

INTERFACING FEMININITIES: PERFORMANCE, CRITIQUE, AND THE EVENTS OF
PHOTOGRAPHY IN AMALIA ULMAN'S *EXCELLENCES & PERFECTIONS*

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ABSTRACT

Kimberley M. Henze: Interfacing Femininities: Performance, Critique, and the Events of Photography in Amalia Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections*
(Under the direction of Carol Magee)

Over the course of four months, Amalia Ulman performed “types” of femininity through Instagram’s vernacular of selfies, fashion shots, food porn, and cheeky quotes in an effort to challenge socially constructed and bound ideas of gender. Ulman’s adopted personas, all formulaic to social media spheres, developed over three consecutive episodes: the “artsy-tumblr girl,” the “sugar baby,” and the “life goddess.” In this thesis, I critically analyze Ulman’s images to illuminate the hegemonic norms of femininity with which she is dealing, explore the meanings of the work that were born and are still-changing on the networked interface, and examine how those meanings shift when the performance is moved into static form on a gallery wall. I ultimately argue that, through its richest form on the interface, *Excellences & Perfections* destabilizes and critiques not only normative representations of women but also the spaces in which these representations are regularly reinforced, online and off.

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INTRODUCTION

Amalia Ulman's 2014 Instagram performance *Excellences & Perfections* appropriates stereotypical social media images and personas to raise issues of socially-constructed identities and gendered visual vernaculars. In this thesis, I argue that *Excellences & Perfections* expresses the construction and contingency of social performances in the mid-2010s, a time when image-based social networks and the norms they often reinforce exist in near ubiquity. In particular, I argue that Ulman's Instagram performance deconstructs the production, engagement, and reception of images and personas on social media. Utilizing precariousness as an aesthetic strategy, *Excellences & Perfections* destabilizes and critiques the hegemonic norms of gender, such as hypersexualized and hyperfeminine images, language, and interests that pervade social environments.¹

At stake in Ulman's performance is a critical awareness of how the images we see, share, and post on social media influence the way we view and value our world, our communities, and

¹ For more on gender stereotypes online, see: Ursula Oberst, Vanessa Renau, Andres Chamarro, and Xavier Carbonell, "Gender Stereotypes in Facebook Profiles: Are Women More Female Online?" *Computers in Human Behavior* 60 (2016): 559-564; Jen Almjeld, "Collecting Girlhood: Pinterest Cyber Collections Archive Available Female Identities," *Girlhood Studies* 8, no. 3 (Winter 2015): 6-22; Amy Shields Dobson, *Postfeminist Digital Cultures: Femininity, Social Media, and Self-Representation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Penny Griffin, *Popular Culture, Political Economy, and the Death of Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Melissa Ames and Sarah Burcon, *How Pop Culture Shapes the Stages of A Woman's Life* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Shuo Chang, Vikas Kumar, Eric Gilbert, and Loren G. Terveen, "Specialization, Homophily, and Gender in a Social Curation Site: Findings from Pinterest," in *Proceedings of the 17th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing*, 674-86. CSCW 2014 (New York: ACM, 2014): doi:10.1145/2531602.2531660.

ourselves. While the fields of art history and media studies have examined mobile photography, gender, and new media in depth, this thesis moves these discussions toward a lesser-studied platform (Instagram) and analyzes three mediated, normative personas to illuminate how gendering operates in *Excellences & Perfections* relative to both social media spheres and contemporary art.² In what follows, I will introduce Ulman's work, define and describe the hegemonic norms of femininity as they operate within this thesis, introduce the theories of precariousness and photographic agency that undergird these chapters, and give an overview of the thesis structure.

Excellences & Perfections was a four-month Instagram performance, which Ulman described as "a full immersion in a screen reality" exploring "how we consume images and how they consume us."³ During this time, Ulman shifted identities on her @amaliaulman profile, presenting herself through Instagram's norms of selfies, fashion shots, food porn, and cheeky quotes, all while accruing almost 89,000 followers.⁴ Ulman assumed three different personas, all coded feminine and all formulaic to social media spheres, which developed over three

² Edgar Gómez Cruz, "Creation and Control in the Photographic Process: iPhones and the Emerging Fifth Moment of Photography," *Photographies* 5, no. 2 (2012): 203-221; Larissa Hjorth, Jean Burgess, and Ingrid Richardson, *Studying Mobile Media: Cultural Technologies, Mobile Communication, and the iPhone* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012); Elana Levine, "Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-first Century," in *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*, ed. Elana Levine, 1-12 (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Susan Murray, "Digital Images, Photo-Sharing, and Our Shifting Notions of Everyday Aesthetics," *Journal of Visual Culture* 7, no. 2 (2008): 147-163; Christiane Paul, *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond: Curatorial Models for Digital Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

³ Amalia Ulman, "Do You Follow? Art in Circulation" Panel, *Institute of Contemporary Art*, London, transcribed by Rhizome (October 17, 2014): <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2014/oct/28/transcript-do-you-follow-panel-three/>.

⁴ Cadence Kinsey, "The Instagram Artist Who Fooled Thousands," *BBC Culture* (London), March 7, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20160307-the-instagram-artist-who-fooled-thousands>.

consecutive “episodes.” While Ulman referred to these episodic characters as “archetypes,” I will use the term “personas” as a less psychoanalytically-loaded concept to explore the hegemonic norms of femininity mimicked and critiqued throughout the performance.⁵

By “hegemonic norms of femininity,” I mean dominant, pervasive modes of representing and enacting the female experience that often cater to a patriarchal gaze and reinforce essentializing characterizations of women.⁶ Within social media environments, these norms manifest in what Amy Shields Dobson has called “digital dreamgirls,” at once particular and universal embodiments of “*the* one, essential, ideal woman” whose “possibilities for transformation and replication are endless.”⁷ Ulman’s three performed personas—which she has labeled the “artsy-tumblr girl,” “sugar baby,” and “life goddess”—each embody aspects of this “essential” woman (figures 1-3).⁸ The specific norms enacted by Ulman in *Excellences & Perfections* shift throughout the performance, but all fall into what Shields Dobson has categorized as “heterosexy feminine forms,” which emphasize Western heteronormative sexuality and traditional, patriarchal ideals of femininity.⁹ Specifically, Ulman’s representations include self-imagery and textual self-descriptions that exhibit elements of innocence and naivety, “hot and hostile” aggressive sexuality, and domestic dispositions, while Ulman’s posts of

⁵ Ulman, “Do You Follow? Art in Circulation.”

⁶ Rosalind Krauss, “Cindy Sherman: Untitled (1993),” *Cindy Sherman*, ed. Johanna Burton (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006).

⁷ Shields Dobson, 55.

⁸ Kinsey.

⁹ Shields Dobson, 55.

flowers, fashion, interior decor, and desserts operate within normative conceptions of “feminine” activities and interests.¹⁰

The posts for each episode were composed of an image and caption crafted by Ulman and posted to Ulman’s public profile. Using the Instagram account (@amaliaulman) on which she was active prior to this piece and on which she has continued to post since (ostensibly as “herself”), Ulman intentionally set up the confusion and elision of identities, remarking that she opened with an aesthetic (“artsy-tumblr girl”) that “was closer to home [so it] wouldn’t look like too suspicious of a transformation.”¹¹ Images for the 187 posts in the work were either composed and performed by Ulman as enactments of hegemonic norms or appropriated in whole from social media sites like Instagram and tumblr.¹² The public settings of the profile enabled Ulman to engage with and attract more followers through the use of hashtags and a riveting narrative. Alongside the posts, Ulman also changed her profile elements—her bio and profile picture—for each episode.

Central to the potency of *Excellences & Perfections* is the precariousness that evokes instability in these images. As Christine Ross articulates, precariousness refers not to the ephemerality of a work or its contingency (though these characteristics may contribute), but to the ways in which the image or interface of a work moves the viewer into “perceptual perturbation,” in which an “unsettling of vision [...] occurs at the viewer-image interface [...] troubl[ing] full visual access to the image (and beyond, to the reality to which it

¹⁰ Shields Dobson, 65: describes how this aggressive sexuality can be seen a normative femininity. For a discussion of domesticity see: Justin Charlebois, *Gender and the Construction of Dominant, Hegemonic, and Oppositional Femininities* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2011): 30; Elana Levine, *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015): 7-11.

¹¹ Kinsey.

¹² Ulman, “Do You Follow? Art in Circulation.”

refers).”¹³ Deployed in multiple ways, precariousness enables *Excellences & Perfections*’ rich critique of social media representations. First, the mimicry of hegemonic norms in the work unsettles viewers’ reading and reception of Ulman’s pervasive image-types and personas. This aspect of precariousness is introduced in Chapter One, when I examine the form and content of posts deployed by Ulman. A second aspect of precariousness is deployed through *Excellences & Perfections*’ placement, mediation, and involvement on Instagram. Chapter Two will demonstrate more fully how the image-viewer interface thrusts the viewer into a virtual public space, setting Ulman’s performance in dialogue with the social viewing and reinforcement of hegemonic norms that happen there. These affirmations of normative femininity are made visible on the interface, where likes and comments demonstrate mass response and where the viewer-turned-user can interact in tandem, on the same application and interface with which they may post their own images and interact with their own networks.

While I use precariousness to analyze the mimetic, dynamic, and interfaced nature of *Excellences & Perfections* as a new media work, Ariella Azoulay’s theoretical framework of photography is central to my examination of the events and encounters engendered by Ulman’s images and the hegemonic norms through which they operate. Chapter One examines the images of *Excellences & Perfections* through the “photographic event,” in which the artist-as-sovereign intentionally crafts and composes images. However, with the Instagram performance, we have to look beyond these images as documentations of normative femininity, understand photography as “a phenomenon of plurality, deterritorialization, and decentralization,” and consider the

¹³ Christine Ross, “Introduction: The Precarious Visualities of Contemporary Art and Visual Culture,” in *Precarious Visualities: New Perspectives on Identification in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture*, ed, Olivier Asselin et al. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008), 7-8.

agency of the camera and the agency of the photograph in its multiple forms.¹⁴ Chapters Two and Three will thus examine the “events of photography” that follow the artist- and camera-initiated photographic event and the agency taken by viewers and images in a continuously unfolding process of spectatorship. In these spheres, a “special form of encounter” emerges “between participants where none of them possesses a sovereign status.”¹⁵ Both on Instagram and in the museum space, the images take on new and myriad meanings, reflecting on and challenging the hegemonic norms depicted in various ways.

The individual chapters, therefore, work together to illustrate the various modalities of precariousness. Thus Chapter One also analyzes images from *Excellences & Perfections* to demonstrate how their form (aesthetic, pose, gesture) and content (selfie, cityscape, fashion) enact and reinforce ideas of gendered identity. Eva Forrest’s concept of the “habit of noticing” and Angelica Svelander and Mikael Wiberg’s theory of “social calibration” provide the context for understanding how Ulman’s performance both mimics and critiques user’s consumption and performance of normative image-types on social media.¹⁶

Along with engaging the event of photography and strategies of precariousness as a means of destabilization, Chapter Two moves Ulman’s carefully enacted images into the environment (Instagram) on which they were dispersed. What results is another iteration of performance: not only did Ulman perform with her body for the camera, now she performs networked identities alongside the resulting photographs on a digital interface. Here, I use Christine Ross’s conception of “precarious visibility” and Sarah Pink’s “digital wayfaring” to

¹⁴ Ariella Azoulay, “Photography,” *Mafte ’akh* 2e (2011): 67.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁶ Eva Forrest, “Exploring Everyday Photographic Routines Through the Habit of Noticing,” 193; Angelica Svelander and Mikael Wiberg, “The Practice of Selfies,” *Interactions* 22, no. 4 (June 2015): 34–38, doi:10.1145/2770886.

deconstruct the filters, captions, tags, and environment of *Excellences & Perfections* and illuminate the new meanings and encounters made possible by the interfaced work.¹⁷

Chapter Three's engagement with the event of photography examines how *Excellences & Perfections* changes when it moves onto the walls of a museum. I argue that the loss of the interface and the resulting shift in precariousness in the museum space critically undermines the impact of Ulman's project because it is the user interactions and dynamic nature of Instagram that allow for Ulman's critique of hegemonic norms of femininity to succeed. To demonstrate this, I will place the exhibition of *Excellences & Perfections* at the Tate and Whitechapel in London in the context of literature on new media in the gallery, analyze what meanings are highlighted in the museum space, and ultimately demonstrate how the most effective encounter is on the social media interface. I now turn toward an analysis of the photographs conceived and performed by Ulman to articulate how their form and content reflect, mimic, and critique hegemonic norms of femininity.

¹⁷ Ross; Sarah Pink, "Photographic Places and Digital Wayfaring," in *Digital Photography and Everyday Life: Empirical Studies on Material Visual Practices*, ed. Gomez Cruz and Lehmuskallio (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 188.

CHAPTER ONE

The images created and enacted for *Excellences & Perfections* embody and self-consciously critique hegemonic norms of gender pervasive to social media environments. By examining their form and content, this chapter undertakes an analysis of the images as “photographic events,” in which the artist is sovereign, her intention is privileged, and her artistic choices can be critically considered for meaning.¹⁸ While the formal analyses conducted here will be complicated in Chapters Two and Three, where I examine how meanings shift with reception on Instagram and in the museum, the analysis here illuminates the performance’s function as an artistic critique of hegemonic norms of femininity while also providing a basis for understanding its further publicly-mediated iterations.

Beyond analyzing the constructed form and content of these images, I will also consider the context from which Ulman’s images emerged to demonstrate the social practices that the artist is working to critique. Here, Angelica Svelander and Mikael Wiberg’s conception of “social calibration” provides a helpful framework for the chapter. In social calibration, users first accumulate a taste for and acceptance of what is expected and successful in online environments (consumption and adoption) and then move forward to execute these norms as their own

¹⁸ Azoulay, “Photography,” 65-67.

