CATALOGUE ESSAY

Martine Syms: Neural Swamp

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A World of Screens

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I'm going to assume you're reading this text from a book—a book that you hold with your hands, that has pages you turn with your fingers and words you read with your eyes. These are the same hands that grasp and cling, the same fingers that scroll and swipe, the same eyes that magnify and mirror our inner and outer worlds. This is the flesh behind our screens.

Martine Syms's *Neural Swamp* is a new multichannel video work and immersive installation created on occasion of the second iteration of the Future Fields Commission in Time-Based Media, a shared initiative of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Turin. Had this commission premiered in the fall of 2020, as originally intended, this essay may have been written differently. But today, Syms's work and its relationship to technology have newfound resonance. The development of this commission, like much of life over the last eighteen months, was a process that unfolded over—and on—screens. Through the conditions of an ongoing global pandemic, our dependence on screens for work, pleasure, and protest has become greater than ever.

Yet Syms's interest in our machines and screens predates the current moment. For Syms, the screen is as much a platform for ecstasy and escape as it is a space of surveillance and capture. Mining the full spectrum of the digital—from police cameras to animated GIFs to TV commercials—her work is concerned with the politics of images and the technologies that allow for their production and consumption. With an approach rooted in the ideologies of Afrofuturism and Cyberfeminism, Syms uses algorithms and avatars to question the ways in which Blackness and gender are constructed and stereotyped—both on- and off-screen.[1] Blurring the lines between humor and horror, hers is a process of production, performance, and play.

Neural Swamp was originally conceived as a table read of a screenplay with three actors, each represented on their own individual video monitors. The plot for the script is seemingly mundane. Two people making plans to meet: At whose house? At what time? Who will bring the wine? Through their dialogue, we meet Athena, a professional golfer facing the decline of her career and her assistant and friend Dee. We also come to know a third character named Jenny, an unpictured narrator who chronicles the off-screen gestures and inner monologues that would otherwise remain unseen. In the process of making their plans, Athena and Dee model the ubiquities of everyday life—from cleaning to watching TV to sending the perfect emoji. As in any rehearsal, with its stops and starts, words repeat and scenes return in strange loops.

But how do we distinguish between rehearsal and the performance, between practice and the game? Do such distinctions even exist?

In her 2017 film *Incense Sweaters & Ice*, Syms documents the ways in which the three protagonists—Mrs. Queen Esther Bernetta White, Girl, and WB ("white boy")—grapple with the daily conditions of looking, being looked at, and going unnoticed (fig. AS1). This project marked an early investigation into what Syms terms "real-time cinema" – the idea that anything anyone does while being watched is a performance.[2] In essence, to be seen is to perform.[3] Such a concept builds upon notions of "expanded cinema" first theorized by the media philosopher Gene Youngblood in 1970, a period marked by the increased public access to platforms like radio, broadcast television, and portable video recorders.[4] Although the history of art and technology is expansive, Syms's work operates within a specific lineage that includes artists like Adrian Piper, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Ulysses Jenkins, and Shu Lea Cheang, whose works bring together performative practice, popular culture, and avant-garde technologies to challenge gender and racial stereotypes and to question what it means to be human in an increasingly digitized world.

Consider the staging that goes into even simple video conference calls. Before logging on, the system asks you to preview your screen. In this virtual green room, you fix your hair, adjust your camera, and stage your background. Then suddenly your coworker is in your bedroom/office, this person who, if it weren't for the screens between you, might otherwise never enter the privacy of your home. When the call ends, you return the small piece of tape that covers the computer camera to its proper place, reinforcing an illusion of protection and control. But surveillance, too, is a form of real-time cinema, and the permission to capture is not always consensual.[5] As attested by pop-up ads and social media algorithms, the data of daily life is regularly being collected, mined, and repurposed as product. In *Neural Swamp*, Syms engages with this constant state of seizure, using technology and manipulating its interfaces to reveal the flesh and the mess on the other side of the screen.

