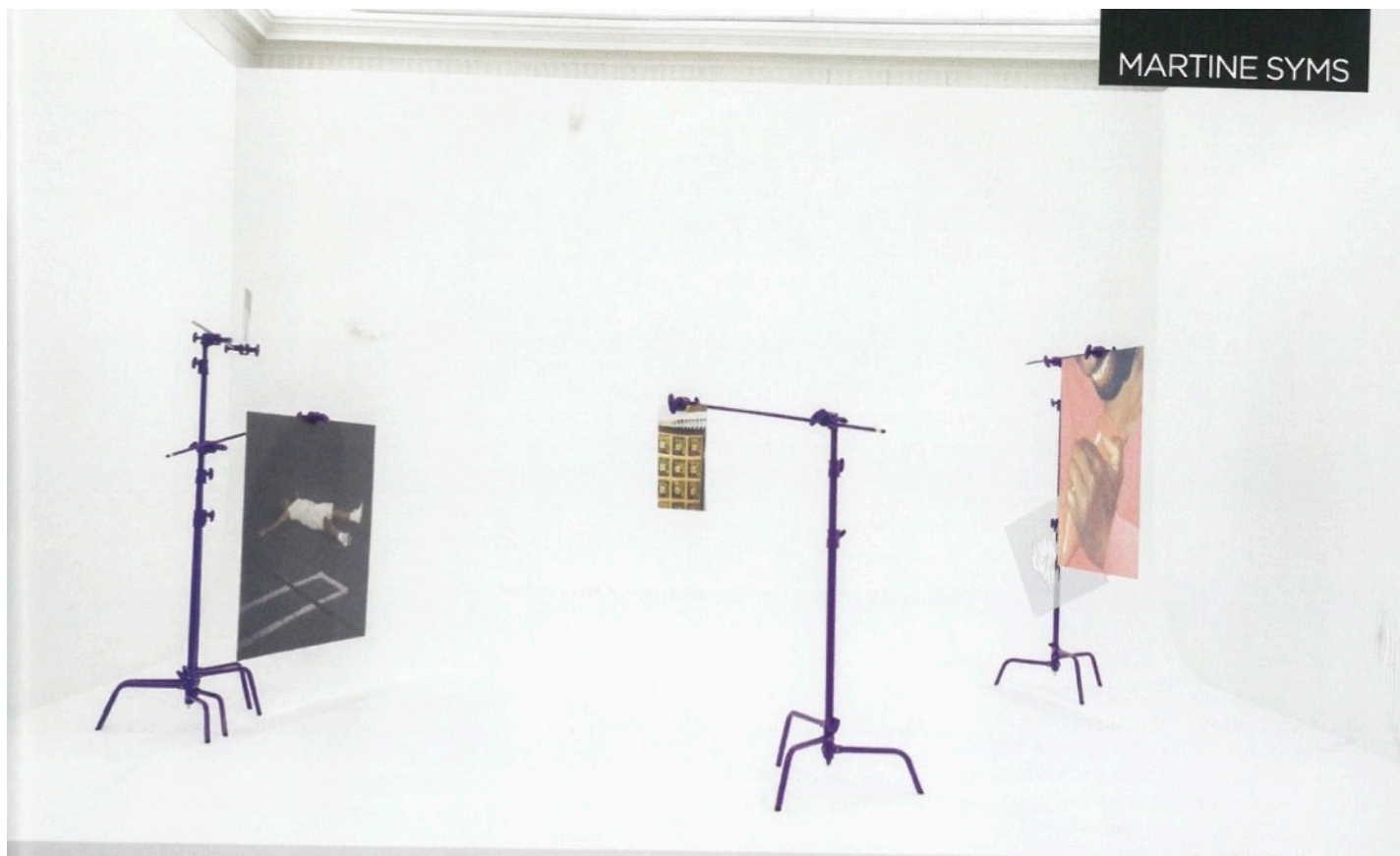
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MARTINE SYMS IS SHOWING FROM 6 SEPTEMBER – 20 OCTOBER AT SADIE COLES HQ, 62 KINGLY STREET, LONDON W1. [SADIECOLES.COM](http://SADIECOLES.COM)



MARTINE SYMS



'I want to work on stuff that's big, that a million people will see'



'Borrowed Lady' (2016-2017) at Audain Gallery, Vancouver; (above) 'Fact & Trouble' (2016) at the Institute Of Contemporary Arts, London



Doreen St. Félix, “How To Be A Successful Black Woman”, *The New Yorker*, July 8, 2017.



THE NEW YORKER

Persons of Interest

## How to Be a Successful Black Woman

*In a new MOMA show, the twenty-nine-year-old “conceptual entrepreneur” Martine Syms takes on lessons in etiquette.*

By Doreen St. Félix      July 8, 2017



*Syms looks to performance as both a medium and a subject, through work that conveys her facility for film, essay, graphic and Web design, and publishing.*

Illustration by Adam Ferriss / Photograph by Manfredi Gioacchini

In 1964, the record producer Berry Gordy recruited Maxine Powell, an elocution, dance, and comportment maven, to work with the new talent at his Detroit upstart Motown Records. Powell's charge was to turn Gordy's artists into entertainers "fit for kings and queens," as Powell liked to say. Many accounts, particularly her own, credit Powell with having taught Diana Ross and the Supremes to smile the sort of unthreatening smile that could, and eventually did, persuade the white owners of the Copacabana to have the trio perform at their Manhattan club. A few years ago, the Los Angeles-based artist Martine Syms found a clip in which Powell, then in her eighties, expounded on her idea that adopting the right style could help black artists overcome the race barrier. "I said to them, 'You know, you're not the greatest singers in the world,' " she said in her regal drawl. " 'We've always had great singers and dancers in our race. But the one thing that I'm going to offer you is class. I feel that class is going to turn the heads of kings and queens.' "

Syms was drawn to both the cadence and the content of what Powell was saying. "There is a way disciplinarians speak," she told me recently, her own voice trailing off. "It's a kind of seduction." Syms, who is twenty-nine, has described herself as a "conceptual entrepreneur," a title that conveys her facility for film, essay, graphic and Web design, and publishing, but which also captures the trickster energy that pulses through her work. Syms looks to performance as both a medium and a subject; she stalks film and television history for images of black women "performing the mundane." In 2015, noticing the ubiquity of gifs featuring physically expressive black women, she created "Notes on Gesture," a looping micro-portrait featuring a friend and collaborator, the Chicago artist Diamond Stingily, posed against a purple backdrop, rolling her eyes, patting her head, and twirling her fingers. Syms is sensitive to the subtle choreographies of black womanhood, especially in the professional realm—a negotiation that the artist, who has shown at museums including the Hammer, in Los Angeles; the New Museum, in New York City; and the I.C.A. in London; among others, knows well.

The clip of Powell appears about midway through "Misdirected Kiss," a somewhat improvised work that Syms debuted in 2015—part lecture, part performance, part blooming digital tableau—in which she sits at a desk, the screen of her laptop projected behind her, delivering a freely associative speech about modern representations of black women. As she talks, she drags clips and images onto the screen: an eight-by-ten head shot of Queen Latifah as Khadijah James, from the nineties working-girl sitcom "Living Single"; the supermodel turned entrepreneur Tyra Banks; the journalist Isabel Wilkerson; images from raucously stereotypical fin-de-siècle gag films and from Syms's own girlhood. At one point, Syms stands center stage, hands on hips, cycling through "power poses" as outlined in the popular TED Talk of the body-language evangelist Amy Cuddy. When I asked Syms whether the

lecture, which seems to blur sincerity and farce, was serious—if she believed, to any degree, in these edicts of respectability, unfashionable in our era of unfettered black self-determination—she grinned slowly. “It is and it isn’t,” she said.

I met Syms a few weeks ago at MoMA, where she was surveying the installation of her new exhibition, “Projects 106.” The show, which furthers the provocations of “Misdirected Kiss,” was partly inspired by the idea, outlined in Jacqueline Najuma Stewart’s history of black moviegoing, “Migrating to the Movies,” that the Great Migration was closely bound to cinematic innovation; the advent of cinema, Stewart argues, irreversibly affected how America’s black citizenry talked, walked, and worked, providing stereotypes to react against and to emulate. “Representation is a sort of surveillance,” Syms explained as she walked me through the show, her wide-leg pants grazing the floor. Syms is tall, high-cheekboned, and reluctantly glamorous; her hair was styled into a bob and her fingernails were tipped with purple.

For the exhibition, she had designed a circular mesh sculpture meant to represent Great Migration routes and also function as a seat for viewers but, when she’d arrived that morning, she’d found that the televisions had been screwed down in the wrong positions. Syms seemed upset, and then intrigued, as she imagined new ways to arrange the seating around the screens.

The room was painted a deep purple—“to produce the effect of people having to say ‘The Color Purple,’ ” Syms explained, referring to the film adaptation of Alice Walker’s Womanist text. Alternative spellings of the word “girl”—ones bringing to mind the many riotous ways that tongues curl around that word—were stencilled on the wall alongside a suite of collages of black film posters, organized by size. A surround-sound system blared out a house song that Syms had co-created with the London-based producer Shamos. “I wanted to give the museum a social life,” Syms said. “Ideally, you’ll hear it from the hallway.” She gestured to the emptiness of the atrium outside of the gallery. “I wanted to enlarge it all, to make it obnoxious.” Like much of Syms’s work, “Projects 106: Martine Syms” has a gloriously conspiratorial feel to it; walking around the room, I had the sensation that the artist had planted coded messages for me, and for other black female viewers—messages that others might walk right by.

The centerpiece of the exhibition, “Incense, Sweaters, and Ice,” is a seventy-minute feature with the bones of a romantic drama. “I wanted to map the Great Migration onto a woman’s life,” Syms said as I sat down to watch. In the film, *Girl*, played by the artist and choreographer Katherine Simóne Reynolds, falls for WB (White Boy), a role briefly made corporeal by Brent Freaney, Syms’s studiomate. Often, WB is either embodied by the camera, which makes him seem like a voyeur, or in text messages, which makes him seem like a jerk.



(“Am I ever going to see you or just text?” Girl messages him at one point.) Girl, a nurse, travels from Los Angeles to Mississippi for work—an inverse of the journey often travelled by hopeful black Americans in the twentieth century. She likes to dance—in front of mirrors at home, while rubbing oils into her skin, and at the Koreatown haunts near her cavernous apartment.

Girl never directly encounters Mrs. Queen Ester Bernetta White, the film’s third character, played by the jazz singer Fay Victor; instead, scenes in which Girl preens—teasing nylon stockings up her thigh, fitting a garish blonde wig over her plaits, sending nude selfies to WB—are intercut with ones in which Queen haughtily paces her purple habitat, or dispenses the gentle indoctrinations we first heard in “Misdirected Kiss.” “When you use a positive word, the corners of your lips go up, go up, go up, go up, and makes you smile,” she sings at one point.

The tonal distance between Girl and Queen gorgeously conjures a discrete American tradition—the way black elders guide their daughters with a mixture of coercion and grace, and the way daughters endure this guidance. As a girl growing up in California, Syms had received similar advice from her mother and her aunts. “Tonally, I disagree with a lot of it,” she said. “But I find that voice very humorous. I was interested in playing in that register. It’s all obviously a reaction to racism. There’s a certain amount of absurdity to the idea that having extremely crisp clothes is what’s going to get you through the door. And there’s a certain sad reality to it, too.” She paused. “If I walk out of the house with wrinkled pants on, I still feel . . .” Syms punctuated the thought with a shudder, mimicking a sound she calls “maternal shame.”

A few days before “Projects 106” opened, Syms had suggested that we meet at the midtown location of Tone House, a boutique gym owned by Alonzo Wilson, a black former lineman represented by Wilhelmina Models. She arrived in all black: a sports top, Nike leggings, and New Balance sneakers. Her eyebrows were beautifully and severely arched. We prepared in the locker area. “Black instructors understand that I want to be strong, not skinny. *Imposing*,” she said, planting her feet. In the class, two instructors threatened and encouraged the group to the exhortations of Gucci Mane; Syms seemed to complete the circuit without breaking into a sweat. Later, she explained that she had resumed exercising regularly since going through a depression triggered by consecutive deaths in her family and overworking. “I was looking at a lot of avant-garde dance, from Yvonne Rainer to Trisha Brown to Maxine Powell,” she said of the preparation she had done for the MoMA show. “But then I was just, like, ‘I’m not really moving right now. I’m just reading about it.’ ” We emerged into the afternoon and set out to the Ace Hotel for lunch.

A while ago, Syms's friend, the filmmaker Kahlil Joseph, gave her a photo he'd found at a flea market, of a little black girl in a puffy dress staring at an old-school monitor; Syms, who has in the past made work referencing Angela Landsberg's idea of "prosthetic memory," recognizes herself in it. As a child, Syms spent a lot of time watching sitcoms such as "Martin," "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air," and "Sister, Sister"—"shows that were targeted to my socioeconomic group," she said.

Syms has a way of talking about her own life as a sociologist might. The fifth of sixth children, she was raised in Altadena, an unincorporated Los Angeles suburb close to the mountains the science-fiction writer Octavia Butler used to walk. Syms's mother, the main inspiration behind the character of Girl, is a nurse; her father, a surveyor for Los Angeles County, inspired Syms to learn about redlining. "If you live west of Lake Street, then you're probably black. If you live east, then you're probably white," Syms said of her home town. Syms's parents encouraged their daughter's natural precociousness. She was homeschooled through ninth grade. At thirteen, she attended an etiquette camp led by Tyra Banks, an experience she describes, wryly, as "traumatic." As a teen-ager, Syms taught herself advanced coding and took extra classes at the Armory Center for the Arts, in Pasadena, studying avant-garde cinema. She began community college classes at fifteen, before transferring to the Art Institute of Chicago. Her thesis project at the Art Institute, which she completed before she graduated, at nineteen, was a video work created from a scene in the MTV social-experiment reality show "Real World: New York," in which the housemates Kevin and Becky argue over a racist slight. "Is it a documentation? Or is it a production?" Syms said of the show, which she obsessed over as a teen-ager. "Those questions are very much a part of the film I just finished."

In 2012, Syms moved back to Los Angeles with her boyfriend at the time, settling in Koreatown; soon after, she established the small independent press Dominica Publishing, which has since put out hybrid texts by the artists Hannah Black and Stingily, among others. She took a series of jobs in branding, which she thought of, vaguely, as artistic experiments, including a position as an interactive designer at the fashion retailer Nasty Gal, then still under the helm of "Girlboss" Sophia Amoruso. In 2014, Syms joined the creative agency Willo Perron & Associates; her final freelance assignment was to spend a day helping Kanye West write his MTV Michael Jackson Video Vanguard Award acceptance speech, for the 2015 V.M.A.s, in which he announced his bid for the 2020 Presidency. Syms told me that she and West had broken the ice by talking about the fashion executive Mickey Drexler and his promotion of "normcore" aesthetics, as well as video art. "He was, like, 'Who the fuck is this girl?'" she said. "He thought I was encyclopedic."

A few years ago, while making a documentary on black artists, Syms noticed that the presence of non-black crew members made her subjects behave differently. She now shoots



her films herself. For “Incense, Sweaters, and Ice,” Syms asked her mother, her aunts, and her grandmother if she could interview them about their emotional and geographical journeys in America. They were amused by the request. “They don’t value their stories,” Syms said, neutrally. She is averse to the idea that art about black lives must advance proprietary narratives of extraordinary struggle and resolution; instead, she sees art in the “boring” details of ordinary life. “That’s how I feel when I talk to my grandmother about sharecropping,” she said. “She’s not theorizing it. It’s not a story. I tried to stay true to that feeling.” Recently, people have been asking Syms if she might make a television show. “Unless I can get that Shonda package, I don’t want to fuck with it,” Syms said, referring to the network producer Shonda Rhimes, who is known for maintaining an impressive creative control.

As we finished lunch, Syms asked to see my phone, then downloaded an app called wydrn—an acronym for “what are you doing right now.” The app, which Syms created with her studiomate Freaney, uses facial-recognition technology to display video and still image over the art works from “Projects 106.” Syms produced a print from the exhibition—a collage of the poster for the film “Poetic Justice”—and told me to train my iPhone camera on it; the screen lit up with a gif of women neck-rolling, from the reality-television show “Basketball Wives,” and then with a photo of Syms as a girl at a Wiffle-ball tournament. Syms, wittily, and almost mystically, had hacked the modern process of looking at art—through cameras, more often than not, and also through the lens of association and memory. “It is an expanded cinema,” Syms said. “A cinema of affiliation.”

On her own phone, Syms proudly pulled up a video of the large apartment she moved into last October, shortly after ending a ten-year relationship and right before the filming for “Projects 106” began. It’s the first time she’s been able to afford living alone, she said; the apartment overlooks the Paramount lot and the Hollywood sign. She turned to me. “I’m on my single-woman shit,” she said, and then put on the deep voice of another of her fixations, the N.B.A. player Kevin Durant. “It’s all about you, Syms,” she said. “You’re the total package.”

Mitch Speed, “Martine Syms at MoMA”, *Mousse* #59 (Summer 2017), 168 - 169.

# MOUSSE

Text by Mitch Speed

The Museum of Modern Art  
11 West 53 Street, New York, U.S.A.  
Through July 16  
[moma.org](http://moma.org)



Martine Syms has been scoring a deep furrow across my brow. Her work is perplexing, and not only because it takes manifold forms, with conventional gallery shows joined by online artworks, films, books, and texts. More to the point, the enigma of her work emits from its layered attitudes, which keep a

viewer slipping through multiple intonations of voice: commercial, comedic, academic, and painstakingly scrupulous.

Overall, a friendliness underlies Syms’s output. While her art often uses a bold and brightly colored visual language, her rigorously

theoretical lectures and writing are bracketed by knowing smiles. A graphic designer by trade and a self-described “conceptual entrepreneur” by vocation, her work has been motivated by a need for self-determination—largely inspired by black-owned businesses—bolstered by the



seductive visuality of start-up culture. As a result, an unsettling blend of theory and self-capitalizing rhetoric has run through the language she has used to explain her efforts. A few years back, however, an “awareness of the problems” with that approach set in. Her work subsequently gained in emotive complexity, delivering un-essentialized provocations on the relationship between identity, America, and the irreducible condition being human.

These concerns have populated Syms’s work since her 2007 graduation from Chicago’s elite School of the Art Institute. *My Only Idol is Reality* (2007), for example, constituted a borrowed clip from MTV’s *The Real World*, in which two characters—a black man and a white woman—argued about social justice. Syms used tape decks to record and re-record the clip, until the protagonist’s identities became fogged. While the man rightly points out the woman’s obliviousness to white privilege, she in turn rightly points out his disregard for the struggles of women within patriarchy. As the scene progresses, tempers rise, and the two shout past one another. With confident economy of means, the piece became a kind of model for the way that time, technology, and cognitive dissonance conspire to condition our understanding of oppression and short-circuit solidarity. Meanwhile, the artificially-aged image reminds that the appropriation of social struggle by popular culture has been ongoing for years—MTV then, Pepsi ads now—with resolutions painfully elusive as ever.

Having begun her career hacking popular television, Syms in 2015 collaborated with music video director Khalil Joseph on the short film *Memory Palace*. Inspired by her own search through a shuttered family home, the film shows singer Alice Smith discovering a family photo album.

On May 27 2017, for MoMA PS1’s *Projects 106* series, Syms will premiere a film called *Incense Sweaters and Ice* (2017), as the centerpiece of her first solo museum show in the U.S. When I asked Syms whether she had taken any risks with this show, she indulged my somewhat naive question: “I made a motherfucking feature film, an augmented reality app, 12 new photographs, a big ass sculpture, and a massive wall painting... I took ALL THE RISKS.”

This jocular response announces her desire to un-couple art from ivory tower pretensions. In private, many artists would deploy similar expletives in describing their efforts. But not every artist would do so while providing quotes for publication. Notwithstanding the fact that *Incense Sweaters and Ice* will take place in a branch of New York’s most venerable Museum her language echoes the dismay she has expressed elsewhere, at the cloistering of art within elite institutions, and rarefied jargon.

With *Reading Trayvon Martin* (2012), she took to the Internet’s democratic space with conscience-throbbing effect. Against a stark white backdrop, the website [www.readingtrayvonmartin.com](http://www.readingtrayvonmartin.com) presented three floating motifs: a black hoodie, a bag of skittles, and a can of Arizona iced tea—the items that Martin had on his body, when killed. Syms here catches the viewer between peppy design and the crushing realization of what these motifs stand for. The work’s tertiary effect arrives via a list of links, backdropping the icons. Leading to articles about Martin’s killing, they invoke an artist and a person, parsing the mediation of murderous racism.

While PS1 describes Syms’s forthcoming film as a story wherein “three protagonists navigate the dramas of surveillance,” the artist is thinking less of security cameras than the individual’s relationship to the digitally mediated social field.

“Think of the suspense involved in those blinking dots you see after sending a missive...” she explained, “Or all of the anxiety involved in being left on ‘Read.’ I wanted to use the tension between private and public to drive the narrative of *Girl* [one of the film’s characters]. Even when she is alone she is aware of being watched...” It seems the film will echo the common paranoia that every move we make might bear consequence on our lives: maybe in five minutes, maybe in an hour, maybe tomorrow, maybe next year.

Although Syms’s exploration of the way we are “being watched whether through surveillance or sousveillance” throws back to French theory—specifically Foucault’s invocation of the Panopticon, in order to explain self-surveillance—a teaser for *Incense Sweaters and Ice* presages a difficult, pathos-laden comedy. Available on her Vimeo page, this preview finds an African-American woman sitting at a piano. Her purple outfit and the purple curtain behind her immediately link the scene to the Syms’s past works, wherein the color reappears as signature motif. While pounding out staccato notes, this pianist recites advice for repressing negative thoughts. “Practice substituting pleasant words for ugly words...” she implores. “When you use a positive word, the corners of your mouth go UP UP UP, and it makes you SMIIIIIIILE.”

There is sarcasm in this scene. But it is hardly glib. Here the critical complexities of Syms’s early work cohere within a fictional protagonist, strained between multiple, contradictory expressions: to be angry, to put on a happy face, to entertain self and other. The trailer could be a work in itself, drawing a constantly self-constructing audience into the discomfiting space between who we are, and who we think we’re meant to be.

“Museum of Modern Art - Projects 106: Martine Syms”, *The New Yorker*, June 26, 2017.



# THE NEW YORKER

ART MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

## Project 106: Martine Syms

In a purple-painted room, three monitors screen the up-and-coming L.A. conceptualist's first feature-length film, “Incense, Sweaters & Ice”—but not simultaneously. To follow the slow-paced, vérité action, you have to move from one screen to the next. The film's protagonist is an introspective young woman named Girl; her aunt is a regal motivational speaker who advocates personal empowerment through dignified comportment. Syms artfully demonstrates how these two very different personalities respond to the stereotyping and the surveillance of black women. Striking long shots of Girl putting on a blond wig in a motel bathroom, gazing at her phone in hot-pink hospital scrubs, and texting with her elusive love interest, WB (“white boy”), are intercut with her aunt's charismatic inducements to be positive. The spare installation—which also incorporates wall text, movie posters, and an app—is Syms's most ambitious and revealing work yet.



Carol Cooper, "Martine Syms's Interactive MoMA Installtion Explores The Tyranny of Screens", *The Village Voice*, June 14, 2017, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2017/06/14/martine-symss-interactive-moma-installation-explores-the-tyranny-of-screens/>

the village  
**VOICE**

# Martine Syms's Interactive MoMA Installation Explores The Tyranny Of Screens

by CAROL COOPER

JUNE 14, 2017



"Incense, Sweaters, and Ice" protagonist Girl texts a friend while hanging outside a job site.

After entering “Projects 106: Martine Syms” at MoMA, you might not know where to begin. Surrounded by walls adorned with collaged photographs, vintage movie posters, and cryptic graffiti sit a trio of outward-facing video screens; three wire benches encircle the triangle of screens at the center of the room. Smartphone-wielding visitors can take advantage of an augmented-reality app that was custom-designed by the artist to interact with the exhibit; those without such devices may find themselves wondering what the “phone zombies” next to them are up to. On the screens are episodic segments of *Incense, Sweaters, and Ice*, Syms’s feature-length piece about the impact of migration, work, and digital media on people’s sense of identity and community. The movie uses text-screen animations, video vérité, and stylized film footage to weave together issues of race, class, gender, and economics. It also prioritizes interactivity: A scene will appear on one screen only to end abruptly and move to another. The resulting circumambulation — like the random migrations of the room’s phone zombies — is simultaneously bizarre and exciting.

Born in Altadena, California, in 1988, Syms has made her name as a multimedia artist whose lectures, performance pieces, and other projects shrewdly interrogate the “information age” through a black feminist lens. Just before Memorial Day, Syms spoke with the Voice about the MoMA undertaking, her first solo showcase in an American museum.

### **How did you come up with the format?**

I wanted to reference Panorama. The first initial proposal I did [required] having a curved 360-degree screen, and I shot a lot of the project with a 360 camera. When I realized I wasn’t going to get the curved screen, I thought, How can I imply that? So, I did that with the seating, and [by] aligning the space so that there is this circle that keeps being reiterated. I am also influenced by the way the internet operates. For me, there are two key characteristics: One is the dynamism — it changes from one day to the next. And second is feedback. You click something and something happens. I try to use this in the way I make a work.

### **What do you want viewers to take away from this show?**

The main thing I want people to do is have a response. There’s a set of things I would like them to physically do: Watch the video, look at the photos, download the app. Just spend time with the work. Now as far as any specific message...all the things I’m thinking about are already happening in the culture. People walk around the other galleries [at MoMA] holding their phones. I’m interested in the idea of “expanded cinema,” and having people move through the space [and decide] whether to see these different interactions or just see the film. You can resist these guidelines, but even if you do that, it’s still a response.

### **It’s interesting you mention that because I was amused by the fact that, in order to view the film, you need to listen to audio prompts to know which screen to move to next.**

I was interested in this control that the screen has. I’ll speak for myself: If there is a TV behind me, I can’t help but look at it. There’s something troubling about that, but it’s also seductive. That’s part of what an image is. I have been using this term in describing the way I make films: *ambient cinema*. Originally I was thinking [about how] we are constantly being recorded, whether through state surveillance or “sousveillance,” where somebody may be taking a photo over there and you are in the background. You can think about that as an ongoing ambient-film project.

### **Being of the generation you are, and being political in your work, how do you reconcile the difference in perspectives between people born before ’88 and people born after ’88?**

Although the way I work is contemporary, I am so research-oriented [that] my work is really informed by history. So I’m always looking for [similarities]. I find parallels between older forms of cinema and digital Vines or GIFs.

### **And perhaps a greater context? Many people tend to be trapped by the perspective of their specific generation.**

I don’t feel that way. I love so many things from all periods. I used to have this project space in Chicago called Golden Age, and we called it that as a joke. Because if you call any time a “Golden Age,” there is always somebody else who will say, “What? That was a terrible time!”



**In *Incense, Sweaters, and Ice*, your main protagonist is a young black nurse called “Girl.” We follow her through many environments: public, private, online. What determined how you represented her point of view?**

I was thinking that she would always be split between public and private. I wanted her to be having two simultaneous experiences. When she’s in the hotel getting ready — that’s private. Then when she’s at the farmers’ market, it’s a public space. I wanted her moving through those extremes, and also [having] micro-interactions, like when she’s at her apartment and she’s being texted. I wanted to show different ways to behave, but also the continuity between [them] all.

**What comes to mind is “fragmented subjectivity.” But are we experiencing her fragmentation or our own?**

Although there is fragmentation, we also experience an extreme continuity. Digital technology is helping us create that. Describing it I think about two things: First, how when you have a text thread with someone, you can view the Details part of [that] conversation; and then, on the Details page, you can be flipping through all the photos you took over a given week. That’s what I wanted the film to feel like. [There’s this] narrative thread connecting it all.

**You chose to use nudity in this film. Why?**

I was more focused on [showing] Girl getting ready. Most of the time, when dealing with images, I want to show something I haven’t seen myself on film. She was moisturizing and doing her hair. Anybody doing makeup, hair, and moisturizing doesn’t do it with their clothes on.

**I was moved by a lot of the intersections in the film: between caregiving, single working women, wellness, family obligations, advice from elders, just the routine necessities of living. It’s emotionally fraught terrain for many, especially for black women.**

Absolutely. Much of my experience has been about ways to succeed in an obviously racist world. How does that change your movement? What does that mean? How are you supposed to speak? And I was thinking about how to use that formally, so that the audience might understand the historical framework of those movements.

## **Projects 106: Martine Syms**

*Museum of Modern Art*

*11 West 53rd Street*

*moma.org*

*Through July 16*

Alex Fialho, “500 Words: Martine Syms”, *Artforum*, May 22, 2017, <https://www.artforum.com/words/id=68509>.

ARTFORUM

## 500 WORDS

### Martine Syms

05.22.17



Martine Syms, *Incense Sweaters & Ice*, 2017, HD video, color, sound, 70 minutes.

*Martine Syms is a self-described “conceptual entrepreneur” based in Los Angeles. Her artistic practice spans publishing, performance, sculpture, photography, film, and more. Here Syms discusses the politics of migration, surveillance, and presentation as they appear in “Projects 106: Martine Syms,” her first solo museum exhibition in the US, which is organized by Jocelyn Miller and on view at the Museum of Modern Art in New York from May 27 through July 16, 2017.*



THE CENTERPIECE OF THIS SHOW is my first feature-length film, *Incense Sweaters & Ice*. The title refers to goods that were originally manufactured in Altadena, a neighborhood in northeast Los Angeles, which is where I'm from and also where one of the main characters, Girl, is from. She is a traveling nurse, and is basically making a reverse migration from the one that older women in her family made—she's going from Los Angeles to Saint Louis to Clarksdale, Mississippi—to do a contract job, while voices narrate their own migrations in the other direction.

The idea of the Great Migration and its psychogeographies is of considerable interest to me. For a lot of blacks, that migration, which often involved their families' migration into cities, changed the way that they presented and fashioned themselves. Two books have really informed my thinking: One is *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* by Jacqueline Stewart, in which she unpacks the parallel between the migration of blacks from the rural South to the urban North and their migration into the film industry, both behind and in front of the camera. They have similar time lines, which is roughly 1915 to 1970; by 1970 you start to see more of a black presence. The other is Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, which pairs narratives of individual migrations with contemporaneous developments in photography and motion pictures. I'm interested in how that's continued to happen, how your sense of self and the way you present yourself are forms of performance, and how this is tied to a knowledge of being seen or unseen.

For me, it's hard to consider the imaging of black people outside of film's ethnographic roots and its relationship to surveillance and cataloguing. Some of the earliest images of people of color were used for those purposes, and I see a lot of similarities between these earlier cinematic forms and present-day Web contexts, for instance. What if you were to assume that you're being constantly recorded, which in our contemporary moment of widespread surveillance is more or less true? You could say that there's just a giant film production happening at all times. What happens to you and your being or identity within that reality? How are we performing or acting in this context? There's a link between the production of self or one's identity and the mediated production of images, and I'm trying to tie them together both formally and conceptually. A primary reference for me is this idea I've been calling "ambient cinema": ambient in the sense of expanded and environmental, that it's always happening.

I wanted the exhibition to look like a set and to have elements from a film production. The space is monochromatic to hint at or conjure this, and there is a large wall painting with the word girl spelled different ways to convey inflection. There's also a suite of twelve photographs printed on film posters targeted toward African American audiences, creating a double exposure of seeing the original poster as well as the image. And there is an augmented-reality iOS app [WYD RN] built in collaboration with Brent David Freaney and designed specifically for the exhibition, which, when held over these images, triggers another interactive video that uses facial-recognition technology to play audio and video through the app. I'm interested in using augmented reality to further connect the project to digital realms and bring this kind of simultaneity into the exhibition space itself.

My insistence on making my exhibition spaces also resemble sites of production is connected to two things: First is the idea that I don't really think of things as ever being done, and so visually, I want it to be a space where something happens. Second, it connects to this idea of everyone's ability to record everything, so the exhibition is already a space of production. People are going to be taking pictures and recording videos in there, and through the iOS app itself they can also produce images. What does this feedback loop do to the viewing experience? People are making images at the same time that they're viewing them and feeling ambivalent about being in them; I'm invested in containing that ambivalence within the project itself and in my own imagemaking.

— As told to Alex Fialho

Franklin Sirmans, “Mixed Media”, *Cultured Magazine*, April/May 2017.

# CULTURED

## MIXED MEDIA

Ahead of her MoMA debut this summer, artist Martine Syms takes five to check in with friend and museum director Franklin Sirmans.

PORTRAIT BY MANFREDI GIOACCHINI

**The Los Angeles/Miami connection is** strong in Martine Syms and Franklin Sirmans. The latter is the new director of Perez Art Museum Miami, and was formerly a curator at LACMA, while Syms is an L.A.-based artist who has strong ties to Miami through a series of past commissions—one of which was curated by Sirmans—as well as a permanent home for her work at PAMM.

Here, the two reunite for *Cultured* to discuss publishing, thinking publicly and what gets the artist up in the morning.

**What made you want to write a manifesto?**

I was invited by Rhizome to write about *Most Days* an audio film I had recently finished and was preparing to release as a 12-inch on Mixed Media Recordings. I started off trying to write an essay but it didn't serve the intentions of the original piece. I wanted a form that embodied the ideas I was working through. I remembered the *Mundane Science Fiction Manifesto* by Geoff Ryman and the 2004 Class of Clarion West Writers Workshop and decide to take on their

language. Manifestos are about adopting a position. I liked the severity of the voice and I had fun writing my own version.

**Your own practice has questioned the idea of being an artist. What are the possibilities for art in the future?**

An exhibition is one format for sharing ideas. I'm not interested in working that way exclusively. I'm most excited about making art in the world! This doesn't just mean community art projects, for me it means making a television show, DJing on the radio, publishing books, teaching... I want to think in public.

**How did your first Miami project come about?**

I was invited by P. Scott Cunningham to create a piece for O, Miami, the annual poetry festival. I made an 800-foot poem inspired by a Sam Cooke concert that happened in Overtown [in Miami] in 1963. I spent a lot of time in the HistoryMiami Archives and The Black Archives, and got to interview the legendary songwriter Willie Clarke.

**Tell me about how *Dominica* got started?**

From 2007-2012, I co-directed a bookshop, project space and publishing imprint called *Golden Age*. When that ended I decided to continue the publishing arm. I renamed it *Dominica* and have released 14 titles since I started. Each book has had a very different process, but at the core it's a collaborative project where I'm in service to another artist. Up until recently I did everything—edit, design, printing, shipping, whatever.

**Your work has often been propelled by pop culture; who and what inspires you now?**

Vine (#rip), Tyra Banks, Serena Williams, Maxine Powell, Shonda Rhimes, *Girlfriends*, Katherine Simone Reynolds, Diamond Stingily, Hannah Black, Juliana Huxtable, the six books I'm currently reading... the list is endless.

**When did you know you wanted to be an artist?**

God, I don't know. I don't know if I want to be an artist. Sometimes it feels like a burden or a compulsion. I like to make shit. There are few things I enjoy more than making something from nothing. It's literally the only reason I get out of bed.





Martine Syms in her Los Angeles studio.



Ocula Conversations 2016 - 2017, "Martine Syms in Conversation with Kate BrettKelly-Chalmers in Auckland", [ocula.com](http://ocula.com), December 15, 2016, 304 - 315.

OCULA CONVERSATIONS 2016-2017

# Martine Syms

IN CONVERSATION WITH KATE BRETTKELLY-CHALMERS  
AUCKLAND, 15 DECEMBER 2016

Photo: Marco Braunschweiler.



## MARTINE SYMS

Martine Syms is a Los Angeles-based artist who is gaining critical attention for works that explore the relationship between black creative cultures and contemporary digital media. She opened her solo exhibition *Fact & Trouble* at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in April 2016, and is currently showing in group exhibitions across the globe, including *Public, Private, Secret* at the ICP Museum, New York (23 June 2016–8 January 2017); *Los Angeles—A Fiction* at Astrup Fearnley Museet, Oslo (22 September 2016–22 January 2017); and *Potentially Yours, The Coming Community* at Artspace, Auckland (10 November–22 December 2016). Ocula talked with Syms about her practice, focusing on her recent video *Notes on Gesture* (2015). The work was shown as part of the Artspace exhibition, and addresses the viral circulation of images of black women in television and online media.



## OCULA CONVERSATIONS 2016–2017

KBC I am interested in the way you refer to yourself as a 'conceptual entrepreneur' rather than 'artist'. How is this term a better fit for you?

