

Miriam Katzeff, "Best of 2019", *Artforum*, December, 2019, 189.

# ARTFORUM

## BEST OF 2019

### MIRIAM KATZEFF

Miriam Katzeff is the deputy director of Artists Space in new york. She is also the cofounder of Primary Information, a nonprofit publisher of artists' books, writings, and recordings.



10

**MARTINE SYMS (BRIDGET DONAHUE, NEW YORK)** Installed a hyperactive installation with photographic wallpaper and photographs laser-cut with text, *Mythicbeing*, 2018 (pronounced "My thick being"), is a four-monitor interactive installation focused on a gender-neutral avatar of the same name. The title plays on the word *thicc* but also alludes to Adrian Piper's cycle "The Mythic Being," 1973–75, for which the elder artist adopted a male alter ego. At Bridget Donahue, Syms invited visitors to text with *Mythicbeing*. Its responses—drawn from a voluminous database of the artist's writings—were so darkly witty I couldn't stop texting with the moody avatar. □

Kristen Tauer, "Five Artist to Check Out During the Whitney Biennial", *WWD*, May 17, 2019.

# WWD

## Five Artists to Check Out During the Whitney Biennial

Presented by Tiffany & Co., the museum survey of contemporary art opened May 17.

By [Kristen Tauer](#) on May 17, 2019

### Martine Syms

The 31-year-old artist from L.A., whose work examines depictions of blackness in America, presents a multimedia installation — a wall painting, photo prints — in a corner of the museum's seventh floor. But the central focus is her video art piece "Intro to Threat Modeling (2017)," presented on a large, rectangular, vertical screen situated within a raised orange table. Viewers watch from above, evocative of how much video content today is consumed — peering down at a rectangular phone. The artist uses screen grabs of text conversations, e-mails, and a digital avatar to piece together a map of personal security risks.



Zachary Smith, "The Apprehensive Politics of a Generation Surface at the 2019 Whitney Biennial", *Hyperallergic*, May 15, 2019.

# HYPERALLERGIC

## The Apprehensive Politics of a Generation Surface at the 2019 Whitney Biennial

Intellectual dispassion trumps emotional engagement at the latest edition of the Whitney Biennial.

Zachary Smith May 15, 2019



Martine Syms, "People Who Aren't Friends or Lovers or Exes" (2019) (photo Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)

Affect failure is itself another unarticulated theme of this biennial. Artists consider how an architecture of apathy in American society has emboldened this country's worst habits: racism, nationalism, and exceptionalism to name just a few.

Artists Nicholas Galanin and Martine Syms tackle this subject in extremely different ways. The former weaves an enormous image of a static television set and calls it "White Noise, American Prayer Rug" (2019); the work blends the concept of whiteness in the United States with mass media's antagonization of intolerance and hate. The latter uses her installation "People Who Aren't Friends or Lovers or Exes" (2019) to discuss the concept of "threat modeling" — a process identifying risks to determine the utmost danger to one's own security — within a network of emails, texts, and video messages. The artist speeds through the texts of these different missives, taking on the performative role of a threat model herself; ultimately, it's a discussion about the vulnerability of Black women's bodies online.

Martine Syms in Conversation with Beatrix Ruf, “The Image is Now Part of My Flesh”, *Mousse Magazine*, Issue 67, April 1, 2019.

# MOUSSE

The  
Image  
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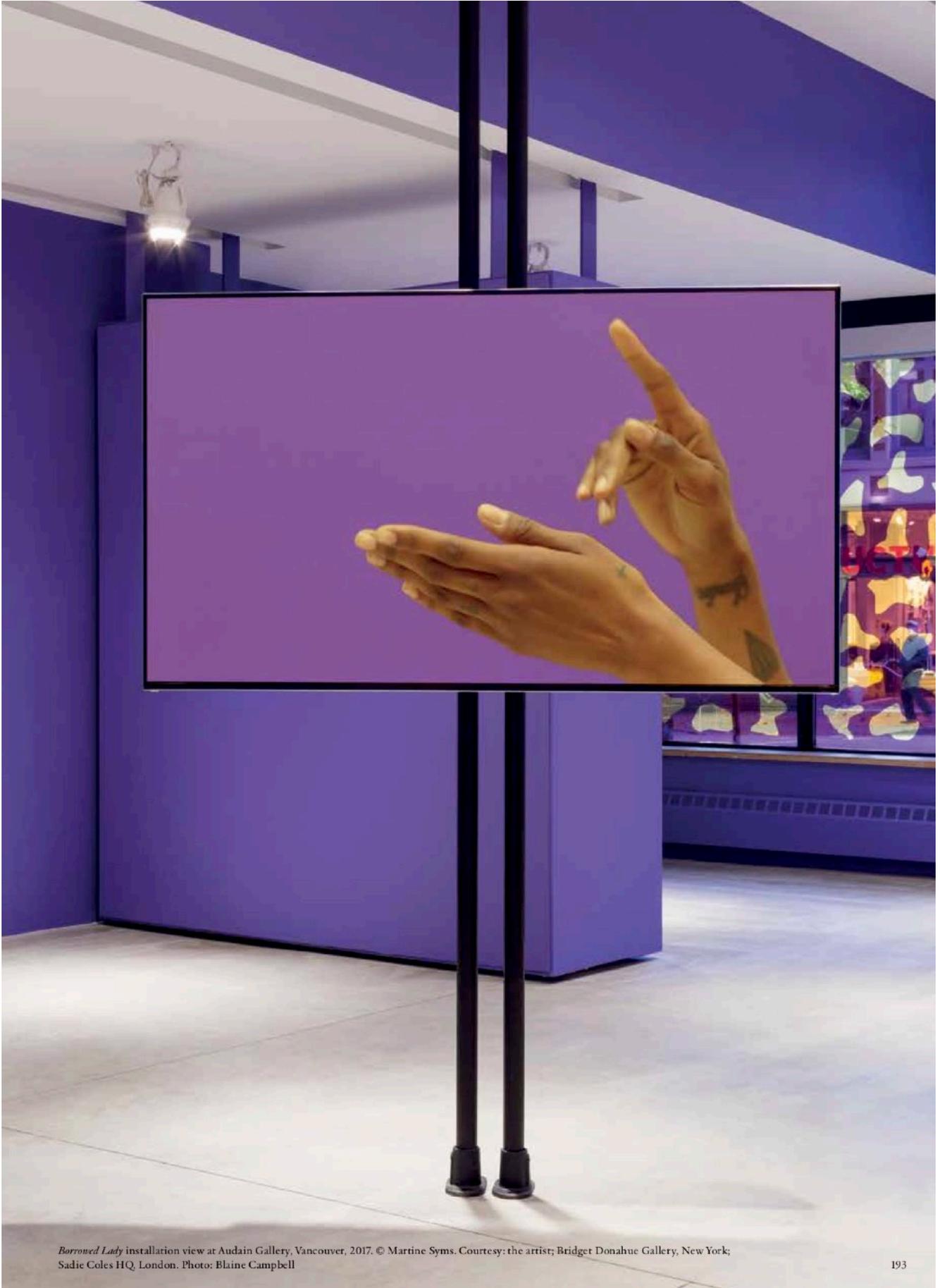
Part  
of  
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Flesh

