



## Constructing the “Instagirl,” Deconstructing the Self-Brand: Amalia Ulman’s Instagram Hoax

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### ABSTRACT

Amalia Ulman is an Argentinian-born Spanish artist who used Instagram as a platform for an art piece titled *Excellences & Perfections* in which she used images of herself to portray a fictional character whose story unfolded over several months. Her images, replicating popular tropes of digital autobiographical performance were presented and widely read as “authentic” selfies. This essay examines how Ulman’s performance piece can be understood as an autobiographical mediation that uses networked photo-sharing practices to investigate feminine embodiment and self-representation, and how self-branding in digital media is gendered.

**Keywords:** Instagram, self-branding, new media, girlhood, gender, hoax

Amalia Ulman is a 30-year-old Argentinian-born Spanish artist based in Los Angeles. Her work is experimental and feminist, and she works with ideas around mediation, middle-class aesthetics, capitalism, globalisation and identity. In 2013 she was singled out by Serpentine Galleries director Hans-Ulrich Obrist as a young artist to watch. After this opportunity, she started to gain some success: she was invited to speak on panels and she exhibited her work in galleries and museums. Like many young artists, she used social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook to promote her career and to network in the art world.

But in April 2014 her Instagram took an unexpected turn. Amalia dyed her hair blonde and began posting cutesy selfies interspersed with photos of luxury beauty products, trendy fashions, and pretty, girly images

of bunnies and flowers. Drawn by hashtags like #dolceandgabbana, #iPhone, and #brunch, Ulman’s following grew. Then came a breakup with a boyfriend, and Amalia’s Instagram became darker and more racy. Her mirror selfies showed her in expensive clothes and their captions hinted that she was finding work as an escort with a sugar daddy. She got a boob job, started partying and taking drugs, and developed a bad attitude. Along with spectators and supportive followers, she also attracted haters and “trolls” (users who provoke and harass others on digital platforms). Events reached a crisis point and two videos from August show Amalia in tears. After this breakdown and a two-week absence from social media, she posted an apology. She was doing much better, had moved back home, and was enjoying yoga, herbal tea, and avocado on toast. By this stage she had amassed nearly 90,000 followers.

Her reputation as a serious artist, though, had suffered. She says:

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People started hating me, [...] Some gallery I was showing with freaked out and was like, “You have to stop doing this, because people don’t take you seriously anymore.” Suddenly I was this dumb b---- because I was showing my ass in pictures. (Sooke)

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It seemed to some that Ulman’s oversharing Instagram account was going to ruin her prospects: these images—cute selfies, photographs of nail art, and images of lattes—were not fitting for a young artist who was serious about her career. Perhaps images that appeared to trade on or replicate conventions and stereotypes of social media self-presentation were not read as artful or experimental, but as reproducing banal scenes of millennial online existence. However, public perception changed when Ulman appeared on a panel discussion for the Institute of Contemporary Arts, and revealed that the entire story was a fiction, an art piece called *Excellences & Perfections*.

After the announcement, the piece was widely received as a hoax, and praised for showing how social media apps like Instagram, and the audiences who flock to them, are vulnerable to fakery. But during her presentation, Ulman explains that her aim for the project was not to point out that Instagram users are drawn to dramatic, superficial content; rather she wanted to ‘appropriate the most popular “it girl” trends on Instagram’ in order to explore the question ‘How is a female artist supposed to look like? How is she supposed to behave?’ (ICA). It was not the Instagram audience that Ulman was attempting to provoke, but rather the gatekeepers of the art world. And the verb “appropriate” is significant here. Ulman draws on racialised and classed, as well as gendered, stereotypes and conventions in choosing which trends to replicate. I will return to the issue of appropriation, and explore how Ulman’s deployment of it

probes conventional frames of reading young women's self-presentation on Instagram. What the piece highlights is not shallow patterns of life narration, but shallow patterns of reading.

In the presentation, Ulman disrupts the easy consumption of young women's Instagram activity by emphasising the distance between the work she has produced here and her "real" identity as an artist. She says, 'my online representation didn't represent me anymore' (ICA).

Here, the artist cues ideas about performativity and self-presentation online: the images that we consume are not simply real life captured and offered to the audience, they are performances. Even when there is a less obvious gap between the creator's online self and her "real life" or embodied self, the text is always an auto/biographical performance. In this initial explanation of the project, Ulman explicitly differentiates between the online and embodied versions of her identity, showing one as authentic (her "true" embodied self) and one as performative (her online representation). Her identity as a young artist is positioned as the authoritative identity.

After the panel presentation, the media reported that the piece was a brilliant hoax and a performance art work (see for example Jansen; Kinsey; Langmuir; Taylor). *Excellences & Perfections* has since been hailed as 'one of the most original and outstanding artworks of the digital era' (Sooke) and images from the series were blown up on canvasses and exhibited at The Tate Modern and Whitechapel Gallery. *Excellences & Perfections* was also exhibited as a captured version of Ulman's Instagram account by Rhizome and The New Museum (Connor). Ulman's reputation has been restored.

