

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.

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, *Domenica*. Through Nov. 1. (Donahue, 99 Bowery. 646-896-1368.)

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

MODERN PAINTERS

REVIEWS IN BRIEF NEW YORK

Martine Syms

Bridget Donahue // September 17–November 1

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

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



Installation view of “Vertical Elevated Oblique,” 2015.

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

Los Angeles Times

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



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

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

November 17, 2015, 2:32 PM

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

10.21.2015

MARTINE SYMS: VERTICAL ELEVATED OBLIQUE

Words By freda nada

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



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

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

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

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



Notes on Gesture, Video Color, sound, 2015

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

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

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



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

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



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

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

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

Aujourd'hui

DAILY

EXCLUSIVES

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ABOUT

MARTINE SYMS - VERTICAL ELEVATED OBLIQUE, BRIDGET DONAHUE



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

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

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

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

Contribution by Marialuisa Pastò.

Martine Syms - Vertical Elevated Oblique

Bridget Donahue, September 17 - November 1

www.bridgetdonahue.nyc

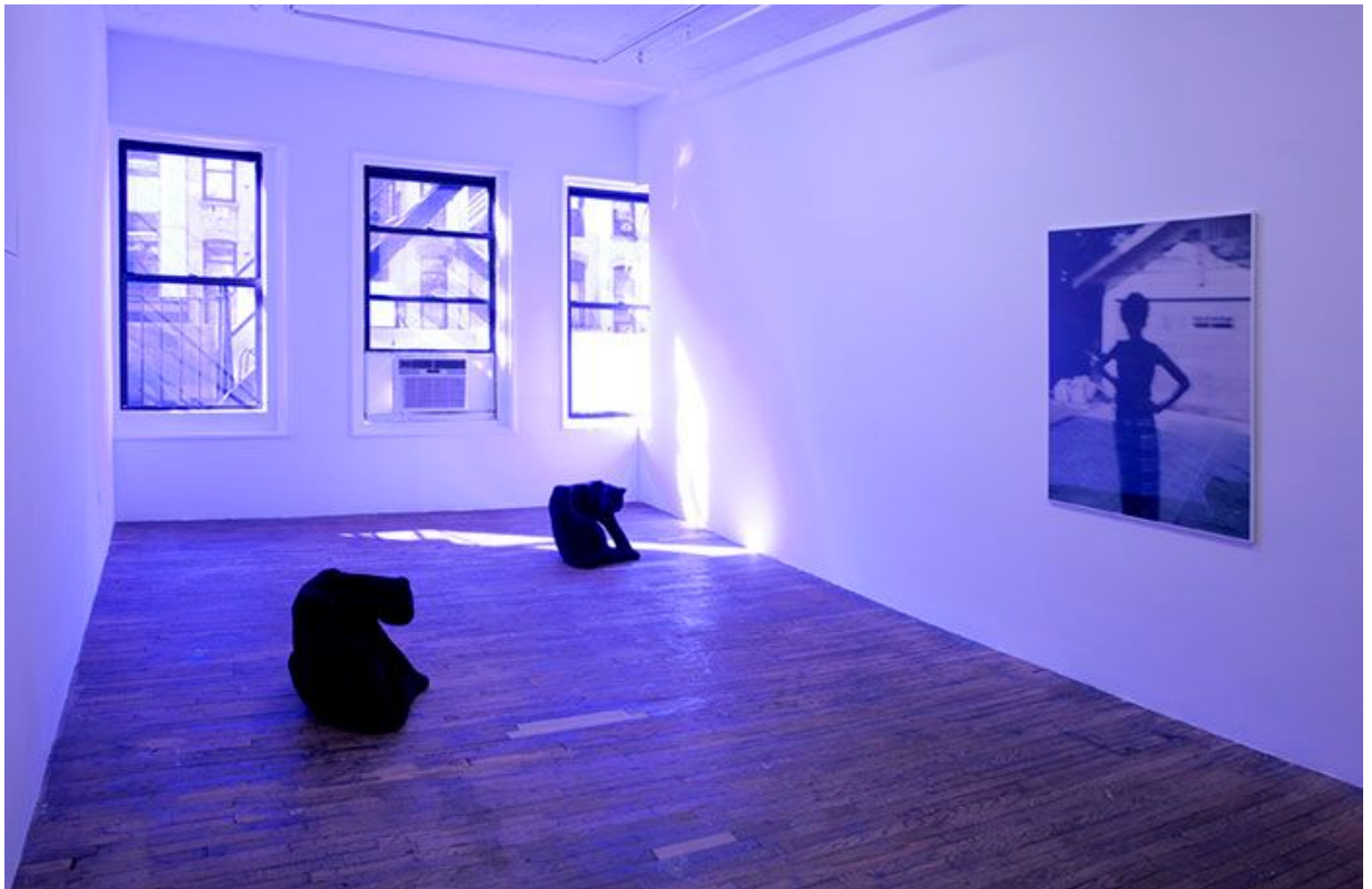
Scott Indrisek, “5 Must-See Gallery Shows in New York: Sarah Sze, Julia Bland, and More”, *Modern Painters*, October 9, 2015.

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.

Artspace

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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§ion=nyc#picks55228>.

