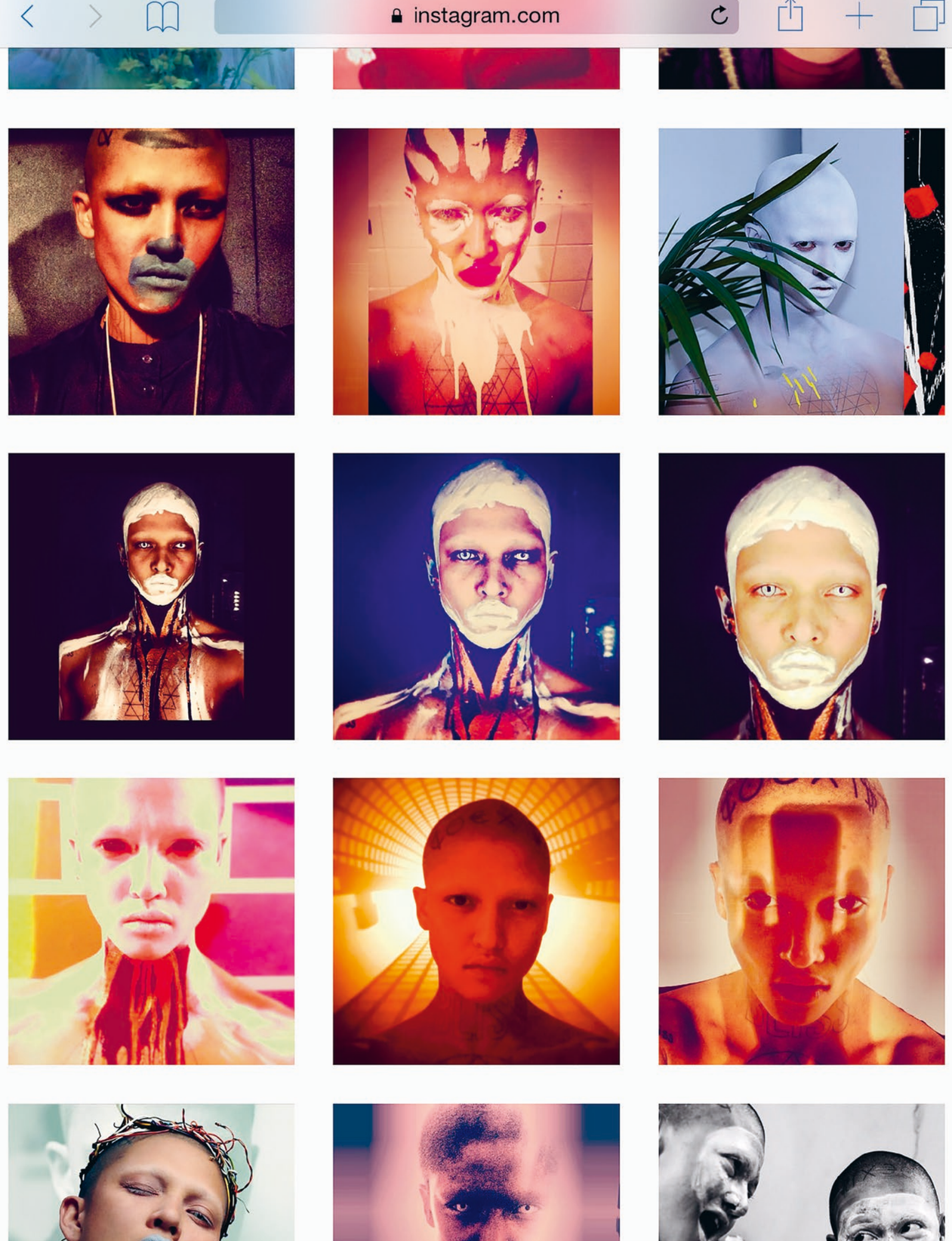


Screenshot of boychild's Instagram feed, 2015
Courtesy the artist

Self-Portraiture in the First-Person Age

Lauren Cornell

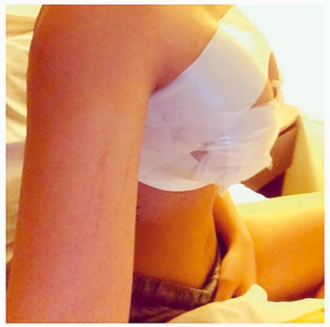
All users perform a version of themselves on Instagram. But how are artists today using the commercial platform to calculated effect? New Museum curator Lauren Cornell looks at how some artists deploy strategies of role-play, humor, withdrawal—or relish in the messiness of everyday life—to unravel social media's conventions of self-presentation.

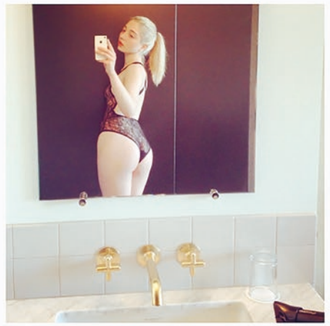
This page:
Both photographs by K8 Hardy.
Left: *IMG_5/27/15 5:41PM*, 2015. Right: *IMG_2/10/15 9:22PM*, 2015
Courtesy the artist

K8 Hardy's video *Outfitumentary* (2001–11/2015) is a montage of hundreds of self-portraits shot over the course of a decade in whatever location the Brooklyn-based artist happened to be living or working at the time. In one early scene, alone in her bedroom, she positions her video camera for a wide-angle shot, then leaps onto a chair and, standing in profile with one leg hoisted onto its back, gazes at the camera with a mix of ferocity and knowing wit. Dressed in a black-and-white checked miniskirt and red thrift-store tee with the sleeves ripped off, her hair in a flowy mullet, her look is a combination of DIY punk, '90s indie, and femme lesbian, plus a dash of Texan dude.