In the installation, Athena, Dee, and Jenny are each represented by their own monitors. The actors were filmed using a SnorriCam, a body-mounted camera made famous by its use in iconic films such as the psychological thriller *Requiem for a Dream* (which, not coincidentally, features a character whose TV addiction ultimately leads to her demise; fig. AS2). Mimicking the visual and sometimes dizzying effects of a FaceTime call, Syms strapped the cameras onto the actors, allowing them to direct and document the ways in which they see and are seen.

This use of the SnorriCam directly reflects Syms's interest in the racialized and gendered relationships we have to the body, to memory, and to our machines. She elaborates: "Human as a category was not extended to Black people until very recently. And so some of my initial interest in technology is thinking about how Black women were almost . . . a kind of technology."[6] As a foil to this cyborg-state, Athena and Dee quite literally become technology, illustrating the ways in which our digital devices are at work on our bodies by embodying the very machines in and on which we craft and broadcast our identities.[7]

Today, our devices and digital avatars function like extensions of ourselves. And how we interact with them—each swipe, click, and tap—is a designed process that alters our attitudes and behaviors both online and when we're away from the keyboard.[8] In the making of *Neural Swamp*, as part of her investigations into movement and machines, Syms studied her own body as she trained in athletic activities like soccer and dance, both of which she participated in as a child. Through muscle memory, she returned to these physical activities with ease, leading her to question what new muscle memories are being formed through our daily use of technology. How are these interactions surveying and conditioning our everyday lives?[9]

Beginning in the early 2000s, the term "phantom vibration syndrome" was coined to refer to the pings and rings that haunt us even when we're away from our phones. Our perception of these vibrations and tones has become embedded into our aural memory like some sort of prosthetic, suggesting screens as another type of skin. Expanding on what the cultural historian Alison Landsberg terms "prosthetic memory," Syms's work reminds us that these skins are not always our own.[10]

In the lexicon of computer technology, the term *deepfake* is used to reference AI-generated videos of people saying and doing things they never actually said or did. Such videos were first popularized in the pornography industry—typically through swapping the faces of well-known actors onto the bodies of porn stars—and are increasingly influential today as tools of political propaganda (fig. AS3).[11] With a deepfake you can quite literally put words into someone's mouth. For Syms, the voice is a "fingerprint of the body,"[12] and her work explores the extent to which that fingerprint can be faked. In the production of *Neural Swamp*, the voices of the three protagonists were captured separately from the filming of the bodies that those voices occupy on-screen. Using expressive AI technology Syms created "voice skins," composed of various audio samples scraped and stitched together from the internet like a digital ready-made. As

part of its "training," the machine voice learned the cadence and inflections of its character—Athena's more brash, Dee's more submissive, and Jenny's more monotone. Further exploring the human possibilities of the machine, the dialogue between these characters is also constructed in real time using a text-generating algorithm. The result is a glitch between the faces that we see, the voices that we hear, and the words that they say – a dissonant effect that echoes the ways in which our digital devices, which hold such promise for connection, have become mediums for distraction and dislocation.

On the screens, footage of the characters is interspersed with scenes of digital golf simulations, a direct reference to Athena's former life as a professional athlete – a lifestyle in which, for Black athletes in particular, to perform is also to be policed for perfection. Sports, like screens, are platforms where greatness and entertainment are demanded, often to the point of exhaustion and exploitation. As Christina Sharpe documents in this publication through her essay "Staying in It" (pp. 000–000), there are numerous examples of Black female athletes who have received criticism not only for refusing to meet capitalist expectations of progress but also for their very excellence. Nevertheless, they persevere. "After all," to quote the poet and cultural critic Hanif Abdurraqib, "what is endurance to a people who have already endured?"[13]

Such a relationship to sports is further emphasized by the bright green environment of the *Neural Swamp* installation, which was designed to resemble a golf course-cum-stage set (fig. AS4). Color has always played an important role in Syms's work, and the green here functions on more than one level. In filmmaking, similar to a deepfake, a green screen is used as a post-production effect that allows actors to inhabit places they never visited and encounter people they never met. It is cinema's own smoke and mirrors. In *Neural Swamp* the stage set becomes the stage as the entirety of the installation, from the hardware to the floor to the walls, takes on this transmutable green.[14]

As if holding a funhouse mirror to the flesh behind our screens, Syms's *Neural Swamp* both reflects and refracts our everyday rehearsals and refusals. It is a reminder that, like the artwork itself, we, too, are constantly in a process of performance and production. And in our world full of screens, from sex drives to hard drives, you fake it till you make it.