In this article, I explore how Ulman's piece unsettles Instagram by playing with audience expectations of authenticity and testing the social media platform's capacity as a space for provocative art. *Excellences & Perfections* (Ulman 2014a) probes the connections between art, mediation and autobiography in contemporary social media; specifically, the piece takes culturally loaded—and often devalued—modes of picturing femininity online and, by framing them as performance art, asks the viewer to reconsider how they read and consume such images. In particular, Ulman's piece examines the identity of the "Instagirl," an identity, or cluster of related identities, particularly reflective of the commodification of the self on social media. In thinking about how Ulman's piece troubles and comments on gender and image-based social media self-presentation, this article takes Instagram as a site where practices of self-branding are developed and play out, and where young women's self-presentation is shaped by complex flows of identity commodification and audience expectations of authenticity. Ultimately,

my reading of this artwork is that it implicates not only the subject—the Instagramming, self-mediating artist—but also the audience, the technology, the app, and a broader capitalist logic that orders and connects these different elements. Specifically, Ulman’s piece critiques and explores how each of these elements contribute to a system that coaxes<sup>1</sup> self-presentations and creates templates for commoditised selfhood like the Instagirl.

Further, Ulman’s performance art uses the strategy of masquerade to draw attention to the Instagaze and its role in constructing gendered, classed, and raced subjects. By using an arena in which life narrative is the mode *de rigueur* to instead present an autobiographical *fiction*, (and one that reproduces generic tropes of Instagram identity performance) *Excellences & Perfections* undermines claims of authenticity that support Instagram’s economy. This implicates everyday users who “like,” “follow” and post, influencers that use the platform to market their self-brand for financial gain, and the corporation that owns Instagram (which is Facebook, as of 2012).

## AUTHENTICITY AND MASQUERADE

Authenticity is a crucial part of Instagram’s economy, and a protected commodity on the site. Like many digital media platforms, Instagram implicitly promises to deliver self-presentations that are sincere, if not completely true to life (thanks to the popular practice of retouching photographs), and this is a core part of its appeal. Brooke Erin Duffy examines how market preferences for ‘authenticity, realness and relatability’ in the social media marketplace have become mandates that regulate the production of self-presentation for young women online (99–100). In this context, authenticity and profit-making—which may seem at odds—become ‘reconciled as public expressions of the personal self-brand’ (Duffy 104). In the course of Duffy’s study she interviews several ex-fashion bloggers who are suspicious of the current landscape, seeing the commercialisation of user-made media as compromising the appeal to the real that blogging once held for them. Through these bloggers’ insights, Duffy identifies a ‘yawning chasm between the blogosphere’s rhetoric of “realness” and a reality where traditional logics—aspirationalism, commercialism, and feminine perfection—endure’ (113). For those who maintain an investment in the currency of authenticity on which they must trade in order to be successful, authenticity must be constantly negotiated and defended against such compromising factors. What Duffy’s study ultimately shows is that authenticity—both a commodity and a currency—serves to conceal

problematic power structures in social media entrepreneurship. By preserving the ruse of authenticity, communities also preserve traditional labour and class divisions (because only those with the resources can afford to launch careers as influencers), as well as gender and race norms (where feminine beauty and whiteness continue to be valued and traded as commodities). Accepting the value of authenticity means playing within the bounds of traditionally oppressive power structures.

But Ulman's manipulation of tropes and conventions attempts to unsettle authenticity as a commodity or currency. The strategy she uses to do this work is *masquerade*, reformulated ironically and self-consciously for a millennial audience.

One way of reading the subversive potential of this strategy of self-presentation is by considering Mary Ann Doane's theorising of 'masquerade' as a mode of gender performativity. Here, femininity 'is a mask which can be worn or removed' and 'in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance' (81). The purpose of holding femininity at a distance here is not to refute it or disclaim it, exactly, but to shake loose the attachment of naturalised gender to a sexed body. This attachment is particularly loaded in regard to visual modes of representation in which dominant ways of seeing picture women as objects and men as subjects. Doane paraphrases Luce Irigaray's insights on gendered modes of gazing and identification, saying that, 'the woman always has a problematic relation to the visible, to form, to structures of seeing' (80). This problematic relation stems from the woman's objectified position within dominant 'structures of seeing,' which mean that as an object she becomes an iconic sign, which Doane describes like a hieroglyph in its pictorialness, as 'the most readable of languages' (75). The hieroglyph—and the iconic sign of femininity in imagistic systems of representation like film, or Instagram—is so readable because of the perceived immediacy between visual symbol and signified concept where signifier and signified are often thought of as less distant than in other forms of representation like written language (*ibid*). Masquerade, though, aims at recovering some of this distance and disentangling the signifier and signified in the case of the iconic feminine sign. Doane explains that:

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the masquerade's resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as [...] imagistic. [...] Masquerade [...] involves a realignment of femininity, the recovery, or more accurately, simulation, of the missing gap or distance. To masquerade is to manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one's image. (82)

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This is precisely the work of *Excellences & Perfections*. By adopting the ‘mask’ of variant performances of femininity, by clearly separating her identity as an artist from the others that she performs, Ulman denaturalises them and shows them as gendered constructs.