When I saw *Outfitumentary* in 2015, it hit a nerve. Hardy's self-portraits are, in their rawness, vulnerability, and trial-and-error fashioning, very different from today's selfie culture. The key difference is one of audience: in a 2015 *Artforum* interview, Hardy said she took the portraits *only for herself* without caring who might see them. "Only for me" now seems an outmoded or rare sentiment in a culture in which personal archives accumulate in public, not in bedrooms or on dusty hard drives. Her vignettes don't only offer a glimpse of her life and milieu, they reflect an intimate approach to self-portraiture that has yielded to a pop culture that compels us to narrate our lives in the first person. When we take photographs today, we always care about who, besides us, might see them.

Now that we are at the end of the *only for me* era, what strategies of artistic self-portraiture are viable? How to distinguish art from selfies in the *big scroll*? Instagram, for example, is a buffet of genres: documentary, appropriation, political commentary, role-playing. But its inherent immediacy, sociality, and instant commodification (every stroke from liking to tagging creates community for *us* just as it creates value for Instagram) changes the nature of these gestures. Here, humor, mundanity, and abjection play against more rule-abiding images, even as the rules for a *winning image* continually evolve. For instance, polished selfies give way to the casual, and meta-commentary now supersedes "genuine" expression. Amid this push and pull—images in lockstep with Instagram's optimized-for-advertisers creativity competing with those who critique such blatant consumerism—what does it look like to carve out a space for abstraction, dissonance, and transgression: in other words, for art? Several artists today are offering answers to this question.