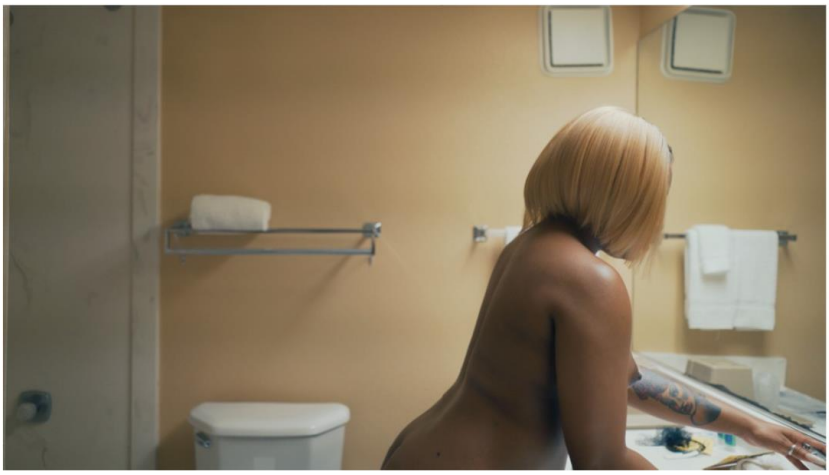

Fig. AS1. Martine Syms (American, b. 1988). *Incense Sweaters & Ice* (still), 2017. Video (color, sound; duration 69 minutes. © Martine Syms, courtesy of the artist; Bridget Donahue, New York; and Sadie Coles HQ, London

Fig. AS2. Actress Jennifer Connelly with a SnorriCam, 2000. From "Close-up: Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream*," Vimeo, September 27, 2018

Fig. AS3. Jordan Peele (American, b. 1979) and Jonah Peretti (American, b. 1974). "Obama Deepfake," 2018. From "You Won't Believe What Obama Says in This Video!," April 17, 2018, BuzzFeedVideo on YouTube, April 17, 2018

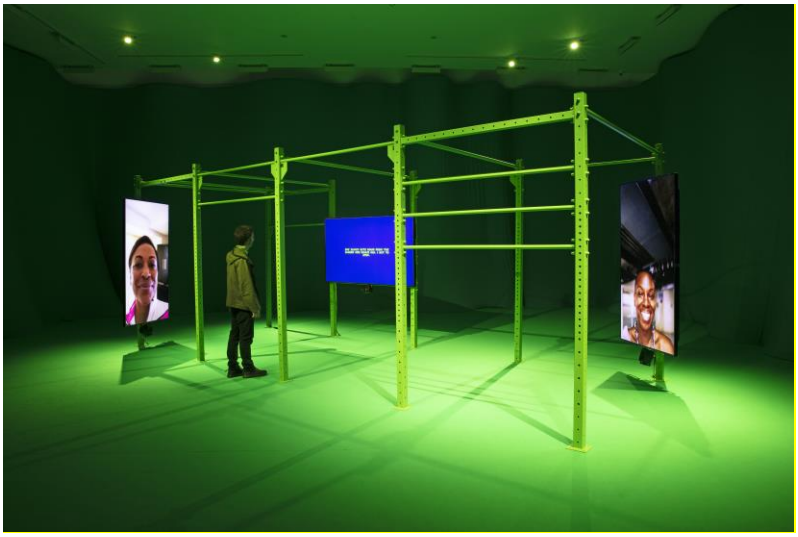

Fig. AS4. Martine Syms. *Neural Swamp*, installation at the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, Italy, November 2021. © Martine Syms

[1] Elaborating on the meaning behind the multifarious artistic approach that Black artists like Syms have embraced, Katherine McKittrick writes that "black people have always used interdisciplinary methodologies to explain, explore, and story the world, because thinking and writing and imagining across a range of texts, disciplines, histories, and genres unsettles suffocating and dismal and insular racial logics. By employing interdisciplinary methodologies and living interdisciplinary worlds, black people bring together various sources and texts and narratives to challenge

racism. Or, black people bring together various sources and texts and narratives not to capture something or someone, but to question the analytical work of capturing, and the desire to capture, something or someone." McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 4.