MS After I left art school, I was much more interested in creating structures for myself and other artists to have a sustainable practice. I was really influenced by the way that people ran record labels or bookshops. When I first graduated, I was definitely not making the kind of art that my school was prioritising, so ['artist'] didn't feel like the right term to me. I actually started a bookshop as a project space right out of school. In one sense, it was just a business, but I'm interested in having different kinds of platforms for creative output.

KBC Can you tell me about your video work *Notes on Gesture*, currently showing at Artspace? Its title refers to Giorgio Agamben's 1992 essay of the same name that discusses 'gesture' as a central feature of cinema, but the work also draws on an earlier and much more obscure text on body language.

MS Yes, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century book by John Bulwer called *Chirologia: Or the Naturall Language of the Hand*. I found it when I was looking at different acting techniques. I was thinking about how much everyone is recorded in their everyday lives, and how this might relate to an actor cheating or blocking a scene, so I tried to make an index similar to that found in Bulwer's *Chirologia*. The Bulwer text relates to gestures in Shakespearean theatre and I noticed similarities between these and emojis. Some of the symbols are exactly the same—like the 'prayer hands' and the 'raised hands' emojis. When I was working with the actor in this video, I was thinking about how we learn the way that we move in life and what influences these things, from pop culture to

family references. There is this interesting relationship between 'authentic' versus 'performed' movement.

KBC And these gestures are looped in *Notes on Gesture* so that they appear like repetitive GIFs.

MS I'm interested in GIFs or Vines because of the way they circulate the behaviours of black people right now. I am sad about Vine being shut down, because it was such a resource and source of inspiration for me. It was really amazing seeing these teenagers making artwork with very limited means—writing and telling stories with such proficiency and economy. I am most interested in how they're choosing to represent themselves and narrativise their experiences. There are certain cinematography styles that are pioneered to do that and then these are circulated widely online and re-incorporated back into bigger film-production models. This cycle is really interesting. Once it's in a big movie, another teen sees it, picks it up and then it morphs again. The problem for me might be that when this influential style gets copied, it is not really thought of as being part of black aesthetics or a black tradition.

KBC Does this relate to your interest in Afrofuturism? You recently made the documentary piece *The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto* (2015), which looks at how this artistic or aesthetic movement emerged in the 1970s. This included conversations with contemporary artists who are similarly interested in futuristically 'reimagining' black experiences. What is your own relationship to the movement?

MS I wouldn't call myself an 'Afrofuturist', as other artists do, but my methodology is tied to Afrofuturism in terms of taking things



## MARTINE SYMS

from the past or using technology to fill in information that's not available in the official archive. I use speculation as a technique to imagine what could happen. Even my use of the term 'entrepreneur' is about speculating with value—about asserting a new value, or different ideas around what could be valued.

The Artspace work [*Notes on Gesture*] is concerned with the image of black women and how these images have acquired greater value through their circulation in the media as GIFs and on American TV shows. While I was making this piece, all the September issues of [the major Western fashion and lifestyle] magazines happened to have black women on their covers. This was the first time that these magazines had simultaneously promoted black women on their covers and there were a whole lot of news stories patting each other on the back for having done this. People were making a bigger deal of it than I thought it deserved. I started thinking a lot about what cultural circumstances had changed to the point where these white magazines were interested in featuring black women—what was it about them that became valuable in the course of a year?

**KBC** The colour purple is really prominent in your work. Can you talk about how it functions?

**MS** Yes, purple is a frequent colour motif for me. Initially, I started using it as shorthand for thinking about the black feminist tradition. The phrase 'the colour purple' obviously references the book [by Alice Walker], but also the Steven Spielberg movie. I was particularly interested in the way Spielberg benefited the most from that movie—something that was an important point of investigation for me. I used to use purple like an Yves Klein blue, but now I realise that it functions more like a 'white'. I use it as a

kind of baseline, like the way white is supposed to be a neutral or 'non-colour'.

**KBC** This baseline purple is both the 'green screen' for the video *Notes on Gesture* but also the colour of the walls in its Artspace installation. The work *Lessons* (2014) in your recent ICA exhibition also established a similar spatial dialogue between a video screen installed in the middle of the gallery and the wall behind it. This spatial dynamic actually reminds me of high-end fashion or so-called 'concept' stores. Is this something that interests you?

**MS** Commercial aesthetics that use glass and coloured light; those kinds of presentation methods are definitely an influence, for sure. I'm also concerned with how to make the video installation more sculptural and architectural. The Artspace installation forms a circular space that you [the viewer] are positioned within. The four-channel audio also works with this—it should sound different depending on where you're standing within that space. This also involves film narratives, including how a story unfolds spatially while still being committed to a two-dimensional flat screen.

**KBC** I can't end this interview without asking you about the recent election of Donald Trump. How has your own art community responded to Trump's rise to power in the US?

**MS** I was talking to people a lot in the week after he was elected who were saying, 'I didn't realise things were this bad' and 'I've never felt this hated'. While I totally understand that those are valid feelings, it was not the first time I had felt hated. It was not the first time I had felt unwanted somewhere. In many ways, it was confirmation of a lot of things I had been feeling already.

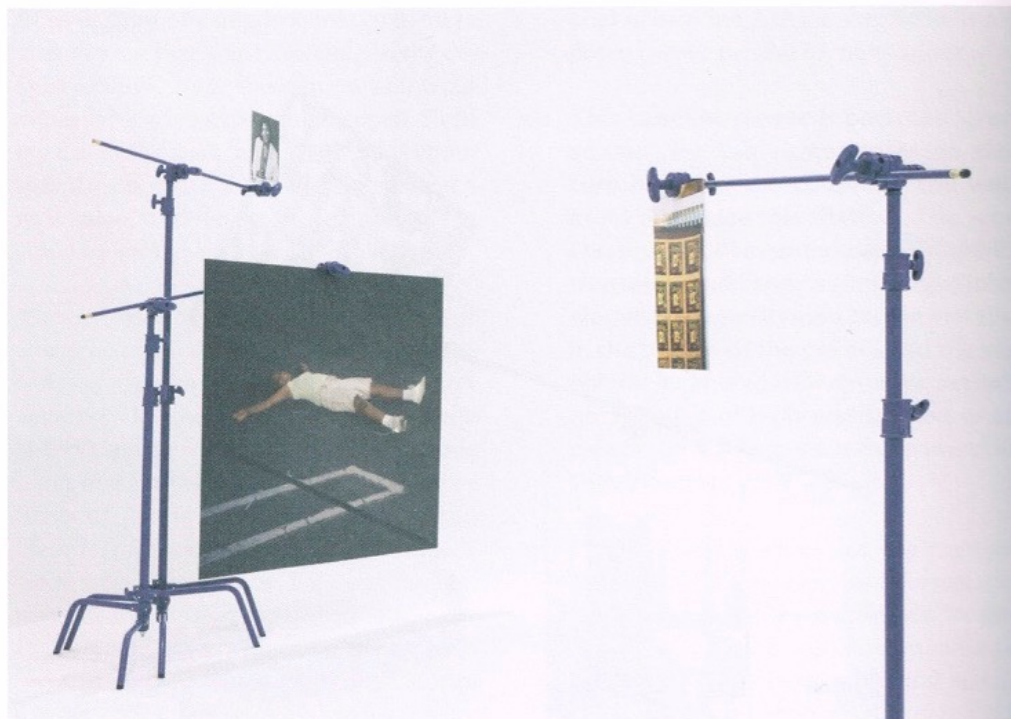


OCULA CONVERSATIONS 2016-2017



This page and previous: Installation view: Martine Syms, *Fact & Trouble*, Institute of Contemporary Arts London (ICA), London (20 April-19 June, 2016). Photo: Mark Blower.

## MARTINE SYMS



Installation view: Martine Syms, *Fact & Trouble*, Institute of Contemporary Arts London (ICA), London (20 April–19 June, 2016).  
Photo: Mark Blower.

## OCULA CONVERSATIONS 2016-2017

There has been this Twitter conversation about how most people learnt about the history of Japanese internment in the US through the memoir *Farewell to Manzanar* [by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston] in high-school English class. So I've been thinking about how literature and art do this heavy lifting, historically and politically. I find that not hopeful—I can't call it 'hope'—but something I feel compelled to do.

My hope is that [Trump's election] actually radicalises people and that art returns to being a place of non-normative ideas. Many art collectors and people on the boards of museums are Trump supporters. For the past decade or so, the art world has felt increasingly conservative, racist, homophobic and misogynistic, in my professional experience. There are a lot of affirming spaces that I feel excited to be a part of, but then there are institutional spaces that I don't feel that way about. So, I hope that this might encourage people not to be so concerned with the institutional 'stamp', because it can be a really hostile space.



Jocelyn Miller, "Martine Syms: One Woman Show", *Osmos Magazine*, Winter 2017, Issue 11, 41-43.

**OSMOS**  
MAGAZINE

MARTINE SYMS SAMPLE SIZE

# MARTINE SYMS ONE WOMAN SHOW

BY JOCELYN MILLER

The newly opened National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC)—affectionately dubbed the "Blacksonian" by *The New York Times*—takes on the formidable charge to analyze and present to diverse audiences essential qualities distinguishing black culture in America. Between earnest explications of door-knocker hoop earrings and the fashion brand FUBU looms a striking display dedicated to the importance of movement in black culture. It's a courageous bit of exposition, attempting to analyze the ongoing in real time. "Gestures of Solidarity" are embodied in Michelle and Barack Obama's famous fist bump and the "dap" greeting that black G. I.'s deployed in Vietnam developed to convey mutual care. "Gestures of Dismissal" finds an icon in Real Housewife of Atlanta Nene Leakes as she fixes a cast mate with a disdainful glare. "Gestures of Defiance and Protest" are demonstrated by Tommie Smith and John Carlos's Black Power salute at the 1968 Olympics. The institutional text concludes that "the body is used to carry important messages—in a complex and powerful language."

Artist Martine Syms invests in readings of these languages and their grammars, what she terms "Black Vernacular," making art as means to "think in public." Her multimedia installations, not unlike museums, are knowledge orchestrations. *Notes on Gesture* (2015), the focal point of her show at Bridget Donahue gallery, is a kind of glossary of black gestures. Inspired by English natural philosopher John Bulwer's 1644 text *Chirologia, or the Natural Language of the Hand*, and named for Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's essay on the politics of gesture in cinema, the video isolates bodily action into linguistic units. Collaborator Diamond Stingily's hands and upper body deliver a series of micro-performances against a purple backdrop: she flips her hair, claps, points a reproaching finger, cautioning "you need to check yourself!" as if to place the responsibility that comes with the often political act of reading squarely on the viewer. Syms loops these, using the glitchy disruption of serial repetition to accumulate nuance, invoking the logic of short-form media like GIFs, Vines, and YouTube reaction videos to focus attention on the signifying power of even the slightest shrug or brow furrow.

Stakes are raised when we consider just how frequently bodies are committed to screen, whether via smartphones, surveillance cameras, or even emoji hand signs acting as surrogates for physical presence, all of which retain potent affect irrespective of their mediation or any actual, indexed body. Syms' installed spaces never let viewers forget this; production equipment evergreens—C-stands, bounce cards, gaff tape blocking marks, moveable backdrops—are

smartly assembled to imply future or past image-making, fixing the viewer in a present of concurrent production and presentation. Syms' background in design is evident in her cohesive aesthetic atmospheres, always meticulously on-message. Rich purples appear throughout her work, website, installations, and publications, a signature she attributes to her fascination with Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and in particular its Hollywood film adaptation, produced by Oprah Winfrey and directed by Steven Spielberg (who could add to his resume mainstreaming a black radical feminist history). Walker's purple stands for the beauty and pleasure in lived experience; Syms cites another purple as well, that of independent filmmaker Julie Dash's 1991 masterwork *Daughters of the Dust*, whose matriarch is a physical trace of history, with hands permanently stained purple by the indigo crops and dye she processed as a slave.

Syms often cites cultural historian Alison Landsberg's argument for a *Prosthetic Memory*, where "technologies of mass culture make it possible for anyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender to share collective memories—to assimilate as personal experience historical events through which they themselves did not live." This is part of Syms' provocation, testing the limits of cinema and performance. She asks us, is there really a difference between being and acting? If we can adopt and incorporate anything into ourselves, can't we also expel and disown anything, exerting perceptual control (and the power this implies) over the range of our publically distributed selves?

In her performance *Misdirected Kiss* (2016), she explores these limits, presenting in front of an enlarged, projected computer desktop. Dragging and dropping her way through a visual essay, she builds a portrait of herself through the media she consumes. Syms' entertaining, enlightening, and specious narrative is filled with personality, autobiography, and only partial facts (spinning tales from what her fellow artist Steffani Jemison has dubbed "weave memory"), forcing us to consider the woman behind this show, and how she's presented herself to us.

It's easy to incorporate Syms' practice into the all-too-small canon of visible black women artists that have preceded her, and make assumptions about the way she works, the concerns that are top of mind, and the audiences to which her work speaks. Her *Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto* displays impatience with certain aspects of black cultural thought, like Afrofuturism, asserting that "the connection between Middle Passage and space travel is tenuous at best," and cautioning that "this dream of utopia can encourage us to forget that outer space will not save us from injustice, and that cyberspace was prefigured upon



MARTINE SYMS **SAMPLE SIZE**

*Vertical Horizontal Extended, Vertical Elevated Oblique, A Thread Or Line That Holds Things Together, 2015*

a master/slave relationship.” Syms notes “I’m regularly asked to dissect my art practice in terms of race, and I have to find and fix the color line, no matter how ambiguous or ridiculous its parameters may seem. But blackness is a discourse, and rather than say what it is or ain’t, I think about how blackness and other identities are constructed. They’re abstractions that are made concrete by social, economic, and legislative phenomena.”

Still, with her deliberate focus on aesthetics of blackness, and in particular black femininity, language about the racialized aspects of her art becomes careful, deferred, non-specific, problematic, contested, halted. Her work joins a larger conversation about how technology mediates perceptions of race, where seamless surfaces and neutered languages insist on a dispassionate, universal fit. But incidents like a 2009 viral video documenting the failure of Hewlett Packard’s motion-tracking webcam to recognize black faces as compared to white ones makes us painfully aware of the literal blind spots inbuilt to technologies. The medium of film itself has been compromised for the majority of filmic and photographic history, unable to depict contours and details of darker skin tones. Godard famously refused to shoot on Kodachrome, citing the medium itself as “racist”; it wasn’t until the 1990 release of Kodak’s Gold Max film (marketed with the tagline “True Colors”) that inherent biases in the chemical composition and development of consumer-grade color film even attempted correction. The use of contemporary imaging technology is critical to Syms’ play with identity; in asking “what does it mean for a black woman to make minimal, masculine net art?” she highlights the deficient assumptions that can accompany artistic mediums and traditions.

Syms’ self-styling as “conceptual entrepreneur” complicates her practice, frustrating those who would label her. She starts-up entities through which she can champion ideas and generate value, both capital and ideological. These entities together form a productive distribution network for her own practice, alongside that of her peers. From 2007 to 2011, she co-ran art space Golden Age to promote artists and art-making in an “economy that was not dependent on extreme wealth.” Out of that came her publishing imprint Dominica, “dedicated to exploring blackness as a topic, reference, marker and audience in visual culture.”

The overarching clarity of Syms’ message, which is almost in spite of the wide range of media she engages, owes to an artistic strategy most akin to institution building. Institutions haven’t always existed for the work Syms is interested in doing and making, so she’s built her own. This spring, Syms brings her institutions to MoMA in the artist’s first solo museum exhibition in the US, an opportunity for a very different kind of institutional conversation. For the occasion, she will debut her first feature-length film, a key institution of cinema, in a gallery setting. Viewers will be able to submit themselves to parsing Syms’ directory of the undefined but universally understood, made visible through her rigorous intercepting, modeling, and commingling of popular forms alongside their historical antecedents in the service of expanded, nonlinear thinking.

Jennifer Kabat, “2016 Highlights: Jennifer Kabat”, *Frieze*, December 9, 2016, <https://frieze.com/article/2016-highlights-jennifer-kabat>.

# frieze

FEATURE - 09 DEC 2016

## 2016 Highlights: Jennifer Kabat

A year of protest, power and people, from L.A. Kauffman to Kerry James Marshall

BY JENNIFER KABAT

One day. Before and after. In the UK that day came in June; in the US, November. I don't live in New York City, but a place that's now a demographic: white rural America. On election day, I voted in a sweater from the 1980s that is connected to the Greenham Common women's encampment. Emblazoned with a labrys, the double-headed axe of lesbian power, the garment was part of 'Congratulations & Celebrations', a performance-for-one/touring exhibition by painter Ellen Lesperance. Revisiting women's protest and Greenham Common in her work, she knitted a jumper she'd seen in photos of the camp, and for 'Congratulations & Celebrations' earlier this year she mailed the sweater to people across the US, collecting the images on Instagram.

I cast my ballot thinking of my mom, who was born not long after women got the right to vote, but didn't get to vote for the first woman president. I was joyous, and then I woke up. I wore the sweater again two days later while I cried in front of my students and showed slides of what the women had done at Greenham Common. Lesperance's sweater linked me to those actions, and to all those on Instagram who had worn her work as they put on the hijab, got their first passport, breastfed their babies, began transitioning from female to male.

Protest is also the subject of L.A. Kauffman's generous history, *Direct Action: Protest and the Reinvention of American Radicalism*, which will be published by Verso early next year. Starting with the ennui of the late Vietnam-era, she examines how the US left has reformed over and over, breaking down, building up and, eventually, with Black Lives Matter, transcending some of the white bro behaviour that's hampered protest movements. Reading the book after the election, I was cheered by Kauffman's affirmation that, in reality, the left has been fuelled by women, often queer women, often queer women of colour, putting themselves on the line.

Women and bodies and putting them on the line were present in Colleen Asper and Marika Kandelaki's alphabet of absence, *Dictionary of the Hole* (2012-16), included in 'Shifters' at New York's Art in General this spring. Inflected with



bitter humour, the on-going project involves a physical font, 26 letters, formed of the artists' bodies. Originating from the pair's shared experiences of sexism during Occupy, the alphabet is used to spell out stories and synonyms for 'hole'.

There were also lines and bodies in Austria-born artist Ulrike Müller's show at Callicoon Fine Arts, 'And Then Some'. Müller recast the gallery space by painting a greige diagonal across the wall, and hanging her sly, subtly anthropomorphic abstractions over the top. The body, the viewer's body, my body, experienced the reconfigured space in relation to her work and those often-comic assertions of bodies.



*Martine Syms, 'Fact & Trouble', 2016, exhibition view, Institute of Contemporary Art, London. Photograph: Mark Blower*

I actually had to move my body to watch Martine Syms's Lessons I-LXIII (2014-16) at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. The film comprises 30-second ad breaks for different aspects of African-American identity, cobbled from home videos, YouTube, talk shows and computer games. The spots flipped from one side of an elevated monitor to the other almost arbitrarily, and the audience – an often-white audience – had to move accordingly, circling the room. The gesture was dry and funny, an action that seemed to literalize the notion of being shaped, but it also had an air of physical comedy, something along the lines of Laurel and Hardy.

In books, dreams of possibility came with Dan Fox's Pretentiousness: Why It Matters (Fitzcarraldo Editions). An editor at frieze, I include him apologetically, but his idea that trying on new identities allows us to experience a broader world is apt, considering our newly elected bully-in-chief, intent on hewing to the most unimaginative worldviews possible. Chris Jennings's Paradise Now (Random House) looks at America as a land of utopian possibility just after another populist, Andrew Jackson, reshaped the electorate during his eight year presidential reign. In the 1840s, in the wake of a recession, utopian communities sprang up across the country's new frontiers, embracing equality, collectivity, shared ownership, women's rights, abolition... I live in upstate New York, a place that once spurred many such communities but is now seen as rural, Republican, regressive, and I look to Jennings's history with the hopes of what could happen here.

Just after the election, protesters massed before Trump Tower, and a couple of days later I stood in front of an abstracted balcony at Simon Preston Gallery. Part of Terence Gower's show, the balcony was constructed in 1:1 scale, and was based on the balcony of the US embassy in Cuba. On the wall were collages of protesters intercut with images of the embassy's design development when the building was meant to epitomize America's might via modernism. Castro subverted that message with protests after the revolution. Standing there made clear the potential architecture has to be a backdrop not just for state power, but also for protesting it (and tyrants-in-waiting).

That same week, my Instagram feed filled with photos of Kerry James Marshall's work. People posted details of his Souvenir II (1997) celebrating the Civil Rights movement. There was also Bang, from 1994, depicting three African-American children wave the flag on Independence Day. Below them, a banner reads: 'We are one'. If only it could be true. Still, his retrospective 'Mastry' at the Met Breuer fills me with hope that this moment is a blip in history, that we are bigger, more generous and broader than this election. Until then, it's time to stand up and protest.

Emily Spivack, “The Phrase One Artist Lives (And Works) By”, *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, December 6, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/06/t-magazine/art/martine-syms-artist-poster-phrase.html>



## The Phrase One Artist Lives (and Works) By

### The Story of a Thing

As told to EMILY SPIVACK DEC. 6, 2016

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*In this series for T, the writer and author of “Worn Stories,” Emily Spivack, interviews creative types about their most prized possessions.*



*For 10 years, the artist Martine Syms has kept a poster in her living room that says “Quality is doing it right the first time!” Below, she explains how the saying has influenced her work.*

My friend found this poster at a thrift store and gave it to me in 2006 when we were both living in Chicago. At the time, I was into self-help, especially the language of self-help and the messages. I still am, but back then I was even more into short-form aphorisms and that style of writing. I was always reading self-help books but was super self-aware about how seriously to take what I was reading.

“Quality is doing it right the first time!” sounded like one of those self-help phrases I’d been reading. But it was also part of my ethos, an attitude. I say the phrase all the time because I see it all the time — 10 inches above the ground and to the left of my TV — and I’m reminded that quality is doing something right the first time.

The word “right” is where it gets confusing. When I’m working on something, even when I don’t know exactly where it’s going, I have a sense of what I’d like to make. So maybe doing things right is following that sense even when I stop trusting myself. The rightness is in the process, even if it doesn’t match up with my plans.



I’m interested in the economy of words and forms: jokes, aphorisms, copywriting, advertising, that way of writing when meaning has to be squeezed into as few words as possible. A folksy, vernacular way that ideas spread. It’s a cultural thing, too, because if you look at aphorisms in different cultures, they’re embedded with the thinking and ideas that are important to that culture, that local context.

I especially think there’s something representing Chicago in the phrase, “Quality is doing it right the first time!” that’s very different from California or New York. It’s an industrial city with a history of labor struggles, and the idea of working with efficiency is wrapped up in that. There’s also this pride about doing something well and assurance that there is a right way. I’m generalizing, obviously, but I live in Los Angeles now and Chicago feels much more like a place where there’s a right way to do things and a wrong way to do things. You see that attitude even among artists — to put your head down and work, finish things, get it done. I read a Bill Murray interview, I think it was in Esquire, and he talks about this Chicago attitude. He says that in Chicago, you work on something together and then become friends, but people won’t become friends first — you can only be friends if the thing you’re working on comes out okay.

Martine Syms  
Photo credit: Marco Braunschweiler

It’s a very Chicago way that I agree with, even if it isn’t always reflective of who I am because I don’t feel like I finish anything. When a piece of mine is “finished,” I can still go back to it and rework it. I had a studio visitor ask me when a piece was complete and afterward, I realized I was kind of annoyed by the question. I wrote down to myself, “Nothing’s ever finished” as an operating value. It aligns with the idea of rightness — even in art the very question of completeness is driven by the market. When it’s “finished,” it can be sold, which is the main reason I’m being asked that. Because otherwise, what difference does it make?

### **Correction: December 8, 2016**

Because of a transcription error, an earlier version of this article rendered incorrectly Martine Syms’s comments about a quotation on a poster. She correctly noted that the poster says “quality is doing it right the first time.” She did not say “quality is doing things right the first time..”



Amanda Hunt, “Martine Syms”, *Aperture Magazine* #225, Winter 2016, 132-137.

# aperture



## MARTINE SYMS

Amanda Hunt

Another week, another video depicting the execution of a black man at the hands of a police officer goes viral. Another black man rendered absent: Walter Scott, Eric Garner, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile...when do I stop? And what of the black women who are prematurely disappeared? It is with this horrific backdrop of continued abuse of power - which has resulted in 559 deaths at the hands of U.S. law enforcement in 2016 alone (as of July 8), only a fraction of which have actually been visualized - that I can begin to talk about the positive power of Martine Syms's art, feminism, and photographic presentation of black women, black life, black power.

Syms's work, foremost, is a conflation of image and text - both are primary to her practice. For a number of years Syms was the director of Golden Age, a Chicago-based project space focused on printed matter. She later founded Dominica Publishing, an imprint for artists that continues today. This fundamental relationship to an engagement with language connects all of her endeavors. As with her writing, Syms's development of a visual aesthetic references the structures of cinema and television. The artist states that she is creating a relationship

between image and text in order to produce a resultant “third meaning”. Now based in Los Angeles, Syms is closer to the Hollywood apparatus; this proximity is evidenced in her art, almost having become a character itself. But the most constant character of all is that of a black, female protagonist.

“Vertical Elevated Oblique” (2015), Syms’s first solo exhibition in New York, at Bridget Donahue, offered an overtly technical installation comprising video, photographs, and staged objects, as well as a space for books from Dominica Publishing. For “Notes on Gesture” (2015), the featured video, Syms employed a female, black actor to enact gestures readily associated with black women and blackness. Interspersed with shocks of text (“DON’T JUDGE”; “WHEN I AIN’T ABOUT THE MONEY”), “Notes on Gesture” is an exercise in nonverbal expression. The video essentializes the essentializing: black women as sassy, finger-snapping, mm-hmming folks. Gestures on blackness are often co-opted, but here we do not know which gesture is authentic or which acts as a quotation. Syms presents an intentional flatness to the image that supports the myth and refutes the dimensionality of its subject. But is this body and identity really just an empty vessel of expression?

The installation of “Vertical Elevated Oblique” smartly collapsed language and image, layering pop culture with enduring symbols of both Hollywood (industrial stands used in film production now held up in Syms’s photographs) and the black resistance (a flock-covered black panther, originally intended as a support for a glass tabletop, co-opted from the Black Panther movement by the home and now repurposed by Syms).

Syms’s photography-based work is a conscious resistance that rejects what we see in the media - a construction of what is real - and flips the balance simply by the fact that it is Syms behind the camera, creating her images. If images of black people are going to continue to be fed into an endless and cruel cycle of stereotype, we may as well control the output - present them as mundane and normal, insert them into history, and reassert them in the contemporary. Syms’s video “She Mad: Laughing Gas” (2016), modeled on a silent film, “Laughing Gas”, from 1907, does exactly that. We follow Syms-as-protagonist to the dentist, where she engages with the hygienist, gets high on titular gas, and is ultimately denied coverage for the visit by her insufficient health insurance. A distinctly American experience.

The power of what Syms does is not only in its visual strength, but also in its political implications in an art world marked by a dearth of diversity in proprietors and artists alike, and in a media universe that suppresses (whether consciously or not at this point) positive images of black life. Syms, by simply representing “herself” - and specifically black women - in the context of institutional, commercial, and codified spaces, is asserting her presence. And that, by nature, is feminist and political.



Still from She Mad: Laughing Gas, 2016. Four-channel video installation, 6:59 minutes (loop), color, sound



Amy Sherlock, “25 Artworks: Martine Syms ‘Notes on Gesture’”, *Frieze*, September 2016.

# frieze



## Martine Syms

*Notes on Gesture*

Hands speak the same language everywhere: this is the premise of the 17th-century treatise, *Chirologia: Or the Natural Language of the Hand*, which is a touchstone for Martine Syms's *Notes on Gesture*. Only they don't, really: hands have their own dialects, their own vernacular. In this ten-minute film, composed of jerkily looping memes, Syms and her collaborator,

Diamond Stingily, catalogue a specific, immediately recognizable, vocabulary of braid-flicks, pouts and dance moves that pertain to African-American women: ‘famous women, infamous women and unknown women’, as the artist says. Tweaking a famous quip by US comedian Paul Mooney, the sentiment underpinning *Notes on Gesture* is: “Everyone wanna be a black woman but no-one wanna be a black woman.’ Meaning: everybody wants to shake it like Beyoncé, but who wants to be amongst the 25 percent of black women in the US living in poverty? *Note son Gesture* shares Mooney’s taut should-we-laugh/ shouldn’t-we-laugh humour at a moment in which the symbolism of black hands — raised in a Black Power salute or in the air on police request — has rarely been more charged. — Amy Sherlock



Antwaun Sargent, "Memes Mediate an Artist's Trip to the Dentist", *The Creators Project*, August 27, 2016, <http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com/blog/artists-dentist-trip-memes-gifs>.

the  
creators  
project

# Memes Mediate an Artist's Trip to the Dentist

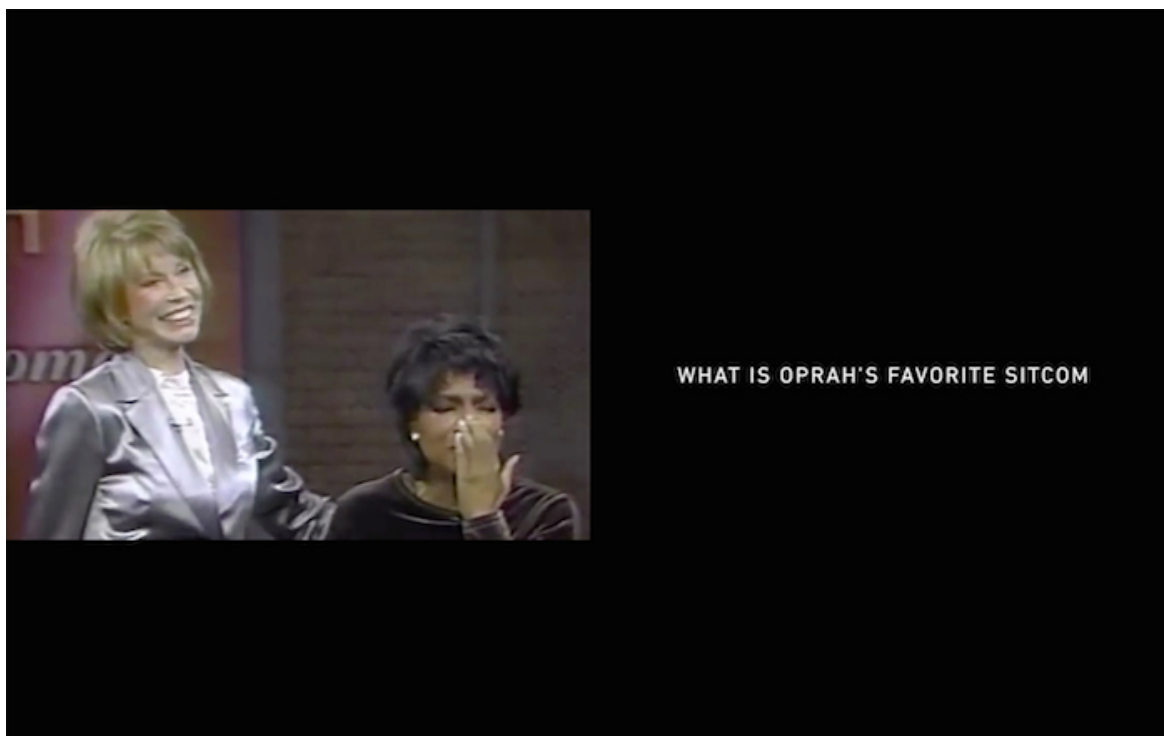
*Antwaun Sargent — Aug 27 2016*



*Martine Syms, Laughing Gas Still, 2016. Courtesy of the artist*

In her followup to *A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere*, a visual treatment shown at the 2015 New Museum Triennial, the artist Martine Syms presents *Laughing Gas* at the Hammer Museum's "Made In L.A." 2016: a, the, though, only. The video work is accompanied by a sculpture and a wall-length text in the biennial exhibition that presents an array of artists, including

Sterling Ruby, the fashion duo Eckhaus Latta, and Wadada Leo Smith, who loosely explore themes associated with living and working in Los Angeles.



*Martine Syms, A Pilot For A Show About Nowhere Still, 2015. Courtesy of the artist*

“It’s an continuation of an episodic project I started last year, that uses the framework of a sitcom to think about identity and the production of it,” explains Syms to The Creators Project. “This is the first actual episode of *She Mad*, the television show that was proposed [during the 2015 New Museum Triennial].” Says Syms, “It’s also a loose remake of this silent film called *Laughing Gas* I came across through a text written by the film scholar Jacqueline Stewart.”

“I became really obsessed with the film and thought it could operate as a structure that could hold cinematic history and my own memory of an experience that happened to me,” she adds.



*Martine Syms, Laughing Gas Still, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.*



“Pretty good,” Martine says, while a second screen displays a GIF of rapper Nicki Minaj, motioning as if she is spilling tea after throwing shade at rapper Iggy Azalea at the 2014 BET Awards. A third and fourth screen share different angles of Martine, in an effort to slow down and approximate for the viewer an exchange with the dental assistant that lasted but a few seconds. The scene, in some ways, signifies what it means to be a 27-year-old black woman artist traversing public space today. The four possible reactions Syms offers up each evoke the ways in which she gestures to how these moments often lead to the kinds of racial microaggressions the poet Claudia Rankine describes in her book-length lyric poem, “Citizen.”



*Martine Syms, Laughing Gas Still, 2016. Courtesy of the artist*

“In real life, if something happens to me, I am always comparing it to some scene in a movie,” explains Syms. “I wanted to incorporate that into the experience for the viewer. There’s a continuous thread of this media interrupting a primary narrative.” She says, “I also shot with a lot of hidden cameras, which speak to the fact that you are always constantly on tape. I have developed this irrational thing about being caught doing something crazy on video that will end up on a Vine.”

She adds, “I wanted it to seem like I could tap into all the cameras that are recording us all the time.”

The nearly seven-minute video is also a contemporary look at how mass media culture has led to the rise of what media theorist Alison Landsberg calls “prosthetic memory.” Syms uses captured memories in the form of memes, GIFs, film clips, and text to share Martine's feelings and emotions and express a full range of complex human ideas. In each frame she assimilates as personal experience manufactured moments from television, film, and social media. The idea raised by Landsberg, acted out on screen by Syms, examines how, in the age of social media, everything, even the personal, is performance.

Gracie Linden, "Deconstructing African American Identity into Axioms, Photos, and Colors", *Hyperallergic*, June 15, 2016, <http://hyperallergic.com/305146/deconstructing-african-american-identity-into-axioms-photos-and-colors/>.

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## MUSEUMS

### Deconstructing African American Identity into Axioms, Photos, and Colors

by **Gracie Linden** on June 15, 201



*Installation view of 'Martine Syms: Fact & Trouble' at Institute of Contemporary Arts London (ICA) (all photos by Mark Blower)*

LONDON — Two things are true: Martine Syms likes both purple and words. As with her website and her publishing imprint Dominica, Syms's exhibition *Fact & Trouble* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts is awash in the color purple: Royal purple C-stands, royal purple television monitors, and royal purple exhibition text. The color is weighted down with too many signifiers to list here but a few come to mind in viewing Syms's work, including Caesar, United States military honors, and Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, which explores the lives and status of African American women in the 1930s South. With purple's historic connotations of bravery and power, Syms recuperates the color and uses it as a signifier of female empowerment.



Be warned: this is not an easy exhibition to understand and the layers cloud each other. Many works have literary undertones and without a required reading list, the material can feel opaque. Syms found the exhibition's title in Margo Jefferson's *Negroland: A Memoir* (2015), though the phrase is originally from the philosopher William James. In an interview with ICA Curator Matt Williams, Syms said, "I was thinking about a documentary impulse, the construction of an identity, one's 'real' life, and the fluidity between these. 'Fact and Trouble' encapsulates the idea of troubling the truth or a kind of reality."

The exhibition is divided between two somewhat spare rooms with the connecting hallway papered with a photomontage, "Misdirected Kiss" (2016), one of few works not initiated from a text. Sourced mainly from the internet, this mosaic of words, photographs, screen grabs, and video stills — of stage lights, collar bones, women dancing and cooking, girls linking arms — coalesces into a scrapbook and also forms a lecture Syms performed in conjunction with the exhibition. She calls the project a collection of "prosthetic memories," moments that could belong to her but, like an artificial limb, are foreign to her body and self.

