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Misdirected Kiss by Martine Syms

Tonight I'm just gonna talk through some ideas that I've been thinking a lot about and working with Gordon for the last couple months, planning this but also just as friends, and kind of in response, actually, to something [they had] written last year, or so.

There's two pictures in my studio that I look at all the time. One is a headshot of Queen Latifah from *Living Single*, the 90's sitcom. Maybe you've heard of it. She's a 90's kind of girl. Well, it's a 90's kind of world; she'd be nothing without her girls. It's an old headshot, before the show was actually called *Living Single*, so it says "My Girls" under it, and it's to the right of my computer. The other photo I have is a found photo of a girl who's maybe seven years old on very large computers, probably taken in '91, '92. My friend gave me the photo and said, "this is you." I spend a lot of time looking at pictures of women, trying to learn something about them, trying to learn something about myself. Usually these are found, a lot of the ones I'm pulling are found. At a flea market in Los Angeles there's a stand, a guy who sells found photographs, and every single day people ask him—he sells once a week there, but—so that people are always asking him "why would anyone want an old photograph?" And they're really disturbed by this idea that strangers take home people's photographs, and I'm one of those strangers that's always taking these found photographs.

I think about it as a, a term I like to use is called "prosthetic memory." It's by a theorist Alison Landsberg, and she talks a lot about this idea that now that there's so many images and videos and things that we can access, we can have memories that aren't our own.

More recently, I've been looking at a lot of photos of my aunt. My aunt was born in Mississippi, then she moved to St. Louis, and then she moved to Los Angeles in the 60's and her house was kind of the center of our family. Most of my extended family lives in St. Louis, but my dad moved out to live with this aunt. Her name is Burnetta, we always called her Bunt. This is her in front of the garage. And she died when I was about fourteen or fifteen, and growing up with her, we didn't have a great relationship, she was always just in the kitchen drinking High Life's and kind of telling me how I should be—how I should stand, how I should dress, how I should talk. But recently, my dad sold her house and I've been taking things from it and trying to get to know her better through her photographs. It sort of got me thinking about—can

you really know anything through a photograph?

That's her.

There's a James Taylor song from 1968 called "Something in the Way She Moves." The song begins with the invocation of movement, we should be able to hear it—

["Something in the Way She Moves" plays for 25 seconds]

George Harrison from the Beatles loved this song, and he stole Taylor's opening line for the Beatles song from 1969, "Something."

["Something" plays for 40 seconds]

There are two other films that share a similar premise. There's a movie, that was a VH1 made-for-TV movie that came out in 2001, it's called *The Way She Moves*. And *The Way She Moves* is a modern love story set in the world of salsa dancing. There's another movie, which is my preferred one, called *How She Move*. It's from 2007, it's a Canadian teen movie. [Laughs] I actually really like this movie, I saw it in theaters. And *How She Move* is about a 'gifted young woman who defies all the rules as she step dances her heart out to achieve her dreams.' I like to pretend that all these shes, the subject of the work, the she that's moving is the same in each object or artwork. There's a million more songs, there's actually a ton of rap songs about "how she move," and what I was interested in about it was that each time "she's" mentioned, language kind of gets compressed. "There's Something in the Way She Moves," "Something in the Way She Moves," "The Way She Moves," "How She Move." And somehow I've been thinking about this "she" in relation to my aunt. How *she* moved, how she sort of moved through the country, how she sort of moved through the house, and how she sort of moved through me, in a way.

Fred Moten who was also mentioned a minute ago, I went to a talk of his last summer for a screening, and he was talking about the idea that—the film was an Arthur Jafa film, *Dreams Are Colder Than Death*—and in the film there's an asynchronous sound to the video, and it's because AJ said that he thought that black subjects having a camera on them, that the camera would be a proxy for a white male gaze, and how they were much different when he just recorded the audio and then filmed them separately. And Moten said he thought this was because capturing black subjects has a metaphoric relationship to the sort of capture of motion, and it is related to a kind of fugitive modality. And one thing he also said was that race is bodily.

