

On Irena Haiduk's *Tableau Économique*

Engineered to infiltrate both our consciousnesses and our closets, pervasive digital images surround us, urging us to acquire things through seamless transactions linked to digital currency and near-invisible automated distribution channels. Irena Haiduk (b. 1982, Belgrade, Yugoslavia) understands these flows of thin images and expendable objects to be part of a Western tendency to treat people and things—including art—as lifeless commodities. “In a world with too much to look at and to desire,” she notes, “things come and go almost instantly. The speed of the transition from thing to trash syncs up with the loading speed of that thing’s image onto your cosmopolitan digital device.” Through Yugoexport, the corporation she founded as a living artwork, Haiduk disrupts those circuits and breathes life back into the relationship between people and things.

In *Tableau Économique*, Haiduk simultaneously depicts and enacts a different kind of economy within the Market Center. This project is a manifestation of Yugoexport, which she describes as

“a corporation modeled after the self-managed, autonomous, unofficial organizations and experimental clubs within the larger state infrastructure of the former Yugoslavia. Incorporated in the United States (a she), launched in Paris, and people, and Yugoexport is a she), launched in Paris, and headquartered in Belgrade, she is a copy or an avatar of Yugoexport, a defunct Yugoslav apparel manufacturer and weapons exporter.”

Tableau Économique demonstrates Yugoexport’s maxim, “how to surround yourself with things in the right way.” In English, “tableau” refers to a picture or to an arrangement of objects or people, and historically, tableaux were performed as a type of theater in which motionless figures enacted scenes. Pairing “tableau” with “économie” invokes the French meaning “table,” in the sense of a chart. “Économie” adds additional layers because its etymology derives from the Greek word for household management. A Tableau Économique might, then, chart forms of economy related not only to flows of currency and material but to choices about managing one’s daily life. It might, in fact, depict how to surround ourselves with things in the right way.

Haiduk’s conviction about “the right way” manifests in her choices about Yugoexport’s products, production methods, and distribution channels. Yugoexport makes only a few things, all of which replicate or are inspired by Yugoslav

designs and design principles. While available to anyone of any gender, their first intended users are women, whom Haiduk equips to walk tall, move fast, and broadcast their power. For instance, a short- or long-sleeved A-line dress, inspired by the work of designer Aleksandar Joksimovic, allows ease of motion “for dancing or strolling.” The Borosana shoe, ergonomically designed in the 1960s for Yugoslavian working women, maintains comfort for long periods on one’s feet. Both are part of the Yugoform that outfits what Haiduk terms an Army of Beautiful Women, as well as its elite force, the Sirens, named after the mythical female beings whose voices could lure sailors to destruction. Their beauty derives not from physical form but from agency, strength, and fierce freedom of movement.

Haiduk’s production choices reinforce these commitments. The dress is produced by a cooperative of seamstresses who once worked for Jugoexport. For the shoes, Haiduk partners with the firm Borovo—now in Croatia, a fragment of a former network of Yugoslavian socialist production. In this way, Haiduk directs money from global art contexts to support the labor of these workers. While a tiny shift relative to the disruptive amounts of external power and money that have shaped the Balkans since Yugoslavia’s dissolution, it nevertheless enacts Yugoexport’s maxim. These reciprocal relationships among artist, laborers, and the things they produce are outside the frame, but crucial to this *Tableau*.

This attention to production could lead down incorrect paths—paths that feel fuzzy and sunny. Haiduk values clarity and darkness. To correct, here are a few things Yugoexport is not: it is not about ethically sourced products; nor socialist nostalgia; nor a proposal for anti-capitalist revolution; nor institutional critique; nor social practice. To quote one of Haiduk’s manifestos, it is not polite. This befits an artist who actively invokes Balkan heritage.

In a region that was violently subjugated by a series of dominant powers for centuries, the vanquished preserved their histories and memories in secret, through voices that passed stories across generations, person to person, in the darkness. She abides by the Serbian saying, “Hope is the greatest whore.”

