

Martine Syms's New Book Is an Irreverent Performance of Contemporary Living

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In *Shame Space*, the narrator obsesses over sex, money, fitness, drugs, friends, work, and self-hatred.

by Allison Conner

Swiss psychologist Carl Jung regarded the shadow as an integral part of the psyche, arguing that it expressed our unconscious, containing the irrational traits and opaque impulses banished by the easily bruised ego. *Shame Space*, the new artist book by Martine Syms, published by Primary Information, brings these shadows into the light, suspending the reader in a free-for-all narrative where the self is made, destroyed, and remade. Designed to resemble a flaming red Bible, the book boasts an embossed leather-texture cover and pages lined with golden edges, a nod to the gleeful overlap of the sacred and profane.

The first half of the book presents a loose narrative in the form of diary entries from 2015 to 2017, which were sourced from Syms's own journals during that period. Divided into 15 chapters, the narrator obsesses over sex, money, fitness, drugs, friends, work, and self-hatred. "I feel stupid writing this shit down, but I have to get it out," she reveals before cataloguing career highs and personal quagmires. The cadence of her words invokes our digital-mediated world, reminding me of catty lines from a juicy group text thread or excerpts from an earnest social media post.



Spread from *Shame Space* by Martine Syms

The confessional, wry text appears alongside a rush of images from Syms's recent video installation, *Ugly Plymouths* (2020). The grainy stills show tropical getaways, club excursions, live music footage, soccer games, and selfies of Syms sporting cherry-red box braids and various weaves. Upon first read, it may seem as if we have been granted unfettered access to her roving thoughts and moods. Who doesn't want to be privy to the private desires and fears of an ambitious, jet-setting artist and thinker? But the mysteries of *Shame Space* expand when you approach the book less as an exercise in autobiography and more as an irreverent performance of contemporary living.

The text entries stretch into the fictive — they have been used as the voiceover for *Mythicbeing*, a wayward character that manifests across a number of Syms's exhibitions, including a 2019 interactive installation that shares the same name as the book. Pronounced “my thick being,” the digital avatar signals a sensuous excessiveness. Described by the artist as a “black, upwardly mobile, violent, solipsistic, sociopathic, gender neutral femme,” Mythicbeing is conceived as an AI-run amok, a bratty Siri who ignores your requests because they need to unpack their own bouts of depression and suicidal ideation. Or one who interrupts your doomscrolling to gossip about their latest fling: “Aside from their dumb girlfriend and the kid, what a catch.” Mythicbeing performs Syms's unruly shadow self, foregrounding how entangled our unconscious impulses are with the apps we depend on.



Spread from *Shame Space* by Martine Syms

Syms is interested in the ways our vulnerabilities are mapped onto the technologies that structure our interactions and conceptions of self. We want to believe these structures are separate from us, but *Shame Space* playfully explores what happens when we treat technology as a mirror instead of an obedient servant or mutinous threat. *Shame Space* collects what we repress and reject about ourselves in an attempt to understand what it means “to be at [your] worst.”

Shame Space by Martine Syms, published by Primary Information, is now available on [Bookshop](#).



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Allison Conner's writing has appeared in Bitch, Full Stop, Triangle House Review, and elsewhere. She writes about movies and books at loosepleasures.substack.com