

# ARTFORUM

## INTERVIEWS

### AMALIA ULMAN

May 18, 2018 • Amalia Ulman on her new book and internet performances



Spread from Amalia Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections* (Prestel, 2018).

*Amalia Ulman's* *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, a durational performance that took place on her Instagram account, featured the artist playing a young ingénue with the kinds of finely calibrated displays of taste we've come to recognize as typical of the pageantry of aspiration many people gamely engage in across social media platforms. By virtue of its placement on Instagram, the artist garnered attention for being a person she wasn't, just as the rest of us do all the time. Every post in the work, along with public comments, was published earlier this month in a book by Prestel with essays by Hito Steyerl, Rob Horning, Natasha Stagg, and Rózsa Farkas. Here, the artist discusses her use of social media, making work with brand endorsements, and her Instagram performance *Privilege*, 2015–16.

**AUTHENTICITY IS AN EXPRESSION OF CLASS.** Everyone that I've seen who tries to be authentic is very rich, and I'm working class. I've always had to deal with this romantic ideal of not needing money as an artist, which I think is based on the fact that most artists in America come from wealth. I think it's very classist to denounce people who have to do commercial work so they can continue making art instead of working at McDonald's. This is a very European-American thing. When you look at other places, like in China, they don't have these biases against brands as much as people do here. I'm very interested in how different cultures approach such things, and I had to learn a lot of codes of conduct from living in the US and Britain that are very different from those in the culture I came from. It's funny to subvert that.

Even with something like the color red. As someone from Spain, red is a leftist color and signifies communism and anarchism. If you're red then you're from the left. But here in America, the Republican party uses this color. My performance *Privilege* took place on the internet from 2015 to 2016, leading up to the 2016 presidential election in the US, which really was a part of the work because the piece was influenced by whatever was happening at the time online. I was using red a lot for other reasons in this particular performance because I was trying to look for things that supposedly defined me, and then seeing everything in red and blue during the campaigns and how differently those hues were being utilized, it was a lost in translation situation for me. The ambivalence that some might sense in my work comes, I think, from being foreign.

I'm interested in playing with different platforms that aren't really supposed to be in art, or be the art. With *Excellences & Perfections* in 2014, I started doing fictional work on social media because you're not supposed to really make art in it, only promote work exhibited somewhere else. There is an expectation now that artists should be online and on social media promoting themselves, but that the promotion shouldn't be the work per se. It felt like a requirement, especially as a woman, to expose oneself to sell the work in a way. I've also tried to undermine that expectation by making art with other social and commercial media, such as magazines and fashion brands, for *Privilege*. I did photoshoots for magazines like *L'Officiel* and *Vogue* which were also later incorporated into my feed as part of the performance itself. Paid posts were part of it too, such as for *Gucci*. Some were real and some were fake, but they were all part of the same story I was creating. *Gucci* and *Chanel* were real, and then *Prada* and *Miu Miu* were fake—everything was mixed up, but the real ones look fake too. The character developed in *Privilege* was meant to be a caricature of myself, and there are a lot of ideas in that character that come from my own childhood. When I was a kid, I would go into characters, and just be a secretary or a businesswoman, for instance. I would sit on the kitchen table with my mother's typewriter, a broken phone, and my pens, getting very angry on the phone.



Amalia Ulman, *Privilege* 2/22/2016, 2016.

Using a pigeon in *Privilege* was the most successful element of the whole performance. Pigeons are unremarkable, and I like looking at things that are almost invisible, then trying to make work about it. My first challenge in this vein was when I was younger and trying to make work about the working class of southern Europe. My British colleagues in art school were really not into it, because it wasn't ethnic looking enough, so it wasn't interesting to them. It was just boring. They were like, "You're Argentinian, just make work about Argentina, Latin America is really cool," etc. But I actually grew up in Asturias, Spain, and it's just industrial, bland,

boring, and working class. Regardless, I wanted to work with that as material, and it was a challenge because it didn't look like anything. The pigeon in *Privilege*, named Bob, was very similar in that sense, because I had no attraction whatsoever to pigeons, ever. So I thought this character needs to be a pigeon, that was the challenge: To make him cute, lovable, to make work about him, and to have this story with an animal that has zero charisma. I bought him for nine dollars—I had never actually touched a bird before in my life, and he was disgusting, pooping everywhere. But I kept him for two years, and the relationship changed. I fell in love with him, and that really affected the work, because then all the work was really made from the heart. People thought he was funny and requested more and more work about him. Changing a point of view is very prevalent in my work, or how something that we don't care about, or find disgusting or scary, can become the total opposite just by learning its language. Bob was, in a way, this idea of the underdog, and that was a very prevalent concept in the public discourse during the election, so in turn he became the most important element in the piece.

The tone of this project was comedic, as opposed to the tragic mode of *Excellences & Perfections*, and people weren't vicious about *Privilege* as they had been with *E&P*. *Privilege* is the last work that I will ever do on Instagram, but both performances needed each other. *Excellences & Perfections* was easy to understand on the surface, since the easiest thing to get people to look at is a hot girl. Only by doing that first piece could I gather the audience to show something weirder later. It couldn't have happened the other way around.

The reality of my life during *E&P* was very, very different from what people were seeing on my Instagram. In the middle of the book between images from *E&P* are a series of letters I wrote from the Ananda Meditation Retreat in northern California, where I was in a forest, cleaning cabins, while online I was like a sugar baby staying in hotels. Most of the negative reactions I got for that work were from men that didn't really understand the performance. Their ego made them not want to feel stupid and my work made them feel stupid. I can't even believe that I got it done, because I had been in a bus accident right before and was using a cane and relearning to walk. I think seeing that piece through was some sort of coping mechanism to go back to normal, at least in pictures. I've used my body as much as I've used many other materials in my work, but the misogyny around me, and my work, is huge. Why would I be more respected if I were using someone else's naked body in my work? I'm just a good actress, that's all, but it has been very easy for people to assume that I didn't know I was doing, which is a very common reaction to women. And now that the book is done, I'm just happy to be able to frame the work the way I want, instead of being analyzed by other people.

— As told to Paige K. Bradley