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On May 19th 2014, Amalia Ulman, an Argentinian artist raised in Spain and currently living in Los Angeles, started to work on a new performance piece to deal with questions that she had been already addressing in previous artworks, such as the contemporary standards of beauty, practices of body modification and the matter of authenticity versus 'fakeness'. This time, however, her performance would solely occupy the virtual space of her own Instagram feed. Ulman still refrains from calling *Excellences and Perfections* (Ulman, 2018) a work of art, viewing it more as an experiment, even though critics have called it the first Instagram 'masterpiece' (Sooke, 2016). For months, the artist posted on her own account @amaliaulman (Ulman, n.d.) a series of 187 posts, between pictures and videos, constructing a narrative that told the story of three versions of herself. She had prepared a script and produced most of the images beforehand. Many of the people who were closest to her did not know about the plan for her Instagram feed, and some of them were surprised, and even appalled by her new displays. The people who ended up following her journey at the time - approximately 90

thousand Instagram users – did not know either that it was all a hoax. The interaction, through 'likes' and comments, made this community an essential part of the artwork, which was perpetually archived online[1] by Rhizome (Ulman, n.d.) making it possible for anyone to access it and observe it the way it was in October 2014, when Ulman announced that it was all part of a performance. This allowed for a wave of new comments, likes and followers to appear on her feed, most of them commenting on aspects of her performance, either praising or criticising it. Some of these comments were even included in the book that registers the performance, published four years later (Ulman, 2018).

In this paper, I analyse Ulman's *Excellences and Perfections* to consider if its aesthetic and narrative choices had any impact on the effect of truthiness the performance had on its viewers. In other words, I investigate whether choices such as the colour palette used in the images, the reproduction of certain Instagram tropes and the general use of visual language could have contributed on the believability of her otherwise fake piece. Moreover, this is a study that methodologically combines analysis, of the images in the performance and of the audience reception through likes and comments, with an overview of academic and media critiques of the piece. It also draws on the observations that Amalia Ulman herself made about the performance piece, and on the outcomes of my ongoing research on the aesthetics of vernacular photography on Instagram.

A question of (in)authenticity

One of Ulman's self-declared goals with *Excellences and Perfections* was to manipulate and destroy her own online persona, with the idea that in the visual space of Instagram, authenticity can be a synonym of a well-constructed fiction. In a lecture the artist gave in a gallery in Vienna (Kunsthalle Wien, 2015), she said that in the "networked world, the question of authenticity can no longer be posed."[2]. The immediate success of *Excellences and Perfections,* which was presented at the Rhizome in New York (Connor, 2014), and exhibited by the Tate

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[1] amaliaulman on Instagram.: http://webenact.rhizome.org/excellences-and-perfections/20141014171636/http://instagram.com/amaliaulman
[2] (David Roberts Art Foundation n.d.) at
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2lSBUKRcrLQ&t=2663s

Modern[3] and Whitechapel Gallery[4] and by many other galleries across the world, is reflective of how much interest there is in the multiple facets embedded in the process of self-representation on Instagram and other social media platforms.

Ulman is interested in the ways that, in order to perform their own selves, people must be constantly morphing through semi-transparent manipulations. The massive use of the hashtag #nofilter, for instance, is a demonstration that this process of fabrication is usually hidden behind an idea of effortlessness, designed to manipulate the audience's perceptions. Such manipulations are not solely alterations to the body and the face, with apps such as *Photoshop* or *Facetune*, but can also occur through carefully thought-out calculations of composition, posing, placement of props, the subtitles of the pictures, tagging and geotagging and the use of hashtags.

So, what were the aesthetic choices that made *Excellences and Perfections* a convincing narrative to so many people? Ulman deems that humans tend to suppose truthiness in whatever they have been programmed to believe. For her, appropriating a set of Instagram stereotypes could make them "function as a potential truth"[5]. According to her, in social media, people do not tend to discredit what has been previously seen in other contexts. Instead, they develop guidelines to decide whether something is fake or not based on certain archetypes. Ulman has thus declared that her script was not only based on the Instagram feed of other women, especially Korean young girls that she used to follow, but also on stereotypes from films and mainstream narratives. The main trope she appropriates on *Excellences and Perfections* is one of a provincial girl that moves to the big city, breaks up with a high school boyfriend, all to become a sugar baby, entangled in a tale of drugs and depression, and finally achieve redemption. Apparently, most people who were following Ulman's online journey, no matter if she knew them previously or not, did not require further explanation to believe it was part of a true story. Interestingly, the artist reveals that she was not invested in making this specific work an aesthetic exercise and she does not view it as such.