ARTFORUM

New York

Martine Syms

BRIDGET DONAHUE

99 Bowery, 2nd Floor

September 17–November 1

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

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

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

— Johanna Fateman



View of “Vertical Elevated Oblique,” 2015

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

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Vertical Elevated Oblique

Martine Syms

Bridget Donahue

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

September 17, 2015 - November 1, 2015

Black Womanhood and the Language of the Hand

by Jessica Lynne

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



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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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

—Jessica Lynne

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



Notes on Gesture

Martine Syms

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

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

Vertical Elevated Oblique

Bridget Donahue

09/17/15 – 11/5/15

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

MODERN PAINTERS

INTRODUCING // MARTINE SYMS

Screen Time

An artist plumbs media, past and present

BY THEA BALLARD

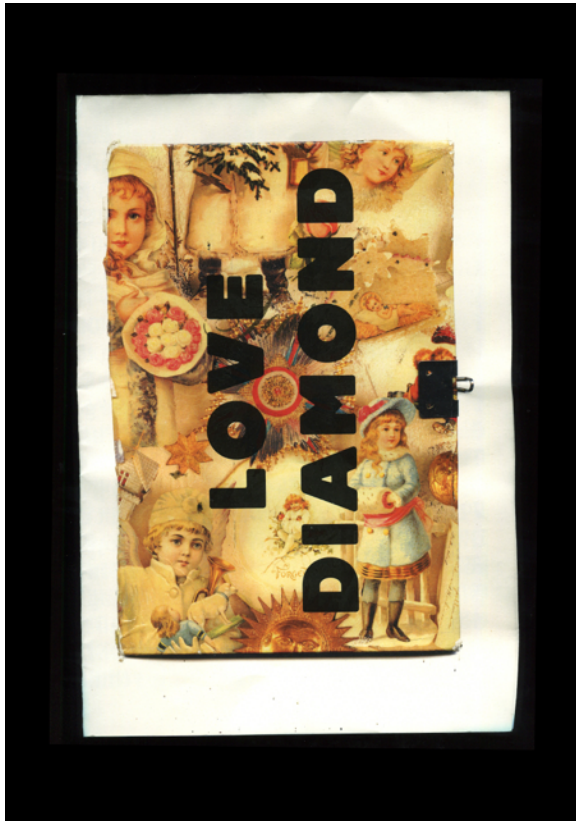
LIKE MANY YOUNG CULTURE hounds who subscribe to an array of streaming services, Martine Syms has her shows: as of early summer 2015, *Scandal*, *Nashville*, and sometimes *Silicon Valley*. However, at the risk of undermining the leisure value of the Los Angeles-based artist’s television watching habits,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

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

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

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

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



FROM TOP:
Martine Syms
2013.

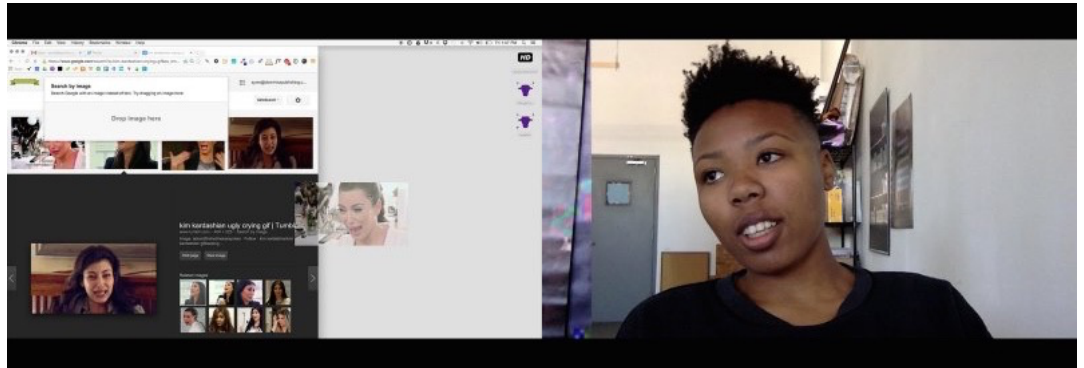
Sym's cover for
LOVE, DIAMOND,
a 2014 release by
Diamond Stingily
on Syms's Dominica
publishing imprint.

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

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

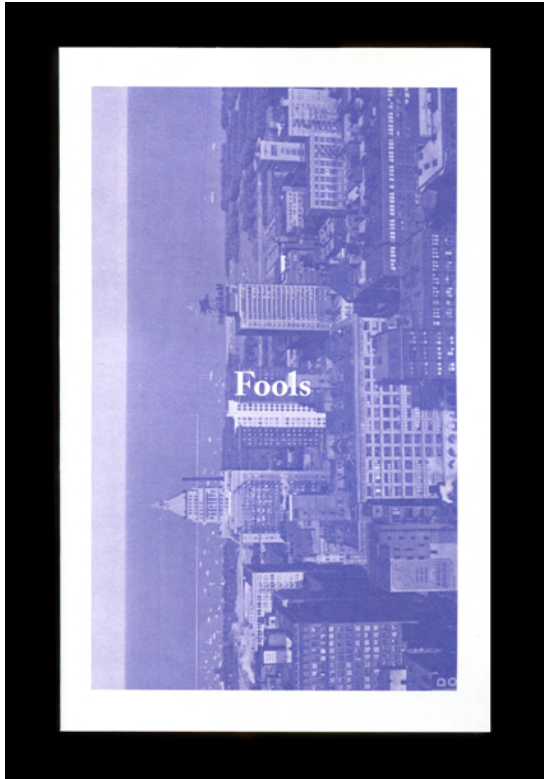
Syms attributes to her “general nerdiness”. She notes that design, at least, “isn’t so directly related to my work, because it’s just how I get paid, and in a perfect world I wouldn’t have to work, I’ll put it that way.” But these different pursuits or methodologies do find common ground in her process.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

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



FROM TOP:
Still from *A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere*, 2015.
Two-channel HD video, 25 min.