The project contains 175 images in total, uploaded gradually over a period of 5 months during April to September 2014. At the time of writing they are still available to view on Ulman’s Instagram account (Ulman 2014a). These images draw on three distinct life narrative aesthetics found on social media, which Ulman uses to portray three distinct feminine identities, tied together through the narrative arc of the rising star who self-destructs and then finds redemption. The three-act template draws on the tradition of theatre and, in this way, also cues ideas about performance and embodied play: like in theatre, Ulman is using her body to play a part. She employs costume, gesture, and setting to bring a character and a narrative to life.

The first Act is characterised by cuteness and infantilised femininity: there are bunny rabbits, a pink and white colour scheme, and strawberry pancakes. The selfies show Amalia in pink robes, white dresses, and wearing Lolita-style love heart glasses. Luxury consumer items are important: photographs of diamond necklaces, delicate lingerie, and expensive skincare sets are scattered throughout the selfies. Act One culminates in the inciting incident: Amalia’s breakup. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of June, a mirror selfie of Amalia and a man, his identity obscured by shadows, is captioned ‘don’t be sad because it’s over, smile because it happened~after 3 years it has been time to move on i guess. there were good and bad moments but i will remember the best bits. life goes on’ (Ulman 2014c).

After this, the colour scheme shifts from pink and white to black and white, and the filters that Ulman uses give the images a seedy, yellow tinge. This aesthetic shift signals the beginning of Act Two. Instead of bunnies and Lolita glasses, the images are of bank notes, tattoos, and memes that read ‘Stay pretty. Be educated. Dress well. Make money’ (Ulman 2014d). Luxury items still appear in this section of the narrative; it is implied that Amalia has found a sugar daddy and is working as an escort. Amalia becomes a hustler, a badass girl using what she has to work hard and make money to pay for an aspirational and luxurious lifestyle. One selfie depicts Amalia wearing leopard print pants and a black crop-top. The caption reads, ‘I might not be the nicest. But i’m real and dont give a fuck about standing alone. It’s those super nice mfs u need to keep an eye on. SHOTS FIRED’ (Ulman 2014e). This “bad girl” persona is a marked transformation from the nice girl who is portrayed in the first Act, and taps into the appeal of the “good girl gone bad” character type.

Finally, the fast lifestyle of the hustler catches up with Amalia, and she breaks down. After two teary videos and a two-week departure from social media, Amalia is back with an apology to her followers:

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Dear everyone, I'm really sorry for my behaviour recently. I was acting weird and committed many mistakes because I wasn't at a good place in my life tbh<sup>2</sup>. I'm recovering now and I feel better, all thanks to the help of my closest friends and family. [...] Also, feeling blessed for all my internet friends who sent wonderful recovery messages on fb. [...] Thank you so much for being patient with me, Blessings, Amalia (Ulman 2014h).

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This post signals a turning point and the final Act. The colour scheme becomes cool and neutral, and photographs of Amalia are predominantly not selfies, but photographs of her holding her baby cousin, meditating, and eating brunch in a café decorated with palms and stone pillars in an image tagged #ethnic #eclectic. The commodities featured here are white interiors, herbal tea sets, nutritious foods. One post is a new age quote titled 'namasté' and captioned with prayer emoji hands (Ulman 2014i). After her public breakdown, it appears that Amalia has recovered and repented.

These three identities—the kawaii girl, the hustler, and the new age “healed” girl—are mediated via three distinct aesthetics. Each aesthetic employs its own set of technological elements like filters and captions to give a sense of texture and voice to the representation, and each engages the representation of commodities to portray the taste and status of the girl being presented. That these identities and aesthetics are so prevalent on social media platforms like Instagram, where people do mediate their lives and selves through such lenses, is certainly one reason that some of Ulman’s viewers were perhaps “tricked” into believing that the series was really Ulman mediating her own life and her own identity. But Ulman says that what she wanted to do with the piece was to show femininity as a construction rather than something natural and, by drawing on contemporary social media conventions for feminine self-presentation, to show how femininity is being constructed in spaces like Instagram—in image-based, networked, social media. By highlighting the performative nature of social media, the piece troubles the idea that young women’s images are a simplistic documentation of “life,” showing them to be highly mediated versions of lives and selves that carry and reflect meanings about gender, class and race. They explicitly and self-consciously draw on cultural scripts to inform the autobiographical subject as well as her relationship to an audience.