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[3] 'Performing for the camera' https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/performing-camera
[4] Electronic Superhighway (2016-1966) - https://www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/electronicsuperhighway/
[5] ULMAN, Excellences & perfections.

To me, however, it was not only her narrative construction but also her aesthetic choices that contributed to engendering believability into her otherwise fake narrative.

Three versions of Amalia

Each of the three parts of *Excellences and Perfections* is a different chapter in Ulman's fictional story. First, she portrays an innocent Lolita-esque version of herself called *cute girl*, then she turns into a sexy bombshell named *sugar baby*, and finally, she rises as a healthy, polished and mature woman, portraying the *life goddess*. Each step of the way comes with its own set of colour palette, filters and editing styles. The first episode's hues, for instance, are revealed through soft shades of pink, grey and white. Then she transitions to darker shades of grey, gold and black, and finally to greys, greens and earth tones in the third 'episode'. Ulman also changed the profile descriptions in each of the chapters, to differentiate and set her intentions. The cute girl says she learns "mostly from books and movies, eating, blogging shopping and sleeping". The sugar baby is a "professional lucid dreamer. Hope dealer. **Boss of me**, Aquarius. Model Artist. Addicted to sugar". And lastly, the life goddess writes that "The past is my lesson. The present is my gift. The future is my motivation #blessed #grateful". These narrative changeovers are also present in the ways Ulman depicts herself and in third party images she chooses to post, which come from various sources such as Tumblr, in accordance with her initial intent of blending her online persona with virtual stereotypes of what it means to be a young woman online.

The cute girl apparently lives in a cotton candy land; everything she posts is soft, blurry and low in saturation. She plays around with nail styles, vintage looking accessories, cosmetics and pink flowers. Very *kawaii,* with her straight blond hair. She seems really keen on taking selfies holding the mobile while facing a mirror, almost always looking down at her own image on the screen. She is in tune with all things sensorial: desserts, duvets, frothy cups of coffee, satin bows, strawberries. #Cutegasm. In one image description, she says "I want to encourage women to embrace their own uniqueness", to which one 'follower' responds "your Instagram

colour palette is on point". She is all sweet, a delicate, dreamy lover of cats and bunnies.

The sweetness seems to turn sour when she gets together with a boyfriend we never got to see. "Life goes on", she says in a post. When she is no longer 'taken' but 'busy getting money' as a post suggests, Ulman becomes more intimate with the camera: she gets closer, starts gazing directly at us, she is the sugar baby now. #Werk. #BossBitch. The photos are mostly taken at night; the contrast is sharp. She exhibits her body, her money, and luxury goods she acquires being a sugar baby, which also means she is always in fancy hotels, restaurants and bathrooms. In July, she creates the narrative of having breast implant surgery with pictures of other women she found online. A follower says: "if you got it, flaunt it", while others worry about her health and wellbeing after the operation. She now drinks black coffee and prefers white flowers and cocaine lines. She's not "like the rest", and is now a brunette who is posing kissing a gun. On August 8th, her followers find a video of Ulman crying. One of them asks: "Please, why are you filming this? Is Instagram your real life?"

On August 14th, Ulman resurfaces with a heart picture drawn on a window. She apologises for her recent behaviour, her many mistakes, thanking her family and close friends for rescuing her from the void. A follower asks: "Drugs?". This inaugurates the third phase of Ulman's performance, where "simplicity is the ultimate sophistication". The life goddess enjoys nicely decorated rooms, cups of tea, and greenery. She is healthy and spiritual and poses with babies. Yoga and coffee mornings. Fewer selfies, more avocado on toast. She is a jeans and t-shirt *kinda gal*. #Simple. She travels and finds another boyfriend, while thanking her followers for being so nice and supportive. Supportive of what?, one can wonder. Of observing the construction of her online persona, of liking it and following her? Finally, she posts a picture of a black and white rose as if to shut the curtains of *Excellences and Perfections*.

