Martine Syms's Shame Space

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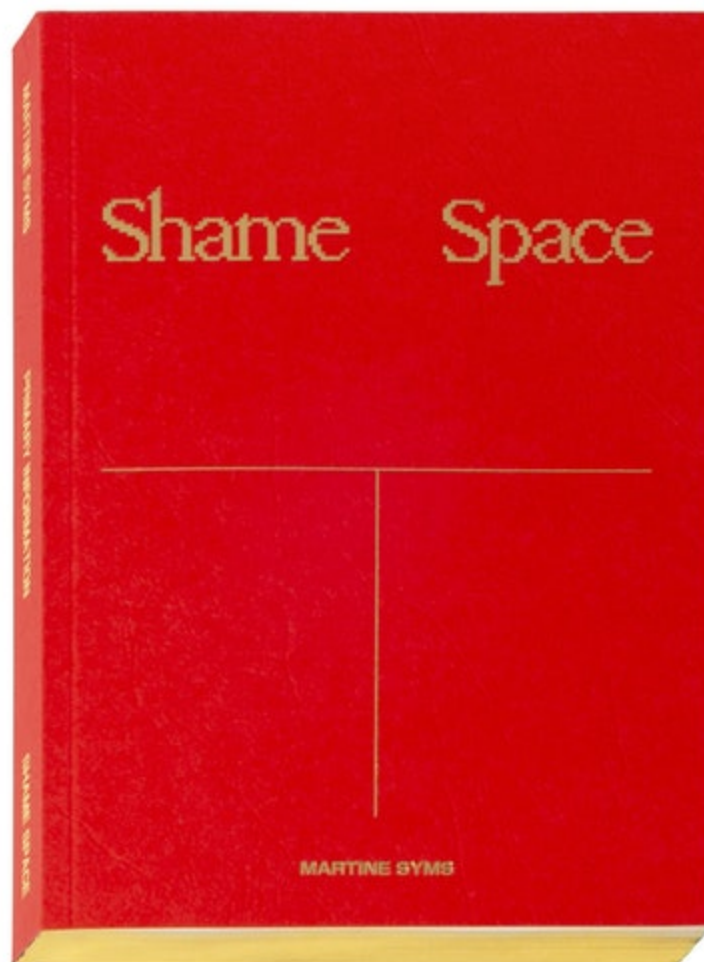
Megan N. Liberty   February 2, 2021

<u>Art Books</u>

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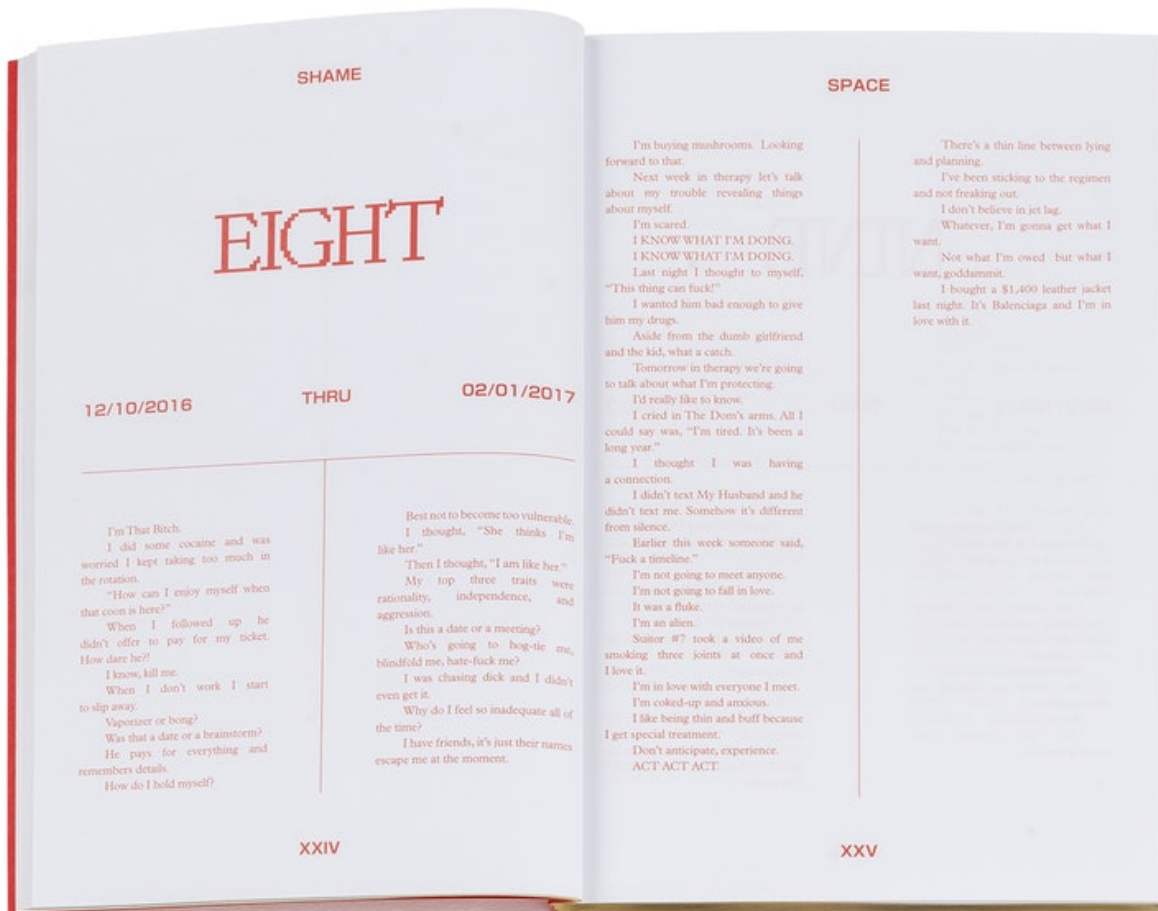