Jacqueline Stewart, she's a film critic, or a film theorist I guess is a better word, scholar, based in Chicago, she also sort of talks about this. A lot of her work is about the transition between the cinema of attractions and kind of narrative cinema, and how that transformation, the kind of formation of early cinema parallels with the kind of great migration in the United States. The Great Migration was 1915 to 1917 and that roughly matches these cinematic developments. And Stewart's work is all about these kind of films that were in-between that time. This is an early one, *Laughing Gas*, this was from 1907. She looks at this migration of blacks onto screen as they're also migrating into cities and into audiences and behind the camera as well. And one thing about this subgenre, which she calls "Misdirected Kiss," and it's called "Misdirected Kiss" because there were all these films where somebody accidentally kisses a black woman, 'cause that would be gross, you know, at that time. But there's all of these figures who are sort of, these women specifically, who are usually alone and they're freely navigating the city in a way that really didn't fit into a kind of minstrel or vaudeville type of subjectivity. So *Laughing Gas* is about a woman who has a toothache and who goes to the dentist, and after she gets gassed, she starts gesturing madly and is kind of moving through the city and she's transgressing all of these social rules as she does this, and this was a really rare thing, it's also probably, it's still fairly rare for movies to feature this kind of subjectivity.

And I started thinking about this work in relation to also Agamben's ideas of gesture, and especially its relationship to film, and this idea that he kind of centers cinema around politics because of movement specifically. I think a lot about movement, especially how I move or how I'm sort of coming across to someone, because there's always this threat of being filmed. I'm being filmed right now. Probably by more than one camera. So I think I'm constantly thinking about the

way I appear on screen. And how I'm appearing in person. (This is another video I forgot to play – we can make this one small.)

And because of this sort of tyranny of potential images, I'm constantly thinking "How am I coming across?" "How can I look better for the camera?" "How can I create a sort of persona purely through these on-screen things?" And sort of thinking about both learning how to move through film, because in "Notes on Gesture," Agamben's essay, he talks about the way that people move on screen sort of being tied to the way that they're being forced to move in restricted ways.

So, also around the time actually that my aunt died, I hadn't thought about that, I went to this camp. It's called "T-Zone," it was started by Tyra Banks, supermodel, [laughs] and basically it was all girls, I wanna say thirteen to eighteen, and it was sort of a boot camp about body politics. It was a precursor to America's Next Top Model, I would say, though not intentionally so. What we did at T-Zone was mostly these ropes courses during the day—if you're not familiar, ropes courses is kind of like rock climbing or, you have to climb up a fifty-foot pole and jump off of it. You have a bungee on so you're Ok, and you do trust falls and things like that. Also at T-Zone we all had to take nicknames, my nickname was Buttercup, Tyra's was BBQ, and in the evening she would do—because she loved barbeque, that's what she said—and she was very present, and in the evening she would give us these self-esteem sermons that were about, like, being a woman in the world, and if you've seen America's Next Top Model you can imagine how insane some of the things she said were. And there was essentially kind of a community formed around trauma, and every night we all cried a lot together. And then after T-Zone ended, every month we would have a meet-up, for about two years she kept this up, and we also shared a lot of e-mail chains at the time. And though she was trying to make us more self-confident, her being a supermodel maybe had the opposite effect. She would complain about her ankles, which she didn't like, you know I would look at myself and be like "well, ankles!" [laughs] But we shared all these e-mail chains, and a lot of them were about body language, really, and how to present yourself. Two things I remember, two emails I can remember, one was about how to avoid rape through movement. Walking confidently, keeping your head up, walking straight down the street, walking on the inside of the street, for example. And another one that I remember very vividly was about sort of, I guess now what I would call respectability politics, but it was an e-mail from another girl who had gone there about how 'all of my white friends secretly hated me, no matter what I did.'

So, these things, and a lot of other reasons, I've always thought about how I move and how I occupy space. I always wanted to move like my brothers, that was something I thought about a lot. I have two older brothers – three older brothers – sorry, forgot one – he's a half-brother, so. But I always thought really that I wanted to move like them, because I noticed that they moved more freely through the world, and one of my brothers, he skated, which I was so envious of because he got to move through the city in this way that I didn't, and I tried to skate, but I was bad at it. So this kind of idea that I just should be more confident and more present, and thinking about the way that I occupy space was something that really got kind of stuck in my head around this time.

So recently, some examples of ways that I occupy space, I always kind of think about it as acting sort of more male, or something like that. I always do it on the plane, that's probably the easiest place I can think about it. I'm usually sitting next to a business guy, and he's totally, you know, man-spreading as they call it. But I'll fight with him, and I'll kind of try to take up an equal amount of space. So if I'm in the middle, I'll take both armrests, and I kind of physically challenge anyone to share, I will share the armrest with you, especially if I'm next to a guy who like has his legs spread out and everything. And I'll try to take up as much space as possible, and I've started to think about this as this kind of like *extreme* presence.

