



# Art in America

## STAGES OF LAUGHTER

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Devin Kenny, Slave name/stage name/Ellis Island snafu, 2008/2012, inkjet prints, 21 by 17 inches each. Courtesy Aran Cravey, Los Angeles.

### MARTINE SYMS

HOLLYWOOD ONCE HAD a near monopoly on the manufacture of celebrity. Showbiz took unknown New Yorkers like Leonard Schneider and turned them into Lenny Bruce. Now, anyone can create a marketable persona using the extended narratives that flow through social media feeds. The rising popularity of contemporary art has redefined what it means to be an “art star.” Fame is dependent on an outsize number of followers. Artists are modeling their self-presentation after comedians and small-screen celebs.



I'm thinking about Amalia Ulman's performance *Excellences & Perfections* (2014), which took place primarily on Instagram. Over the course of five months, Ulman posted a series of carefully staged images conveying the fragmented story of a young woman who, like Tina Fey's Liz Lemon, struggles with the four basic guilt groups of food, love, work and family. Unlike Lemon, Ulman transformed herself (or at least her image) through diet, costuming and postproduction. She conducted extensive research on the verbal and visual language of three female archetypes, which she described in a recent interview as "the Tumblr girl (an Urban Outfitters type); the sugar-baby ghetto girl; and the girl next door, someone like Miranda Kerr, who's healthy and into yoga."

Ulman embodies these girls in her images and endows them with the semblance of personalities through captions. *Excellences* traffics in the tone-deaf language of hyper-privilege. Ulman, in the guise of one character, rapidly shifts from the ecstasy of consumerism to callous vanity. "Matching!! #flowers #girl #iPhone #nails #sunglasses #dolcegabbana #dolce&gabbana," reads the caption of one selfie. Another—a sexy full-body shot—lists "reasons i wanna look good." (On the list: "To plant the seed of envy in other bitch's hearts.")

I didn't pay attention to the project, until Ulman described it in the interview as a romantic comedy. The main tropes of that genre are ripe for creative mutation. When done right, romantic comedies articulate our unspeakable desires of all kinds, whether that desire is for affection, objects, happiness or an identity; the worst rom-coms are merely about falling in love with someone.

I've long harbored a secret dream to create a half-hour comedy-drama with a strong female lead. In my fantasy, the working title is "She Mad." The phrase has become a Hail Mary to diffuse ridiculous arguments about cooking and cleaning in my household. I used to say, "We're not in a fucking sitcom!" Now I say, "She mad," and it's like we are.

Earlier this year I made a video called *A Pilot for a Show About Nowhere* that considers the politics of watching television. It's about the way I frame my life within the fictional milestones I learned from pop culture. Should I be anxious that I don't have a car or a house or a job? I've described the project as an experimental sitcom pilot, though it doesn't resemble a conventional episode in any way. I appear in filmed reenactments of my daily life, and a "She Mad" title card is used occasionally to suggest a complete, linear narrative. When I showed the video to a friend who works in the industry, he told me that if I wanted to "be like Steve McQueen"—as in, break into the mainstream from the art world—I should "pull a Lena Dunham."



In artist and writer David Robbins's book *High Entertainment* (2009), there is a chapter on self-presentation and impression management that includes two memorandums. "1. Imagine what a system, context or culture needs. 2. Be that thing, either through real actions or by creation of a persona." Ulman turned into a hot babe, took the lead role in her own drama, and earned herself thousands of followers from within the art world and beyond. Though the format she used may be new, the basic characters Ulman deployed to explore female desires and insecurities have deep roots that extend to the earliest forms of popular entertainment.

On another level, art careers can resemble episodic stories, with meaning accumulating, narratives developing and clout building from exhibition to exhibition. Ulman figured out that she could control that storyline, too, by casting herself in any role she wanted.

There's also evidence that the art system is hungry for qualities associated with another type of comedic performer: the stand-up. Matthew Daube, a Stanford researcher whose work focuses on the performance of race and comedy, suggests the stand-up comic as a desirable model for contemporary selfhood. This individual can "operate amidst apparent entropy with the security of an ironic outlook." The best way to reveal silent expectations or scrutinize and subvert assumptions is with a joke. Comics are highly attuned to the relationship they establish with their audience. "It is against and with the audience that the stand-up comic stands up, simultaneously one of the crowd and yet distinct from it," writes Daube. Many artists use this double-consciousness to their advantage.

One art wit I'm quite envious of is Yung Jake, né Jake Patterson. He's a Net artist, a rapper, a creative at Cartoon Network and a director of both Pepsi commercials and music videos for the cult hip-hop act Rae Sremmurd. Yung Jake was born on the Internet in 2011. The songs he produces are three-minute bits usually accompanied by online videos. In "Datamosh" he brags about his digital effect skills in a glitched video. The lyrics annotate the images. "I'm moshing data, making art on my computer." Jake once left a comment on the site Genius.com explicating his own self-referential work: "Yung Jake is calling attention to the fact that his videos are 'art.'" In "E.m-bed.de/d," Jake goes viral, creating a feedback loop in a narrative that spans multiple browser windows. In a recent live performance of "Look" he stood between a laptop and a dual projection of his desktop and iPhone screens. He spoke to the audience and into his devices' cameras simultaneously. A text message to his phone was all it took for the audience to become a part of his show, their words appearing live onscreen. Most of the messages he received were nonsense.



The joke as we know it is a modern invention that arose from vaudeville. Cultural historian Susan Smulyan argues that the “compression and verbal basis” of Jewish humor made it perfect for mass media. Black humor thrives on the Internet. In the black vernacular tradition, words, signs and their meanings can be endlessly doubled. Scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. likens the effect to a hall of mirrors. This fluidity of language is what Internet memes are made of.

Take Los Angeles artist Devin Kenny. (Please, take him.) He spends a lot of time on his computer when he’s not making sculptures, videos, installations and music. I first encountered him on Facebook and I couldn’t remember if we were friends in real life. When we finally met it didn’t matter. We’d shared so many links at that point. Kenny uses words out of place. A few years ago he installed status updates/jokes on the marquee of a theater in New York’s Chelsea neighborhood. My favorite reads: “Twerkin’ is shorthand for gesamtkunstwerkin.”

For “Wrong Window,” his exhibition at Los Angeles’s Aran Cravey Gallery, he made an Internet of things. Untitled (But I swear this beat go haaard), 2012, is a glass plank on which the parenthetical title has been rendered in enamel. It’s a comment made physical, and it’s installed in a group of similar works adorned with verbal asides and emoticons. Another piece called Slave name/stage name/Ellis Island snafu (2008/2012) lists possible names for his alter egos. Kenny raps under the pseudonym Devin KKenny. His raps are funny because they’re true. In interviews he notes his interest in the figure of the griot, a traditional African historian who speaks in musical, poetic language. His latest track, “LANyards,” ends on a refrain that speaks to the plethora of social media services offered gratis: “If it’s free, best believe you are the product.”

Paradoxically, you might be able to avoid being the product by becoming one. Nathaniel Donnett has a 2011 sculpture titled How Can You Love Me and Hate Me at the Same Time?, a protest sign modeled after those held at the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike declaring, “I Am A Man.” This one reads, “I AM A MEME.” The original was a declaration of independence. Expressing pride at being a meme means establishing a link between personhood and the representation of a person. Self-reference is salvation from top-down control.