

INSIDE THE COVER
AMALIA ULMAN
HER BODY, HER SELF

Text by
Travis Diehl







In a tree outside my living room window in Los Angeles, two doves are building a nest. The mother dove sits on her eggs while the father runs errands back and forth, gathering sticks and grubs: the nest slowly fills the crook of a branch. To have all this activity play out at eye level, for weeks on end, starts to erode the notion that we, human beings, are the only ones to “make things.” Birds certainly practice artifice, and some are very good at it. The latest season of the BBC’s *Planet Earth* features bowerbirds decorating their sculptural mating-grounds with attractive bits of human trash. One has found a small, red plush heart; another steals it. It’s not ritual nor aesthetics nor trickery that make us unique—if, indeed, we are.

Our own species’ seductive efforts, in turn—from clothing and makeup to social media profiles and sexting—start to seem birdlike, like a layer over and above our bodies that acts and is acted upon in a way that extends and delimits the body itself. A nest is an example of what biologists call the extended phenotype: whatever an animal does to alter its environment. Take for example Amalia Ulman’s gauzy pornographic video *International House of Cozy* (2015), which captures the rites and accoutrements of two mating hipsters: the scented candle on the dresser, the rind concentrate body balm from Aēsop, the shallow bowl of fresh fruit on the modern-white credenza. This is commodified intercourse in a well-feathered nest. It is an alien and documentary ritual. One has the feeling that there are no bodies here at all, only elaborate shells—extensions of, but not, “The Body.” Such a coupling approaches a sort of prearranged, recursive intimacy, like watching someone watch themselves on YouTube.

What does it mean to stage the extremes and epitomes (excellences and perfections, even) of millennial self-care? In other words, to affect concern for a body that isn’t exactly there? Ulman’s *Excellences & Perfections* (2014), her most famous performance, did exactly this for an unsuspecting audience of Instagram followers. The term *lifestyle porn* goes beyond raw depictions of sex to include pictures of avocado toast and green juice and walks in Griffith Park. *Excellences & Perfections* is peppered with shots of fresh fruit and glistening,

barely-touched desserts like periodic statements of bodily health. Her outfits are costumes, the hotel mirrors are sets. But the series’ most salacious moments come when Ulman points this artificial artifice towards her own flesh. In *E&P* Ulman gets a breast augmentation that is as real as any photoshopped cover girl’s; her pregnancy shown throughout *Privilege* (2016) is an online one, an Instagram gestation, where each image of Ulman’s pregnant belly says more about the mother than about whatever child. If art is embodied meaning, then this is art, regardless of whether it’s a baby or a prosthetic, a performed pregnancy or a private one. When Ulman provokes this irreconcilable ambivalence, she is simply stating what we already know, but rarely admit—that a selfie is more like a search than a record.

So Ulman performs the things we do to find ourselves, or—with great capitalist realism—to brand our selves. People don’t collect colorful bottle caps and straws, they gather labels: Miu Miu, Prada, Gucci. A handful of clips posted as part of *Privilege* are actual endorsements.¹ The Gucci logo overlays a video of Ulman kicking a red crepe paper ball and repeatedly mumbling the brand’s name. One Prada ad is nothing more or less than a view of Ulman’s feet as she rides an escalator in a pair of their shoes. In 1999 Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe began their project *No Ghost Just a Shell*, in which they co-own the rights to an anime character named Annlee; in 2003 Bernadette Corporation completed a video manifesto for disaffected activists titled *Get Rid of Yourself*. These projects hug the turn of the millennium; it’s no accident that violent anti-globalization demonstrations surrounded the G8 summit in Genoa, and that Annlee was made to embody the polyvalent emptiness of the branded self, at just the moment when a teenage Amalia Ulman was first exploring the Internet. Now it’s 2018 and corporations are legally people, just as they are also made of people, just as they are also lifeless shells.

It’s a short step from “you are what you wear” to “you are what you post.” But before virtual bodies transacted on Myspace and Instagram, Pornhub and Chatroulette, the interface was text only. The chat rooms Ulman frequented had no imagery,







no avatars, and no bodies—which is why she could be anybody. It was salad days. Yet part of that imageless freedom persists in Ulman's most recent work, in her insistence that the self is not structured like a pit in the body's peach, but flows like a centerless juice.