*Martine Syms, "Lessons" (2014–) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)*

To the left of the hallway is Syms's ongoing video work *Lessons* (2014–). Inspired by Kevin Young's *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (2012), a book of cultural criticism arguing that African American culture is American culture, Syms's piece explores the book's five lessons, or axioms, such as "struggle." Syms has made a series of 30-second commercials for Young's lessons, and once she completed the first five, she realized she needed more. Ultimately she plans to make 180; currently, there are 68. The commercials flip between two back-to-back monitors, so a lot of time is spent jumping back in forth between the two. These are not regular television commercials: In one, three small children play on the beach; another simply blares the words "Video is Feminine"; a third shows a Disney-like cartoon of a woman spinning in a circle. These feel like mini-movies, without any conclusion or reconciliation. Syms's impulse to create more commercials implies there are more than five lessons; if African American culture is American culture, then it is diverse, undefined, and cannot be reduced to only five points.





*Installation view of 'Martine Syms: Fact & Trouble' at Institute of Contemporary Arts London*

A large text surrounding the monitors reads “Lightly, Slightly, Politely,” one word per wall. Syms found the phrase in Zora Neale Hurston’s slang glossary, a collection of terms used in 1930s Harlem. In the same interview with Williams, Syms said, “It means something done perfectly. It’s one way of being. It is one of the lessons. I thought it was a good framework for thinking about the idea of tradition and cultural inheritance.” But the words “Lightly, Slightly, Politely,” placed within the exhibition’s focus of “defining” black Americans, could also be a comment on the ways in which they, black women especially, are expected to behave and be in the United States. Aesthetically, “lightness” has long been asserted as superior, allowing for the possibility of racial passing, while “slightly” and “politely” could refer to the tenuous position black women have conventionally occupied in society, one that has been shaped by invisibility and disrespect.

In the other room, photographs clamped to C-stands in the installation *More Than Some, Less Than Others* (2014–2016) borrow images from *Lessons*, as well as from Syms’s earlier works, and are conceived as movie posters for each lesson. Syms has expressed her interest in building narratives that are continuous rather than progressive, which would redefine how we think of stories. By reusing images across works, temporal boundaries collapse into malleable fictions. So often we consider time in a linear progression, one thing always producing the next; but Syms’s remixing underscores just how difficult it is to completely leave the past in the past.

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*Installation view of 'Martine Syms: Fact & Trouble' at Institute of Contemporary Arts London*

In the essay “Black Vernacular: Reading New Media,” Syms wonders how “prosthetic memories” function within collective identity. How can digital media reinforce fictions until stories become accepted truths? In her works, which constantly shuffle images and use words in ambiguous, multiple ways, there is never a single truth to grasp on. While *Fact & Trouble* is at time impenetrable, perhaps that is part of the point: identity construction and social structures are confusing, pliable, and at times arbitrary.

Deborah Vankin, "At Hammer Museum's 'Made in L.A.' biennial, Martine Syms makes her moment," *Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 2016

Los Angeles Times

# At Hammer Museum's 'Made in L.A.' biennial, Martine Syms makes her moment



Martine Syms in "Made in L.A. 2016," the Hammer Museum biennial. (Mark Boster / Los Angeles Times)

By **Deborah Vankin**

June 11, 2016, 3:00 AM



It starts with a burp. And she's mad.

Or maybe she isn't mad? Because she's laughing. Or she is mad and she's just pretending to be happy.

Then again, it could just be the laughing gas.

An undercurrent of uncertainty runs throughout Martine Syms' zany but heady video piece, "She Mad: Laughing Gas," which anchors her installation in the Hammer Museum's third biennial, "Made in L.A. 2016," opening Sunday. The seven-minute video is a fictional sitcom episode called "Laughing Gas" that's part of an invented TV series called "She Mad." Based on the 1907 silent film short "Laughing Gas," starring African American actress Bertha Regustus, Syms' piece follows an L.A. graphic designer and aspiring artist named Martine Syms who makes a comically ill-fated trip to the dentist. Syms plays the lead character who may or may not be based on herself, as is the Seinfeldian tradition.

"I'm consciously invoking those tropes," Syms says, sitting in the Hammer's courtyard. "A lot of my work, the subject is film and television itself, and history, and how that kind of coincides with larger cultural history and memory."

Syms, 28, is very much of-the-moment. She's an art darling, with a solo exhibition now at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, inclusion in the Hammer biennial and the ICA show opening at the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow, Scotland, in September. She's also of-the-moment in her approach to conceptual art. Her work is rooted in the tradition of '80's appropriation art, but with a millennial twist. Toggling between publishing, performance, video, essay and photography, she melds images from her life and juxtaposes them against silent films from the turn of the 20th century and contemporary snippets from the Internet, TV and film to probe linguistic and visual representations of gender and African Americans in mass media.

It all simmers into what exhibition co-curator Hamza Walker calls "a wide-ranging bouillabaisse of pop culture."

"It's a portrayal of black middle-class life from a biographical perspective, and she'll appropriate all this other footage to voice: 'How do you see yourself when you weigh yourself against magazine imagery and TV and film? Do you see yourself?' Those are ongoing questions. She's fresh in terms of the range of her source material."



In Syms' "TV episode," after Martine has been doped up with laughing gas and is about to be operated on, she's told about a problem with her health insurance and sent home, still high. As she navigates the public bus and Koreatown sidewalks, a hilarity of sorts ensues — something that comes through in the presentation of the piece even more than the plot. Cameras offer varying viewpoints — head on, over the shoulder, above from the surveillance camera point of view — resulting in four video streams that play simultaneously on a grid of four flat-screen TVs, each with occasionally different soundtracks. Some screens may follow the narrative from different angles, while others intercut seemingly unrelated pop cultural tidbits: clips from "Star Trek," "SpongeBob SquarePants" or "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air," with Internet GIFs, YouTube footage and still images from her computer archive.

The result is wacky and fast-paced, a Rubik's Cube-like scramble of imagery bound by a loose, sitcom-simple storyline. Peel back the layers, however, and "She Mad" is teeming with depth, an exploration of race, identity and culture.

"If you would just empty out my brain, it's what I'm thinking about on any given day," she says, laughing. She pauses frequently, thoughtfully, referencing obscure film theory or esoteric essays. Then, just as frequently, she dissolves into giggles, her quick-shifting demeanor echoing the fragmented tenor of her video.

"A lot of my work, the subject is film and television itself, and history, and how that kind of coincides with larger cultural history and memory," Martine Syms says.

If that's at all unsettling, Syms says, that's the point. The split screens, blending of truth and fiction, layering of sound and saturation of images are meant to dizzy or destabilize the viewer and to upend assumptions. "So they consider a different experience from their own," she says, later adding: "Sure, I'm a black artist. But is that going to align with someone's expectations of black art? I have no idea. And I am not even interested in considering that."

Syms' dentist encounter in "Laughing Gas" is based on truth. She had nearly the same experience while living in the Midwest after graduating from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The 1907 silent film short of the same name features a bizarrely similar plot, in which the main character wanders the streets, high, after visiting the dentist. Syms found the parallel funny and the film historically significant.

"It's an early example of black women having a kind of subjectivity," she says.

Syms had all the music in her video composed so that it would be reminiscent of familiar sitcoms. The fleeting close-up shots — a book laying on the floor of her apartment or a block of text on her iPhone — are meant to prompt curiosity, so the viewer will look things up online afterward. She doesn't remember the names of every TV face she appropriated for the video, but no matter. The pictures were chosen only for an expression or feeling they evoke. And the stream of pop cultural imagery is "sort of a collective subconscious, like an ongoing annotation."

Syms grew up in Altadena as the fifth of six siblings. Neither parent was an artist. Her mother was a case manager and her father a survey engineer. But they were culturally engaged, she says, jazz and soul music fans who took the family to museums, concerts and comedy shows.

The independent films of John Waters and George Kuchar were among her early artistic influences. The Pasadena Armory Center for the Arts' after-school classes and the California State Summer School for the Arts program introduced her to experimental films and contemporary art as a teen. At CSSSA, she also discovered the Echo Park Film Center, which would become a lasting influence.

Shortly after graduating from college in 2007, she co-founded the bookstore and project space Golden Age in Chicago. In 2012 she founded the independent publishing company Dominica, which is "dedicated to exploring blackness as a topic, reference, and marker, and audience in visual culture."

So it's not surprising Syms calls herself a "conceptual entrepreneur," alluding to the blurring of lines between art and business. To say that she is prolific would be an understatement. In the past six months, she's performed a lecture, "Misdirected Kiss," at the Broad museum in L.A.; showed 30-second video works, "Lessons," at the artist run space Human Resources in Chinatown; and exhibited photography at Karma International in Beverly Hills.

For the Hammer exhibition, which carries the full title “Made in L.A. 2016: a, the, though, only” and presents emerging and underrepresented artists, Syms created a wall mural carrying the phrase "Is you is, or is you ain't." She also made an enlarged film still for the exhibit of the original "Laughing Gas" star, Regustus, into which she lasered abstract cutouts.

But there is never, ever, lack of time to watch TV. Syms is a junkie, highbrow and low, she says. "Nashville," "Scandal" and "How to Get Away With Murder" are favorites.

The sitcom, however, with its simplistic plot line, fast-pace and pliability, is what she prefers to work with, artistically.

"I think the sitcom is the format for television," she says. "It's the essential form and it represents more of the canon of TV, which is why I latched onto it."

The title of her own sitcom grew out of a joke with her boyfriend, she says.

“‘She Mad’ — it's like, 'Are you mad, bro?' It's a meme.”

As to whether or not Syms, herself, is actually mad?

"I may be. Or I may not be," she says slyly.

Then she falls into a fit of giggles.

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“Made in L.A. 2016: a, the, though, only”

Where: Hammer Museum, 10899 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles

When: Sunday-Aug. 28. Closed Mondays.

Admission: Free

Info: (310) 443-7000, [hammer.ucla.edu](http://hammer.ucla.edu)

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Ananda Pellerin, “Martine Syms: Fact & Trouble”, *Time Out*, May 17, 2016.



## Martine Syms: Fact & Trouble



‘Lightly, Slightly, Politely.’ In her ‘Glossary of Harlem Slang’, American writer Zora Neale Hurston says this expression means ‘to do something perfectly’. The three words appear on the wall of Martine Syms’s current solo ICA exhibition, in a typeface the LA-based artist also created. It’s just the tip of the show’s iceberg of cultural references. Over two rooms we are invited into Syms’s manifold universe – layer upon layer of historic and pop-culture moments and personal experiences; a sophisticated collage of digital art and analogue memories.

At the centre of this first room two TVs stand back to back. They show 30-second videos – found, personal and archive footage – which fade softly in and out and alternate between the screens. The clips, using the visual grammar of the internet – Gifs, Vines – depict everything from activist and Public Enemy affiliate Sister Souljah in front of a daytime talk show audience, to a mid-range shot of a young woman’s face placidly watching a screen (we watch her watching). Syms has

titled the work 'Lessons' and she calls the clips 'commercials' for these lessons, which feature mantras like 'what you claim, you are'.

The walls and ceilings of the exhibition entrance are covered with a teenage-bedroom-style collage of photos entitled 'Misdirected Kiss'. Family snaps, a profesh shot of Boney M and pictures of Syms herself are wallpapered together, levelling the pop and the personal. The theme continues in the second room, where publicity shots and personal photos are held up by C-stands (used in photography studios), drawing attention to the process of image production itself. But despite this seeming K-hole of cultural meaning, the layout is deceptively economical – poised between very little and everything at once.

The 28-year-old artist, whose work is often about blackness, new media and black artistic expression, also runs independent publisher Dominica, and she brings to her visual work an almost literary sensibility: what is read/seen and understood and what is felt on a personal level converge. How to describe Syms's show? Three words come to mind...

**BY: ANANDA PELLERIN**

Eliza Anyangwe, “Martine Syms at the ICA: ‘people act like art is a white thing’”, *The Guardian*, May 9, 2016.

the guardian

## Martine Syms at the ICA: 'people act like art is a white thing'

More likely to quote cultural theory than Beyoncé songs, this home-schooled, high-achieving Los Angeleno prefers to take her art out of the gallery to where everyone really hangs out – the internet – even if it brings the haters



*Lightly, Slightly, Politely ... Martine Syms' Fact & Trouble at the ICA. Photograph: Mark Blower/ICAS*



Walking into Martine Syms's first solo UK show, *Fact & Trouble* at the ICA, feels like walking into someone else's memories: a disconcerting mix of the familiar and the foreign.

Arrows point up a narrow, poorly lit stairwell which opens up into a bright white floor. In the small corridor that separates two rooms, enlarged pictures and video stills plaster the walls. These images are part of Syms's 2016 work, *Misdirected Kiss*, and appear in what seems to be no particular order; an imperfect tapestry of moments in other people's lives.

Syms builds on this sense of voyeurism in the adjacent rooms. Two screens mounted back to back show snippets of home videos from her ongoing project *Lessons* (2014-), in a randomly ordered loop. I watch footage of a gospel choir, the video quality so bad I can't make out any faces, until it's suddenly replaced by another clip. Painted in large black letters on the three walls that surround the screens are the words: "Lightly, Slightly, Politely."



*Imperfect tapestry ... Fact & Trouble at the ICA. Photograph: Mark Blower/ICA*

The characters here are anonymous, save for a photograph of the actor and rapper Queen Latifah, and another of model Tyra Banks, posing with a pre-teen Syms. Syms' work considers what is to be a black woman, based on representations in film, text and photography: but *Fact & Trouble* makes no explicit attempt to create a narrative. As I crane my neck to see what lies behind one of her double-sided pictures, searching for meaning starts to feel as futile as trying to make sense of a hoarder's treasures – their aesthetic and symbolic appeal apparent only to the hoarder.

And Syms does describe herself as a hoarder, of what she calls "orphaned media" – old home videos and family photos. We meet just after her exhibition opens, at the west London hotel where she is staying. Tired, dishevelled and dressed in black, she is sitting at a booth in the restaurant, sipping on green juice. Given what I've read about her – Syms calls herself

a “conceptual entrepreneur” whose work covers themes as varied as “Afrofuturism, queer theory, the power of language, and the spiritual nature of the colour purple” – I am expecting to meet someone burdened by deep thoughts and artspeak.

Instead Syms, who looks younger than her 28 years, exudes southern California cool. She takes her time, pausing often, aware perhaps that her life and experiences will always be compared to the stereotype of what it means to be black in America. “My mum was very interested in art and liked to write, and my dad was a hobbyist photographer,” she says of her upbringing (some of her father’s photos are in the show). “It was a cultural household, but that wasn’t a special thing – I feel like a lot of black families are like that. Being into music wasn’t a thing. I don’t even know if being into photography is anything special.”

This habitual exposure, and also her years as a graphic designer, explain why Syms isn’t interested in what she calls “a rarified type of art”. Instead, she takes her work to where everyone is – the internet – and engages with different audiences through films, public lectures and publications.

“People act like art is a white thing – or not for people of colour – when really so much culture and art comes from people of colour. I want everyone to get into what I am doing. So sometimes I don’t like to work just in an art context because” – she pauses for a long time then says, laughing – “it feels like a lot of people aren’t going to see it. I like it to be a part of everyday life. It is for me.”

Raised with three siblings in Altadena, an area north of Los Angeles (which in the early 1900s attracted millionaires from the east, many of whom left after the schools became desegregated in the 1960s and 70s), Syms was home-schooled for three years: “The area I grew up in didn’t have the best public schools and it was hard to get all of us into the same private school – for a lot of racist reasons from what it sounds like.”

Skipping grades when she did start school, Syms is influenced by ideas old and new. Misdirected Kiss derives its name from a 1904 film and both our conversation and her “performative lecture”, later in the week, are peppered with references to African American intellectuals (Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, Arthur Jafa, Audre Lorde) and other cultural theorists such as Alison Landsberg.

She appears more at ease examining and testing the work of these thinkers than immersing herself in the more ephemeral, attention-seeking world of pop culture. Even as pop icons such as Beyoncé delve into politics and respond to protests such as the Black Lives Matter movement, Syms doesn’t believe art can change the status quo for black people in America.

“I have said it before and I will continue to say that I don’t think art is the most effective form of protest,” Syms tells me. “I don’t think it changes policy, I think it changes discourse, and discourse can change ideas, and for me that’s what it’s about: having that space for conversation.”

And Syms wants to have that conversation, whether with art audiences at venues such as the ICA or the wider black cultural community, whom she targets in her Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto, a video essay first published in 2013 by the digital art organisation Rhizome. Afrofuturism has traditionally explored the black experience through science-fiction and is often seen as a means of escape from present-day hardships. But Syms puts forward the theory there’s no happy-ever-after for the black person beyond the stars.

“I was a black person using technology so in this one year I kept getting invited to all these Afrofuturist events,” she explains. “And I was not really feeling it. I thought some of the claims were just a little too self-serious. Around the time there was a noticeable increase in deaths from police brutality, and some of it just felt extremely strange. Senseless. I had already been thinking about that and responding to that.”

Drawing inspiration from writers Kodwo Eshun and Greg Tate, as well as Geoff Ryman’s mundane science-fiction manifesto, Syms starts by saying: “We the mundane Afrofuturists, being alternately pissed off and bored, need a means of asserting a different set of values to begin imagining the future.” Dreams of utopia, she says, “can encourage us to forget that outer space will not save us from injustice ... post-black is a misnomer, post-colonialism is too”.

It’s not all serious, of course. Syms’ humour, transmuted to her work, is dry and sarcastic. At her ICA lecture, she deadpans some of her personal “rules”: “The natural state of your skin is ashy. Shea butter is the only defence, use it generously. Lotion is for white people. When unoccupied, read from a book with an impenetrable title such as The Politics of

Representation in Network Television.” But at a time when black creatives from Cape Town to Chicago are building bodies of work and reputations on the very notions Syms is dismissing, her manifesto has been met with both praise and scorn.

“I guess I can be a little mischievous!” Syms counters. Mischievous is one word. Some might say volunteering to create a space for meaningful, open dialogue beyond the art bubble is bold, dangerous even, especially in an age when trolling is mistaken for candour and the ubiquitous presence of cameras means everything you’ve ever said or produced could live forever online.

Still, Syms insists she is ready for it: “Art’s function is to communicate. If someone goes to the show and they hate it and want to write about that, that’s cool. I’m happy for that. Don’t email me about it. Don’t @ me, but go ahead!”



Eli Diner, “The Most Relative Media”, *Flash Art*, May 2016, No. 308, Volume 49, 72 - 79.

# Flash Art

## The Most Relative Media

*Eli Diner on the art of Martine Syms*

Let's start with purple. It's everywhere in the work of Martine Syms (b. 1988, US): the backdrop of the video *Notes on Gesture* (2015); the sixteen-foot-long, eight-foot-high monochrome painting on wood *Belief Strategy VIII* (2015); her sculptural works that appropriate lighting devices from film — powder-coated C-stands and plastic cucolorises; and her website — where the work, of course, is most likely to be seen — and where purple so richly envelops text and image that it seems almost to form something closer to *context* than background.

Though all of these share a single, uniform hue — something close to what Google Image Search wants me to call “eggplant” or “blue roses” — video stills and reproductions of the objects read in a spectrum of purples, from too pale to muddled. Nothing surprising in that. Beyond the vagaries of light, photography and CSS variables, we might recall Josef Albers's introduction to *Interaction of Color*: “In visual perception a color is almost never seen as it really is — as it physically is. This fact makes color the most relative medium in art.” While such *relativity* provided the very driving force behind Albers's work, it has haunted philosophical inquiries into the nature of color; Wittgenstein, for example, failing to rework Goethe's famous physiological theory of color into a set of logical propositions, lamented that, in the end, “there is merely an inability to bring the concepts into some kind of order. We stand there like the ox in front of the newly painted stall door.”

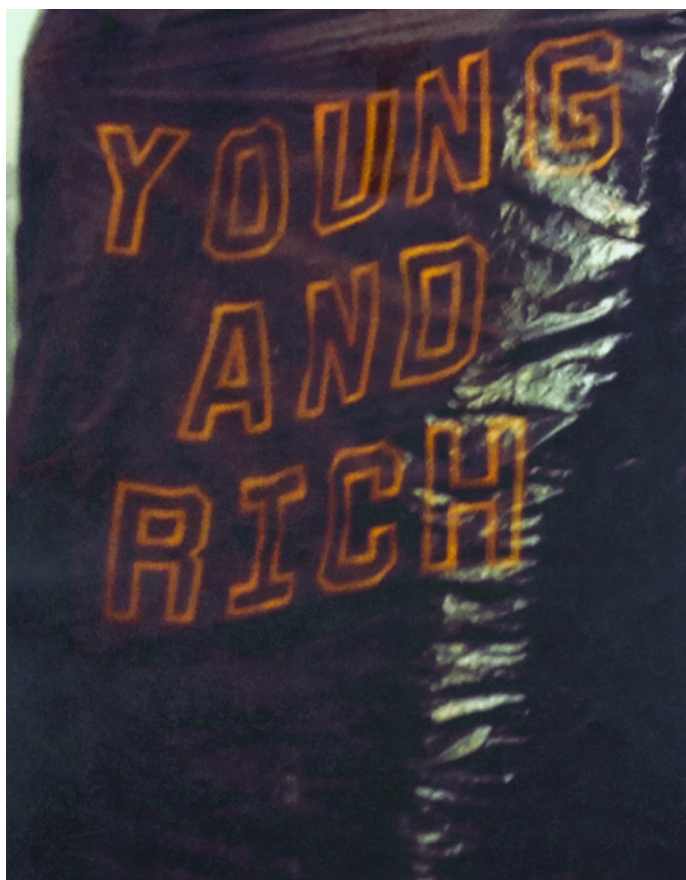
Where philosophy falters, however, information capitalism advances, untroubled by *what*, preferring to ask *how much*, whether defined in CMYK, RGB or whatever. And it's not merely a philosophical inadequacy. The very language of color pales to the point

of insignificance when compared to the easy specificities of hexadecimal web color values. Eggplant? No. It's #482e84.

A parallel can be drawn between the simultaneous uncertainties and specificities of color in general and the subcategory of colors that so frequently serve as a metonym for race. The latter, similarly, can't be rationalized, can't be brought into order. Race is an illusion, an abstraction, a generality. And yet it is a forceful, historically conditioned social relation, and as such it is experienced in very real and highly specific ways. Syms's inquiries into representations of blackness, and black people, and often specifically black women, move along the spectrum between mediated generalities and something much more precise.

Color has another function here. Like its clear antecedent, International Klein Blue, Syms's purple works as a marketing device, a key component in a strategy for branding and promoting the figure of the artist — not so much Martine Syms as “Martine Syms.” She invites this idea, dubbing herself a “conceptual entrepreneur,” which I read less as being in the business of selling concepts than as selling the concept of being in business. Anyway, as a rule, artists are selling something — or trying to — while self-figuring and self-marketing, for many, form a fundamental feature of neoliberal daily life.

Syms interpolates this self-figuring into a broader investigation of representations of race and gender. A *Pilot for a Show About Nowhere* (2015) is both a documentary video essay on the history of the black sitcom and a fictional account of a sitcom called *She Mad*. The show's protagonist, “a young, ambitious black woman” named Martine, works in “the Los Angeles creative industry,” while she and her friends “try to create the



More Than Some, Less Than Others XXIX (2014-16) *Courtesy of the Artist*



## FEATURE



lives they want, and deal with the unrealistic goals they and society have set." That television has served to inculcate these unrealistic goals is both the point and beside the point. The timeworn critiques of popular culture often presume that we don't understand what we consume; yet, as Syms reminds us in voiceover early in the video, "television viewing has always been highly personalized and highly politicized." If savvy viewing, or understanding the ideological operations of a TV show, does not amount to liberation — from unrealistic goals or from anything else — it does at least offer the tools for attempting to control your own representations. Fictionalizing herself into the sitcom format with a certain deadpan irony, Syms assumes a position neither exactly critical, nor, of course, acquiescent, instead offering an illustration of the formative powers of popular culture, but also of its malleability in the hands of its consumers.

This, of course, is conditioned by the digital technologies of the present. It's there, in its most simplistic form, in every meme that uses a clip or a still from a Hollywood movie (*She Mad* takes its name from a meme). Syms's installations of cinematic lighting equipment seem to say: You are *already* an image. But they point as well to sources that, consciously or not, determine what kind of image you want to be, what kind of story about yourself you want to tell. "Think of your most Internet-famous friend," she says in *Pilot*.

"Do you even recognize her life? Does it have a plot? Is there a will-they-won't-they romance at its core? Does she find herself in wacky situations? If you can't think of such a friend, you are that friend." Or take, once more, her use of the color purple: As Syms makes clear, it has yet another meaning, and that is, of course, *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker's hugely popular, critically acclaimed 1982 novel about the lives of African American women in the south during the 1930s, adapted for the screen and again as a Broadway musical. The color then doubles as a tool for self-fashioning and a reference to a beloved narrative of black femininity—popular culture phenomenon. Purple is always also "Purple."

TV and Instagram, however, are but two elements in the morass of mediation and memory — the accumulated mass of depictions and caricatures of black women, the historical cultural strata of a country built on white supremacy, the assumptions and ideologies of the past and the present refracted through infinite stories, pictures, information, all coexisting with an unmanageable flood of user-generated content. Syms seems to delight in the vastness of it all. Out of inundation she pulls fragments and presents each — even when only vaguely legible — as something solid, a specimen to be considered, an island in the stream. That is to say, even as she works on a thematics of representation, she is often less interested in those questions

*This page:*  
*Nite Life* (2014)  
*Courtesy of the Artist*

*Next page, from top:*  
*"Black Box,"* installation  
view at Human Resources,  
Los Angeles (2016)  
*Courtesy of the Artist*  
and Human Resources,  
Los Angeles

*Life is Better When*  
*I'm Cruel* (2016)  
*Courtesy of the Artist*  
and Karma International,  
Los Angeles



of the construction or deconstruction of image, stereotype or identity, as she is with a kind of sifting through.

For example, her video project *Lessons* (2014–16) consists of 180 thirty-second segments of found and original footage, each, according to Syms, featuring a black figure (though sometimes unseen). Running from silent-era film clips to mundane home movies, the piece comes in and out of focus — literally, but also in terms of what the individual lessons here might be. It's clear enough when we watch politically charged rapper Sister Souljah on the Phil Donahue Show in 1992, speaking about the exclusion of African Americans from the promises of capitalism and the state; or the segment of a woman sitting on a stool against a white backdrop, her face cropped largely out of frame, reading from James Baldwin's *The Price of the Ticket*; or even, perhaps, when we hear the theme song to the 1990s sitcom *Moesha*, playing over abstract video: "Up in the morning / A new day is starting / It's me, it's me / Am I realizing my responsibility? / It's me." But other segments, if evocative, come across more didactically ambiguous: camcorder footage from the fight that broke out between white and black teenagers at a bowling alley in Hampton, Virginia, in 1993, an incident famous for the resulting prosecution of future NBA star Allen Iverson; a blurry and jump-cutting scene of a gospel choir; or handheld footage, which looks to be from the '80s, of black families seated at a banquet, as a band plays on stage.

Their ambiguity mirrors the fleetingness in the form of the work. Many of the fragments that make up *Lessons* have a fascinating and intense specificity, almost to the point of feeling arbitrary. You could imagine her just as well pulling a different set of 180 thirty-second clips. In *The Grey Album*, Kevin Young's 2012 wide-ranging book of African American cultural criticism, which Syms has cited as inspiration for *Lessons*, the author remarks that "the dominant mode of this post-soul era is *fragment*: pieces that don't so much stand in for others (as in postmodern metonymy), or as mere metaphor (as in modern blues or Waste Lands), but that serve as a series of synonyms, equivalences as a form of equality." *Lessons* is a work of synonymy, playing precisely on the endless availability of such material. Identifiable or not, well known or obscure, the sources become commensurate through the structure of the editing.

*Notes on Gesture* (2015) also works on the logic of the fragment. The video consists of a series of short clips, each no more than a few seconds, featuring the artist Diamond Stingily performing a series of actions, hand gestures and facial expressions. Each clip loops several times before cutting to the next, and fragmentariness is emphasized in the abrupt interruptions of Stingily's movements, echoing the jerky repetitions of a meme or a Vine. *Notes* presents a kind of satirical taxonomy of black female gesture — one that is happily unsystematic and necessarily partial. Yet even if we recognize a given gesture as familiar or caricatured, the rapid repetitions render it increasingly abstract and inscrutable.

Syms realizes a more pronounced effect of inscrutability in her photo series *More Than Some, Less Than Others* (2014–16), a title that suggests vagueness and amplitude as a theme. A few of the images are more or less identifiable: a page from *Aunt Sally's Policy Players Dream Book*; a grainy close-up of a woman's face taken from a clip that appears in *Lessons*; and a screen with white text on Syms purple that seems to float in a darkened space (probably documenting a lecture), which reads, "When entertainment frames the future, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy." Most, however, provide few clues, their context, meaning, or stories withheld: an orange curtain, a silhouette of a hand, a garment with the words "life is a paradox" in gold letters, hanging from a white wall. It is unclear in most cases whether they're "originals" or sourced from somewhere. Apart from their fragmentariness, these works, whatever their sources, share with *Lessons* — as well as *Pilot*, parts of which are shot on smartphones and webcams, indifferently framed — a penchant for what Hito Steyerl calls the *poor image*: "It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution."

Syms's poor images reflect an interest in the everyday — not the real, as such, but rather something closer to a *prosaics of representation*. Her text "The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto" issues an exhortation away from the seductions of that corpus of temporally and spatially expansive black imagination (Samuel Delaney, P-Funk, Sun Ra, etc.) and the uses to which it can be put, eschewing "unexamined and hackneyed tropes" for more realistic ones. Even the mundane is a trope. And even old camcorder footage, new webcam footage and unplaceable pictures are incidents in the ongoing history of representation. They are both right here and out there, in the abstractions of the image world. In *Lessons*, Syms draws her fragments from the vast store of images of black figures. She reifies them, animates them, presents momentary specificity, and each fragment, in turn, slips back into generality. Remember that hers is a show about nowhere.

*Previous page:*  
Prone Horizontal  
Forwards, Elevated  
Oblique Noting,  
A Thread Or Line  
That Holds Things  
Together (2015)  
*Courtesy of the Artist  
and Bridget Donahue,  
New York*

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*Martine Syms's solo exhibition "Fact & Trouble" is on view at the ICA, London, until June 19.*

*Eli Diner is Flash Art Associate Editor.*

“An Interview with Martine Syms”, *AQNB* (May 10), <http://www.aqnb.com/2016/05/10/an-interview-with-martine-syms/>



## An interview with Martine Syms

scarab, 10 May 2016

Interviews

“I just didn’t see myself in that, so I was like, ‘I guess I’m not an artist’” says Martine Syms, about her formative relationship to art education that led her to be involved with independent music and film communities first. From working in the co-op of a small bookshop and then cult Ooga Booga in her hometown of Los Angeles, Syms went on to open and run a space in Chicago for six years, as well work on film sets for advertising, making moving-image for a commercial context. It’s from these experiences that she named herself a ‘conceptual entrepreneur’ which was “really coming from this idea of self-reliance”.

I meet the artist in the downstairs cafe of London’s ICA after she has been taking some documentation shots of her current solo show, *Fact & Trouble*, running April 19 to June 19. Though mentioning she is tired after completing the install, she is relaxed, self-assured and generous with the explanations she offers as we sit down and unpack the thinking that led up to it.

Syms’ multifarious practice explores popular cultural representations, collective memory, performing identity and constructing an aesthetic of Blackness. Citing writer Fred Moten and film-maker Arthur Jafa as influences, her practice explores the circulation of pop imagery and how these get interpreted and transformed by local contexts. She also established Dominica Publishing as a dedicated outlet for artists exploring black aesthetics, including artist Hannah Black’s *Dark Pool Party*.

Syms’ work draws on the methods of Afrofuturism in drawing on historical and current events to create a fictional speculation or imagining of a different kind of black futurity. The ongoing work ‘Reading Trayvon Martin’ (2013) tracks Syms’ archiving and bookmarking of web pages relating to the case, and media representations of this miscarriage of justice. The most recent instantiation of this ever-evolving process is her show at the ICA, which includes sculptural installations mimicking a film set with metal stands and laser-cut plastic sheets or ‘cookies’ —to use the industry term — and an immersive visual essay including found images and excerpts from texts that sprawl across the gallery walls. Another room features ‘Lessons’ a video-based poem in 180 sections of 30-second clips at the centre, surrounded by large wall-based texts that reads ‘Lightly, Slightly, Politely’, taken from a slang glossary by writer Zora Neale Hurston that suggests life advice given from an older generation.



We talk about Syms' process, which involves multiple, parallel trajectories of research that inform her essays, lecture-performances, films and installations. We discuss nostalgia, the longevity of popular cultural representations, how contexts shift and how places such as LA undergo changes like gentrification. Syms gives a background to the formation of communities and peer groups in the United States that have allowed her to sustain an alternative means of living and practicing as an artist.

Having only been in London for a week on this visit, we question the idea of whether the mainly US-American cultural material will have cross-cultural meaning, and how localised interpretations shape wider cultural understandings. The exhibition's *Fact & Trouble* title comes from a phrase in Margo Jefferson's *Negroland*, as explained in an interview between Syms and ICA curator Matt Williams that accompanies the exhibition. It was originally used by philosopher William James to explore the idea of constructing a real, public 'self' and the elements that disrupt this. It's this space between historical fact and personal narrative, the convergence of cultural and personal significance, that Syms finds fertile ground for making work.

*\*\* I just had a look at Fact & Trouble, in which there are multiple layers of text and images that the audience has to navigate their way through. I was just wondering: where do you begin? Do you have a system for filtering through all this source information?*

Martine Syms: There are a few ways that I work, and there's not one way to start, because I think there's a sort of fluidity in the way that I work. Sometimes it doesn't always have a place that it's going to be yet. I'm constantly going through archives and libraries, as well as being online looking at what's accessible digitally.

There's this term I like to use or think about and talk about a lot: prosthetic memory, which is this idea that you can take on memories that aren't your own through seeing images, that they can be externalised. These are sort of part of that prosthetic memory, and I think of it as maybe a public imagination. I like this term because there's this great book by Robin Kelley called *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* that's talking about the possibility to imagine another space being really fundamental to revolt and change. Tied to that, a lot of my subject matter is about cinema and television, so that's another kind of shared imagination, but it's obviously coming from a more commercial place, and there's an overt narrative that's being put forth that then everyone is kind of negotiating. I think I'm interested in where those two things intersect. Then I also think there's a kind of much more hybrid space of that in a networked, web-based environment.

*\*\* Over the last 10 years, with the increasing availability of audio-visual material online, has it become easier to find certain things that would've been harder before?*

MS: No, not really, I actually think it's a lot harder. They just become a replication of other mainstream systems; those distribution systems just get reproduced. I kind of joke with a lot of friends about this really interesting moment where there were all these music-sharing blogspots using Napster and peer-to-peer torrents, things that were never previously digitised, that were put on there. With Megaupload you could download like a crate, you could download every song someone ever made, you could download their entire collection. But it got shut down. The streaming stuff, there's just much less available, and I think there's this idea that 'if it exists, it's online', and I really don't find that to be true at all. It's being just sorted, and sorted, and sorted.

Even just as I've been here in London, my search results are totally different than they are in the US. Even my search results for myself are different here than they are in the States. I guess maybe what's more popular, what people are looking at here, is sort of influencing that. Who knows how they process the information. Plus, I mean, obviously everybody's using new technology, and I'm just so excited by the things I see, you know? Like these teenagers in the middle of nowhere making these amazing videos [laughs]. Even just what people do with a six-second Vine, I think's pretty incredible.

*\*\* How is it to see what you were working on in the 'States re-contextualised here in London?*

MS: I mean, I think it will translate, definitely. Part of what I am interested in is the circulation of imagery and how that is a part of its content: the way it circulates. I think a big part of this mainstream American media is that it does get heavily exported. Maybe one of the main exports is music, TV, and movies from America. But I'm curious how it will resonate or greet differently. I'm really interested in that.



I just had a show *Black Box* at HRLA in Los Angeles, with videos that were shot all over the city and there are some very specific things that are referenced that maybe you would get: places, or places that used to exist. I'm curious to hear responses to the videos, and how things change based on local culture.

