

Feminine Aesthetics as Feminist Critique in Amalia  
Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections* (2014)

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Master's Thesis in the History of Art and Visual Studies  
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# Abstract

*Excellences & Perfections* is an immersive art performance that was carried out on Instagram in 2014, in which the artist Amalia Ulman performed feminine tropes common to Instagram culture to assert a feminist critique about the constructedness of femininity.

Approaching *Excellences & Perfections* through the framework of affect, performativity and cyborg theory, this thesis investigates the critical and empowering potential of feminine aesthetics, as well as the creative and entrepreneurial possibilities of using social media platforms to produce feminine subjectivities. Ulman is blurring the boundaries between character and self, artist and artwork, reality and fiction, and by interweaving aesthetic and narrative tropes of femininity, she produces a rich fabric for understanding the complexity of feminine representation in contemporary digital society. By examining the feminine tropes that Ulman embodies in the three episodes that make up the performance, I will argue that these tropes, which can easily be dismissed as reductive stereotypes that flatten the diversity of female experience into mere image, in fact can be read as multilayered critical commentary about the relations between the representations of young women, the logics of neoliberal consumer capitalism, and gendered embodiment in the contemporary contexts of social media. My analytical method involves relating the tropes evoked by Ulman's characters to feminine stereotypes and symbolic figures that are conceptualized to represent certain themes and assert a specific critique about contemporary society. Through this relation, I provide a reading of Ulman's characters as manifestations of those themes and criticisms, which allows me to explore how femininity is employed as a tool, both in the discourses of feminist internet art, and in the cultural and social contexts that produce ideals and pedagogies that shape women's self-expressions.

The aim of this thesis is to show that *Excellences & Perfections* embraces a double movement of feminist critique, one that foregrounds how these tropes are constructions that can easily be reconstructed, deconstructed and repurposed, while also giving existential legitimacy to the lived subjectivities that are made to emulate them. This way, I argue, the work critically subverts the feminine image and celebrates its feminist potential, without erasing the real experiences that are framed by it.



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# 1 Introduction

On April 19th 2014, a young artist called Amalia Ulman posted an image on her Instagram account. The only content of the image was black letters spelling out “Part I” against a white background, and it was accompanied by an enigmatic caption that read “Excellences & Perfections”. This post might not have meant much to her followers at the time, but in the months that followed, Ulman shared her everyday life in near-daily Instagram posts, while gradually becoming someone they no longer recognized. At first, she appears as a cutesy blonde girl trying to make it as a model in Los Angeles, posting doe-eyed selfies in pastel colored lingerie, and images of pink cakes, cute bunnies and rose petals. After around two months she posted about breaking up with her longtime boyfriend, after which the wash of pink that had painted the images up to this point began to fade. Ulman evolved into a sexually aggressive sugar baby, flaunting apparent wealth in the form of designer merchandise and drugs, posing seductively and undergoing breast enlargement surgery. Her mirror selfies showed her in expensive clothes, and their captions hinted that she was finding work as an escort with a sugar daddy. Her growing audience of followers watched on as she headed for a breakdown, sharing a string of gloomy selfies and tearful videos, and their comments ranged from support and flattery to criticism and malicious trolling.<sup>1</sup> After posting an apology, a recovering Ulman reemerges as a clean-eating wellness goddess, sharing images of shabby chic interiors, avocado on toast, teacups and yoga. On September 14<sup>th</sup> 2014, she uploaded a black-and-white image of a rose with the caption “The End”, and then the posting ceased. By that point, five months had passed and she had acquired some 90,000 followers.<sup>2</sup> Her reputation as a serious artist, though, had suffered. “People started hating me,” Ulman said, “some gallery I was showing with freaked out and was like, ‘You have to

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<sup>1</sup> Cultural theorist Whitney Phillips defines trolling “as a behavioral practice predicated on disruption.” Trolling is used as a term for making deliberately offensive or provocative online postings with the aim of upsetting someone or eliciting an angry response from him or her. See: Phillips, Whitney, “Why Study Villains, Scoundrels, and Rule Breakers? Whitney Phillips at Tedxccc,” TEDx Talks, 2013 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAubx3BBgLk> (accessed 18.11.2018)

<sup>2</sup> Though many, it turned out, were fake accounts bought by the artist Constant Dullaart as part of a project meant to highlight the art world's “superficial attention culture.” See: Duray, Dan, “New Project Boosts Instagram Followers for Art World Accounts,” Article, published 30.09.2014 *Artnews* (2014), <http://www.artnews.com/2014/09/30/new-dis-project-boosts-instagram-followers-for-art-world-accounts-2/> (accessed 30.09.2018)

stop doing this, because people don't take you seriously anymore.' Suddenly I was this dumb b---- because I was showing my ass in pictures.”<sup>3</sup>

A month later, on October 17<sup>th</sup>, Ulman appeared on a panel at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London and announced it had all been an elaborate performance, and that everything had been carefully staged and scripted in advance.<sup>4</sup> “How is a female artist supposed to look like?” Ulman asked the crowd. “How is she supposed to behave? How do we consume images, and how do they consume us?”<sup>5</sup>

## 1.1 Presentation of Thesis

*Excellences & Perfections* is a five-month performance that took place on Instagram and Facebook in 2014, which Ulman described as “a full immersion in a screen reality”.<sup>6</sup> During this time, Ulman performed a fictional version of her own identity on her @amaliaulman profile, and by presenting herself through Instagram’s vernacular of selfies, fashion imagery, ‘food porn’, and motivational quotes, she situated her performance within the Instagram culture. Using images, videos, hashtags and captions, she assumed and evolved through three different feminine characters based on common tropes within Instagram culture, weaving a narrative of aspiration, downfall and redemption. As a popular platform for sharing user-generated images, Instagram has become a powerful tool for self-expression, and its users are encouraged to perform their identities for an online following in exchange for validation in the form of likes and followers. While the visibility offered by this platform can enable women’s experiences and opinions to be heard and acknowledged by a wider public, it is also a platform where some forms of femininity are rewarded and valued over others, and comes with an intensified pressure to self-surveil and self-improve, and to adhere to already-popular feminine tropes.

Exploring how feminine identities are constructed and circulated on social media, *Excellences & Perfections* sets the idea of gender performance in the context of how femininity is commodified and valorized within these spaces in contemporary consumer

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<sup>3</sup> Sooke, Alastair, "Is This the First Instagram Masterpiece?," Article, published 18.01.2016 *The Telegraph [online]* (2016), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/photography/what-to-see/is-this-the-first-instagram-masterpiece/> (accessed 02.08.2017)

<sup>4</sup> Black, Hannah, Shields, Derica , and Ulman, Amalia "Do You Follow? Art in Circulation 3 (Transcript)," Rhizome, Panel discussion transcript, 2014 <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2014/oct/28/transcript-do-you-follow-panel-three/>. (accessed 04.11.2018)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

culture.<sup>7</sup> Ulman's stated goal was to show that femininity is nothing inherent to being a woman, rather, it is a construction that takes a lot of effort and work to produce and maintain.<sup>8</sup> This critique of femininity may echo that of acknowledged feminist theorists, but the strategy, medium and subject matter used to advance it are all strikingly contemporary. Most striking perhaps, is the way Ulman used feminine tropes to assert her feminist critique, embodying them and circulating them in the same online environment in which they are most salient. But is it possible to challenge the feminine ideals of Instagram culture while producing and posting feminine content for the very platform that reinforce them?