Importantly Ulman’s gendered masquerade is also about engaging with racial archetypes appropriated by white culture. The Kawaii girl draws on

constructions of cute identity developed by Japanese girls. The hustler draws on traditions established by Black American women (and men). And the new age #namaste trope draws on Western notions of Eastern spirituality. Ulman identifies as ‘mixed race’ (Kinsey), describing herself on her artist website as an Argentinian-born Spanish artist. However, the images and reception of *Excellences & Perfections* show her passing as white. Indeed, when I presented early research on this piece, despite articulating specifically that Ulman self-identifies as ‘mixed-race,’ I received questions about Ulman’s ability to gain fame on social media by trading on her prettiness and whiteness, which signals that these images do read as white appropriation of Japanese, Black, and Eastern identity traditions. To what degree Ulman’s masquerade comments on or employs appropriation and exploitation is important to consider, and it is not clear to me how self-aware the piece is about its use of commonly appropriated cultural identities. Or, more simply put: the piece does engage in appropriation. The question is whether Ulman is consciously and purposefully probing practices of cultural exploitation or not. Ulman’s comments initially revealing the piece as art seem to indicate the use of irony in appropriating these types, which allows her a slipperiness: it is difficult to settle on whether or to what degree the piece is exploitative of the visual cultures on which it draws. As the images read as white appropriation, it is perhaps the case that it is the cultural practice of appropriation that is the target here. There is not room in this paper to explore this question more fully but I want to draw attention to the integral part that race plays in *Excellences & Perfections*, and how Ulman uses masquerade to show that gender is one of several power structures at play here: race and class are just as significant.

Although Instagram might not be readily associated with contemporary art, Ulman’s use of her body as subject or medium draws on a tradition of female artists using their own bodies in their work. Artists like Cindy Sherman, Hannah Wilke, Carolee Schneemann, Ana Mendieta and Yoko Ono, for example, have taken up photography and performance art as forms that allow them to use their bodies in their art. Like these artists, Ulman, too, investigates the kinds of labour involved in constructing femininity as well as how the gaze operates to construct gendered subject and object positions. Ulman looks specifically at online spaces where the visual is the mode *de rigueur*, as it was with the photographic production of third wave feminists. She has expressed that one of her goals for the project was ‘to show that femininity is [not] inherent to being a woman—instead, it takes a lot of effort and work’ (Björk). She says:

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I really wanted to play with fiction in social media using the rhythm and cadence of the internet. And everything that is ever posted online is curated,



a construction of sorts. All of these popular characters are chosen to then be performed. Along the same lines, I was meaning to say that femininity—at least the image-based version of it, which in the world we live in is, like, 90 percent of the feminine experience—has little to do with biology. (Ulman in Björk)

Ulman, here, is linking the performativity of life narrative online with the performativity of gender, and she is doing it through the lens of ‘the feminine experience.’ *Excellences & Perfections*, in appearing to depict things that are widely taken for granted as natural—being a girl, taking a photo of your life—but showing them to be, in fact, constructions that rely on complex arrays of meaning-making between audience and creator, asks the viewer to look again at what they think they are seeing. This is a way of interrupting or calling into question the consumption of the feminine image on Instagram—a site that generates an abundance of images of girls and young women. Thus, Ulman’s hoax makes visible the construct of her Instagram Girl, positioning her as a character—or, specifically, three characters—that women can slip into in order to achieve success and be visible on Instagram.

## INSTAGRAM

Ulman’s images, however, are not the only thing on display in *Excellences & Perfections*. Part of what both constructs and is under examination in this performance piece is the technological platform itself—Instagram—along with its affordances and conventions. Instagram is a photo sharing app created for use on mobile devices. It allows users to upload images and short videos, which they can enhance with in-app filters, to which they can add a caption and hashtags. Users can “follow” other accounts and comment on other users’ posts. When a user uploads an image, it is added to their profile grid—a profile “page” that includes a collection of all past uploads in reverse chronological order, which users can go back and edit, adding or deleting text or deleting images that they no longer want to appear on the grid. Instagram requires users to nominate a username with which to interact on the app, as well as stating their name on their profile. The profile has space for a short biographical statement or information about the account, and users can include a link to direct traffic from their Instagram account to another website. This reflects one of Instagram’s key uses as a promotional space to grow and engage an audience which can then be funnelled elsewhere, such as an online store, a blog, or a YouTube channel. Urged by the popularity of rival app Snapchat, the developers of Instagram

have newly added the function of Stories, which allow users to share images and videos that self-delete once they are twenty-four hours old,<sup>3</sup> however, my analysis focusses chiefly on the Instagram profile as the site of Ulman’s performance piece.

Three important concepts that underpin Instagram are the self, community, and capturing moments in time. The description of the app on Apple’s iTunes store foregrounds self-presentation and the sharing of ‘moments’ with a community as key behaviours facilitated by Instagram (Instagram, Inc.). The description encourages users to ‘*express yourself* by sharing all the moments of your day—the highlights and everything in between, too’ (Instagram, Inc., my emphasis). Here, the self is central to Instagram—the images that users share ‘express’ a self by communicating both significant and mundane moments from their life. Importantly, recording daily life by sharing ‘the moments of your day’ forms part of Instagram’s fabric, linking it to preceding forms of life narrative like the diary. And the profile grid, with its reverse chronological organisation, offers the potential for a life narrative—however fragmented—to unfold over time. It is worth noting that the Instagram profile takes the form of a grid displaying users’ photographs in reverse-chronological order, acting as both an archive and a profile page. Because of this affordance, the platform has seen the growth of increasingly polished and professional-looking images. Profiles are not impulsively thrown together but planned and composed according to aesthetic sensibilities, adding pressure to make sure the self that users ‘express’ is appealing to others.

