Dazed & Confused - Amalia Ulman Interview



[‘Buyer, Walker, Rover’ video embed]

Amalia Ulman is a 24-year-old Argentinean-born, predominantly Spanish-raised artist who presently divides her time between the cities of London and Gijon. A self-described transatlantic expat child, a spirit of national nomadism and outsider cultural inquisitiveness inform her practice.

Her works are primarily voiced in the first person, often blurring the distinction between the artist and object of study. The aesthetic is clean, minimal and translucent. The dominant hues are white and grey. The recurring imagery - pearls, butterflies, hearts, flowers, ripped jeans, coffee art, household ornamentation, embroidered motivational slogans, hygiene and cosmetic products in their deglamorized domestic habitat – a montage of mundane prosaicness, budding sexuality and kitsch – evoke the iconography of teenage beauty magazines, a coming-of-age femininity and and the language of relationship advice columns, with their undertones of possession, seduction, anxiety, insecurity, and crassness. Ubiquitous, everyday objects are observed as unearthed treasures concealing exotic truths, viewed from a furtive, almost voyeuristic vantage point.

Via graphic design, photography, installation, web and video art, she charts a soft-toned exploration of the relationships between consumerism and identity, class imitation and social deception, altruism and orientalism, with a particular focus on the signifiers of Southern European and Latin American 'chav' culture. Recent works include'Overcome/Cleanse', which juxtaposes visuals of appropriated high-street interior design against a first-person online diary of mental listlessness and rebirth, point to a preoccupation with Western leisure mentality, middle-class spiritualism, office etiquette codes, the notions of ethical commerce and the advertising soundbites of 21st century hyper-individualism

Her latest piece 'Buyer, Walker, Rover' is the first of four live Skype lectures presented at Regional States Archive in Gothenburg. To the backdrop of a floating PowerPoint presentation, a stream of consciousness, first-person narrative recites a city dwellers' experience of its surrounding commercial and urban environment. It introduces the notion that connections and interactions can be drawn between world metropolitan centers via the simultaneous presence of graphic design patterns and replicated goods in them as stemming from cost-efficient, outsourced production and the constant flow of imports.

I was unsure as to how to view the piece - was it an impenetrably toned satire on the 'Occupy generation', raised in prosperous times on the ethos of the pursuit of creativity, individualism and self-fulfillment as means of success, and emerging into a reality of joblessness, debt, cyclical education and terminal practice in test environments, an ultimately status-fixated, politically conservative class that utilizes 'cultural capital' and lifestyle culture as tools of preserving social hierarchy and dominance? Or was it channeling something more ambiguous and sincere - a

fascination with the discrete beauty of esoterically produced, cheaply available commodities, the transcendent anonymity afforded by the inner laws of the retail sphere, and the quiet romance of window-shopping? Amalia answered some questions on the piece, consumerism, nationalism and the way she approaches her work.

'Buyer, walker, rover' was presented in the form of a Skype lecture. How did this format come about and how did it work? Are there elements in this medium that communicate with the piece, or was this more a matter of functionality?

I feel the need to put in words what I'm doing to explain my work. Last year I wrote an essay, but after having a hard time following the rules of standardized essay writing and Harvard system of referencing, I decided to stop limiting myself to any sort of guideline. I got invited to give this Skype lecture for the Regional State Archives in Gothenburg, and it became the perfect excuse to put together all the material I had in mind.

I feel that giving a Skype lecture worked because I was able to reach an audience very directly in despite of being in another country, which also made sense with the content of the lecture itself. Also, because of this format, the interaction with the audience was more intense, felt more like a wound in my daily life, with a very precise starting and finishing point. It would have been different if I had been there: there would have been a pre-lecture tea, a post-lecture dinner, an obligation to meet and greet etc. In this case, when the lecture ended, my cat jumped on me and everything was like "what just happened?"

The exposure felt more intimidating than a stage, I remember saying that I felt like a cam girl.

The lecture veers between lucidness and a dream like state, interspersing the main narrative with overtures of poetry, 'keywords' and abstract reflection. How did you approach its structuring?

I think it reflects the way I work. I've been thinking of all this material for a long time but I don't do sketches or write notes, so when it comes to producing something I have to make it on the spot and vomit all the words in one sit, no matter how many days it takes, how many hours awake it requires.

Especially here, in this lecture, it is very apparent how I start lucidly and end up in a dream-like estate. This is not the only work I made this way, it is just more obvious in this one.

"I've seen you before, yes. I've seen this same wallet somewhere else. We have the same wallet! And I'm here while you are there. There is something we can share."