Ulman's ambient relationship to her own embodiment sometimes presents in her work as ambivalence, sometimes as antagonism. Ulman's *Privilege* photos use red and gray almost exclusively, a palette that is color-pop one minute, gore the next. The lo-fi crackle in shots of Ulman riding the LA Metro's escalators, for instance, makes the walls look blood-spattered. In other posts, the artist's body seems damaged. One shows her legs splaying out of an office doorway; her arm holds a corded phone to her head, which juts into view at a broken angle.² In another, Ulman in a pencil skirt and blouse leans against the office wall, grimacing and clutching her knee, which glows a painful red.³ The only other color is the red of her high heels and bag. For *Privilege*, Ulman took up an office-worker persona, but also worked in an office. In another Instagram post, Ulman digitally multiplied her outstretched arms into the posture of a multitasking Hindu goddess [Kālī], holding coffee, scissors, a clock, two roses, and indicating, with two hands, her pregnant-presenting belly.⁴ Both powerful and servile, creative and distressed, she represents the dual nature of the precariat: we can do it all, and it hurts.

Shortly after the conclusion of *Excellences & Perfections*, Ulman debuted *Stock Images of War* (2015), a series of open wire sculptures of tanks, wheelchairs, and bicycles, placed around a gallery draped in black fabric. She first imagined these skeletal machines before *E&P*, while recovering from a bus accident in a Pennsylvania hospital. This pain is real and chronic, even if the body suppresses its memory—and even if the pain of others is among the most difficult things to feel. Instead, like a nightmare antiseptic, air fresheners on little shelves spurted sickly apple-scented mist into the room; the video on the wall, with a voiceover punctuated by gunfire sound effects, was turned up way too loud. Physical pain morphs into the pain of Ulman's frustrated attempt to commodify a

compound image of suffering. It is like the poet W.S. Merwin writes in *For the Anniversary of My Death*: “Then I will no longer / Find myself in life as in a strange garment,” as if the flesh, too, is something we put on, like a pair of rhinestone-studded heels. Just as easily, we slip it off.

Viewing *Excellences & Perfections* and *Privilege* in their native form, on Ulman's Instagram feed, you start to notice the many flavors of disillusionment expressed in the comments section by her followers. Some are in on her jokes, others feel cheated or offended, but perhaps the most misguided are those comments that urge Ulman to be true to herself. This, for example, after she dyed her brown hair blonde as part of *E&P*, and again after she changed it back. Whether such reactions express genuine concern, or are more like the cathartic cries of the audience at a horror film, the implication is that any of these images, consciously performed or not, might overlay and obscure a true inner self. In a more complete analysis, however, Ulman proposes a stickier truth: that this whole extended phenotype—art, clothes, décor—doesn't express the self—it is the self. Ulman's followers wonder aloud if her body is art, or if it's artifice. The answer is yes.

Philosophers call it *pure semblance*—like an illusion, but not an illusion; an image through and through. And when you can't tell if it's an illusion or not, you must act as if it's both. Given the circumstances, it's understandable that it's sometimes difficult to know how to take Ulman's work. The response, like the work, is both at once, oscillating like a high velocity update of Jasper Johns's flags and targets: both pictures of things and the things themselves. This also makes it difficult to decide exactly where the work ends and the body begins. Like an intricate nest or dam, Ulman's artwork is an extended phenotype inseparable from her other ways of living. There is, for instance, a tendency for Ulman to guide the press towards her own ends, using magazine photo shoots to produce new work, or interviews to undermine old interviews. Her work is her lifestyle and her lifestyle is her work; she is never not working.