Martine Syms  
in conversation with Beatrix Ruf



*Shame Space*, 2019. *Dialogues: Irena Haiduk and Marlene Syms* installation view at Insitute for Contemporary Art at Virginia, Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia, 2019. Courtesy: the artist; Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; Sadie Coles HQ, London. Photo: David Hunter Hale for the Institute for Contemporary Art at VCU

*Engaging a wide range  
of media including photography,  
video, installation,  
performative practices,  
and publishing,  
MARTINE SYMS has gained  
recognition for a conceptually  
and visually impressive  
body of work addressing  
questions of representations of  
blackness, historical  
and contemporary models,  
and codings of identity and  
body politics.*



*Borrowed Lady* installation view at Audain Gallery, Vancouver, 2017. © Martine Syms. Courtesy: the artist; Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; Sadie Coles HQ London. Photo: Blaine Campbell

BEATRIX RUF

Since your last appearance in *Mousse Magazine* 49 (2015), a lot has happened in your work. Do you still use the description “conceptual entrepreneur” for yourself?

MARTINE SYMS

I started phasing it out in 2015, but it is persistent. I wrote it the first time twelve years ago, and I still get asked about it in every interview. It is still true. It's very practical to me. It is not a theoretical position. It came from my urgent need to create a self-sufficient, sustainable, generative infrastructure driven by artistic practice. I am very influenced by the Black Panthers' writing about economic self-reliance, mom-and-pop stores that perform multiple functions for underserved communities, and the autonomous culture of punk and hardcore. Given the lack of resources, lack of public funding, and lack of familial wealth, you'll be shit outta luck without a business model. I am an artist. I would like to be able to make art for a long time, hence my need for money.

BEATRIX

Have your general perceptions of—your presence in—models of the art world taken on other thinking or forms?

MARTINE

I'm always looking for new models. I've never looked to the art world for inspiration. It's gotten better, but it is one of the most homogeneous, conservative, boring worlds to choose from. It is the place I feel compelled to work, but it's not my home. It's hard to talk about any kind of underground these days—does it still exist?—but that term sufficiently covers the weirdos I seek out. I love art, though, I want to be clear. I see lots of it, but I almost never go to any openings because they are like bad parties: no music, bright lights, no dancing, people I don't want to see. I spend a lot of time reading, listening to music, cooking, going to the movies, working out, benching, shopping, fucking around on the internet, and talking to strangers. I used to go out all the time, but I'm taking a break.

BEATRIX

I assume your life has also changed quite a bit, and you have traveled a lot lately?

MARTINE

Yes. I've gone all over. I love the airport lounges. I love the Airbus A380. I love doing my stretches in the back of the plane. I love crying inconsolably during *BPM (Beats per Minute)* because *Sean was so full of life*. For many years, I ran a space in Chicago, and my favorite part was meeting people all the time. I hosted artists, and bands, and randos. They stayed on my couch. I took them around the city. Now I get to do the opposite. I've met incredible people, and I have experienced so much. I've learned that after three weeks of #XOTOURLIFE, I start to go mad. It only took me four years to figure that out. I'm currently on week two of six, so I haven't really learned my lesson yet. Soon.

BEATRIX

Since 2015 you have realized many new projects. Can you speak about the series of works that developed from *Notes on Gesture* (2015), which borrows its title from a Giorgio Agamben essay, and *Misdi-*

*rected Kiss* (2016), a performative lecture with projected image material, which looks at a series of women who all have had lasting impact on your personal life?