*Excellences & Perfections* operates within both 'feminine' and 'feminist' aesthetics simultaneously, which initially appears to pose a fundamental contradiction. But what exactly is feminine aesthetics? It would be an impossible task to try to unpack the visual properties of 'femininity'. According to Nellie Richard, feminine aesthetics is usually understood as the expression of woman as biological, essential fact, and feminist aesthetics as that which subverts it, theorizing woman as a constructed image immersed in a patriarchal system of oppression which must be broken.<sup>9</sup> The historical relationship between feminism and femininity has been a complex one, and, following Richard, is generally considered to present a fundamental dichotomy. This begs the questions that will guide my research: can feminine aesthetics be used for feminist purposes? Or does the use of feminine aesthetics endorse oppressive essentialist ideologies in a way that evacuates its feminist potential? Audre Lorde famously declared that "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house,"<sup>10</sup> meaning that the patriarchal systems of oppression cannot be challenged by women's participation in those same systems. But this is exactly what Amalia Ulman is attempting in *Excellences & Perfections*. What happens when Ulman deliberately takes control of the master's tools, such as the commodified image of femininity, feminized modes of production, homogenizing tropes and negative stereotypes and corporate digital platforms that facilitate misogynistic trolling, to dismantle the master's house, the gender systems of patriarchy? Does she remain trapped in the master's house? This forms the starting point for this thesis, which will investigate how Amalia Ulman with her performance *Excellences &*

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<sup>7</sup> Kinsey, Cadence "The Instagram Artist Who Fooled Thousands," Article, published 07.03.2016 *BBC Culture* (2014), <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20160307-the-instagram-artist-who-fooled-thousands> (accessed 15.08.2017)

<sup>8</sup> Black, Shields, and Ulman, "Do You Follow?"

<sup>9</sup> Richard, Nellie, *Masculine/Feminine: Practice(S) of Difference* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2014). 29

<sup>10</sup> Lorde, Audre, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House.," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press, 1984).

*Perfections* criticizes the constructedness of femininity on Instagram from within this culture, using its own aesthetic language.

### 1.1.1 Research Aims

This thesis seeks to contribute to the growing scholarship on the emerging current of feminist art practices that engage with feminine aesthetics and digital environments in new and radical ways. *Excellences & Perfections* has captured the attention of both the art world and mainstream press alike, and has been heralded by critics as the “first Instagram masterpiece”.<sup>11</sup> The performance will undoubtedly will be recognized by history for its pioneering strategies and its cultural resonance and influence, but as the digital landscape changes at an increasingly faster rate, my study can hopefully benefit future research by providing an account of the work from within proximity to its temporal and cultural specificity. The critical tendency has been to view *Excellences & Perfections* through the lens of authenticity, as a critique of the deceptive nature of social media that exposes the gap between who we are in real life and who we choose to be online.<sup>12</sup> Frequently described as a “hoax,” the performance has received widespread attention for the way it manipulated social media platforms and the way it “duped” its real-time audience.<sup>13</sup> Few, if any, had questioned the veracity of Ulman’s posts during the performance, and the artist’s ability to successfully create a believable fictitious online identity has continued to be a central focus in the discussions of the work.

This thesis will argue that *Excellences & Perfections* is more than a hoax, and cannot easily be disentangled into categories of real and fake, online and offline. Ulman is blurring

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<sup>11</sup> Sooke, "Is This the First Instagram Masterpiece?".

<sup>12</sup> Smith, Giulia, "Fake It until You Make It: Amalia Ulman's Recent Work," Essay, published (2016), [https://www.academia.edu/33147127/Fake\\_It\\_Until\\_You\\_Make\\_It\\_Amalia\\_Ulmans\\_Recent\\_Work](https://www.academia.edu/33147127/Fake_It_Until_You_Make_It_Amalia_Ulmans_Recent_Work) (accessed 15.08.2017) Dean, Aria, "Gentle Deception," Article, published 06.01.2015 *Topical Cream* (2015), <http://topicalcream.info/editorial/amalia-ulman-gentle-deception/> (accessed 15.08.2017)

<sup>13</sup> Mantock, Rachel, "'Being a Girl Is Not a Natural Thing' – Why This Instagram Hoaxer Faked Her Cool-Girl Selfies," Article, published 10.02.2016 *Gadgette* (2016), <https://www.gadgette.com/2016/02/10/amalia-ulman-instagram-hoax/> (accessed 07.06.2018) Ruigrok, Sophie, "How This 2014 Instagram Hoax Predicted the Way We Now Use Social Media," Article, published 14.03.2018 *Dazed* (2018), <http://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/39375/1/amalia-ulman-2014-instagram-hoax-predicted-the-way-we-use-social-media> (accessed 07.06.2018); Caplan-Bricker, Nora, "The Instagram Hoax That Became an Art-World Sensation," article, published 25.01.2016 *Slate* (2016), [http://www.slate.com/articles/double\\_x/doublex/2016/01/the\\_instagram\\_hoax\\_that\\_became\\_an\\_art\\_world\\_sensation.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2016/01/the_instagram_hoax_that_became_an_art_world_sensation.html) (accessed 07.08.2018)

the boundaries between character and self, artist and artwork, reality and fiction, and by interweaving aesthetic and narrative tropes of femininity, she produces a rich fabric for understanding the complexity of feminine representation in contemporary digital society. By examining the feminine tropes that Ulman embodies in the three episodes that make up *Excellences & Perfections*, I will argue that these tropes, which can easily be dismissed as reductive stereotypes that flatten the diversity of female experience into mere image, in fact can be read as multilayered critical commentary about the relations between the representations of young women, the logics of neoliberal consumer capitalism, and gendered embodiment in the contemporary contexts of social media.

In what follows, I will introduce Ulman's work and relevant existing scholarship, present my methodological approach and the theoretical framework that undergirds my analysis, and give an overview of the thesis structure.

## **1.2 Presentation of Amalia Ulman and *Excellences & Perfections***

### **1.2.1 The Artist: Amalia Ulman**

Amalia Ulman (b.1989) is an Argentinian-born Spanish conceptual artist who received her BA in fine art at Central Saint Martins in London in 2011, and is currently based in Los Angeles. She employs a wide range of mediums and practices, including installations, performance, video, graphic design and internet art, and her work explores the links between consumerism and identity, class, gender and sexuality. Her work has been featured in numerous exhibitions and solo shows since she first grabbed critical and public attention in 2014 with the performance *Excellences & Perfections*. In October of 2014, *Excellences & Perfections* was shown through the New Museum in NYC, and in 2016, the piece was included in a group show at the Tate Modern, "Performing for the Camera", making her the first social media artist to enter into a top institution.<sup>14</sup> Since its conclusion Ulman has moved on to other art projects, but *Excellences & Perfections* is still gaining recognition, and has recently been published as a book by Prestel that also includes essays by Hito Steyerl, Rob Horning, Natasha Stagg, and Rózsa Zita Farkas.<sup>15</sup>

Ulman has been associated with a new generation of artists referred to as the new "digifeminist artists", who self-mediate in digital spaces to discuss themes such as femininity,

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<sup>14</sup> Ruigrok, "How This 2014 Instagram Hoax Predicted the Way We Now Use Social Media".

<sup>15</sup> Ulman, Amalia, *Excellences & Perfections* (Munich, London, New York: Prestel Verlag, 2018).

issues of representation and online sexism in the post-internet era.<sup>16</sup> The term “digifeminism” was coined in 2014, and while it does not correspond with some self-proclaimed or unified movement, it can be applied to certain artistic practices of feminist critique that has appeared in the recent years which differ from previous brands of feminism.<sup>17</sup> The strategies of the digifeminists and their relation to the history of feminist Internet art will be explored further in chapter three.<sup>18</sup>

### **1.2.2 The Site: Social Media and Instagram**

Social media is a term that refers to online applications that allow users to generate and exchange content. The performance of *Excellences & Perfections* was carried out on the image-driven platforms of Facebook and Instagram, which are both social network services that facilitate personal or professional connections, and rely on user-generated content.<sup>19</sup> Ulman created all the posts of the performance in the Instagram format, and only later shared them on her Facebook account. As Instagram was the primary site for the performance (and because her Facebook account has not been archived) this platform will be the central focus of my research.