(enactment).¹⁹ By breaking down the images of Ulman’s performance, we can critically examine the processes that went into their production, i.e., the processes of social reinforcement that *Excellences & Perfections* is working to critique. The first section of the chapter engages with the content material and photographic frames (selfies, cityscapes, fashion shots, etc.) cultivated in the social image economy and performed across the episodes of *Excellences & Perfections*. The second section then examines the normative “types” of femininity that Ulman enacts for each episode through poses, captions, and aesthetics. I argue that the content, frames, and personas appropriated by Ulman in *Excellences & Perfections* reveal hegemonic norms of gender that undergird visual tropes in social media. Ulman’s strategic parroting of these tropes sets up a tension and precariousness for the viewer, pressing us to question the roles and representations pervasive across social media.

PERFORMING NORMS OF FEMININITY

Within each episode of *Excellences & Perfections*, Ulman employs specific poses and aesthetic tones to perform distinct normative “types” of femininity for her “artsy-tumblr girl,” “sugar baby,” and “life goddess” personas. While these episodes enact different ideas of what “femininity” is—innocence/naivety, aggressive sexuality, and domesticity—they all employ “heterosexy feminine forms” by grounding their identities and self-expression in essentialized understandings of women’s bodies and constructed gender roles—childlike passivity, impassioned sexuality, and motherhood, respectively.²⁰ In what follows, I will analyze images from each of the episodes to demonstrate how Ulman constructed poses and tone to mimic trends of popular social media images that reinforce hegemonic understandings of femininity.

¹⁹ Svelander and Wiberg, 34–38.

²⁰ Shields Dobson, 55–59.

Wanting to start the performance with an aesthetic that “was closer to home [so it] wouldn’t look like too suspicious of a transformation,” Ulman adopted the feminized image of sweetness and childlike innocence from “all those Korean girls whose Instagram [she] check[s] every morning.”²¹ A survey of Korean and Japanese lifestyle bloggers whom Ulman follows on Instagram (figures 4-6) reveals an abundance of pastel pink, doe-eyed selfies, stuffed animals, cutesy fashion, and brightly-colored sweets. For the “artsy-tumblr girl” episode, Ulman appropriated these poses and the visual tone pervasive to *kawaii* pop culture, an aesthetic native to Japan but gaining popularity across Asian and global markets. *Kawaii* is an adjective in Japanese meaning “cute,” “adorable,” or “lovable” as well as a “key affect word used to describe things that are small, delicate, and immature.”²² Figure 7 shows Ulman—or a woman whose image Ulman appropriated as her own—with blonde pigtails in pastel pink pajamas, sitting with a large stuffed animal between her legs. The image, along with its caption of “Good niteeee!!” offer the type of childlike image associated with *kawaii*. Apart from this aesthetic of cuteness pervading consumer goods, fashion, and beauty, *kawaisa* also “stimulates feelings of wanting to protect something that is pure and innocent,” a sentiment that undergirds systems of patriarchal control where women are impelled to play “girl[s] whose sexuality is yet to emerge.”²³ Figure 8 shows Ulman at a pole-dancing studio but the traditional associations of lasciviousness and loose morals associated with the activity in a strip club are sterilized by her setting, outfit, posturing, and caption. The white light on the left side of the image suggests the presence outside the frame of daylit windows which, combined with two additional interior lights behind Ulman, deny any

²¹ Ulman quoted in Kinsey; Ulman, “Do You Follow? Art in Circulation.”

²² Matthew Burdelski and Koji Mitsuhashi, “‘She Thinks You’re *Kawaii*’: Socializing Affect, Gender, and Relationships,” *Language in Society* 39 (2010): 65.

²³ Fran Lloyd, “Post-Identity *Kawaii*: Commerce, Gender and Contemporary Japanese Art,” in *Consuming Bodies: Sex and Contemporary Japanese Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004): 128.

association with dark, windowless clubs. Furthermore, with the polished wooden floors, ballet bar, mirrors, and practice mat, the space more readily evokes a ballet studio than a nightclub. Ulman's cutesy, pastel ballerina outfit and her uncompromising pose affirm this more innocent reading, even as the nature of pole dancing itself and the hint of Ulman's revealed thigh bear sexual connotations. Such images evoke exactly the kind of innocent, burgeoning sexuality associated with *kawaisa* and thus cater to essentialized ideas of women as childlike, naive, innocent, and delicate.

The "sugar baby" performance differs greatly from the "artsy-tumblr girl" in that Ulman jumped from conceptions of femininity as passive and innocent to aggressive and overtly sexualized. In her exploration of these different "types" of femininity, Ulman operates within a tradition of female artists, including Cindy Sherman and Nikki S. Lee, who use self-portrait photography for performing and highlighting stereotypes of gendered identity. Feminist scholar Laura Mulvey has described Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (figure 9) as "highly connotative but elusive" mise-en-scènes in which the camera "intrudes into moments in which [the subject] is unguarded, sometimes undressed, absorbed into her own world in the privacy of her own environment," while Phil Lee described Nikki S. Lee's *Projects* (figure 10) as "imitat[ing] semiotic codes of dress, appearance, bodily gestures and postures" of communities, "creating a world of hyperreality where the distinctions between the real and unreal Nikki S. Lee are ambiguous."²⁴ Such statements could just as well describe images from *Excellences & Perfections*, attesting to the similar efforts by all three artists to capitalize on the sovereignty of the artist to mimic and re-present hegemonic norms of femininity. Azoulay articulates this

²⁴ Laura Mulvey, "A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman," *New Left Review*, 188 (1991): 141; Phil Lee, "Indefinite 'Nikkis' in a World of Hyperreality: An Interview with Nikki S. Lee," *Chicago Art Journal* 18 (2008): 77-78.

artistic sovereignty as a privileging of the constructed image as “a form of testimony that pertains solely to that which was positioned in front of the lens,” a positioning conceptualized, framed, and—in these cases—enacted by the photographers.²⁵

While analyses of these artist-sovereign perspectives are important and investigation of the works via this traditional approach comprises the majority of the history of photography, Azoulay points out that these analyses examine *only one* aspect of the photographs, bracketing off the space, time, and intention in which the images were taken as of primary, perhaps sole, significance.²⁶ Ulman, Sherman, and Lee, as artist-sovereigns, all work in this vein to control the way we read femininity in their works. By directing viewers to read their constructed images in particular ways, the artists implicate patriarchal structures of seeing to engender the recognition that the femininities depicted are not inherent to the woman or even to the image but are the product of socially-conditioned readings.

In her first episode-shift of the performance, Ulman moves from the cutesy innocence of the “artsy-tumblr girl” to gestures and poses of Ulman’s “sugar baby” that center on the display of her sexualized body. In gestures common to fitness communities (figures 11-14), Ulman repeatedly pulled up the front of a shirt to reveal her stomach (figures 15-16) or turned perpendicular to a mirror to emphasize her curves (figures 17-18). This episode featured a lot more skin through cleavage-enhancing camera angles and half-naked dancing videos. The visual tenor moved in kind from pastel and pink to a hard urban aesthetic of black and gray tones, animal print, jewelry, and edgy designer labels (figures 19-21), a look most famously associated with Kardashians (figures 22-25), whom Ulman follows on Instagram.

²⁵ Azoulay, “Photography,” 76.

²⁶ Ibid., 65-67.

Episode three, the “life goddess,” returns to a lighter, white aesthetic, but this time, rather than the pink pastel of episode one, Ulman uses clean, earthy tones of brown, green, and yellow, mimicking networked communities focused on healthy living and home life (figures 26-28). Gone are the overtly-sexualized poses, and in their place are images attesting to domesticity and self-care (figures 3 and 29). In figure 30, Ulman holds a baby on her hip, her face and attention turned toward the child. Motherhood and propriety are engaged in a caption that reads, “Some quality time with my beautiful cousin Cayetana. She is such a wonderful miracle, I love her.” While the “life goddess” wardrobe is notably more conservative than that of either the “sugar baby” or “artsy-tumblr girl,” signs of Ulman’s sexuality—though restrained—remain. While holding the child, for example, Ulman’s blouse shifts to the left, revealing a hint of her bra. This post affirms the sexualization of her body, but the accidental nature of the shirt-slip gives her a sense of purity. This particular image fits into hegemonic understandings of motherhood, which Carol Smart has tied to culturally-constructed ideas of a “naturalistic chain” of events in women’s lives, comprising sexual activity, pregnancy, birth, mothering, and motherhood.²⁷ Smart describes the internalization of these stages as a product of the institutionalization and homogenization of motherhood, in which women—whether or not they are actually mothers—are expected to be nurturing, loving, and proper yet still bound to the sexual condition on which the institution of motherhood relies.²⁸

Another aspect of the “life goddess” “type” is a renewed focus on family and domestic concerns. This manifests in an increase in references to family and an increase of images centered on food and interior design. Figure 31 shows “Sunday brunch with my sister,” in which

²⁷ Carol Smart, “Deconstructing Motherhood” in *Good Enough Mothering? Feminist Perspective on Lone Motherhood*, ed. Elizabeth Bortolaia Silva (New York: Routledge, 1996): 37.

²⁸ Smart, 39; Gayle Letherby, “Mother or Not, Mother or What? Problems of Definitions and Identity,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 17, no. 5 (1994): 525-532.

Ulman, in a high-necked blouse, little makeup, and a simple hairstyle, sits at a table in a homey café. While her body is square with the camera, she looks aside as if not expecting or aware of the camera, which—positioned from the opposite side of the table—we assume must be held by her referenced sister, who snapped an image of the unassuming and un-self-interested Ulman during their family time together. With Ulman’s eyes looking away, the viewer is drawn to the photograph above and behind Ulman, picturing a black man whose eyes directly meet ours. We are drawn more into the background of the image and into the setting in which Ulman is posed. This post is thus constructed to be more about the homey, interior space (likened to “feminine,” domestic spaces in general) and her reason for being there (family time), all affirmed by a caption that references her sister and notes “loved the decoration #ethnic #eclectic.” The “life goddess” thus conforms to essentialized understandings of woman as caregiver, mother, and domestic figure. In these realms, she may still exhibit sexuality, but, in contrast to the “sugar baby,” that sexuality is tied to her reproductive capabilities, her responsibilities within the home, and her “natural” disposition as a caregiver.²⁹

FRAMING NORMS OF FEMININITY

The poses and aesthetics analyzed in the preceding section facilitate the readings of “types” of femininities within each episode, but across the whole performance, Ulman utilizes selfie- and content-types appropriated from social media to mimic and bring to attention the normative frames through which these femininities are portrayed. Not only do users become conditioned to viewing the *content* they see on social media as worthy of photography, they also

²⁹ Donnalyn Pompper, *Rhetoric of Femininity: Female Body Image, Media, and Gender Role Stress/Conflict* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017); Charlebois; Mairtin Mac an Ghaill and Chris Haywood, *Gender, Culture, and Society: Contemporary Femininities and Masculinities* (New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2007).

begin to internalize the way this content is posed and framed as model ways for viewing the world around them. Eva Forrest, who followed and interviewed photographers in their everyday life calls this the “habit of noticing;” she found that people who regularly look at or take photos start to see the world around them in photographic frames.³⁰ One participant noted: “I am always thinking with photos in mind; it is kind of an obsession [...] you start to see things through a camera, even if you don’t have one.”³¹ This compulsive framing is manifest in smartphones, where the digital viewfinder spreads over the same LCD screen on which users view their friends’ and extended networks’ social media photos. The very same pixels that illuminate images for viewing on Instagram are here reappropriated to discover and frame similar images in the user’s own world. The photographer can literally “watch the world becoming an image” parallel to the posts she views regularly.³²

Excellences & Perfections operates through and within this continuous social reinforcement of normative frames. Indeed, Ulman’s construction of personas and frames in the work evolved from her own social calibration process of consumption and adoption. As noted above, in a panel with the Institute of Contemporary Art, Ulman disclosed that she was “inspired by all those Korean girls whose Instagram I check every morning” and used this content to inform her own constructed performance: “I guess out of their daily selfies, I wrote a story in pictures.”³³ In what follows, I will use found images—first of selfie-types and then broader content-types—to illustrate the visual norms of framing femininity on Instagram with which

³⁰ Forrest, 193.

³¹ Ibid., 198.

³² Martin Lister, “Is the Camera an Extension of the Photographer?” in *Digital Photography and Everyday Life: Empirical Studies on Material Visual Practices*, ed. Gómez Cruz and Lehmuskallio (London and New York: Routledge, 2016): 271.

³³ Ulman, “Do You Follow? Art in Circulation.”

Ulman engages and to demonstrate how *Excellences & Perfections* mimics these posts in both frame and content.

The selfie in many ways continues traditions of female self-portraiture and its exploration of woman-as-object, but—moved to a mass scale and tempo—selfies also bear stereotypes of self-obsession and self-importance.³⁴ The bulk of these stereotypes falls disproportionately on women, who are seen by many viewers as objectifying themselves.³⁵ Selfies thus directly manifest hegemonic understandings of women as “feminine body-subject[s]” who are socially-habituated to make over and present themselves as “object and prey” to the “panoptical male connoisseur.”³⁶

In 2010, the same year that Instagram was created, Apple released its iPhone 4, featuring for the first time on a mobile device a front-facing camera and revolutionizing the selfie game. Front-facing selfies (figures 32-33) enable the photographer-subject to adjust immediately to the most flattering angles, lighting, and posture. In *Excellences & Perfections*, Ulman’s front-facing selfies, taken at arm’s length, offer attractive images of the artist’s face as well as fragments or hints of the rest of her often-sexualized body. In Figure 2, Ulman’s gaze meets the camera, but rather than serve as a confrontational assertion of empowering sexuality, the look seems to

³⁴ Pavica Sheldon and Katherine Bryant, “Instagram: Motives for Its Use and Relationship to Narcissism and Contextual Age,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 58 (2016): 89-97; Jang Ho Moon, Eunji Lee, Jung-Ah Lee, and Tae Rang Choi, “The Role of Narcissism in Self-Promotion on Instagram,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 101 (October 2016): 22-25.