MARTINE

*Notes on Gesture* is a video comparing authentic and dramatic gestures. I had been emptying out my late great-aunt's home, where I was living when I first returned to Los Angeles after many years in Chicago. I had amassed this archive of material, and I was starting to write a film about her. In some ways, this film became *Incense Sweaters & Ice* (2017).

I'd read the Agamben essay and disagreed with its central point about losing our gestures. The piece alternates between title cards proposing hypothetical situations and short, looping clips that respond. The actor (artist Diamond Stingily) uses her body to quote famous, infamous, and unknown women. I had found this text from the sixteenth century called *Chirologia: The Natural Language of the Hand*, and some of the hand positions reminded me of movements used in GIFs.

Black women were prominent subjects in early cinema because of their history as spectacles and their presence in the city as domestics. In Giorgio Agamben's essay *Notes on Gesture*, he asserts that movement, not image, is the essence of cinema. The essay emphasized the relationship between the image and the body. I'm intrigued by the visual regimes that make spectacles of black life (and death) and the increase through animated GIFs, police cams, surveillance footage, vines, and other digitally circulated formats. I'm also thinking about the proliferation of these images as a private-public unconscious that I can “swim” in.

BEATRIX

*Notes on Gesture* created a character from the language, movement, and performance of black female entertainers.

MARTINE

I presented the video in a show at Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York, called *Vertical Elevated Oblique* (2015). 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?

The material that I used in *Misdirected Kiss* derived from the research I began when I was working on my video *Notes on Gesture*. I isolated and repeated movements from women in my family, popular memes, and GIFs shared between me and my friends. I was looking for some of the origins of black femininity in popular American culture. The talk was improvised. I chose media from a folder, and it became a new way of writing for me. The first time I did it was at Storm

King in the summer of 2015 for Gordon Hall's Center for Experimental Lectures. It was very loose.

Slowly it became about language, movement, and performance as observed in black female entertainers. Deeply influenced by the curriculum of Maxine Powell, director of the in-house finishing school at Motown Records in the 1960s, who thought that "class and style and refinement" would help her race become outstanding, this performance was a visual essay that traces how we construct and stage ourselves for the world.

I found the term "misdirected kiss" in an essay by Jacqueline Stewart called "What Happened in the Transition?"<sup>1</sup> I am a huge fan of her scholarship. I was struck by the fact that kissing the black woman is the punch line. I was thinking about how race, gender, and labor coincide with visibility. How representation creates problems. I was feeling very alienated by the push towards legibility, towards essentialism, and towards being highly visible in order to be "successful."

Eventually, performing the piece started to feel terrible—as if I was performing exactly what I was trying to think my way out of—so I stopped doing it.

BEATRIX

How and why did you bring all of those together to the exhibition *Borrowed Lady*, at Simon Fraser University Galleries, in Vancouver (2016)?

MARTINE

My friend Lauren Anderson always jokes that a show isn't finished until people start walking through the door. There were many ideas I had for the show at Bridget's that didn't make it in. *Borrowed Lady* allowed me to expand the project. First, I wanted to emphasize this chorus idea and the split self, and I worked with Nicole Otero on that. The four channels created these "rounds" in which the performer responds to herself. We could play with the repetitions and make different formal patterns. I also worked with the composer Celia Hollander to make a four-channel audio piece derived from the on-board sound. I had been using purple as a recurring motif since a show I did in 2011 at Green Gallery in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

BEATRIX

It seems all your works are closely connected—a continuum of remembrances, recompositions, accumulations, and transformations of your themes.

MARTINE

I have been working very intensely the past few years, and each project feeds into the next one. I will come across an idea, a method, a place, a person that I feel pulled towards. I follow the trail. I have quit many jobs because I felt some urgency. It sounds quite romantic, but I'm quite intuitive in that regard. Once I get an idea in my head, it's hard to shake it of. I have to do it. I've learned to accept it.

BEATRIX

You often use found images of black representation in film, video, magazines, photography to touch on role models, missing links, identity politics—in the beautiful book accompanying the exhibition of *Borrowed Lady*, you use the terms "prosthetic memory" and "shadow histories." Can you talk about what those terms mean to you?

MARTINE

Prosthetic memory is like a limb you can attach. It is made possible by the sheer abundance of moving images, photographs, and audio that we encounter on a daily basis. You can have a relationship to these images and an experience with them that is similar to memory.

I'm very invested in the fantasy of the total archive. I want to download the entire internet. I want to have the NSA servers. I want to make something with all that fucking footage. I would love to watch hours of footage from the little camera on your laptop computer.

BEATRIX

Sounds amazing, but also frightening—one could totally disappear from life.

MARTINE

I started working with found footage as a teenager at CSSSA [California State Summer School for the Arts] pre-college program on the CalArts campus. I had a 16 mm class where we spliced up and manipulated old reels. From there, I lived at the Echo Park Film Center, shooting my own "period" shorts that I could cut up with old Super 8 films I bought on eBay. In college I started buying home videos from thrift stores. I felt like all the footage was out there. I just needed to find it.

But some footage isn't out there, and that's maybe where the shadow history comes in. You use fiction to fill in some gaps. You imagine what you can't confirm. I still like to make everything look like I found it.

BEATRIX

The history of technologies of representation—like photography, film, printed matters, for example—is also a synchronized history of mediums of repression. How does this translate into a now for you?