Last year I started writing down all these rules I had of like, things like that, kind of a rule I have with myself that if I'm sitting on a plane and somebody's taking up more room, then I'll just start to expand next to them. So I'm gonna read some of these rules that I made up. They're kind of titled under "presentation."

Your hair requires three treatments: pre-conditioning, conditioning, and deep-conditioning. On occasion you should also moisturize. You seek perfect curl definition.

You need a haircut at least once a month. Fade the sides and back to skin, don't touch the top. Line the nape, keep the

hairline natural.

(I'm breaking all these things right now.)

Keep your eyebrows well-groomed at a medium thickness with an unmistakable arch. The brows frame your eyes and prevent your face from looking overly round. You prefer threading to waxing, waxing to plucking, and plucking to nothing.

The hair on your upper lip should remain visible at all times.

Never shave your armpit or pubic hair. This is a sign of the resistance.

The natural state of your skin is ashy. Shea butter is the only defense. Use it generously, lotion is for white people.

Before showering, remove dead skin by vigorously sweeping your arms and legs with a dry brush. Afterwards, massage with sesame oil.

Once a week, bathe in a soup of hot water, olive oil, and lavender. Use soap sparingly.

Don't touch your face. Don't let others touch your face.

Cleanser, toner, moisturizer, sunscreen. Use tea tree oil and benzoyl peroxide for spot treatments. Remedy inflammation with a spritz of rose water.

Use an electric toothbrush. Floss sometimes. Try to see the dentist every six months.

Get a manicure and a pedicure once a month. Your preference is round and natural, cuticles trimmed. Do not pay for a buff shine or any other extra treatments.

You also like the look of bitten nails. The shapes are contingent.

Scuffed. Be scuffed. Visible tags, tears, holes, patches, embellishments, dirt, and fixes are central to your look. Never look too put together. You don't wear dresses.

Direct communication only. Hide or remove logos, graphics, colors, tags, etc., that are not a part of your message. Comfort and incongruity are always part of your message.

When unoccupied, read from a book with an impenetrable title, such as "The Politics of Representation in Network Television."

Look straight ahead while walking down the street. Walk quickly and confidently, do not stop for anyone or anything. Stand up straight. Your right side is your good side. Take the stairs. Drive fast, and take the shortest route. Plan your trip before you get into the car. Signal. The horn is a tool, honk often. You like to keep the windows down. Listen to the streets or the radio.

Be the first on and off public transit. On the bus, sit behind the rear exit in the outside seat. Sit in priority seating on the train, or stand.

Always ask the cab driver how his or her day is going. Give your preferred route. Provide turn by turn directions if necessary. Do not pay if you are being ripped off.

Be local. Know what your neighborhood has to offer. Make allies. Only go out when banana parking is available.

Evenings after 6, Sunday all day. That's Los Angeles specific. Parking tip.

Leave while you're having a good time.

Don't say sorry unless you're apologizing for a grievous error. Err on the side of insensitivity. Never give anyone the satisfaction. Direct communication only. Say what you think and feel as you experience it. Avoid metaphor and analogy. Be clear. Consider your word choice.

Create ambiguity around your personal history. Refer to your education as "undergrad." Refer to your adolescence as "before." Say "Los Angeles," not "L.A." Retain a California accent, certain mispronunciations, and a casual way of speaking. "Girl," is your favorite way of beginning a sentence.

Don't talk to people who bore you. Seek life-affirming energy in social settings. Maintain eye contact with everyone who attracts you until you have spoken to all of them. Always speak for yourself. Be easy.

In addition to these things, recently I found out about power stances. Does everyone know what a power stance is? Power stance is something you're supposed to do before a big meeting, get yourself psyched up. How else do I explain it? Well, there's one that's called Superwoman, I think it's called. "Superwoman," I'm trying to describe it. I probably should just do it, I guess. It's kind of like this.

[Stands and demonstrates the Superwoman power stance]

You just do that for five minutes before you have a big meeting or you go somewhere where you need to be confident. And another one is, actually, I can demonstrate this one as well.