Installation view
of “S1:E1” in the New Museum’s 2015
Triennial, “Surround Audience.”



FROM TOP:
Cover for Sym's
short story
Fools, 2012.

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

Responses to her project led to a series of questions: “What does it mean for a black woman to make minimal, masculine net art?” she asks in the lecture. “What about this piece is ‘not black’? Can my identity be expressed as an aesthetic quality?” Considering “the tension between conventional, segregated channels of distribution and black imagination,” Sym's invokes code switching, the sociological notion of moving between languages or dialects in varied cultural contexts, which entered mainstream vocabulary around the election of President Obama in 2008. “Writing the SXSW talk was the first time I

though about code switching as a metaphorical term,” she notes. “I was thinking about it more as a way of making stuff — the idea of smashing two things together that seem like opposites.” She compares it to amphiboly, a grammatical structure deployed formally by the collective Slavs and Tatars: “It could mean two things, or something and its opposite, contained in one idea. So it’s not just switching cultures but bringing ideas together. That’s something that’s continued throughout my work since writing that essay.”

In late 2013, Sym's wrote a piece for Rhizome called the “Mundane Afrofuturist

Manifesto,” seeking “a new framework for black diasporic artistic production.” The manifesto drew from the language and structure of 2004’s “Mundane Manifesto,” written by Geoff Ryman and others from the Clarion West sci-fi writing workshop, which focused on “this premise that if you focus on outer space, you forget about what’s actually

happening to the planet,” she explains. “I took the environmental concerns and adjusted them to be social concerns.” Here, adherents (the “alternately pissed off and bored”) agree to imagine a future without magic, space travel, Martians, or alternative universes, instead seeking a “cosmology of blackness and...possible futures” rooted in black humanity, and “the awesome power of the black imagination” that already exists on Earth. Sym's own entry to this genre is *Most Days*, an audio piece set in 2050 in which she narrates the day of Chanel Washington, a young black woman living in Los Angeles. Accompanied in its vinyl release on Mixed Media Recordings by Neil Reinalda’s ambient score, the voice-over lingers on both Chanel’s wholly relatable domestic routines (waking up alongside her boyfriend, painting her toenails) and her equally intimate interactions with technology (a sleep-monitoring blanket, a vaporizer pen). With the background synth sounds creating a dreamlike mood, that small distance Sym's’s futurity creates



between the listener and this imagined reality becomes one of quietly unsettling possibility.

While any continued adherence to the rules of Mundane Afrofuturism after *Most Days* is unintentional, the mood of the piece certainly resonates in her work since then, particularly the presence of a solitary female protagonist, a role that, she says, will be a part of the body work she's producing for her upcoming exhibition at Bridget Donahue gallery in New York, which opens this month. It's not an autobiographical representation of herself but rather, she explains, "a reference to a vernacular, existing mythologies that we already have around us." She references Georges Polti's *36 Dramatic Situations*: "I like using that because it's the essence of all popular narratives from the Renaissance until to now. It allows me to focus on the interpretation of these things that we've already established." By a mechanism similar to that utilized in *Most Days*, possibility through this proximity to autobiography, the solitary female character takes on a performative edge as well. This has been of interest to Syms since her

early LiveJournal days, under the handle "ambiguousperson". "I like to think about self-performance, for screen and for life," she says.

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

Which brings us back to TV, one of many containers of cultural knowledge that Syms has examined and unpacked, equal parts amused viewer and media archaeologist. Responding to the notion of a voice actor or LiveJournal user who's layered different selves, she says, "I'm really obsessed with this show right now called *Power*, produced by 50 Cent. One of the characters owns this club and is a drug dealer, and his nemesis is a young, attractive black guy. The club owner invites him to come work with him, and asks, "You know, we can't get blacks and Latinos at our club. What's the secret?" The guys like,

"Different people come to my club because I'm different things." MP

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



Mousse Publishing

MOUSSE - Current Issue - Issue #49 / MARTINE SYMS



Martine Syms, *Lessons I-XXX*, 2014

Courtesy: the artist

THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

by Aram Moshayedi

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

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

Martine Syms: I started using "conceptual entrepreneur" around 2007. After graduating from art school I didn't want to make art. I wanted to open a business. I signed a lease on a 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, *For Nights Like These*, 1979 (3), 2014
Courtesy: the artist



Martine Syms, *Primetime Fall Schedule 1988*, 2014
Courtesy: the artist

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

MS: Definitely. I was driven towards entrepreneurship by economic concern. I graduated right before the recession. I quit the one shitty job I was able to get in like September and wasn't able to get another one until 2012. I wanted to create