MARTINE

Simone Browne's book *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (2015) does a brilliant job of explaining how this relationship between image capture and surveillance is ongoing. Their latest manifestation in the digital context is part of a history. Fred Moten's *In the Break* (2003) is also seminal for me. I started a video series, *Lessons*, that directly responds to some of the questions in that book. Arthur Jafa's *My Black Death* (2015) is another big text.

Seeing AJ, Fred, and Kara Keeling in convo a few years ago marked an important turn in my thoughts towards the problems of representation, that it isn't everything. Now I can't stop thinking about death.

BEATRIX

In 2018, in London, you realized the exhibition *Grand Calme*, an immersive spatial installation comprising wall texts, projections, and sound you performed through an avatar figure in a video, but you also organized sessions that performatively involved the audience, creating experiences, recoding performances. What is *Grand Calme* about?

MARTINE

Power, shame, vulnerability, exhaustion, and ecstasy. All I've been thinking about is power and powerlessness and how you go from one to the other. I chose to personify a threat model, an info security process used to determine the threats/vulnerabilities of your system. I was interested in that as a metaphor for psychoanalysis.



*Incense Sweaters & Ice* installation view at Graham Foundation, Chicago, 2019. © Martine Syms. Courtesy: Sadie Coles HQ, London and Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York. Photo: Nathan Keay



*Notes on a Gesture* (stills), 2015. © Martine Syms. Courtesy: Sadie Coles HQ, London

1 Jacqueline Stewart, "What Happened in the Transition?" Reading Race, Gender and Labour between the Shots, in *American Cinema's Transitional Era: Audiences, Institutions, Practices*, eds. Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

MARTINE SYMS (b. 1988) lives and works in Los Angeles. She holds a MFA from Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, and a BFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Syms' recently presented exhibitions include *Projects 106: Martine Syms*, Museum of Modern Art, New York; *Borrowed Lady*, Simon Fraser University Galleries, Vancouver; *Fact and Trouble*, ICA London; *COM PORT MENT*, Karma International, Los Angeles; *Vertical Elevated Oblique*, Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; *Grand Calme*, Sadie Coles HQ, London. She has lectured at Yale University, SXSW, California Institute of the Arts, University of Chicago, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, and MoMA PS1, New York, among other venues. From 2007-2011 she was the co-director of the Chicago artist-run project space Golden Age, and she currently runs Dominica Publishing, an imprint dedicated to exploring blackness in visual culture. She is the author of *Implications and Distinctions: Format, Content and Context in Contemporary Race Film* (2011). Syms is a faculty member in the School of Art at the California Institute of the Arts.

At an early point during my research into artificial intelligence, I decided that recording is about death, not memory like I always thought. Philip Auslander's concept of liveness points to a contradiction in the conditions of my visibility. I have to be repeatedly thrown against deathness to be alive. Whatever happens to a shitty JPEG or GIF has consequences on my body. It's called compression. The image is now part of my flesh.

I began thinking deeply about the intimate relationships we have with our tech and the ideologies embedded within them. I'm fascinated by the ways we disidentify, negotiate, or change them to fit real life. In her book *The Mantra of Efficiency* (2008), Dr. Jennifer K. Alexander looks at this Western virtue in modern history and argues that it is ultimately a pursuit of mastery via surveillance, discipline, and control. Her solution is to "thicken" machines. Mythicbeing—thicc' cause she's got hips.

BEATRIX

One of your last research projects kind of brings us back to your interest in "Black Panthers' writing about economic self-reliance, mom-and-pop stores that perform multiple functions for underserved communities." You did a portrait of Dorothy Simpson, who ran a now closed record store in Six Mile, Detroit, since the 1960s.

MARTINE

I'm just getting started with this one. I wasn't able to photograph Dorothy herself, but I returned to Detroit in December to document the store, buy tons of records, and do some field recordings before it closed. I was able to make a 3D model of the interior as well. I wish I had more to say, but I'm still working it out.



*Grand Calme* installation view at Sadie Coles HQ, London, 2018. © Martine Syms. Courtesy: Sadie Coles HQ, London. Photo: Robert Glowacki

BEATRIX RUF is a curator, and the former Director of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, and the Kunsthalle Zürich, Zurich.

Taylor Dafoe, "The Prodigies: Meet 8 Groundbreaking Millennial Artists Who Are Already Being Taught in Art History Classes", *Artnet*, February 28, 2019, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/artists-under-35-1475338>.

# artnet

## People

### The Prodigies: Meet 8 Groundbreaking Millennial Artists Who Are Already Being Taught in Art History Classes

Professors are staking their claims that these artists will make it into the history books.

**Taylor Dafoe**, February 28, 2019

## Martine Syms



Martine Syms. Film still from *Incense, Sweaters, and Ice* (2017). Courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York.

**Age:** 31

**Based In:** Los Angeles, California

**Known For:** Her use of video and photography to explore the representation of blackness; solo shows at the Museum of Modern Art, the Institute of Contemporary Art, Bridget Donahue, Sadie Coles HQ

**Chosen By:** Karthik Pandian, artist and assistant professor of Visual and Environmental Studies, Harvard University

**Why:** "I've been teaching Martine Syms's *Notes on Gesture* (2015), a video featuring Diamond Stingily, in my Introduction to Video course since 2016. Seen in concert with Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), Maya Deren and Talley Beatty's *Study in Choreography for Camera* (1946), and Barbara McCullough's *Water Ritual #1: An Urban Rite of Purification* (1979), Syms's work brings questions of movement into the present, reframing the internet's obsession with black female expressivity. Her choices in framing and editing are uniquely accessible and challenging to students working in the medium today. *Notes on Gesture* both calls on and defamiliarizes the form of the animated gif, using composition and repetition to propose new possibilities for montage in the digital era."

