

exhibitions

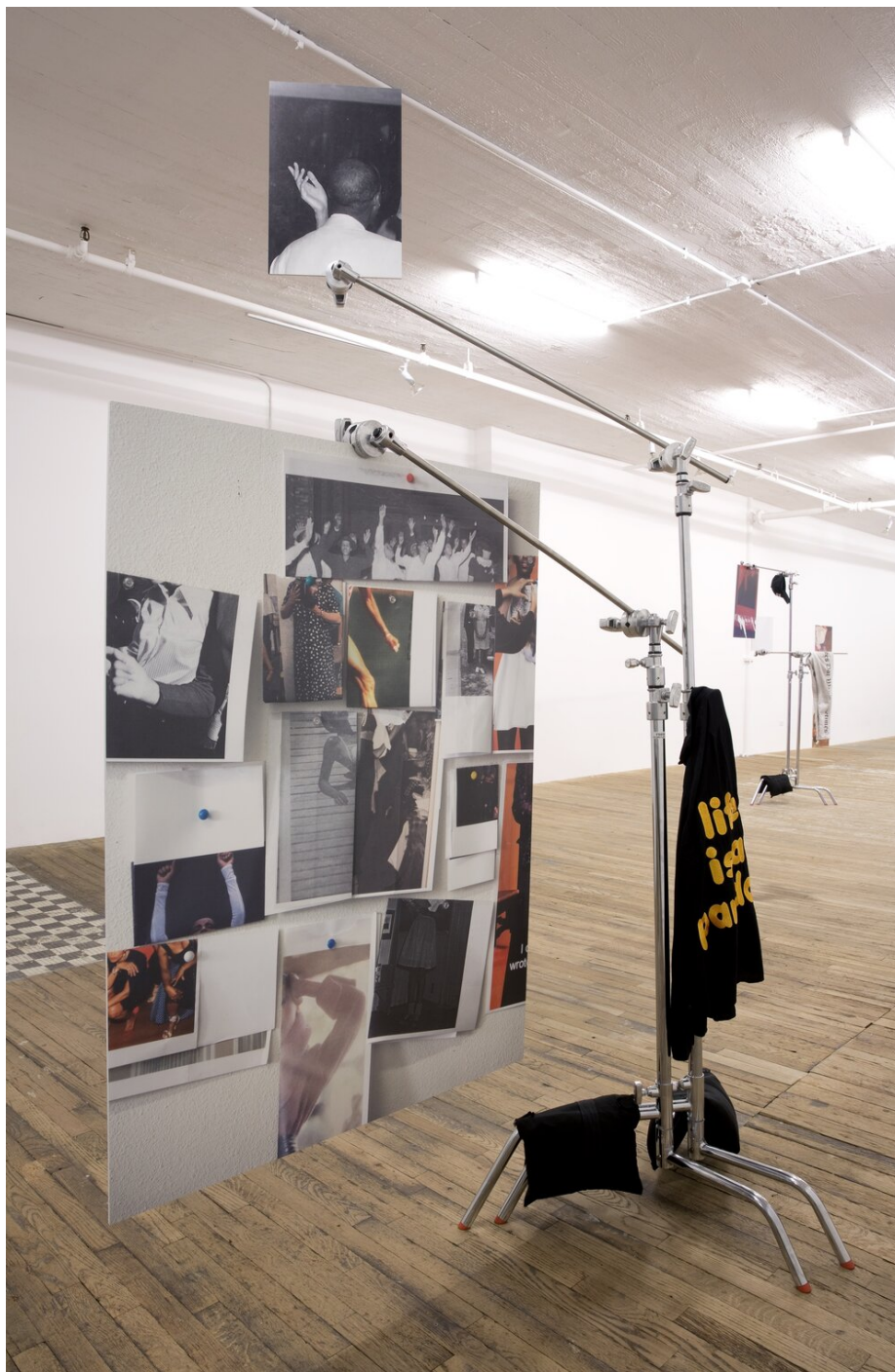
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Vertical Horizontal Extended, Vertical Elevated Oblique, A Thread Or Line That Holds Things Together, 2015

MARTINE SYMS



ONE WOMAN SHOW

BY JOCELYN MILLER

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

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

Stakes are raised when we consider just how frequently bodies are committed to screen, whether via smartphones, surveillance cameras, or even emoji hand signs acting as surrogates for physical presence, all of which retain potent affect irrespective of their mediation or any actual, indexed body. Syms’ installed spaces never let viewers forget this; production equipment evergreens—C-stands, bounce cards, gaff tape blocking marks, moveable backdrops—are smartly assembled to imply future or past image-making, fixing the viewer in a present of concurrent production and presentation. Syms’ background in design is evident in her cohesive aesthetic atmospheres, always meticulously on-message. Rich purples appear throughout her work, website, installations, and publications, a signature she attributes to her fascination with Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, and in particular its Hollywood film adaptation, produced by Oprah Winfrey and directed by Steven Spielberg (who could add to his resume mainstreaming a black radical feminist history). Walker’s purple stands for the beauty and pleasure in lived experience; Syms cites another purple as well, that of independent filmmaker Julie Dash’s 1991 masterwork *Daughters of the Dust*, whose matriarch is a physical trace of history, with hands permanently stained purple by the indigo crops and dye she processed as a slave.

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

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

It’s easy to incorporate Syms’ practice into the all-too-small canon of visible black women artists that have pre-ceded her, and make assumptions about the way she works, the concerns that are top of mind, and the audiences to which her work speaks. Her *Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto* displays impatience with certain aspects of black cultural thought, like Afrofuturism, asserting that “the connection between Middle Passage and space travel is tenuous at best,” and cautioning that “this dream of utopia can encourage us to forget that outer space will not save us from injustice, and that cyberspace was prefigured upon a master/slave relationship.” Syms notes “I’m regularly asked to dissect my art practice in terms of race, and I have to find and fix the color line, no matter how ambiguous or ridiculous its parameters may seem. But blackness is a discourse, and rather than say what it is or ain’t, I think about how blackness

and other identities are constructed. They're abstractions that are made concrete by social, economic, and legislative phenomena."

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Installation view of *Vertical Elevated Oblique*, Bridget Donahue, New York, 2015

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

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

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

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