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

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

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

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

MS: People assume I'm telling the truth in *A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere* because my voice is used and it's obvious I'm recording in a closet reading from a piece of paper. I appear on screen through footage shot on my computer and phone and the image quality makes people believe. *Fools* is also assumed to be autobiographical and it uses a much different voice. I'm not actually that sincere. There is a line where I say "Martine is

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

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

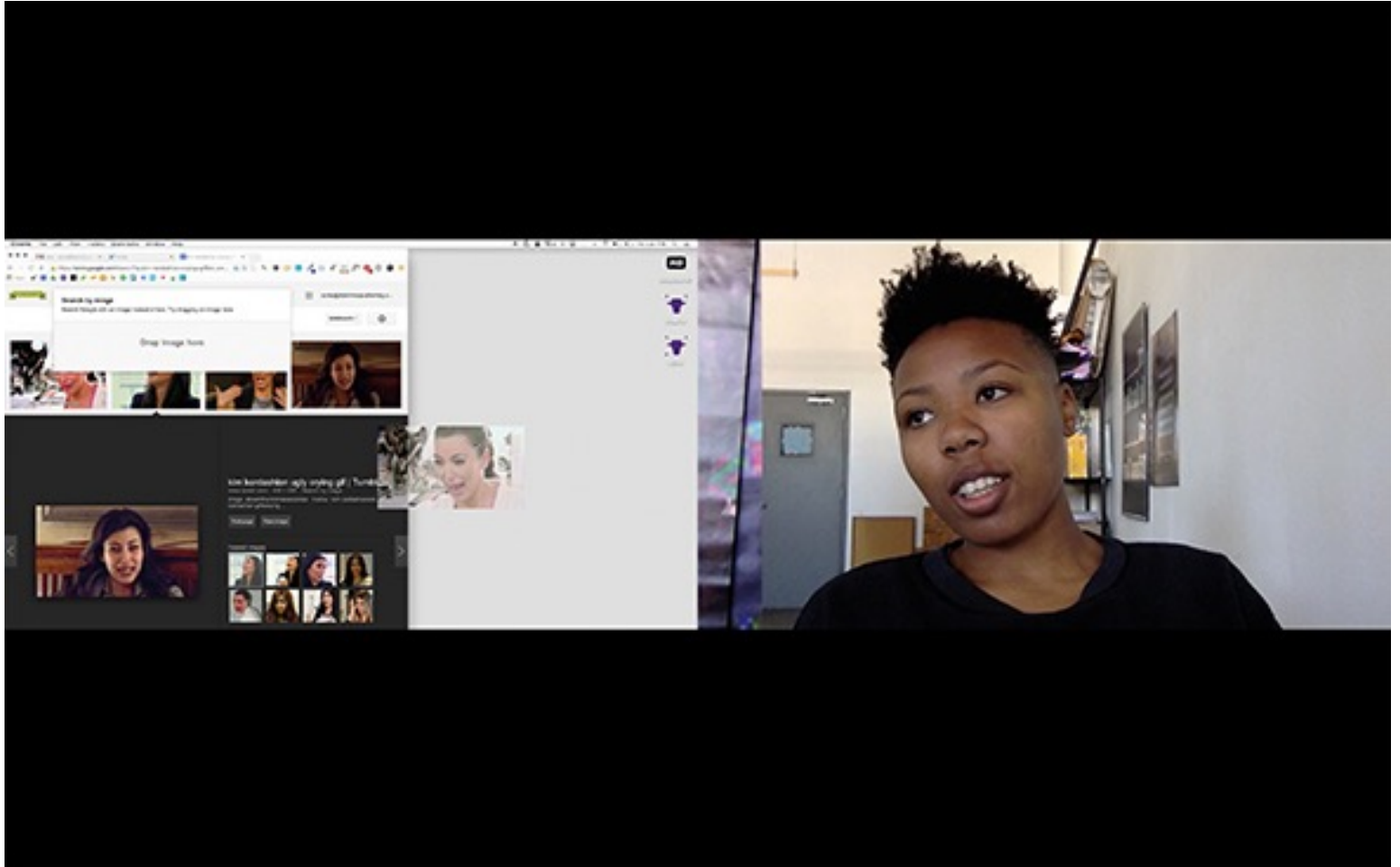


Martine Syms, *Fools*, 2012

Courtesy: the artist and Dominica publishing

MS: The first commercial in *A Pilot* features an excerpt of Sister Souljah on a Phil Donahue special following the 1992 Los Angeles riots. I found it looking through footage of Anna Deavere Smith who is also a guest on the show. I was struck by

her words. She encapsulates some of the beliefs I have, such as "America is business and without business you will have nothing and be nothing." Basically she is condemning the school systems for not teaching students about business so they "can create sustainable institutions in their communities." (I wish I could write this how she says it.)



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

This commercial is *Lesson I* in a series of 30-second videos I've been making for the past year. I'm working towards a 90-minute feature (180 videos), but the project began as a commission from the Walker Art Center. I was a part of the Design Insights lecture series in 2014 and my talk was structured around the five lessons of the tradition that are woven throughout Kevin Young's book *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness*. I've taken those lessons as a way of explaining how I work and I wanted to make an ad for each of them. Once I started working on them, I became less tied to the

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

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

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

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

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

MS: Sometimes it seems like we're still talking about an essentialist idea of what is or is not black art. Right now a lot of artists my age are interested in claiming blackness and

I think that's related to the historical moment, much like it was in early 90s film and music, or the Black Arts Movement of the 70s. I get really bored with the idea that there is some specific way that black art looks. I am, however, very intrigued by the idea of making an image in a black way. Arthur Jafa refers to this as a Black Visual Intonation. He writes about it better than me.

