

# Martine Syms

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Martine Syms invests in histories of image-making, parsing the visual languages that structure how we recognize and signify identity. Through close readings of traditional cinema and photography alongside television, memes, YouTube videos, GIFs, Vines, police-cam recordings, and surveillance footage, Syms makes visible the evolution of these languages, particularly in relation to Black women. She reassembles their parts into multimedia collages viewers can inhabit, exposing the mechanisms of performance: both the learning of styles, signs, and symbols and their reformulation into a self presented to the world.

Syms's installation for *Projects 106* cues viewers physically; from the moment you enter the space, you find you're hitting your mark. Her debut feature film, *Incense Sweaters & Ice* (2017), plays on three screens. Images migrate from screen to screen, simulating the polyphonous, nonlinear nature of experience. Technologies and equipment typically used behind the scenes to create "high production values"—special lights, filters, or backdrops—are assembled to imply past or future image-making, fixing the viewer in a site of concurrent production and presentation. A diffuse glow radiates from overhead fixtures, emulating the photo silks and bounce cards used to shape subjects with light and creating an environment that feels digitally retouched. A "cookie" filter, used to simulate lighting effects, is inserted into the gallery's window architecture. The space's uniform color conjures a visual-effects studio in which figures placed against a "purple screen" can be excerpted and inserted at will through video compositing. Framed works in the gallery feature vintage movie posters overlaid with photographs by Syms. These palimpsestic surfaces expand with the aid of an augmented reality (AR) app that allows viewers to access additional content from Syms's film. This medium notches right into Syms's system: a kind of automated collage, AR flattens distinctions between the digital and the real.

*Incense Sweaters & Ice* expands on the artist's earlier works, including *Notes on Gesture* (2015), a glossary of gestures associated with Black women, and *She Mad: Laughing Gas* (2016), a reimagining of a 1907 Edwin S. Porter film dramatizing social difference, which Syms updated with CCTV split screens, reaction clips, and a range of shots simulating the splintered nature of contemporary spectatorship and

experience. *Incense Sweaters & Ice* likewise dramatizes the ways we observe and are observed with the aid of technology. Using iPhones, GoPros, and cameras shooting in 4K, the film replicates the range of image captures (traffic cams, other people's phones) and screens (televisions, laptops, phones) we encounter in daily life, public and private. Shots are remote yet intimate; gazes vacillate between POV, objective, and objectifying. Through this ambient filmmaking, Syms looks at how the female self is articulated.

The film's central protagonist, Girl, negotiates relationships with friends, family, and strangers, modulating her voice, hairstyle, and behavior for different audiences. She dances in nightclubs; flirts with WB (whiteboy); roams flea markets; travels from Los Angeles to visit family in St. Louis, Missouri, and to work a nursing gig in Clarksdale, Mississippi; and reads aloud from Suzanne Scanlon's *Her 37th Year, an Index*: "I don't want to become a power woman, masculinized, my hair *done*. What they've created: *nymphet cougar mother-in-law dame*. No, I want to be punk about aging, punk about gooeey mothering, punk about turning thirty-eight, thirty-nine, forty."<sup>1</sup>

Dream-like interludes with Girl's great-aunt, Mrs. Queen Esther Bernetta White née Palmer, counter Scanlon's advocacy of punk realness. Preacher, self-help guru, and talent coach, Queen holds forth from a piano pulpit, drilling Girl and the audience on the basics of posture, grooming, and attitude, lifting material from sources ranging from Motown Finishing School director Maxine Powell's curriculum to psychologist Amy Cuddy's viral TED Talk on power poses. Queen also conveys the ways individual bodily movement is imprinted with the collective movements of people across time and space, such as the Great Migration, whose afterimages resonate across the generations portrayed in Syms's film. Members of Syms's own family participate in the film via interviews that provide a cross-generational perspective on the questions of becoming and performing at the center of her story. The thrust of Queen's teachings is that your body, and its language, communicates who you are, and you must manipulate the message. Her philosophy is driven by a politics of respectability, through which members of marginalized communities self-edit, assimilate, and police their own behavior—often resulting in the erasure of identifiers and, over time, of cultural history—as a means of survival when daily faced with the elevated risk of state violence.