I have a friend who is a video artist from South Korea, and he uses a lot of RnB, soul music, Motown, Northern Soul, and I was so confused by his usage of it. He was just saying that that's the music that was really popular when he was growing up, like K-pop is so influenced by the RnB era. So the social, or maybe the specific context that I was kinda reading into it, wasn't present; it didn't mean the same thing for him, it felt very native to South Korea. I'm interested in what things get transformed by the local, and that's part of that negotiation of popular culture.

*\*\* I was also wondering how things might translate generationally. Do you think cultural references have a different resonance if people experienced it first-hand?*

MS: Yeah, I would say the material that I'm working with spans from 1907 to the present. Yeah, definitely. I think that's the other thing about popular culture over time. In *Nite Life*, a project I did in Miami last year at Locust Projects, I was looking at this live performance of Sam Cooke and using that as source material.

There's an album called *Live at the Harlem Square Club* and it was recorded in 1965, but it was shelved and released in 1985, and I was kind of looking at that moment. I did this project that was based on his on-stage banter, but then I also did this sort of lecture that was thinking about that moment and what happened in those 20 years around the record. Because the record didn't change and recording is static, but the context changed dramatically between '65 and '85, especially in Miami, especially where this club was. So that's something which is a recurring interest for me.

*\*\* In terms of taking historical events and incorporating them into a speculative imaginary, is this something like Afrofuturism?*

MS: Yeah, I mean, for me, Afrofuturism is really just a way of working than a way things look. I think I'm interested in it as about asserting different values. It's how can you create a story or an idea based on these new, different values, and then use that as a kind of playground for imagining something else. That's kind of where that ties into Kelley's idea of a kind of radical imagination.

For me, that's where it really is exciting. Even if you look at, I would call them Black Americans, but at some point they were Negroes, and after that they were Coloured, you know what I mean? A lot of what's been informing my thinking has been really Fred Moten's writing, talking about blackness, it's kind of philosophical. Thinking about the idea of the break that he's talking about in improvisation and in jazz, but looking at this in art, a kind of black aesthetics. There's the cinematographer Arthur Jafa who looks at Black visual intonation. I'm interested in thinking about what does it mean to create a black aesthetics? Taking some of those theoretical positions to maybe answer or just explore them visually.

*\*\* I was interested in the sculptures in the show, which seem to be referencing lighting fixtures on a film set?*

MS: Most of the time I'm referencing specifically lighting, and the sizes of photographs in the stands- those are called cookies. I'm interested in the way that that's part of mise en scene, and kind of setting, really a way of creating affect in an image, and then how can you take that as a formal gesture, and what sort of affect that produces.

I feel like the film set for me is this metonym for the film industry at large, because the C-Stand is kind of this workhorse piece of equipment that's pretty much on every set. It's like a metonym for like the larger complex.

*\*\* Is it your experience in advertising that led you to naming yourself as an entrepreneur? I was interested in that term because I find it has a troubled relationship with the corporate sphere.*

MS: *[Laughs]*. Um, no. What led me to that was getting out of school and not making art. Because the kind of model of an artist that was purported was extremely studio-painter, white-guy oriented. I really came up through a kind of independent music community, everybody had their own labels, booked their own shows. So I went to Chicago knowing that I wanted to open a space like that. And so, for me it was really coming from this idea of self-reliance. I was thinking more about creating structure around the work I wanted to do and the work I wanted to see. But since then, the word itself has become much more tied to kind of the technology sector. I think for me it's just much more about creating resources.\*\*

Matt Williams and Martine Syms, “Martine Syms: Fact & Trouble, A Conversation with Matt Williams”, Institute of Contemporary Art, London: London, April 20, 2016.

FACT

&

TROUBLE

# Martine Syms

## *Fact & Trouble*

### 20 April–19 June 2016

Matt Williams (Curator) in conversation with Martine Syms about her first solo UK institutional exhibition *Fact & Trouble* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.

MW Firstly, can you expand upon why you chose to quote the phrase *Fact & Trouble* from the book *Negroland* by Margo Jefferson for the title of the exhibition?

MS I came across that phrase in the book, which is a memoir, but depression is one of the major themes. I'm interested in this idea of the post-Civil Rights movement as a depression. The Chicago collective Feel Tank influenced my thinking. During their *Annual International Parade of the Politically Depressed*, they had a sign that said, "Depressed? It might be political."

When I read the phrase "Fact & Trouble", it really struck me. It's originally from William James. He describes people's lives as being a sphere of fact and trouble. I was thinking about this gap between a documentary impulse, the construction of an identity, one's "real" life, and the fluidity between these. "Fact and Trouble" encapsulates the idea of troubling the truth or a kind of reality.

MW There doesn't appear to be any ostensible hierarchy in the way that you use various literary or cultural references throughout your

work, instead it projects a sense of ambiguity which also feeds into the way that you use images and video footage. The distinction between personal and appropriated commercial or found footage never feels apparent, is this a consideration when you are developing work?

MS I have always worked with found material to supplement the footage I shot myself. Montage is an important concept for me. I like taking the best of both worlds. I get to use those existing meanings and augment them. I build the story around these shared cultural touch points and create intimacy by representing my own experiences.

MW Your text works suggest a general intonation of empathy, arguably in a similar approach to advertising or church billboards, offering comfort and a connection with specific audiences. When you are researching, do you subconsciously find yourself using texts that have a stylistic feature or employ expressive language to communicate the context of the work?

MS Church signs, self-help books, TED talks, pop songs, and advertising all employ a similar structure. I want my work to have a similar stickiness so I adopt that way of writing. I don't always do it intentionally, but I'm surrounded by it. It gets in my head. I save a lot of references from signage or movies or ads or whatever. I'll take

a picture or write them down but I rarely look at them again. They're internalised. When I start working on a text piece I tend to start very direct, almost didactic, and then I think about how it will work within the set of images. It's also formal. I think about it like editing. We can go back to the idea of montage. It's about the relationship between images and text. How I can create that third meaning.

MW When you enter the exhibition, you are greeted by an immersive visual essay entitled *Misdirected Kiss* (2016), can you tell us more about this work?

MS It's a collage titled *Misdirected Kiss* (2016) that I will also be performing as a lecture at the later this month. Most of my work begins with text, but this is one of the projects where the other materials were primary. My previous show *Vertical Elevated Oblique* was about the way images are embodied, and conversely how people get flattened out through visual regimes. I started collecting videos, music, pictures, and quotes that were "prosthetic memories." I improvised a lecture around these materials. The lecture is generative: it's changed every time I've performed it and this is one snapshot of it.

MW Adjacent to the collage is the ongoing video work *Lessons* (2014-), how did you approach collating and editing this material



when you first started to develop the work?

MS I was inspired by the book *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* by Kevin Young. The book is split into two halves; the first half is about literature and the second half is about music. He articulates five lessons of the tradition that are threaded throughout. Lesson one is “What you claim you are.” Lesson three is “Struggle.” I wanted to make commercials for each lesson. I decided they would be 30 seconds and I followed a set of rules on how to film and edit them. Once I finished the first five I decided there had to be more than five lessons and it continued from there. I was thinking about the advertising commercial as a break. How can I extend that break like it’s done in music? The first time I screened them I saw how they began to accumulate meaning. They are overwhelming. I also showed them to a friend who mentioned *The Cantos* by Ezra Pound. I still haven’t read all of the cantos, but the idea of creating a larger narrative through small stories appealed to me.

MW This is accompanied by the wall text *Lightly, Slightly, Politely*. Where does that phrase originate from? It suggests an intentional open-mindedness that distances itself from being overtly didactic.

MS I found it in Zora Neale Hurston’s slang glossary. It means something done perfectly. It’s one way of being. It’s not the way I am, but maybe a way I’d want to be. It is one of the lessons. I thought it was a good framework for thinking about the idea of tradition and cultural inheritances. The lessons are not aspirational. You know,

maybe they’re not things that everyone will want to do or things that I even do myself but I’ve just decided that these are the lessons of this tradition.

MW The larger of the upper galleries consists of a group of new works presented on a photography studio platform and wall entitled *Belief Strategy* (2016). The works comprise of repurposed filmmaking equipment; with C-Stands as armatures for the images and cucoloris’ (commonly known as cookies) which are devices used to create shadows or silhouettes. Can you tell me more about your thinking behind these works?

MS I want to put the conditions of production and viewing on display. Maybe looking is a better word than viewing. The c-stand is a sign of the entertainment complex. It’s a workhorse piece of equipment that is basically found on every shoot. The cookies are similarly standard. They create the mood and affect of the images that we see. I also reference the formal qualities of light modifiers. I want to bring these objects into the frame. This is another kind of break. I want to expand the moment when an image is created. I don’t believe in a decisive moment. I’m stretching it out. Regardless of whether it’s a commercial or personal photo, I’m interested in the conditional aspects of the image. I’m always thinking about what you’re not supposed to see.

MW How does the ongoing series of works *More Than Some, Less Than Others* correspond with the other works in the exhibition?

MS These are movie posters for each *Lesson*. Each photograph corresponds to one of the lessons.

I shot most of them “on location” as I was making these different videos.

MW Your work to date has attempted to articulate an understanding of the materiality of cultural production and its relationship with black aesthetics, is the ambition of your work to present an alternative historical overview?

MS Photography and film have ethnographic origins. As long as there has been photographic technology it has been used to capture people of colour all over the world. It has been used as a colonial tool. It is impossible to escape the racist beginning of Hollywood as seen in *Birth of a Nation*. I recognize that history. There’s another discourse around film and photography and its conditional relationship to the truth.

Now we’re all carrying cameras all the time. All our devices have cameras on them. Every experience you might have—a concert, a walk in the park, a romantic dinner—somebody is recording it. There are these ambient images. If you think of an image as something that can be read, there’s a vernacular to them. It’s connected to the way the images circulate. I see a link between internet culture and black aesthetics. Especially given the dominance of black cultural production online. I’m trying to make that connection clear.

Martine Syms (b. 1988) is an artist based in Los Angeles. Her artwork has been exhibited and screened extensively, including recent presentations at Karma International, Bridget Donahue Gallery, the New Museum, Kunsthalle Bern, The Studio Museum in Harlem, Index Stockholm, MOCA

**BRIDGET DONAHUE**

Los Angeles and MCA Chicago. She's lectured at Yale University, SXSW, California Institute of the Arts, University of Chicago, Johns Hopkins University and MoMA PS1, among other venues. Upcoming exhibitions include *Made in LA* at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and *Manifesta 11* in Zurich, Switzerland.

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# DAZED

## Martine Syms on LA, coming offline and the language of pop

As the artist and Dazed 100-er opens a new London show, she tells us the formula for evading an identity crisis in the age of social media, TV and celebrity culture

Text **Dalya Benor**



Martine Syms, details of *Misdirected Kiss*, 2016, *Courtesy of the artist*



Drawing upon the influence that television and digital media have on our day-to-day lives, LA-based artist, and Dazed 100-er Martine Syms brings the influence of social media, mass media and advertising to London's ICA for her latest exhibition, *Fact & Trouble*. Confronting the adopted 'traditions' that have subconsciously become a part of global language, Syms believes that, with an infinite wealth of information at our disposal, a shared heritage is no longer limited to a set of passed-down beliefs and rituals, and that the omnipresent 'cultural omnivore' (a term coined in a study by Richard Peterson in 1992) embodies the mix of both high and low cultures that shape the millennial generation. Through this, Syms' work confronts the influence of these cultural elements that have replaced the clearly defined traditions of generations past.

Flipping cultural stereotypes on their heads, Syms' work riffs on the nuanced symbols of communication through movement and performance. As her work spans every medium from poetry to video art and live performance, her self-titled moniker of 'conceptual entrepreneur' ensures that she transcends any singular format or category.

With past shows at Bridget Donahue Gallery, New Museum and Walker Art Center alongside work for companies such as mega-fashion retailer Nasty Gal, Syms has journeyed far and wide through the landscape of art and commerce. She also runs her own publishing house called *Dominica*, an imprint which commissions original books from artists. If an identity crisis is on your 21st-century to-do list, fear not – the 'cherry-picking' tendency of our time is the fluid formula that Syms so richly celebrates.

**“There’s an assumption that if you don’t have black figures, you’re not being political, and I disagree with that – it bothers me when people say that” –  
Martine Syms**

**A lot of your work has to do with communication and the way language is used culturally. How do you think the American mode of communication and vernacular, in particular, has informed your work?**

**Martine Syms:** I think it's just my native tongue – so, pop culture and advertising. I often talk about book songwriting and literature, which is native to me. I have an interest in how those things construct identities. Part of my interest in being curious in how the show will be received in London is also thinking about the way those things are exported and circulate and change based on other local cultures. The immediate thing is just my native way of speaking.

**Did growing up in LA play a role in your interest in film? Is the city itself a backdrop at all to your work?**

**Martine Syms:** Definitely. There's an uncanniness to living in Los Angeles, from the way you move through the city to the moments of feeling familiarity or *deja vu*, like you've been somewhere or you know something when you really don't. You've seen an image of it multiple times so you're familiar with it that way. I can think of being a kid and going to Missouri, where my parents are from, and telling people I was from Los Angeles, and (people) thinking of beaches and surfing and asking if I surfed, which is very different from where I grew up, which was inland. Or Hollywood and how people think of it who actually haven't been there and know how sleazy it is. Those are the things I like about the city – this gap between the reality and the representation. I find that to be a really productive space for me. I don't feel on display at all here and I can kind of be left to my own devices. I'm not thinking about what everyone's making or showing or who's doing what. I'm able to do the work I want to do here.

**Did you grow up with any traditions or practices that have influenced your work?**

**Martine Syms:** I didn't really grow up with any traditions. I grew up in a pretty liberal household in southern California. I think that's part of my interest in thinking about heritage. I don't have a second language or cultural heritage in that way. I also think that Los Angeles as a city is kind of new. As a city, there's history to it, but the facade that you see is very new and contemporary. My thinking is that, in lieu of an official history, one of the things that you take on as your own is popular culture, which can function as a prosthetic memory or public imagination.

**Do you think your work will be received differently in London than in America?**

**Martine Syms:** I don't think it will be too different, just because a lot of the things I'm referencing – for one, within the African diaspora there are shared cultural phases that are global. Not to discount the differences from place to place, but I do think there are things that are shared. Many of the things I talk about do kind of circulate and have this currency. Part of what I'm interested in is how those things acquire meaning and value, once they're taken on personally. There won't be references that someone in London wouldn't understand. I never know how a show is going to be received, but that's what is fun about it for me. I get to just think of this stuff and then put it out into the world, which is always a surprise. It's really regenerative for me, seeing what people take from it.

**Are there any female artists whose work you've really been inspired by?**

**Martine Syms:** Pipilotti Rist is a Swiss video artist I learned about pretty early on. She's one of the first contemporary artists I knew about and was really drawn to.

**A lot of your work talks about female and racial issues. How do you go about addressing those topics without being pigeonholed?**

**Martine Syms:** I never go about trying to address those overt issues. It's more that there are some set things that I'm interested in learning more about. That's usually what drives me. I try not to get too concerned with the pigeonholing. On one hand, obviously no one wants to be given restrictions on what they can and can't do or what kind of work they make. It's not so much of a problem for me. There's a big audience of people who would be interested in work, whether it's from a 'black female' perspective or a 'feminist' perspective or work that doesn't include any of that. Remarking on that, I've used a lot of black figures (in my work), and the same work without those figures wouldn't be interpreted that way. Part of my real interest is in this idea of convention. There's an assumption that, if you don't have black figures, you're not being political, and I disagree with that – it bothers me when people say that.

**What about your interest in poetry, is that something you've always been drawn to?**

**Martine Syms:** No, it's very recent. I always thought poetry was kind of corny. This book by the poet Kevin Young is something I've been interested in, as well as a few modern poets, like EE Cummings or Lyn Hejinian. Poetry has been a new interest that parallels the way I write and put together some of my videos. The pieces in the ICA show I describe as an 'incomplete poem', with different parts. Each video is tied to a sentence, which are almost like stanzas when I piece them together. Right now there are 80, but I'm working towards 180.

**“I think that the way people are constructing themselves via social media has taken on Hollywood cues” – Martine Syms**

**Poetry is a format that has lost its cultural cache, but it's interesting to see how you've appropriated it.**

**Martine Syms:** Part of that is driven by digital media and the way that language is used and compressed online, from Twitter to comments, to a text message – these are all short-form. People working with that compression and trying to convey their meaning and style and mood inadvertently is how my interest in it got started. It is kind of inadvertently poetic.

**You work across so many different media, but is there one that makes it easier to communicate certain ideas or topics?**

**Martine Syms:** I think the medium or format of distributing things has its own characteristics. I think that an exhibition can communicate certain things that a video can't, and publications communicate that in a different way. For me, it's about this one line of enquiry I'm following. Different things I choose for different formats. I might write an essay, another thing might be presented more in a lecture format, another thing might be in a video. I try to have it so that they all accumulate towards a larger meaning and whatever that goal is. I also think about it as kind of a montage. My background really is in film, it's what I went to school for. Viewing things through that lens and thinking about the idea of montage and how placing things together creates a 'third', which is something that I think a lot about. I'm putting together an exhibition

which is described as an installation of collage, but montage is more appropriate in my mind – it's an edit of different material. I want people to be in the space and think about the way they encounter things and the order across a sequence of how you would do them, I'm thinking about a way to communicate my meaning through that – the way you encounter and move through the space.

**There's an element of self-referentiality in film, especially with performance work. It seems like it's easier to communicate the ideas you want to get across.**

**Martine Syms:** Yeah, definitely. There's a directness, and there's this great quote I've been thinking a lot about from an artist called William Pope.L in a catalogue he did for a show in Chicago – he talks about the idea of 'liveness' – the idea of modes of production, especially in a screen-based world. That's something I've been thinking about – improvisation is another thing – as this driver. Some of the more recent work I've been doing is this lecture I've improvised based on images, video and text. I think you have this directness and intimacy that you don't have in other ways. You can really exploit your narrative, linear or nonlinear, whatever it is.

**It's interesting that you mention improvisation and directness. We're in a digital age where so much of our identity is constructed and you lose that sense of spontaneity. It's quite different to deliver something publicly and have your audience digest that in real-time.**

**Martine Syms:** I think that the way people are constructing themselves via social media has taken on Hollywood cues. From the way people pose to the story they tell about themselves. I'm really fascinated by that – I guess I'm guilty of it. More recently, I've been thinking about the way I'm doing that and how it matches up really closely to archetypes and conventional narratives such as rom-com or sitcom. That's something I really explore a lot. In the video I did for a show at the New Museum, it was *A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere*. The Lessons I did at the ICA show are sort of commercials because they're 30 seconds long. I'm playing off of those conventions and they're already preexisting, like using readymades.



**Martine Syms, still from Lessons V, 2014, *Courtesy of the artist***

**Do you feel pressure to submit to this era of social media and posting online?**

**Martine Syms:** Not pressure, more just my own addiction. I've been slowly on a deprogramming regimen. It's been happening for several years. I'm still on Twitter, it's probably the one I'm most addicted to. The internet has changed so much, even in my lifetime as place to share things and put my work on. It's causing me an existential crisis because it was such a home to me for so long, that I feel a bit alienated by it right now.



**Can you talk about your publishing house and how it supports your work?**

**Martine Syms:** In Chicago I had a project space/bookshop called Golden Age. I initiated exhibition programs and organized shows where we would make a book or a zine for each one. When we stopped doing Golden Age, that was still the part I was still the most excited about. When I moved back to LA, I was kind of like, *do I want to start another space?* And imagining what that would be like. I decided I was most excited about commissioning other artists and getting them to realise projects. Since 2012, I've been doing Dominica and publishing one or two books per year. Almost everything is newly commissioned, which is most exciting for me, working with artists I'm inspired by and seeing what they're doing. That's kind of how it starts – I just approach people and try to develop projects with them that make sense for a book publication format.

**Can you tell us about your upcoming show at the ICA and how that happened?**

**Martine Syms:** The primary cornerstone of the exhibition is a series of 30-second videos called Lessons, that are conceived as being commercials for traditions, which is kind of loosely defined. It started as a commission from the Walker Art Center. I did a talk there, which was organised around five *Lessons* that were in a book by Kevin Young called *The Grey Album*. I started making an ad for each of these. When I was working on them, I realised there were more than just these five 'lessons' and started making more of these videos. They range in tone and texture, but each one explores the idea of black radical tradition – as much in terms of the way I was making it – the process – as the content that was within it. Those will be at the Mall Gallery. There will also be a wall painting that surrounds the videos with two monitors set up that will play the *Lessons*. I wanted this multiplicity of images to feel like an overwhelming amount. There's a digital essay which focuses on familial emphasis and putting yourself into a tradition or thinking about what that might mean.

**What do you do when you lack the inspiration to keep yourself working?**

**Martine Syms:** I like to go on couple-mile walks around LA. People always say nobody ever walks here, but I don't think that's true. If I feel stuck, I just start wandering around.

*Martine Syms: Fact & Trouble opens at the ICA on April 20. Upcoming exhibitions include Made in LA at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and Manifesta 11 in Zurich, Switzerland. Syms will be speaking at the ICA on April 22 – tickets are available here. The artist will also participate in the ICA Artists' Film Biennial, a five-day celebration of film and moving image, from May 25–29*

Lauren Mackler, “Introduction: Martine Syms, A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere”, *Vdrome*, April 17, 2016.

**Vdrome**

# MARTINE SYMS A PILOT FOR A SHOW ABOUT NOWHERE

*A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere* uses the premise of a pitch and the formula of Sitcom to deliver an essay on representation, self-presentation, viewership and embedded codes, as they exist on the American screen. All this, paced by commercial interruptions as Lessons, with the same stakes in hand.

## A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere

2015, Two-channel video, color, sound, 24:29 minutes

## Introduced by Lauren Mackler

Episode = Familiar Status Quo => Ritual error made => Ritual lesson Learned => Familiar Status Quo

**You are watching a pitch, an essay, a trial.** And though you are not specifically on trial, you are complicit; your complicity is what makes it work. “It” is television’s role as a mirror of our concerns, our moral commons, our public display of values. What you are watching begins and ends with the pitch: *SHE MAD is a half hour comedy about what it means to be an adult against the backdrop of Los Angeles’ Creative Industry. It follows a young ambitious black woman, and her friends, as they try to create the lives they want and deal with the unrealistic goals that they, and society have set.*

In *A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere*, Martine Syms uses the premise of pitching a new television sitcom in order to deliver an essay on the representation of Black Americans on the American household screen. The video opens on a split composition: on one side the narrator-character-director is facing you, though not watching you, she is cleaning-up her inbox which is on the other side of the screen, exposed. She is speaking to someone off-camera (you?). The video is POV of her smart-device and, in the tradition of the cold open, she will set up her name, job, interests, and location before the title sequence begins. All this information happens to be almost biographical for Syms. It is a show about a young woman living in Los Angeles, trying to make it as an artist, by a young woman living in Los Angeles making it as an artist.

*“None of that Hollywood shit.”*

Using the formula of a sitcom episode as scaffolding, *A Pilot* begins with an introduction, is cast of archetypal characters, is 22 minutes long plus commercial breaks, and ends where it began. The feature presentation combines low-resolution YouTube clips of historical and contemporary television shows, as well as low-fi live-action scenes shot by Syms. The commercial interruptions, also a mix of found and shot, are a separate body of work the artist calls *Lessons*, which have also been exhibited separately: the pilot/video-essay and the *Lessons* are two bodies of work, intertwined.

## 1. American Television

American television and film are debatably its largest and most ideology-laden exports. While most countries have their own local and culturally specific programming, the reach of US entertainment is staggering, especially when you consider that it is broadcasting an illustration of family life and personal relationships that is so profoundly, well, North American; and that the American family is an idea that has been shifting with each generation, and each administration, at a pace that other nations, with more deeply embedded family models, tend not to follow. Regardless, this entertainment industry has consistently used humor, broad strokes, lack of complexity or very selective complexity to create a paradigm, which the public can use as a mirror and a template to reflect / project, changing belief systems and national self-image. In conversation with Syms, she notes that for an American audience, television exerts a powerful pull and often acts as a kind of “proof.” If it happened on television, an event gains authority. Television is its viewers shared experience, it facilitates a publicly agreed upon “normal.”

The sitcom, short for “situation comedy,” is structured around this very idea of the common: It involves a reoccurring cast of types, who share a space or a circumstance, domestic or professional. In each episode the characters begin in status quo, are subjected to a plot, and then return to status quo. Nothing changes. Each iteration’s obstacle is topical and contained entirely in the allocated time. It is not repeated (as opposed to real life problems, which tend to be more, let’s say *reoccurring*.) Sitcom characters do not evolve; growing is more conducive to the nuanced narrative building of drama. Through consistency and by means of repetition, these characters enroot stereotypes.

In tracing sitcom history, Syms highlights the fraught and often violent history of black representation on the American screen, one that begins before the screen, with minstrelsy. Minstrel shows, which date back to the late 18th century, consisted of white actors wearing blackface makeup and performing their interpretation of black life at the time. Composed of a three-act structure mingling song, pun-filled speech, and skits, minstrel shows were riddled with racist stereotypes and stock characters. They are considered to be one of the first distinctly American forms of theater and embody the racism, oppression, and abuse at the root of North American culture.

*A Pilot* sketches sitcom evolution through three seasons of television. The first corresponds to the 1970-1971 years of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Sanford and Son*, when the sitcom became a vehicle for addressing gender taboos, or as Syms notes, gave “visibility to a private black sphere” previously largely unseen. Secondly, the 1988 television season marked the rise of the cable drama and the proliferation of black sitcoms like *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World*, which used the safe, lighthearted frame of the half-hour comedy to address big ticket issues such as racial stereotyping, sexism, and AIDS. Lastly, the 2006 television season which showcases baring-the-device shows, such as *The Bernie Mac Show*, a series by a comedian, about a comedian in which the narrator regularly breaks the fourth wall. This third era also marks the transition from the television set to computer screens. Viewers are now in control of what they are consuming, seeking it out actively, packaging their own experience. Watching actors perform themselves, goes hand in hand with a growing trend of the audience’s self-performativity.

## 2. Self-Performing / Twice-Behaving



Self-performing is second nature to the present-day citizen. Social media platforms allow us to *curate* our public image on a daily basis and *on the air*, because we are in control of not just the picture but also its distribution. We are a product in flux. In the opening of this video Syms, our narrator, establishes herself: she is facing us, she speaks to us, but as the video progresses she is followed by an array of other faces, confronting the camera as well, speaking directly into it at times, in a range of tones. “Each person featured on screen is a proxy for me,” says Syms in an interview. Like a stand-up comedian, she uses her life as a guide but weaves in “historical narratives and tropes from popular culture.” In the end, the voices all come together coherently but imply a collectivity that is indefinable by “style,” tone, or “brand.”

“Style schmyle.” says writer/painter Percival Everett in a recent interview when asked about his writerly-range. Storytelling is part of an economic system, and creating a fixed style or persona is a marketing exercise. Though in fact, the bold strokes of logo-making appear comparable to the historical archetypes we thought we were leaving behind. Pointedly, Syms’ fictional show is titled “*SHE MAD*,” recalling the angry black woman stereotype constructed by, amongst others, the early sitcom *Amos ‘n’ Andy*; a stereotype whose nefarious effects have included, over time, the delegitimizing the very real, very anger-provoking realities of a black woman’s experience in America.

The commercial breaks stress this range further through their non-sequitur collage of ideas and voices. Characters “question the value of representation;” watch television (creating an infinite regress of watching and being watched, of passively becoming the characters on screen.) They mock the manipulative selectiveness of advertising, telling us who the viewer *should* be through the carefully targeted products selected for this time-slot: “black soap,” power yoga, biz-lit, together paint a portrait of the viewer. Reversely at times, the commercials become a testing ground, a consumer survey, a focus group that is content-gathering with demographic-defining cues:

“Complete the following sentence:

-I am a person who...

-Ever since I was a child...

-It’s hard for me to admit...”

That there is more than one proxy in Syms’ *A Pilot*, stresses the artifice of the seemingly un-staged candid expressions, which are in reality, self-consciously staged, and come closer to what theater- critics call “twice-behaving” or performing a performance. Behaving, which implies etymologically to “be,” and to “have” hold of yourself independent of context, is of course, contextual. When asked how she would begin working with an artist, Maxine Powell, etiquette instructor and Motown Records Charm Coach, answered: “First, who are you and what makes you tick. [...] Then get rid of all your hang ups.” The rules of presentation for the Motown artists involved a kind of forgetting, a learning to present oneself within an existing and unemotional protocol. Behaving, not-behaving, performing, not-performing these are all questions Claudia Rankine’s characters contend with in her book *Citizen, An American Lyric* which recounts in vignettes, a collective set of everyday aggressions in the supposedly liberal landscape of American academia. Behaving in these vignettes implies following the script, performing, often with interior consequences. By extension, not-performing, not-behaving, is upsetting an existing ecosystem, this time with exterior consequences. “The study of blackness is inseparable from the study of performance.” Says Fred Moten, “Non-performance is a problematic of decor, of a refusal to decorate, to embellish tastefully.”

### 3. Audience / Codes

A “situation” implies a “commons” a commonality of experience. When asked about the “politics of identity” in her work, Syms responds “I think less about myself as a black artist than I do about making work for a black viewer. I think a lot about the ideal viewer / reader / listener / user, and how assumptions about who they are and what they want influence aesthetic choices in pop culture. I usually out myself in reference or language or appearance, but I see an opportunity to be vague about blackness, to refuse an identity by

shifting focus from author to audience.” Creating an audience is creating a context, a scenario in which this discourse is no longer forced to be the discourse of “the other,” as artist Charles Gaines recently described to Syms in a conversation. A community is not just a geography and a blood-line, it is a collective history of connotations, a set of codes. Not to say that two (or more) different communities cannot watch the same content, but as Syms reminds you (the viewer of *A Pilot*) of the sub-content, the undertow of the narratives in *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* “a secret hidden in plain sight, Will was not talking to *you*, he was talking to *me*.”

Syms’ intended audience in *A Pilot* is unreliable, just as she is an unreliable narrator. In one instance the audience is assumed to be in the know and references are unexplained. In another, she gives her audience an outsider’s breakdown. This uncertainty is key to watching *A Pilot*, nothing here is a given. In either case Syms is petitioning the viewer’s empathy: a layered read of the project, through layers that are intellectual as much as optical. *Why do you watch what you watch?* In the 2014 pilot for *Black-ish* the voice-over narration opens, skeptically, “Whatever American had *this* American Dream probably wasn’t where I’m from.”

#### 4. American Business

*“Nobody ever told me that America is business and without business you will have nothing and be nothing, and nobody ever told me how to organize business so that I would be able to develop institutions in my own community. So now the sincerity, the sincerity, of all of the education has to be questioned, indicted and convicted.”*

Though this pilot and its pitch are fictions, not intended for a real skewer of Hollywood execs, Syms’ role as an entrepreneur, and the entrepreneurialism implied in writing and pitching a pilot, is an important part of her practice as an artist. The mutual absorption of business into art and art into business is a conceptually interesting proposition to her. This particular kind of entrepreneurialism on-screen is empowered not only by creating watchable content but also by creating a community out of its viewers. Syms’ content is didactic in the most productive way: didactic and experiential, pointed while elliptical.

Syms’ choice of the sitcom as subject matter and structure is incisive. As Jack Halberstam reminds us in his introduction to *The Undercommons: Fugitive planning & Black Study* “It ends as it begins, in motion, in between various modes of being and belonging [...] because this book is not a prescription for repair.” This disclaimer is petitioning for the provisional, for identifying not solving, as a radical place. *A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere* is not a prescription, but it is a series of lessons, embedded in a larger lesson, wrapped up in easy-watching, because one thing we certainly know how to do is watch. Watch this video, and then watch it again, and then watch it again.

#### Credits

Directed by Martine Syms  
Edited by Marco Braunschweiler  
Music by Anthony Iamurri



Martine Syms, "Portfolio: Martine Syms", *Frieze*, April 11, 2016, <https://frieze.com/article/portfolio-martine-syms?language=en>.

# frieze



INFLUENCES - 11 APR 2016

## Portfolio: Martine Syms

BY MARTINE SYMS

A Twitter academic, a science fiction writer and a Wells Fargo debit card: Martine Syms shares some images that are important to her

On my desktop is a folder named MOOD; its icon is a purple Chicago Bulls logo.

Two years ago I started dragging files into it in preparation for a parody site I was working on called 'FubuWeb'. (A pilot version of FubuWeb can be viewed [here](#).) Since then, I've collected conceptual writing, electronic music, ethnopoetics, videos and other documents. My MOOD folder catalogues the vagaries of my interests better than anything else. Below are a few highlights.





All images courtesy: the artist

### Woman with a Video Camera

I found this image at the Altadena Historical Society while I was researching for my short story '[Solitude](https://canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/solitude)' <<https://canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/solitude>>. The science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler inspired the main character, and I came across this photograph in her 'people file'. It documents a public reading and book signing at a black feminist bookstore in the 1980s. The women organized the signing, publicized it and shot it for posterity. I wish I could get hold of that footage.



**The Public Archive** @public\_archive · Dec 1

Let me tweet like a cultural theorist for a moment: Police cams will only intensify the visual regimes spectacularizing Black death.



30



34



A Tweet from 1 December, 2014

'The Public Archive <[https://twitter.com/public\\_archive](https://twitter.com/public_archive)>' is one of my favorite academics. I've learned more from him over Twitter than I ever did in college.

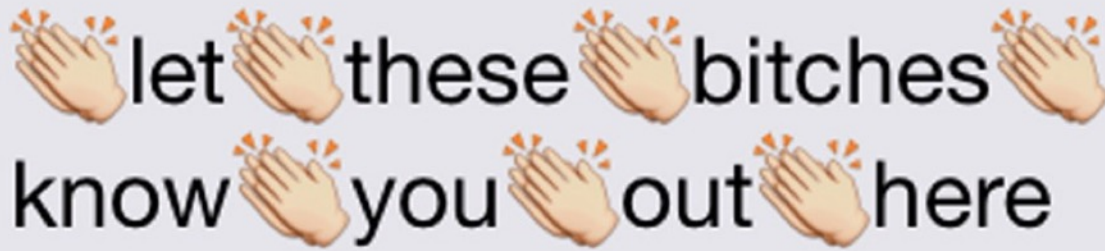
When he posted this tweet I stopped scrolling, hit *command + shift + 3*, read it several times to make sure I understood it, and then slid into those DMs for some recommended reading. *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (2000) is a good place to start if you want to learn more.



### I BE THINKIN TOO

George Wallace was an OK guest on *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*, but he wore this hat so he wins. It's available on his [website <http://www.georgewallace.net/store/products/test-product/>](http://www.georgewallace.net/store/products/test-product/). There's a shirt too.





👏 let 👏 these 👏 bitches 👏  
know 👏 you 👏 out 👏 here

### Motivational Text Messages

From my diary:

I just read this essay called 'Coalition Politics' (1983) by Bernice Johnson Reagon and it has given me a completely new idea about my engagement to the art world. Like, if I think about the art world as a coalition, as a moral and political economy that I'm in, then it all makes sense. It is not my home. It a place where I do the work I need to do. The work I *feel* I need to do.

*'Coalition work is not work done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets. And it is some of the most dangerous work you can do. And you shouldn't look for comfort. Some people will come to a coalition and they rate the success of the coalition on whether or not they feel good when they get there. They're not looking for a coalition; they're looking for a home!'*

I got a home and it ain't contemporary art nawmean.





...Out ...Into this world ...This world

Every morning you should watch the made-for-television performance of Samuel Beckett's *Not I* (1972), which was broadcast by the BBC in 1990 and stars the mouth of Billie Whitelaw. It's only 15 minutes long.