³⁵ Anne Burns, “Self(ie)-Discipline: Social Regulation as Enacted Through the Discussion of Photographic Practice,” *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 1716-1733; Derek Conrad Murray, “Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media,” *Consumption Markets & Culture* 6 (2015): 490-516.

³⁶ Sandra Lee Bartky, “Foucault, Femininity, and Patriarchal Power,” in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, ed. C. McCann and S. Kim (New York: Routledge, 2017): 472-3.

convey permission, welcoming or even expecting the viewer to explore her body on display. Such frames conform to hegemonic ideas of woman as sexed object.

While front-facing selfies primarily feature the face and décolletage, mirror selfies (figures 34-35) allow the photographer to incorporate a greater expanse of space into the image, which allows for visual statements to be made about the environment, outfits, and/or actions of the subject. These mirror images make up more than a third of the selfies in *Excellences & Perfections*.³⁷ Figure 36 shows Ulman, her phone in her right hand, her left hand on her hip, standing in front of a gold-framed mirror with her eyes cast down at the LCD screen on the front face of her phone. From her perspective, she can adjust her posture, the angle of the camera, fix her hair, check lighting, and frame just enough of the background through the open door beyond to give a sense of the lush hotel of her shoot. Through this emplacement of her body, Ulman demonstrates normative conceptions of women as A) preoccupied with luxury, consumer goods and B) encased/essentialized/imagined within interior, domestic spheres—particularly the bedroom.³⁸

Another type of self-image that Ulman utilizes in the performance is the situated selfie (figures 27 and 37). While the subject here does not hold the camera in these photographs, sometimes recruiting another individual to capture the image, I will—as other researcher have done—include these images in the category of “selfie,” as the subject often conceives, constructs, poses, and performs the photos herself.³⁹ Like the mirror selfies, these distanced images allow for a greater encapsulation of the environment and actions of the subject, as well as

³⁷ Of the 187 posts in *Excellences & Perfections*, 83 are selfies, and 28 are mirror selfies.

³⁸ Levine, 1-12; Charlebois, 37-40.

³⁹ Matthew Bellinger, “Bae Caught Me Tweetin’: On the Representational Stance of the Selfie,” *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 1806-1817; Zizi Papacharissi, “A Networked Selfie,” *Medium* (2014), <https://medium.com/p/cb4e929af3ee>.

an unobstructed view of the subject's body and posture. In figure 29, we see Ulman relaxing in a bath, looking out the window in a meditative state as if she's completely unaware of the camera. Many of Ulman's situated selfies (figures 31 and 38-39) employ this diverted gaze, offering her body, centered in the image, for uninterrupted and unabashed viewing. Again, here Ulman is working in an established trajectory of artists engaging with these issues. Sherman's *Film Stills*, beyond working in a similar exploration of "types" of femininity, also facilitate/allow for the voyeuristic (male) gaze of the camera to "observe [Sherman], composed, simultaneously demure and alluring, for the outside world and its intrusive gaze."⁴⁰ While not self-portraiture, Barbara Kruger's *Untitled (Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face)* very explicitly confronts the objectification/spectacle of woman effected by the male gaze and the ways that it fixes/restricts/controls the image of woman (figure 40). The compositions and performances of Ulman's selfies facilitate/critique in kind the visual and ideological positioning of woman-as-object as it is manifest on social media.

The final selfie-type appropriated by Ulman centers the body in a much more phenomenological position for the viewer. In what Michele Zappavigna has called "'you could be here with me' photography," the photographer-subject incorporates a partial view of her own body into the frame (figures 41-42).⁴¹ In doing so, she invites the viewer to imagine themselves into the scene. In *Excellences & Perfections*, Ulman uses this type of selfie to convey intimate, even provocative images of herself. In Figure 43, we see Ulman's bare legs stretched out before her on a bed. With a model-like bend in her knee, the intimacy of rumpled bed sheets, and no indication that she is clothed, the camera frame shows just (not) enough of her body to

⁴⁰ Mulvey, "Cosmetics and Abjection: Cindy Sherman (1991/1996)," in *Cindy Sherman*, ed. Johanna Burton (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006): 68.

⁴¹ Michele Zappavigna, "Social Media Photography: Construing Subjectivity in Instagram Images," *Visual Communication* 15, no. 3 (2016): 272.

tease/please a male gaze. The objects shown to her left—coffee, an iPad, and what appears to be a women’s magazine—suggest the comfortable acceptance of a woman’s place in the home (and the bedroom). Such images frame and perpetuate normative ideas of femininity, phenomenologically positioning Ulman’s body as an object of consumption for the (male) viewer.

Apart from selfies, *Excellences & Perfections* employs other normative content-types that reinforce associations of “femininity” with consumer and luxury goods and the domestic sphere. While some content subjects—like landscapes and cityscapes (figure 44)—continue a visual tradition that precedes the advent of camera phones and social media, others—brunch food (figure 45), everyday objects (figure 46), and aestheticized words and quotations (figure 47-48)—emerged as noteworthy and shareable only with the rise of social networking sites in the last 15 years. Not only are these everyday objects and experiences now worthy of photography, the frames of their capture have also been codified. For example, food and coffee posts are often taken in flat lay perspective, which allows the photographer to frame the objects in an idealized, aesthetic composition (figure 45).

Ulman appropriated this image-material and framing for *Excellences & Perfections*, where cityscapes (figure 49), flatlays of food (figure 50), everyday objects (figure 51), and found quotes (figure 52-53) are exhibited as her own “Instagrammable” frames from everyday life. In Figure 54 from the “life goddess” episode, an intricately-decorated porcelain tea cup with orange and lemon slices sits atop an old copy of Annie Fellows Johnston’s *The Little Colonel’s Christmas Vacation*, which, first published in 1906, chronicles female friendship at a private girls’ school in Virginia. An old card with an etching of a lighthouse and a muffin also sit, artfully, on top of the book’s yellowing pages. This arrangement is framed by two peace lilies,

aesthetically-scattered tea leaves, tea accessories, and an amber, ceramic teapot—all set upon an aged grey wooden table, partially covered by a barely-pink dish towel or napkin. While the resulting image is certainly beautiful, a closer look betrays the almost-absurd constructedness of the space and the norms of femininity that it evokes. Ulman used the image as if it were a snapshot of her own afternoon tea ceremony, but the setting functions primarily as a collocation of objects and activities coded feminine: teacups, women’s literature, baked goods, and flowers in a domestic, kitchen-like setting. Additionally, the aesthetic of the image carefully matches the earthy color scheme of the “life goddess” episode. Less an honest depiction of daily activities, the image in *Excellences & Perfections* highlights the constructedness of the frames and gendered objects. Dispersed amongst the selfies in *Excellences & Perfections*, posts like these amplify the normative ideas of femininity—daintiness, consumerism, and domesticity—prevalent across Instagram profiles and performed in kind through Ulman’s self-portraits.

The content, frames, and personas appropriated from social media by Ulman for *Excellences & Perfections* operate within hegemonic understandings of femininity as sweet innocence, aggressive sexuality, and domestic care. However, by mimicking these distinct visual tropes in a dramatic progression and within an artistic performance, Ulman evokes precariousness to unsettle our reception of the images and the narrative to which they contribute. Our knowledge of Ulman as an artist beneath these images and personas points to the artificiality of the whole work and ties that idea of fabrication to the frames through which we have become accustomed to viewing the world around us. Ulman’s role and identity as an artist, a woman, and an Instagrammer relate her *intentional* performance here to the perhaps unconscious enactments of these hegemonic norms by the public at large on these platforms. In the following chapter, I will move these analyses into Instagram to examine how the interface on which *Excellences &*

Perfections was performed and the interactions that resulted shift the meaning and reception of the work.

CHAPTER TWO

In the previous chapter, I examined the form and content of images in *Excellences & Perfections* to demonstrate how Ulman, as sovereign artist, enacted and critiqued hegemonic norms of femininity. *Excellences & Perfections*, however, was not just a series of photographs, but a time-based, interactive performance of these images on the digital interface of Instagram, which is integral to the full meaning and gravity of the work. Accordingly, this chapter moves the images and analyses of the “photographic event”—in which creative action is central—into the realm of the “event of photography.”⁴² Rather than relegating meaning to a single moment of capture, Ariella Azoulay describes the event of photography as an “infinite series of encounters” in which parties of any level of involvement with the original event (photographer, subject, viewer of event, or subsequent viewers of the photograph) interact with the image in ever-changing ways and with shifting points of view.⁴³ Azoulay argues that through these levels of dissemination and interaction, sovereignty is decentralized, and each party has equal agency in meaning making around the image.⁴⁴

When uploaded to Instagram, the visual modalities addressed in the previous chapter are complicated by the verbal and nodal modalities of captions, comments, hashtags, and the networked interface. Ulman brings this network-involvement into *Excellences & Perfections* not only by appropriating the established visual norms—as demonstrated in the preceding chapter—

⁴² Azoulay, “Photography,” 70.

⁴³ Ibid., 77.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 76.

but also by infiltrating the networked communities within which those norms dominate, using the same methods of tagging, annotation, and dispersion that everyday users take for granted on social media. I argue that the captions, comments, and tags in *Excellences & Perfections* further mimic hegemonic norms of framing femininity and that the work, through strategies of precariousness, unsettles the viewers' reading and reception of these norms on Instagram and off.

CAPTIONING FEMININITIES

Beyond the carefully constructed norms of femininity analyzed in Ulman's images in the preceding chapter, the Instagram interface offered the artist an additional platform for hegemonic mimicry by way of her profile and post captions. These annotations provide an "authorial voice" that situates the image, hints at intention, and conforms to hegemonic ideas of femininity. At the same time, they reinforce Ulman's meanings for the photographic event.⁴⁵

With each new episode of *Excellences & Perfections*, Ulman changed both her 150-character bio statement and profile image (figures 55-57). These are the standing features that greet viewers when they first open Ulman's profile, and together they activate a "discourse of self" that orients the viewer to the interests and identity of the user.⁴⁶ For *Excellences & Perfections*, Ulman selected images and crafted bios that concisely manifested the norms she explored in each episode: pink flower emojis and innocent interests in books and movies for the "artsy-tumblr girl;" jewelry emojis and "faux-feminist empowerment" phrases like "*Boss of Me*" for the "sugar baby;" and inspirational quotes for the "life goddess."⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Zappavigna, "Social Media Photography," 282.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 277.

⁴⁷ Ulman, "Do You Follow? Art in Circulation."

As with the images for each post, Ulman crafted her captions with content appropriated from social media norms and aligned them with the tone and aesthetic for each episode. For the “artsy-tumblr girl,” Ulman made extensive use of flower emojis, exclamation points, and “word lengthening” to reinforce her *kawaii*-inspired constructions of femininity. For example, Ulman captioned her post of a bunny, “Omg i dieeeeeee so fucking cutee” (figures 58). Word lengthening is the repetition of letters—here, the duplication of e’s—within a word and is a linguistic stylization associated in popular media most often with young women as a means to convey playfulness or sometimes “seductive murmuring.”⁴⁸ Its use then makes sense for the “artsy-tumblr girl” episode, which I’ve argued Ulman constructed to evoke hegemonic ideas of innocence and burgeoning sexuality. Indeed, the caption for the pole dancing post analyzed visually in Chapter One conveys exactly these connotations of naiveté and sexualization: “so so happy about pole dancin session today it was soooooooooo much fun and crazy workout” (figure 8). The caption affirms the presence of the sexualized activity of pole dancing but simultaneously works to dispel the lasciviousness associated with the activity through a playful, but still indulging, linguistic style.

With the “sugar baby,” the language of captions becomes more crass, words are shortened to letters, and rap lyrics make frequent appearances, all of which are manifest in “U see thers leaders n followers, n i rather b a dick than a swallowe” (figure 59).⁴⁹ While the

⁴⁸ Public conceptions of this word-lengthening phenomenon as “feminine” can be seen across a number of popular articles emerging in 2013, including the following: Madeleine Davies, “I Can Lengthen My Words and So Can Youuuuuuu,” *Jezebel* (February 2013): <http://jezebel.com/5987133/i-can-lengthen-my-words-and-so-can-youuuuuuu>; Maureen O’Connor, “The 5 Reasons Girls Type Like Thissss,” *NY Magazine* (February 2013): <http://nymag.com/thecut/2013/02/5-reasons-girls-type-like-thissss.html>; Jen Doll, “Why Drag It Out?” *Atlantic* (March 2013): <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/03/dragging-it-out/309220/>.

⁴⁹ Lyrics from Kanye West’s, “New Slaves,” *Yeezus* (2013).

provocative images of the “sugar baby” episode center on the sexualization of Ulman’s body and thus accommodate hegemonic norms of sexed femininity, Ulman complicates this reading by articulating messages of seeming self-empowerment through the post’s captions. For example, in this episode, Ulman feigns a boob job and justifies both the surgery and her self-sexualization as her own choice: “reasons i wanna look good / for myself / for myself / to plant the seed of envy in other bitch’s hearts / for myself” (figure 60). Reappropriation of the selfie as an “inherently feminist” form of self-expression and self-empowerment has been attempted by individuals and campaigns across social media. Lindsay Bottos, an artist who explores selfies as creative self-determination has asserted that “[selfies] declare that ‘hey I look awesome today and I want to share that with everyone’ and that’s pretty revolutionary.”⁵⁰ While this kind of feminist, individual expression can and does exist on social media, many—if not most—of these efforts fall into what Stephen Barnard has called a “(dis)empowerment paradox” in which “personal expressions of beauty may feel empowering at the same moment as those expressions may conform to, and thus reinforce, hegemonic and oppressive cultural norms.”⁵¹

Ulman’s “sugar baby” epitomizes this (dis)empowerment paradox. Even as she uses captions to articulate her Instagram posts as empowered individuality, as in “I’m not like the rest” (figure 61) and “I might not be the nicest. But i’m real and dont give a fuck about standing alone” (figure 20), her body-centric poses and performance still conform to hegemonic ideas of “hot and hostile” hypersexualized femininity, a contradiction magnified by posts that seem to be

⁵⁰ Bottos quoted in Ali Vingiano, “This Tumblr User Shows Her Horrific Anonymous Messages In A Powerful Art Project,” *Buzzfeed* (Jan 30, 2014): https://www.buzzfeed.com/alisonvingiano/this-tumblr-user-shows-her-horrific-anonymous-messages-in-a?utm_term=.kaXQ4MAAO#.ppdoGdxx6.

