

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 Markel 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 (where corporations are people, and Yugoexport is a she), launched in Paris, and headquartered in Belgrade, she is a copy or an avatar of Jugoeksport, 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 “économique” invokes the French meaning “table,” in the sense of a chart. “Économique” 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 Jugoeksport. 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 the ICA’s galleries. The black-walled exterior is occupied by 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 or replicant. Within this sanctum, Yugoexport operates in either leisure or labor mode. Here, at regular hours each day that the ICA is open, living Sirens interact with visitors, either in conversation or, if the visitor self-identifies their income level, as part of a transaction to purchase Yugoexport products through a flexible pricing system. Those who buy Borosana shoes will sign a contract agreeing only to wear them 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.) In leisure mode, the space rests. In either mode, the voice of a Siren 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

irena haiduk

dialoques

martine symms

dialogues

For this annual series, two curators invite two artists to activate the distinctive “V” shape of the second floor galleries. As the name implies, a conversation through and about distinct artistic visions unfolds in this space. Each artist creates an independent project, and visitors are encouraged to consider overlap, resonance, and difference between their practices.

For this inaugural installment, artists Irena Haiduk and Martine Syms present new works developed for the ICA. Both are committed to ongoing research-based projects that reshape familiar entities, such as the corporation or the personal digital assistant, into complex works of art. These multi-disciplinary projects are not merely representations of those things, but are the things themselves: a corporation founded by Haiduk and a chatbot coded by Syms. Marked by each artist’s visual style and conceptual approach, these projects inhabit the Markel Center as interactive platforms that invite participation.

By reinventing familiar commercial and technological forms, the artists offer calls to action. They ask us to rethink our relationships to things and to others, and to shift how we engage with dominant structures. Each of their presentations at the ICA is a chapter within a larger work that will continue to evolve over time.

Dialogues: Irena Haiduk + Martine Syms is organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and co-curated by Chief Curator Stephanie Smith (Haiduk) and Assistant Curator Amber Esseiva (Syms).

Irena Haiduk’s *Tableau Économique* is commissioned by the ICA, with additional support from Kavi Gupta, Chicago. Special thanks to Anna Shteynshleyger and Paul Smith.

Martine Syms’s *Shame Space* is supported by the ICA, with additional support from Bridget Donahue Gallery, New York; Sadie Coles HQ, London; and the Technology Residency at Pioneer Works, Brooklyn. Special thanks to Rocket Caeshu, John O’Doherty, Gabbi Ncube, Stevan Bell-Nixon, Tyler Adams, and Tommy Martinez.



VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

icavcu.org

martine syms

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 Syms calls attention to the myriad constructions that influence our public images. As we perform success, Syms 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.

Syms’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, Syms 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 Syms 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, Syms layers telecommunications technology and AI with film, image, and text to develop an interactive environment that infuses Blackness into AI. Here and elsewhere, Syms 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.

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 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. Syms’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 Mantra of Efficiency: From Waterwheel to Social Control* in which she describes the machine’s heft as a physical manifestation of power, productivity, and efficiency. Syms’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 Syms’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—Syms’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, Syms’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 Syms’s work, often replacing the standard white of museum and gallery walls—a gesture that echoes Syms’s choice to replace the standard and supposedly neutral AI voice with a resolutely Black presence. The color purple specifically has appeared in Syms’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 Syms’s interest in the vulnerable nature of self-fashioning on technological platforms. At the center of the room viewers will encounter an unidealized space—a semi-enclosed aluminum structure filled with installation detritus: crates, visible hardware, and miscellaneous debris. Syms 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?”¹

If the modern subject is constructed by the eradication of the unidealized 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, Syms 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 Syms’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 Syms 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.