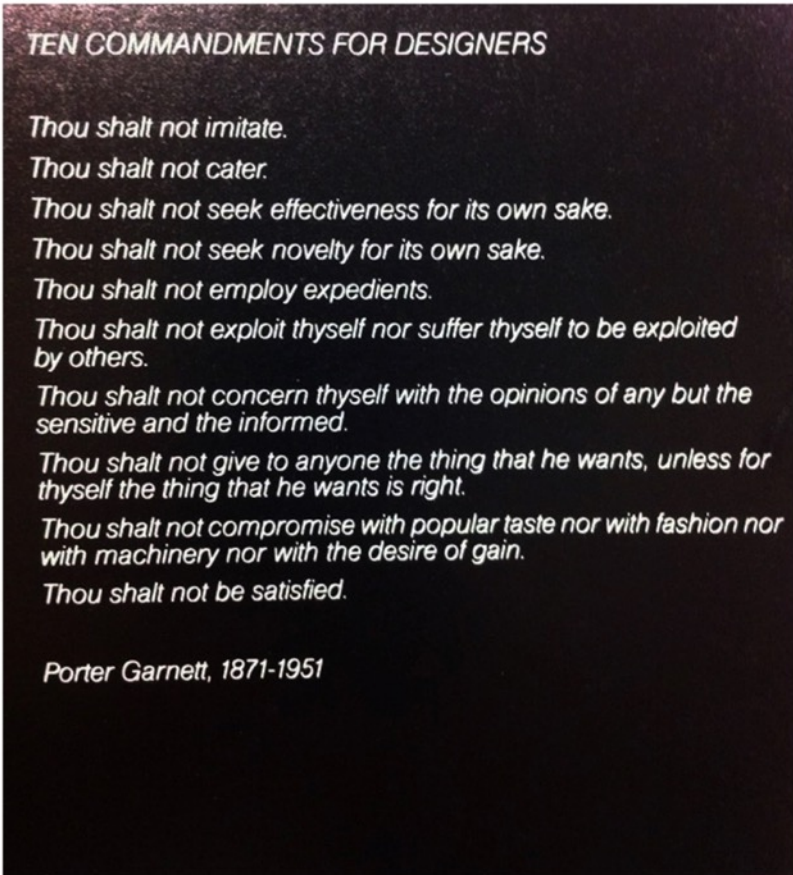
When I joined Wells Fargo they said I could put a photo of my family on my debit card. I uploaded an image of Whitelaw's mouth.



### **Who is Bertha Regustus?**

My current obsession is the 1907 short-film *Laughing Gas* – I’m working on a remake. I’ve been trying to learn everything I can about Bertha Regustus, who plays Mandy, the film’s star. Neither the Library of Congress nor the Thomas A. Edison Papers at Rutgers University provided any leads, but I’m not surprised: archives don’t care about black people.

If you know something they don’t know, hit me up.



### Thou Shalt Suck My Grits

Porter Garnett's laws are printed on the back of one of Esprit's brand books. I don't remember which it comes from; it's either *Graphic Work 1984-1986* or *Esprit: The Comprehensive Design Principle*. If you have USD\$500 and an eBay account you can find out.

The most important rules are #6 and #7. I like to surround myself with the sensitive and the informed.

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### MARTINE SYMS

Martine Syms is an artist and entrepreneur based in Los Angeles, USA. She is the founder of Dominica, a small press dedicated to 'nowhere shit'. Her artwork has been exhibited and screened extensively, including recent presentations at Karma International, LA, Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York, the New Museum, Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland, Index Stockholm, Sweden, MOCA Los Angeles and MCA Chicago. Syms has also lectured at Yale University, California Institute of the Arts, University of Chicago, Johns Hopkins University and MoMA PS1, amongst other venues. From 2007–11, she directed Golden Age, a Chicago-based project space focused on printed matter. Her solo exhibition 'Fact & Trouble' opens at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, on 18 April, and her work will be included in 'Made in LA: a, the, though, only', Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, in June.



Essence Harden, "Edification of the Box: Martine Syms at Human Resources LA", *SFAQ*, February 23, 2016, <http://sfaq.us/2016/02/edification-of-the-box-martine-syms-at-human-resources-la/>

# SFAQ / NYAQ / AQ

## INTERNATIONAL ARTS AND CULTURE

REVIEW

## EDIFICATION OF THE BOX: MARTINE SYMS AT HUMAN RESOURCES LA

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ESSENCE HARDEN — FEBRUARY 23, 2016



Martine Syms, still from *Black Box*, 2016. Video installation. Courtesy of Human Resources LA.

[Martine Syms: \*Black Box\*](#)

Human Resources Los Angeles

410 Cottage Home, Los Angeles, CA 90012

February 6 – 27, 2016

Martine Syms latest project, *Black Box* (2016), situates the screen as an omnipresent poetic figure. By screen I mean quite literally the projected images from VHS tapes, the Internet/computer, self-montages, television shows, family video, advertisements, and everything else that exists in the realm of representation as a light-emitted record. Syms projects a series of 60 recordings—each running 30 seconds—onto the three walls of the Human Resources main gallery. As part of Syms's larger project *Lessons*, an incomplete and continuous poem of 180 sections, *Black Box* posits the quotidian as an indispensable source of edification.



**Martine Syms, still from *Black Box*, 2016. Video installation. Courtesy of Human Resources LA.**

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A massive image of the opening sequence of *Oprah* dominates the left screen; she walks through the streets of Chicago in the early 1990s and freezes a smile at the audience. Thirty seconds later, the screen to the right projects a black man raptured by another screen off camera. We faintly hear an announcer relaying sports plays and watch the man lean forward with exclamation cheering for what we cannot see. The video dims and the center screen lights up with a high school marching band bending down a Los Angeles street. The black man watching the sporting event appears suddenly to our right again and then a still of the words “Video is Feminine” in 1980s typeface is on the left. Filling the wall, a blurry video of the television show *Girlfriends* is crossed by a VHS recording of a family banquet, tables of black elders adorned in Sunday's best, eating and drinking while looking sincerely annoyed and/or confused at the camera's presence. This is *Black Box*: a series of non-linear videos and stills which function as a new narrative of lyrical structure. Syms's work has generally been a query and contestation of propriety within art and art forms (The “Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto” is a great example of this). With *Black Box*, Syms disaggregates the narrative mode of poetry by a re-assimilation of videos and stills that place blackness—as self, as representation, and as sound—and media as sources of poetic prose.



Martine Syms, *Black Box*, 2016. Video installation. Photo Credit: Essence Harden

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Syms signifies the screen as a rapturing physicality—as her projections literally encapsulate the space and situate the audience at center, in the dark, leaning and laying on pillows and friends, not sure where to look next. *Black Box*, then, is a lesson in the everyday in which Sister Souljah, city lights, and the flipping hair of an animated black girl are discourses that teach.



Martine Syms, still from *Black Box*, 2016. Video installation. Courtesy of Human Resources LA.

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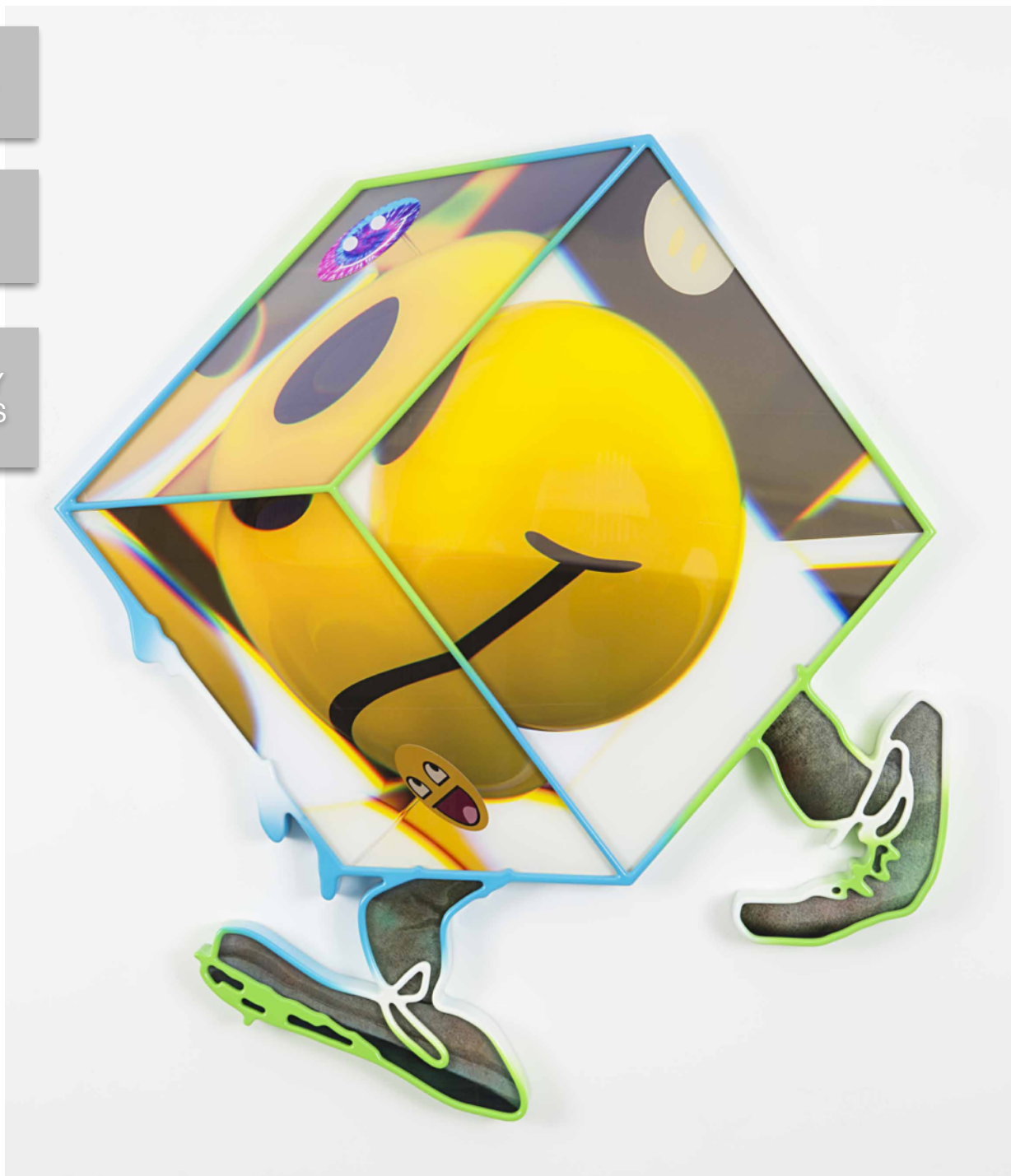
Hanne Mugaas and Martine Syms, “Martine Syms”, *Kaleidoscope*, February 18, 2016, Issue #26.

# KALEIDOSCOPE

SUPERIMAGES

ROUNDTABLE

MODERATED BY  
HANNE MUGASS



What does “iconic” mean today? Is it something that can be boiled down to an Instagram square-cropped image? If so, is there any room left for the conceptual? Are image resolution, photo documentation, or uniqueness still a concern? Are social media feeds a hassle or an opportunity? A group of artists whose work reconsiders the status of the image discuss notions of taste, impact, exposure, fetishism, titillation and sympathy in the age of memes, watermarks and clickbait.

A close-up photograph of a hand with a dark skin tone, palm up, holding the word "UOENO" in large, white, sans-serif capital letters. The hand is positioned as if it is presenting or supporting the text. The background is a solid, deep purple color.

# UOENO

*Martine Syms (American, b. 1988) is an artist and conceptual entrepreneur who lives and works in Los Angeles, where she runs Dominica publishing. She is represented by Bridget Donahue, New York. Upcoming solo exhibitions will open at Karma International, Los Angeles in March and at the ICA, London, in April. She will be included in the Hammer Museum's "Made In L.A. Biennial", Los Angeles, this June.*

## MARTINE SYMS

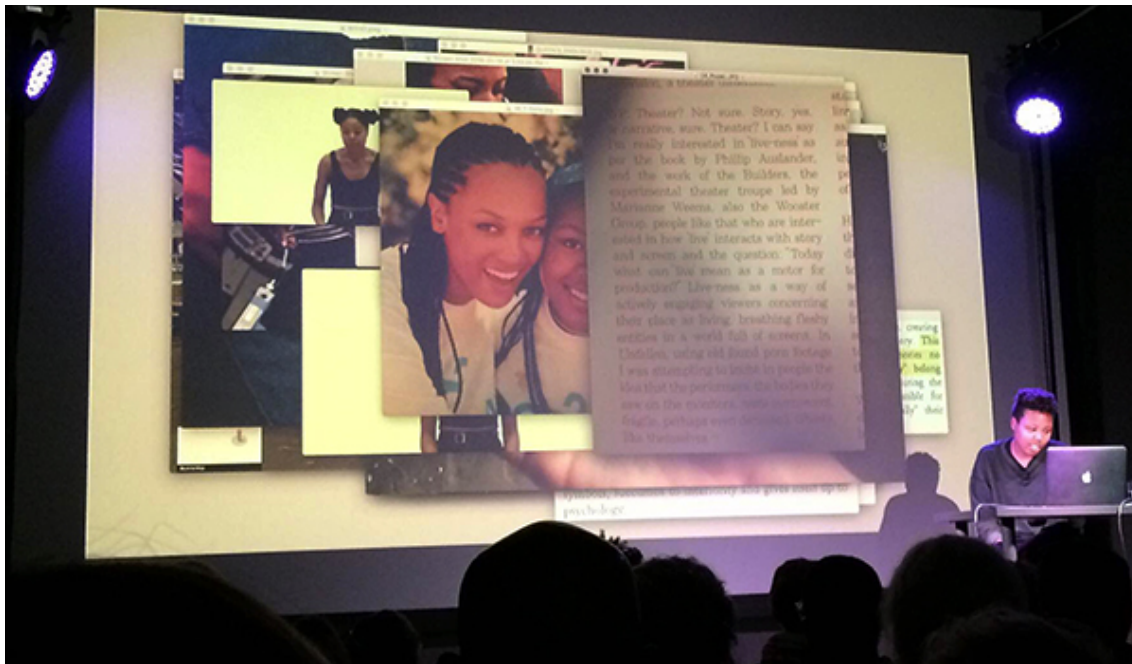
I want my work to be seductive. It has to boom. I want people to stare at it with mouths agape, kind of like how Lionel Richie looked at Kanye West at the 2015 Brit Awards. If you want to feel a picture, it's working. A few examples: Sam Cooke on Ed Sullivan, Grace Jones's Island Life cover, Emmet Till's body, Mary J. Blige in the "Not Gon' Cry" video, LL Cool J for Gap (and Fubu), the poster for Coffy, the Soft & Beautiful Just For Me no-lye relaxer packaging, Tray- von Martin's hoodie, Jennifer Holiday at the 1982 Tony Awards, Michael Jordan's "Failure" commercial for Nike. Images become iconic through circulation. I have to save it, look at it everyday, share it with everyone I know, remake it and, ultimately, embody it. I find the best images at the Slauson Swap Meet.

Catherine Damman, “Syms’s City”, *Artforum*, February 9, 2016, <http://artforum.com/slant/id=58051>.

# ARTFORUM

## Syms’s City

02.09.16



Martine Syms, *Misdirected Kiss*, 2016. Performance view, The Broad, Los Angeles, January 21, 2016. Photo: Dori Scherer.

**QUEEN LATIFAH** looks at the camera, smiling with lips lined, hair pressed, blazer on. A headshot from her days starring as Khadijah James in the 1990s FOX sitcom *Living Single*, the image’s caption betrays an earlier, discarded title for the show: “My Girls.”

To whom, in fact, do these girls belong? The artist Martine Syms calls photos like this—purchased on eBay and at flea markets—a type of “prosthetic memory,” a means of claiming a past that is not, conventionally speaking, your own. Speaking to an audience at The Broad in Los Angeles, Syms tells us that the term (from cultural historian Alison Landsberg) has been rechristened by her friend, artist Steffani Jemison, as “weave memory.”

From a virtual backstage, Syms drags the source, a video clip, into the fore of a collage she’s arranging on the projected screen. Vine user DisforDivinee—like Queen Latifah before her—looks directly at the camera, at us. Hands running



through her twists, she says, “I go to work and all the white ladies say ‘I love your hair, it’s so long,’ ” brows furrowing as she stretches the vowels in “love” and “so” into a mock-beatific drawl. Cut to: “It’s mine, I bought it!” a declaration tinted with both exasperation and more than just a hint of glee. It’s a capitalist model of ownership, to be sure, but one that feels radical nonetheless.

Without sound, these six seconds loop over and over again, becoming a silent refrain as the performative lecture moves associatively on. Syms riffs on photos of her aunt (affectionately known as “Bunt”) and the afterlife of a 1968 James Taylor lyric (“there’s something in the way she moves”), as it was borrowed first by George Harrison, then by a 2001 made-for-TV movie, and compressed still further into the title of yet another film, about a female dancer trying to break into the male-dominated world of stepping.

Backflips from that film, *How She Move* (2007), become a kaleidoscopic background for yet another layer of Syms’s onscreen choreography. This time it’s the 1907 Edison-produced gag film, *Laughing Gas*, starring Bertha Regustus. After a dose of nitrous oxide, her character’s uninhibited, uncontrollable laughter traverses the city in a racialized spectacle that is also contagious, inducing those around her to laugh along too.

Next we hear from Maxine Powell, giving a 1986 interview about her role as the self-appointed head of Motown Records’s “charm school” in the ’60s, a program aimed at getting the artists out of the so-called chitlin’ circuit and into “first-rate” (read: white) venues. In her impeccably tailored suit and hat, Powell admonishes, “Class will turn the heads of kings and queens.” In the audience, heads both nodded and rolled, well-schooled in respectability’s nefarious double-bind.

Even as she delves into the current vogue for “power poses” in the corporate world, Syms’s own body language is casual, in control. Her voice alternates from deadpan delivery to a tone of collusion, divulging childhood artifacts as if they were secrets. (A photo of the artist as a preteen at “T-Zone,” the summer camp for girl empowerment run by supermodel Tyra Banks, elicits both giggles and recognition.)

Among these confessions were Syms’s own “rules for presentation,” which include a three-step process of hair conditioning, a mandate to “be scuffed” (i.e. not too polished), and, when in public, an imperative to read books with obfuscating titles. These rules for self-care are also a kind of self-governance, both a luxury and a form of defense. As with most things, Audre Lorde said it first and said it best, caring for the self can be an act of political warfare.

Rife with Vines, GIFs, and other media signatures, Syms’s work is rightly considered as that of a digital native. But perhaps more than the techniques of the contemporary observer, it is those of the twenty-first-century art student that shape her oeuvre most.

What is a “performative lecture” after all? Perhaps it is merely a marketing ploy, bound up with the institutionalization of performance and the museum’s growing voracity for public programming, but the form is also emphatically related to the professionalization of artists of Syms’s generation: so trained in theory, studio visits, crits. They are so good at talking about their work, which, like Syms’s practice, is increasingly research-based. (Syms received her BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2007 and is an MFA candidate at Bard College.) Besides a whole lot of debt, the cynic might ask: What is art school but a kind of finishing school anyway?

Syms both masters and subverts that training. Laced with ambivalence—like the artist’s self-designation as a “conceptual entrepreneur”—her work both slakes our thirst and denies it, hews to our expectations and then cleaves brilliantly away.

— Catherine Damman

*Martine Syms’s Misdirected Kiss was organized by Jennifer Doyle and ran January 21 at The Broad in Los Angeles. Her exhibition “Black Box” is on view through February 27th at Human Resources LA.*

Laura McLean-Ferris, “Language, gesture and black identity”, *Frieze*, January - February 2016, Issue 176.

# frieze

[Issue 176](#) January-February 2016

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## In Focus: Martine Syms

FOCUS

Language, gesture and black identity

by *Laura McLean-Ferris*



Notes on Gesture, 2015, HD video still. All images courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York

“We in dis bitch, finna get crunk. Eyebrows on fleck, dafuq.’ Just four months after a Vine video of black schoolgirl Kayla Newman saying the words ‘on fleck’ and stroking her eyebrows was posted online, the phrase had been culled and spun into marketing speak on Taco Bell and IHOP Twitter feeds. (‘Pancakes on fleek.’) The meme-ification of this particular black female, as well as countless others (Kimberly ‘Sweet Brown’ Wilkins, who escaped from an Oklahoma fire and proclaimed on camera: “Ain’t nobody got time for that,” when interviewed by a reporter, is a classic example) shadowed Martine Syms’s recent video, *Notes on Gesture* (2015), the centerpiece of her exhibition ‘Vertical Elevated Oblique’ at Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York.

Taking its title from a Giorgio Agamben essay written in 1992, the video is a series of short clips of an actress with braided hair, performing against a purple backdrop. She is responding to dramatic cues and title cards that appear on-screen such as 'WHEN DEY GOT YOU FUCKED'. The actress's range of responses, expressions, hand movements and spoke phrases ('C'mere, I'm talking to you'), are looped fast and repeated a number of times, suggestive of GIF and Vine video formats, as well as the 'reaction video' genre (footage of people excessively responding to anything from a new Britney Spears video to some shocking, gross-out footage), all of which have become popular online the last decade or so. That the actress's miniature performances are a collection of dramatic responses to hypothetical situations gives the video the feeling of being an outsourced form of public feedback, a kind of Greek chorus that responds so you don't have to.

Syms gave particular focus to the language of the hand. A wagging 'no-no-no' finger, seen as often in social situations as it is in music videos, is accompanied in *Notes on Gesture* by the looped singsong vocal, 'I don't lu, I don't lu, I don't lu', which finally breaks into the phrase 'I don't love you,' before being replaced by a new cycle. Drawing on British physician John Bulwer's 1644 text *Chirologia: Or the Natural Language of the Hand*, Syms suggests a complex vocabulary of hand movements (or, at least, a coded set of gestures), some of which may resonate across centuries, while others remain specific to an individual or time.

A connecting tissue in Syms's work concerns what it is to 'read' or to be 'read'. (The artist also founded Dominica, a publishing imprint dedicated to exploring blackness in visual culture.) 'Vertical Elevated Oblique' included c-stands used as workhorses for lighting, fabric, showcards and other apparatus in the film industry (Syms grew up in Los Angeles around this business and remains based in the city) strung with found photographs in which several hands were pictured forming the kind of gestures seen in her video, while items of the artist's clothing printed with phrases were also slung over these tubular frames, suggesting an absent body. Two other sculptures quietly carried phrases associated with particular articulations of black identity. A false theatrical wall mirroring the backdrop of *Notes on Gesture* was painted in the colour purple, alluding to Alice Walker's eponymous 1982 novel and the subsequent cinematic adaptation starring Whoopi Goldberg and Oprah Winfrey, while two bases for tables formerly belonging to one of the artist's relatives glowered in the shape of two black panthers. Taken together, the impression of the entire show was that of a set or production studio, a general environment of image production and mediated forms of identity.

The production of the self in response to screen images is another ongoing concern for Syms. An early work, *My Only Idol is Reality* (2007), used found footage from season one of the MTV show *The Real World* (1992), the canary in the coal mine for the current era of mediated self-publicity. *S1:E1* (2015), Syms's contribution to 'Surround Audience', the 2015 New Museum Triennial, was both a sketched pilot for a TV series entitled *SHE MAD*, set to star an aspiring artist called Martine, as well as an analysis of key moments in the production of blackness on television, and the way in which certain shows reflect and contribute to the formation of a society. The pilot included lo-fi footage and cheap production values, deliberately signaling immediacy and 'realness'. Syms plans to shoot an episode of *SHE MAD*, taking as a starting point Thomas Edison's 1907 film *Laughing Gas*, starring a woman who visits a dentist and goes through the rest of the day in fits of laughter. The film is notable for its starring actress, a woman of colour, whose gestures, notes Syms, appear over the top, until she enters a church and her flailing and hysteria fits in with the behaviour of the congregation.

The press release for Syms's latest show noted that she had been inspired by the riff: 'Everybody wanna be a black woman but nobody wanna be a black woman,' which is a tweaked phrase from the 'Ask a Black Dude' sketch on Dave Chappelle's show. This bleak, comic ontological observation pits wanting to 'be' (as in adopting, copying, appropriating, acting like) against 'being' (as in living as, and all it entails). Syms points to the implication of this nullified equation, particularly on how being the carrier of gestures makes one a support or an apparatus for the dominant society, even if it creates visibility. Or, to put it as Agamben does in his essay: it's on screen that a society which has lost its gestures attempts to reclaim and record what it has lost.

*Laura McLean-Ferris is a writer and curator based in New York, USA.*

*Martine Syms is an artist living and working in Los Angeles, USA. In 2015, she had solo exhibition at Locust Projects, Miami, USA; Machine Project, Los Angeles; Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York, and White Flag Projects, St. Louis, USA.*



Colby Chamberlain, “Martine Syms”, *Artforum*, January 2016, 242-243.

# ARTFORUM

## Martine Syms

BRIDGET DONAHUE

Martine Syms has lectured in venues as varied as the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, South by Southwest Interactive in Austin, and, this past September, in a field on the outskirts of Storm King Art Center in New Windsor, New York. There, seated at a table with a makeshift AV setup, she played a recording of James Taylor’s 1968 ballad “Something in the Way She Moves.” The wistful vocals momentarily heightened the easy romance of a countryside evening, but then Syms began speaking of how she grew up studying her aunt - in effect transposing Taylor’s admiration of a nameless lover onto a black teenager’s observation of a role model. The song became a meditation on gesture, on the ineffable

“something” that invests a body in motion with allure, authority, or authenticity. A little over a week later, Syms opened her solo exhibition “Vertical Elevated Oblique.” The title pilfers from the terminology of an early attempt to record and capture gesture, John Bulwer’s *Chirologia: Or the Natural Language of the Hand* (1644), describing a (decidedly Anglo-Saxon, decidedly male) public speaker standing with his hand cocked upward (Vertical) and his arm raised in line with his shoulders (Elevated) while angled forward forty-five degrees (Oblique).

For the exhibition’s centerpiece, the ten-minute, thirty-three-second video *Notes on Gesture*, 2015, Syms used *Chirologia*’s elaborate notation system as a rough guide for directing the performance of her collaborator Diamond Stingily. (Stingily’s fold-out poster, *Love, Diamond*, 2013, appeared among the items on sale in the gallery’s back-room-pop-up store for Syms’s imprint, Dominica.) Before a purple backdrop, Stingily executed a range of actions for the camera, each edited down into quick cuts and looped several times. The repetitions turned audio snippets of ambient music and Stingily’s uttered phrases - “Real talk,” “Check yourself,” “Point blank, period” - into a lurching, percussive sound track. Stingily bobbed her head, rolled her eyes, hunched her shoulders. Often only her hands appeared on-screen: pointing, admonishing, beckoning, clapping.

*Notes on Gesture* is only the latest indicator of a widespread concern with the “natural language of the hand,” one also evident in the hand sculptures of Josh Kline and Aleksandra Domanovic; in hands sifting through archival material in video by Camille Henrot and Ellie Ga; in the collaborative investigation of touch-screen swipes by Alexandra Lerman and choreographer Madeline Hollander; and in the parsing of hand signals in politics and finance by, respectively, Liz Magic Laser and Ben Thorp Brown. A perennial metonym for labor, the hand is now a hinge between the precariat and its devices. Much of this work, like the media theory that informs it, reduces human subjects to producers or consumers, often at the expense of considering gesture’s broader cultural dimensions. *Chirologia*, for instance, betrays an anxious chauvinism when Bulwer exhorts English rhetoricians to match the voluble body language of their neighbors on the Continent. *Notes on Gesture* deliberately mimics the stuttering rhythms of media formats like Vine or animated GIFS, yet the video’s driving question is how gesture constructs and conveys black femininity - a process that, like the loop itself, is circular.

“If we understand manufacturing as a process or context that provides repetition,” Syms has written, “then mass media allows for narratives - and subsequently, ideologies and typologies - to be industrialized.” The flat-screen playing *Notes on Gesture* was surrounded by C-stands and a Hollywood flat painted the same purple as the video’s backdrop. These props cast the gallery as a studio for a film shoot, though, instead of their usual spotlights and bounce cards, the C-stands held photographic prints, mostly of hands - presumably source material for Stingily’s character studies. Syms’s image selection mixed snapshots of her aunt and other relatives with magazine clippings, like a close-up on the nails of Olympian Florence Joyner. The combination of the familial and the commercial mirrors identity’s double status, as “something” inherited and shared, yet also bought and sold.

- Colby Chamberlain



Martine Syms, *Notes on Gesture*, 2015, video, color, sound, 10 minutes 33 seconds

Emily McDermott, “The Conceptual Entrepreneur”, *Interview Magazine*, December 29, 2015.

*Interview*

ART

# THE CONCEPTUAL ENTREPRENEUR

By **EMILY MCDERMOTT**  
Photography **BRIAN HIGBEE**

Published 12/29/15



MARTINE SYMS IN LOS  
ANGELES, NOVEMBER 2015.  
PORTRAITS: BRIAN HIGBEE.

The first time we spoke to Martine Syms in 2009, she was a recent graduate of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and still living in the same city alongside artist Marco Braunschweiler. Together they ran Golden Age, a carefully curated boutique, bookstore, and event space, until it closed in 2011. Since that conversation, Syms has founded the publishing imprint Dominica, returned to her childhood home of Los Angeles, and established a name for herself within various art communities through written and printed works, videos, and lectures (she also does branding and web design). Her written texts, which have appeared in various publications, such as *Art in America* and *Triple Canopy*, explore and analyze cultural phenomenon through the creation of fictional worlds, though often spurred by autobiographical information. Syms' videos and images tackle similar subject matters, but almost always feature her own voice or appearance in conjunction with only one other performer and found footage. Above all else, however, her work—no matter the form—nearly always returns to one thing: television, specifically the sitcom.

For the New Museum's 2015 Triennial earlier this year, Syms created a large-scale installation, *S1:E1, with A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere* serving as its centerpiece. The 25-minute long video gives a pastiche history of African Americans' depictions in television through Syms' imagined sitcom, *She Mad*. It highlights the comedic strengths and deficiencies of sitcoms like *The Cosby Show* (why was there no mention of crack cocaine or the AIDS crisis?). This fall and winter, the 27-year-old presented a solo show at Bridget Donahue in New York (fusing gesture with video, text, and nightclub-like lighting) and debuted a poster-based series for Locus Projects during Art Basel Miami Beach." She also just finished her first documentary.

Now, Syms is working on an ambitious solo show that will open in February at Human Resources, an artist-run space in L.A.'s Chinatown, and is preparing to publish two books via Dominica: one a compilation of performance scripts by British artist Hannah Black; the other a collection of science-fiction poems written by Sara Knox Hunter. In 2007, Syms' multiple endeavors led to her coining the term "conceptual entrepreneur," which she has since labeled herself. Though the definition of the term might continuously evolve, this can be certain: Syms is intelligently going to do what she wants, how she wants, and will not slow down any time soon.





EMILY MCDERMOTT: Can you tell me about your upcoming show at Human Resources?

MARTINE SYMS: It's going to be a show of videos. I've been making 30-second videos for the past year and a half. They were first commissioned by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis—I gave a talk there about five lessons from the poet Kevin Young's book [The Grey Album]. In the book, he writes them as the lessons of a tradition, but it felt like there had to be more than five, so I started thinking of more myself. That was the initial impulse. I got it into my head that I was going to make an hour-and-a-half feature length film of all these lessons. Right now I have about 60, but I'm trying to do 180 by February.

MCDERMOTT: You use yourself as a character in many of your videos. At what point did you realize you wanted to not just create art, but insert yourself into it?

SYMS: I guess I've always inserted myself with my voice. The piece that was in the Triennial at the New Museum this year, Pilot for a Show About About Nowhere, was the first time I was in it as a performer performing myself, making a version of my life. But everything that I've worked on, including the show I had this fall at Bridget Donahue, uses a lot of autobiographical material as the source of the world—building and storytelling.

MCDERMOTT: So you use autobiographical information to form fictional worlds. What is the balance between fiction and the real world within your work?

SYMS: I think I do more fiction than autobiography. My interest in autobiography is more as a kind of a historical research; there's a great book, Wayne Kostenbaum's My 1980s [and Other Essays], where he talks about autobiography being an intellectual pursuit. I've also been working on a piece for Triple Canopy that is based in the area I grew up, but set in the future. A lot of my research was looking at housing covenants that made me born where I was, when I was. Growing up in a specific area has a certain sociological and economic reason, so I'm interested in using myself as a case study to look at those things. My writing, it's mostly fiction, but I want it to feel intimate and real.

MCDERMOTT: A lot of your work is humorous as well. Where does the humor come in?

SYMS: I think that's from watching so many sitcoms my entire life. I just have a deadpan sense of humor, I guess. It's a tone that I really appreciate and most of the things I'm engaged with are comedic. I think there's a lot of freedom in the comedic and the absurd. It's a way you can play or do things that are maybe extreme ways of cutting a heavy handedness. You can really talk about, say, or do anything under the guise of the comedic.

MCDERMOTT: But do you ever feel like using so much comedy then dilutes the previously heavy handed meaning or message?

SYMS: I don't think it dilutes it because I never want to sound too self-important. It's more about being in the right tone. It's not about watering something down or making it easier to swallow; it's actually more direct, in a way.

MCDERMOTT: I read the piece you wrote for Art Papers about growing up with television in the '80s and how it's changed in recent years. So, like you said, TV has a huge influence on your work, but at what point did you recognize its impact?

SYMS: Senior year of art school, every piece I was making was about MTV's The Real World, so I guess television's been a pretty constant influence. The work with The Real World was about people in their 20s, or even younger, college age. I realized I was older than the people on the show and that was such a shocking realization. [laughs] I watched it when I was young because it was like, "This is how you're supposed to be when you're an adult."

MCDERMOTT: If everyone was that way when they were an adult we'd be in for an interesting world...

SYMS: [both laugh] Yeah, now you're like, "Oh my god, that's a horrible idea." But then, it was trying to fit into some of those stock characters. Also, with that show, I was really interested in fictionalizing reality. The first piece I made is this seven-minute excerpt that I modified through VHS manipulation. That was a really early piece and it has a lot of the same threads I continue to be interested in. Additionally, I feel like within American culture, TV is such a dominant discursive platform; it is where all of our culture values and anxieties end up being discussed and where the conscious of American culture really resides. There's a lot of material in thinking through that and our national identity.

MCDERMOTT: Growing up, did you ever act out your own television shows or make home movies?

SYMS: I didn't really make home movies, but once I was in high school, I was in this arts program at Echo Park Film Center, so I was making films and videos. One was a horror movie about the Unborn Victims of Violence Act. It was like a feminist horror movie. It was all these fetuses attacking people. I made them all, they were very supportive of me. [laughs] I was really into John Waters and George Kuchar and that kind of trash cinema style of moviemaking. I made another Super 8 film that was all about road rage, but it was interpretive road rage, so all the cars were cutouts that my friends were wearing. I was home schooled, so I had some time on my hands...

MCDERMOTT: When did you become aware of the ability to create art through film? Has art always been a part of your life?

SYMS: I would say in middle school I started to think of myself that way. I was never good at drawing. I wasn't one of those people who was "talented." I could not draw photo realistically; I could not paint anything. So it was never, "Oh, Martine, she's good at art." I would write, though. I was interested in writing, coming up with these stories. I was always really interested in film and wanting to make movies, take polaroids.

MCDERMOTT: Do you remember a specific artist or book that impacted you at that time?

SYMS: I remember seeing a Diane Arbus and [William] Eggleston show in middle school. There was a show at the Getty of that era of photography, the '60s, and that was really influential to me. I was also really into punk music and the culture surrounding that—making books, reading Please Kill Me, looking at old fanzines. Also, skateboarding. I didn't skate, but all my friends and my brother did, so I watched skate videos and things like that. Skating videos and watching John Waters movies were more of my sensibility at the time, probably more influential than Eggleston.

Then later, once I started learning more about art, I remember Richard Prince and [John] Baldessari were two of the first artists that I knew in conceptual, more contemporary art, after this introduction through photography. So I was doing a lot of printmaking. That was the first stuff I was really into.

MCDERMOTT: I'm not going to ask you to define "conceptual entrepreneur," because I know that's always asked of you and you've been using the term for about eight years. But how do you feel about labeling yourself a conceptual entrepreneur now? Do you feel like it's still appropriate?

SYMS: I'm surprised that it's been able to last that long. [laughs] I definitely didn't think I'd still be talking about it. But I think my main interests and ideas have always come from independent music, black-owned businesses, and the idea of self-determination through having a sustainable institution, through institutionalizing yourself. Now I'm more aware of the problems and theoretical issues with that. And obviously, with the tech industry, where entrepreneur has kind of a horrible air surrounding it, I'm definitely more conflicted. But I'm still very interested in self-determination and being able to actually survive doing the work I want to do. So it's important to talk about some of things I'm doing as labor, as work, but I also understand the limitations of that and of using that

language. I'm not resolved on it now. But I still do this publishing company, I still definitely am running a small business. So it's still accurate, but I have more qualms with it.

MCDERMOTT: On another note, purple has been a recurring color in your works since the beginning. What does the color purple mean to you?

SYMS: It's about this slip in language, the split between object and language. When you see the object or piece, you think, "The color purple," sort of in reference to the book and the movie as well. I'm really interested in that movie as a cultural product that maybe helped Spielberg the most. But also, Alice Walker, the way she describes the book, she says something like, "Woman is to feminist, what purple is to lavender." That's a nice corollary to how I came at it. Really, I just want people to think that phrase and tie it back to the idea of black radical feminism.