You point to a recurrence of design patterns across world commercial capitals and seemingly disparate areas of retail. How did you come to take notice of these patterns? Are there any common parallels that could be drawn between the themes - culturally, aesthetically, industrially, or otherwise?

I once had an addiction to euro-store shopping. I must have been eight or ten years old, and Spain still had Pesetas. These places were called 'Veinte Duros'. I would go with so little money and buy so many things. I ended up going every two days until my mother told me to go back and return what I bought because the situation had turned ridiculous: Selfishly, I would buy her the most horrible presents, just to experience this consumerist satisfaction. Since then my approach to commerce has been determined by that guilt and shame experienced back then. I don't buy many things and I'm definitely not an impulsive buyer: sometimes I think too much about objects: I even have clear memories of objects I never had. I'm a spectator, a peep; it is enough for me to watch, I don't need to possess these objects.

I pay attention to design, to patterns, to the shape of clothes, to the distribution of the furniture around me; it wasn't difficult to start recognizing patterns after some years visiting these sort of stores in different countries.

Moreover, the newspaper pattern is very much an attempt to represent an idealized idea of western culture. There's a stereotyped idea of beauty (fashion magazine covers imagery), there are references to capitalist fastness (mention of world capitals) and the dream of success (inspirational messages in English or bad-English). I decided to focus on these patterns in particular, against other recurring ones, as they made sense for me by being directly related to my work.

"The fear of provinciality and the anxiety derived from the need of staying connected to those world capitals a-lá American Apparel bag: London, New York, Los Angeles, Berlin, Tokyo, Seoul; makes me avoid nationalism, makes me escape from any distributor of native production. I walk towards imports like a moth flies towards the light "

To what extent in your opinion has the proliferation of imports, omnipresence of international brands and homogenization of production design blurred aesthetic and cultural boundaries between urban capitals? Does this have an influence on our national identity and sense of belonging to a cultural collective? Does it encourage a sense of mobility and possibility, or rather a loss of distinction and oppressiveness?

Maybe before the bubble burst, the proliferation of information and a wider scope of options made people decide what they wanted to be in a very individualistic way, leaving behind any sort of characteristic determined by a specific background.

Now, after doing a workshop with high school students in Spain, I noticed changes in this regard, and that this behavior might be in decline due to the current economic situation, recession and general limitations. There was an atmosphere of collaboration and a sense of community in

which these teenagers felt a need to restructure their own environment instead of escaping from it –there was also a feeling of provinciality and in a way it felt like nationalism was flourishing again.
I'm an immigrant baby: not from where I was born, not from where my parents moved to. I don't feel I'm from anywhere and I never experience a defined sense of nationalism. My mental map is definitely constructed from all this bits and pieces; what I consider home is made out from all the rooms I felt comfortable in, from all the streets I walked at night.
I'm optimistic, and even though I am conscious of the oppressive and damaging effects of globalization, and that there is always a critique intrinsic to my work; I personally feel a sense of mobility, an idea of future with open ends or a tunnel with a light at the end. I constantly escape from feeling trapped, and by being connected I avoid that sensation. That's why airports are my favorite places, because they are nothing and everything at the same time; sort of non-places that at the same time are a container of all possible destinations, of all countries.
As an absolute foreigner localisms make me feel very uncomfortable.

"The wavy willow makes its appearance, with little differences, in London's The City at the lobby of some headquarters, as well as it presents itself at the front desk of the local hair salon."

The Wavy Willow is brought as an example of a recurring decorative item that seems to embody both democratic and capitalist characteristics: adaptive, innocuous and versatile, and on the other hand rootless, opportunistic and artificial. Do you feel that certain forms of design are more adaptive and universal than others in embodying objective aesthetic truths and transcending cultural boundaries? Or is the Wavy Willow a metaphor for the hollowness and alienation of commercial and corporate interior spaces - of ready-made, cloned objects lacking a human imprint?
This question made me wonder how I started being interested in the Wavy Willows, how they became part of my life/practice. Sincerely, I cannot remember: there's a blank in my memory right now. In some way I guess that's how it works, it suddenly is in your house, in your office space and you don't really know how it got there; but also you don't mind, because it is a quiet companion.
I'm very romantic, and even though I objectively and actively know that I want to address certain subjects, like that of class divide, corporate coldness, seduction etc., I do feel a personal connexion to this item. Can't deal with my practice from a cynical or ironic perspective; when I approach things I really have to have fallen in love with them.
The Wavy Willow is a metaphor for the survival technique of mediocrity, the theory that implies that mediocre humans would be able to survive for longer just as they are not noticeable, while charismatic personalities have more chances of being attacked.