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.

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: PAWEL 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 TRITSCHE

WORDS MAISIE SKIDMORE

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.

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 Installation 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 circumbulation — 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*

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.

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

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.

Dipesh Chakrabarty, David Joselit, Kara Keeling, Kobena Mercer, Michelle Kuo, and Emily Roysdon; moderated by Huey Copeland, "Collective Consciousness: A Roundtable", *Artforum*, Summer 2019, 264-277.

# ARTFORUM

COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS: A ROUNDTABLE - Artforum International

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PRINT SUMMER 2016

# COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS: A ROUNDTABLE

Dipesh Chakrabarty, David Joselit, Kara Keeling, Kobena Mercer, Michelle Kuo, and Emily Roysdon; moderated by Huey Copeland

TO MAP THE SHIFTING COORDINATES OF IDENTITY—and difference—in culture today, critic and art historian HUEY COPELAND moderates a roundtable with artist EMILY ROYSDON; film theorist KARA KEELING; *Artforum's* editor, MICHELLE KUO; and some of the foremost thinkers on globalism, postcolonialism, and art: scholars DIPESH CHAKRABARTY, DAVID JOSELIT, and KOBENA MERCER.

**DAVID JOSELIT:** There is a possibility that affect can be used in a progressive way. In fact, I think there's a danger—the precise danger that you just articulated in terms of erasing history—in not directly confronting the conditions of spectacle.

It's important to understand how affect works—to move through it and not just withdraw from it. I admire Rowland's systematic effort to withdraw from that kind of experience, but I don't think that's the only valid or valuable approach.

**KOBENA MERCER:** I would agree. I hear an element of a cultural-studies position there in terms of thinking of spectacle as a site of struggle. It's not sewn up. It's not accomplished. There are still opportunities to antagonize. And here I would think of someone like Martine Syms, who made a recent work in which she's addressing commodified images of blackness, in which everybody wants to be a black woman and yet nobody wants to be a black woman. The structure she's identified is not really an antagonism or a contradiction. It's more like an antinomy.

You have these mutually exclusive propositions, but we instantly recognize the truth, the validity, of what she said in that utterance. This is an artist who is finding the cracks in the spectacle.



**Martine Syms, *Black Panthers* (detail), 2015**, two flocking-coated resin sculptures. Installation view, Bridget Donahue, New York, 2015. Photo: Marc Brems Tatti.

**MICHELLE KUO:** Technology is another way in which affect and identity are being splintered. A lot of new work that engages social media or new technological platforms is often seen as literally posthuman, posing a world in which identity is so flexible as to be essentially obsolete. Identity becomes an effect. And yet we obviously know that's not the case.

**KOBENA MERCER:** Presenting yourself online seems to involve an atrophy of self, so that identity is an advertisement, a performance of one's life, one's story.

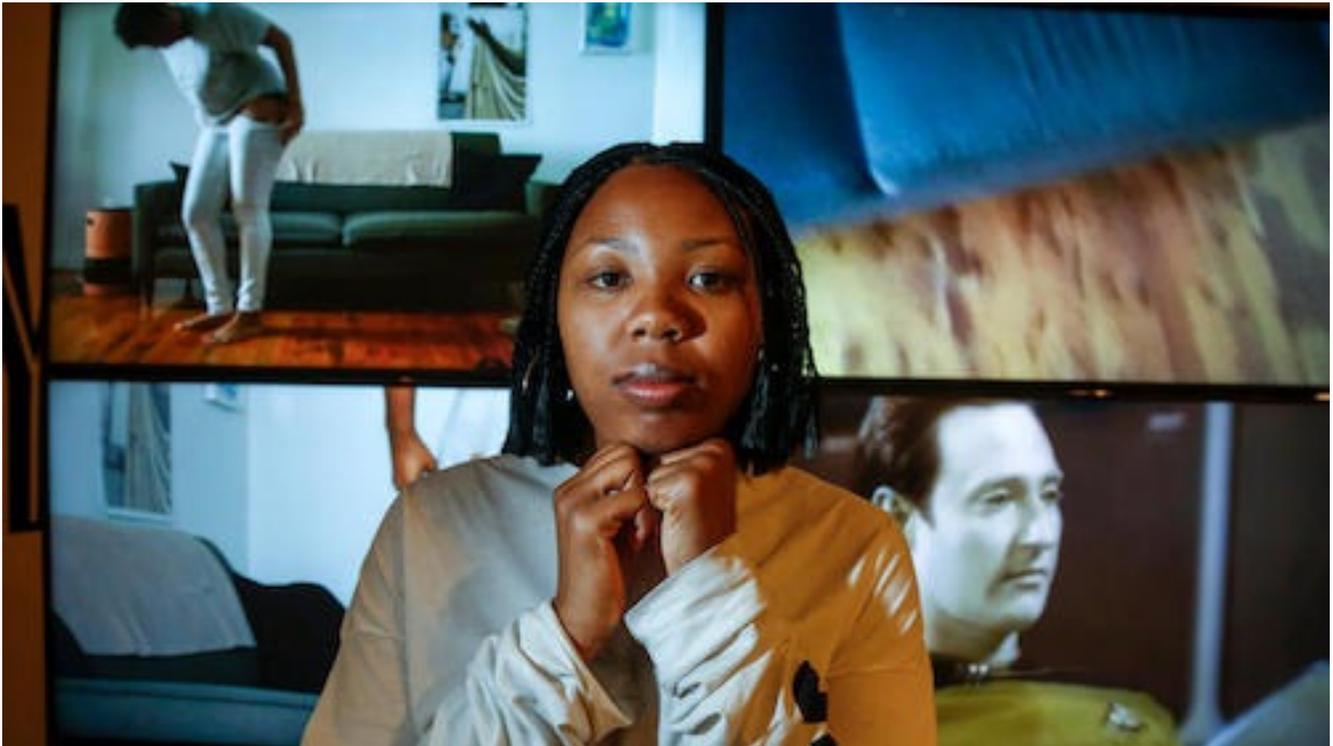
**KARA KEELING:** But social media is also opening up—not necessarily the production of a commons, but something more collaborative and iterative.