Instagram is a smartphone application for image sharing launched in 2010 by founders Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger.<sup>20</sup> It quickly became one of the most popular social media platforms; it reached 300 million users the year of Ulman’s performance (2014), and this year the number of users surpassed 1 billion.<sup>21</sup> The platform is centered around visual content, and users can upload images of short video clips which can be enhanced by photographic filters, and accompanied by captions, location tags and hashtags. Hashtags (#) are a search tool, they are used to indicate subtext and content of the post, which increases its searchability, circulation and visibility. This allows users to curate and discover content that appeals to specific interests and audiences, allowing posts to collect ‘likes’ and comments, and the user to accumulate an audience of ‘followers’.

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<sup>16</sup> Geurts, Yasmin "Digi-Feminisim," Article, published 18.05.2015 *Topical Cream* (2015), <http://topicalcream.info/editorial/digi-feminsim/> (accessed 15.08.2017)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Many terms have been used to describe art on the Internet: web art, net art, digital art, new media art, electronic art, and software art. Such terms are defined in many different ways, and can be used to describe a variety of artistic practices that have some digital component. In this thesis, I will use Internet art as a broad term for art practices that rely intrinsically on the internet to exist by engaging with the interactive interface and connectivity that the World Wide Web offers.

<sup>19</sup> Van Dijck, José, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford University Press, 2013). 8-9

<sup>20</sup> "Instagram Press Center," Instagram website, <https://instagram-press.com/>. (accessed 01.12.18)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



### 1.2.3 The Work: *Excellences & Perfections*

In *Excellences & Perfections*, Ulman portrayed three different feminine characters, which are all formulaic to social media culture, and all emphasizing Western heteronormative sexuality and patriarchal ideals of femininity. These characters, which she has labeled the ‘cute girl,’ ‘sugar baby,’ and ‘life goddess,’ were based on existing Instagram tropes, and articulated through posting content that was characteristic to these. By basing her self-representation on these identity templates, she managed to frame her persona as a certain type of girl, a familiar trope that primed her audience with a prior context that they would use to interpret the subsequent narrative and character development. The tropes were chosen by analyzing Instagram’s most popular profiles, by which she concluded that it was these three styles of Instagram accounts that amassed the most followers. These tropes still dominate the contemporary social media landscape, and are still popular among Instagram’s 800 million active monthly users.<sup>22</sup>

Ulman arranged these tropes into an order that would play out as a narrative as she gradually changed from one to the next. The narrative unfolded in three episodes, each centered around one of the tropes, and she opened with an aesthetic (‘cute girl’) that “was closer to home [so it] wouldn’t look like too suspicious of a transformation.”<sup>23</sup> She described the narrative like this:

*“Money, boredom, malaise, addiction, self-esteem, surgery, the provincial girl moves to the big city, wants to be a model, wants money, breaks up with her high school boyfriend and wants to change her lifestyle, enjoys singledom, runs out of money, maybe because she doesn't have a job. Because she's too self-absorbed in her narcissism, she starts going around, seeking arrangement dates, gets a sugar daddy, gets depressed, starts getting into more drugs, gets a boob job because her sugar daddy makes her feel secure about her own body and also pays for it. She goes through a breakdown, redemption takes place, the crazy bitch apologizes, the dumb-blonde turns brunette and goes back home, probably goes to rehab, then she's grounded at her family's house.”<sup>24</sup>*

The narrative was performed through a series of posts that were published to Ulman’s public Instagram account (@amaliaulman), and then shared on her open Facebook profile. Ulman had been active on both accounts and posted content as “herself” prior to *Excellences & Perfections*, and since its conclusion she has continued to use them for both conventional social networking purposes and other performances. Each of the 187 posts that make up the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Black, Shields, and Ulman, "Do You Follow?".

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

performance contained either an image or a short video, and were with only a few exceptions accompanied by captions that feature short messages, excerpts from song lyrics, emojis and hashtags. Both the captions and the image material for the posts in the work were either composed and produced by Ulman, or appropriated from social media sites like Instagram and tumblr. Because of the public settings of her profiles, Ulman's posts were visible and accessible to a larger audience, and this enabled her to attract more followers through hashtags, and engage with them in the comment sections of the posts. Alongside the posts, Ulman also changed her profile elements, her 'bio' and profile picture, for each episode. The tripartite structure of *Excellences & Perfections* indicates that Ulman followed a script that had a clear beginning and end, but this was not necessarily apparent to her real-time audience.<sup>25</sup> The artist has revealed that she had prepared all the posts for the performance in advance, and then published them on her Instagram and Facebook accounts over an interval of five months.<sup>26</sup>

The performance was first presented as an art project at a Rhizome panel discussion in London October 17th 2014, which was part of the talk series "Do you Follow? Art in Circulation," organized by Rhizome and the Institute of Contemporary Arts.<sup>27</sup> Here, Ulman delivered a scripted presentation of how the performance was carried out, how it played out, and presented the themes that had inspired her performance. The transcript of this panel is an important source for my analysis, as it speaks to the artist's intentions and strategies.

The original posts that make up the performance can still be accessed in their original form on Amalia Ulman's Instagram and Facebook accounts. While the posts themselves have been left untouched by the artist, they are still active and open for interaction from other users, and have consequently changed significantly since the end of the performance in 2014. After Ulman revealed that her online presence had been an art performance and subsequently became an "artworld sensation,"<sup>28</sup> a new audience engaged with the posts, liking, commenting and sharing the content. Aware that they are viewing an artwork, their comments are markedly different from those of the work's real-time audience. At the same time, many of the earlier comments have likely been deleted, by users deliberately or from accounts being deactivated. However, Rhizome developed Colloq, a new online tool for preserving art created on social media, and in 2014 *Excellences & Perfections* became the

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<sup>25</sup> Smith, Giulia, "Smoke and Mirrors: Amalia Ulman's Instagram.," 2017  
<http://www.oarplatform.com/smoke-mirrors-amalia-ulmans-instagram/>. (accessed 15.08.2017)

<sup>26</sup> Black, Shields, and Ulman, "Do You Follow?".

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Caplan-Bricker, "The Instagram Hoax".

first artwork to be archived with Colloq.<sup>29</sup> With this archived version of the performance from October 14<sup>th</sup> 2014, I had the opportunity see the posts as they would have appeared shortly after the performance ended, and review the comments that were posted before the first public presentation of *Excellences & Perfections* at the Rhizome panel.

In this thesis, I will use Ulman's name to refer to both Ulman as the artist performer, and to Ulman as the character she performed, unless further clarification is necessary. Because the artist and her character are deeply intertwined, it would be both impossible and meaningless to try to disentangle the two. As will be discussed in my analysis, this intertwining is a constitutive feature of her work. Ulman has referred to the characters she performed as archetypes, but in this thesis, they will be described as tropes. Archetypes are literary devices and conventions that are recognizable to the audience as typical characters or situations that represent universal patterns of human nature, and allows them to map certain expectations onto the figure.<sup>30</sup> Tropes are similar to archetypes, they are also used as literary devices with narrowly defined characteristics to help the audience identify a certain 'type', but they belong to specific cultural contexts.<sup>31</sup> As the 'cute girl', 'sugar babe' and 'life goddess' are characters that appear within Instagram culture and not universal types that are widely recognizable outside this context, tropes seems to be a more appropriate term.

### 1.3 Existing Scholarship

Scholarly research is now beginning to examine the continued impact of digital technologies on contemporary feminist artists. Several writers are exploring how young female artists, frequently referred to as digifeminists, are "using their image as a tool of rebellion".<sup>32</sup> The discussion of digifeminism in this thesis primarily draws on the accounts of Angela Washko, Rózsa Zita Farkas, Sara Sylvester and Maria Walsh.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Tsjeng, Zing, "New Rhizome Tool Preserves Net Art for Future Generations," Article, published 23.10.2014 *Dazed* (2014), <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/22272/1/new-rhizome-tool-preserves-net-art-for-future-generations> (accessed 25.09.2018)

<sup>30</sup> Sullivan, Cate, "Identity: Archetypes, Stereotypes, and Tropes," 17.02.16 <https://prezi.com/s7h9hgzh0w1/identity-archetypes-stereotypes-and-tropes/>. (accessed 01.12.18)

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Geurts, "Digi-Feminism".