⁵¹ Stephen R. Barnard, “Spectacles of Self(ie) Empowerment? Networked Individualism and the Logic of the (Post)feminist Selfie,” in *Communication and Information Technologies Annual: New Media Cultures*, ed. Robinson et al. (London: Emerald Group Publishing, 2016): 74.

written/created/posted for an interested spectator/voyeur: “wishin you understood wat i feel for u #miss #you” (figure 62).⁵² The normative “type” of femininity engaged here is what Ulman has referred to as “faux-feminist,” professing self-acceptance and self-determination but still operating within normative sexualized understandings.⁵³

With the shift to the “life goddess,” Ulman retreats from this (dis)empowering language and moves to articulate sentence structures, with fully spelled-out words, correct grammar, and a positive tone. In her first post as “life goddess,” Ulman uploads an image of a traced heart with a length apology “I’m really sorry for my behavior recently [...] I committed many mistakes because I wasn’t at a good place in my life tbh. [...] I’m very grateful to my family for rescuing me from such a dark void. I was lost.” and signs “Blessings, Amalia” (figure 63). Further into the episode, “Small presents are the best gifts. Paying attention to details” (figure 64) and “The view from my window~ There is so much beauty in this world” (figure 49) are representative of the “life goddess” captions, which accompany images that shift in kind from sexually-aggressive to mature and meditative.

It is in this shift from “sugar baby” to “life goddess” that the arc narrative of *Excellences & Perfections* reaches its zenith, what Ulman referred to as “redemption” post-“breakdown.”⁵⁴ Viewers try and fail to rationalize who this person is and how/why she swings so dramatically between characters. The distance between the viewer and the Amalia Ulman behind these mediated representations is made increasingly insurmountable by the inconsistencies in Ulman’s shared identities. The resulting precariousness destabilizes any easy reading of reality or identity behind these images and the hegemonic norms of femininity that they embody.

⁵² Shields Dobson, 65.

⁵³ Ulman, “Do You Follow? Art in Circulation.”

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Indeed, the captions themselves influence and complicate the photographic event, thereby making manifest the events of photography that surround these images once posted to Instagram. It is productive, therefore, to examine another aspect of the interface that adds complexity and precariousness to the work and the incumbent events of photography: its networkedness. The follows, likes, and comments that result from Ulman's shared and tagged performance further complicate and destabilize the viewers' readings of the work and understandings of the reality behind the mediated personas.

NETWORKED FEMININITIES

Alise Tifentale of the *Selfiecity* project has asserted that networked sharing is the “raison d'être of a selfie.”⁵⁵ Ulman facilitated this essential process of sharing in *Excellences & Perfections* not just by posting images to her profile but by promoting them to larger public networks through the use of hashtags. These user-generated tags allow users to create and apply their own annotative metadata, connecting their content to other posts with the same hashtag. Social tagging systems like those on Instagram are often championed as democratic because they decentralize the creation of information structures and enable the horizontal discovery, interaction, and use of tags, “resulting [in an] equal distribution of ‘power’ among all participants.”⁵⁶ In reality, however, certain established discourses and tags can and do still

⁵⁵ Alise Tifentale, “The Selfie: Making Sense of the ‘Masturbation of Self-Image’ and the ‘Virtual Mini-Me,’” *Selfiecity*, https://d25rsf93iwlmg.cloudfront.net/downloads/Tifentale_Alise_Selfiecity.pdf (2014): 11.

⁵⁶ Michael Derntl, Thorsten Hampel, Renate Motschnig-Pitrik, and Tomas Pitner, “Inclusive Social Tagging and Its Support in Web 2.0 Services,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 27 (2011): 1463.

dominate these virtual public spaces, enabling hegemonic norms to persist.⁵⁷ This section explores the networked quality of *Excellences & Perfections* by examining Ulman's use of hashtags, her accumulation of followers, and their networked comments. Analysis of Ulman's tagging illuminates how the artist capitalized on popular tags to market her normative images and gain followers, while an examination of the resulting follows, likes, and comments demonstrates the "infinite series" of events of photography enabled by the interface.⁵⁸ I argue that this tagging and networked interaction are what enable the performance to be alive, to grow, and to change beyond the original intentions or contributions of the artist, creating a rich and meaningful manifestation of the networked events of photography.

In an interview with *Vulture*, Ulman remarked that "it was easy to increase the followers by using shortcuts to popularity, like following the trending topics. If you are using the Photoshopped image of a woman and a bunch of popular hashtags, the likes are going to go up."⁵⁹ In *Excellences & Perfections*, Ulman used mainstay popular or provocative hashtags like #tbt (throwback Thursday), #brunch, or #undies as well as extensive descriptive hashtags like #happy, #cool, #LA, #girl, #iPhone, and #dolce&gabbana. By increasing her networked visibility through popular tags, Ulman accrued a following of almost 89,000 by the end of her performance.⁶⁰

For Ulman, the effort and success of building a following on social media can be read as a manifestation of hegemonic understandings of woman-as-object. Ulman's concerted efforts to

⁵⁷ Jurgen Gerhards and Mike Schafer, "Is the Internet a Better Public Sphere? Comparing Old and New Media in the USA and Germany," *New Media & Society* 12, no. 1 (2010): 143-160.

⁵⁸ Azoulay, "Photography," 77.

⁵⁹ Rachel Corbett, "How Amalia Ulman Became an Instagram Celebrity," *Vulture* (December 2014): <http://www.vulture.com/2014/12/how-amalia-ulman-became-an-instagram-celebrity.html>.

⁶⁰ Kinsey.

gather followers mimics an internalization of this norm, which she has referred to broadly as the “model fantasy [...] the most widespread contemporary dream shared by young women of all backgrounds. Being watched means coming to life and being someone.”⁶¹ Here, Ulman equates this desire to “be someone” with the normative prescription of self-objectification for women, a desire embodied so well in *Excellences & Perfections* that Ulman received offers for further (professional) visual objectification: “Very soon, I started receiving messages from men who wanted to shoot me, the very phallic camera lens. I even received an email from a professional photographer in the line of Urban Outfitters and American Apparel.”⁶²

The phenomena of follows and likes are related to the communication studies model of “parasocial relations,” which occurs when a media viewer feels social attraction toward a mediated persona (often a celebrity, athlete, or internet star) and begins to invest emotional energy into that person, even if the relationship remains one-sided.⁶³ Many social media platforms enable, and in certain ways even encourage, this kind of relationship through the asymmetrical act of following.⁶⁴ In *Excellences & Perfections*, these parasocial relations are facilitated by networked discovery through hashtags and are manifest in the likes and comments on Ulman’s posts.

Ulman’s followers demonstrated their parasocial evaluations with her normative performance of femininities through likes—“Only after one week of posting images in my new

⁶¹ Ulman, “Do You Follow? Art in Circulation.”

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Rebecca B. Rubin and Michael P. McHugh, “Development of Parasocial Interaction Relationships,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 31, no. 3 (June 1, 1987): 279–92. doi:10.1080/08838158709386664.

⁶⁴ Instagram and Twitter, for example, allow users to follow the profiles of others without requiring the latter party to follow back. For contrast, Facebook requires a two-way connection: users are either both friends with each other, or not friends at all.

persona, the likes went up”—and comments.⁶⁵ While some followers “accepted” Ulman’s performances, others either found fault with Ulman or the personas she was enacting. For example, in her final post as the “sugar baby,” Ulman uploaded two videos of herself crying mid-breakdown. Ten-seconds each, these videos show Ulman in a dark room, with just enough light to make out her red-splotched eyes and nose as she lightly gasps and sobs (figure 65). The videos garnered comments of concern and empathy: “Why are you crying,” “miss you so much,” and “:(“.⁶⁶ Other users were critical or apathetic to Ulman’s performed anguish: “A N N O Y I N G” and “All this shit is so fucking pretentious oh my gah.”⁶⁷ While these comments were captured by Rhizome at the end of 2014, the last few years have seen additional commentary where viewers address Ulman as an artist directly, praising her work: “Master piece!” “I love your work!” and “Saw this one at liste [OK emoji] congrats on both booths in Basel!”

While the above comments might be read at face value, as the posts continue to garner additional comments, it becomes harder to evaluate whether users are aware of the construction behind the posts. For example, on the same video post of Ulman crying, @cashoutandgetfitted wrote “Thats right, cry. Im getting hott watcheing this,” “#crybitch!,” and “It sounds like you’re #cuttingyourself #lolol,” to which @jordanabragg responded “@cashoutandgetfitted = trying to censor, silence and mediate women who openly express their emotion, via negative comments is not cool/sexy/useful/positive or OK. #crymeariver.” @cashoutandgetfitted rebutted with “The comment section is adding to the art. Open your mind fuccboi.”⁶⁸ The interactions on Instagram

⁶⁵ Ulman, “Do You Follow? Art in Circulation.”

⁶⁶ Archived version of *Excellences & Perfections* is available at: <http://webenact.rhizome.org/excellences-and-perfections>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ These comments can be viewed at <https://www.instagram.com/p/rcBXSLIV-R/>.

thus continue to challenge/destabilize viewers' grasp of the line between performance and reality and the hegemonic norms persisting there.

Comments such as these exhibit what Sarah Pink has called “digital wayfaring,” a process that involves not only human movement through the digital-material environment in the way that we use our ever-handly camera phones to document moments and upload them to shared spaces online but also the movement of the images themselves.⁶⁹ In a “sugar baby” post, Ulman uploaded a mirror selfie in which she’s dressed only in underwear and a short croptop with hair in a bleached-blond ponytail, standing in a hotel-like space and holding a pillow to her side to make her body appear skinnier (figure 66). The caption addresses the “sugar baby” efforts to exercise more: “#no #excuses #workout #strongisthenewskinny.” However, the meaning of the image shifts for each viewer. As Pink states of digital wayfaring, images and the meanings that they convey are “produced by moving through and not over or on environments, and they are not stopping points so much as outcomes of and in movement,” which requires us to reimagine each photograph not as a representation of a static moment but as a product and producer in motion.⁷⁰ While some viewers respond to the objectification of Ulman’s body: @vfiles posted the “flushed face” emoji, @beeare_br commented “Holy crap,” and @yerrrrmomzz said “Seems like you wanna be a noir stripper. You’re beautiful,...but borderline boring.” Other comments, though, emerged not in response to the image, but in response to Ulman as a person: @weldingninja originally commented—and has since deleted—“I used to take you seriously as an artist until I found out via Instagram that you have the mentality of a 15 year old hood rat.” @annasoldner responded to @weldingninja “yas,” while @yanzeecandle and @bbcarat defended Ulman with

⁶⁹ Sarah Pink, “Photographic Places and Digital Wayfaring,” 188.

⁷⁰ Sarah Pink, “Sensory Digital Photography: Re-Thinking ‘Moving’ and the Image,” *Visual Studies* 26, no. 1 (2011): 9.

“Hood rat is a good style” and “Why is the meaning and value of the work diminished when the artist does not act in a way the viewer feels they should?” While these conversations were archived on Rhizome, later viewers’ used the comment section to tag friends, so that they could find the profile and view Ulman’s work as well.

Ulman’s posts were constructed with the knowledge that social media thrives through these kinds of interactions, a knowledge gained by the artist consuming this content herself on Instagram, on Facebook, on tumblr. She built her images and personas from certain “types” of femininities, but then dispersed them out into networked environments, where friends and strangers could consume and interact with them as they willed.

Extending this logic, one could see how each of these posts, likes, tags, comments, or follows on social media serves in some ways as a vote for what types of images will rise above the rest and establish themselves as acceptable—perhaps desirable—mediated representations of identity. Social media thus not only represents but also constructs hegemonic forms of femininity; users are “not simply passive vessels, but possess agency to accept, contest, or reformulate syndicated images of masculinity and femininity.”⁷¹ The Instagram iteration of this work, then, engages the user-viewer not only with representational critiques of hegemony but with(in) the environment where they have power to contest and remodel norms.

This is what differentiates *Excellences & Perfections* from the work of Cindy Sherman and Nikki S. Lee. Rather than letting constructed images speak for themselves on museum walls, Ulman has placed her posts—as well as the whole profile, performance, and narrative—in the public sphere of social media, where the masses gather to follow, like, comment on, and influence continuing norms of femininity. The “infinite series of encounters” that Azoulay

⁷¹ Charlebois, 134.

identifies and the power relations that undergird them leave digital traces and are made visible on the Instagram interface.⁷² Viewers of the work are left to question whether or not these traces are “real” or “correct.” Here precariousness serves as an aesthetic strategy to render the boundary between person and persona, image and reality ambiguous and unknowable.

Azoulay’s framework of the event of photography here enables us to examine the Instagram iteration of *Excellences & Perfections*, with its images, captions, likes, and comments, “as not being a consequence, application or implementation of the photographer’s point of view but, rather, as resulting from an encounter between several protagonists.”⁷³ The interface makes these multiple interactions visible for the viewer, brings these lives/events to the fore.

With this perspective, we can move to understand the images, comments, hashtags, followers, and commentators of *Excellences & Perfections*, Instagram, and social performance on and offline more broadly as participants in the development of a power-laden “communal aesthetic” of norms, validated through various systems of judgment, which manifest on Instagram as likes, comments, and follows.⁷⁴ In social media photography, “both the persistence of existing practices and the development of new ones require visible, public performance,” which is why the posts, parasocial capacities, and networkedness of the Instagram interface are so essential to the profundity and meaning of *Excellences & Perfections*.⁷⁵ In the following

⁷² Azoulay, “Photography,” 77.