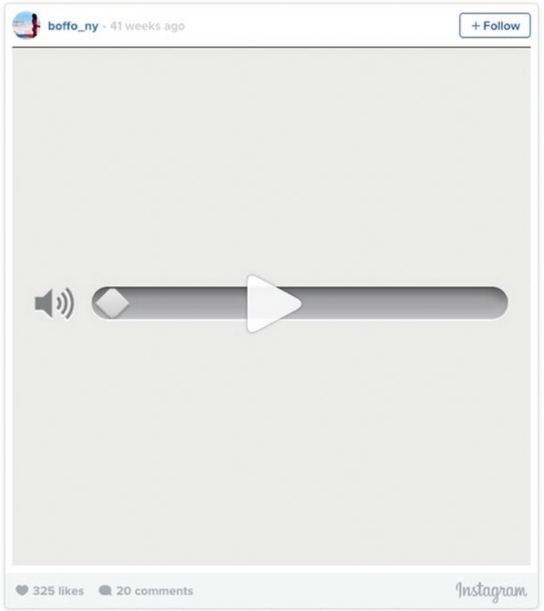


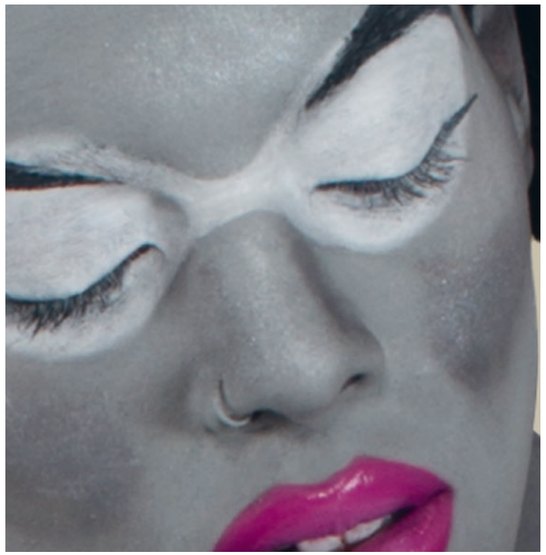
Amalia Ulman, *Excellences and Perfections*, 2014
Courtesy the artist

What does it look like to carve out a space on Instagram for abstraction, dissonance, and transgression: in other words, for art?

"TMI is the best way to enjoy some privacy," predicted artist Amalia Ulman of life in 2020 in a text published within the online journal *e-flux*'s *supercommunity* series in 2015. "Posting confusing information, over-posting, over-sharing, and over-tagging are used as strategies for diverting attention." Ulman's TMI (too much information) approach seems like a sound strategy and also happens to describe her performance and visual art, which often involves excessive self-exposure where the originary self is deeply in question. In *Excellences and Perfections* (2014), for instance, she stages an *Extreme Makeover*–style transformation—allegedly involving facial surgery, breast augmentation, dieting, and pole-dancing classes—and documents each step.

When I first saw this work, I thought of feminist artists who were active in the '70s, like Orlan, who underwent physical transformation for her art, or Hannah Wilke, who documented her body after being diagnosed with breast cancer, and I couldn't see how Ulman's work transcended that of her predecessors. But I came to understand it as a *site-specific* intervention, one born out of the mores of self-creation and consumption on Instagram. *Excellences and Perfections* amplifies the coercive prompts that inform photography here; these prompts are wildly contradictory and include being beautiful, being real about pain, exposing every detail of one's life to the public, and retaining a sense of mystery. Of course, this mode of calculated, mediated self-presentation is not heretofore unknown. But when Rosalind Krauss described "the aesthetics of narcissism" associated with video art in a 1976 essay for *October* journal, it would have been hard to predict the mass habitation of narcissism we know today—a state Ulman's work consciously emerges from. Another aspect of *site specificity* is how her work is constituted not just by photographs but by an ongoing call and response. Like so many projects on social media, it only signifies as art





Top:
Xavier Cha, *<3 Like: A BOFFO Instagram Project*, 2014
Courtesy the artist and BOFFO NY

Bottom:
Juliana Huxtable, *Untitled (Instagram Photo)*, 2015
© and courtesy the artist

when seen as a dialogical series—or, more aptly put, a feed that includes comments, tags, and likes. Here, the self is nothing without its followers. And, in this case, it's unclear how Ulman's audience sees her: it's likely some of her followers see the work as performance while others see it as the true story of a relatable blonde in search of the perfect "after" shot to the extreme makeover process.