<sup>33</sup> Washko, Angela, "From Webcams to Wikipedia There Is an Art & Feminism Online Social Movement: Happening and It Is Not Going Away," *Nordisk Tidsskrift for Informationsvidenskab og Kulturformidling* 5, no. 1 (2016). Farkas, Rózsa Zita, "Immanence after Networks," in *Plants, Androids and Operators - a Post-Media Handbook*, ed. Clemens Apprich, et al. (Lüneburg, Germany: Post-Media Lab & Mute Books, 2014); Sylvester, Sara, "A Transfictive Tale: Life of the Artist as a Self-Brand" (PHD thesis, Cardiff University, 2016), Retrieved from

*Excellences & Perfections* has received widespread attention in the press, and has been the subject of discussion and critique in numerous essays and articles. The scholarly work on the performance, however, is still quite scarce. An important voice in the discussions of Ulman's artistic practice is that of curator, editor and academic Rózsa Zita Farkas, who has worked with Ulman in exhibiting her work and in publishing the book edition of *Excellences & Perfections*, for which she also authored the foreword. Her essay "Immanence After Networks", published in *Plants, Androids and Operators - A Post-Media Handbook* (2014), briefly discusses Ulman's practice as part of a current of artists who engage with feminine aesthetics.<sup>34</sup> In this text, Farkas investigates the radical possibilities of feminine aesthetics, arguing that it acts as a de-naturalizing force, disarming the gendered structures of representation by opening up a gap within patriarchal space. This idea has influenced my argument that Ulman uses feminine tropes as an embodied position from which the economic and ideological structures that shape women's self-expression can be exposed and critiqued, which I will discuss in chapter five through the framework of Donna Haraway's concept of partial perspectives. In "Immanence After Networks", Farkas only discusses Ulman's works made prior to *Excellences & Perfections*, but in her 2015 article "Whose bodies 2" for Temporary Art Review, she considers *Excellences & Perfections* together with Ann Hirsch's performance *Playground* (2013).<sup>35</sup> Farkas reflects on how Ulman's and Hirsch's use of self-mediation highlights issues of authenticity and visibility in the contemporary context of self-representation on social media.<sup>36</sup> Issues of authenticity are also central in art historian Giulia Smith's essay "Smoke and Mirrors: Amalia Ulman's Instagram".<sup>37</sup> Examining *Excellences & Perfections* and Ulman's subsequent Instagram performance *Privilege* (2015-16), Smith considers how these works are site-specific to the web, but argues that the artificial situations and characters portrayed, and the way they circulate on social media in the same way as memes and fake news, construct their reality as a non-site. This thesis will also discuss issues of authenticity and construction, but I argue that Ulman's performance works to legitimize the lived reality of feminine self-production.

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<https://orca.cf.ac.uk/106366/1/2017sylvestersphd.pdf.pdf>. Walsh, Maria, "From Performing Resistance to Performing Autonomy and Back Again: Alex Bag Meets Ann Hirsch," *MIRAJ: Moving Image Review and Art Journal* 4, no. 1&2 (2015).

<sup>34</sup> Farkas, "Immanence after Networks."

<sup>35</sup> Farkas, Rózsa Zita, "Whose Bodies 2," Art review, published 03.08.2015 *Temporary Art Review* (2015), <http://temporaryartreview.com/whose-bodies-2/> (accessed 15.08.2017)

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Smith, "Smoke and Mirrors: Amalia Ulman's Instagram."

Another contributor to the scholarship on Ulman is art historian Cadence Kinsey, whose essay and interview “Taste-y///There’s a Maggot in My Edamame” explores the relations of class, privilege and femininity in Ulman’s early work. Kinsey also provides an account of *Excellences & Perfections* in her widely cited article “The Instagram Artist Who Fooled Thousands”, and she writes that Ulman’s work “sets the idea of gender as a performance in the specific context of how we reward and value images of women online.”<sup>38</sup> This thesis seeks to further explore the context Kinsey mentions, in order to uncover how Ulman engages with the neoliberal and postfeminist forces that operate within it.

## 1.4 Methodology

The chosen methodological approach for this thesis is the case study approach, as it allows for an analysis of the work within the context in which it presents itself. *Excellences & Perfections* is a multidimensional work, and it is inextricably linked to the medium and context in which it is embedded. Its site, mode of production, duration and reception are all constitutive aspects that cannot be separated from the work itself. My analysis draws on Lauren Berlant’s case study method, as this approach recognizes that the artwork is enmeshed in its aesthetic and social context, but considers that it is trying to negotiate that context in its own way.<sup>39</sup> Berlant’s method is to read the patterns of that negotiation in order to “derive what’s collective about specific modes of sensual activity toward and beyond survival.”<sup>40</sup> This approach does not suggest that the lives of the aesthetically mediated characters can be equated with actual individual lives, but that by examining the affective scenarios in Ulman’s performance as articulated through the experiences of her characters, it is possible to “discern claims about the situation of contemporary life.”<sup>41</sup> My analytical method involves relating the tropes evoked by Ulman’s characters to feminine stereotypes and symbolic figures that are conceptualized to represent certain themes and assert a specific critique about contemporary society. Through this relation, I will be able to read Ulman’s characters as manifestations of those themes and criticisms, which will allow me to explore how femininity is employed as a tool, both in the discourses of feminist internet art, and in

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<sup>38</sup> Kinsey, “The Instagram Artist Who Fooled Thousands”.

<sup>39</sup> Berlant, Lauren, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). 9

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 9

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 9

the cultural and social contexts that produce ideals and pedagogies that shape women's self-expressions.<sup>42</sup>

In order to investigate how feminine self-representation on Instagram can hold feminist potential in *Excellences & Perfections*, this thesis will analyze Ulman's characters in relation to the underlying ideological and economic relations that structure and govern the landscape of social media within contemporary capitalist society, as this is the context for the production and circulation of the types of feminine and feminist aesthetics they represent. The discourses of feminism and femininity have been significantly impacted by two paradigmatic shifts: the first is the emergence of internet technologies and networked digital spaces, and the second is the economic shift to a post-Fordist society in late capitalism that is characterized by neoliberal ideology, immaterial labor and consumerism. Ulman's work is situated at the intersection of these two shifts, and my analysis calls attention to how the performance reflects both the oppressive ideals of neoliberalism and postfeminism, and the potential for feminist critique and reconfiguration that this development provides.

#### **1.4.1 Theoretical Framework**

Taking a multifaceted approach to this multifaceted work, this thesis weaves together strands of feminist theory, affect theory and media studies to establish a rich theoretical framework through which the complexity and interplay of the work and its context can be analyzed. The hybridity of the methodological approach not only reflects the hybridity of the artwork, it also represents a theoretical position from which Ulman's shifting online identities can be analyzed, and that will allow me to theorize that it is this unsettledness that holds the potential for feminist criticality. While this thesis draws on a range of scholarly work, it is important to clarify the central concepts that form the basis for my arguments. Donna Haraway's concept of the 'cyborg' will provide a framework for discussing the entanglement of internet technologies and the feminine body, and to understand the feminist potential of performing feminine identities online. The idea of performance is of particular significance in this thesis, and exploring self-representation as a practice of performing gendered identities can provide a better understanding of how internet technologies and digital platforms shape

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<sup>42</sup> I should clarify that by 'femininity' and 'feminine aesthetics' I am not referring to essential qualities or practices that are particular or natural to women or given in the state of being female. Rather, I use it to describe certain cultural meanings and aesthetic conventions that have been constructed as expressions of and signifiers of female essence, as well as practices and roles that have been defined as located within women's spheres.

and enable the expression of particular feminine subjectivities. I will therefore employ Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which serves to highlight the active construction involved in identity performance.