For *Privilege*, Ulman introduced a supporting character, a pigeon named Bob. At first the pigeon was an animatronic, and appeared this way when a version of *Privilege* was installed for the 9th Berlin Biennale. But soon Ulman replaced the model with the real thing. Like Ulman, Bob has a job portraying an office worker, going daily to an office, doing what office workers do. This much is the saccharine conceit of a children's book Ulman produced, thick cardboard pages and all, in which Bob in suit and tie simply takes the bus to work. But even this whimsical story sinks, past parody, into an honest telling of an artist's white-collar precarity. Bob is a pet, but one that is optimized for work, for labor—for production, and specifically for the production of images of himself working. He is also a representative of pigeonkind, as if this strange relationship—between human and bird—mirrors that between artist and image. Whatever drives are specific to Bob, he also possesses avian motivations common to all pigeons, individuals all, but also nodes of some greater entity, a flocking, undifferentiated mass.

The *Privilege* collages and photos, again, are desaturated save red accents—red, among other things, the color of sex worker solidarity. Ulman puts her body to work in a kind of digital emotional labor, no less emotional or laborious for being digital, yet still somehow virtual, made-up, like that of a pole dancer or a cam girl. Who is truly surprised that the image, any image, is partly disingenuous, a fantasy for hire? When is it ever otherwise? The expectation of sincerity clings to the online world, just as it does to art, in a way that doesn't apply to meatspace—or rather, the online and art audiences cling to their expectation. Perhaps this is why Ulman plans to direct a film—to work in a medium where artifice is only natural.

In 2015, Ulman took a trip to Pyongyang, North Korea.⁵ She doesn't consider the trip an artwork as such, although she did post a few tourist shots on Instagram. (They're still there, a brief interlude between *Excellences* and *Privilege*.) The trip is documented in greater detail in a travelogue published this year as *Pyongyang Elegance: Notes on Communism*. The essay's tone is drifty, over the

shoulder, as if Ulman is watching her own body travel. The country is infamously restricted; the Internet is censored and so is the television, and Ulman can only visit sites approved by the three local men assigned as her guides: tourist restaurants, gift shops for foreigners, a larger-than-life replica of the Arc de Triomphe. But what seems to bother her the most in this cold communist paradise is how little time she has to herself. The climax of the essay comes when she convinces her handlers to take her for a massage, and she spends an hour—one hour—in the company of one woman, naked, not talking, finally “herself.” Ulman notes that wherever she goes there are bowls of fresh fruit: to some the sign of a stage-managed dictatorship, but to her simply a performance of plenty that is common to the world's poor.

If our buildings express a certain regional character, the city is our kind's ultimate extended phenotype. Of her hospital stay, Ulman writes cryptically, “My confinement is the victory of the skyscrapers over my bones.” Of Pyongyang, “I took the city off me like a Band-Aid.” To make the completion of *Privilege*, Ulman and her husband opened Bob's cage, a wood and wire box attached to their apartment window. A short, closely cropped video shows him hop out of frame and into Los Angeles. Ulman tells me that pigeons pair for life; in order to train them as messengers, they are separated from their mates. It's not their homes, exactly, that they seek out, but their mates.

1. See Ulman's Instagram feed, August 24, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BJf9SubhZzq/>;
- May 29, 2016, https://www.instagram.com/p/BF_ifkGIV5w/;
- April 12, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BEGu8fLIV4Z/>.
2. *Ibid.*, January 14, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BAG-pu3FV2x/>.
3. *Ibid.*, March 30, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BDIKY-CuFV30/>.
4. *Ibid.*, September 15, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BKZjerkAkF9/>.
5. Amalia Ulman, “Pyongyang Excellence: Notes on Communism,” *affidavit*, February 12, 2018, <https://www.affidavit.art/articles/pyongyang-elegance>.

Privilege 5/4/2016, 2016 (opposite page) *Privilege* 3/12/2016, 2016 (p. 54) *Dignity* 01, 2017 (p. 55) *Privilege* 2/20/2016, 2016 (p. 56) *Privilege* 11/01/2016, 2016 (film still) (p. 58) *Privilege* 9/27/2016, 2016 (film still) (p. 59) *Intolerance*, 2017, installation view, Barro, Buenos Aires (p. 60) *Privilege* 8/9/2016, 2016 (p. 62) *Privilege* 4/29/2016, 2016 (film still) (p. 63) *Privilege* 7/27/2016, 2016 (p. 66) *Privilege* 6/17/2016, 2016 (film still) (p. 67) All images Courtesy: the artist and Arcadia Missa, London