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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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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!”

Dayla Benor, "Martine Syms on LA, coming offline, and the language of pop", *Dazed*, April 20, 2016, <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/30820/1/martine-syms-on-la-coming-offline-and-the-language-of-pop>

**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, "Martine Syms 'A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere,'" *Vdrome*, April 17, 2016. <https://www.vdrome.org/martine-syms-a-pilot-for-a-show-about-nowhere>

## Vdrome



# Martine Syms "A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere"

Introduced by Lauren Mackler

Two-channel video, color, sound, 24'  
29"

Year: 2015

***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.**

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 archetypical 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 viewers 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



**SHE MAD**

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)'. 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/>> . 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.

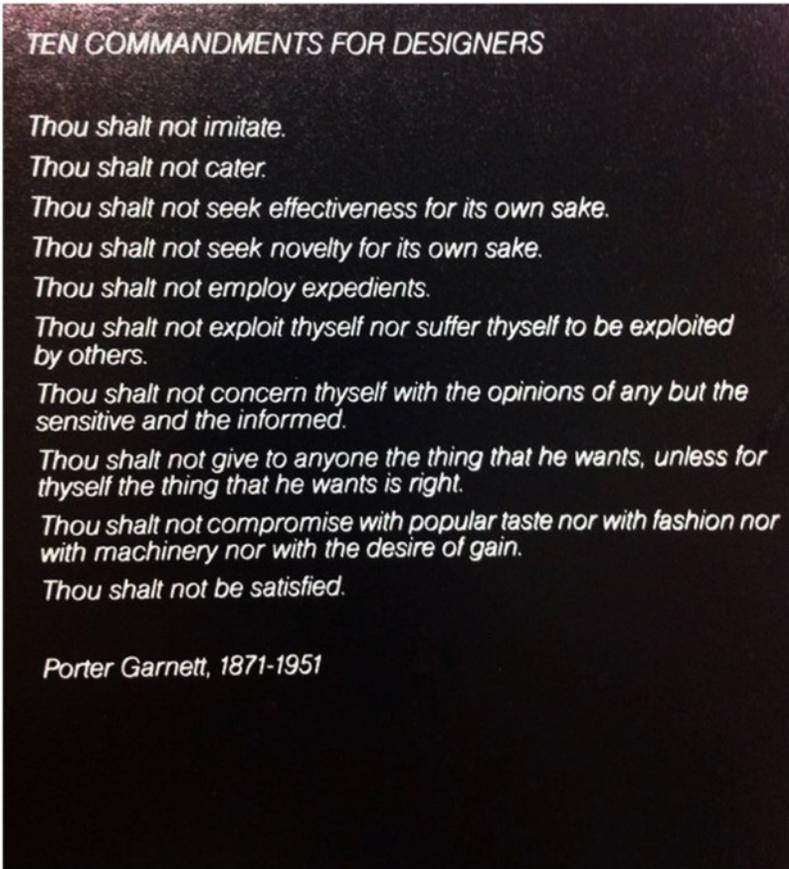
When I joined Wells Fargo they said I could put a photo of my family on my debit card. I uploaded an image of Whitelaw's mouth.