MCDERMOTT: Your work moves between object and language all of the time, but what attracted you to that split to begin with? During the lecture you gave at Walker, you said "everything beings with with reading"...

SYMS: For me, it is about reading. There's a literary element to a lot of my work, but also thinking about images as a thing that can be read, and setting them up to be read. Sometimes it's [reading in] a very literal way, but with others, like a video, it's about still having text, where each gesture feels almost like a letter or word and there's sentences that get constructed. It's making you read images, in a way, or thinking about the way that I'm reading them.

I'm a very avid consumer of everything—music, film, television, books—but all of those I think of as texts, and my work is a way of thinking through all of the ideas I'm encountering. It's thinking through another form and reading—I'm using that term broadly, reading, watching, looking, seeing—is maybe the initial message of inquiry. For a long time, the next step was writings; I would write an essay or some kind of story that was not directly in response to readings, but responding to ideas brought up. More recently, I've been trying to push this idea that the image operates in the same way, but further. So I'm not writing first, but making images first. I used to use pretty much exclusively found footage, but I've moved into producing a lot of images and thinking about what it means if I start that way. It's the same way [of working] as reading a text and then writing, but what happens if it's more about me creating images?

MCDERMOTT: What are some of the struggles you've faced in the changing of that process?

SYMS: I just finished this documentary and that was one of the biggest productions I've done. It was a crew of maybe 10 people, which is small for films, but for me, it's usually just me and the performer, if there's another person in it. That made me really conscious of how every step of the process has a visual result. I guess I knew that from jobs I've been on, but it's really different when it's for my artworks, where every person on set, you see them in the work.

It made me realize the systematic racism of making images, too. I learned that the default in film production is a white guy working on it. Doing color was crazy, thinking about film stocks and making things for black skin. Color, just on a programatic level, kind of freaked me out—every way you make a film look, what darkness represents or what lightness represents. With skin, how to make dark skin look better, the defaults aren't built that way. In making a film about black aesthetics specifically, it was exploring all of those things. But now that I've done it once, I'm excited to make more and really push. There's this cinematographer, Arthur Jafa—he worked with Julie Dash a lot and he works with Ava DuVernay now and a bunch of other people—he talks a lot about a black visual intonation, shooting at different rates and exposures, and trying to make a different image. That's an idea I've been really interested in, but after working on this film, I'm like, "I understand this in a totally different way." I guess it's about an image being a text and thinking about how it can be changed and worked on.

MCDERMOTT: So what are the last things you read and watched that inspired you?



SYMS: [laughs] The last thing that I read is kind of embarrassing. I read Shonda Rhimes's *Year of Yes* on the plane this weekend and I've been quoting it a lot. I shouldn't be embarrassed, but it's not the most intellectual book... And the last thing I watched—I watched *The Hunger Games* last night, but I was really mad about ending. So I don't know if that counts. *The Assassin*, that film was probably the last thing I watched that made me want to shoot something, like shoot an image. *The Hunger Games* made me want to shoot something in a bad way.

MCDERMOTT: I want to quickly ask about Dominca as well. How do you select the artists and writers that you publish?

SYMS: It's really driven by things I want to see. With Hannah [Black], I've read a lot of her works—she writes a lot for *The New Inquiry*, *Text Der Kunst*, and *The Guardian*—and I've seen her videos as well. Then I met her in April, we were both part of Rhizome's "Seven on Seven." I was so blown away by the piece that she did, I was like, "I have to do something with her." So it's really people I'm excited by, either commissioning them to do a work or somebody mentioning in passing that they have an idea. Sara [Knox Hunter] mentioned that she was writing a short science fiction text, and I was like, "Hey, let's do a book of those." This other girl, Diamond Stingily, I did a book project with her two years ago because she had been posting excerpts of her first diary on Facebook and they were so funny to me. I just find and ask people if they'd want to expand on ideas. It's very laid back, organic, low-key projects—that's how I want to keep it.

FOR MORE ON MARTINE SYMS, VISIT HER WEBSITE.

Catherine Wagley, "8 L.A. Artists and Art-World Figures To Watch in 2016", *LA Weekly*, December 28, 2015.



## 8 L.A. ARTISTS AND ART-WORLD FIGURES TO WATCH IN 2016

BY CATHERINE WAGLEY MONDAY, DECEMBER 28, 2015



### Martine Syms' entrepreneurship

Martine Syms doesn't call herself an artist. She's a "conceptual entrepreneur," which makes her sound aligned with the startup-obsessed vein of creative culture. She's not. She's more a deep-digging philosopher who frequently performs her ideas, because thoughts manifest as body movements. The first performance she'll do in L.A. in 2016 is at the Broad Museum. Called *Misdirected Kiss*, it's a stylized lecture informed by a trend from the silent-film era: White men would inadvertently kiss black maids, mistaking the maid for a white lover. Syms did some web design for fashion brand Nasty Gal and also runs a press, *Dominica*, where she publishes her writings and the writings of others. She has an unpretentious but intentional kind of fierceness. "I take on whatever role I need to get my idea out into the world," she said at the Walker Art Center in 2014. "I work from the margins. I privilege my ignorance. I think in public." Maybe her approach to entrepreneurship will catch on. Syms performs at the Broad on Thu., Jan. 21, 8 p.m.; \$15. 221 S. Grand Ave. (213) 232-6200, [thebroad.org](http://thebroad.org) or [martinesyms.com](http://martinesyms.com).

Gillian Young, “Martine Syms”, *Art in America*, December 11, 2015, 137.

# Art in America

REVIEWS DEC. 11, 2015

## MARTINE SYMS

NEW YORK,  
at Bridget Donahue

by Gillian Young



The 17th-century English physician John Bulwer posited that hand gestures might comprise a universal language. This notion was later revived by 20th-century anthropologists studying the striking similarities in body languages evident across cultures. Recalling anthropological films used to record, replay and dissect the mechanics of bodily communication, Martine Syms’s video *Notes on Gesture* (2015) takes Bulwer as an unlikely interlocutor for exploring contemporary black female subjectivity.

*Notes on Gesture*, which Syms has said was inspired by Bulwer’s research, is the centerpiece of “Vertical Elevated Oblique,” the first solo exhibition for the Los Angeles-based artist, publisher, Web designer and self-described “conceptual entrepreneur.” The 10-minute loop features a young black actor with braids and red lipstick enacting clipped gestures repeatedly. Her actions illustrate a series of phrases drawn from African-American vernacular—“When you can turn hood real quick,” for instance, or “UOENO”—that periodically appear on-screen like the captions that often accompany animated GIFs. A format native to one of Syms’s professional worlds—the Internet—

View of Martine Syms’s exhibition  
“Vertical Elevated Oblique,” 2015, at  
Bridget Donahue.



animated GIFs often feature snippets of movies and TV shows that can then be used as a kind of digital parlance, conveying, on image boards and in chat forums, what words alone cannot. In *Notes on Gesture*, Syms reproduces the looped visuals associated with GIFs, creating a stuttering, cacophonous effect.

*Notes on Gesture* also puts what Bulwer called “the natural language of the hand” to the test: some viewers will instantly connect the image of the actress sticking her tongue out and holding her fist up with the attitude expressed by the phrase “UOENO”; others will have to Google a translation of the slang term to grasp the culturally specific nuance of the pose. As the anthropologist Marcel Mauss theorized, countering the basic propositions made by Bulwer, gesture is not innate and universal, but a “technique of the body” shaped, like any language, by cultural forces and divisions.

If Syms’s video explores how a seemingly neutral mode of communication is contingent on race and gender, her installations elsewhere in the gallery playfully undermined the purported neutrality of the “white cube.” Syms’s cube had a purple tint: the vibrant purple backdrop in the video was echoed by a similarly hued board leaning against one wall, while the gallery windows were covered with a violet filter. Two black panthers stationed by the entryway (Syms’s aunt’s feline side-tables covered in black cladding) subtly reminded viewers that the color schemes of home decor can be charged statements of racial identity. These works are also gestures—evanescent, suggestive—forming associations in each viewer’s mind that disallow any impartial reception of “color.”

The realm of the video also opened onto the space of the room through the presence of C-stands—mechanisms used to position light modifiers and filters in film production—which gave the gallery a backstage quality. Draped with articles of Syms’s clothing (including a pair of white jeans that read along one leg, “It Bees That Way Sometimes”), the stands hold double-sided photographs of black women’s hands—motioning, reaching, tapping, grasping. This archive of gestures, collected by Syms from personal, popular and historical sources, remains in tension with Bulwer’s taxonomy. Despite his dream of the universality of gesture, even Bulwer allowed that hand signals could become “privy ciphers.” Performed within Syms’s video, such signals become ambiguous codes for identity and agency.

Lauren Palmer, "20 Emerging Female Artists to Keep on Your Radar", *Artnet News*, December 9, 2015.

# artnet® news

ART WORLD

## 20 Emerging Female Artists to Keep on Your Radar

Lauren Palmer, Wednesday, December 9, 2015

This year was a strong one for female artists, and next year it appears that it might be even better. In 2016, all of the solo shows at SculptureCenter in Queens, New York, will be by women. We're also looking forward to Catherine Opie's "Portraits and Landscapes" at Lehmann Maupin gallery in New York in January, and "Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947 – 2016" in March at Hauser & Wirth in Los Angeles.

Below, we've found 20 emerging female artists who we'll also be tracking in 2016.



.Martine Syms.

Image: via [www.kcet.org](http://www.kcet.org).

### 1. Martine Syms

Los Angeles-based artist Martine Syms works across publishing, video, and performance. She runs the site Dominica, and was a participant in the 2015 New Museum Triennial in New York. Syms's current project NITE LIFE will be on view at Locust Projects in Miami until the end of the year.

“Of Note: Martine Syms”, *The New Yorker*, October 26, 2015, 8.

# THE NEW YORKER

## ART

### OF NOTE Martine Syms

In the video at the heart of this nuanced exhibition by the promising young L.A.-based artist, a performer pairs hand gestures with spoken words. Clapsed hands mean “real talk”; a raised finger, extended out from the chest, conveys “check yourself.” Syms has edited the segments down to staccato fragments, repeated up to a dozen times each. In its looped, stuttering format, the piece recalls Vines or Snapchat videos, as if to underscore that expressions of identity and race (both Syms and her actor are black) are now the domain of social media. Still, like many young artists, Syms, a self-described “conceptual entrepreneur,” is also devoted to printed matter, and she’s set up a bookshop in the gallery’s back room where you can browse through selections from her publishing project, *Dominica*. Through Nov. 1. (Donahue, 99 Bowery. 646-896-1368.)



“Martine Syms”, *Modern Painters*, December 2015, 108.

# MODERN PAINTERS

## REVIEWS IN BRIEF NEW YORK

### Martine Syms

*Bridget Donahue // September 17–November 1*

“Vertical Elevated Oblique” contains mixed-media sculptures and a functioning bookshop selling titles from Syms’s publishing imprint,

Dominica, but the focal point of the show is “Notes on Gesture,” 2015, a video in which a young black woman’s brief actions and utterances are edited into a choppy, almost musical rhythm, like a CD that repeatedly gets stuck. The video’s intentionally glitched pace makes it both hypnotizing and maddening; drawing from texts like Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*, Syms says that she’s looking to “aestheticize that exhaustion” felt by black women.



Installation view of “Vertical Elevated Oblique,” 2015.

Carolina A. Miranda, "KCET kicks off 7th season of 'Artbound' with hourlong special on contemporary black artists", *Los Angeles Times*, November 17, 2015.

# Los Angeles Times

## KCET kicks off 7th season of 'Artbound' with hourlong special on contemporary black artists



Los Angeles curator Erin Christovale is featured in an hourlong program on "Artbound" on contemporary black artists and post-modernism. (KCET Artbound)

By **Carolina A. Miranda** - Contact Reporter

November 17, 2015, 2:32 PM

An hourlong program that traces luxury goods to the Mexican artisans who craft them. Another that explores the legacy of journalist and historian Charles Lummi on Southern California. And yet another that looks at the ways in which the city of L.A. will design and build for the future. The Emmy Award-winning cultural program "Artbound" kicks off its seventh season Tuesday with a raft of a dozen new shows devoted to examining the art and culture of the Southland.

The first episode, which premieres Tuesday on independent public television station KCET, looks at four Southern California artists who are examining questions of the contemporary black experience and representation in their work. The show was done in collaboration with L.A. artist and filmmaker Martine Syms, who served as the episode's guest director, as well as the locally based creative studio Ways and Means.

This represents a slightly new way of doing things for the arts program, which first launched in 2012. (Full disclosure: I wrote for the Artbound website on a few occasions as a freelancer before I joined The Times last year.)

Traditionally, "Artbound" has featured segments drawn from its Web stories, which are chosen by readers. And it has produced specials that explore larger topics in depth. But the show is now looking to involve guest directors and other special contributors on more hourlong programs that provide a more in-depth view of contemporary cultural topics.



**WATCH:** KCET's arts and culture series "Artbound" kicks off Tuesday with a new episode devoted to Afrofuturism and black aesthetic production guest directed by L.A.-based artist Martine Syms.

"I was doing an interview with Martine a little while ago," says Juan Devis, who, as senior vice president at KCETLink, helped conceive and shepherd the show into existence. "We were talking about the state of black aesthetics today. And we were talking about this new generation of artists and media makers within the black community. That conversation really intrigued me, so when we were setting up the season for this year, I wanted a chance to take a deeper look.

"The idea," he adds, "is to engage different makers in the production of these programs, engage people who are embedded in those worlds."

Syms, an artist and thinker who explores topics such as Afrofuturism and black identity in her work, was the perfect partner for the first show, Devis says. In addition to showing her work at New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art and the



**BRIDGET DONAHUE**

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Studio Museum in Harlem, she has lectured at Yale University and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, among other places.

The latest season will still feature half a dozen episodes made in the traditional "Artbound" mold: segments that have been voted on by readers of the website. But viewers also can expect longer, deeper pieces involving a wide range of Southern California artists, designers and architects.

"We've got some interesting things that we're brewing here," Devis says. "The key is to recognize the areas that we are not an expert in and invite people who are in that world to help us shape the coverage. It's very exciting"

The seventh season of "Artbound" kicks off at 8 p.m. Tuesday on KCET with "Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto," directed by Martine Syms. That same show airs nationally on Link TV on Nov. 23. Check local listings for details.

Freda Nada, “Martine Syms: Vertical Elevated Oblique”, *Topical Cream*, October 21, 2015, <http://topicalcream.info/editorial/martine-syms-vertical-elevated-oblique/>.

10.21.2015

# MARTINE SYMS: VERTICAL ELEVATED OBLIQUE

Words By freda nada

Well versed in the architecture of the screen, Martine Syms’ first solo exhibition in New York titled Vertical Elevated Oblique is currently on view at Bridget Donahue gallery until the first of November. The exhibition is a collection of artifacts, photographs, sculptures, century stands, sandbags and video works. The installation evokes the atmosphere of a well-archived but abandoned makeshift set of a career YouTube star.



Notes On Gesture, is the focal point of the exhibition, a roughly ten-minute piece performed by Diamond Stingily, sliced up by the artist. The video is a collage of black female tropes in gif-ish loops. In a talk at The Walker Art Center, Syms discussed her piece, “Black Vernacular: Lessons of The Tradition” which consists of processed footage from MTV’s The Real World season one, explaining that she used “repetition as a framework for abstraction.” Repetition in Notes On Gesture draws the viewer into decontextualized nuance.

For Syms,—repetition draws the viewer into decontextualized nuance. ‘Blackness,’ the concept we are so fascinated by, is the preoccupation here as it is in Syms’ work in physical media.

In addition to her video work, the artist recontextualizes physical objects, clothing lays deliberately drooping like old painterly smocks, displaying slogans like “my eyes remind you where you came from.” The dialectical relationships between private/performative, authentic/self-promoting, fetish object/byproduct carries forth a vague and informal YouTube aesthetic. A large purple panel—presumably the backdrop for other works—anchors the show on the right side of the gallery wall.

Syms considers herself a ‘conceptual entrepreneur’ but doesn’t concede to the “Concept” in a traditional sense. In 1969, Sol Lewitt wrote in his highly referential “Sentences on Conceptual Art”: “The artist’s will is secondary to the process he, initiates from idea to completion. His willfulness may only be ego.” However, Martine Syms is more of an anonymous manager in the choreographed performance of ego. However, the question is more vague here than in the past. Syms’ current piece contains questions about the relationship between the mechanical and the social. She breaks down language and image in an exercise which can be read as an attempt to break down the authority of language itself— leaving us with technical artifacts.



*Notes on Gesture, Video Color, sound, 2015*



The virtual has not transcended socio-political judgments the way utopian afrofuturist texts envision. Rather than moving into a decolonizing fantasy, Vertical Elevated Oblique is invested in contemporary ‘stuckness’ the way every public conversation about ‘blackness’ eventually reaches its limit of incomprehension. For example, the stuttering of speech in Notes On Gesture, serves to deconstruct language while also referencing the machine-logic of beta-testing currently dominating the digital frontier as part of a post-enlightenment culture which seeks marginal change in praxis despite a rhetoric of disruption.

Two black resin panthers, titled Black Panthers, are anchored, smoldering, towards the front of the gallery; though this area functions more like a ‘backstage’ in the scheme of the exhibit’s installation. Purple film over the windows provide etherea lighting, a more nostalgic version of the electrified purple in the in her video works. A metanarrative process can be traced to this section of the exhibit. The panthers present an analog doubling or ‘twoness’ to the artist’s photographic prints—and the multiple glitchy takes in the video. A photograph showing the silhouette of a woman with arms akimbo is one of the few fixed images in the exhibition without a visible flip-side.

As a footnote, a pop up bookshop for Syms’ publishing outfit, Dominica, is tucked at the very back of Bridget Donahue. The shop traces related works from Lauren Anderson, Black Radical Imagination, E. Jane, Gene’s Liquor, Nicky Benedek, Marco Braunschweiler, Kayla Guthrie, David Hartt, Kahlil Joseph, Chloe Maratta, Hassan Rahim, Diamond Stingily and Wilmer Wilson IV. The popup is organized in a way which suggests a kind of historical narrative progression, in contrast with the nonlinear configuration of Vertical Elevated Oblique.



Martine Syms has made some interesting new developments to her ideas since I first encountered her work at the New Museum Triennial Surround Audience where she exhibited S1:E1, an examination of blackness in the American sitcom. Vertical Elevated Oblique is a more ambiguous riff on a similar theme, the production of culture. The staged quality lends a grotesque passion-for-the-real, rather than, reality TV gloss. S1:E1 was tied more closely to its original concept, its tangible effects included a legible, self-contained script. Vertical Elevated Oblique reveals in its totality a production model beyond being simply an array of art objects, – a representation of a group, or a cinematic feature. It’s the kind of production

expected from someone who has been using the title of ‘conceptual entrepreneur.’ It’s a deceptively casual debut for Syms, like a planned leak of a mixtape, downloadable through a “link in bio.”



*Prone Horizontal Forwards, Elevated Oblique Noting, A Thread Or Line That Holds Things Together, 2015*

freda nada is a writer and new media theorist based in new york chinatown. her work has appeared via new inc, bullet magazine, new bloom and the huffington post. she is currently working with live programming at ps1 and focusing on web/electronic based projects. her social networks identifier is @spxghett1.

Marialuisa Pastò, “Martine Syms - Vertical Elevated Oblique, Bridget Donahue”, *Aujourd'hui*, October 14, 2015, <http://www.aujourd'hui.pt/blog/vertical-elevated-oblique>.

# Aujourd'hui

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## MARTINE SYMS - VERTICAL ELEVATED OBLIQUE, BRIDGET DONAHUE



Vertical Elevated Oblique, a new body of work from Martine Syms, is now on view at Bridget Donahue in New York City. For her first solo show with the gallery, Syms was inspired by a riff on a popular joke. “Everybody wanna be a black woman but nobody wanna be a black woman.” Using



the 17th century text Chirologia: Or the Natural Language of the Hand as a guide she created an inventory of gestures for performance.

Notes on Gesture is a video comparing authentic and dramatic gestures. The piece alternates between title cards proposing hypothetical situations and short, looping clips that respond. The actor uses her body to quote famous, infamous, and unknown women. She repeats and interprets each movement several times, switching from a physical vernacular to acting techniques like blocking and cheating. The world of the film is imported to the gallery through costumes, staged objects, a monochromatic fake wall, and a color filter used for simulating purple neon or a nightclub atmosphere.

Alongside these works is a suite of double-sided photographs mounted on century stands, a standard workhorse of film production. This ad hoc collection gathers images of women sourced from family photos, magazines, advertisements, movies, and television. Each image features a “speaking motion” forming a chorus of action. The women pictured are models of agency. Their bodies are frequently used to express popular ideas and emotions. What do they signify? What politics do they perform?

Contribution by Marialuisa Pastò.

Martine Syms - Vertical Elevated Oblique

Bridget Donahue, September 17 - November 1

[www.bridgetdonahue.nyc](http://www.bridgetdonahue.nyc)

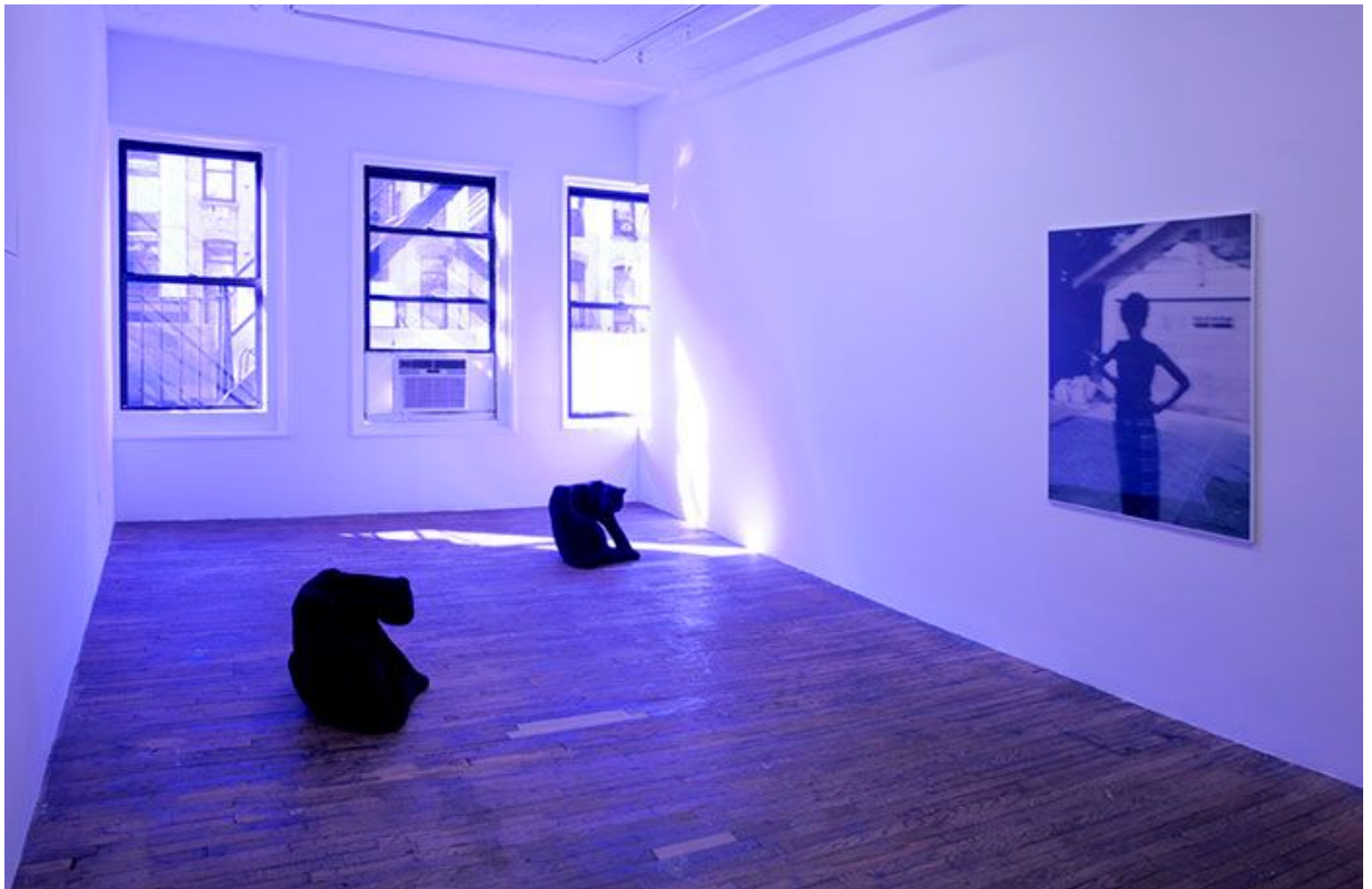
Scott Indrisek, “5 Must-See Gallery Shows in New York: Sarah Sze, Julia Bland, and More”, *Modern Painters*, October 9, 2015.

# BLOUINARTINFO

VISUAL ARTS / FEATURES / ARTICLE

## 5 Must-See Gallery Shows in New York: Sarah Sze, Julia Bland, and More

BY SCOTT INDRISEK | OCTOBER 09, 2015



## Martine Syms at Bridget Donahue, through November 1 (99 Bowery, 2nd Floor)

“Vertical Elevated Oblique” contains mixed-media sculptures and a functioning bookshop selling titles from Syms’s publishing imprint, but the focal point of the show is “Notes on Gesture,” a video looping a young African-American woman’s hand gestures and utterance of various clichéd phrases (“you need to check YOURself,” “stop...real talk”). It’s edited into a choppy, almost musical rhythm, like a CD stuck on repeat. “The gestures are taken primarily from images of black women in popular media, though I also included the women in my life — my mother, my sister, my aunts, my friends,” Syms told ARTINFO. “It was important to me to show moments when these signs do work, when they’re coming from a relationship, an experience and not just commercial culture.” What about the video’s intentionally glitchy pace, which somehow makes it both hypnotizing and maddening, I wondered? “The writer Claudia Rankine, whose book ‘Citizen’ was a touchstone during my research, began working on that project because she had been diagnosed with cancer and she had this suspicion that racism had made her sick,” Syms said. “I often say that it is a full-time job being a black woman. I was looking for a way to aestheticize that exhaustion. I was also trying to create a character and a narrative, and repetition is one of the ways that’s done. It also works to destabilize that same structure because new and different meanings occur each time you see the moment again.”



Karen Rosenberg, “Critic’s Choice: Martine Syms’s Master Class in Micro-Acting for the YouTube Age”, *Artspace*, October 6, 2015, [http://www.artspace.com/magazine/news\\_events/critics-choice/martine-syms-at-bridget-donahue-53150](http://www.artspace.com/magazine/news_events/critics-choice/martine-syms-at-bridget-donahue-53150).

# Artspace

INSIDER ACCESS TO THE WORLD’S BEST ART

Critic's Choice

## Martine Syms's Master Class in Micro-Acting for the YouTube Age

By Karen Rosenberg  
Oct. 6, 2015



A still from Martine Syms's *Notes on Gesture* (video, 2015, 10:33 minutes). Copyright Martine Syms, courtesy of Bridget Donahue, New York.

Martine Syms is among the younger creatives who are eschewing the label “artist” in favor of broader, shrewdly commercial designations. (On her website, she calls herself a “conceptual entrepreneur.”) She lectures, makes video and net art, and runs a publishing imprint, Dominica,

which is devoted to blackness in visual culture; she also does branding and web design. Syms appeared in last spring's New Museum Triennial, alongside similarly multifaceted collectives like K-Hole and DIS, with a video installation about the history and future of television called S1: E1; it included a video about the representation of African-Americans in sitcoms called *A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere*.

Her first New York solo show, at Bridget Donahue gallery through November 1, includes a little bit of everything, from video, sculpture, and photography to a bookstore in the back room where one can purchase publications and editions from Dominica. But it also has one big something: the performative video *Notes on Gesture*.

In this 10-minute piece a mysterious woman (identified by the artist and the gallery as Diamond Stingily) cycles through a series of small actions and expressions as if she's in an acting class, with multiple do-overs. (Title cards appear on the screen before each sequence.) The percussive and repetitive soundtrack, which includes snippets of dialogue, reinforce the work's visual stutter. Sometimes we see the actor's face, and at other times just her hand—extended in a parrying motion, for instance, as she utters the line “You need to check yourself.” Some of those hand gestures are drawn from the 17th-century text *Chirologia: Or the Natural Language of the Hand*; a copy sits in the back room next to the guestbook.

In addition to being instantly engaging, *Notes on Gesture* hits a nerve. The gestures of cultural and political figures are being chopped up into GIFs and further dissected on various social platforms, and women's gestures, in particular, are being scrutinized with special intensity. (Just follow along with any awards show or major-party political debate to see this process in action.) If Syms's New Museum installation was about the television program in its traditional form, *Notes on Gesture* is about the new micro-television and its strange synecdoches: its replacement of whole bodies and characters (which, often, aren't really fully-drawn to begin with) with little moments and movements.

Johanna Fateman, “Critics’ Pick: Martine Syms”, *Artforum*, October 2, 2015, <http://artforum.com/?pn=picks&section=nyc#picks55228>.

# ARTFORUM

## New York

### Martine Syms

BRIDGET DONAHUE

99 Bowery, 2nd Floor

September 17–November 1

The color purple is a motif in artist and “conceptual entrepreneur” Martine Syms’s work. It’s the background of both her spare, utilitarian website and her video *Notes on Gesture*, 2015, the arresting centerpiece of “Vertical Elevated Oblique,” her first solo gallery show. Of course, you can’t say or write “the color purple” without invoking *The Color Purple*—Alice Walker’s 1982 novel, Steven Spielberg’s 1985 adaptation of it, and the cultural omnipresence of Oprah Winfrey ever since. Syms uses this rich chain of associations to orient her concerns, such as pop culture’s production of blackness and its mediation of radicalism, and maybe to introduce her sense of humor as well.

A kind of index, *Notes* resembles a series of jerking GIFs: A black woman’s movements—contemporary vernacular gestures as well as those taken from a seventeenth-century book about “the language of the hand”—are isolated and looped. As the actor clasps her hands together, pats her head, or wags a warning finger, meme-ish title cards of white text, such as a series that spells out “It ain’t about the money,” and audio snippets of speech (e.g., “Check yourself”) provide the hypothetical social contexts for these distilled signs.

The piece, shown on a monitor mounted away from the wall, commands viewers to make sense of the objects Syms has carefully scattered in its orbit. Two neo–Art Deco panthers coated with black flocking stand toward the front of the space, and C-stands display an array of found photos featuring hands and gestures. The show’s serene anchor is *Belief Strategy VIII*, 2015, an eight-by-sixteen-foot uniformly painted matte monochrome and presumably the purple background used for *Notes*. The overall effect of the installation is that of a paused or abandoned video shoot—totally stylish, with the added allure of something in process.

— Johanna Fateman



View of “Vertical Elevated Oblique,” 2015



Jessica Lynne, "Black Womanhood and the Language of the Hand", *ArtSlant*, October 2, 2015, <http://www.artslant.com/ny/articles/show/44074>.

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## *Vertical Elevated Oblique*

Martine Syms

Bridget Donahue

99 Bowery, 2nd Floor, New York, NY 10002

September 17, 2015 - November 1, 2015

## **Black Womanhood and the Language of the Hand**

by Jessica Lynne

**Martine Syms** is a funny woman. This is what I thought as I stood in Bridget Donahue Gallery watching Syms' *Notes on Gesture*, the short video that anchors the artist's first solo show, *Vertical Elevated Oblique*. Syms talks to us, her viewers. Or maybe, more specifically, her viewers that are not black women. It's all in the hands.



Martine Syms, Installation view of *Vertical Elevated Oblique*, 2015. © Martine Syms, Courtesy of Bridget Donahue, New York. Photo: Marc Brems Tatti

Set to continuous loop, *Notes on Gesture* features artist Diamond Stingily recreating familiar phrases and hand gestures most readily attributed to black women in pop culture. Against a bright purple backdrop, she re-stages the classics: there's the hand clap as in "you've picked the wrong one to mess with today"; the finger wave of "no no no"; the omelet it slide, or "imma let it slide, I just gave you a pass"; and the bonnet is on—no sex tonight boo.

All the while Stingily is neck rolling and gum smacking, repeating everything to make sure you get the point. At this point a certain type of viewer might laugh but think: this is caricature. This viewer is not entirely wrong. See the thru line of the exhibition, a joke that according to the gallery text inspired the artist: "Everybody wanna be a black woman but no one wanna be a black woman."

Syms' use of humor in the film instantly calls to mind the many late night comedy show skits that have the tendency to poke fun at a perceived notion of black womanhood. What these performances often

miss is the real political ecology in which such cultural gestures live. That is, cultural signifying is not arbitrary: there are codes and rules that govern the use of gesture one in situation A and gesture two in situation B.



Martine Syms, Installation view of *Vertical Elevated Oblique*, 2015. © Martine Syms, Courtesy of Bridget Donahue, New York. Photo: Marc Brems Tatti

Syms is also a smart woman. The exhibition is a play on John Bulwer's *Chirologia: Or the Natural Language of the Hand*, a 17th century text which discusses the multiplicity of gesture and manual rhetoric. The remainder of *Vertical Elevated Oblique* attempts to reckon with this very fact: the codes of gesturing. Syms uses the space to assemble a physical representation of her film by filling it with a series of double-sided photographs and other images, mounted on metal C-stands. Hanging from these stands are also jeans, fitted hats, and other pieces of clothing with phrases such as "my eyes remind you where you came from" and "It bees that way sometimes."

A large purple wooden square, the same color as the backdrop in film, rests against the gallery wall furthest from the entrance. A purple color filter is used to light the area nearest the gallery's front windows.





Martine Syms, Installation view of *Vertical Elevated Oblique*, 2015. © Martine Syms, Courtesy of Bridget Donahue, New York. Photo: Marc Brems Tatti

Yet as a tool for display, the physical world of the film falls flat. Indeed, the most successful components of this installation are the photos themselves: they signify the signifying. The close-ups—hands on hips, hands playing a tambourine—assert a lived experience full of nuance. In conversation with one another, *Notes on Gesture* and these images speak to the way black womanhood is volleyed between extremities in pop culture, between caricature and performance, hyper visible—or hardly noticed at all.

—Jessica Lynne

“Notes on Gesture: Martine Syms”, *Dis Magazine*, September 17, 2015, <http://dismagazine.com/dystopia/78525/notes-on-gesture/>.



## Notes on Gesture

Martine Syms

“Everybody wanna be a black woman but nobody wanna be a black woman,” is a joke expanded upon in Martine Syms’s newest exhibition “Vertical Elevated Oblique.” The artist consulted a 17th century text *Chriologia: Or the Natural Language of the Hand*, in which John Bulwer proclaims: “the art in the hand [...] chiefest instrument of eloquence.”

“Notes on Gesture,” investigates archetypal gestures through repetition. We see in the gestures that are repeated an identity being developed in the span of a mere two minutes — revealing the importance of these seemingly insignificant physical movements in identity creation.

Vertical Elevated Oblique

Bridget Donahue

09/17/15 – 11/5/15

Thea Ballard, “Screen Time: An artist plumbs media, past and present”, *Modern Painters*, September 2015, 48–50.

# MODERN PAINTERS

INTRODUCING // MARTINE SYMS

## Screen Time

An artist plumbs media, past and present

BY THEA BALLARD

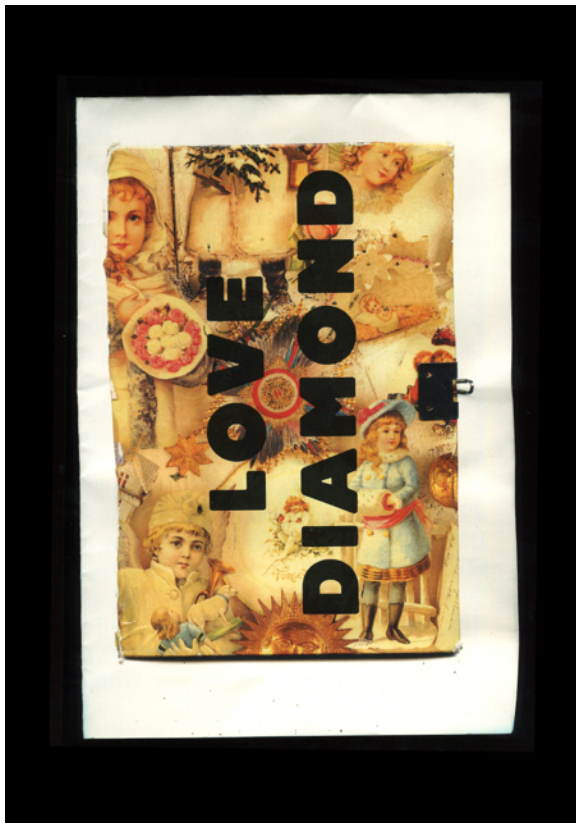
LIKE MANY YOUNG CULTURE hounds who subscribe to an array of streaming services, Martine Syms has her shows: as of early summer 2015, *Scandal*, *Nashville*, and sometimes *Silicon Valley*. However, at the risk of undermining the leisure value of the Los Angeles-based artist’s television watching habits, she possesses a particular grasp of the medium’s depth.