Please leave a comment

If observed closely, the original comments posted while the performance was live, and registered on its book (Ulman, 2018), show a diverse set of reactions

to the artwork from Ulman's followers. At first, she was just receiving short observations, mostly about her physical appearance, such as user @_malayer saying "you're so incredibly perfect", or @spencermashby who thinks she is "#lookinggood", and even @ihaveflatcherst2 who says "wow u r such an angel". As soon as the feed gains more followers, Ulman starts to get more responses to what she posts, some of them very critical like @palais_des_papes who writes in one of the posts "why not accept that u r beautiful, particularly when you are ugly". Another user, @yerrrmomzz asks "do you feel that you are a sad/trapped Lil porcelain doll? #everypicture. People are also deeply interested in aesthetic aspects of Ulman's body: they want to know the colour of her make-up, who does her hair, what products she uses on her skin, and where she buys her clothes and accessories.

The sugar baby phase increases the amount of comments of supporters and of the so called haters. One user @weldingninja mentions her past by aggressively writing "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 ****". Also, the same person who has previously called her a porcelain doll goes further by writing "you're beautiful… but borderline boring #kindawhiney!". The comments are either very flattering or belligerent. For instance, when Ulman pretends to have breast enhancement surgery, some people input their opinions about her choice, such as @yoitzcam_ who writes "honestly I don't understand why do women have to enhance their bodies", while others support her decision, like @legitinate who sends "ultra healing vibes" to Ulman. Some comments are as enigmatic as revealing at this point in the performance: @belliesdiaries writes "Dear @amaliaulman could you please explain why you posted this? Thanks a lot in advance #thevalueoftruth". When she alludes to being a creative person, Ulman gets a comment from @livick saying "disagree, your feed looks like every other insta celebrity. (…) Original, not so much". These comments evoke the hazy dichotomies between what is fake and what is true, between the real and the fabricated, that permeate Instagram posts and the discussions concerning this community.

As mentioned before, one of the most crucial moments of the performance was when Ulman released two posts of her crying as the sugar baby role came to an end immediately after the fake turn of events which depict her spiralling out of

control. On the videos, her face is red and shiny, while she sighs with sadness with tears running down her face. This is a moment where one can imply that the boundaries between fake and real could have been seen as even blurrier because the artist was in fact crying in front of the camera. As Rózsa Farkas writes on the preface of Ulman's book (2018), the meltdown was the part of the story when "we as audience feasted on the most, clawing on her vulnerability" (p. 6). She claims that the traditional "realness" of the physical body, inherent to the history of performance, is in this work made hyperreal, "as Ulman moves the terms and territory within which performance is permitted to live" (ibid.). By moving the art form to the digital space of social media, the logic of the performance is inverted: it is more about the unreality of things than about real experience. According to Farkas, *Excellences and Perfections* provoked an initial upheaval concerning the fakeness of its story, which suddenly died down with the lucid perception of "all of our personal performances as untruths" (ibid.). The crying videos are a good example of that: the reactions go from aggressiveness to support and, then, to indifference. People call Ulman annoying, accuse her of being pretentions and tell her to shut up. The user @cashoutandfetfitted even makes fun of the situation saying they are "getting hot watching this", and that it sounds like she was cutting herself. User @jordanabragg comes to defend Ulman by responding: "trying to censor, silence and mediate women who openly express their emotion, via negative comments is not cool/sexy/useful/positive". Even though people claimed their right to know why Ulman was crying, because she chose to share one more intimate moment with an avid audience, they were, as we said before, left in the dark until she came back a few weeks later. Her apologies, however, did not seem to stir so many answers: the post did not have any comments at the time.

The following phase, the one of the life goddess seemed to attract less comments such as those. As User @open1one observes: "balance is restored". People seem to be starting to pick up on Ulman's intentions at this point, for instance user @figment_hf who comments: "First you were like this pretty artist, and your leg was hurt once. You pretended to clean toilets with no clothes on. Then you became lady from a hip hop video with breast implants. Now; simple", while most of them appear somewhat oblivious of the fact that was all part of a fictional narrative. The last post of the work had no comments at all at the time the

performance was announced. Today, however, it has 86 comments, most of the appraisals on the quality of the performance, such as @Jenwriting who comments "this is a beautiful piece of work", or @hannahroberts_ who writes "I loved this piece of art, I'm 20 years old and I found it very pertinent/relevant xx". User @verywryly comments on the fakeness aspect of it by writing that "a lot of people don't even realise that they are creating a false image or 'story' on social media".