### **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

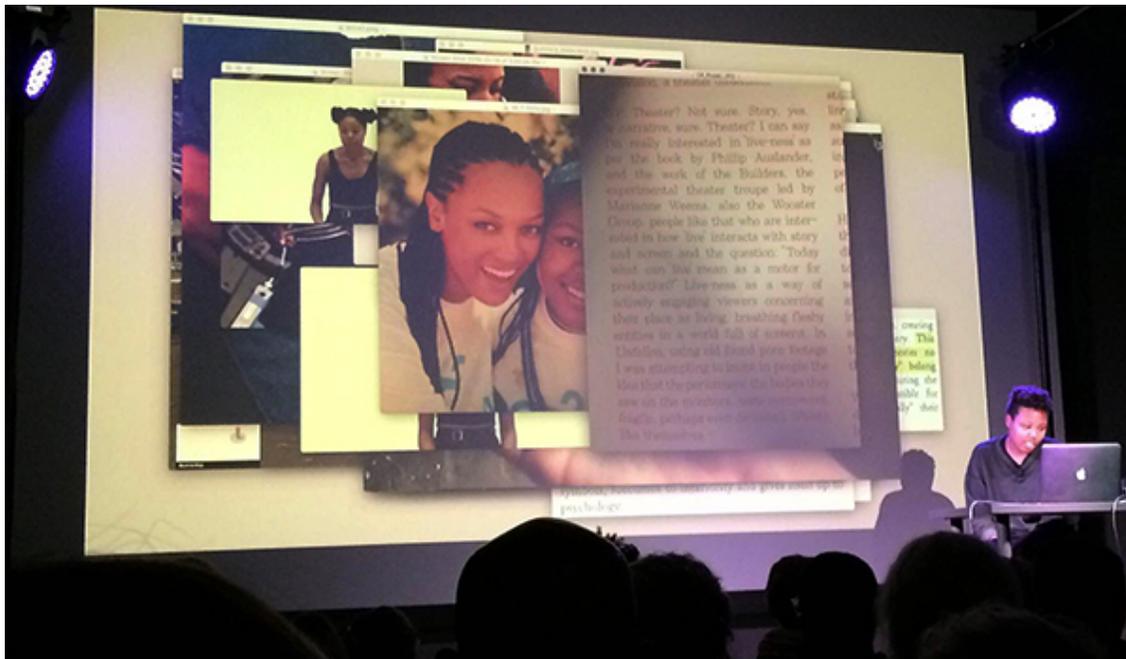
Martine Syms is an artist and entrepreneur based in Los Angeles, USA. She is the founder of *Dominica*, a small press dedicated to 'nowhere shit'. Her artwork has been exhibited and screened extensively, including recent presentations at Karma International, LA, Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York, the 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.

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 fleek, dafuq.’ Just four months after a Vine video of black schoolgirl Kayla Newman saying the words ‘on fleek’ 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.



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

- Colby Chamberlain

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.

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. Clasped 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.)

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 Lummis 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

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.

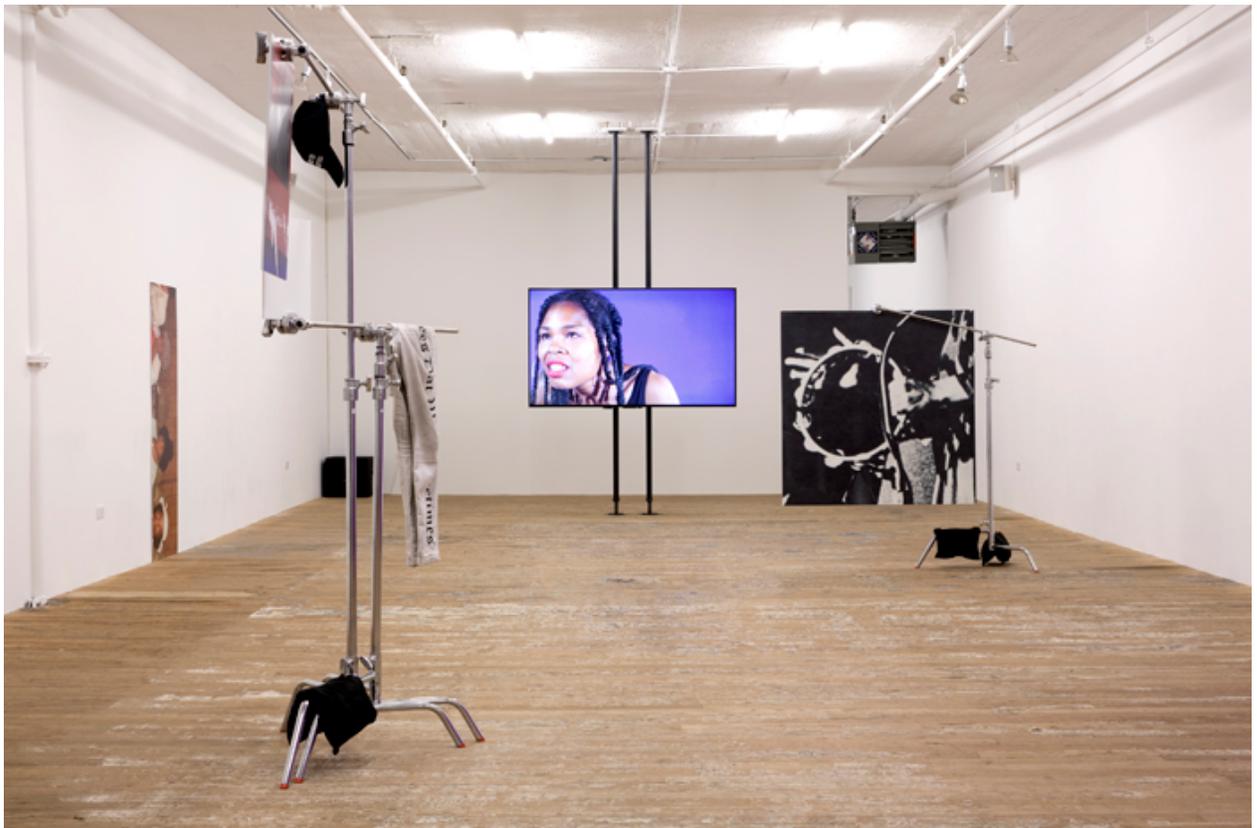
Freda Nada, “Martine Syms: Vertical Elevated Oblique”, *Topical Cream*, October 21, 2015, <http://topicalcream.info/editorial/martine-syms-vertical-elevated-oblique/>.

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.