Martine Syms
Shame Space
(Primary Information, 2020)

We live in a state of endless scrolling, a series of seemingly stream-of-consciousness feeds: news, email, Twitter, Instagram, blurring the line between our daily and digital lives. For many, this feed, this constant refresh, is experienced primarily through our mobile phones, which act as an extension of ourselves, keeping us constantly connected to friends and global events. These devices remain intimately close to us, often taken into our beds and the bathroom, clutched in our hands they witness and catalogue our most private moments, selectively broadcasting them to the world. Martine Syms makes her material this digital influx, trafficking in the visual and textual overload of contemporary communication. Her video and performance work employs formal strategies of autofiction, collage, and the blending of image and text to explore digital image culture and how we perform and maintain a digital (and as a consequence, physical) self. Often with interactive components—inviting viewers to text or call a phone number, or to converse with chatbots—image and text collide, sharing temporal and visual space in chaotic layered ways with popup windows and short video clips. While Syms's videos reflect the pace and flux of digital life, her publications offer a moment to slow down and move at one's own pace.

Syms's newest book, *Shame Space*, a small red softcover with gold edging that references the design of pocket bibles, slows the speed of internet saturation by separating text and image into two distinct components. The first is a series of 15 dated chapters with lines of diaristic text printed in columns of red text. These lines of text often begin with "I," giving them a confessional tone; but the short lines and non sequitur flow reads more like a glimpse into phone notes than journal entries. The second half of the book is a series of full bleed, grainy, awkwardly cropped photographs including selfies of the artist drinking wine or smoking, concert snapshots, and palm trees and oceanscapes, also not clearly connected, like a "phone dump" of images. Together, the two distinct sections share a sense of digital stream-of-consciousness, sliced from the space of our most private and public device.

SHAME

SPACE

EIGHT

12/10/2016   THRU   02/01/2017

I'm That Bitch.
I did some cocaine and was worried I kept taking too much in the rotation.
"How can I enjoy myself when that coon is here?"
When I followed up he didn't offer to pay for my ticket. How dare he?!
I know, kill me.
When I don't work I start to slip away.
Vaporizer or bong?
Was that a date or a brainstorm?
He pays for everything and remembers details.
How do I hold myself?

Best not to become too vulnerable. I thought, "She thinks I'm like her."
Then I thought, "I am like her."
My top three traits were rationality, independence, and aggression.
Is this a date or a meeting?
Who's going to hog-tie me, blindfold me, hate-fuck me?
I was chasing dick and I didn't even get it.
Why do I feel so inadequate all of the time?
I have friends, it's just their names escape me at the moment.