⁷³ Ariella Azoulay, “What Is a Photograph? What Is Photography?,” *Philosophy of Photography* 1, no. 1 (2010): 12.

⁷⁴ Susan Murray, “Digital Images, Photo-Sharing, and Our Shifting Notions of Everyday Aesthetics,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 7, no. 2 (2008): 151, 158.

⁷⁵ Nancy Van House, “Outlook: Photographic Wayfaring, Now and To Come,” in *Digital Photography and Everyday Life: Empirical Studies on Material Visual Practices*, ed. Gómez Cruz and Lehmuskallio (London and New York: Routledge, 2016): 275.

chapter, I will examine what changes when the work is moved into a gallery space and rendered in static form.

CHAPTER THREE

In 2016, Ulman altered the form of *Excellences & Perfections* and moved it from its dynamic iteration on Instagram into the physical museum space, an often-contentious site for new media works.⁷⁶ As a part of exhibitions at the Tate Modern and the Whitechapel Gallery in London, Ulman exhibited *Excellences & Perfections* through static prints of selfies from the performance. Within these white-cube spaces and in this two-dimensional medium, *Excellences & Perfections* engages social media representations of femininity within the history of art, provokes a mindful and ritualistic reception, and facilitates encounters and perspectives on the persistence of hegemonic norms related to but distinct from those conceived on the Instagram interface. While the display of *Excellences & Perfections* at the Tate and Whitechapel galleries has value and engages critically with normative representations of gender perpetuated by social media, these static, limited representations of the work fail to integrate the native interface, its precariousness, and its dynamism as living system. I argue that this loss in the museum space critically undermines the richness of Ulman's project because as I demonstrate here and in the preceding chapters, it is the ever-changing dynamic nature of the Instagram interface that allows for the critiques of hegemonic norms and the destabilization of the audience's reading to occur. To demonstrate this, I will place the exhibition of *Excellences & Perfections* at the Tate and Whitechapel in the context of literature on new media in the gallery, analyze what meanings of

⁷⁶ Paul; Sarah Cook, "On Curating New Media Art," *Preserving and Exhibiting Media Art: Challenges and Perspectives*, ed. Noordegraaf et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013): 379-406.

the work are brought out in the museum space, and ultimately argue that the richest encounter with the work is on the interface.

NEW MEDIA IN THE GALLERY

In *Excellences & Perfections*' original form on Instagram, Ulman carried out a networked performance, in which viewers observed, followed, liked, and commented on a conceptually-constructed digital object in a popular medium. Thus, *Excellences & Perfections* was (and is) a new media work, operating on a platform that provokes interaction, engages public voices, and complicates the viewer's understanding of reality. As I have articulated in the preceding chapter, Instagram users continued to interact with the work through and after its exhibition, tagging friends to view the narrative or tagging Ulman herself, as in "@amaliaulman I thoroughly loved this masterpiece. You've definitely inspired me and my art!" Further, as Ulman continues to post to the account (now ostensibly back to her artist self), viewing the narrative requires extensive scrolling through her "real" post-performance profile. The process of scrolling and viewing the intervening images affects the reception of the work, as viewers gain a strong sense of the disjuncture between Ulman's performed identities and subsequent posts.

In addition, in allowing *Excellences & Perfections* to be exhibited in a gallery space, Ulman engaged with a field of critique about the display of networked art, as new media works are often considered to be fundamentally limited when moved into a physical museum space. Charlie Gere has argued that museums, "founded in and for conditions of art production and reception of the late nineteenth century, are not properly equipped to show [new media] work."⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Charlie Gere, "New Media Art in the Gallery," in *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond: Curatorial Models for Digital Art*, ed. Christiane Paul (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 24.

White walls and fixed feature lighting, the standard for museum galleries today, assume a physical object; photographs, paintings, and sculptures are here highlighted and offered as physically-manifest demonstrations of aesthetic, political, and social moments.⁷⁸

Wall labels are a significant part of that political positioning. In “Death by Wall Label,” Jon Ippolito asserted that museums’ attempts to reduce a new media work to artist, date, medium, and collection, while an honest effort at establishing and conserving authority ends up operating as “manacles on creativity,” confining the work to a describable static iteration.⁷⁹ Ippolito further asserts that a new media work, like Ulman’s, “can survive only by multiplying and mutating,” actions which go against the constraints necessary for traditional museum objects.⁸⁰ Thus, new media works, including *Excellences & Perfections*, undergo a fundamental shift in entering the gallery. While I argue that this gallery iteration of the *Excellences & Perfections* loses the critical characteristics of the work that I have outlined in the previous chapter, it is not entirely without value. In what follows I articulate the benefits such exhibitions of this work can have, though ultimately argue that the richest encounter with the performance occurs via Instagram.

EXHIBITING *EXCELLENCES & PERFECTIONS*

In the first half of 2016, *Excellences & Perfections* was on view in two major London museum spaces: the Whitechapel Gallery and the Tate Modern. At Whitechapel, the

⁷⁸ Sarah Cook, “Immateriality and Its Discontents: An Overview of Main Models and Issues for Curating New Media,” in *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond: Curatorial Models for Digital Art*, ed. Christiane Paul (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 29.

⁷⁹ Jon Ippolito, “Death by Wall Label,” in *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond: Curatorial Models for Digital Art*, ed. Christiane Paul (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 106.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 106.

exhibition *Electronic Superhighway* explored the impact of computer technology on art and artists over the last half century and showed “the hardware of circuits, screens, cameras and drones, the software of coding, data transmission, hypertext and virtual reality [...] as aesthetic, critique and philosophy.”⁸¹ Two images from *Excellences and Perfections* were c-type printed, mounted on aluminum, and installed onto black edge frames (figure 64). Labeled *Instagram Update 18th June 2014* and *Instagram Update 20th June 2014*, the works hung at staggered parallels on their own plane of a partial exhibition wall. Within the exhibition narrative, *Excellences & Perfections* “render[s] visible the affective modulations that occur when selfhood is shaped according to the demands of social media applications.”⁸² Here, Ulman’s work addresses issues of socially-mediated representation and self-fashioning within a larger narrative of technology in art.

Meanwhile, the exhibition *Performing for the Camera* at the Tate Modern explored the collusion of performance and photography “from the stars of the Victorian stage to the art happenings of the 1960s, and today’s trend for selfies.”⁸³ Here, three images from *Excellences & Perfections* were also c-type printed onto aluminum with black edge frames and placed in a single row hang, similarly labelled *Instagram Update 1 June*; *Instagram Update 8 July*; and *Instagram Update 5 September 2014* (figure 65). In what was likely an attempt to offer a concise overview to the viewer, the three images were sampled from each of the three episodes of Ulman’s performance, evoking the art historical tradition of triptychs. Within the exhibition

⁸¹ Iwona Blazwick, “Electronic Superhighway,” in *Electronic Superhighway: From Experiments in Art and Technology to Art After the Internet*, ed. Kholeif et al. (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2016), 22.

⁸² Erika Balsom, “On the Grid,” in *Electronic Superhighway: From Experiments in Art and Technology to Art After the Internet*, ed. Kholeif et al. (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2016), 47.

⁸³ “Performing for the Camera,” *Tate*, webpage, accessed 23 April 2016, <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/performing-camera>.

narrative, *Excellences & Perfections* raises “questions surrounding the documentation of performance, the construction of identity and the dissemination of photo-media,” issues that are borne on—yet resonate beyond—the digital interface of Instagram.⁸⁴

In an effort to acknowledge the networked performance and its platform, the Tate laid out three iPads linked to Ulman’s Instagram account on a table in front of the three prints for viewers to peruse but not interact with.⁸⁵ An information placard introduces the three episodes of Ulman’s performance as “the apparently diaristic daily posts [...] carefully staged and performed by Amalia Ulman” and concludes, “Ulman’s [...] creation of unique prints of these posts removed from their original context, further complicates our understanding of what is reality and what is performance.”⁸⁶ While the wall panel nods in documentary explanation to the original iteration of work on Instagram, it privileges—in concert with the prominent placement and size of the prints on the wall—a reading of this new static, gallery object over the original work. Indeed, with the iPads laid on the table (a secondary gallery device), the impression was that they are supplementary or informational tools which viewers could use for background information, not for accessing the original work itself.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Simon Baker and Fiontan Moran, “Performing Real Life,” in *Performing for the Camera*, ed. Baker and Moran (London: Tate Publishing, 2016), 197.

⁸⁵ Viewers could only scroll through the interface, not interact directly with the work via following, liking, or commenting.

⁸⁶ Wall label content gathered via email correspondence with Adam Smith, Information Assistant, Tate Modern, April 16, 2016.

⁸⁷ iPads are increasingly used in museum spaces as educational tools providing background information or interactive exploratory tools for exhibitions: Mike Emergy, “UH Blaffer Art Museum Tours Enhanced by iPad Interviews, Videos,” *University of Houston*, 9 July 2013, <http://www.uh.edu/news-events/stories/2013/july/0709BlafferiPad.php>; Purnima Ruanglertbutr, “A Museum Educator’s Guide to Implementing a Digital Pedagogy using Connectivism: Making the Case with iPads to Enhance K-12 Student Learning in Art Museum Education,” in *Revolutionizing Arts Education in K-12 Classrooms through Technological Integration* (2015):

The Tate and Whitechapel, I realize, were working with significant limitations. Operating within centuries-old institutional systems built for displaying *physical* objects in a *physical* gallery space, they were attempting to acknowledge and contextualize dynamic new media work that is inherently non-physical. Their framing was limited to artist-proffered objects, wall labels, and placement within the larger exhibition narratives. In a commentary on their own experiences curating and exhibiting new media works, Tilman Baumgärtel, Hans Christ, and Iris Dressler reflect that “the goal of exhibitions cannot be to (re)construct an authentic experience of net art. [...] They should make clear that the genuine spaces for experiencing and engaging in net cultures can be translated into a physical exhibition space only to a limited extent.”⁸⁸ Thus, representation of the Instagram interface is likely a vain effort, and one not attempted by the Tate or Whitechapel curators. It’s worth examining here what conversations *were* activated through the static prints that Ulman chose to display in the gallery space.

PRINTED SELFIES AND THE WHITE CUBE

Because the museum space cannot aim to reconstruct the original experience of new media, as Baumgärtel, Christ, and Dressler point out, it must instead strive to “productively confront the contradictions and exclusions in the relationship between art and the institution without nullifying them.”⁸⁹ Thus, with *Excellences & Perfections*, while the performed Instagram experience could not be exhibited in its original form, Ulman, the Tate, and

41-86; Linda Norris and Rainey Tisdale, *Creativity in Museum Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 191.

⁸⁸ Tilman Baumgärtel, Hans D. Christ, and Iris Dressler, “games: Computerspiele von KünstlerInnen (games: Computer games by artists),” in *New Media in the White Cube and Beyond*, ed. Christiane Paul (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 239.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 240.

Whitechapel chose instead to isolate a selection of social media images from the performance and engage them with issues of mediated femininity that could be productively (and have historically been) examined in the museum space.⁹⁰ To this end, all the images that Ulman printed for the exhibitions were selfies. Within the gallery space, these printed selfies placed popular social media imagery—and the norms it embodies and reinforces—in dialogue with art historical conversations on the performance of femininity.

As I have discussed in previous chapters, a central figure in this art world discussion of performed gender norms is Cindy Sherman, whose *Untitled Film Stills* embodies “present, congealed, cultural clichés” from cinematic notions of femininity.⁹¹ Seven of these works (#17, #27, #53, #97, #98, #99, and #100) were exhibited at the Tate Modern as part of *Performing for the Camera*, the same show in which Ulman’s works appear. Through this juxtaposition, the similarities between the *Film Stills* series and *Excellences & Perfections* become quite clear: both appropriate hegemonic norms of gender to express and critique socially mediated ideas of femininity. What was once performed by actors in a cinematic media environment and critiqued by Sherman is now enacted on platforms like Instagram and critiqued by Ulman. The continuation of this cultural critique points to the pervasiveness and gravity of normative representations of femininity. The conversations between these works demonstrate the value of this art historical positioning of *Excellences & Perfections* against Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills*, which is more directly addressed in a museum space than on Instagram.

Apart from engaging with the history of art, the placement of Ulman’s selfies in the museum space allows for the viewer to engage with images in an environment that primes them

⁹⁰ Mediated femininity has a notable history in museums, especially in the last half century. Some major artists working in this realm include Cindy Sherman, Nikki S. Lee, and Tomoko Sawada.

⁹¹ Krauss.

for critical contemplation. Carol Duncan has articulated how the museum provides a frame for mindfulness, what she calls a ritualistic “liminal experience.”⁹² Here, the viewer, in a theatrical setting of stillness and intimacy, “can step back from the practical concerns and social relations of everyday life and look at themselves and their world—or at some aspect of it—with different thoughts and feelings.”⁹³ The selfies from *Excellences & Perfections* hung on a white wall in a major art museum are thus likely to be received with a critical mindfulness and an attention to their position within a museological narrative. As a part of *Electronic Superhighway* and *Performing for the Camera*, for example, Ulman’s work productively posed the question of how these new and mass-mediated image-types, enabled by continuously evolving technologies, continue or complicate the historical genre of self-portraiture.

While some viewers of the work on Instagram will also approach Ulman’s posts with this critical perspective, the negotiation of meaning that results from viewing the Instagram iteration occurs in a space/environment where critical reception is not as central as it is in a museum. Media theorist Julie B. Weist has shown that mass media messages are received and activated according to an individual’s “cultural capacity,” or their self-assigned competency to process a message as true.⁹⁴ In *Excellences & Perfections*, Weist’s model explains why some viewers are able to process Ulman’s performances on Instagram critically as art—whether they were introduced to her performance as art in a museum or in an article or discerned the fallacy of her shifting personas and artistic identity for themselves—while other viewers process Ulman’s

⁹² Carol Duncan, “The Art Museum as Ritual,” in *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 11.

⁹³ Ibid., 11.