That Instagram allows for serial self-representation—an autobiographical strategy honed by women artists in the twentieth century—makes it an ideal platform for Ulman’s project. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2002, 7) explain that women artists’ experiments with serial self-presentation via mediums like performance, photography, and film have opened up a ‘frequent and multifaceted exploration of seriality itself, of self-presentation in time’ at the interface of visibility and textuality. Instagram practitioners, particularly those like Ulman who are interrogating the platform’s functions and norms around presenting the self over time, can be seen as extending this exploration into digital territory. Ulman conducted her piece over five months, which is a realistic timeline for the events of her story to play out. The “crash and burn” tale of a beautiful girl who self-destructs is familiar as a cultural narrative, both in fiction and in celebrity culture. That audiences find it entertaining to watch a beautiful girl publicly self-destruct should be deeply disturbing, but in a tabloid landscape, it has become so common as to be mundane with examples ranging from Marilyn Monroe to Amy Winehouse, Britney Spears, and

Amanda Bynes. Ulman's real-time unfolding of this narrative invites the viewer to reconsider this narrative as horrific and troubling, and importantly, *real*.

One of Instagram's affordances, the ability to leave comments on other users' photographs, is another part of *Excellences & Perfections* that is under examination here. The comments and interactions of Ulman's Instagram audience (literally) become part of the artwork itself. That the disturbing images of Amalia in tears attracted comments like 'ANNOYING' and 'That's right, cry. Im getting hot watcheing [sic] this/ #crybitch!/It sounds like you're #cuttingyourself #lolol' (Ulman 2014j) is deeply unsettling. But it is incredibly common for girls and women to attract violent, vitriolic, threatening, and abusive commentary on social media (Banet-Weiser & Miltner; Jane 2014; Jane 2016; Shaw). That the audience's comments here literally become part of the artwork itself indicates that the public reception of Ulman's image is an integral part of the performance, and in this case, it serves to highlight the hostility that many girls and women face in mediating their lives online, revealing the micro-politics of social media. Ethically, questions arise here about the extent to which the piece manipulates its audience, and also around consent: would the audience still have participated had they been aware it was an art piece? What responsibility does Ulman have to her audience in reframing their engagement as art? Questions arise, too, around the way that exhibiting single photographs on the walls of art galleries abstracts them from the narrative sequence and erases the element of audience engagement that is so crucial. Another way to look at this is that shifting the frame and the way that audiences view and comment on the images in fact extends the work, moving it into physical space, and in doing so enriching the piece by contrasting material and digital modes of circulation and audience positioning.

#### DECONSTRUCTING SELF-BRANDING: THE INSTAGIRL, CRUEL OPTIMISM, AND EMBODIMENT

Self-branding forms a significant part of the way lives and selves are constructed and shared on Instagram, and it is also an increasingly important skill for young professionals who, today, are encouraged to develop their self-brand in order to communicate themselves to target audiences such as potential employers or clients. Ulman's performance piece responds to her experiences of self-branding as a young female artist. Prior to creating *Excellences & Perfections* Ulman began using social media to promote herself as an artist and she became disturbed

by how much her career success seemed to depend on making herself accessible in a particular way. She describes how the people she saw as gatekeepers—male gallerists, curators, critics—showed interest in her work because of what they saw of her online (Langmuir). She expresses frustration that she could only make money and generate interest in her work by making herself visible as a pretty, quirky young artist. But despite Ulman’s grievances, she was good at self-branding. In fact, she became so visible as an artist with a successful brand that in 2013 she was invited to speak on a panel about branding as an artist hosted by art organisation 89Plus and featuring trend forecasters, brand strategists and artists (Art Basel). Ulman describes how this request compelled her to think about how her self-representation was being commoditised within a gendered system and, ultimately, to develop the ideas that would feed into *Excellences & Perfections*:

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Was I self-branding? My openness had become a commercial strategy. No filter. I was unintentionally performing the stereotype of the artsy brunette. The poor female artist who had moved from a provincial town to the big city. The eager learner who requires to be saved by the male director of some museum or some school of fine arts. (ICA 2016)

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Ulman recognised that her success depended, partially, not on the quality of her work but on the image she was cultivating online in order to market it. She began seeking a way to ‘boycott [her]self’ in order to ‘undermine the capitalist undertones of [her] online presence’ (ICA). She says: ‘I had been this cliché of an arty girl. Which is so fetishised by certain people. So I thought, what if I transform myself into something that is *not* allowed in the art world?’ (Langmuir, my emphasis). As a strategy to boycott herself, Ulman decided to ‘let the trolls in’ (ICA). The ‘something [...] not allowed in the art world’ that she sought to become turned out to be a creation of Ulman’s, based on what she was observing about girls on Instagram: she created and performed an “Instagirl.”