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



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

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

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

MS: Audience and distribution are intimately connected. I decide what I want to say, to whom, and then figure out the best way to present it. Last night I was tweeting with Tisa Bryant about Marlon Riggs because there's a group show opening at MOCA called *Tongues Untied* which features one black artist—Riggs. Tisa wrote about how Riggs worked collaboratively and collectively. He wasn't trying to "represent" a community;

instead, his community was his work. He actively fought against exceptionalism. The exhibition can't accommodate that multiplicity. It shows him as a singular entity, whereas his film work, particularly *Tongues Untied*, is able to provide context and [demonstrate] the creative/romantic/political relationships he was involved in.

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

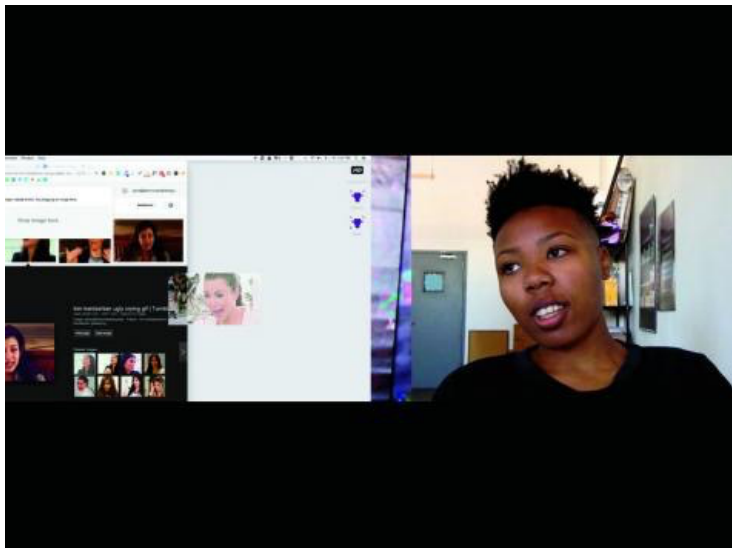
Martine Syms, “Stages of Laughter 3 - Martine Syms”, *Art in America*, June 1, 2015.

Art in America

MAGAZINE JUN. 01, 2015

STAGES OF LAUGHTER 3 - MARTINE SYMS

by Martine Syms



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

called “sudden glory”—that comes from witty assertions of superiority.

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

—Eds.

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

MARTINE SYMS

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

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

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

Ulman embodies these girls in her images and endows them with the semblance of personalities through captions. *Excellences* traffics in the tone-deaf language of hyper-privilege. Ulman, in the guise of one character, rapidly shifts from the ecstasy of consumerism to callous vanity. “Matching!! #flowers #girl #iPhone #nails #sunglasses #dolce&gabbana #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-presentation and impression management that includes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ART PAPERS

A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere

Text / Martine Syms

I DON'T WATCH GOOD TELEVISION.

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

—Paul Beatty, *Slumberland*, 2008



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

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

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



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





WHAT IS OPRAH'S FAVORITE SITCOM?

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

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

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

BARTENDER: Yes, sir. What will it be?

ARCHIE: Whisky.

BARTENDER: Any particular brand?

ARCHIE: Uh, yeah, the expensive brand.

BARTENDER: And what about you sir?

GEORGE: Scotch and soda, please.

BARTENDER: Yes, sir!

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

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

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

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

ARCHIE: What do you mean by that?

BARTENDER: Here you are, sir.

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



TELEVISION IS HOW WE FEEL

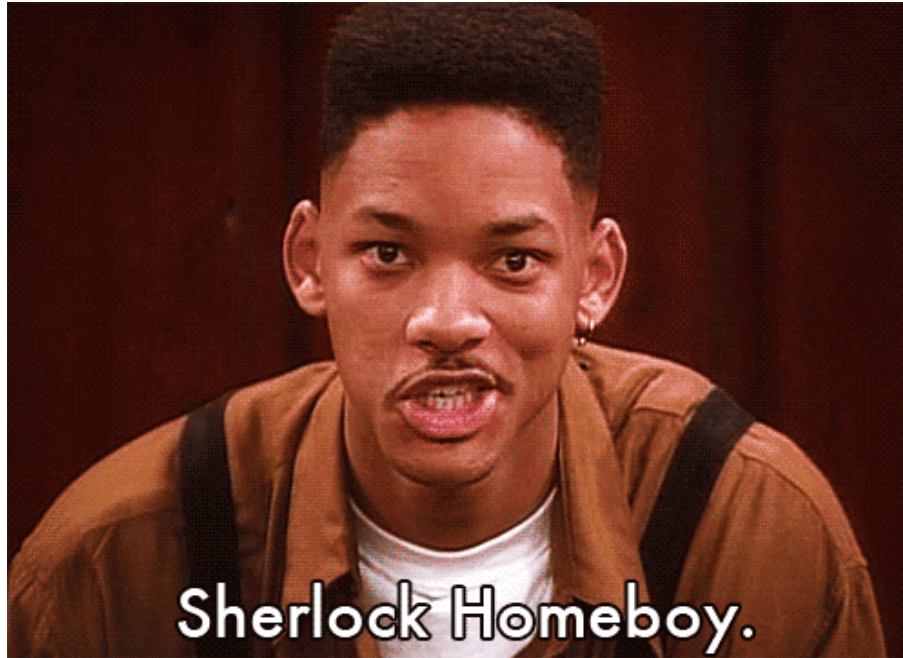
Television has always been in my life. I was born in the late 80s, after the tube had been fully integrated into American society. Young urban professionals (like my parents) had seen JFK's assassination, witnessed the Television War, watched the Watergate hearings, and gotten their MTV. Ted Turner splintered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