*Incense Sweaters & Ice* deploys a sophisticated network of allusions, sampling Tony Robbins's self-help evangelizing while also referring to the films of Jean-Luc Godard. By casting a broad—but specific—net across art, cinema, music, and literature, and incorporating choice elements into her

new-media mosaic, Syms complicates a facile reading of the influences audiences might stereotypically align with her demographic: visual artist, Angeleno, millennial, Black, female. This is exemplified by the club flyers Girl circulates to her friends, which have graphic themes that invoke David Lynch as much as they do basketball. Similarly, Syms's text painting *GIRRRRLGIRLLGGGIRLIIIRL* (2017) sets the "girl" of Black vernacular (an address that has reverberated throughout culture) alongside other references. The undoing and redoing of the word points to the violence of its appropriation but also represents the way it sounds when carrying different meanings. It might refer to Riot Grrrl, or even No Doubt's 1990s single "Just a Girl," sung in the film. Syms's work radically expands debates about cultural ownership, summoning cultural historian Alison Landsberg's argument that "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."<sup>2</sup>

Code-switching, a linguistic concept, refers to the movement between multiple languages or dialects. Syms's film demonstrates this notion with karaoke—entertainment predicated on assuming the identities of others, badly. WB doesn't disappoint, stumbling through Nicki Minaj and Mariah Carey, artists whose identities (black, female) are starkly different from his own (white, male). The poet Kevin Young talks about "the notion of lying—the artful dodge, faking it 'til you make it,"<sup>3</sup> the way "black writers create their own authority in order to craft their own, alternative system of literary currency and value . . . functioning both within and without the dominant, supposed gold-standard system of American culture."<sup>4</sup> For Queen's generation, lying meant survival; her royal prefix is, in a literal sense, fabricated, much like the names—and new stories, new truths—her forebears invented for themselves as they migrated, newly emancipated, from the American South. Syms's film asks, is there really a difference between being and acting? Or, in a contemporary mediascape where our performed selves and interior selves have merged in intricate, unruly ways, are being and acting not only indistinguishable but key informants for one another?

Moreover, if cinema is happening in real time, is it a performance? Is it live? Developments in consumer technology have enabled the production of documentation to coincide with its broadcast: Apple iPhones now take "live photos" and Google devices take "motion stills"; Instagram tells us "stories" and Facebook has new VR "spaces." The conditions of their production are established in their dissemination. The distinctions between still and moving images, as well



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*Projects 106: Martine Syms* is organized by Jocelyn Miller, Curatorial

Monday, July 10, 7:00 p.m.  
The Roy and Nita Titus Theater 2 in-depth conversation with some of take place in the exhibition, providing Syms presents a selection of her single-channel moving-image works.  
A series of special gallery sessions with *Martine Syms*  
Modern Mondays: An Evening  
Gallery Sessions  
Friday, June 2, 1:30 p.m.  
Free with Museum admission  
Q&A with artist Richard Kennedy  
Monday, June 5, 11:30 a.m.  
Q&A with composer Fay Victor  
Friday, June 30, 1:30 p.m.  
Q&A with performer Katherine Reynolds

## Projects 106 Martine Syms

Projects 106: Martine Syms  
May 27–July 16, 2017  
The Museum of Modern Art  
Related Programs

## Notes

as those between photographers, their subjects, and their audiences, have become established. We build expansive digital archives of our idealized selves yet rarely consult these photographs after sharing them. These conditions are so ubiquitous, we almost forget that documentation is taking place, perhaps hoping that we will forget ourselves, stop performing or behaving. Syms explores this idea of recording as a precondition for liveness.  
Syms's film examines the ways in which social relationships are infected by dynamics of consumption and control. It uses mass media's built-in asymmetry—between the consumer who knows only the performance or lie and the producer who distorts and shapes his or her image in accordance with prevailing attitudes—as a narrative tool for exposure as much as for obfuscation. Syms shows us how we make pictures to depend on ourselves and how, in turn, our identities come to depend on those images. With *Projects 106*, she avoids playing the role of the evangelist or "influencer" in favor of the collageist or producer who acknowledges the self in dialogue, created in collaboration with the past and a proposed future—faked until it is made.  
<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Scanlon, *Her 37th Year, an Index* (Las Cruces: Noemi Press, 2015), p. 25.  
<sup>2</sup> Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 217.  
<sup>3</sup> Kevin Young, *The Grey Album: On The Blackness of Blackness* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2012), p. 17.  
<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.



INCENSE SWEATERS & ICE

A FILM BY MARTINE SYMS