

EXIT by Lanka Tattersall, Curator, Drawings and Prints at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; published on the occasion of *Aphrodite's Beasts* at Fridericianum, Kassel Germany July 2021

I originally thought that this essay was going to be about how Martine Syms is an inheritor of multiple traditions — the Black radical tradition, Marcel Duchamp's readymades, and the swagger and conceptual sharpness of Adrian Piper's *The Mythic Being* (1973-1975). Then I received a work-in-progress clip of *DED* (2021) and watched Syms's avatar, made from a 3D scan of her body, shoot itself/herself with a virtual gun, alone in a digital non-space, accompanied by a soundtrack of aching beauty featuring the artist's voice. "I want to give and receive infinite possibilities," the voice intoned. The soundtrack was a delectable melancholic almost-pop epic for our time, while the visuals on the screen left me gutted.

There was no way to continue with the text quite as I had planned. How could I find a point of reference, a context, for this searing, somewhat shocking, heartbreaker of a new work? The previous year plus of nearly unfathomable loss and catastrophe reaching around the globe. Yes. The never-ending spectacularization of Black death. Yes. Tragedy. But also, slapstick — as if Buster Keaton had been reincarnated into this Black, female, computer-generated character, alone and inescapably trapped in a Sisyphean task of auto-destruction.

"To Hell with My Suffering" reads the back of the shirt on Syms's avatar. The message suggests that if you can dismiss your pain, externalize it, then maybe you can own it, shape it, turn it into matter and material. *DED* might at first appear like a work of catharsis — an expression and release of excess pain, particularly through the art of tragedy — yet there is no resolution. As the old saying goes, sometimes you have to laugh to keep from crying.¹

If *DED* is a tragic, operatic solo, *Ugly Plymouths* (2020) is a melodramatic trio. It takes place in shifting middle spaces, purgatories, or light hells: in a traffic jam on the way to the airport; in the eternity of waiting for someone to text you back; in the feeling of suspension activated by switching your phone to airplane mode before a flight. A press release tells us that the three protagonists have ridiculous names, like ones you might find on a bad dating site — Hot Dog, Doobie and Le Que Sabe — though the names aren't uttered over the course of the eight-minute, three-channel work.¹ Described as a one-act play, it's a theater of missed connections, misunderstandings, and clichés. The title "Ugly Plymouths," is taken from a line in a poem "Hollywood" by the Beat poet Bob Kaufman, which reads, "Ugly Plymouths, swapping exhaust with red convertible / Buicks." The poem concludes, "*Hollywood, I salute you, artistic cancer of the universe!*"² Los Angeles, with all of its' contradictions, ugly beauty, exaggerations, entertainment business, and traffic, could be considered a fourth character in the story.

Perhaps it's a pandemic-era association, but *Ugly Plymouths* brings to mind Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist drama *Huis Clos* (*No Exit*, 1944), as if Sartre's play, published in the aftermath of the Nazi occupation of Paris in 1945, had somehow fallen through a portal and ended up in Sys's congested, 21st century Los Angeles. (Sartre's characters are three recently-deceased people stuck together in the afterlife; it's the work from which we get the expression "L'enfer c'est les autres."³) Both plays feature three protagonists — two women and a man — who torment each other through their projections of guilt. Syms's characters are not stuck in a room together, but they are certainly stuck in each other's text messages, voicemails, and, likely, cars.

Syms appears as one of the three characters in *Ugly Plymouths* — one of the work's pleasures is witnessing her mastery of the subtlest shifts in the gesture, facial expression and vocal tone as she moves from swaggering to coy, from theatrical to vulnerable. Near the midpoint of the play, the three characters seem to finally settle on a plan to get together — "Amazing!", "Fabulous!", "Let's do it!" they exclaim across their three screens. Syms appears in a still image, beaming before a window, holding a joint; the other screens glow orange and yellow. There's a beat, and then Syms's character asks, "Just making sure, you know who this is, right?" It's a punchline for the internet dating age, but also one of the most fundamental philosophical questions: can one ever really know another?