"Walking the city I am the master of my hodological space: I decide, I become the entrepreneur of my own existence.
Visiting these stores I can widen my mental map. I'm closer to everything and very quickly, I don't feel lonely anymore."

The walker in the piece is simultaneously an active, self-willed entity and a conditioned consumer, "anonymous sponge", that absorbs and reflects the commercial environment surrounding it. How do you see the relationship between a city and its walker - is the walker merely a passive spectator that is defined by its navigational choices, or is it an active participant in shaping and informing the landscape it roams?

Walkers are definitely active; it is very difficult to be a flâneur with no output. Even a commentary regarding the things seen can turn into feedback capable of modifying another person's opinion and maybe future purchases. Everything counts: shoplifting, buying, seeing, window-shopping. Every single transaction contributes to or boycotts the system. Not accepting that is a lazy position that diminishes the power of democracy, that weakens every opportunity of change.

Cities and industrial environments are natural for me, while nature feels completely alien. The way I walked the cities I've visited is very similar to the way someone would go to the countryside to bird-watch or to do botanical drawings.

I am an active participant, but in a discrete manner, because of my personality. But also, as a visual artist, my responsibility is, I think, to be plastic and aesthetic about these matters; I can analyze and question anything, but I'm not in a position from which I could provide with answers –at least not for now.

KEYWORDS
#equality #equalitarian #ornament #democracy
#taste #interiorism #worldwide #silence #class #decorative #innocuous

Do you think there is a danger of potential crossover of the escapist, 'global' mentality into the political realm, making us more prone to passiveness and dormancy, reluctant to challenge fundamental orders or be attached to any greater political collective in the sake of not compromising our individuality?

For some reason, I believe that we are the last generation with an enthusiasm for high connectivity. Younger people take that, as well as information overload, for granted and therefore focusing their attention to a new order of things, like trying to sort out the roots of the problem instead of just playing around with the fruits of it. I think there has been a revival of the concept of community. Not that I am part of that, but I perceived so from people born in the 90's.

The British philosopher Nick Land introduced Accelrationism, the idea that rather than resist dehumanizing capitalist processes, we should capitulate and submit to them to bring

forth their inner contradictions and encourage their demise. What are your thoughts about this brand of commentary on capital, technology and consumerism, simultaneously critiquing and celebrating it?

It sounds good; but seems like one of those things that are better as a concept, something that fails when put into practice. Capitalism thrives on creative destruction; accelerationism would only accelerate the process intrinsic to it, which wouldn't be useful when trying to abolish this system, taking into account that crisis is needed for the continuation of it: If a temple is to be erected a temple must be destroyed. Economic collapses are far from being a sign of decline, but a symptom of regeneration part of a cyclical development –like a woman having her period. Personally, I'd go for an anarcho-capitalist system or minarchism, with an economy ruled by laissez-faire; but maybe out of laziness. Utopically I'd fight for a global collectivist anarchism.

"Stuck in austerity and forced to the slowness of recession, there is time for meditation, time for analyzing the content that was never meant to be scrutinized. With eyes wide open I now stare at what was meant to be consumed in a estate of blindness. "

Recent, loosely connected movements in underground and DIY music utilizing capitalist and corporate iconography and imagery have been referred to as 'Distroid' or 'Vaporwave'. Artists such as James Ferraro, Fatima Al Qadiri and E+E. Do you consider the themes of your work as operating within a similar field at all? Do you feel that this aesthetic communicates with today's financial climate of recession and austerity, and if so in what way?

From those artists Fatima is the one only I listen to in an objective way, just because I love what she does. Some of her tracks have become some sort of soundtrack to my own life -I use 'Hip Hop Spa' as a alarm sound to my afternoon naps, for example. With James, and more so with Elijah (E+E), it's different, I have a strong connexion to their music as it triggers many memories: my relation to music is usually very intimate. I crossed America with Felix Lee and Elijah Crampton (E+E), we slept in the car in the middle of sandstorms and I had panic attacks all the way from Virginia to the Bryce Canyon. Their music truly affects me in both good and bad ways. I've been present through the whole creative process of some of their compositions (months on end, day and night) and have certain sounds marked with fire deeply inside of me. I didn't even know those tags or labels even existed. I think my work could be related to theirs just as we are contemporaries, but I would never say it is this way in a 100% intentional basis.