“It’s like a prosthetic memory,” she says speaking of TV’s relationship with American culture. “One of my early memories is of a white girl twirling in a circle. I realized later on that it was from that show *Small Wonder* — the oldest I could have been when I was watching it was four or five, but

it’s one I think about a lot. It’s stuck in my head, this terrible Fox television show.” There’s a lot embedded in this single gauzy recollection, Syms points out: “I think about my family, my background, socioeconomically where I was. At that time, Fox was really heavily targeting an African-American demographic, part of a shift in the television landscape in general. Even though *Small Wonder* is an all-white show, there’s a reason that my parents would have been watching that show or channel.”

This train of thought informed the production of her video *A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere*, part of her installation “S1:E1” in the New Museum’s 2015 Triennial. The work posits a brief history of recent television (focused on three golden age shifts, in 1970, 1988, and finally 2006, with the advent of YouTube) alongside images of Syms herself interacting with screens in banal or domestic ways — constituting herself as a sort of hybrid viewer-user-creator.

This structure of thinking — unpacking a moment, “looking at the context of production, the conditions of viewing an image, and including that contingency in the work” — informs much of Syms’s varied, but consistently media-engaged, practice. Her Twitter bio offers the tongue-in-cheek



FROM TOP:  
Martine Syms  
2013.

Sym's cover for  
*LOVE, DIAMOND*,  
a 2014 release by  
Diamond Stingily  
on Syms's Dominica  
publishing impr



## BRIDGET DONAHUE

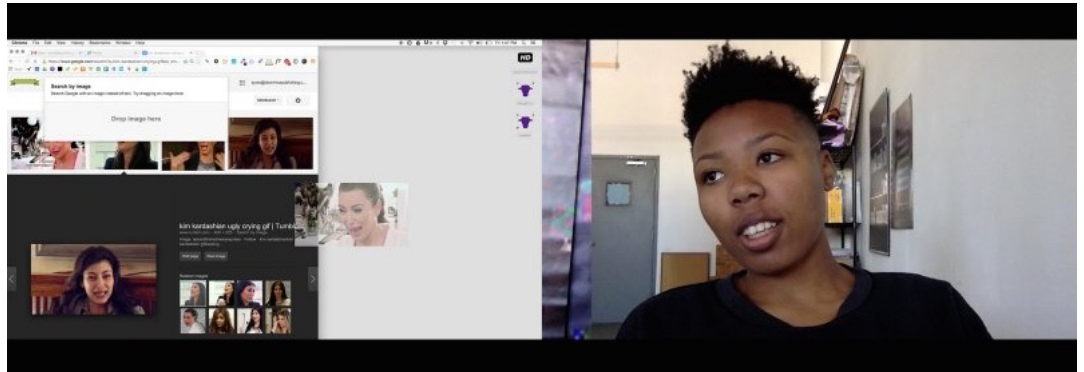
99 BOWERY 2ND FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10002 USA BRIDGETDONAHUE.NYC

identification of “conceptual entrepreneur”; recent projects have taken the form of videos, lectures, narrative screenplays, and objects, and she also heads the publishing imprint *Dominica*, putting out two commissioned books a year, as well as artist editions. Prior to *Dominica*, Syms, with Marco Braunschweiler, founded and ran the Chicago project space *Golden Age* between 2007 and 2011, an artist-run endeavor that hosted projects by Jon Rafman, Alex Da Corte, Lauren Anderson, and many others. Though she found herself at the time “really crazy about being professional, and wanting to make it look like a commercial gallery,” *Golden Age* drew significantly as well on her background in the DIY-oriented Los Angeles punk community, her zine-making, and a stint working at print material mainstay *Ooga Booga*.

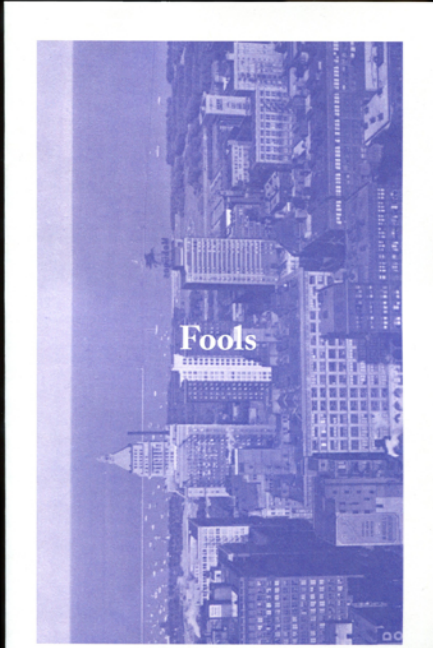
Her day job is in design, something that came out of a long-standing interest in the Web, which

Syms attributes to her “general nerdiness”. She notes that design, at least, “isn’t so directly related to my work, because it’s just how I get paid, and in a perfect world I wouldn’t have to work, I’ll put it that way.” But these different pursuits or methodologies do find common ground in her process. “I feel like there are actually a lot of relationships between a website and a film,” she says, “in terms of designing an experience for a screen. And I started to see a lot of parallels between books and publishing and websites, as far as pacing, sequencing, editing. I definitely think an on-screen experience is universal, in a way.”

There’s certainly overlap, then, between Syms’s artistic output and net art, but the way she approaches the issue of digital technology is informed by a broader cultural context, not the least of which includes an eye toward the black radical tradition. In a 2013 talk for SXSW Interactive called “Black Vernacular: Reading New Media,” which will be anthologized in a forthcoming book from MIT Press, she recalls an online project archiving her Google searches that was exhibited alongside those of two white male artist peers.



FROM TOP:  
Still from *A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere*, 2015.  
Two-channel HD video, 25 min. Installation view of “S1:E1” in the New Museum’s 2015 Triennial, “Surround Audience.”



TOP:  
Cover for Syms's  
short story  
*Fools*, 2012.

Still from  
*Memory Palace*, a 2015  
collaboration  
with Kahlil Joseph. HD video,  
2 min

between languages or dialects in varied cultural contexts, which entered mainstream vocabulary around the election of President Obama in 2008. “Writing the SXSW talk was the first time I thought about code switching as a metaphorical term,” she notes. “I was thinking about it more as a way of making stuff — the idea of smashing two things together that seem like opposites.” She compares it to amphiboly, a grammatical structure deployed formally by the collective Slavs and Tatars: “It could mean two things, or something and its opposite, contained in one idea. So it’s not just switching cultures but bringing ideas together. That’s something that’s continued throughout my work since writing that essay.”

In late 2013, Syms wrote a piece for Rhizome called the “Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto,” seeking “a new framework for black diasporic artistic production.” The manifesto drew from the language and structure of 2004’s “Mundane Manifesto,” written

by Geoff Ryman and others from the Clarion West sci-fi writing workshop, which focused on “this premise that if you focus on outer space, you forget about what’s actually happening to the planet,” she explains. “I took the environmental concerns and adjusted them to be social concerns.” Here, adherents (the “alternately pissed off and bored”) agree to imagine a future without magic, space travel, Martians, or alternative universes, instead seeking a “cosmology of blackness and...possible futures” rooted in black humanity, and “the awesome power of the black imagination” that already exists on Earth. Syms’s own entry to this genre is *Most Days*, an audio piece set in 2050 in which she narrates the day of Chanel Washington, a young black woman living in Los Angeles. Accompanied in its vinyl release on Mixed Media Recordings by Neil Reinalda’s ambient score, the voice-over lingers on both Chanel’s wholly relatable domestic routines (waking up alongside her boyfriend, painting her toenails)

Responses to her project led to a series of questions: “What does it mean for a black woman to make minimal, masculine net art?” she asks in the lecture. “What about this piece is ‘not black’? Can my identity be expressed as an aesthetic quality?” Considering “the tension between conventional, segregated channels of distribution and black imagination,” Syms invokes code switching, the sociological notion of moving



and her equally intimate interactions with technology (a sleep-monitoring blanket, a vaporizer pen). With the background synth sounds creating a dreamlike mood, that small distance Syms's futurity creates between the listener and this imagined reality becomes one of quietly unsettling possibility.

While any continued adherence to the rules of Mundane Afrofuturism after *Most Days* is unintentional, the mood of the piece certainly resonates in her work since then, particularly the presence of a solitary female protagonist, a role that, she says, will be a part of the body work she's producing for her upcoming exhibition at Bridget Donahue gallery in New York, which opens this month. It's not an autobiographical representation of herself but rather, she explains, "a reference to a vernacular, existing mythologies that we already have around us." She references Georges Polti's *36 Dramatic Situations*: "I like using that because it's the essence of all popular narratives from the Renaissance until to now.

It allows me to focus on the interpretation of these things that we've already established." By a mechanism similar to that utilized in *Most Days*, possibility through this proximity to autobiography, the solitary female character takes on a performative edge as well. This has been of interest to Syms since her early LiveJournal days, under the handle "ambiguousperson". "I like to think about self-performance, for screen and for life," she says.

"Where an on-screen performance is made to be more realistic or true to life, how that changes a gesture or a movement. How real-life performance is influenced by television or movies, that theatricality. I feel like LiveJournal was a really tangible way to create a self with many different personalities."

Which brings us back to TV, one of many containers of cultural knowledge that Syms has examined and unpacked, equal parts amused viewer and media archaeologist. Responding to the notion of a voice actor or LiveJournal user who's layered different selves, she says, "I'm

really obsessed with this show right now called *Power*, produced by 50 Cent. One of the characters owns this club and is a drug dealer, and his nemesis is a young, attractive black guy. The club owner invites him to come work with him, and asks, "You know, we can't get blacks and Latinos at our club. What's the secret?" The guys like, "Different people come to my club because I'm different things." MP



“The Unreliable Narrator,” interview with Aram Moshayedi, *Mousse* #49, Summer 2015, 62–69.



Mousse Publishing

MOUSSE – Current Issue – Issue #49 / MARTINE SYMS



Martine Syms, *Lessons I-XXX*, 2014

Courtesy: the artist

## THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

by Aram Moshayedi

*Might it be the fault of Steve Jobs if qualities attributed to artists like freedom, creativity and originality are now increasingly associated with the figure of the entrepreneur? Martine Syms, an artist based in Los Angeles, wonders about the supposed assimilation of business by art (and vice versa), or perhaps the porous screen that separates those two worlds. Wherever the truth lies, the title of "conceptual entrepreneur," as Syms calls herself, does seem to fit her versatile activity that includes video, performance and the helming of the Dominica publishing company. Aram Moshayedi met with the artist to talk about her recent video A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere and the video series "Lessons".*

Aram Moshayedi: You describe yourself as being a "conceptual entrepreneur," with perhaps some derision toward the overuse of titles like artist or curator. When did you start to use this way of describing yourself, and why did it seem to provide a viable alternative?

Martine Syms: I started using "conceptual entrepreneur" around 2007. After graduating from art school I didn't want to make art. I wanted to open a business. I signed a lease on a



Martine Syms, *For Nights Like These*, 1979 (3), 2014  
Courtesy: the artist



storefront a few weeks before I finished school and opened Golden Age, a bookstore, later that year with Marco Kane Braunschweiler. I was reading a lot of business books and I was excited by the idea that I could do more as an entrepreneur than I could as an artist. It seemed like you needed a title to succeed—for your “elevator pitch”—and since my responsibilities at Golden Age were split between writing, publishing, buying and accounting, I felt like the term artist wasn’t accurate. I mashed together all the biz lit with art theory and “conceptual entrepreneur” was the absurd term I made up.

AM: Along those lines, the sphere of contemporary art seems to have absorbed the entrepreneurial spirit and the idea of innovation, as had been the case previously with other disciplines like dance, music, and film. You can see this playing out in the New Museum’s incubator NEW INC, as well as the recent announcement of USC’s “Degree in Disruption,” otherwise known as the Jimmy Iovine and Andre Young Academy for Arts, Technology, and the Business of Innovation, which is part of a larger trend moving away from a traditional studio-based curriculum. Do you feel somehow implicated in this by what was once just a turn of phrase and a reconceptualization of your identity as an artist?

MS: I do. Sometimes I hate explaining what a “conceptual entrepreneur” is because I feel much more ambivalent about framing my activity in capitalist terms than I did eight years ago. When I first started saying it the tech industry didn’t loom as large as it does now. Many qualities previously associated with the artist—freedom, creativity, originality—are now linked to the entrepreneur thanks to extensive marketing. I blame Steve Jobs specifically. You mentioned NEW INC and the mess at USC, but Simon Denny’s recent show at PS1 MoMA includes a series about DLD, a major tech conference that happens in New York and Berlin. Several of the works feature direct quotes from speakers about how they’re changing the world. K-Hole went from an art project parodying the marketing industry to becoming a reputable trend forecasting company. They were just named one of Fast Company’s Most Creative Companies. I wonder if contemporary art is absorbing business or if business is absorbing it. Or maybe the walls between them are as porous as I thought they were.



Martine Syms, film still produced for the cover of *Most Days* (2014). LP. Mixed Media Recordings, Brooklyn.  
Courtesy: the artist.

AM: This has all unfolded in the last 8 years within a context that has become increasingly interested in contemporary art as an untapped market and the simultaneous instrumentalization of artists as participants in a creative industry. But would you say you were interested in finding a sustainable model, a way to live as a type of a contributor of a different nature?

MS: Definitely. I was driven towards entrepreneurship by economic concern. I graduated right before the recession. I

quit the one shitty job I was able to get in like September and wasn't able to get another one until 2012. I wanted to create

my own infrastructure. I was looking for a sustainable model. Even last year I decided to be a "full-time artist" whatever the fuck that means, and after a month I was like "nah I'm good."

AM: Did that decision have anything to do with adopting a persona? I ask because there is an element of fiction that plays itself out in some of your works. *Fools* (2012), for instance, is a small book published by your imprint Dominica, in which the text takes on the voice of a white man. Similarly, in *She Mad*, which is the pilot outlined in your recent video *A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere* (2015), you describe a semi-autobiographical account of your own life, of the trials and tribulations of "making it" in Los Angeles. There is something almost parodic about this. Do you think these strategies are somehow about deferring your own identity?

MS: I think it's more about constructing my identity. I used to write these extremely short sentimental stories that I described as "fictional memoirs" until a friend said "isn't that just fiction?" (I recently found out the writer Anne Carson uses the term and I feel validated.) I combine my own experience with historical narratives and tropes from popular culture. *Fools* is a love story. It's sappy. There's a meet-cute, a sex scene, and a breakup. *She Mad* could be anyone's story of making it in L.A.—that's what people do here.

AM: I think *She Mad* gets tied to you, in part, because it's clearly your voice as the narrator. Actually, the entire video has a kind of provisional nature that makes it appear to be sincere, intimate, or even "honest." These tend to be art's bad words, which may or may not have some validity, but might this also be a byproduct of the low-production that the works rely upon?

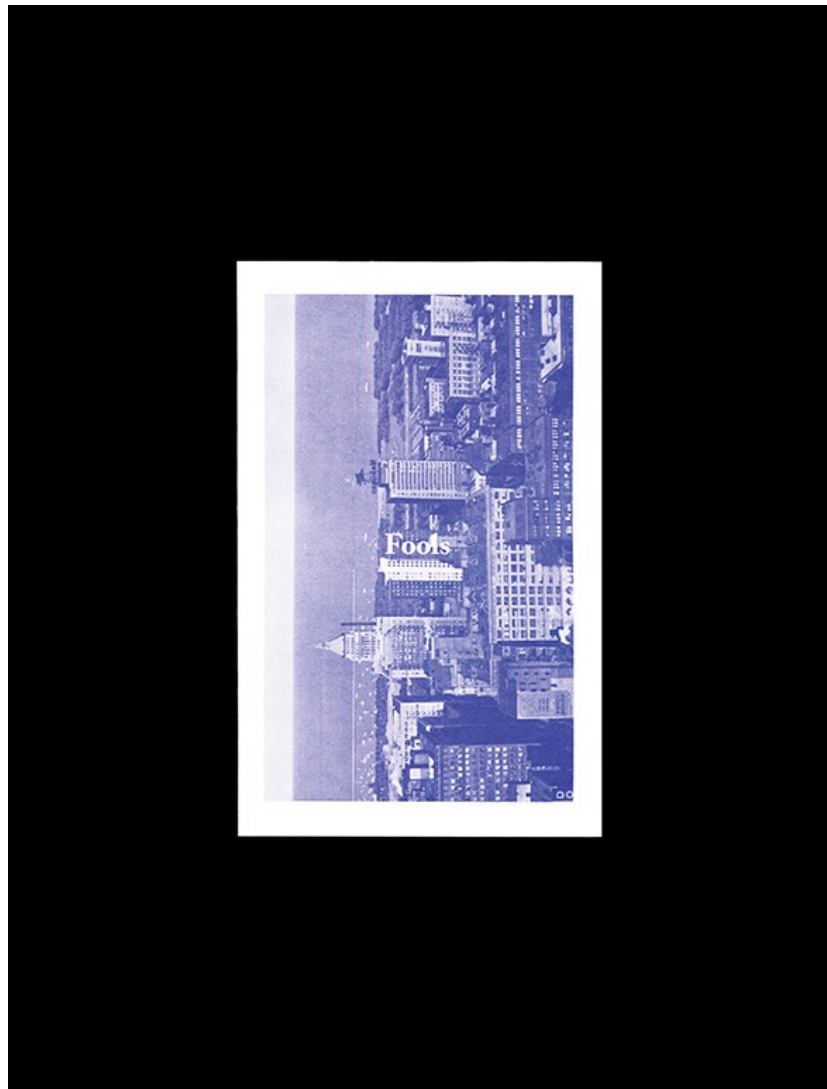
MS: People assume I'm telling the truth in *A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere* because my voice is used and it's obvious I'm recording in a closet reading from a piece of paper. I appear on screen through footage shot on my computer and phone and the



image quality makes people believe. *Fools* is also assumed to be autobiographical and it uses a much different voice. I'm not actually that sincere. There is a line where I say "Martine is

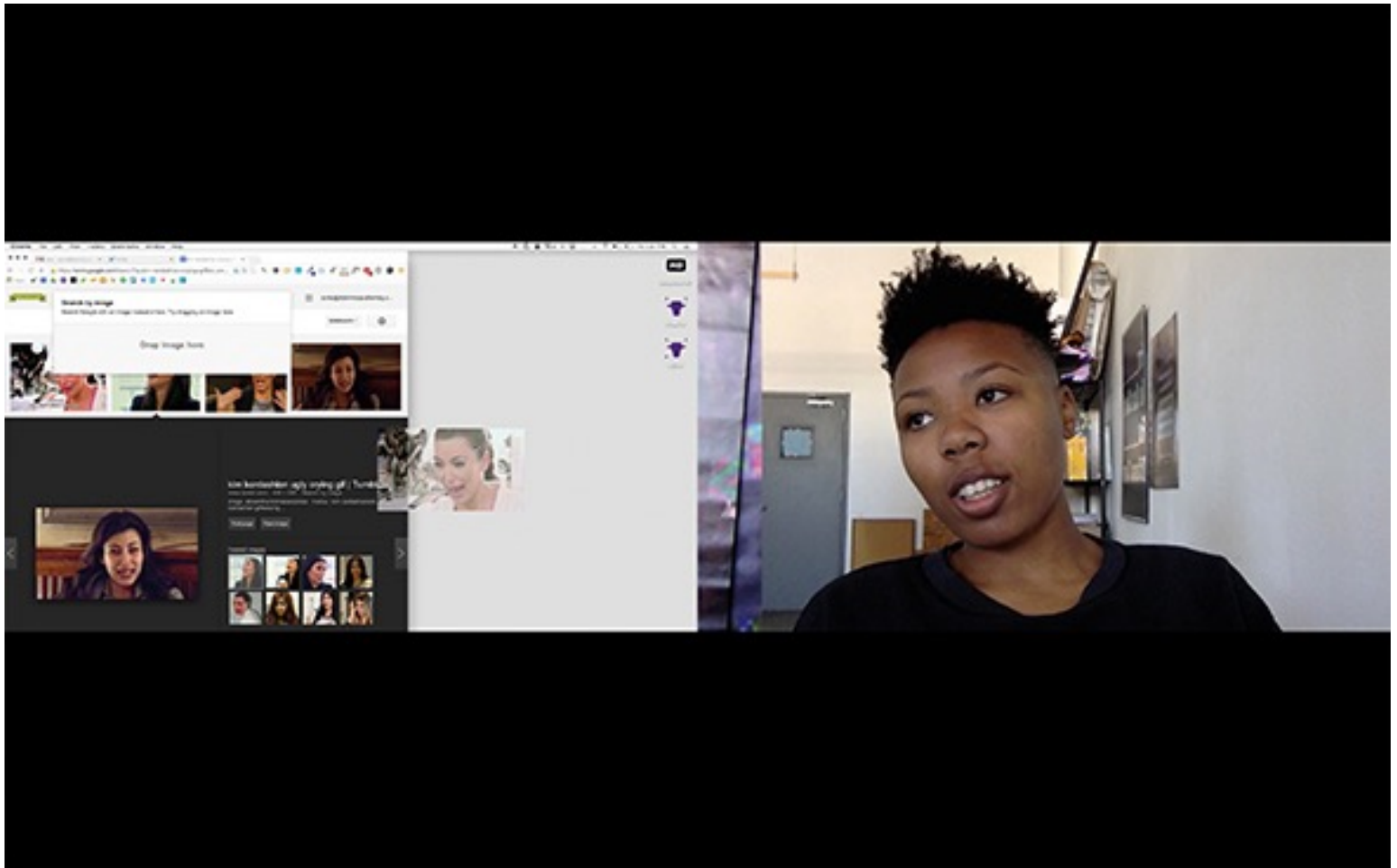
a graphic designer who wants to be an important artist." It's a joke. I use terrible quality video because it feels real. Sort of like the way Beyoncé used iPad video in her HBO documentary. I'm an unreliable narrator. I want to confuse the viewer about the source.

AM: Is the same true for the way in which footage from your video series "Lessons" (2014) formed the basis for what you've called commercial breaks in *A Pilot*?



Martine Syms, *Fools*, 2012  
Courtesy: the artist and Dominica publishing

MS: The first commercial in *A Pilot* features an excerpt of Sister Souljah on a Phil Donahue special following the 1992 Los Angeles riots. I found it looking through footage of Anna Deavere Smith who is also a guest on the show. I was struck by her words. She encapsulates some of the beliefs I have, such as "America is business and without business you will have nothing and be nothing." Basically she is condemning the school systems for not teaching students about business so they "can create sustainable institutions in their communities." (I wish I could write this how she says it.)



Martine Syms, *A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere*, still, 2015  
 Courtesy: the artist

This commercial is *Lesson I* in a series of 30-second videos I've been making for the past year. I'm working towards a 90-minute feature (180 videos), but the project began as a commission from the Walker Art Center. I was a part of the Design Insights lecture series in 2014 and my talk was structured around the five lessons of the tradition that are woven throughout Kevin Young's book *The Grey Album: On the*

*Blackness of Blackness*. I've taken those lessons as a way of explaining how I work and I wanted to make an ad for each of them. Once I started working on them, I became less tied to the

text and decided there were way more than five lessons of the tradition.

When I started working on *A Pilot* I wanted it to be exactly the length of a sitcom, including commercials. I selected "Lessons" that made sense for the context. I probably had twentyish done, and I made several new ones to be included in the New Museum presentation. The "Lessons" are all about constraints, they are thirty seconds, must feature a black figure, and I have rules about where to make cuts, how to edit sound, etc.

AM: It's clear that the clip of Sista Souljah's monologue included in *A Pilot* omits cutaways to a mostly white audience that were originally a part of "Lessons". What was the reason for this shift with the material?

MS: I limited the amount of white voices featured in *A Pilot* because it is a black sitcom. Each person featured on screen is a proxy for me. I used their presence as a way to think about the relationship between my interior self, my public persona, myself as the platonic viewer, and me as the star. What changes between each role? What stays the same? I was thinking a lot about how standup comedians transform their life into a bit and then how the narrative elements of the act shift when it gets developed into a sitcom pilot. I exist in the film in many different capacities. This wasn't an intentional reference, but one of my favorite things in the world is the director's commentary on R. Kelly's *Trapped in the Closet* DVD. He's sitting in a chair facing the camera/viewer and there's one point in the song where there is R. Kelly commenting, R. Kelly narrating, R. Kelly acting, and R. Kelly singing.

AM: In a recent conversation with artist Charles Gaines, you asked him about the validity of the category "black art" as it pertains to his work in a historical sense. You expressed a bit of reservation toward the validity of such modifiers, and I'm wondering how you characterize the politics of identity within your work?



MS: Sometimes it seems like we're still talking about an essentialist idea of what is or is not black art. Right now a lot of artists my age are interested in claiming blackness and I think that's related to the historical moment, much like it was in early 90s film and music, or the Black Arts Movement of the 70s. I get really bored with the idea that there is some specific way that black art looks. I am, however, very intrigued by the idea of making an image in a black way. Arthur Jafa refers to this as a Black Visual Intonation. He writes about it better than me.

With regard to my own process, I think less about myself as a black artist than I do about making work for a black viewer. I think a lot of about the ideal viewer / reader / listener / user, and how assumptions about who they are and what they want influence aesthetic choices in pop culture. I usually out myself in reference or language or appearance, but I see an opportunity to be vague about blackness, to refuse an identity by shifting focus from author to audience.



"Surround Audience" installation view at New Museum, New York, 2015.

Courtesy: the artist and New Museum, New York. Photo: Benoit Paisley

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AM: Do you think emphasizing various practical forms (lectures, publications, videos, etc.) which articulate different modes of delivery and distribution for specific research projects also helps to redress the very idea of a unique experience and, therefore, a singular viewer or receiver? This question for me has to do with the way in which most mainstream institutions continue to rely upon a narrative of art and art history that remains unaccommodating to difference, not so much of the makers but of the terms of engagement.

MS: Audience and distribution are intimately connected. I decide what I want to say, to whom, and then figure out the best way to present it. Last night I was tweeting with Tisa

Bryant about Marlon Riggs because there's a group show opening at MOCA called *Tongues Untied* which features one black artist—Riggs. Tisa wrote about how Riggs worked collaboratively and collectively. He wasn't trying to "represent" a community; instead, his community was his work. He actively fought against exceptionalism. The exhibition can't accommodate that multiplicity. It shows him as a singular entity, whereas his film work, particularly *Tongues Untied*, is able to provide context and [demonstrate] the creative/romantic/political relationships he was involved in.

Riggs is a model for me. I work very collaboratively and I usually include several voices in all my projects. Lectures, publications, and videos are part of a constellation of ideas. They don't operate independently. They link outwards, and it's that accumulation of meaning that is most exciting to me. I think an artwork can do that too, but the exhibition isn't appropriate for every idea. I have no loyalty to the format.



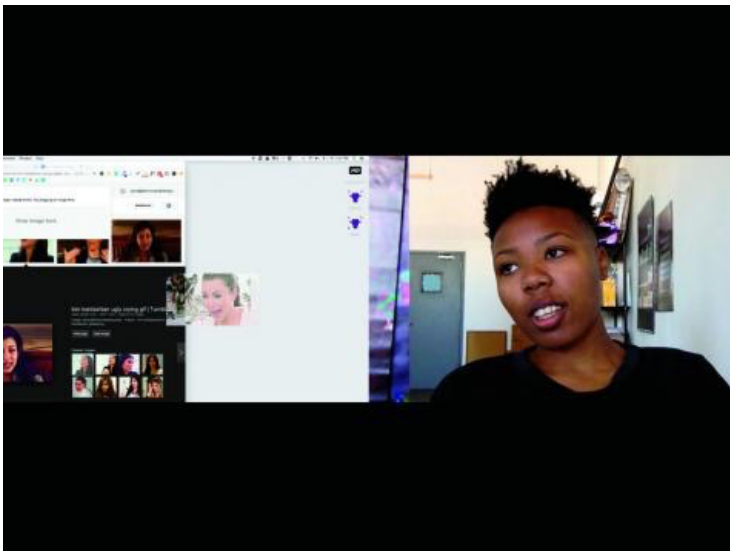
Martine Syms, “Stages of Laughter 3 - Martine Syms”, *Art in America*, June 1, 2015.

# Art in America

MAGAZINE JUN. 01, 2015

## STAGES OF LAUGHTER 3 - MARTINE SYMS

by Martine Syms



ART HAS ALWAYS had a sense of humor. Scenes from Greek theatrical comedies are immortalized on classical vases. Bawdy sexual jokes are common in the art of the Dutch Golden Age. And many of the paintings favored by 18th-century French aristocrats were inspired by commedia dell'arte pageantry. The history of art can be a lens through which to examine the ever-evolving cultural forms, dramatic genres and literary conventions that fall under the heading of comedy. Whether reveling in the pleasures of everyday life or skewering the cultivated manners of the elite, art with a comedic sensibility can reflect the values of a dominant class, challenge ruling ideologies—or sometimes appear to accomplish both at the same time. Erupting from perceived incongruities in otherwise conventional situations, comedy can effect a “victorious tilting of uncontrol against control,” as anthropologist Mary Douglas has observed. Laughter, however, can also

accompany a feeling of self-satisfaction—what Hobbes called “sudden glory”—that comes from witty assertions of superiority.

The essays that follow explore some intersections of contemporary art and comedy while reflecting each contributor’s singular sense of humor. The comedic forms they consume, spanning from experimental improv to late-night talk shows, are as diverse as the work they produce. Comedian Kate Berlant performs at both galleries and comedy clubs, manipulating the expectations embedded within different venue types. Self-described conceptual entrepreneur Martine Syms identifies kernels of truth within the sometimes pallid fare offered by television sitcoms and romantic comedies, even as she is drawn to the memes shared within online subcultures. While new media defines new contexts for humor, a remarkable reliance on physical comedy and the immediacy of performance remains, whether through the spontaneity and responsiveness of the improv techniques that Amy Sillman applies to her abstract paintings or the dynamics of slapstick that animate Aki Sasamoto’s performances.

—Eds.

There’s evidence that the art system is hungry for qualities associated with another type of comedic performer: the stand-up.

### MARTINE SYMS

HOLLYWOOD ONCE HAD a near monopoly on the manufacture of celebrity. Showbiz took unknown New Yorkers like Leonard Schneider and turned them into Lenny Bruce. Now, anyone can create a marketable persona using the extended narratives that flow through social media feeds. The rising popularity of contemporary art has redefined what it means to be an “art star.” Fame is dependent on an outsize number of followers. Artists are modeling their self-presentation after comedians and small-screen celebs.

I’m thinking about Amalia Ulman’s performance *Excellences & Perfections* (2014), which took place primarily on Instagram. Over the course of five months, Ulman posted a series of carefully staged images conveying the fragmented story of a young woman who, like Tina Fey’s Liz Lemon, struggles with the four basic guilt groups of food, love, work and family. Unlike Lemon, Ulman transformed herself (or at

least her image) through diet, costuming and postproduction. She conducted extensive research on the verbal and visual language of three female archetypes, which she described in a recent interview as “the Tumblr girl (an Urban Outfitters type); the sugar-baby ghetto girl; and the girl next door, someone like Miranda Kerr, who’s healthy and into yoga.”

Ulman embodies these girls in her images and endows them with the semblance of personalities through captions. *Excellences* traffics in the tone-deaf language of hyper-privilege. Ulman, in the guise of one character, rapidly shifts from the ecstasy of consumerism to callous vanity. “Matching!! #flowers #girl #iPhone #nails #sunglasses #dolcegabbana #dolce&gabbana,” reads the caption of one selfie. Another—a sexy full-body shot—lists “reasons i wanna look good.” (On the list: “To plant the seed of envy in other bitch’s hearts.”) I didn’t pay attention to the project, until Ulman described it in the interview as a romantic comedy. The main tropes of that genre are ripe for creative mutation. When done right, romantic comedies articulate our unspeakable desires of all kinds, whether that desire is for affection, objects, happiness or an identity; the worst rom-coms are merely about falling in love with someone.

I’ve long harbored a secret dream to create a half-hour comedy-drama with a strong female lead. In my fantasy, the working title is “She Mad.” The phrase has become a Hail Mary to diffuse ridiculous arguments about cooking and cleaning in my household. I used to say, “We’re not in a fucking sitcom!” Now I say, “She mad,” and it’s like we are.

Earlier this year I made a video called *A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere* that considers the politics of watching television. It’s about the way I frame my life within the fictional milestones I learned from pop culture. Should I be anxious that I don’t have a car or a house or a job? I’ve described the project as an experimental sitcom pilot, though it doesn’t resemble a conventional episode in any way. I appear in filmed reenactments of my daily life, and a “She Mad” title card is used occasionally to suggest a complete, linear narrative. When I showed the video to a friend who works in the industry, he told me that if I wanted to “be like Steve McQueen”—as in, break into the mainstream from the art world—I should “pull a Lena Dunham.” In artist and writer David Robbins’s book *High Entertainment* (2009), there is a chapter on self-



Paradoxically, you might be able  
to avoid being the product by  
becoming one.

-presentation and impression management that includes actions or by creation of a persona.” Ulman turned into a hot babe, took the lead role in her own drama, and earned herself thousands of followers from within the art world and beyond. Though the format she used may be new, the basic characters Ulman deployed to explore female desires and insecurities have deep roots that extend to the earliest forms of popular entertainment. On another level, art careers can resemble episodic stories, with meaning accumulating, narratives developing and clout building from exhibition to exhibition. Ulman figured out that she could control that storyline, too, by casting herself in any role she wanted. There’s also evidence that the art system is hungry for qualities associated with another type of comedic performer: the stand-up. Matthew Daube, a Stanford researcher whose work focuses on the performance of race and comedy, suggests the stand-up comic as a desirable model for contemporary selfhood. This individual can “operate amidst apparent entropy with the security of an ironic outlook.” The best way to reveal silent expectations or scrutinize and subvert assumptions is with a joke. Comics are highly attuned to the relationship they establish with their audience. “It is against and with the audience that the stand-up comic stands up, simultaneously one of the crowd and yet distinct from it,” writes Daube. Many artists use this double-consciousness to their advantage.

One art wit I’m quite envious of is Yung Jake, né Jake Patterson. He’s a Net artist, a rapper, a creative at Cartoon Network and a director of both Pepsi commercials and music videos for the cult hip-hop act Rae Sremmurd. Yung Jake was born on the Internet in 2011. The songs he produces are three-minute bits usually accompanied by online videos. In “Datamosh” he brags about his digital effect skills in a glitched video. The lyrics annotate the images. “I’m moshing data, making art on my computer.” Jake once left a comment on the site Genius.com explicating his own self-referential work: “Yung Jake is calling attention to the fact that his videos are ‘art.’” In “E.m-bed.de/d,” Jake goes viral, creating a feedback loop in a narrative that spans multiple browser windows. In a recent live performance of “Look” he stood between a laptop and a dual projection of his desktop and iPhone screens. He spoke to the audience and into his devices’ cameras simultaneously. A text message to his phone was all it took for the audience to become a part of his show, their

words appearing live onscreen. Most of the messages he received were nonsense.

The joke as we know it is a modern invention that arose from vaudeville. Cultural historian Susan Smulyan argues that the “compression and verbal basis” of Jewish humor made it perfect for mass media. Black humor thrives on the Internet. In the black vernacular tradition, words, signs and their meanings can be endlessly doubled. Scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. likens the effect to a hall of mirrors. This fluidity of language is what Internet memes are made of.

Take Los Angeles artist Devin Kenny. (Please, take him.) He spends a lot of time on his computer when he’s not making sculptures, videos, installations and music. I first encountered him on Facebook and I couldn’t remember if we were friends in real life. When we finally met it didn’t matter. We’d shared so many links at that point. Kenny uses words out of place. A few years ago he installed status updates/jokes on the marquee of a theater in New York’s Chelsea neighborhood. My favorite reads: “Twerkin’ is shorthand for gesamtkunstwerkin’.”