Another central concept is affect, which on a fundamental level can be understood as the forces that exists in the encounters between bodies, "in the capacities to act and be acted upon."<sup>43</sup> Affect emerges in the interactions between bodies, things and discourses, shapes their interactions, and moves them to act. Affect theory involves tracing these interactions, and is a field of scholarly research that encompasses a wide range of theoretical perspectives, such as sociology, Marxism, new materialism, queer theory, feminism and psychoanalysis.<sup>44</sup> These various theoretical approaches have differing conceptions of affect, but for my analysis, I will rely on two conceptualizations. The first is the concept of affective labor as found in the work of Michael Hardt (1999) and others, and the second constitutes the more cultural theorization of affect as a circulatory force found in the work of Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant.

Affective labor has long been of interest to feminist theorists in analyses of 'women's work', which is based on the model of domestic or caring work in the sphere of reproduction, forms of labor that have often been unpaid and unrecognized.<sup>45</sup> The products of this kind of labor are often the feelings incited in others, and are produced through service work, 'labor in the bodily mode', and social contact.<sup>46</sup> The framework of affective labor has been further developed in the work of Autonomist Marxist scholars Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, Paolo Virno and Maurizio Lazzarato, who use it to make sense of the role of labor in contemporary capitalist society.<sup>47</sup> These thinkers describe the transition from a Fordist to a post-Fordist mode of production as a transition to a society where immaterial labor creates more value than traditional forms of productive labor.<sup>48</sup> Immaterial labor is the kind of labor that does not produce 'material goods' in the conventional sense, but rather produces immaterial goods, such as services, social connections, knowledge and subjectivities.<sup>49</sup> This includes the

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<sup>43</sup> Gregg, Melissa and Seigworth, Gregory J, "An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J Seigworth (United States of America: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 6-9

<sup>45</sup> Hardt, Michael, "Affective Labor," *Boundary 2* 26, no. 2 (1999). 96

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 96

<sup>47</sup> Bromberg, Svenja, "Vacillations of Affect: How to Reclaim 'Affect' for a Feminist-Materialist Critique of Capitalist Social Relations?," in *Re-Materialising Feminism*, ed. Alice Brooke, Giulia Smith, and Rózsa Farkas (London: Arcadia Missa Publications, 2014). xxviii

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. xxviii

<sup>49</sup> Hardt, "Affective Labor." 94

computational and communicational labor involved in the production of services, which includes forms of digital labor, such as networked communication and information technology.<sup>50</sup> Affective labor is another form of immaterial labor, as the labor of human contact and interaction. According to Hardt, the transition from the Fordist industrial economy to a post-Fordist service and informational economy has positioned affective labor as “not only directly productive of capital but at the very pinnacle of the hierarchy of labouring forms.”<sup>51</sup> By this he means that affective labor is no longer limited to domestic work, but has become the dominant form of labor in the contemporary economy, in which many sectors depend on the production of affect. This includes service work, health care and education, but it also applies to the creation of the affects that drive and circulate in cultural spheres such as fashion, entertainment, and branding and advertising. The kinds of affective labor involved in these spheres, including care giving, creating social networks and producing affects such as well-being, ease and attachment, are the kinds of responsibilities that have traditionally befallen women, and have been associated with femininity and women’s ‘nature’.<sup>52</sup> Affective labor can thus be considered feminized labor, and Hardt notes that it is “firmly embedded as a necessary foundation for capitalist accumulation and patriarchal order.”<sup>53</sup> *Excellences & Perfections* is embedded in a digital landscape that is driven by immaterial and affective labor. While I will not delve deeper into Hardt’s text in my analysis, I will use the concept of affective labor as outlined above to explore the gendered dimensions of the kinds of labor involved in the production of feminine self-representations on Instagram, and how these are performed throughout *Excellences & Perfections*.

The second conceptualization of affect involves the theorization of emotions and the ways in which culture, ideology and feelings are intertwined and circulated within the materiality of objects and bodies. Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant’s theorizations of affect each provide useful frameworks for understanding how feelings of happiness create attachments to certain representations of femininity.

In “The Promise of Happiness” (2010), Ahmed describes how happiness works as a disciplinary force that orients subjects towards certain normative ideals, such as

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 95

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 90

<sup>52</sup> Bromberg, "Vacillations of Affect: How to Reclaim 'Affect' for a Feminist-Materialist Critique of Capitalist Social Relations?." xxxii

<sup>53</sup> Hardt, "Affective Labor."



heteronormative relationships, wealth, family, which lead them to ‘the good life’.<sup>54</sup> Certain objects are perceived to contain a ‘promise of happiness’, an expectation that obtaining them will lead to future happiness.<sup>55</sup> This promise creates attachments to these objects – which could be material things, or immaterial objects such as values, ideas, aspirations and practices – which then become ‘happy objects’ that are circulated as social goods and imbued with affective value.<sup>56</sup> Ahmed’s theorization of happiness will allow me to analyze how Ulman’s characters articulate attachments to the neoliberal and postfeminist ideals of femininity that work pedagogically within Instagram cultures as happy objects that orient women toward self-improvement and consumption.

In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Berlant similarly explores how the promise of happiness creates attachments to objects that are seen to embody the good life, but focuses on these attachments themselves and what happens when they “no longer make sense, yet remain powerful as they work against the flourishing of particular and collective beings”<sup>57</sup>. This thesis will examine how *Excellences & Perfections* highlights how the aspirational culture of Instagram produces a form of what Berlant calls ‘cruel optimism’, in which the participants maintain attachments to fantasies of happiness even though they are unsustainable and stand in the way of fulfillment. Chapter four will discuss how postfeminist femininity in particular exists in this context, engaging in a cruel optimism, and through Berlant’s concept of the ‘impasse’ I will analyze how Ulman’s performance deals with the traumatic loss of the attachment to the fantasy.

## 1.4.2 Thesis Structure

This thesis consists of five chapters. Following the introduction, chapter two charts the way in which internet technologies have been appropriated for feminist action and artistic practice, from the cyberfeminists of the early text-based web, through networked feminism facilitated by Web 2.0, to the so called digifeminists that Ulman is associated with.

Reviewing these feminist interventions into digital spaces at the outset of this thesis will serve to contextualize the artistic practice of Amalia Ulman as part of a larger feminist discussion about femininity, embodiment and visibility in online environments. This history also seeks to uncover how gender operates in networked spaces, and how the performance of

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<sup>54</sup> Ahmed, Sarah, "Happy Objects," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Gregory J Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). 34

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 34

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 35

<sup>57</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. 13

feminine and feminist identities is both enabled and restricted by these environments. The chapter outlines Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg and Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which have been important influences in the development of feminist internet art. The aim of this chapter is not to draw up a matrilineage of internet-based feminist practices, but to understand the conditions for both feminist and feminine expression within online spaces.

The following three chapters will analyze *Excellences & Perfections* in the context of feminine self-representation on social media, and explore how different articulations and expressions of femininity are used to highlight the struggles and experiences of lived subjectivities within this context. Modelling my thesis after Ulman's tripartite performance, I will enter each of the three analysis chapters through the character portrayed in each of the three episodes. Each of these characters will be used to exemplify tropes, stereotypes and figures of femininity which will serve as a frame for the themes and discussions. Each chapter begins with a brief description of the character and aesthetic of the episode in question, which is then related to a structural framework that takes femininity as its form.

The third chapter centers on the 'cute girl' trope from the first episode of *Excellences & Perfections*. I relate the 'cute girl' to the stereotype of the narcissistic feminine subject of selfie culture, and to the figure of the Young-Girl, as theorized by the French artist collective Tiquun in their 1999 text *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, a symbolic figure that represents how young women are conceptualized as both the ideal objects and subjects of consumer capitalism. By analyzing the 'cute girl' through these figures, this chapter will examine the conditions and strategies for feminine self-representation on social media, and explore how the image of femininity has been commodified and appropriated for symbolic and economic purposes. The chapter introduces the concept of neoliberalism, specifically positioning neoliberal ideology as a form of governmentality which influences feminine self-expression, and traces how Ulman's performance registers the affective attachments to this ideology and the affective labor involved in the production of its feminine ideals.