As I mentioned before, by reproducing certain tropes, stereotypes and aesthetic choices, Ulman in fact managed to blend in the aesthetic universe of Instagram, and that also entailed being envied, desired, loved and hated by her own followers. As Horning (Horning & Ulman 2014) argues, "social media run on this fiction that everyone wants to be the centre of attention, when in fact that desire operated simultaneously with the desire to thrust everyone else into the spotlight and get to feel surer or one's place within the sovereign audience". According to him, the attention we pay to others can make us feel safe but also make "those others seem exceptional, different, somehow always already deserving attention (...) envy is the bitter aftertaste of comfort". Concerning the same matter, Ulman observes (Horning & Ulman, 2014) that this logic increases the expectations of effortlessness on digital content: cognitive and creative work has to seem like a naturalised activity, where no one can spot any sign of the constructed-ness of characters, and the effort that it takes to create 'looks'. She observes that only women were able to observe this aspect of her performance labour, because they too had "previously seen themselves in similar systems where all these efforts were concealed under the illusion of the naturalisation of their bio-femininity".

On that same note, Ulman observes that most of the criticisms she got about *Excellences & Perfections* came from the fact that she "depicted archetypes that should be destroyed rather then perpetuated" (Horning & Ulman, 2014), implying very sexualised portrayals of young women. She defends herself by saying that the idea was in fact to appropriate this mainstream archetypes "to show their construction: how these are not natural ideas and patterns of behaviour, but something acquired, and therefore, exchangeable" (In: Gavin 2014). Her aim was thus to expose how much construction goes into creating a real persona, even more then what went into creating her own fictional ones, and also, how changeable seemingly intrinsic personal characteristics can be. She claims that the reason she

decided to hyper-accelerate and consciously manipulate it was to reveal that it is almost impossible for women to escape objectification with self-representation.

Skotvedt (2019) wondered in her research how Ulman's use of feminine aesthetics could in fact achieve feminist purposes. According to her, by appropriating such types of aesthetics, the artists risks endorsing oppressive essentialist ideologies, potentially evacuating any feminist outcomes to her work. The fact is that Ulman's characters, whose borders blur with the artist's own self, seem to emphasize Western heteronormative sexuality and ideals of femininity. For instance, while "the 'cute girl' is represented through a body inscribed by ideals of burgeoning sexuality, delicacy and youthfulness" (Skotvedt 2019 p.55), the sugar baby character projects the archetype of a strong more empowered woman - less aesthetics and a more bodily femininity - embodied by people such as Kim Kardashian, who is in fact the most followed person on Instagram. The life goddess comes from other archetypes of domesticity, wellness and self-care, inspired by people such as Gwyneth Paltrow. For Skotved, the fact that Ulman performs based on tropes of femininity is not about mimicking them or reproducing it, but about mirroring the "processes by which they are created" (Skotvedt 2019 p.86), which highlights how women are not just passive consumers, but also active producers who are entitled to their own online persona. One could again argue that by mirroring these processes, Ulman is also provoking the replication of the processes of the audience, but, in fact, by stating the falsehood of her posts, she is exposing how an audience's perception and reactions are also a by-product of oppressive, essentialist ideologies. To me, the feminist outcome of Ulman's work is revealing how entangled the question of feminine stereotypes is, amongst content producers, their audience and ourselves. Even when not true, they are strong as ever in ourselves, like user @Mackenziewolff observes on a comment on the performance's last post: "The thing is, even though I knew about the 'hoax' before I looked at the project, I still wanted to be her (you). What does that say about me? And society?". By, therefore, discussing these types of feminine tropes and aesthetics on a large art world scale, Ulman was also working on its feminist potentials, and claiming and reclaiming these images for their reconstructive feminist purposes.

