

FACT

&

TROUBLE

Martine Syms

Fact & Trouble

20 April–19 June 2016

ICA

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

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

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

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

MW There doesn't appear to be any ostensible hierarchy in the way that you use various literary or cultural references throughout your work, instead it projects a sense of ambiguity which also feeds into the way that you use images and video footage. The distinction between personal and appropriated commercial or found footage never feels apparent, is this a consideration when you are developing work?

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

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

MS Church signs, self-help books, TED talks, pop songs, and advertising all employ a similar structure. I want my work to have a similar stickiness so I adopt that way of writing. I don't always do it intentionally, but I'm surrounded by it. It gets in my head. I save a lot of references from signage or movies or ads or whatever. I'll take a picture or write them down but I rarely look at them again. They're internalised. When I start working on a text piece I tend to start very direct, almost didactic, and then I think about how it will work within the set of images. It's also formal. I think about it like editing. We can go back to the idea of montage. It's about the relationship between images and text. How I can create that third meaning.

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

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

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

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

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

MS I found it in Zora Neale Hurston's slang glossary. It means something done perfectly. It's one way of being. It's not the way I am, but maybe a way I'd want to be. It is one of the lessons. I thought it was a good framework for thinking about the idea of tradition and cultural inheritances. The lessons are not aspirational. You know, maybe they're not things that everyone will want to do or things that I even do myself but I've just decided that these are the lessons of this tradition.

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

MS I want to put the conditions of production and viewing on display. Maybe looking is a better word than viewing. The c-stand is a sign of the entertainment complex. It's a workhorse piece of equipment that is basically found on every shoot. The cookies are similarly standard. They create the mood and affect of the images that we see. I also

reference the formal qualities of light modifiers. I want to bring these objects into the frame. This is another kind of break. I want to expand the moment when an image is created. I don't believe in a decisive moment. I'm stretching it out. Regardless of whether it's a commercial or personal photo, I'm interested in the conditional aspects of the image. I'm always thinking about what you're not supposed to see.

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

MS These are movie posters for each *Lesson*. Each photograph corresponds to one of the lessons. I shot most of them "on location" as I was making these different videos.

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

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

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

Martine Syms (b. 1988) is an artist based in Los Angeles. Her artwork has been exhibited and screened extensively, including recent presentations at Karma International, Bridget Donahue Gallery, the New Museum, Kunsthalle Bern, The Studio Museum in Harlem, Index Stockholm, MOCA Los Angeles and MCA Chicago. She's lectured at Yale University, SXSW, California Institute of the Arts, University of Chicago, Johns Hopkins University and MoMA PS1, among other venues. Upcoming exhibitions include *Made in LA* at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and *Manifesta 11* in Zurich, Switzerland.

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