These currents and others shape *Tableau Économique*, which fills adjacent areas within a gallery. The black-walled exterior contains a static arrangement—a tableau. The mirror-walled interior reflects myriad copies of any person in the space, echoing Yugoexport’s nature as an avatar. Within this sanctum, Yugoexport operates in either leisure or labor mode. In leisure mode, the space rests. In labor mode, living Sirens interact with visitors, conversing or

selling Yugoexport products using a flexible pricing system keyed to income level. Some visitors might pay to make copies of Yugoexport’s incorporation documents or other materials through a slow, intimate process of rubbing graphite across paper laid on engraved surfaces. Others might buy Borosana shoes and sign a contract to wear them only while working, to mark the separation between labor and leisure. (This also is true of the ICA staff: those who wished to participate were gifted a pair.) On either side of the transaction, Haiduk asks participants to take care as they interact with objects and each other. In either mode, a female voice regularly orates a list of Yugoexport products—the demon in this demonstration.

Along with the Yugoexport website (for Haiduk does not claim to exist outside the systems that she disrupts), the ICA is a distribution vector for Yugoexport, which we might think of as an economic virus spread in part by those who wear its products. Architectural theorist Sylvia Lavin uses the term “kissing architecture” to describe projects like Haiduk’s that bring a work of art into temporary contact with a building. Perhaps through Yugoexport’s kiss, the ICA becomes a host within which this virus replicates. Kissing requires one’s physical presence, which also is true for *Tableau Économique*. Like all Yugoexport demonstrations, it is to be experienced in person and may not be photographed.

Tableau Économique asks us to close our eyes to that flow of images and to reformulate our relationships with history, things, and each other—without ever forgetting that problem with hope. A detail clarifies the stakes. On the template used to produce Yugoexport wrapping paper, the phrase “how to surround yourself with things in the right way” repeats on a diagonal in English and Serbian. Except, that is, for a fragment nearly hidden in one corner, camouflaged amidst the rest: “I WANT MORE LIFE FUCKER.”

– Stephanie Smith, Chief Curator, ICA

In this installation threat models are rendered visible as cuts on seven photographic acrylic panels that line the perimeter of the installation and video. Each panel holds

Sym’s practice has been dedicated to locating Blackness as a foundational condition of U.S. culture. Prior work has focused on industries such as film, television, music, and literature, whose products are rich with the vernacular of Blackness even as they circulate beyond the societal bounds constraining Black people. Recently, Sym has been researching AI, an emergent technology that promises being and becoming beyond what we consider strictly human. Unlike entertainment media, AI products render Blackness nearly invisible, presenting Sym with a field dry of referent, a blank slate to fill with new postures and possibilities.

In *Shame Space*, one component of a multi-part project that emerges from this research, Sym layers telecommunications technology and AI with film, image, and text to develop an interactive environment that infuses Blackness into AI. Here and elsewhere, Sym examines modeling as a technique, process, and act—from its adaptation in the development of technology and machine learning to its socio-psychological implications. In the development of new technology, “threat modeling” is a method of testing and improving an application. Security analysts look for any vulnerabilities in their products, trying to see them as a hacker might, then attempt to safeguard those areas. In our society, Black women could be said to play a similar role, acting as the survivors and protectors of their families and communities, with full knowledge of the structural impositions they must endure. In this way, the state of constant threat, and the development of skills to evade such threat, are the preconditions for both advanced technology and Black womanhood.

As we increasingly look to our networked devices for dialogue, entertainment, and validation, our innermost desires are ever more susceptible to programming. Every day, we use wireless networks, social media platforms, and artificial intelligence (AI) to disseminate aspects of ourselves to the public. Martine Sym calls attention to the myriad constructions that influence our public images. As we perform success, Sym suggests, we reproduce the demands capitalism makes of us. Our desire to look and feel happy and healthy is routinely exploited by individuals, corporations, and governments. Our sense of the real, even our sense of ourselves, may be an artifice imposed for profit and control.

On Martine Sym’s *Shame Space*

fragmented phrases, questions, and symbols. Phrases such as “I’ve been avoidant,” “What do I owe him?,” “I have

body dysmorphia,” and others visualize internal fear, doubt, and shame. Sym’s examination of language as non-linear self-talk presents the viewer and user with models that are central to the construction of language in both advanced technology and psychology. The results are at times neurotic to the point of humor and reflect the anxious determination of one’s inner monologue.