[Stands to demonstrate the second power stance]

I forget what that one's called but it's a good one, highly recommended, you should try it out.

But the thing about the power stance is it's actually the most popular TED talk. But yeah, you're supposed to do it before you go into a situation where you might be, where you might not feel as powerful as you need to, or you don't have agency, and supposedly standing in these ways is supposed to give you this confidence. And I do think it works. One thing that I've been thinking a lot about is sort of, I come up with these rules and I'm sort of tracking them and organizing them as an idea of like thinking about the ways that I'm being interpreted, my language is being interpreted, whether it's on screen or in person. And one reason I think this is so prevalent to me is this idea that negative experiences that I have are sort of accumulating in my body. Claudia Rankine, who wrote the book *Citizen*, she's been writing these amazing essays on Serena Williams that Gordon and I were just talking about, that made us interested in tennis. And she, part of the reason she started working on *Citizen*—which is sort of a collection of microaggressions and macroaggressions really, that happened to her—was she had cancer and she couldn't shake this feeling that it was racism that was making her sick, that it had manifested in her body. And she said, "my body's frailty—not the cancer but the depth of my exhaustion—had been brought on by the constant onslaught of racism. Whether something as terrible as the killing of Trayvon Martin or something as mundane as the guy who let the door slam in my face. The daily grind of being rendered invisible or being attacked, whether physically or verbally for being visible, wears a body down." And I think this is something that I really, in looking at all these images and also thinking of my own images and the way that I act, I think it's in response a lot of times to—it's pre-emptive. So this idea of countering invisibility with what I'm calling "an extreme presence," taking up too much space, or trying to take up as much space as possible. And I think that doing that, which maybe leads to a kind of exaggerated movement, or an exaggerated gesture, can sometimes get you into trouble, though.

I was going to play—well, it might be kind of intense, but I'll still play it.

[plays dashcam footage of Sandra Bland's arrest]

The kind of exaggerated gestures, as I'm saying, which can be read as anger or an attitude, can sometimes lead to trouble. Rankine said: "where's the safest place, when that place must be somewhere outside of the body? Because what happens to you doesn't belong to you, it only half concerns you. It's not yours, or it's not only yours."

This is a Gordon quote—"politics is something that you do with your body." Something I've been thinking a lot about, since you said it, really, that there's this idea that experience can kind of change your movement, that there's a vernacular to the way that I move that's completely influenced by what has happened to me. It's a document of what's happened, and there's kind of a muscle memory that I've developed, that my body has, just from hauling a kind of psychic weight. And the thing that I've been sort of thinking about in my work lately is how to communicate that, and communicate all of it, you know, like, the kind of goofy elements of it, the parts that I enjoy about it, and the dangers of it—communicate my own experience in this body. And part of that has been an interest specifically in repetition and the idea that maybe repetition is an aesthetic analog to exhaustion, this kind of exhaustion, and I've been looking at a lot of gifs of black women, primarily, which are used as reactions by everybody. They kind of get re-purposed, taking the place of image for everyone. And this idea of like, how do you keep a black female body present, and how do you value something that isn't typically valued in society, is maybe through this sort of performed body, and how these behaviors circulate. And I've just been wondering, what do they signify? What do they mean for people, you know, whether it's something as absurd as Janet Jackson eating chips or Oprah shaking her head, or whatever it is.

There's a curator, Jason Epping, he talks about the gif as an actual image that takes the place of a gesture. And so, going back to this idea of early cinema and how these transitional figures can operate within that, I've been thinking about gifs in a similar way, of them being cinematic. And also maybe that they're a kind of cinema of affiliation, that you're empathizing and sort of finding yourself in these images of black women, and that's something that's very exciting to me, and that in my own kind of use and looking at these images, I'm thinking a lot about this difference between an authentic and a kind of inauthentic gesture. In a search for meaning in, frankly, a world that feels often meaningless.

Another thing about the gif that I've been thinking a lot about is that Steyerl's idea of a kind of poor image—she talks about ads primarily in that essay "The Poor Image"—but I've been thinking about how not only are these kind of poor images in terms of compression, but that they're compressing an experience into one movement that repeats endlessly. And that it kind of relates to this entire problem of representation, that to me they're emblematic of my own feelings of being on camera and how my body and others are used on camera.

I don't have a really great way of ending this, but those are some of the things I've been thinking about. So, thank you for listening.