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

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

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



WHATEVER CARROLL O'CONNOR GETS, PLUS A DOLLAR

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

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

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

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



THE COMMODIFICATION OF DIFFERENCE

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

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

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

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

THE SITCOM IS AS AMERICAN AS JAZZ OR COMIC BOOKS

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

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

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

*ARE YOU THE STAR OF YOUR OWN LIFE?*

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

Every time I talk about one of my favorite sitcoms, a well-intentioned friend invariably mentions that he watched the show too, that he never considered it to be "black"—as if its popularity had annulled its specificity. How do I explain the secrets hidden in plain sight? Double entendre? The dozens? Call and response? Tonal semantics? Indirection?

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

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

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

She Mad is a show about nowhere.

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



i-D

watch fashion music culture news think pieces beauty

ART | Emily Manning | 29 May, 2015

let martine syms and kahlil joseph unlock your mind

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



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

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

What are some themes or ideas that consistently interest you?

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



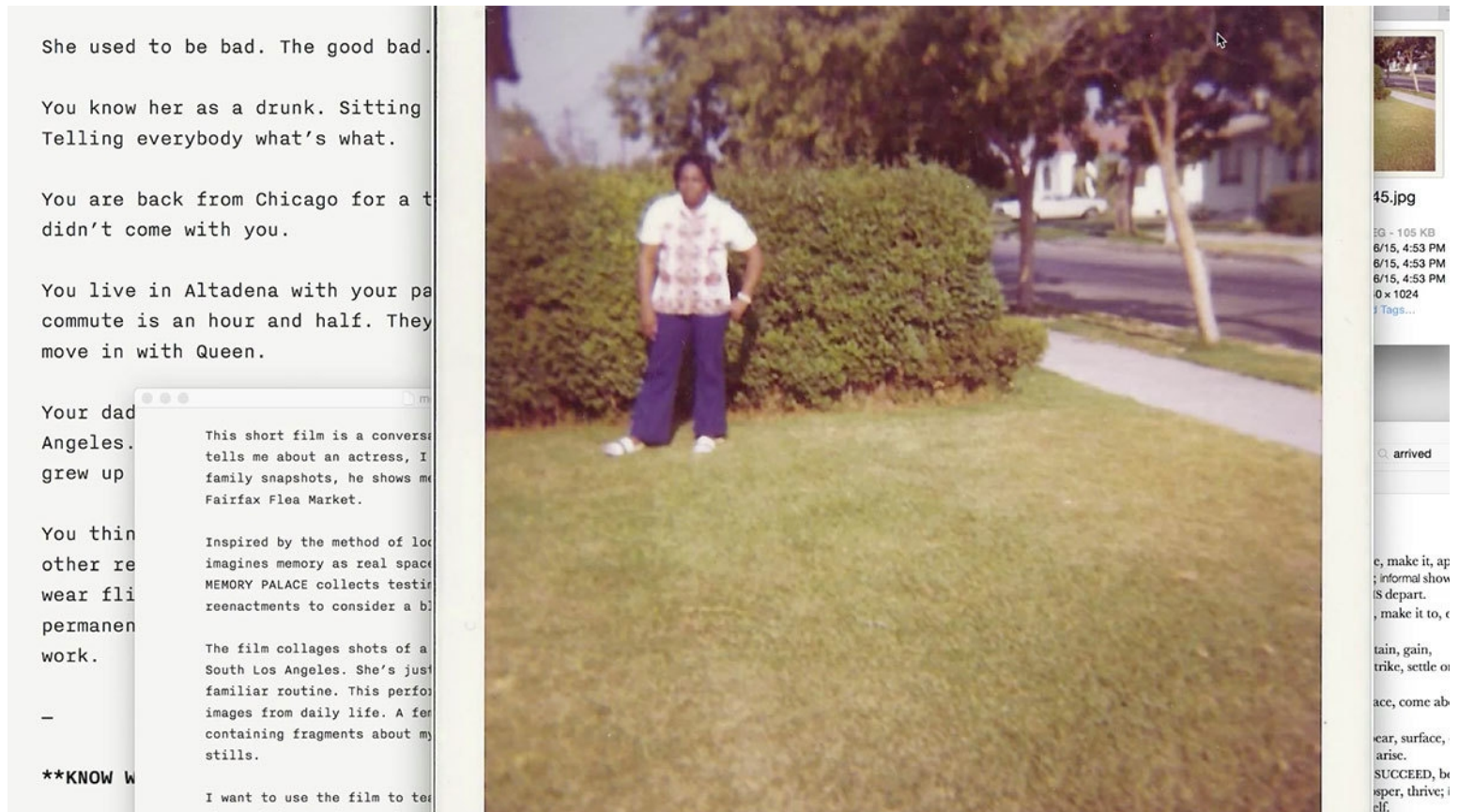
Martine Syms and Kahlil Joseph, stills from the video *Memory Palace*, 2015, courtesy of the artist and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Credits

Text Emily Manning

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

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

RHIZOME

The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto

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



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

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

The Mundane Afrofuturists recognize that:

We did not originate in the cosmos.