#DoItForTheAesthetic

Finally, I would like to propose a question that kept echoing with me during this research: would there be a crucial difference between one of the images of Ulman's performance and a similar, almost identical image, posted on another's users feed? Could one be seen as an artwork while the other is solely seen as an Instagram post? Such a dilemma reminds me of Arthur Danto's theoretical chronicles of Andy Warhol's Brillo Box. Using it as a thinking tool (Danto, 1981), he imagines indistinguishable pairs of objects in which one is an artwork and the other one is not, even though their material properties and aesthetic characteristics are exactly the same. The methodological experiment works to a certain point: for him to conclude that anything can express any meaning and be a work of art, as long as the pertinent conventions are known and the facts that explain their status as expression are acknowledged. That is, anything can be an artwork, but not everything is one, like the Brillo Box exhibited by Andy Warhol and the ones one can find on the shelf of the supermarket. Decades later, Danto (Danto, 2007) goes back to his dilemma after perceiving that he could have not put aside the aesthetic characteristics in his equation. There was a reason why he decided for the Brillo Box and not for other works by Warhol, and that reason was an aesthetic preference that drew him to it, one of the many decisions based on aesthetics we seem to make every day. While considering that, I would say that there is no distinguishable difference between Ulman's pictures and similar photos on other women's profiles, which is why I consider Ulman successful in her goal of blending her online persona with the ever-shifting community of images that is on Instagram. Ulman's performance also echoes Baudrillard's idea that art is dead because "reality itself, entirely impregnated by an aesthetic which is inseparable from its own structure, has been confused with its own image" (Baudrillard, 1983: 152).

Furthermore, Ulman's performance interweaves issues such as image manipulation, lifestyle porn, body liquidity and the timelessness of our imaginary narratives with the thread of the fake. I have previously argued (Salazar, 2018) that the circle of aesthetics has become so widespread around us, that we can no longer distinguish what came before: the aesthetic or the aestheticization. The idea behind having a picture-perfect life is that it should be perfect not only on what is

represented in images and narratives but a priori flawless and ideal. #DoItForTheAesthetic. Therefore, Ulman's performance could be seen as a hyperbolized version of anyone's practices on Instagram, fitting perfectly within the category of the *instagrammable*, which intertwines lifestyles with visual cultures by turning everything and everyone's lives into a visual fabrication.

Excellences and Perfections also reflects on aspects of my own online persona and probably provokes similar thoughts about yours. By questioning my own practice on Instagram, I decided to pose questions on the matter to my circle of "followers" of my feed at the network (Salazar, n.d.) @mundomosaico (Mosaic World, in Portuguese). My tool of choice this time were the stories, a function that Instagram introduced in 2016 and made it possible for users to share images and videos for 24 hours only. I asked people whether Instagram is a space for the real or the fake and if they believed in what they saw there. Many of my friends said that it is a space for both. One person humorously claimed that "Instagram is the Schrodinger's cat of social media" because it is at the same time in the box of the real and the not real. The main idea amongst them was that it is rather difficult to distinguish the real from the fake. People even admitted t "playing the game of an idealised everyday" themselves. One person said that Instagram is like a life with makeup: an edited version of it. For someone, fakeness starts in people's lives and that is why everything seems untrue. "It's auto-fiction, the fakeness of the real", said another. And lastly, someone said that "even if what one posts is true, we would always imagine a different truth".

This last answer reminded me of something Ulman said in an interview (Horning & Ulman, 2014), in which she confesses to having found a pertinent question posed by a member of her audience: someone asked about the legitimacy of her performance in terms of authenticity. They wanted to know how her work can have value if it does not come from a place of 'real' lived experiences. She admits answering it wrongly by justifying that most episodes were based on past experiences. "I failed", she says, "I shouldn't have tried to legitimize my actions with the card of lived experience. It was fiction, not a documentary". And even here I can still see that she is missing a point, because in the contemporary aesthetics of Instagram, as my friends observed, everything can be fake and real at the same time. One could say that, in this universe, words like fictional and documental are

almost redundant, because *Instagrammers* treat them as games: more hide than seek, more dare than truth. Aware of such rules, people can tick boxes to agree to the terms and conditions of this world, embracing the realness and the fakeness, in order to be able to fabricate their own online selves, observe and judge other people's lives based on their own ideas of what is real and what is not.

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