Chapter four analyzes the second episode of the performance and the character of the 'sugar baby', which will be read as an embodiment of the ideal subject of postfeminism, and discussed in relation to the negative stereotype of the angry feminist and the sensationalized figure of the unraveling female celebrity. My account of postfeminism is indebted to feminist cultural theorists such as Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill, who have examined popular cultures, gender representations and media practices.

Through this framework, I will analyze how the ‘sugar baby’ demonstrates how neoliberal culture portrays and appropriates feminist discourse to create a postfeminist sensibility which produces conflicted postfeminist subjectivities that engage with both feminine and feminist aesthetics simultaneously. Relying on Sara Ahmed’s theorization of happiness, Lauren Berlant’s concept of ‘cruel optimism’, and artist Audrey Wollen’s proposed ‘Sad Girl Theory’, I will examine how this episode serves to highlight the social and affective cost of engaging in postfeminist femininity, and explore the possibility of resistance and feminist critique through negative affects.

Chapter five will provide a reading of the last episode of the performance, in which the ‘life goddess’ character will be examined as a representation of the feminine subject of contemporary wellness culture, and related to the stereotype of the ‘basic bitch’. Through this connection, I will discuss how the idea of authenticity that defines and governs this form of femininity is related to neoliberal ideals and consumerism. By analyzing how Ulman’s character articulates an aesthetic of inauthenticity, I will be able to connect this figure to the figures of the Young-Girl and the cyborg, and review the themes and arguments that have been presented in the previous chapters. This will allow me to discuss what my research has uncovered about feminine representation in *Excellences & Perfections*, and lead me to present my main arguments about the work’s potential for feminist criticality.



## 2 The Feminine Body in Feminist Internet Art: A History

This chapter seeks to understand the conditions for both feminist and feminine expression within online spaces, and how the advent of the internet potentiated new possibilities for feminist intervention. The focus of this thesis is Amalia Ulman's performance of feminine identities within the networked environment of Instagram in her work *Excellences & Perfections*. But in order to explore how the feminine body and its image can be deployed in digital environments to assert a feminist critique, I will examine the context for this gesture, both in terms of the historical and present use of this strategy within feminist art, and in terms of site, as the temporal, technical, cultural and social specificity it is embedded in. In doing so, this chapter temporarily departs from Ulman's work, and explores the histories of internet-based feminist practices, through the discussion of embodiment and disembodiment as central concepts. First, I will address the notion of digital disembodiment in early cyberculture, and consider how Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg presents an alternative figuration of subjectivity in digitized society, one which offers great potential for feminist reimagining. The cyborg represents a transgression of boundaries that destabilizes essentialist categories of identity, which I will discuss in relation to Judith Butler's theory of performativity. I then discuss how these ideas were taken up by the cyberfeminists of the early World Wide Web, and give a brief account of their strategies and practices. The disarticulation of cyberfeminism will lead me to explore how the internet, as both technology and social sphere, was profoundly changed by the shift to Web 2.0, and how this has fostered new social possibilities but also facilitates online harassment and abuse. Lastly, I will present networked feminism and digifeminism as reaction to the gender-based harassment in online cultures, and I will discuss their use of social media and self-mediation for feminist purposes.

The aim of this chapter is to show how the digifeminist practices that Amalia Ulman is associated with relate to a larger context of feminist thought. I intend to show that while there have been various feminist articulations that engage with online spaces, there are some recurring themes: collectivity, affinity and plurality, the theme of embodiment, and the issue of the body marked as feminine. Examining their approaches to these themes will help me understand the complexities of feminine self-representation in digital spaces and the opportunities and risks this presents, and serve to contextualize Ulman's performance.

## 2.1 Disembodiment in Cyberspace

The Internet is often imagined in dematerialized and disembodied terms, as a virtual environment separate from everyday life. The basis for this conception is the fact that digital information is implicitly immaterial, and thus the digital spaces constituted by such information are rendered inaccessible to physical bodies. The conception of the internet as disembodied and a separate sphere echoes the spatial metaphor of “cyberspace” as it was conceptualized in early cyberculture of the 1980s and early 1990s, which relies on a fundamental distinction between online and offline, the virtual and the real.<sup>58</sup> Because of this separation, cyberspace was envisioned as a space that allows the user to transcend the limitations of material reality, such as time, space and the corporeal, a space where the consciousness could be liberated from the constraints of the physical body. Such accounts rely upon and reproduce the traditional Cartesian dualism in which the mind is considered separate from and privileged over the body.<sup>59</sup> Central to the Cartesian epistemology is the essentialist belief that logical reason is superior to the illogical nature, considering the body not as part of the self, but as its container.<sup>60</sup> Belonging to the realm of illogical nature, the body is merely an object to be instrumentalized. As the World Wide Web was launched in 1991, the Internet was continually theorized as inherently disembodied, and many theorists asserted the emancipatory and democratic possibilities of cyberspace as a post-bodily space in which existing social prescriptions such as race, class and gender could be subverted.<sup>61</sup> Feminists were among the first to recognize digital disembodiment as a potential source of empowerment and liberation, as the fluid identities enabled by digital technologies could be used to evade and disrupt traditional bodily constructions of gender and sexuality.<sup>62</sup>

The idea of changing identities, constructing new gender identities or genderless identities in digital spaces was central to the early cyberfeminists, who envisioned the internet as an ideal space for experimenting with female thought and expression. Cyberfeminism refers to a wave of academic and artistic practices that emerged in the

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<sup>58</sup> Powell, A.; Henry, N., *Sexual Violence in a Digital Age*, ed. Marie-Helen Maras and Thomas J. Holt, Palgrave Studies in Cybercrime and Cybersecurity (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). 51

<sup>59</sup> Richardson, I. and Harper, C., "Corporeal Virtuality: The Impossibility of a Fleshless Ontology," *Murdoch University. Centre for Research in Culture and Communication* (2002). 1-2

<sup>60</sup> Paasonen, Susanna, *Figures of Fantasy: Internet, Women, and Cyberdiscourse* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005).

<sup>61</sup> Powell, *Sexual Violence in a Digital Age*. 56

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

early 1990s, but is neither a singular theory nor a feminist movement with a clearly articulated agenda.<sup>63</sup> Attempting to define cyberfeminism would be an impossible task, partly due to the plethora of different practices involved and lack of a coherent framework, but also because it actively resisted definition.<sup>64</sup> However, the common feature is the critical analysis of the interconnections of gender and digital technologies, and the feminist appropriation of these technologies on a both practical and theoretical level.<sup>65</sup>

## 2.2 The Cyborg

Although the early cyberfeminist articulations were characterized by the utopian vision of a disembodied cyberspace, cyberfeminism has from the start also emphasized the importance of embodiment, and conceptualized cyberspace as inhabited by bodies.<sup>66</sup> While it has been claimed that this presents a fundamental contradiction within cyberfeminism, the apparent paradox of disembodied embodiment is resolved in the figure of the cyborg.<sup>67</sup> The cyborg was introduced in the feminist context by Donna Haraway in her 1984 essay “A Cyborg Manifesto” which inspired and paved the way for cyberfeminism and became one of the foundational texts in feminist posthumanist theory. Theorizing the emancipatory potential of women’s engagement with technology, Haraway uses the cyborg as a metaphor for both the lived reality of modern technology and for a post-human subjectivity with feminist potential to subvert and transgress social categories of gender. She argues that modern life has made the relationship between humans and technology so intimate that it is no longer possible to tell where the human ends and the machinic begins, and neither part can be singled out as separate entities.<sup>68</sup> Rather, they mutually constitute each other. According to Haraway, “By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics.”<sup>69</sup> As hybrids, our bodies or selves are not stable or

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<sup>63</sup> Daniels, Jessie, "Rethinking Cyberfeminism(S): Race, Gender, and Embodiment," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 1 & 2 (2009). 102