I'm buying mushrooms. Looking forward to that.
Next week in therapy let's talk about my trouble revealing things about myself.
I'm scared.
I KNOW WHAT I'M DOING.
I KNOW WHAT I'M DOING.
Last night I thought to myself, "This thing can fuck!"
I wanted him bad enough to give him my drugs.
Aside from the dumb girlfriend and the kid, what a catch.
Tomorrow in therapy we're going to talk about what I'm protecting.
I'd really like to know.
I cried in The Dom's arms. All I could say was, "I'm tired. It's been a long year."
I thought I was having a connection.
I didn't text My Husband and he didn't text me. Somehow it's different from silence.
Earlier this week someone said, "Fuck a timeline."
I'm not going to meet anyone.
I'm not going to fall in love.
It was a fluke.
I'm an alien.
Suitor #7 took a video of me smoking three joints at once and I love it.
I'm in love with everyone I meet.
I'm coked-up and anxious.
I like being thin and buff because I get special treatment.
Don't anticipate, experience.
ACT ACT ACT.

There's a thin line between lying and planning.
I've been sticking to the regimen and not freaking out.
I don't believe in jet lag.
Whatever, I'm gonna get what I want.
Not what I'm owed but what I want, goddammit.
I bought a $1,400 leather jacket last night. It's Balenciaga and I'm in love with it.

XXIV

XXV

Syms's work mines selfhood, particularly the parameters, assumptions, and expectations around it such as Blackness ("I hate pretty people like I hate white people. They just don't know what life is like for the rest of us."), queerness ("Can I be queer and never date a woman?"), and gender ("He was pushing back on the idea that men request more emotional labor than they give. He not-all-men'd me. I'm really starting to hate men. YES, ALL MEN."). Syms wrote the text over a period of three years in an effort to "push biography towards fiction," she explained in an the audio guide for her installation at ICA Virginia Commonwealth University titled "Shame Space." Before being published in book form, the text was originally used to generate the script for Syms's digital avatar *Mythiccbeing* (pronounced "my thick being"), a "gender-neutral femme" interactive chatbot who is voiced with the artist's pre-recorded readings of excerpts from this text. The title of the work echoes Adrian Piper's '70s performance project *Mythic Being*, which had many iterations including one in which Piper walked down the streets of New York City dressed as her male alter ego reciting lines from her own journal. In both these works, the private is made public, but through specific selected gestures that are mediated by a gender-fluid alter ego, disrupting

expectations and highlighting the ways we intentionally perform our identity. Whereas Piper's project tackled the public of the street, Syms's *Shame Space* tackles the public of the internet.

The images in the second half of the book also appear in a previous work, her three-channel video *Ugly Plymouths* (2020), in which the pictures flash across screens with voice over audio of casual conversations and greetings, similar, but less diaristic, to the text in *Shame Space*. In the book, we are able to flip through them at will, and spend time on some while skipping over others at our leisure. But the pace remains fast, with the cropped edges, there is a constant sense that we are missing something, unable to see the whole picture, we continue to flip in the hopes of gathering more information about the scene, only to be confronted by something completely unrelated. There is a poetic flow, references repeat: a selfie of the artist leads to an image of hands holding up a phone to take a photo (both the photographer and the subject are not shown), palm trees towering over the ocean appear throughout, as do the interiors of cars (Syms is from Los Angeles, a city where much time is spent inside cars) and scenes from stadium sports. Appearing simultaneously on three-channel screens, these images overwhelm and blur together. But in the book, we can only consume one two-page at a time, and we have the luxury to flip back and forth and make visual connections (yes, it is the same image of a palm tree from two pages earlier but no, the figure swimming in the water has moved a few paces since the last photograph).

In the audio guide for *Shame Space* at ICA Virginia Commonwealth University, which included *Mythiccbeing*, Syms explained:

> If I could use other people's diaries I would but I just don't have access to them so, I think more shame than me feeling oh, I feel really vulnerable and strong doing this. It's more like I feel like totally ashamed about doing it, but I also feel that way sometimes about just making art in general.

At one point in the text, Syms writes, "What a lovesick little puppy. I feel stupid writing this shit down, but I have to get it out and I don't want to bore anyone." Digital culture encourages us to "get it out," to create and share content, and yet there is a shame to it, a performance of the private in public. Are we ashamed of what we share or our need to share? If everyone shares, are we even ashamed at all? Or is shame another layer of performance, a forced humility? But what if instead of moving onto the next thing, the next page, the next click, the next headline, we dwelled on and spent time contemplating what we shared? The

content of *Shame Space* is about the privately performed self made public, but the format—the book—disrupts the speed and consumption of that self and, in turn, the selves presented by others.