Rewind. It's 2016, and I'm in an artist-run space in Los Angeles's Chinatown called Human Resources. I'm here for a screening of the first portion of what will become *Lessons I — CLXXX* (2014-2018). There are cushions on the floor, and everyone is reclining as floor-to-ceiling projections play on all four walls. Every thirty seconds — about the length of a commercial — a new short video plays on each of the walls. It feels like channel surfing through a virtual library of storytelling about Black achievement, desire, grief, and the contours of everyday life. Some of the footage is found; some of it was made by the artist; some of it was made by Syms to look

¹ "Martine Syms: *Ugly Plymouths*," press release, bridgetdonahue.nyc

² Bob Kaufman, "Hollywood," in *Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness* (New York: New Directions, 1959), pp. 24, 26.

³ "Hell is other people." Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit* (London: Samuel French, 1958).

found. The progression of videos is selected randomly through a computer program, and the work feels like a kind of universe or chorus.

Syms has mentioned the influence of Kevin Young's book *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* in making *Lessons*. Young's text ranges across media to articulate historical contours of the Black imagination. He outlines a series of "lessons" about Black culture in the book, the first of which is: "*What we claim, we are.*"⁴ In a similar way, across the 180 cantos of *Lessons*' epic structure, Syms connects — that is to say, claims — a vast span of experiences, moods and gestures as part of the Black radical tradition, of which she herself is both an inheritor and contributor. She appears in a host of mutable guises, hairstyles, and situations: they are all her, and somehow none of them are specific to her. As in *Ugly Plymouths*, she is recognizable as the maker of the universe that we're invited into, but at the same time, she's an unfixed signifier, taking just the form needed to stage a question, a thought.

In *Lesson LXXV*, which is presented as independent work in Kassel, Syms appears with blonde extensions, a grayish milky substance coating her face and shirt. Her features are unmoving, save for her blinking eyes. This silent video evokes images of protesters dousing milk into their eyes to counteract the pain from being teargassed, particularly the heavy teargassing of protestors in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, after Michael Brown, and 18-year-old, unarmed, Black man was killed by a police officer. Syms, lit from above, appears almost glowing against a stark, dark background. Almost imperceptibly, the video alternates between moving forward and in reverse, so the drips subtly toggle between falling and ascending. The slight stutter this creates, a break from the laws of gravity and time, adds to the sense that Syms's figure is a kind of miraculous vision while also totally of the present-day, tragic newsfeed. Uprisings are lessons of a profound sort, sites of deepest pain and struggle.

When recently asked to describe how the messages of her work might shift across the various media she uses, Syms replied, "I listened to a beautiful interview with [the author] Arundhati Roy the other day and someone asked her for this. She said, 'The inquiry is always the same.' I agree. Form longing for formlessness."⁵

Form longing for formlessness. As Black people, we have to contend too often with existing within too much form: too spectacularized, too much of an object. Syms's summoning of formlessness can be seen as a resistance to this. Her statement evokes the dissident surrealist George Bataille's classic text "L'informe" ("Formless," 1929), where the formless is described as akin to "dire que l'univers est quelque chose comme une araignée ou un crachat."⁶ Syms's longing for formlessness is also a sister to what artist Arthur Jafa describes as the "good death" in his essay "My Black Death" (an essay that Syms has mentioned as important for her own thinking).⁷ Jafa articulates a conundrum of Black creative life: how to exist within a system that is both oppressive and gives one meaning ("our specificity, our uniqueness, our flavor,"⁸ he says), and how to release those binds into a kind of formlessness like death.

Spending time with Syms's work, one might have the sense that it's the longing that's key: form longing for formlessness. The central refrain from *DED* floats in the air: *I want to give and receive infinite possibilities*. Like Syms's avatar, never quite getting to the exit door, to the moment of total dissolution, but rather always somewhere on the path of longing, suspended in giving and receiving: at times ecstatically, sometimes painfully, and other times mundanely, every day.

⁴ Kevin Young, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (Minneapolis: Gray Wolf Press, 2012), p. 31.

⁵ Martine Syms, "Martine Syms has big feelings too," interview by Zainab Jama, *The Face*, March 24, 2021 www.theface.com

⁶ "[...] saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit." "Formless," Georges Bataille, in *Georges Bataille: Visions of Excess. Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, (University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 31. First published in *Documents*, no. 1, Paris 1929, p. 382.

⁷ Arthur Jafa, "My Black Death," in *Everything but the Burden: What White People are Taking from Black Culture*, ed. Greg Tate (Broadway Books, 2003), p. 257.

⁸ Ibid.