⁹⁴ Julie B. Weist, “The Role of Mass Media in the Transmission of Culture,” in *Communication and Information Technologies Annual: New Media Cultures*, ed. Robinson et al. (London: Emerald Group Publishing, 2016): 203-210.

account as “real.” Erika Balsom, in an essay for Whitechapel’s *Electronic Superhighway* exhibition catalogue, argued that “the uncertain status” of Ulman’s Instagram account as real or unreal “dismantl[es] any simple opposition of truth and falsity.”⁹⁵ This is what differentiates the museum from the interface in terms of image-viewing: the museum primes viewers to be critical, but the interface does not. While some Instagram users will certainly still be critically-attentive to content on the interface, others will miss the critical mimicry in Ulman’s representations because social media reception does not operate (as museumgoing does) within a framework for critical reception.

Furthermore, as I’ve articulated in the previous chapter, the captions, comments, likes, and networked profile are integral to the full meaning of the work. With the interface displayed on their own devices, viewers see Ulman’s images on the same screen on which they view their friends’ and their own posted images. Indeed, the Tate’s curator of photography Simon Baker acknowledged Ulman’s use of her own Instagram profile before and after the “performative intervention” of *Excellences & Perfections* as an unsettling force on the authenticity of Instagram images more broadly.⁹⁶ Its existence on the interface challenges viewers in a more direct way to evaluate/consider the hegemonic norms presented because with their likes and comments, they can actively employ their “agency to accept, contest, or reformulate syndicated images of masculinity and femininity.”⁹⁷ Moreover, on Instagram, the viewer has the opportunity to become a user and co-creator of the still-evolving work by interacting directly with Ulman’s

⁹⁵ Balsom, 47.

⁹⁶ Simon Baker, “Performing for the Camera,” in *Performing for the Camera* (London: Tate Publishing, 2016), 23.

⁹⁷ Charlebois, 134.

posts and profile. These features are all absent from the museum space, which articulates only the date of the post in its wall label metadata.

Thus, while the printed selfies in the gallery space enable the museum to raise questions of femininity and performance by engaging with the history of art and stimulating the critical mindfulness of museum goers in a ritual environment, they miss the richer meanings behind the native interface, its precariousness, and its dynamic, networked condition as living system rather than static object. These latter elements are, as I have argued in the previous chapter, what make the work so powerful to a contemporary audience because the interfaced performance operates in parallel to their own socially-mediated projections of identity on Instagram or similar platforms and builds meaning in conjunction with (changing) public contributions to and networked sharing of the work itself. The meaning and political activation of *Excellences & Perfections* is thus much more richly present in its original form on Instagram, where users can view the hegemony-affirming and -challenging commentary of the masses and be moved to immediate visible interaction with the work than through the presentation of static selfies in a museum space.

CONCLUSION

In aligning itself with the works of Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and Nikki S. Lee, *Excellences & Perfections* engages with a long tradition of women artists exploring the clichéd and essentializing representations of women in media through mimicry and critique as well as the hegemonic gendered roles that those representations reinforce. As I have argued in the preceding thesis, however, Ulman's work moves beyond constructed images and dives into the sharing and interactive processes through which these images are affirmed or challenged on a daily basis by the mass public and pushes the audience into the role of actor within this environment. Because of its medium and platform, this analysis of *Excellences & Perfections* demands an approach steeped both in the history of art and in contemporary media theory. While such an approach has been carried out here, further investigation of the work in greater sociological depth could proffer insights into the ways in which hegemonic norms of gender are reified in our contemporary visual landscape.

Studies in this vein might examine what meanings emerge for viewers of *Excellences & Perfections* in a museum space, what meanings emerge for viewers of the work on Instagram, and how those meanings or perceptions differ. To push this further, we might follow the lead of media studies and communications, where studies of *perception* lead to studies of *effect*. Thus, further research on *Excellences & Perfections* might examine how viewing the Instagram critique affects viewers' subsequent evaluations of images and identities when using the app for their own personal use.

Instagram works like *Excellences & Perfections* or Leah Schrager's Instagram-based *Celebrity Project* provide a promising environment for such sociological and art historical hybrid studies because they offer a narrow platform of investigation. Any "impact" of art on viewers from a museum visit is wildly difficult (if not completely impossible) to operationalize because the works in a museum, the topics they treat, and the forms in which effects might manifest in real life are innumerable. While I certainly believe that Instagram works like Ulman's influence viewers outside of the interface, their effects or impact could productively be analyzed and measured within the platform. Here, art history might borrow methodologies from the fields of media studies and communications, where perception and media effects studies of Instagram images are already well established. Instagram artworks could thus provide a narrow enough platform for quantifying and defending certain facets of art's impact.

As I write, art departments are facing university budget cuts, and the President of the United States just released his proposal for the FY 2018 budget, which recommends the complete elimination of the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services, which provide mass critical support for cultural institutions, projects, and education around the country. Evidence-based studies like the one outlined above provide a way for art history as a discipline to articulate the importance of visual literacy and the power of arts and cultural institutions to the greater public at large. Certainly, I'm not proposing that a humanities field transfigure into a social science or that such studies would wholly encompass the value of the arts. Rather, I'm proposing that art historical studies steeped in sociological methods could provide a critical, if partial, step toward an evidenced-based defense of our academic and cultural value at a time when we direly need it.

FIGURES



Figure 1. Amalia Ulman, “artsy-tumblr girl,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/m-6bPjFV5b/>.



Figure 2. Amalia Ulman, “sugar baby,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/p761dzFVwU/>.



Figure 3. Amalia Ulman, “life goddess,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/sc48slFV6l/>.



Figure 4. @jam_ponybah, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BIhsxZdjuV/>.



Figure 5. @eva_pinkland, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BHwoYcEAfHQ/>.



Figure 6. @chan.tsz.ying, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BFIQu3iL5iH/>.



Figure 7. Amalia Ulman, “artsy-tumblr girl,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/pPdMqblV4K/>.

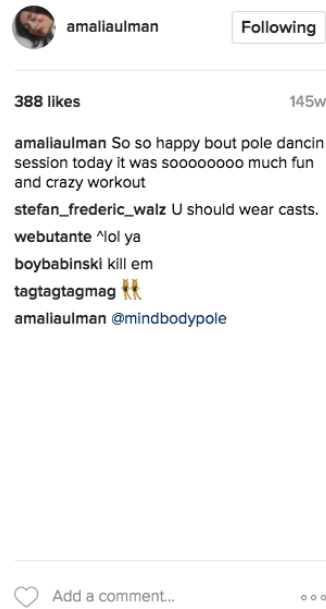


Figure 8. Amalia Ulman, “artsy-tumblr girl,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/owzk9DFV0O/>.



Figure 9. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #2*, gelatin silver print, 1977. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Figure 10. Nikki S. Lee, *The Yuppie Project #4*, chromogenic development print, 1998. Chicago, Museum of Contemporary Photography.



Figure 11. @hannahbronfman, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BOe-LXilO5Y/>.



Figure 12. @hiit.whit, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BRbzia8Ahu9/>.



Figure 13. @jenselter, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BQ9RTJ5hYLx/>.



Figure 14. @bootyprogram, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BLsqCNSD4T0/>.



Figure 15. Amalia Ulman, “sugar baby,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/qBLIVPIV-X/>.



Figure 16. Amalia Ulman, “sugar baby,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/q9Qc1KFV9M/>.



Figure 17. Amalia Ulman, “sugar baby,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/qjzmthlVyc/>



Figure 18. Amalia Ulman, “sugar baby,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014,
<https://www.instagram.com/p/qNDFxGIV6N/>.



Figure 19. Amalia Ulman, “sugar baby,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014,
<https://www.instagram.com/p/p5ataiFV4V/>.

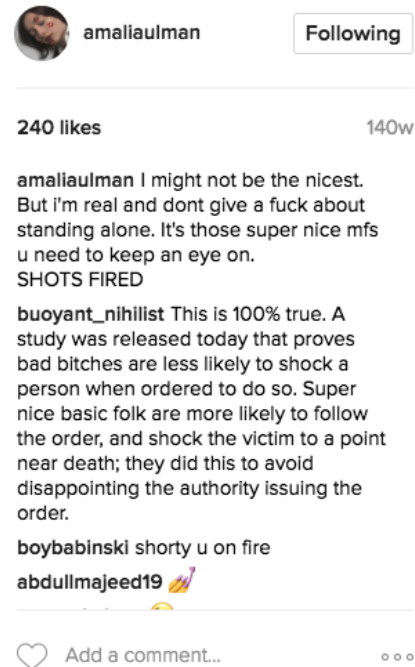


Figure 20. Amalia Ulman, “sugar baby,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/qGUMyRIVxL/>.

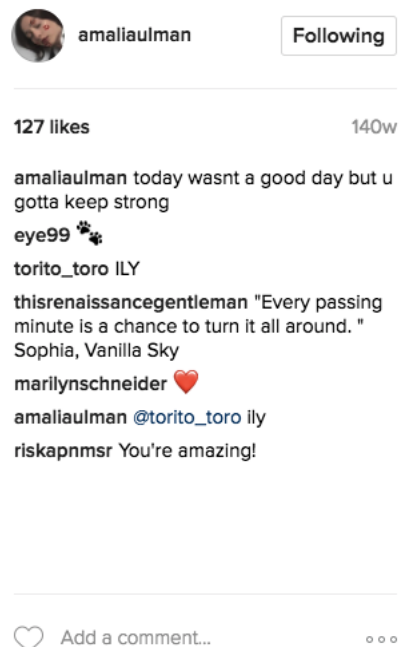


Figure 21. Amalia Ulman, “sugar baby,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, https://www.instagram.com/p/qAdsTHIV_n/.



Figure 24. @kyliejenner, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/363OMyGHJ/>.



Figure 25. @kyliejenner, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/37CB3hHGuk/>.



Figure 26. @mndflmeditation, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BNUdMEkA-aH/>.



Figure 27. @thetiafox, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BRnVKpogrUI/>.



Figure

28. @ameliamarthelia, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/8I5ilguXvV/>.

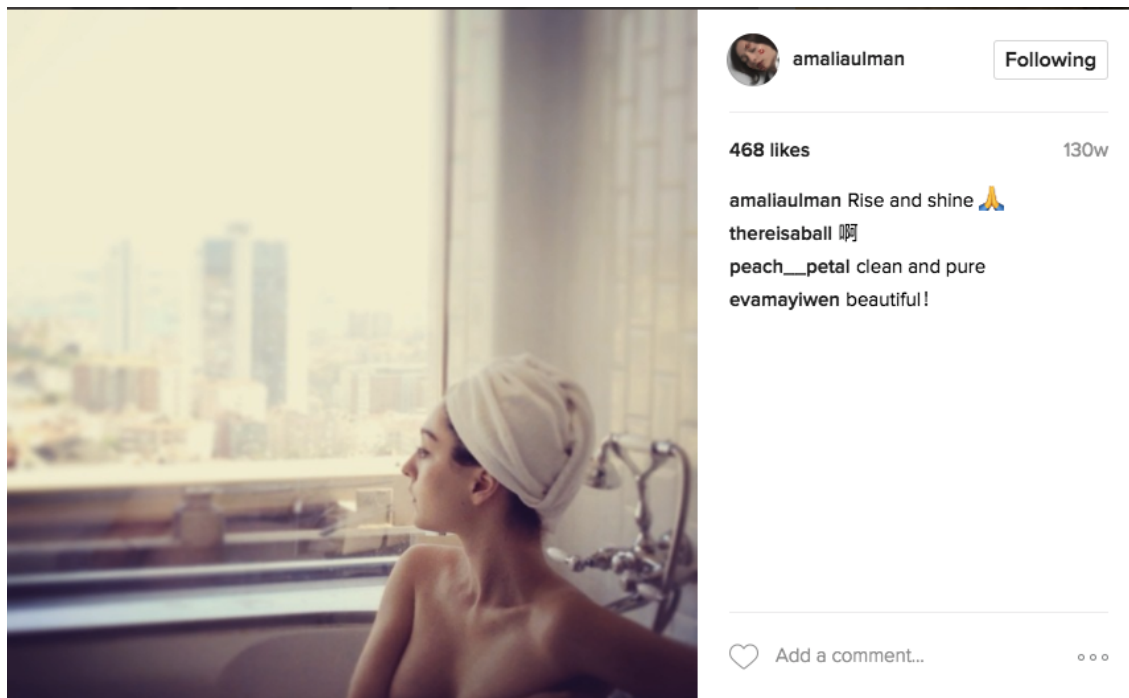


Figure 29. Amalia Ulman, “life goddess,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/s1qhbVIVwY/>.



Figure 30. Amalia Ulman, “life goddess,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/sM87m9FV0S/>.



Figure 31. Amalia Ulman, “life goddess,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, https://www.instagram.com/p/sFVf_IIV2p/.



Figure 32. @_dez07_, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BRpTJWJgrQc/>.



Figure 33. @claudiaalende, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BPtObkdDgY9/>.



Figure 34. @lucyjsenior, Instagram post, https://www.instagram.com/p/BRG_0HSgh-O/.



Figure 35. @ewansee, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BQ0J5TQD8Gv/>.



Figure 36. Amalia Ulman, “artsy-tumblr girl,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/oFPJN9FV6L/>.



Figure 37. @lauraraephoto, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BQ0J5TQD8Gv/>.



Figure 38. Amalia Ulman, “artsy-tumblr girl,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, https://www.instagram.com/p/nWm_5MFVwQ/.



Figure 39. Amalia Ulman, “artsy-tumblr girl,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/pmDrqlFV4p/>.



Figure 40. Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Your gaze hits the side of my face)*, photograph and type on paperboard, 1981. Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art.



Figure 41. @emmahenault, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BRqm4HpgYN0/>.



Figure 42. @nilzehm, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BRq19J2hf-j/>.



Figure 43. Amalia Ulman, “sugar baby,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/qXK8sfFVyy/>.



Figure 44. @debhewlett, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BRoTWzlFkp7/>.