<sup>64</sup> Wilding, Faith, "Where Is Feminism in Cyberfeminism?," Essay, 1997  
[http://www.obn.org/cfundef/faith\\_def.html](http://www.obn.org/cfundef/faith_def.html). (accessed 26.10.17)

<sup>65</sup> Paasonen, Susanna, "Revisiting Cyberfeminism," *Communications - The European Journal of Communication Research* 36, no. 3 (2011). 335

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 345

<sup>67</sup> Daniels, "Rethinking Cyberfeminism(S): Race, Gender, and Embodiment." 112

<sup>68</sup> Haraway, Donna, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991). 151

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 150

natural, and our identity is no longer fixed. Rather, we are multiple, fractured and intertwined, and cannot be disentangled or categorized into one thing or the other. The cyborg thereby represents a transgression of boundaries, not only the boundary between human and machine, but also other naturalized dualisms such as human and animal, corporeal and incorporeal, public and private, nature and culture, male and female.<sup>70</sup> In this way, the hybrid cyborg allows a human condition that undermines and destabilizes traditional essentialism, in which binary oppositions or identities are considered to be natural distinctions. While Haraway maintains that the subject is inevitably split and contradictory, she doesn't reiterate the Cartesian paradigm that separates mind and body and envisions a disembodied consciousness. Her cyborg is disembodied because it is dispersed in the network of relations that constitute social reality.<sup>71</sup> As thus, the identity of the cyborg is not rooted in any pre-existing organic wholeness, and by obscuring the boundaries between nature and culture it resists conceptions of 'Woman' as a natural embodied unity. "There is not even such a state as 'being' female," Haraway writes, it is "itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism."<sup>72</sup>

In this way, Haraway's project has some overlap with the theory of gender performativity put forward by queer theorist Judith Butler in her iconic work *Gender Trouble* (1990) which was published six years after Haraway's *Manifesto*<sup>73</sup>. Here, Butler similarly rejects the essentialist notion that gender difference is a manifestation of biological or natural sexual division. Instead, she argues that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results."<sup>74</sup> By this she means that gender is an act of performance, it is something we 'do', not something we 'are'. Gendered identity is constituted through the repetition of acts within a socio-historically defined framework of conventions. As such, identity is a process, and the ongoing work of performance produces an expression of gender that is defined by certain practices and experiences. This provides a social script of what gender is and should look

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<sup>70</sup> Sundén, Jenny, "What Happened to Difference in Cyberspace? The (Re)Turn of the She-Cyborg," *Feminist Media Studies* 1, no. 2 (2001). 216

<sup>71</sup> Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." 181

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 156

<sup>73</sup> Butler, Judith P., *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 34



like, which in turn is internalized and re-performed. Butler asserts that gender is not the natural starting point but the consequence of culture, a social construct that is retrospectively naturalized.<sup>75</sup> Although Butler's theory has been misinterpreted as claiming that biological gender is a fiction and that we therefore can freely choose our gender identity, she is not suggesting that the labels of gender identity can be removed and altogether discarded in favor of something else. Rather, she is claiming that the biological is always already inscribed by the social and that it cannot exist prior to the discursive practices that produces it as such.<sup>76</sup> She writes, "If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can neither be true or false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity".<sup>77</sup> Donna Haraway similarly uses terms of inscription and writing to describe processes of meaning-making across the body, and asserts that this form of writing has been a tool for Western phallogocentric culture to inscribe women's bodies with stories of hierarchical dualisms and myths of natural origin.<sup>78</sup> With this inscription, the body exists as a "map of power and identity", a cyborgian unbound network that is not binary, but a hybrid between real and unreal, nature and culture, organic and machine.<sup>79</sup>

Haraway questions the tendencies of feminisms that collapse the multiplicity of women's experiences into a universal category of *woman*, theorized as an all-encompassing unity, because they naturalize the essential dualisms that have been used to mark women as 'other'.<sup>80</sup> Instead, Haraway proposes cyborg writing, a reappropriation of the tools for signification, so that the stories and myths that have defined women's identity can be rewritten and subverted. Such cyborg writing is about disrupting totalizing narratives and instead embracing the multiplicities, ambiguities and contradictions of experience. The transgressive, disruptive cyborg thus serves as a subversive and empowering strategy that holds the possibility of realization of a utopian dream of a post-gender future.<sup>81</sup> The cyborg is not a flight from the body or gender, nor does it mark the disappearance of embodiment; rather, it represents the multiple possibilities of embodiment that transgress the boundaries of identity politics. Like the cyborg, the performative body theorized by Butler

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<sup>75</sup> Mortensen, Ellen et al., *Kjønnsteori* (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 2008). 78

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*. 136

<sup>78</sup> Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." 176

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 181

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 156-161, 178

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 180

“has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality,”<sup>82</sup> and because gender identities have no origin in any biological truth, they are flexible, and open to resignification and recontextualization.<sup>83</sup> In order to destabilize essentialist gender binaries, Butler argues for the subversive imitation of gender as a way of denaturalizing the conventions that holds it in place by exposing gender as performative, calling for the deconstruction of feminine identity by means of irony and parody.<sup>84</sup> Through Haraway’s concept of the cyborg and Butler’s theory of performativity, the hybrid and conflicted female body can emerge as a site for feminist critique and action.

## 2.3 Cyberfeminism

Cyberfeminism emerged in the early 1990s, as multiple more or less interconnected constellations of female scholars, activists, coders, and media artists from different parts of the world who believed that the recently launched internet would bring about the post-gender future described by Haraway.<sup>85</sup> The term ‘cyberfeminism’ was coined in 1991, simultaneously by Sadie Plant, a cultural theorist from Great Britain, and the Australian art collective VNS Matrix (Venus Matrix), who authored their own “Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century” (Figure 1) as a tribute to Haraway.<sup>86</sup> This manifesto included the phrase “the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix,”<sup>87</sup> which became a slogan of sorts for cyberfeminism, since it emphasizes the material relationship between women and technologies, the female body and the machine.<sup>88</sup> The various strands of cyberfeminism represented a variety of agendas and theoretical approaches, and it was not organized into a clearly definable movement. The term thus refers to a range of theories, debates and practices that explored how the internet and new digital technologies could be used to subvert hegemonic gender norms.<sup>89</sup> The participation in and visibility of cyberfeminism increased year by year, culminating in the first Cyberfeminist International Conference at Documenta X in Kassel, Germany in 1997, which was organized by the European group Old Boys Network

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<sup>82</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*. 136

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 140

<sup>84</sup> Mortensen et al., *Kjønnsteori*. 79

<sup>85</sup> Paasonen, "Revisiting Cyberfeminism." 337

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 338

<sup>87</sup> Matrix, VNS, "Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century," Electronic manifesto, 1991 <http://www.sterneck.net/cyber/vns-matrix/index.php>. (accessed 03.12.2017)

<sup>88</sup> Paasonen, *Figures of Fantasy: Internet, Women, and Cyberdiscourse*.