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

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

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

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

While we are often Othered, we are not aliens.

Though our ancestors were mutilated, we are not mutants.

Post-black is a misnomer.

Post-colonialism is too.

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



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

The Mundane Afrofuturists rejoice in:

Piling up unexamined and hackneyed tropes, and setting them alight.

Gazing upon their bonfire of the Stupidities, which includes, but is not exclusively limited to:

- Jive-talking aliens;
- Jive-talking mutants;
- Magical negroes;
- Enormous self-control in light of great suffering;
- Great suffering as our natural state of existence;
- Inexplicable skill in the martial arts;
- Reference to Wu Tang;
- Reference to Sun Ra;
- Reference to Parliament Funkadelic and/or George Clinton;
- Reference to Janelle Monáe;
- Obvious, heavy-handed allusions to double-consciousness;
- Desexualized protagonists;
- White slavery;
- Egyptian mythology and iconography;
- The inner city;
- Metallic colors;
- Sassiness;
- Platform shoes;
- Continue at will...

We also recognize:

The harmless fun that these and all the other Stupidities have brought to millions of people.

The harmless fun that burning the Stupidities will bring to millions of people.

The imaginative challenge that awaits any Mundane Afrofuturist author who accepts that this is it: Earth is all we have. What will we do with it?

The chastening but hopefully enlivening effect of imagining a world without fantasy bolt-holes: no portals to the Egyptian kingdoms, no deep dives to Drexciya, no flying Africans to whisk us off to the Promised Land.

The possibilities of a new focus on black humanity: our science, technology, culture, politics, religions, individuality, needs, dreams, hopes, and failings.

The surge of bedazzlement and wonder that awaits us as we contemplate our own cosmology of blackness and our possible futures.

The relief of recognizing our authority. We will root our narratives in a critique of normative, white validation. Since "fact" and "science" have been used throughout history to serve white supremacy, we will focus on an emotionally true, vernacular reality.

The understanding that our "twoness" is inherently contemporary, even futuristic. DuBois asks how it feels to be a problem. Ol' Dirty Bastard says "If I got a problem, a problem's got a problem 'til it's gone."

An awakening sense of the awesome power of the black imagination: to protect, to create, to destroy, to propel ourselves towards what poet Elizabeth Alexander describes as "a metaphysical space beyond the black public everyday toward power and wild imagination."

The opportunity to make sense of the nonsense that regularly—and sometimes violently—accents black life.

The electric feeling that Mundane Afrofuturism is the ultimate laboratory for worldbuilding outside of imperialist, capitalist, white patriarchy.

The sense that the rituals and inconsistencies of daily life are compelling, dynamic, and utterly strange.

Mundane Afrofuturism opens a number of themes and flavors to intertextuality, double entendre, politics, incongruity, polyphony, and collective first-person—techniques that we have used for years to make meaning.



Neil Beloufa, Still frame from *Production Value* (2013).

The Mundane Afrofuturists promise:

To produce a collection of Mundane Afrofuturist literature that follows these rules:

- 1 No interstellar travel — travel is limited to within the solar system and is difficult, time consuming, and expensive.
- 2 No inexplicable end to racism — dismantling white supremacy would be complex, violent, and have global impact.
- 3 No aliens unless the connection is distant, difficult, tenuous, and expensive — and they have no interstellar travel either.
- 4 No internment camps for blacks, aliens, or black aliens.
- 5 No Martians, Venusians, etc.
- 6 No forgetting about political, racial, social, economic, and geographic struggles.
- 7 No alternative universes.
- 8 No revisionist history.
- 9 No magic or supernatural elements.
- 10 No Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, or Bucks.

- 11 No time travel or teleportation.
- 12 No Mammies, Jezebels, or Sapphires.
- 13 Not to let Mundane Afrofuturism cramp their style, as if it could.
- 14 To burn this manifesto as soon as it gets boring.

— Martine Syms & whomever will join me in the future of black imagination.

Most Days is a Mundane Afrofuturist sound work released on vinyl by Mixed Media Recordings, due to be released in early 2014. The audio consists of a table read of an original screenplay alongside a score composed in collaboration with artist [Neal Reinalda](#). The piece considers what an average day looks like for a young black woman in 2050 Los Angeles. For this piece, I adapted the literary rules of "[Mundane Science Fiction](#)." I produced a film still for "Most Days" to assert its reality and circulate it within visual culture.

Britt Julious, "Black by Distribution: A Conversation with Martine Syms", *Rhizome*, August 31, 2011, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2011/aug/31/black-distribution-conversation-martine-syms/>.

RHIZOME

Black by Distribution: A Conversation with Martine Syms

BRITT JULIOUS | Wed Aug 31st, 2011 12:18 p.m.



Although she identifies as an artist and “conceptual entrepreneur,” [Martine Syms](#) is a seasoned essayist. Her combination of personal anecdotes, expository investigation, and academic analysis is enigmatic, drawing the reader into the purpose of her writing and the rich storytelling of her written voice.