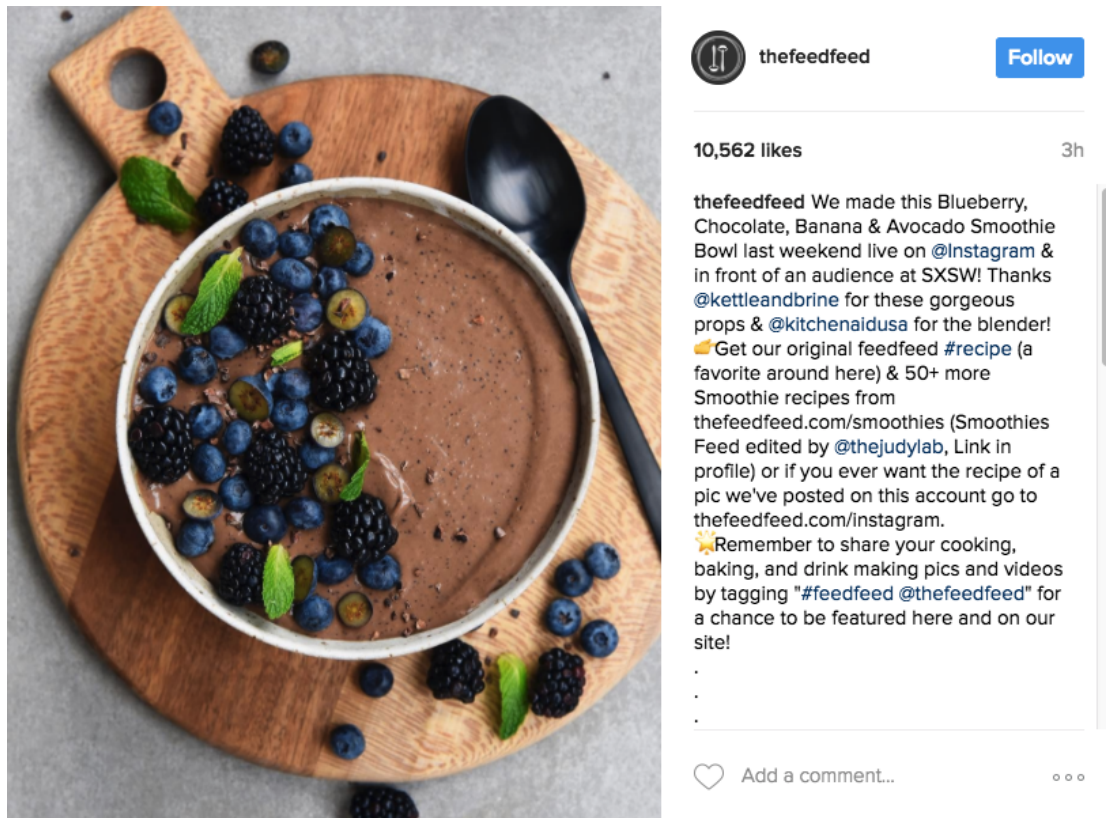


Figure 45. @thefeedfeed, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BRqXzGHhDua/>.

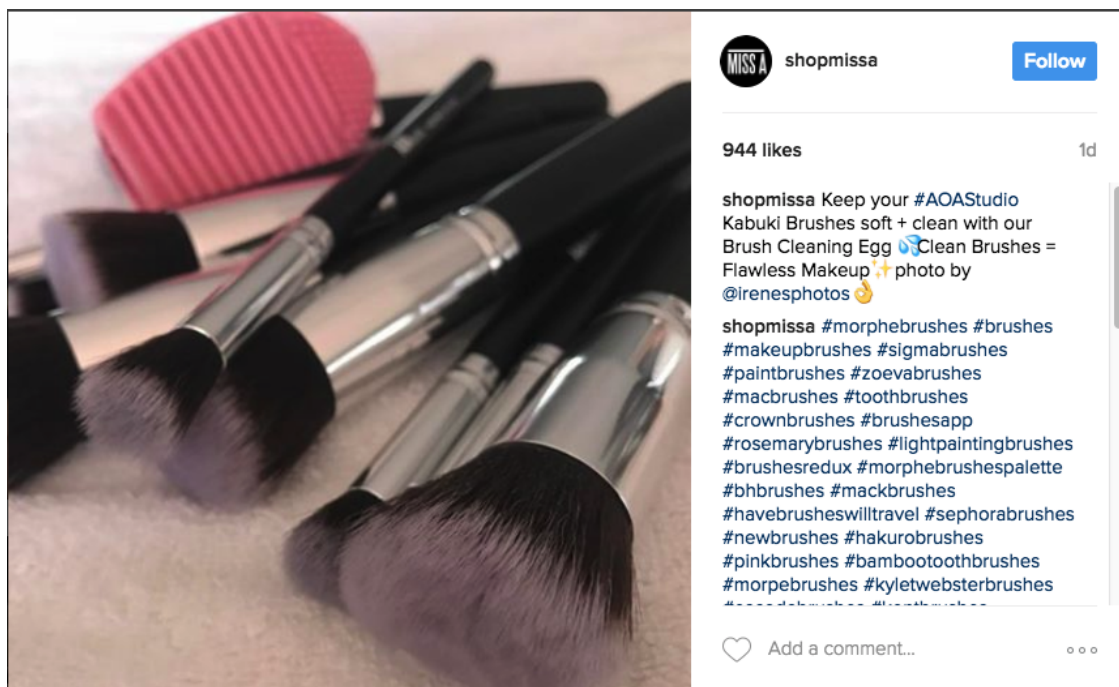


Figure 46. @shopmissa, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BRnxxYODmNr/>.

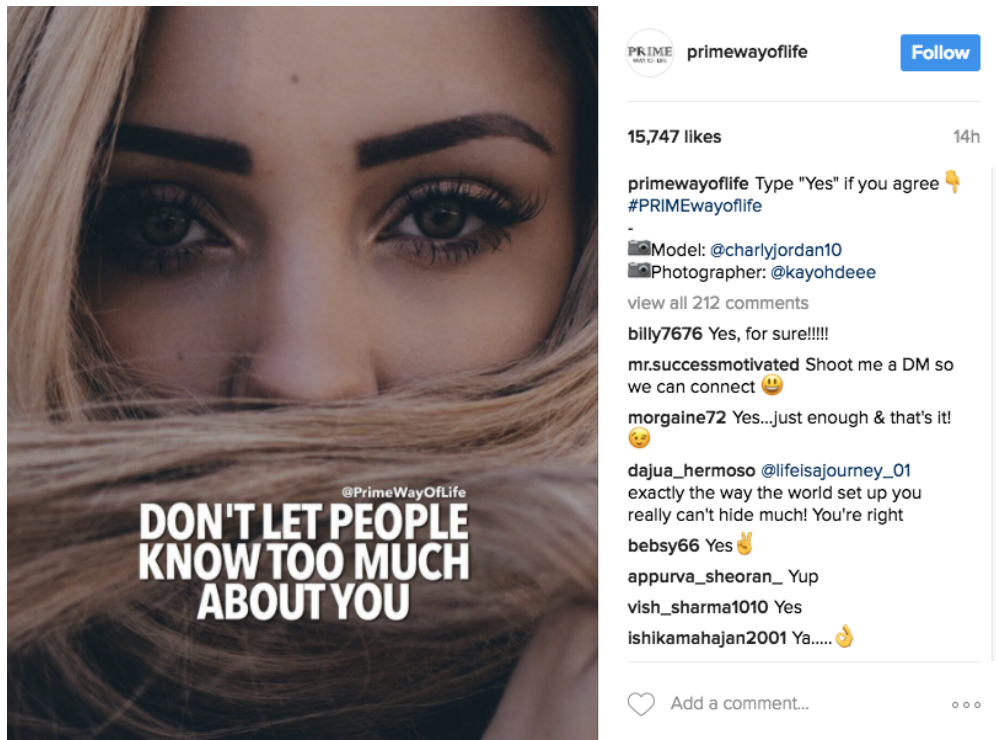


Figure 47. @primewayoflife, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BRpPcUIFTVG/>.



Figure 48. @parisparisaz, Instagram post, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BRqxKMVA58b/>.



Figure 49. Amalia Ulman, “life goddess,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, https://www.instagram.com/p/sy8_OzIVwY/.



Figure 50. Amalia Ulman, “life goddess,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/sxKKisFV0C/>.



169 likes 137w

amaliaulmanand i used to collect stamps lmao

kayrawolk Lol

trudgeon Kinda funny

aileenalanna @pixiwoos @nixiepixi1 your brushes in this Instagram performance piece. ;)

♡ Add a comment...

...

Figure 51. Amalia Ulman, “sugar baby,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/rFXbwBIV0w/>.



167 likes 140w

amaliaulman lol so tru

miranda_pharis @htownnciara

oliviabfoster @karisc123

paulo.avelino @fe_cirillo

♡ Add a comment...

...

Figure 52. Amalia Ulman, “sugar baby,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/qLe2VIFVyV/>.

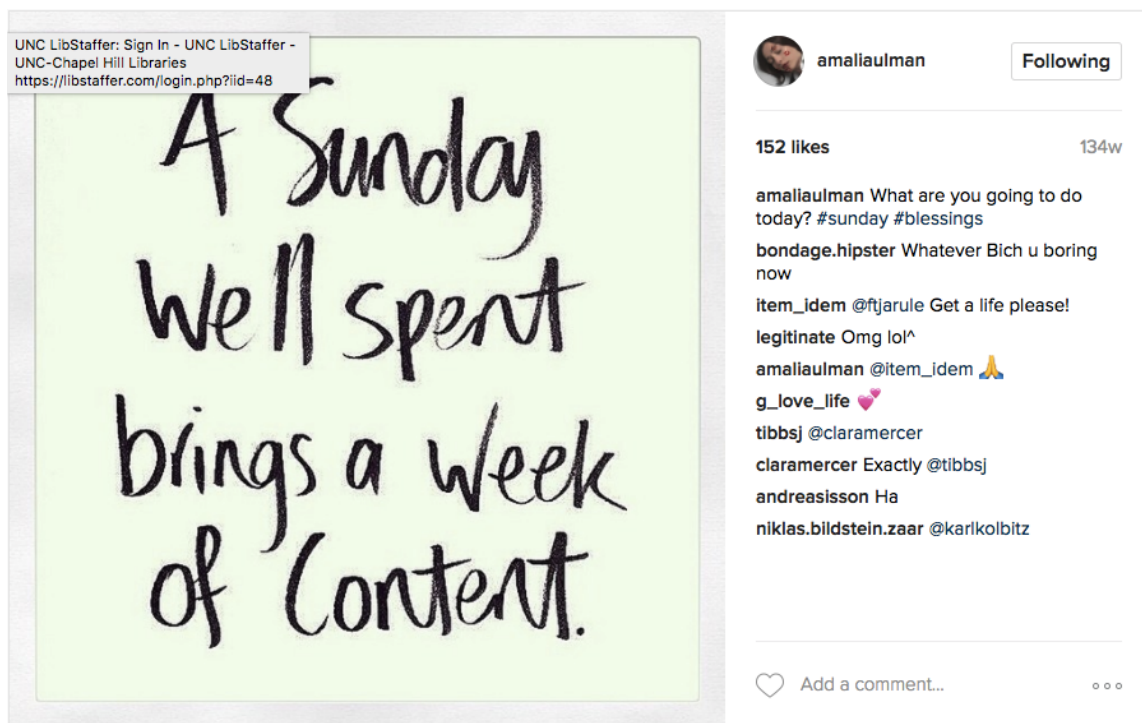


Figure 53. Amalia Ulman, “life goddess,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, https://www.instagram.com/p/ry6-bMIV_v/.



Figure 54. Amalia Ulman, “life goddess,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/sPiL5hFV5U/>.

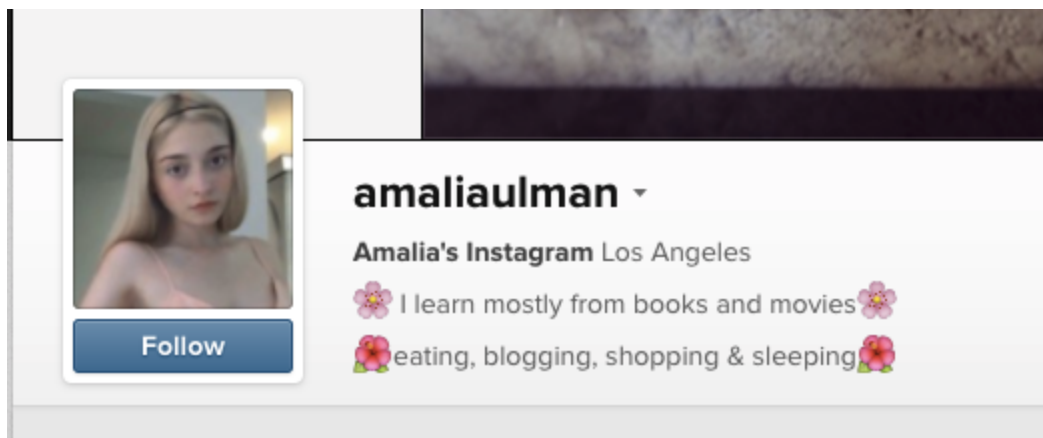


Figure 55. Amalia Ulman, Screenshot of “artsy-tumblr girl” Instagram bio, *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <http://webenact.rhizome.org/excellences-and-perfections/20141014150552/http://instagram.com/amaliaulman>.