A counterstrategy to TMI is total retreat. In an interview published in *DIS Magazine* in 2015, choreographer and visual artist Xavier Cha wrote, "I personally don't feel a need at the moment to add to the excessive inundation; that's why I'm more inclined to create experiences and open up ways of thinking rather than add to the clutter of objects and images. To me, most of that has grown mute." For Instagram, Cha conceived of a project consisting of seventeen sound files each comprising an individual post. Their visual aspect is minimal, featuring only a play button and clip timeline, but the texts are dense: each one is a captivating performance in which a hired actor reads a pornographic or violent passage, her voice stripped of any inflection or emphasis. The quick sound bites evince states of desire, rage, and psychological intensity rarely found on Instagram. The script of one audio piece reads, "A beautiful young man's face, cradled by a hand, grasping his scalp, his mouth longingly agape for one of the hard cocks, coming on his face, from every angle of the frame."

Cha has long been interested in how the self forms in relation to technology. Previous performances include *Ring* (2010) in which a throng of photographers, with cameras rapidly, loudly flashing, snake around a gallery with no incentive, i.e., no notable person or event in sight. Or *Body Drama* (2011), in which a performer writhes on the floor as a video camera, strapped tightly to his or her body, records the performer's facial expressions, which are projected live and large onto a nearby screen. In her new work, Cha displaces herself to represent what is unrepresentable—or off-limits—on Instagram. If these were images, they would be rapidly censored. As sound, they escape the trawling bots that would deem them pornographic and delete them. They offer a counterpoint to the "excessive inundation" of visual imagery in social media that, in her opinion, becomes neutered and voiceless. The work points to how sound and language open up a territory where codes of conduct are nascent if at all existent, and 1:1 representation is irrelevant. Her retreat, or visual erasure, also dovetails with an artistic conversation related to feeling under threat—artistically or personally—by a relentless 360-degree gaze peering out from multiple devices (see the work of Zach Blas or Adam Harvey, artists who are interested in privacy issues and so-called digital dark spaces). Withdrawal of the body and substitution of the voice in Cha's work emerges as a potent form of self-protection from Instagram, and other commercial entities, that are continually tracking our interests and quantifying our movements to better advertise to us, or sell our data to another source. Without a body, she is untraceable.