An illustrative description of the popular conception of Instagram Girl comes from *Elle* magazine, which, in October 2016, ran a story about young women who were gaining large audiences on the platform. The article, in its description of the ‘Insta-Girl,’ anticipates an audience that is already familiar with her: ‘You know the M.O.—beautiful girls perpetually strolling through an Italian sun-lit street or lying on a Caribbean beach, freshly cracked coconut in hand and some expert lighting in place. Girls whose Instagram feeds are as beautiful and curated as the pages of a glossy, and whose personal brands are as successful as their filter choices’ (*Elle*). The Instagirl is a lifestyle blogger and social media influencer

who uses her self-brand to advertise products on social media, and she is an increasingly pervasive identity in the media landscape. Part of the Instagirl's appeal is that she is potentially just an ordinary girl, 'walking among us on the street or maybe even sitting beside us in lecture halls' but one whose Instagram account depicts 'a kind of fashion and lifestyle utopia' (Nolan). But the Instagirl has special status as an identity that can sell products to consumers: *Vogue* featured a group of Instagram-famous young women on its September 2014 issue, inspiring headlines announcing that Instagirls had superseded models ('Forget Supermodels. It's Now All About the "Instagirls"' (Saad)) and the Instagirl has been the topic of tabloid, news, and entertainment media commentary from approximately 2014 onwards (see, for example: Argyle; Larbi; Saad; Shenn; Moss; Okwodu; and Sharkey). Integral to the Instagirl's self-presentation is the form of the selfie.

As a mode of digital self-presentation, selfies—particularly those created and posted on Instagram—occupy a complex position in discourses of authenticity and commodification. For Instagirls, one of the most valuable tools that they, as social media influencers, have in their skillset is the ability to create appealing selfies (Abidin, 3–4) that attract audiences. Selfies here are a genre of advertising, used to sell all kinds of things from charity causes to luxury items like watches and expensive phones, to beauty products and holiday destinations (Abidin). As a persona used to sell lifestyle products, the Instagirl is a commodified identity category, and the reason for this is, partly, embedded in the affordances of Instagram. Firstly, the practice of tagging brands in photographs enables the brand to literally be embedded into the self-presentation of an Instagirl. But also, because of way that Instagram functions as an archive, assembling users' content in a profile grid, rather than a momentary site for circulating fleeting or candid selfies, it has become a site for the production and circulation of selfies that are highly stylised and 'overtly commercial,' more so than other social media sites like Twitter and Snapchat (Abidin, 6). This means that they are highly performative, with established formal conventions for presenting the selfie subject.

This performativity can, for some, call the authenticity of self-presentation practices into question, as in the brief media flurry around erstwhile Instagirl Essena O'Neill who, in 2015, deleted many of her Instagram photos and edited the captions on the remaining few to make visible the labour that went into creating effortless-looking images, as well as the motive behind them: money. One updated caption read: '[I was] paid for this photo. If you find yourself looking at "Instagram girls" and wishing your life was there's [sic], Realise you only see what they want. [...] [There is] no purpose in a

forced smile, tiny clothes and being paid to look pretty’ (O’Neill cited in Hunt). O’Neill stated that her goal in dramatically overhauling her account was to create awareness in her young and potentially vulnerable audience. She writes, ‘I just want younger girls to know this isn’t candid life, or cool or inspirational. It’s contrived perfection made to get attention’ (O’Neill cited in Hunt).

Another form of critique positions the performative Instagirl as ‘the product of the social media echo chamber’ and ‘an escapist fantasy’ that functions to alleviate life in turbulent political times (Shenn), in other words, a fiction. And still other currents running through popular media express concern that widespread Instagram fakery—through adjusting photographs using photo editing apps—is linked to the trend in ‘fake news’ and part of ‘a worrying aspect of the erosion of authenticity online’ (Tait). So the authenticity of the Instagirl is suspect: the perfection constructed on her Instagram profile is potentially manipulated, misleading, or simply not real.

If this is the case, though, why did Ulman’s hoax surprise people? Perhaps audiences on Instagram have integrated a suspicion of authenticity claims into the way they read images. There is a level of fakery that is accepted, and even anticipated, on the platform. But what the audience did not expect was for Ulman to use her existing online presence to perform an entirely different self-brand. It is one thing to be someone ordinary trying to make oneself appear artful, but it is another phenomenon altogether to be someone artful trying to make oneself appear ordinary. There is a layering of deceptions occurring here: a girl pretending to be a fake girl who is pretending to be a real girl (but who is, herself, already widely suspected of being fake). The real surprise of *Excellences & Perfections* was not that the Instagirl Ulman constructed was fake—audiences already suspected this—but rather that Ulman was never an Instagirl at any point in the narrative. By this I mean that she was not invested in the exchange between audience and subject in which she becomes an object for their consumption. She was not attempting to convince them of her authenticity as a young, beautiful, desirable commodity in order to trade their audienceship for sponsorship. In fact, what she did in revealing the narrative to be fictional was to make the audience’s role in this exchange visible and problematic, and—conveniently—free to her. As I have discussed, it is common for critics to bemoan the Instagram Girl, but it is more difficult to implicate an audience that creates the demand for her, and the system that she exists within.