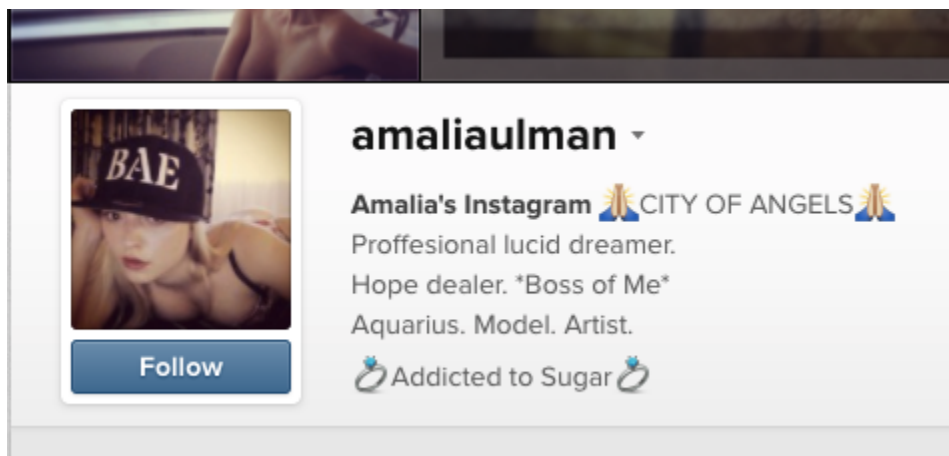


Figure 56. Amalia Ulman, Screenshot of “sugar baby” Instagram bio, *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <http://webenact.rhizome.org/excellences-and-perfections/20141014155217/http://instagram.com/amaliaulman>.



Figure 57. Amalia Ulman, Screenshot of “life goddess” Instagram bio, *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <http://webenact.rhizome.org/excellences-and-perfections/20141014162333/http://instagram.com/amaliaulman>.



Figure 58. Amalia Ulman, “artsy-tumblr girl,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, https://www.instagram.com/p/nqurgrIV9_/.

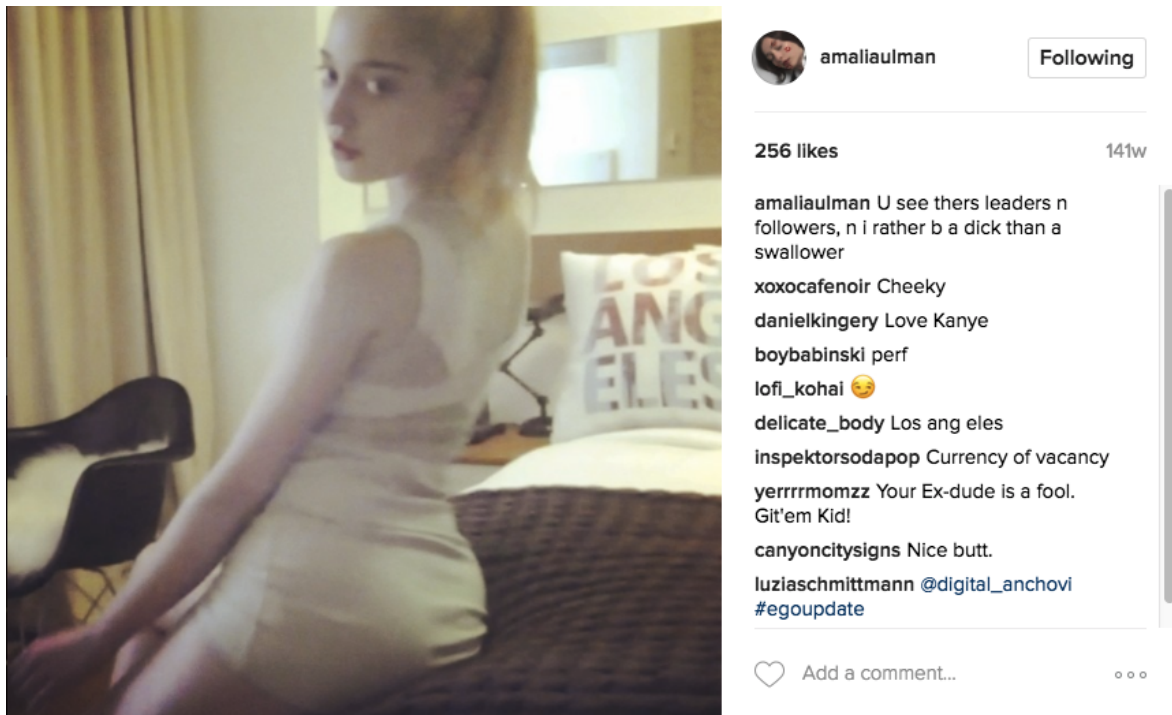


Figure 59. Amalia Ulman, “sugar baby,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/prkcSRIV5y/>.

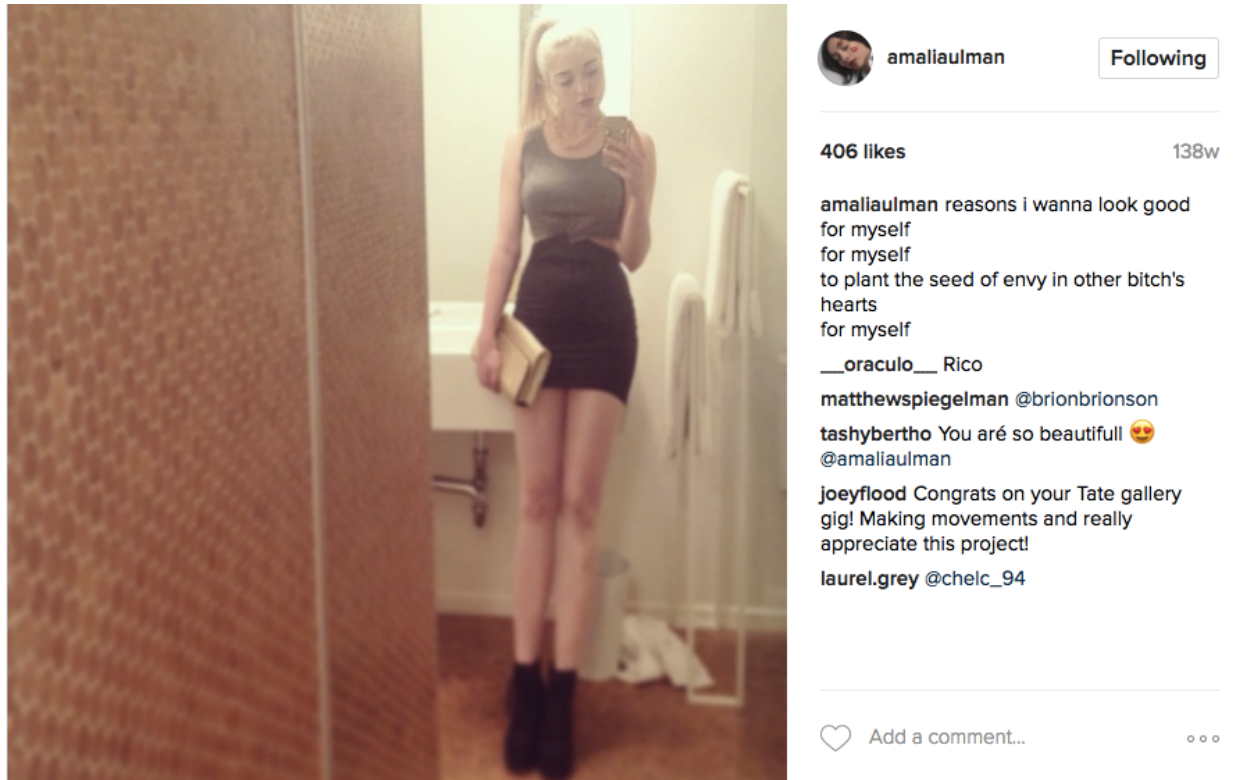


Figure 60. Amalia Ulman, “sugar baby,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014,
<https://www.instagram.com/p/qmV6DCFV0p/>.



Figure 61. Amalia Ulman, “sugar baby,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014,
<https://www.instagram.com/p/rFXbwBIV0w/>.



Figure 62. Amalia Ulman, “sugar baby,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/rCI0eSIV2d/>.



Figure 63. Amalia Ulman, “life goddess,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/rrUG3QIV78/>.



Figure 64. Amalia Ulman, “life goddess,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014,
<https://www.instagram.com/p/sj6TkSIV3a/>.

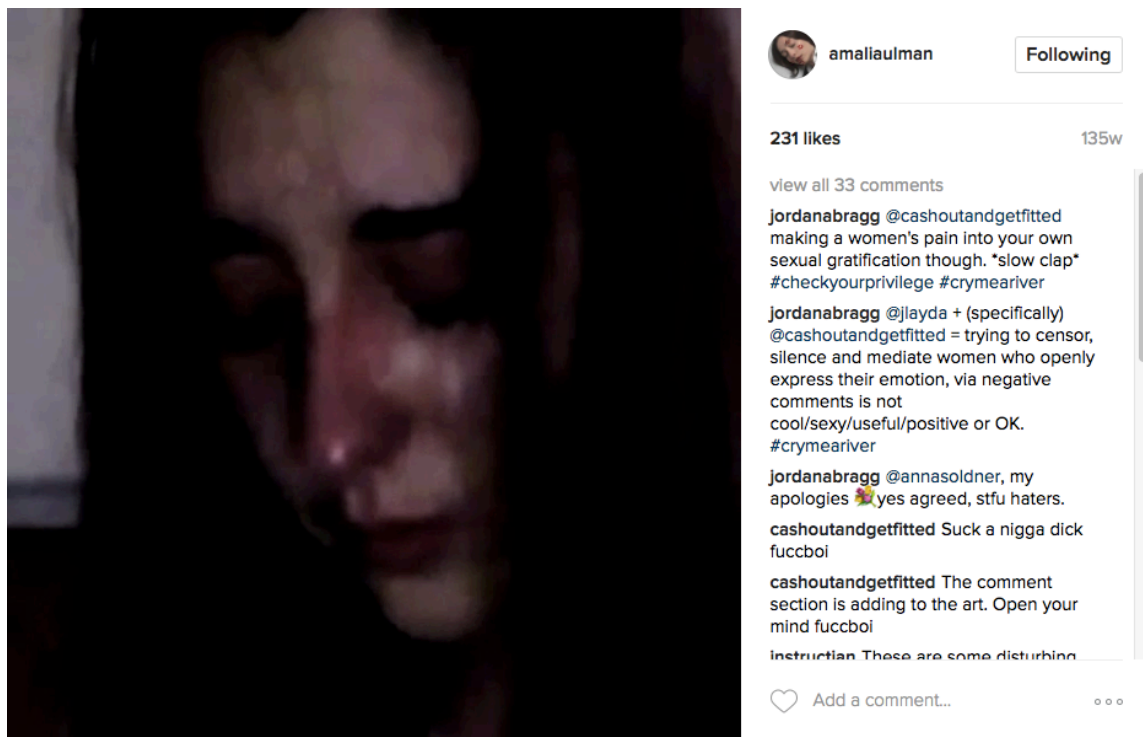


Figure 65. Amalia Ulman, “sugar baby,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014,
<https://www.instagram.com/p/rcBXSLIV-R/>.



Figure 66. Amalia Ulman, “sugar baby,” *Excellences & Perfections*, 2014, <https://www.instagram.com/p/pxVqkHlV8P/>.

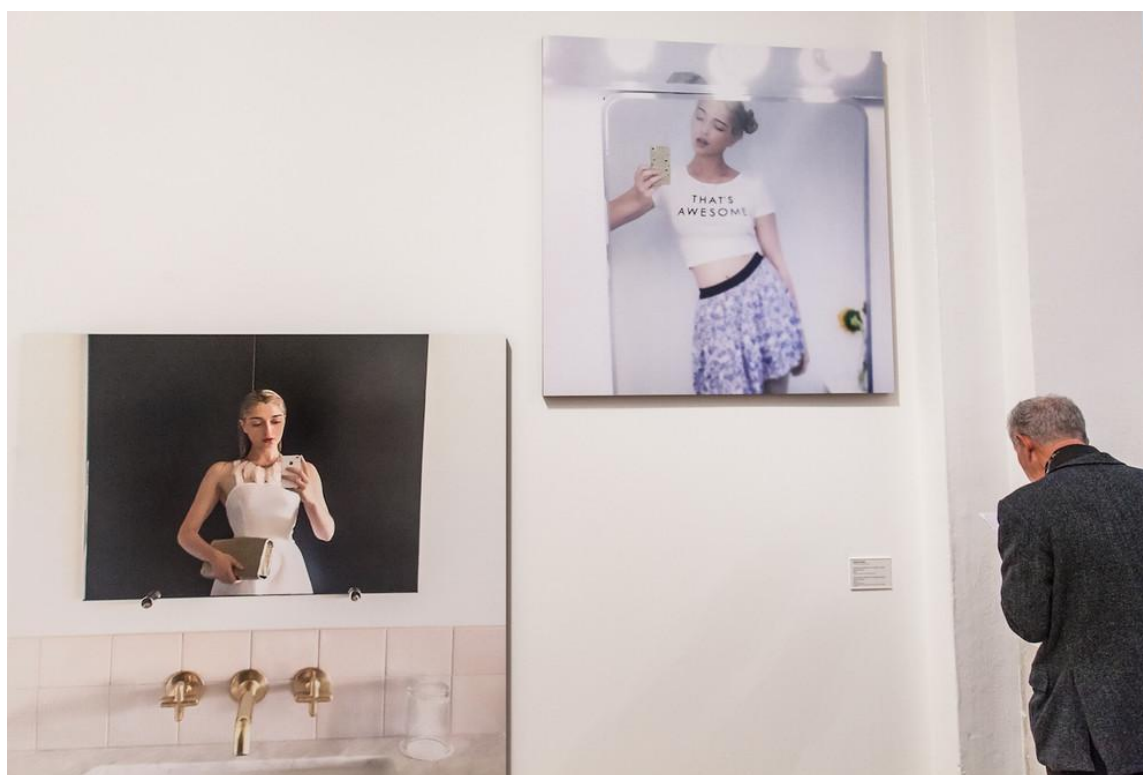


Figure 67. Amalia Ulman, *Excellences & Perfections*, at *Electronic Superhighway, 1966-2016*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2016.



Figure 68. Amalia Ulman, *Excellences & Perfections*, at *Performing for the Camera*, Tate Modern, London, 2016.

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