At the core of this installation is the interactive video *Mythicbeing* (my thick being), inspired by Jennifer Karns Alexander’s *The Mantle of Efficiency: From Waterwheel to Social Control* in which she describes the machine’s heft as a physical manifestation of power, productivity and efficiency. Sym’s *Mythicbeing* is structured in two parts. The first features a male avatar performing a day in the life of a Los Angeles artist—a daily experience familiar to Sym’s. Morning, afternoon, evening: the character is seen in moments of mundanity—walking, reading, scrolling, masturbating—while wearing a shirt that reads “To hell with my suffering.”

The second component of *Mythicbeing* is a chatbot programmed to converse with viewers in the artist’s voice via text messages. Unlike conventional chatbots—designed to be agreeable, usually feminine, entities in service to the user—Sym’s bot is in service to no one. Instead, it interacts with users through language that conveys the perpetual state of Black consciousness under surveillance. Provocative rather than neutral, Sym’s bot communicates in comical, existential, and at times disagreeable prompts, such as “How do you cultivate joy?” and “Everyone is a piece of shit, right? As users converse with the chatbot, animations, images, and text bubbles appear across the four monitors, live-editing the narrative of *Shame Space*.

Color has been a key signifier in Sym’s work, often replacing the standard white of museum and gallery walls—a gesture that echoes Sym’s choice to replace the standard and supposedly neutral AI voice with a resolutely Black presence. The color purple specifically has appeared in Sym’s work as a reference to Alice Walker’s 1982 novel, and gives viewers cause to utter its title: *The Color Purple*. For Walker, deep shades of purple are signifiers of the power of Black women, but also of the pain they are made to endure. In *Shame Space*, however, the walls are painted orange and the windows and skylights covered with orange gels. The hue is known to construction workers as safety orange and to hunters as blaze orange. Here, it establishes a tension between the notion of “safe space” and Sym’s interest in the vulnerable nature of self-fashioning on

technological platforms. At the center of the room viewers will encounter an unrealized space—a semi-enclosed aluminum structure filled with installation detritus: crates, visible hardware, and miscellaneous debris. Sym has preserved these materials as a metaphor for the neuroses and labor most often omitted from our constructed personas. The poet and scholar Fred Moten describes our relationship to the mess:

“Revolution or anti-colonialism, as [Frantz] Fanon says, is a program of total disorder, and museums and academic institutions clean up messes...The history of the modern subject, as codified by [Immanuel] Kant, is about the cleaning up of the mess. It’s about the eradication swarm, and of fuzz and buzziness...And politics is meant to regulate that. But what if this got to be a mess that the Museum chose to present rather than clean up?”

If the modern subject is constructed by the eradication of the unrealized and our contemporary condition is predicated on the mass dissemination of the idealized, can *Shame Space* be seen as an alternative to our contemporary condition? A speculative proposal that engenders visual representations of vulnerability and failure? An alternative to the dehumanizing behaviors to which we are wedded? What is certain is that *Shame Space* presents viewers with a model for examining how under-representation can be explored through art and technology and, by doing so, Sym challenges the illusory promise that technology is both a mechanism for freedom and a platform to reflect diverse conditions.

Shame Space is the third iteration of Sym’s exploration into artificial intelligence and its relationship to constructed representations and imposed gestures. This installation follows two solo exhibitions, *Grande Calme* at Sadie Coles HQ, London, and *Big Surprise* at Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York, in which Sym explored the psycho-technological consequences of modeled behavior on the shifting boundaries of public and private spaces.

– Amber Esseiva, Assistant Curator, ICA

¹*The Weight of Words: Legacies and Futures, A Conversation between Johanna Burton, Lia Gangitano, Ariel Goldberg, Jack Halberstam, Fred Moten, and Eric A. Stanley, New York: New Museum, 2017. Published in the exhibition catalog for Trigger Gender As A Tool and A Weapon, September 27, 2017–January 21, 2018.*

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Works:

Martine Syms, Shame Space, 2019. Interactive video installation including photographic-printed acrylic with CNC cuts, LED displays, vinyl, aluminum, gaming computers, and miscellaneous installation waste.

Irena Haiduk, Tableau Économique, 2019. Yugoexporteconomy at the Institute of Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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