Rather, like many hoaxes, the object of critique is the audience or the culture in which the hoax thrives. Life writing scholar Susanna Egan tells us that life writing hoaxes are revelatory. It doesn’t necessarily matter

what the author's intentions are in perpetrating the falsity, what is interesting about hoaxes is that they expose cultural assumptions, they unsettle tropes and conventions of life narrative, and they make norms visible (2–3). Here, the sexism and elitism of the art world as well as the commodification of young women's images are made visible. So behind this piece is an investigation of the identity of the young, female artist, which is informed by Ulman's life experiences. It explores genres of female self-presentation and self-branding and it troubles the modes in which audiences receive and read them. Ulman points to the currency of particular identity tropes or genres (the yoga girl, the kawaii girl, the hustler), but also the way they are turned around on the women who employ them. They are a path to success on platforms like Instagram, images like these get a lot of likes, audiences are attracted to them. But they also attract charges of falsity and deception, or of unoriginality; girls and women who post them are accused of being fake or vapid, they are oversharing or sexualising themselves, they are seen as attention seekers. So the work points to this double bind where the same behaviours and aesthetics that are the route to success for women online also opens them up to criticism. Author Robin Romm, the editor of an anthology called *Double Bind: Women on Ambition* (2017) indicates that Instagram is not the only place where, for women, success is paired with gendered criticism. She says that for women, there is a cultural double bind in which 'success [is] paired eternally with scrutiny and retreat,' which means that 'achieving [must] be approached delicately or you risk [...] the negative judgement of others' (2). Romm writes that the ideal way to navigate public achievements and avoid criticism is to present an air of 'self-sacrifice' (2). Perhaps this is why Instagirls have become the target of critique. Their success is not self-effacing, but self-promoting. Their *self*—both its embodied presentation as well as the (branded) narrative of their life—is the foundation on which their success is built. The self is hypervisible here as a desirable object available for consumption, but also one on which the Instagirl can trade in order to make a living and to find success by gaining likes and followers.

Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism is useful in unpicking this dynamic. Berlant states that 'A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing' (1) and when 'a person [...] becomes [...] bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming' (2). I think we can look at some social media landscapes as sites where cruelly optimistic attachments to gender performance play out. While certain performances of youthful femininity are rewarded in the currency of the media landscape—likes, followers, shares—those same performances are often



also read as examples of the evils of social media—narcissism, triviality, oversharing. And while social media has been lauded as a place where marginalised voices can make themselves heard, Ulman is quick to point out that ‘Misogynist trolls can, nowadays, be as vocal as any girl trying to express herself’ (Ulman in Björk), a fact which the above discussion about hateful comments on Ulman’s images illustrates. Another way of putting this is that misogyny becomes a way to undermine the success of women in public spaces. And the types of self-presentation that lead to success here attach to neoliberal myths of class mobility that feed rather than challenge conditions that are ultimately oppressive for subjects who are not white, wealthy, cis-gendered, masculine.

There is a temptation to see *Excellences & Perfections* as redeeming because it tricked a gullible audience or because it shows how “fake” and inauthentic the women are who genuinely self-present as Instagirls (i.e. they genuinely use the tropes that Ulman has performed here—the mirror selfie, plastic surgery, bad girl, cute girl, organic girl—not to perform a character, but to perform a version of themselves). But Ulman is keen to point out that the work is not satire: ‘nothing was a satire, I was always embodying my own insecurities and fears’ she says (Björk). In an interview with art history scholar Cadence Kinsey, Ulman says that her interest in these kinds of aesthetics—the mundane, what some would consider trashy or low—is sincere and genuine. Kinsey asks her, ‘But you wouldn’t necessarily call it a parodic gesture? It isn’t about parodying or re-presenting?’ to which Ulman replies:

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No, I’m really bad with that. When I do something I really get into it and I really love it and I really consume those images from a really sincere perspective like, *I like this*—what I’m working on. I’m never like, oh this is like kind of funny like I’m making jokes about [it]. I’m always pretty sincere about the topics I choose. That’s why *I can’t make a distinction between my own life and art practice because I get really involved* with [my subjects]. [...] I can’t just be that cynical about things. (Video in Common, my emphasis)

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So Ulman isn’t interested in poking fun at the young women that she imitates here, or in tearing down these aesthetics that she investigates: she realises that for some these are a valuable currency that affords material benefits unavailable to them through other routes. And this statement, suggesting that she doesn’t make a distinction between her life and her art practice, troubles some of that distance between her and her work that she had set up previously in asserting that the work is fiction, and that her ‘online representation didn’t represent’ her (ICA). Ulman’s shifting stance demonstrates the productive slipperiness of identity employed in masquerade, and it is never quite clear to what degree one is able to prize



free the Instagirls she has played from Ulman's other, more authoritative identity—that of the young artist.