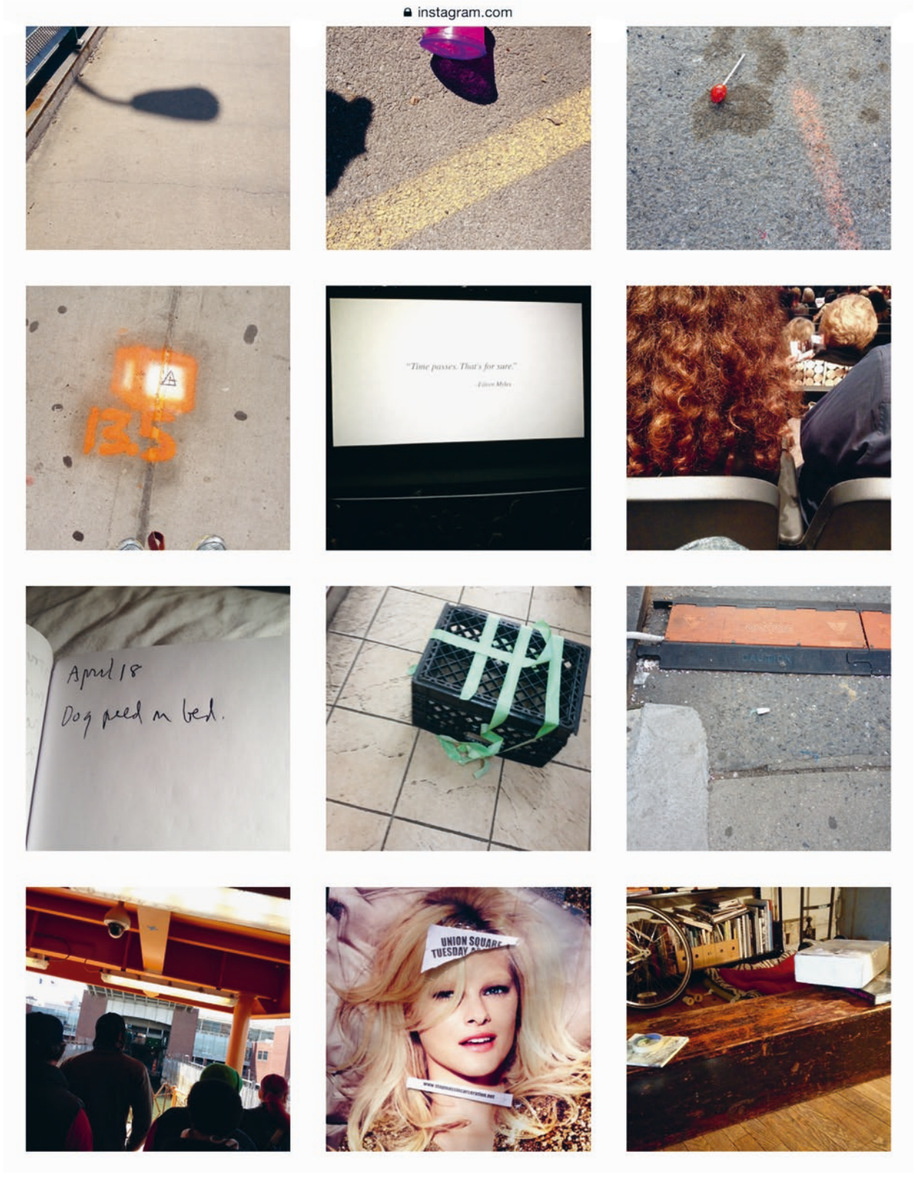
Self-portraiture in the arts has long been linked to political questions of visibility and representation. Artists associated with identity politics of the late '80s and '90s contested the essentialist discourse of multiculturalism that would have them reduced to narrow social categories with attendant stereotypes. In a sense, artists emerging today have similar battles to wage—presenting themselves as more complex than their social appearances—but these battles are now often staged within highly branded and commercial spaces of social media that harden old pressures and add challenges. Faced with the vicissitudes of self-branding, artists often respond or resist with depictions of highly flexible, liminal selves. Photographer Cindy Sherman, who since the '70s

Juliana Huxtable, *Untitled*, 2015
© and courtesy the artist

Withdrawal emerges as a potent form of self-protection from Instagram and other entities.

has seamlessly inhabited various female archetypes, drawn from Hollywood films or mass culture, is frequently invoked as an important precedent to this younger generation of women artists, such as Hardy. But a more suitable precursor might be Claude Cahun, the early twentieth-century Surrealist, whose pliable self-portraits released her from strict gender types and evoked the vast inconclusiveness of her subjectivity.

Cahun was also an expert of collage, of the cuts and edits now associated with digital editing programs. Her spirit hovers over several of the most poignant self-portraitists on Instagram, all of whom use editing tools—cropping, filtering, highlighting—techniques that weren't available so freely only a decade ago (one



Screenshot of Eileen Myles's Instagram feed, April–May 2015
© the artist

used to have to buy and master Photoshop, whereas Instagram simplifies basic special effects). These include the searing poet and artist Juliana Huxtable, whose photographs project her into fantasy realms in which she channels divergent cultural eras and their attendant fashions, from the 1960s and '70s Black Power movement to the 1990s stylization of black militancy in hip-hop as seen through camouflage clothes. The performance artist boychild's performances take on the hard and heavy feel of a club, with immersive lighting—pink, green, or black, all shot through with white light—and remixed pop songs, for instance a guttural version of Destiny Child's airy track "Say My Name." Center stage, boychild mixes futuristic, sci-fi effects—her mouth and hands glow as she dances—with the simmering vengeance and wild energies of what one imagines a recently hatched posthuman might feel. Her performances often seem to be rehearsed or tested out on Instagram, where her feed is rife with images that look otherworldly: she shimmers holographically, submerges herself in color fields, and appears splattered in red paint that looks like blood from an unknown source. These images punch out of traditional gender binaries with a new set of terms; boychild seems to invent new gender options that blend heretofore unpaired modes from gladiatorial warrior to ethereal hologram. In their constant mutability and careful composition, they eschew rawness and, instead, become self-fashioned icons: half self, half shareable possibility.