[2] Martine Syms, "Episode Two: (In)Visibility," *Mirror with a Memory* podcast, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, February 8, 2021 (4:03), cmoa.org/art/hillman-photography-initiative/mirror-with-a-memory/podcast/.

[3] "The relation to the self, the relation to the world, the relation to the other: all are constituted through a *reversibility* of seeing and being seen, perceiving and being perceived." Amelia Jones, *Body Art / Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 41.

[4] See Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: Dutton, 1970).

[5] We each have a distinct relationship to this performance—to the production and distributions of our worlds. See David Robbins's *High Entertainment* project, davidrobbinsartist.com/high-entertainment/.

[6] Syms, in Annie Armstrong, "Smarter Child," *Garage Magazine* 19 (October 30, 2020), garage.vice.com/en_us/article/epd47p/smarter-child.

[7] In this way, Syms's work harkens back to notions of the cyborg first introduced by Donna Harraway in her 1985 "A Cyborg Manifesto," written at the height of the Reagan era and in the final years of the Cold War (first published in the *Socialist Review*, Harraway's essay was reprinted six years later in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* [New York; Routledge, 1991], 149–81). Harraway's cyborg served as a tool to investigate and trouble traditional notions of gendered and racialized bodies. Part-human, part-animal, part-machine, the cyborg merged the technological and the biological and represented a kaleidoscopic interrogation that addressed feminist studies and post-humanist theory. Harraway's writing has since been built upon, questioned, and problematized by scholars and artists, including Harraway herself and, most recently, Legacy Russell in *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (New York: Verso Books, 2021).

[8] The iPhone swipe was patented in 2010. AFK (away from the keyboard) as opposed to IRL (in real life) is used throughout Russell's *Glitch Feminism.*

[9] Syms explains, "I was doing all this work about movement, looking at vernacular movements, like gesture and body language and the more psychological side of movement. Someone suggested I think about dance, so I started going to this dance class. In childhood I did ballet for many years, with my best friend who went on to join a dance company. As I started to reinvestigate dance in my own body, I realized how much these movements and the muscle memory had shaped and conditioned me. When I started playing soccer again, the feeling was crazy, like, I *know* how to do this thing. These experiences are just so ingrained in your body." See Steffani Jemison, "Martine Syms," *BOMB Magazine*, November 13, 2020, bombmagazine.org/articles/martine-syms/.

[10] In her book *Prosthetic Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), Alison Landsberg elaborates on the idea of "prosthetic memory" as a way to think expansively about identity as it relates to a sense of memory and time not rooted in lived experience but instead in a shared social familiarity with cultural texts, such as films and books, but also GIFs, Vine videos, and memes.

[11] David Mack, "This PSA about Fake News from Barack Obama Is Not What It Appears," *BuzzFeed News*, April 17, 2018, www.buzzfeednews.com/article/davidmack/obama-fake-news-jordan-peele-psa-video-buzzfeed.

[12] Martine Syms, in a Zoom call with the authors on April 6, 2021.

[13] Writing about Black performance in *Little Devil in America*, Abdurraqib elaborates: "What is it to someone who could, at that point, still touch the living hands of a family member who had survived being born into forced labor? Endurance, for some, was seeing what the dance floor could handle. It did not come down to the limits of the body

when pushed toward an impossible feat of linear time. No. It was about having a powerful enough relationship with freedom that you understand its limitations." Abdurraqib, *Little Devil in America: In Praise of Black Performance* (New York: Random House, 2021), 9.

[14] One of the first examples of the use of a green screen in cinema (which at the time was not green but black) was in the 1933 horror movie *The Invisible Man*, based on the science-fiction novel of the same name by H. G. Wells.