Ulman appears to want to unsettle visual cultures and the norms around feminine self-presentation that emerge from them to urge audiences to think about how these subjects are constructed, how they are consumed, and what meanings they take on as consumer objects. In my view, the goal of the work is not to mock or condemn the Instagram-girl that Ulman performs, but to investigate the ecosystem of which she is a part. Whether this goal is achieved or not perhaps depends on the audience, some members of whom being more equipped or inclined to read it this way than others. Thanks to the digital revolution and the new media economy where 'produsage' (Bruns) is the norm, young women and girls are in a particularly beneficial position to trade in on public demand for images of young women and girls. They can produce and exercise control over their own images, and, if they are savvy, profit from them. But although this sounds, and *is* in part, revolutionary, selling a self-brand for girls and women is complex and fraught. The images that are popular and saleable in social media economies continue to draw on dominant constructions of femininity shaped by patriarchal and heteronormative discourses, and which overwhelmingly privilege whiteness. And girls and young women must navigate conflicting demands around desirability, saleability, and control of their own image while using it as capital. And as Ulman herself notes, although the digital realm is disembodied, feminine embodiment remains key to women's self-mediation online. She says, *Excellences & Perfections* is a project about our flesh as object. Your body as an investment. How do we market this flesh? How do we price this meat? And how long will it stay fresh for?' (ICA). Although it is increasingly true that young men, and young people of all genders, also face pressure to commoditise their bodies and their images, this question has painful historical baggage for women. As Hélène Cixous asserts, 'women are body' (886). In culture, in images, and in language, femininity has complex and knotty ties to embodiment which, in digital spaces, continues to shape and play out via gendered self-narration. Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections* probes the questions she asks about flesh as object, about marketing and pricing the 'meat' of self-mediation, but the answers are not clear cut.

## CONCLUSION

The Instagirl is the latest in a long line of real and symbolic women maligned for achieving fame not for doing anything "worthwhile" but simply for being "herself."<sup>4</sup> But for the Instagirl, being her "self" means performing particular tropes and conventions in order to be recognised

as a brand worth investing in. This performance is labour. It is the naturalisation of such gendered tropes and conventions that Ulman both exploits and problematises in *Excellences & Perfections*. This piece makes various and conflicting claims about reality, authenticity and self-presentation online, and it doesn't easily sit as fiction, or as hoax, or as autobiographical. Ulman straddles the line between autobiography and fiction: she is a provocateur, inviting the audience to re-examine how they consume images of young women on social media. Significantly, she interrogates the conditions that formulate lives and selves as commodities on social media. When the performance of selfhood becomes a strategy for making money or gaining fame, what we think of as “authenticity” (true, sincere, or unfiltered communication whereby the act of mediation preserves—rather than interferes with—the real) is compromised. But Ulman, in this piece, implicates not only the subject, but the audience, the technology, the app, and a broader capitalist logic in her critique, and explores how each of these elements contribute to a system that coaxes and creates templates for (commoditised) selfhood such as the Instagirl.

Ulman continues the artistic tradition, established by women artists, of examining the connections between gender, art, the gaze, and the body, and her investigation breaks new ground in terms of how these ideas re-emerge in the digital age. She brings attention to the performance and the commodification of life narrative in digital contexts by ironically employing stereotypes and conventional tropes of online self-branding. Ulman's performance uses masquerade to show both gender and self-brands as constructions that require resources and labour, rather than something that is natural. The kind of masquerade that the piece uses draws on a history of women's art practice that critiques gender and feminine representation in art and culture. But it reformulates masquerade, injecting irony and an even greater awareness of how intersectional power and identity are: it's not only gender at play here, it is race and class, too. Masquerading as the Instagirl here demonstrates how a feature of the digital landscape in danger of becoming naturalised is, instead, created through networks of power at the heart of which is the commodification of the self. This is important because it undermines the currency that powers the machine: authenticity. At the same time, Ulman makes an important point using her own life narrative: the identities that she stepped into in *Excellences & Perfections* are commoditised and constructed, but so is her identity as a young, female artist, as are all identities to some degree. However, some are policed more thoroughly than others, some must work harder to be marketable, and for some, their visual image requires a good deal more labour, resources, and vigilance.

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## NOTES

- 1 A quick note on the use of the term "coax" in auto/biography theory: In their 2010 book, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson draw on Ken Plummer explain that life narratives and autobiographical acts are often solicited rather than voluntary. They describe 'coaxers' as 'any person or institution or set of cultural imperatives that solicits or provokes people to tell their stories' (2010, 64). The concept of 'coaxing' was taken up by Anna Poletti to analyse how models of and platforms for digital storytelling work to produce particular kinds of subjects within intimate publics. Notably, Aimée Morrison's essay on 'Facebook and Coaxed Affordances' in Julie Rak and Anna Poletti's 2014 edited collection *Identity Technologies* developed the notion of coaxing to examine how specific media affordances work to allow or limit the ways in which users can self-present on social media.
- 2 Tbh is shorthand for the phrase *to be honest*.
- 3 For a fuller discussion of the development of Instagram Stories in relation to Snapchat, see Cardell, Douglas and Maguire.
- 4 Socialites like Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie, and more recently the Kardashian sisters, have also been maligned for gaining fame by selling their personal brands via reality media and tabloid coverage, as were camgirls like Jennifer Ringley.