Hardy, too, has been posting self-portraits to Instagram since 2013 that she refers to as "sketches," a fitting term for the open-ended response such an iterative medium elicits. In her stream, she can be seen in myriad "looks," as imaginative and disparate as those in her video *Outfitumentary*, except here increasingly with body parts cut, collaged, or resized. In one, she appears against the side of a whitewashed house with stylishly contrasting clothes, flowered top, yellow jacket, faded neon airbrushed skirt, prompting a lone comment from artist Travis Boyer (@fazboy) reading "beauty." In others, she dives into the abject, surreal, and humorous: she collages her facial features—hairline, eyes, lips—so that they hover over a patch of dirt; pastes a miniature version of her body onto a dining room table, as if she is a living centerpiece; doubles and distends herself; layers her naked backside onto someone else's torso with a comment reading "a piece of burger from yesterday"; and cycles herself through a striking range of poses and attitudes, special effects–assisted and not. Looking at her feed, one gets a kaleidoscopic impression of a persona—her own—that clearly refuses to be flattened into a recognizable Insta-brand. Hardy, Huxtable, and boychild transgress Instagram's norms: in their expansive, irreducible self-presentations, they veer away from the hardened rule-playing privileged personae that Ulman's work undermines.

In contrast, the lack of effects and the absence of staging—the lack of a curated, stylized self—whenever found, has its own allure. The American poet Eileen Myles's feed, for instance, often seems fired off or pounded out, similar to the feel of her rousing, blunt verse. Here are sinks of dirty dishes, jokes typed in Microsoft Word docs, a semi-sucked red lollipop lying on a dirty street, a two-line diary entry: "April 18 / Dog peed in bed," a string of shots of a single melting candle, the first explained in the comments with her note "& I'm hearing a train." Showing multiple versions of the same shot reveals the entire photography process, not just the "good" one that made the cut. Her photographs are sometimes taken at off-kilter angles, almost as though they were taken from the perspective of objects rather than people—a shirt button, a moving car, a chair. In one particularly abstract and compelling series, she takes multiple shots of several scavenged woodchips. The meaning or significance of the woodchips is unclear to the viewer—at first, they appear like souvenirs of a walk in the woods or mismatched puzzle pieces—but Myles's interest in them is writ large through her continual posting. As the images accumulate and the woodchips find themselves persistently rethought and rearranged, they take on an anthropomorphic quality, as if they are helpless models stolen from their organic habitat and forced to submit to the arbitrariness and scrutiny of a modern device. In the most recent shot, perhaps the series finale, they are mingled on a plate with garlic and crackers, as if their allure has been fully exhausted. Myles's feed is full of upstart, rowdy sketches that diverge from the carefully composed pictures of pretty people and lattes for which Instagram is often (and justly) parodied. They give no heed to the inherent rules of the medium but rather create space for the messiness of life, and of the creative process, that Instagram users often crop out.

What it means to present yourself, your body, your autobiography, your day-to-day existence in public has changed today, as the first person has become a default and commercialized mode of presentation. What if apps compelled us to speak collectively, with our biological family, or through consensus with a group of diverse peers, or around shared causes or values? We would be challenged to balance conflicting opinions, to gather consensus and break away from self-interest. Instead, pop culture has hardened around the individual voice. In this context, strategies for presenting and preserving a singular artistic viewpoint are harder to grasp and hold, especially because social media is so adept at absorbing its antagonisms. The appropriation of subcultures (by brands or popular usage) has never been faster or more efficient. What feels dissonant today, erasure, say, or disorder or reinvention, as named above, may, in only a short time, become status quo. But social media, in its omnipresence and ubiquitous use, has become a main site for the contestation of identity and the self—a new arena that repeats and extends previous eras' questions of visibility and self-definition, and begs for artistic challenge.

Lauren Cornell is Curator and Associate Director, Technology Initiatives at the New Museum.