Born in Los Angeles and based in Chicago, Syms received an MFA in Film, Video, and New Media at the School of the Art Institute in 2007. Syms is the founder and co-director of [Golden Age](#), an artist-run project space, performance venue, and bookshop. Rather than merely sell zines, books, art, and other ephemera from visual artists and critics, Syms – along with her co-director Marco Kane Braunschweiler – uses the space to engage a diverse community of design and art fans and practitioners.

Focusing on race, context, and form in Black cinema, [Implications and Distinctions: Format, Content and Context in Contemporary Race Film](#) works in large part due to the simplicity of its words and the depth of its subject matter. Syms’ idea — that race film is both constantly evolving and utilizing methods of exposure implemented decades earlier — is complex, but the clarity in her thesis makes her work digestible.

"My family, my background ... it just parallels really nicely with a lot of social and cultural movements," Syms said during a recent interview. Her writing reflects this connection, using personal anecdotes to highlight the evolution of "race" film from its earliest producers to the more homegrown, independent, and online efforts of emerging filmmakers.

[Implications and Distinctions](#) is one of five recent releases from Future Plan and Program, artist Steffani Jemison’s new project incubated by Project Row Houses that publishes the literary works of emerging visual artists. The clean layout and production of the book only slightly masks its purpose to present one-of-a-kind ideas and experiments combining the written word and emerging artistic practices. Recently, I met with Martine Syms to talk about some of the points she makes in the book.

How were you first contacted about this project?

When I was at SAIC, one of my thesis projects was an essay about race film in a class with Romi Crawford. I had written this essay examining early race film and Buppie film, which I felt there were more of. I was really unhappy with that essay. It was too academic. That’s not really the way I write at all. It didn’t manage to communicate the ideas I wanted to write because it was written in this faux academia writing. I had told Steffani that I had written this essay about race film, and I would want to revisit it and rework it.

I was teaching in California that summer so I had the opportunity to talk about that book project. I actually had no copy of the original essay so I pretty much started from scratch. I had some of the research materials, the essays.

implications and
distinctions:
format, content
and context
in contemporary
race film

martine syms

What sort of changes did you make in terms of the project from your first initial draft?

Originally my idea was that the film work becomes black by these distribution channels that it goes through. It may not be racialized to begin with but because of the way it is marketed, it changes. Through research and writing, I began thinking that it was much more nuanced than that. It was subtle, the way these distinctions get made. Not everything is just BET-Black. These subtleties that maybe only I or you recognize as being Black, but someone not raised culturally that way, might not pick up on it.

Can you expand on Black by distribution?

On Netflix, there's a genre called "African American Dramas." I don't see it as that but when this movie gets put through those channels, it suddenly gets seen as an African American film. It's things like that, those outlets. If it's seen as a Black movie, it won't get played at the AMC River East but someplace farther South.

And what are your personal opinions about those classifications?

As a practitioner, it can be extremely frustrating. It just seems like, whether you like it or not, you have to work within this cannon of Black work. You can resist it or work around it, but it still exists. That can be frustrating but also a positive or interesting thing.

What would you consider to be the Black American aesthetic?

The one thing I've noticed is the emphasis on language. You could call it literary, but I think it's spoken. It's an interest in spoken language: new words, a rhythmic language of the way things are said. I can't think of any visual characteristic that I would consider Black. Most of these movies that are Black are not written or produced by Black people, not that they have to be. There's this kind of creation of a slang word that sounds Black that I'm interested in. You see that sort of thing from older films as well as newer ones.

Why do you think the 90s is such a good time for that to happen and what's happened now?

Cinema opened up to a wider audience. In the 90s, it became profitable. It was just incredibly profitable for a while, making these sort of films. It was a new and exciting glimpse of the ghetto, an updated version. There's a type of work that focuses on the ghetto that has this voyeuristic quality. I don't think you can ignore it on film, or television, or online. It's part of the medium. It's changed to be a multi-cultural cast. I think now, from 2000 to now, you start to see this tokenism to a cast in film.

Will Smith and Denzel almost transcend race. There was a chapter that I was writing that I took out. They led us to a multi-cultural cast. At some point, all Black movies became biopics. All the good, serious ones became biopics. *Ray*, *Ali*...those types of movies, those are the opportunities available for mostly men. Those are the opportunities for a Black actor to transcend "Black" movies. They have to play a Black icon.

They're kind of Obama-esque. They're obviously Black. It's like a part of their persona. Whenever they're in films, they're not necessarily a part of a Black community. They themselves are Black enough, are Blackness enough. They're sort of more than Black. I think there's something interesting when someone can go beyond that. In the movie, there's nothing particularly Black about the character. I don't know what that relationship is.

How does the internet play into the classification of Black film?

It's weird how the internet changes everything. The kind of narrow casting ... instead of reaching for a broad audience, you are reaching for a more targeted audience. You're creating works for sort of niches of people. I think that'll be the way to go, in the future in terms of the market for different films. You can direct a show just to your audience. I don't really watch TV when it's first airing or go to the movies as much as I used to.

They're going to have to contend with viewers seeking material on their own. Even though most people don't do that yet, they will once it becomes easier to do. Once it is, people will watch it. Just making it easier to do.