For “Wrong Window,” his exhibition at Los Angeles’s Aran Cravey Gallery, he made an Internet of things. *Untitled (But I swear this beat go haaard)*, 2012, is a glass plank on which the parenthetical title has been rendered in enamel. It’s a comment made physical, and it’s installed in a group of similar works adorned with verbal asides and emoticons. Another piece called *Slave name/stage name/Ellis Island snafu* (2008/2012) lists possible names for his alter egos. Kenny raps under the pseudonym Devin KKenny. His raps are funny because they’re true. In interviews he notes his interest in the figure of the griot, a traditional African historian who speaks in musical, poetic language. His latest track, “LANyards,” ends on a refrain that speaks to the plethora of social media services offered gratis: “If it’s free, best believe you are the product.”

Paradoxically, you might be able to avoid being the product by becoming one. Nathaniel Donnett has a 2011 sculpture titled *How Can You Love Me and Hate Me at the Same Time?*, a protest sign modeled after those held at the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike declaring, “I Am A Man.” This one reads, “I AM A MEME.” The original was a declaration of independence. Expressing pride at being a meme means establishing a link between personhood and the representation of a person. Self-reference is salvation from top-down control.

Martine Syms, "A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere", *Art Papers*, May/June 2015, 24–28.

# ART PAPERS

## A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere

Text / Martine Syms

*I DON'T WATCH GOOD TELEVISION.*

"I told her I once heard a comedian say that if you put an apple on television everyday for six months, and then placed that apple in a glass case and put that on display at the mall, people would go up to it and say, Oooh, look, there's that apple that's on television. America's a lot like that apple."

—Paul Beatty, *Slumberland*, 2008



Right now, I'm watching two shows in earnest. *Nashville* is a primetime musical soap about Rayna Jaymes, an aging star in the cutthroat country music biz. The show was created by Callie Khouri, best known for the 1991 womanist film, *Thelma & Louise*. Past episodes have tackled paternity rights, alcoholism, sexual harassment, mental illness, homophobia, and infidelity, among other themes. This season has a domestic violence story line. *Scandal* is a political melodrama about a DC "fixer" named Olivia Pope. Pope is the sidepiece of POTUS, a petulant man-child with perpetually sullen eyes. *Scandal* is heavy on monologuing, walking-and-talking, sappy synths, and the voyeuristic specter of camera shutter sound effects. The series hails from ShondaLand, a production company that traffics in ensemble casts and emotional devastation. (Showrunner Shonda Rhimes is often pejoratively referred to as "colorblind," though she also uses the term herself to describe her casting process. I think that's too easy. *Scandal* is almost science fiction. As Willa Paskin wrote for *The New York Times*, "[O]n her



show, America is run by an African-American spin expert, a scheming first lady and a mercenary gay guy who also happens to be in one of the sexiest homosexual marriages on television.”)

In 1971, Paul Klein, former VP Audience Measurement at NBC, wrote an article for *TV Guide* magazine titled "Why You Watch What You Watch When You Watch." The piece focused on a theory of the "Least Objectionable Program" (LOP). Under the heavy influence of Marshall McLuhan, Klein argued that viewers consume the medium itself, rather than the content. Viewers do not turn on the TV searching for their favorite shows, he claimed; instead, they are happy with whatever doesn't suck—that is, with the LOP.



Klein was wrong. My preferences, for instance, are clear: I like a strong female lead. My father, a passive watcher who keeps the TV on as he floats between rooms fiddling around, still only tunes in to local news, sports, or cop shows—informative, masculine programs that are suggestive of reality. I don't think he's ever watched a show without at least one black character. Every viewer makes a choice. Television viewing has always been highly personalized, and highly politicized.





*WHAT IS OPRAH'S FAVORITE SITCOM?*

*The term "quality television" emerged in 1970, with the fall season premiere of The Mary Tyler Moore Show. When All in the Family joined the CBS Saturday night line-up in 1971, critics declared a new era for the medium.*

ARCHIE: Hey, Jefferson, I seen you hosing down your porch yesterday.

GEORGE: Oh yeah? When am I going to see you hosing down yours? [Beat] Bartender—get the man a drink, please.

BARTENDER: Yes, sir. What will it be?

ARCHIE: Whisky.

BARTENDER: Any particular brand?

ARCHIE: Uh, yeah, the expensive brand.

BARTENDER: And what about you sir?

GEORGE: Scotch and soda, please.

BARTENDER: Yes, sir!

ARCHIE: Hey hey, Jefferson, there's a switch for you. This guy giving you the big "Yes, sir"?

GEORGE: Why? He's a bartender ain't he?

ARCHIE: Yeah, but what I meant was that I'm used to having it the other way around.

GEORGE: Oh yeah? How many servants you got in that mansion you're living in?

ARCHIE: What do you mean by that?

BARTENDER: Here you are, sir.

GEORGE: Let me tell you something about people. [...] That bartender's willing to work for me, because if you've got enough green in your pocket then black becomes his favorite color!



### TELEVISION IS HOW WE FEEL

Television has always been in my life. I was born in the late 80s, after the tube had been fully integrated into American society. Young urban professionals (like my parents) had seen JFK's assassination, witnessed the Television War, watched the Watergate hearings, and gotten their MTV. Ted Turner splintered the three-channel monopoly, and Fox was born. Non-whites and gays were regularly on TV. *The Cosby Show* (1984) followed an upper-middle class black family; *Roseanne* (1988) was a sitcom in which the title character worked in a factory; *A Different World* (1987) was about students at a historically black university. These were the three highest-rated shows of my birth year. Advertisers had discovered new demographic frontiers, and the networks responded in turn. This trend continued through the mid-1990s, but by the early 2000s, whiteness had peaked with the improbable New Yorks of *Friends* and *Sex and the City*. Last year, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Modern Family*, and *How to Get Away with Murder*—a ShondaLand production—took the top three spots. The success of *How to Get Away with Murder* and this year's *Empire* prompted Deadline.com TV editor Nellie Andreeva to write an article called, "Pilots 2015: The Year of Ethnic Castings," in reference to the recent string of black shows. Andreeva suggests that white actors are being discriminated against and that the talent pool of "experienced minority performers" is insufficient. I hate *Empire* because it's written for an audience that isn't familiar with black life. Twenty years from now we'll see this televisual moment is as complex as the 1980s were, when *The Cosby Show* was framed by the crack epidemic and the welfare queen. What's the relationship between #Ferguson and *Empire*'s Cookie?

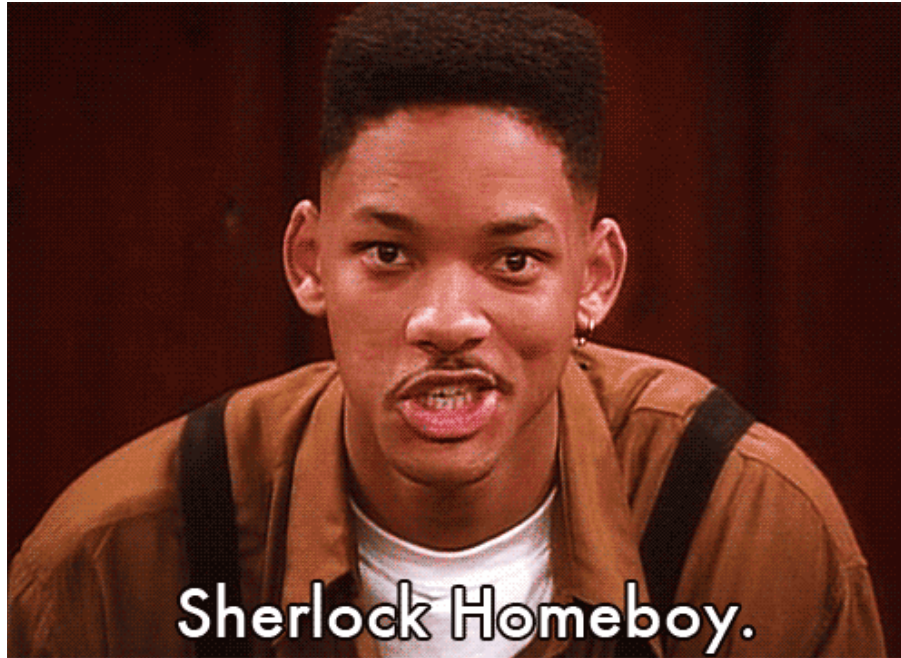




Television expresses the values of its culture. To quote television executive Lauren Zalaznick, it "directly reflects the moral, political, social and emotional need states of our nation. ... [T]elevision is how we actually disseminate our entire value system." Nonviolent Communication (NVC), a method developed by psychologist Marshall B. Rosenberg, provides a useful framework for understanding how television conveys our desires. NVC focuses on four components: observation, feelings, needs, and request. Basic NVC involves observing the concrete actions that affect our well-being; stating how we feel in relation to what we observe; identifying the needs, values, and desires that create our feelings; and requesting the concrete actions necessary to enrich our lives. In the language of NVC, every conflict is a result of needs unmet, and every joy a result of the opposite.

American television replicates this approach in a commercial setting. As an advertising medium, its economic engine is powered by demographic statistics, by which producers might interpret "need." Viewers tune in to programs according to a given feeling, accommodated by a given genre: drama, comedy, romance, action, etc. This relationship stops short of the fourth focus of NVC: "request."

Zalaznick revealed in a 2011 TED talk that her team at NBCUniversal surveyed almost 3,600 individuals, ages 18 to 70, and asked them how they felt emotionally while watching the top 20 Nielsen-rated shows of each year since the 1959/1960 season. Participants were asked to respond to questions such as the following: "How did you feel watching every single one of these shows? Did you feel a sense of moral ambiguity? Did you feel outrage? Did you laugh? What did this mean for you?"



WHATEVER CARROLL O'CONNOR GETS, PLUS A DOLLAR

The sitcom format originated in radio. There is little consensus about the very first sitcom, although WMAQ Chicago's *Amos 'n' Andy* is considered one of the genre's pioneers. Originally aired on WGN as *Sam 'n' Henry*, two men who had recently migrated to Chicago from the rural show, it was the first show to be syndicated nationally. Voiced by white comedians Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, it relied on dialect, malapropism, and stereotype: the fast-paced banter between the titular players was directly inspired by that of Tambo and Bones, the stock character end men of minstrel shows. The conventions of minstrelsy set the tone for ethnic performances in popular entertainment, and for sitcoms as such.

One of television's most popular 20th-century inheritors to this tradition was Norman Lear's *Sanford and Son*, which starred the comedian Redd Foxx. Foxx, a protégé of Moms Mabley well known in the black community for his raunchy party albums, cut his teeth in vaudeville and brought a vernacular comic style to the small screen. By the mid-1970s, leading sitcoms had adopted some narrative techniques from controversial stand-up comedians such as Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor. Direct, extended conversation would become a hallmark of the form. Pryor even wrote a few episodes of *Sanford and Son*.

Foxx had a traditional style. There was a sharp distinction between the "Fred Sanford" character, the Redd Foxx comic persona, and the actor's personal identity. Foxx told one-liners; his show featured guests from his "chitlin' circuit" days, with appearances from co-star LaWanda Page, and Billy Eckstine and Scatman Crothers cameos; the effect gave visibility to a black private sphere. *Sanford and Son* was a huge success throughout its six-season run.

Foxx was making a lot of money for NBC, but the network still treated him like a second banana. In 1974, the radical playwright turned story editor Ilunga Adell told the *Sarasota Herald Tribune*, "Everybody was angry. People yelling at each other, yelling at Redd. You can't say 'do this, do that' to Redd .... People had never ordered him around before. I respect him for his stand." Foxx was a crossover sensation who refused to assimilate.



### THE COMMODIFICATION OF DIFFERENCE

An abundance of shows imitating the innovative style developed by MTM and Tandem followed in the 1970s. Yet by the mid-1980s CBS, ABC, and NBC were losing viewers to cable channels and the newly minted Fox. They responded by targeting new audiences for their programming. As the yuppie fell in love with the hour-long drama, we took the sitcom.

In his book *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (1995), sociologist Herman Gray proposes three practices for representing "otherness" on television: assimilation, pluralism, and multiculturalism. The assimilation narrative is color-blind. Every character exists equally, no matter his background. The themes of the show are "universal." The social and political realities of racism are the problems of individuals, reserved for very special episodes. The pluralist television show operates by a separate-but-equal doctrine. Bronzeville, Harlem, Southeast DC, or Watts are merely relatable versions of other neighborhoods. Occasionally, a protagonist finds herself in a "fish out of water" scenario.

The multiculturalist approach situates the "other" at the social and cultural heart of the program. The narrative acknowledges the structural implications of race and class. There is an explicit construction of identity in the show's aesthetics, through music, costuming, language, and style. These shows usually last for only one season, but we treasure them nonetheless.

*The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* is one notable deviation. The series ran from 1990 to 1996 and, like its star, Will Smith, managed to transcend race and its surrounding discourses (and to become the cultural symbol of the 1990s). In high school, I went to a taping of *The Tyra Banks Show*. Smith was her guest and they played a clip of a scene from "Father of the Year" (season 4, episode 4), in which their characters bicker like old lovers. Later, Banks and Smith laughed about footage like it was from a family barbecue.



## THE SITCOM IS AS AMERICAN AS JAZZ OR COMIC BOOKS

In 1967 the sociologist Robin M. Williams Jr. published an essay, unassumingly titled "Individual and Group Values," in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*. Williams' text distinguished 15 "major value-belief clusterings" that influence American society and individuals, as follows: activity and work; achievement and success; moral orientation; humanitarianism; efficiency and practicality; science and secular rationality; material comfort; progress; equality; freedom; democracy; external conformity; nationalism and patriotism; individual personality; racism and related group superiority. Williams derived these 15 values from the study of commercial fiction and used it to analyze how they changed over time. He noted that fiction typically targets specific audiences and does not "reflect reality in a total way." Rather, it argued, it shows "specific kinds of transformation" within a given population.

Although this research is 48 years old, it is still particularly resonant to me. The contradictions in Williams' list correspond to my own constant—and perhaps distinctly American—anxieties. How can we value equality yet still believe in group superiority? How do we cultivate the individualism we claim to value, if we must conform to external pressure? Why is being a good person so often conflated with having a good job?

What does it mean to be American and watch TV? This country is defined by its commercialism. President John Calvin Coolidge Jr. famously said, "the chief business of the American people is business"—or, in other words, specifically author James M. Cain's, "The whole goddamn country lives selling hot dogs to each other." The "best" Americans buy for a dollar and sell for two; the worst are bought and sold. Every American exists between product and merchant. We're a market, not a public. We're all hucksters for the ideologies sold on our televisions.



## ARE YOU THE STAR OF YOUR OWN LIFE?

In *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (2004), media theorist Allison Landsberg notes that the introduction of the word "empathy" into 20th-century vocabularies coincides with the birth of cinema. In the public imagination, cinema made it possible to feel what another person was feeling—to touch or be touched by a picture. Today, days of video are uploaded to the Internet by members of this public every minute; for any event, real or cinematic, thousands of images are generated, through which we might make feelings and memories (and, of course, forget them).

Every time I talk about one of my favorite sitcoms, a well-intentioned friend invariably mentions that he watched the show too, that he never considered it to be "black"—as if its popularity had annulled its

specificity. How do I explain the secrets hidden in plain sight? Double entendre? The dozens? Call and response? Tonal semantics? Indirection?

My shows were infected with a "meaning-virus." The very presence of a black family on television is self-reference. The black sitcom destabilizes the medium's core vocabulary of the close-up, the zoom shot, and the "two faces east" shot to break the fourth wall, compelling viewers (like me) to respond. Television like this makes our beliefs visible, and because we see them, we believe them more. The sitcom is a "comic performance structure" entangled with the production of identity. The stand-up comedians who inspire and star in them provide a model for the self-reflexivity that characterizes the contemporary moment. Think of your most Internet-famous friend. Do you even recognize her life? Does it have a plot? Is there a will-they-won't-they romance at its core? Does she find herself in wacky situations? If you can't think of such a friend, you are that friend.

When my parents were kids in St. Louis, the television broadcast stopped at midnight. My mom and her siblings would sit through it every night, watching as if they'd never seen it before. They'd wait for the sign-off speech, while Ray Charles' version of *America the Beautiful* played in the background. Then the test pattern came on and the set went dark. Today, it never stops.

My show hasn't been picked up yet—I'm still working on the pilot. It's called *She Mad*. It's a half-hour comedy about what it means to be an adult, set against the backdrop of the Los Angeles creative industry. It follows a young, ambitious black woman and her friends as they try to create the lives they want, and deal with the unrealistic goals they and society have set. It's about futility and hope, individuality and community, privacy and fame. Its themes include survival, self-performance, and the idea that longing for pleasure is the only real pleasure.

*She Mad* is a show about nowhere.

Emily Manning, “let martine syms and kahlil joseph unlock your mind”, *Vice Magazine: i-D*, May 29, 2015.



i-D

watch fashion music culture news think pieces beauty

ART | Emily Manning | 29 May, 2015

# let martine syms and kahlil joseph unlock your mind

As we premiere her collaborative short film with Kendrick and FKA twigs director Kahlil Joseph, get to know Martine Syms, the young artist and filmmaker stepping inside America’s mind.





Ahead of his *m.A.A.d* exhibition's opening at MOCA and the unveiling of her piece in the New Museum's 2015 Triennial earlier this year, director Kahlil Joseph enthusiastically recommended I explore his fellow LA-based artist and filmmaker Martine Syms' work. Martine has already produced a prolific body of work, as well as having lectured at Yale, SXSW, and MoMA PS1. Whether penning her Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto or compiling three years of her Google search terms as a diary on everythingiveverwantedtoknow.com, Martine uses publishing, video, and performance to explore the ways we frame our individual and collective identities by challenging what and how we remember.

We're proud to exclusively premiere *Memory Palace*, Joseph and Syms' collaborative film commission for MOCAtv. While the short depicts singer/songwriter Alice Smith's discovery of a photo album, the film's flickering memories are deeply rooted in Martine's own. We caught up with the artist to find out how raiding her aunt's boarding house for old soul vinyl inspired the intimate and beautiful piece.

### What are some themes or ideas that consistently interest you?

In general, I'm interested in the way we make meaning within a culture. Whether that's through television or other kinds of popular media, the ways we come to frame our identities really interest me. I like to explore how personal histories intertwine with social histories, and examine the ways we look at femininity or blackness or even regional identities--I'm actually making a piece about California right now. What are the historical, economic, or social frames that help us make meaning?



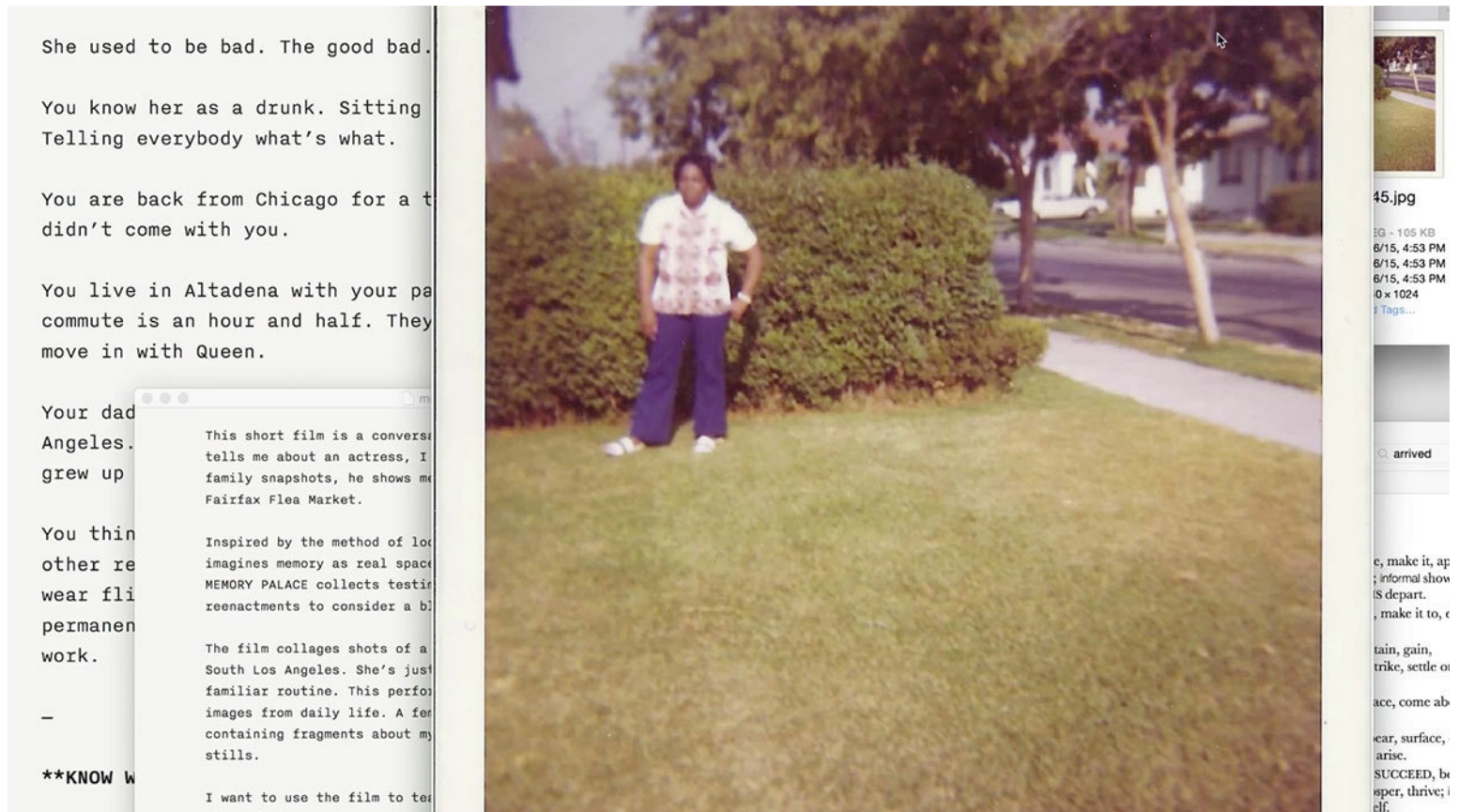
Martine Syms and Kahlil Joseph, stills from the video *Memory Palace*, 2015, courtesy of the artist and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

**A few years back, you presented your *Reading Trayvon Martin* project at The New Museum. Have you thought about expanding it to include events since then?**

readingtrayvonmartin.com is a personal bibliography full of articles I have read about the Trayvon Martin case. It's ongoing, although it's definitely slowed down. After Trayvon Martin was murdered, I was following the response and subsequent criminal case closely. I saw it picked up both in mainstream media and on Twitter, and was interested in how the story shifted through the media.

The way the website is designed, it strips a lot of the information but leaves the titles so it's only working with the language of the headlines. It goes through tweets, primary documents, articles, videos, anything that I was encountering and thinking about my own position as a reader--when I was the presumed reader, when I wasn't, and what the difference between those kinds of stories were. Now, I think it tells a kind of meta story about how it gets pushed out of the news, but at the time, I was just immediately trying to find information. My initial motivation to make the piece was 'Where can I find a place to put everything that I've been reading in one place, so that if someone wanted to read about this they could?'

When that case was going on, I felt it was maybe for someone my age, was one of those big, important civil rights occurrences. It brought a lot of attention and wider visibility to what's going on in the criminal justice system, biases, the safety of black bodies, and the double standard of the law--which, if you're black, you already knew about! But since it was a very specific response, I haven't really thought about expanding it to involve current cases or making new sites around them.



Martine Syms and Kahlil Joseph, stills from the video *Memory Palace*, 2015, courtesy of the artist and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

***Memory Palace* deals with amassing information as well, but seems to work with an existing archive rather than creating one. Can you tell us more about the video and how you and Kahlil came to collaborate on it?**

My aunt had a boarding house in LA that had been in our family for a while. There were all these different people living there and it's where we spent many holidays when I was a child. My dad lived there when he'd first moved to LA, and my brothers and I have all lived there as well at different points, so it was this big nexus for my family.

When I met Kahlil, the house was being sold, so I was going there and taking photos, objects, and old magazines to my studio. I use a lot of those kinds of found materials in my work--one exhibition I did, *The Queen's English*, was a collection of books from the bibliography of another book I'd found called *Black Lesbians*--and I wanted to do something about place and story. Kahlil coincidentally also collects found snapshots, primarily of black families. I was showing him some of the things I got at the house, which included seven boxes of independent soul 7" records. We were just hanging out and every week, I had more and more stuff. He started showing me the photos that he was taking, and we were just sort of messing around and talking about stories that were behind these photos, so it made sense to use those photos to start to tell a story. *Memory Palace* is really thinking about that house and some of my memories and my family's memories there, but conflating those with our collective found materials.

**Kahlil's exhibition is up at MOCA until August, but do you have any plans to push these ideas further?**

I have a solo show opening at Bridget Donohue Gallery in New York this September. The show is more or less a kind of deconstructed film, and it'll operate using a similar character to the person who's explored in *Memory Palace*.

[martinesyms.com](http://martinesyms.com)  
[@MOCAlosangeles](https://www.instagram.com/MOCAlosangeles)

Credits

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Text Emily Manning

Martine Syms and Kahlil Joseph, stills from the video *Memory Palace*, 2015, courtesy of the artist and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles



Martine Syms, “The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto”, [rhizome.org](http://rhizome.org), December 17, 2013, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/dec/17/mundane-afrofuturist-manifesto/>.

# RHIZOME

## The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto

MARTINE SYMS | Tue Dec 17th, 2013 10:40 a.m.



Martine Syms, film still produced for the cover of *Most Days* (2014). LP. Mixed Media Recordings, Brooklyn.

The undersigned, being alternately pissed off and bored, need a means of speculation and asserting a different set of values with which to re-imagine the future. In looking for a new framework for black diasporic artistic production, we are temporarily united in the following actions.

\*\*\*The Mundane Afrofuturists recognize that:\*\*\*

We did not originate in the cosmos.

The connection between Middle Passage and space travel is tenuous at best.

Out of five hundred thirty-four space travelers, fourteen have been black. An all-black crew is unlikely.

Magic interstellar travel and/or the wondrous communication grid can lead to an illusion of outer space and cyberspace as egalitarian.

This dream of utopia can encourage us to forget that outer space will not save us from injustice and that cyberspace was prefigured upon a "master/slave" relationship.

While we are often Othered, we are not aliens.

Though our ancestors were mutilated, we are not mutants.

Post-black is a misnomer.

Post-colonialism is too.

The most likely future is one in which we only have ourselves and this planet.



Coco Fusco, *Observations of Predation in Humans: A Lecture by Dr. Zira Animal Psychologist* (2013).

\*\*\*The Mundane Afrofuturists rejoice in:\*\*\*

Piling up unexamined and hackneyed tropes, and setting them alight.

Gazing upon their bonfire of the Stupidities, which includes, but is not exclusively limited to:

- Jive-talking aliens;
- Jive-talking mutants;
- Magical negroes;
- Enormous self-control in light of great suffering;
- Great suffering as our natural state of existence;
- Inexplicable skill in the martial arts;
- Reference to Wu Tang;
- Reference to Sun Ra;
- Reference to Parliament Funkadelic and/or George Clinton;
- Reference to Janelle Monáe;
- Obvious, heavy-handed allusions to double-consciousness;
- Desexualized protagonists;
- White slavery;
- Egyptian mythology and iconography;
- The inner city;
- Metallic colors;
- Sassiness;
- Platform shoes;
- Continue at will...

\*\*\*We also recognize:\*\*\*

The harmless fun that these and all the other Stupidities have brought to millions of people.

The harmless fun that burning the Stupidities will bring to millions of people.

The imaginative challenge that awaits any Mundane Afrofuturist author who accepts that this is it: Earth is all we have. What will we do with it?



The chastening but hopefully enlivening effect of imagining a world without fantasy bolt-holes: no portals to the Egyptian kingdoms, no deep dives to Drexciya, no flying Africans to whisk us off to the Promised Land.

The possibilities of a new focus on black humanity: our science, technology, culture, politics, religions, individuality, needs, dreams, hopes, and failings.

The surge of bedazzlement and wonder that awaits us as we contemplate our own cosmology of blackness and our possible futures.

The relief of recognizing our authority. We will root our narratives in a critique of normative, white validation. Since "fact" and "science" have been used throughout history to serve white supremacy, we will focus on an emotionally true, vernacular reality.

The understanding that our "twoness" is inherently contemporary, even futuristic. DuBois asks how it feels to be a problem. Ol' Dirty Bastard says "If I got a problem, a problem's got a problem 'til it's gone."

An awakening sense of the awesome power of the black imagination: to protect, to create, to destroy, to propel ourselves towards what poet Elizabeth Alexander describes as "a metaphysical space beyond the black public everyday toward power and wild imagination."

The opportunity to make sense of the nonsense that regularly—and sometimes violently—accents black life.

The electric feeling that Mundane Afrofuturism is the ultimate laboratory for worldbuilding outside of imperialist, capitalist, white patriarchy.

The sense that the rituals and inconsistencies of daily life are compelling, dynamic, and utterly strange.

Mundane Afrofuturism opens a number of themes and flavors to intertextuality, double entendre, politics, incongruity, polyphony, and collective first-person—techniques that we have used for years to make meaning.



Neil Beloufa, Still frame from *Production Value* (2013).

\*\*\*The Mundane Afrofuturists promise:\*\*\*

To produce a collection of Mundane Afrofuturist literature that follows these rules:

- 1 No interstellar travel — travel is limited to within the solar system and is difficult, time consuming, and expensive.
- 2 No inexplicable end to racism — dismantling white supremacy would be complex, violent, and have global impact.
- 3 No aliens unless the connection is distant, difficult, tenuous, and expensive — and they have no interstellar travel either.
- 4 No internment camps for blacks, aliens, or black aliens.
- 5 No Martians, Venusians, etc.
- 6 No forgetting about political, racial, social, economic, and geographic struggles.
- 7 No alternative universes.
- 8 No revisionist history.
- 9 No magic or supernatural elements.
- 10 No Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, or Bucks.

- 11 No time travel or teleportation.
- 12 No Mammies, Jezebels, or Sapphires.
- 13 Not to let Mundane Afrofuturism cramp their style, as if it could.
- 14 To burn this manifesto as soon as it gets boring.

— Martine Syms & whomever will join me in the future of black imagination.

*Most Days is a Mundane Afrofuturist sound work released on vinyl by Mixed Media Recordings, due to be released in early 2014. The audio consists of a table read of an original screenplay alongside a score composed in collaboration with artist [Neal Reinalda](#). The piece considers what an average day looks like for a young black woman in 2050 Los Angeles. For this piece, I adapted the literary rules of "[Mundane Science Fiction](#)." I produced a film still for "Most Days" to assert its reality and circulate it within visual culture.*



Britt Julious, "Black by Distribution: A Conversation with Martine Syms", *Rhizome*, August 31, 2011, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2011/aug/31/black-distribution-conversation-martine-syms/>.

# RHIZOME

## Black by Distribution: A Conversation with Martine Syms

BRITT JULIOUS | Wed Aug 31st, 2011 12:18 p.m.



Although she identifies as an artist and “conceptual entrepreneur,” [Martine Syms](#) is a seasoned essayist. Her combination of personal anecdotes, expository investigation, and academic analysis is enigmatic, drawing the reader into the purpose of her writing and the rich storytelling of her written voice.

Born in Los Angeles and based in Chicago, Syms received an MFA in Film, Video, and New Media at the School of the Art Institute in 2007. Syms is the founder and co-director of [Golden Age](#), an artist-run project space, performance venue, and bookshop. Rather than merely sell zines, books, art, and other ephemera from visual artists and critics, Syms – along with her co-director Marco Kane Braunschweiler – uses the space to engage a diverse community of design and art fans and practitioners.

Focusing on race, context, and form in Black cinema, [Implications and Distinctions: Format, Content and Context in Contemporary Race Film](#) works in large part due to the simplicity of its words and the depth of its subject matter. Syms’ idea — that race film is both constantly evolving and utilizing methods of exposure implemented decades earlier — is complex, but the clarity in her thesis makes her work digestible.

"My family, my background ... it just parallels really nicely with a lot of social and cultural movements," Syms said during a recent interview. Her writing reflects this connection, using personal anecdotes to highlight the evolution of "race" film from its earliest producers to the more homegrown, independent, and online efforts of emerging filmmakers.

[Implications and Distinctions](#) is one of five recent releases from Future Plan and Program, artist Steffani Jemison’s new project incubated by Project Row Houses that publishes the literary works of emerging visual artists. The clean layout and production of the book only slightly masks its purpose to present one-of-a-kind ideas and experiments combining the written word and emerging artistic practices. Recently, I met with Martine Syms to talk about some of the points she makes in the book.

### **How were you first contacted about this project?**

When I was at SAIC, one of my thesis projects was an essay about race film in a class with Romi Crawford. I had written this essay examining early race film and Buppie film, which I felt there were more of. I was really unhappy with that essay. It was too academic. That’s not really the way I write at all. It didn’t manage to communicate the ideas I wanted to write because it was written in this faux academia writing. I had told Steffani that I had written this essay about race film, and I would want to revisit it and rework it.

I was teaching in California that summer so I had the opportunity to talk about that book project. I actually had no copy of the original essay so I pretty much started from scratch. I had some of the research materials, the essays.

implications and  
distinctions:  
format, content  
and context  
in contemporary  
race film

**martine syms**

**What sort of changes did you make in terms of the project from your first initial draft?**

Originally my idea was that the film work becomes black by these distribution channels that it goes through. It may not be racialized to begin with but because of the way it is marketed, it changes. Through research and writing, I began thinking that it was much more nuanced than that. It was subtle, the way these distinctions get made. Not everything is just BET-Black. These subtleties that maybe only I or you recognize as being Black, but someone not raised culturally that way, might not pick up on it.

**Can you expand on Black by distribution?**



On Netflix, there's a genre called "African American Dramas." I don't see it as that but when this movie gets put through those channels, it suddenly gets seen as an African American film. It's things like that, those outlets. If it's seen as a Black movie, it won't get played at the AMC River East but someplace farther South.

### **And what are your personal opinions about those classifications?**

As a practitioner, it can be extremely frustrating. It just seems like, whether you like it or not, you have to work within this cannon of Black work. You can resist it or work around it, but it still exists. That can be frustrating but also a positive or interesting thing.

### **What would you consider to be the Black American aesthetic?**

The one thing I've noticed is the emphasis on language. You could call it literary, but I think it's spoken. It's an interest in spoken language: new words, a rhythmic language of the way things are said. I can't think of any visual characteristic that I would consider Black. Most of these movies that are Black are not written or produced by Black people, not that they have to be. There's this kind of creation of a slang word that sounds Black that I'm interested in. You see that sort of thing from older films as well as newer ones.

### **Why do you think the 90s is such a good time for that to happen and what's happened now?**

Cinema opened up to a wider audience. In the 90s, it became profitable. It was just incredibly profitable for a while, making these sort of films. It was a new and exciting glimpse of the ghetto, an updated version. There's a type of work that focuses on the ghetto that has this voyeuristic quality. I don't think you can ignore it on film, or television, or online. It's part of the medium. It's changed to be a multi-cultural cast. I think now, from 2000 to now, you start to see this tokenism to a cast in film.

Will Smith and Denzel almost transcend race. There was a chapter that I was writing that I took out. They led us to a multi-cultural cast. At some point, all Black movies became biopics. All the good, serious ones became biopics. *Ray*, *Ali*...those types of movies, those are the opportunities available for mostly men. Those are the opportunities for a Black actor to transcend "Black" movies. They have to play a Black icon.

They're kind of Obama-esque. They're obviously Black. It's like a part of their persona. Whenever they're in films, they're not necessarily a part of a Black community. They themselves are Black enough, are Blackness enough. They're sort of more than Black. I think there's something interesting when someone can go beyond that. In the movie, there's nothing particularly Black about the character. I don't know what that relationship is.

## **How does the internet play into the classification of Black film?**

It's weird how the internet changes everything. The kind of narrow casting ... instead of reaching for a broad audience, you are reaching for a more targeted audience. You're creating works for sort of niches of people. I think that'll be the way to go, in the future in terms of the market for different films. You can direct a show just to your audience. I don't really watch TV when it's first airing or go to the movies as much as I used to.

They're going to have to contend with viewers seeking material on their own. Even though most people don't do that yet, they will once it becomes easier to do. Once it is, people will watch it. Just making it easier to do.