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

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

dis



## 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

“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

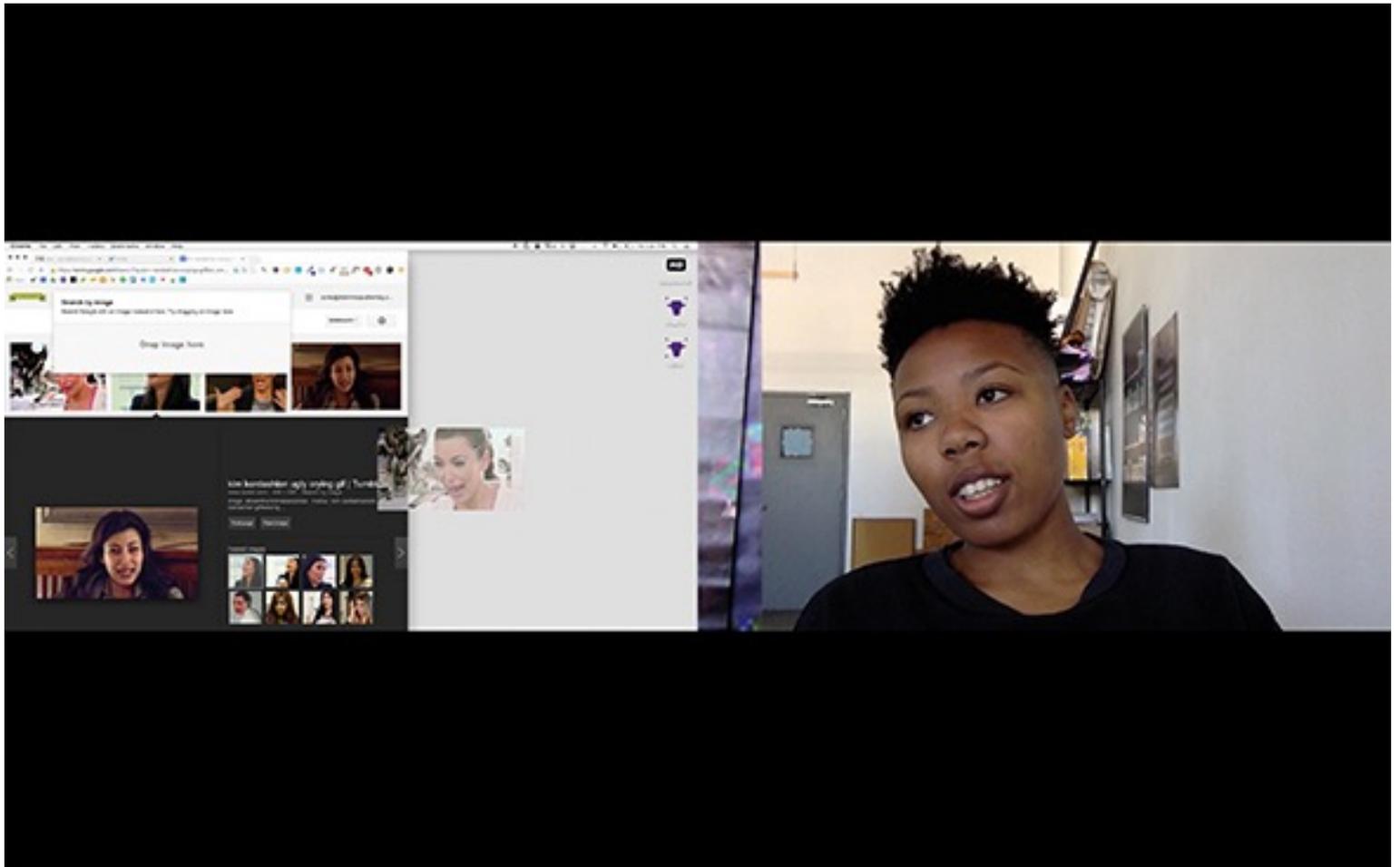
image quality makes people believe. *Fools* is also assumed to be autobiographical and it uses a much different voice. I'm not actually that sincere. There is a line where I say "Martine is a graphic designer who wants to be an important artist." It's a joke. I use terrible quality video because it feels 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

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?

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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.

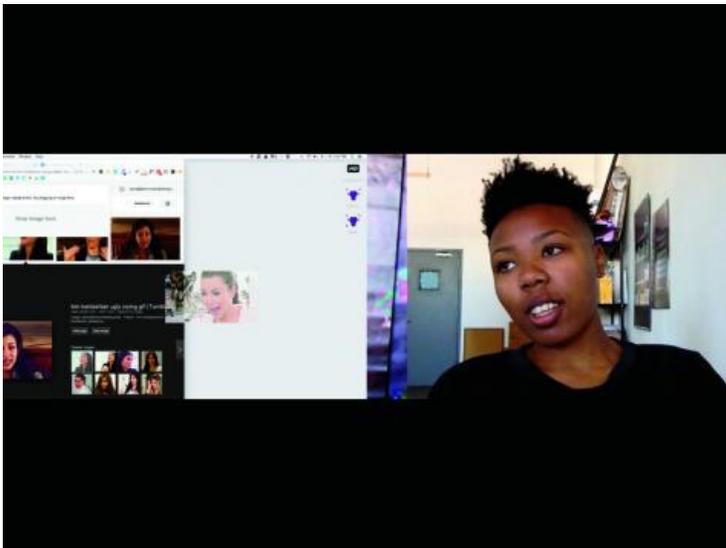
Martine Syms, “Stages of Laughter 3 - Martine Syms”, *Art in America*, June 1, 2015.

# 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 outside 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.