

Amalia Ulman



View of "Amalia Ulman," 2016. Photo: Tim Bowditch.

"On the Internet, no one knows you're an artist." These words, written in 2010 by critic Ed Halter, expressed the identity crisis suffered by early online artists, swamped by legions of teenage internet virtuosos whose proficiency with cut-and-paste culture often exceeded that of most MFA grads. Argentinean-born, Spanish-raised, UK-educated, Los Angeles-based Amalia Ulman is among those who in subsequent years carved a role for artists operating in the digital youniverse. In her online performance *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, Ulman fabricated an idealized social-media avatar by feeding her Instagram account with staged selfies. These "true-life" pictures chronicled a fictitious life in three acts: youthful temptress, social-media victim, lifestyle diva. Ulman's mimicry of the web's peculiar contest for the self-absorbed—sexy, aspirational, objectified, weirdly blank—was pitch-perfect. After posting this elaborate imitation of life for four months and amassing nineteen thousand followers who alternately admired, desired, bullied, and belittled her, Ulman finally came clean.

She'd beaten the web at its own game, emerging among the internet's sharpest infiltrators after becoming one of its stars—having her critical cake and eating it too. Since then Ulman's fan base has continued to expand; in 2016 she ranked among *Forbes's* "30 Under 30" hot list and was hailed as a "meme come true" in *Dazed* magazine. Her Instagram following has swollen to 127k—and I number among her devotees. Across history, artists have regularly worked with portraiture, mimesis, and ambiguous social caricature, as Ulman does. But few today share her sense of humor, timing, and style.

Speaking of expanding and swelling, in her recent exhibition "Labour Dance" Ulman appeared pregnant—another female condition the artist is trying on for size. Working with a strict palette of corporate gray, white, black, chrome, and red, Ulman retiled the gallery floor in black-and-white checks. She wallpapered it with a repeated black-and-white photograph of the Manhattan skyline, semi-concealed behind peekaboo see-through curtains. The Statue of Liberty was relocated to midtown, the sole female among countless phallic skyscrapers. The gallery ceiling was crowded with dozens of helium-filled red balloons, symbolic of bulging bellies, I guess, each with a long, thin, red ribbon looping downward like a trickle of blood. On the floor two TV monitors showed Ulman's videos, along with flattened red-ceramic "balloons"—like deflated breasts and wombs, postpartum.

Was this heavy-handed postfeminist artmaking another put-on? We may never know, just as we may never fathom her mesmerizing fashion sense: part art-school hipster; part mid-'90s secretary; part Gucci brat; part First Holy Communion recipient. And what's with the Dora-the-Explorer haircut and big brown eyes, and her assumed personality as a living cartoon (observed in her website drawings and elsewhere)? These video performances were hysterically funny, with Ulman rolling across the screen in a swivel chair with an inscrutable smile and flawless slapstick timing. I thought of Andy Kaufman, another comedian-cum-artist, whose elaborate gags also prompted laughter and discomfort, then pathos.

What's a web goddess doing occupying a three-dimensional gallery anyway? After all, many of Ulman's videos are available on Instagram and can be viewed more comfortably from home. As I looked around again—a little bored—at the festive balloons decorating the ceiling, the dance-floor-like tile pattern, it hit me. Ulman has identified the single lingering function of the art gallery for her laptop generation: the ideal venue for a party (and rumor has it the opening bash was a blast). The gallery is where, finally, Ulman can occupy public space and engage directly with like-minded people—not just trolls, fans, and assorted weirdos. She'd redecorated for the occasion. Perhaps the multit talented Ulman has not merely found a role for the twenty-first-century artist, but seen the future of the gallery, too.

—Gilda Williams