<sup>89</sup> Paasonen, "Revisiting Cyberfeminism." 339

(OBN).<sup>90</sup> During the conference, the participants agreed not to define cyberfeminism and instead collaboratively produced “The 100 anti-theses of cyberfeminism”.<sup>91</sup> These anti-theses defined cyberfeminism by what it is not, and the list includes: not a fragrance, not for sale, not ideology, not a fashion statement, not complete, not caffeine-free, not exclusive.<sup>92</sup> This negative definition articulates cyberfeminism as an open site, a potentiality, into which radical bodies and thoughts could be interjected.<sup>93</sup> The lack of definition was intended as strategy of political disidentification, a rejection of limiting and divisive labels which instead would allow for diversity, plurality and fluidity, and reflected the influence of cyborg politics.<sup>94</sup>

Resisting definition allowed cyberfeminism a versatility that many previous types of feminism lacked, and this openness was crucial to its appeal.<sup>95</sup> While there were many different, or even contradictory, theories and practices operating under the umbrella of cyberfeminism, there was still some common ground. Haraway’s *Manifesto* was a significant influence, they adopted her ideas about rewriting and reconfiguring gendered identities and bodies, resisting and subverting essentialist binaries, and embracing multiplicity and hybridity. They embraced the idea that if gender is constructed as opposed to natural, then like a cyborg, it would be possible to construct new identities, sexualities and genders through the use of new technologies.<sup>96</sup> They were enthralled at the prospect of digital disembodiment, and recognized that the early text-based internet provided conditions of anonymity that seemed to make cyberspace a post-human space that had unlimited political potential. While cyberfeminism is widely associated with this enthusiasm for the subversive potential of internet technologies, it is also characterized by the use of irony and parody as political and artistic tools.<sup>97</sup> It is perhaps no coincidence that the first cyberfeminist articulations emerged only a year after the publication of *Gender Trouble*, where Butler describes and proposes parodic practices of performative gender acts that “disrupt the categories of the body, sex, gender and sexuality and occasion their subversive resignification

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. 343

<sup>92</sup> Network, Old Boys, "100 Anti-Theses," Electronic manifesto, 1997  
[http://www.obn.org/reading\\_room/manifestos/html/anti.html](http://www.obn.org/reading_room/manifestos/html/anti.html). (accessed 02.12.2017)

<sup>93</sup> Walsh, Joanna, ""She Wore a Usb Cord Instead of a Necklace": Whatever Happened to Cyberfeminism?," Article, published 25.05.2016 *New Statesman* (2016),  
<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/feminism/2016/05/she-wore-usb-cord-instead-necklace-whatever-happened-cyberfeminism> (accessed 02.12.2017)

<sup>94</sup> Paasonen, "Revisiting Cyberfeminism." 344

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. 342

<sup>96</sup> Paasonen, *Figures of Fantasy: Internet, Women, and Cyberdiscourse*. 204-205

<sup>97</sup> Paasonen, "Revisiting Cyberfeminism." 343

and proliferation beyond the binary frame” as a strategy to “denaturalize and resignify bodily categories”.<sup>98</sup> Irony and parody were important strategies for the cyberfeminists, and they answered Butler's call for subversive parodic practices by combining humor and seriousness, seemingly contradictory affects and regimes, as a political and artistic strategy.<sup>99</sup> Haraway also asserted the critical function of irony for feminist politics. In the opening paragraph of her *Cyborg Manifesto*, she defines the cyborg as fundamentally ironic and contradictory:

*“Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humour and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method, one I would like to see more honoured within socialist-feminism. At the centre of my ironic faith, my blasphemy, is the image of the cyborg”.*<sup>100</sup>

Here, Haraway presents irony as a tool that allows multiple truths or realities to exist at the same time with equal validity, and the ironic metaphor of the hybridic cyborg thus represents a paradigm for collective political action. She calls for a feminist politics based on affinity rather than identity, meaning that political groups should be formed not on the basis of assumed essentialist identities, but “only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship”,<sup>101</sup> coming together as partial, differently situated and hybrid selves. The politics of affinity were taken up by cyberfeminism. By refusing to self-define, cyberfeminists instead embraced multiplicity and difference, creating hybridic coalitions along the lines of solidarity.<sup>102</sup>

The cyberfeminists adopted many early internet formats, and shared their manifestos and artworks in mailing lists, online forums, message boards, support networks and self-organized websites.<sup>103</sup> They encouraged women to not only participate in these initiatives, but to share knowledge and build knowledge in the development of software, digital platforms, programming languages and the use of technologies for support and artistic expression.<sup>104</sup> Cyberfeminist art was characterized by both “disruptive, argumentative and

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<sup>98</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*. (Preface) x

<sup>99</sup> Paasonen, "Revisiting Cyberfeminism." 343

<sup>100</sup> Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." 149

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. 156

<sup>102</sup> Wilding, "Where Is Feminism in Cyberfeminism?"

<sup>103</sup> Chan, Jennifer, "Why Are There No Great Women Net Artists? Vague Histories of Female Contribution According to Video and Internet Art," Essay, 2011 <http://pooool.info/why-are-there-no-great-women-net-artists-2/>. (accessed 28.11.2017) 11

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. 11

fluid performances that evaded categorization” as essentialist feminine identities,<sup>105</sup> and also by the appropriation and insertion of the sexualized feminine body into digital spaces, which according to Susanna Paasonen “bordered on mimicry in the sense of reiterating familiar connotations concerning sexuality and the female body.”<sup>106</sup> Wielding ‘cunts,’ ‘sluts,’ ‘bitches’ and ‘clitorises,’ they used imagery of the feminine body for provocative, empowering and parodic effect.<sup>107</sup> They designed satirical computer games, such as *All New Gen* (1993), revolutionary CD-ROMs like *Cyberflesh Girlmonster* (1995), and built web-based multimedia artworks.<sup>108</sup> They explored new gender identities in Multi User Dungeons and virtual role playing games, invaded male-dominated arenas of computer science by taking up coding, and infiltrated communication networks with blunt, sexualized language and imagery.<sup>109</sup> The idea was to transform inequalities, to disrupt patriarchal power structures and provide women with an accessible public space for political activism and performance through technologies.<sup>110</sup>

## 2.4 The Social Web

Cyberfeminists engaged with the techno hype of early cyberdiscourse, and combined the utopic dream of overthrowing the patriarchy with a relentless enthusiasm for the new possibilities of the internet. However, their lack of definition and excessive use of irony confused their enthusiastic message with a blurriness of meaning.<sup>111</sup> As the new millennium approached, the cyber enthusiasm of the 1990s began to wear off, and cyberfeminism appeared to have lost its appeal.<sup>112</sup> The dot.com bubble bursting in the year 2000 would mark the end of this techno hype. During the second half of the 1990s, investments in internet-based companies led to a sudden rise in equity markets, which spurred a buying frenzy in which investors uncritically bought the stocks of any internet company, including those

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid. 15

<sup>106</sup> Paasonen, "Revisiting Cyberfeminism." 345

<sup>107</sup> Paasonen, *Figures of Fantasy: Internet, Women, and Cyberdiscourse*. 210

<sup>108</sup> Scott, Isabella, "A Brief History of Cyberfeminism," Article, published 13.10.2016 *Artsy* (2016), <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-how-the-cyberfeminists-worked-to-liberate-women-through-the-internet> (accessed 03.12.2017)

<sup>109</sup> Chan, "Why Are There No Great Women Net Artists? Vague Histories of Female Contribution According to Video and Internet Art". 13

<sup>110</sup> Van Zoonen, Liesbet, "Gendering the Internet: Claims, Controversies and Cultures," *European Journal of Communication* 17, no. 1 (2002). 13

<sup>111</sup> Paasonen, "Revisiting Cyberfeminism." 349

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

without any revenue or even a working business model.<sup>113</sup> This created an economic bubble that inevitably burst, and most of the companies either went bankrupt or experienced massive drops in their share prices.<sup>114</sup> The collapse led to the emergence of ‘Web 2.0’, a development that not only represents a change in the technological structure itself, but also a change in how the Internet is used. The shift towards user generated content is a central aspect of Web 2.0, and this has turned the World Wide Web into a much more interactive, collaborative, participatory and social space.<sup>115</sup> Social media are a direct result of this reconfiguration. In the 1990s, the Internet was a text-based system primarily used as a static tool for retrieving information, but with the shift to Web 2.0 it became a part of social life.<sup>116</sup> This makes it increasingly difficult to separate the online sphere from the offline without considering how they are fundamentally entangled, and the notion of a disembodied cyberspace somehow detached from everyday life is harder to uphold.<sup>117</sup>

The first decade of the twenty-first century served to dispel cyberfeminist expectations of a techno-utopian world beyond binary gender identities. While the cyberdiscourse of the 1990’s focused on disembodiment through technology, the idea of the internet as an emancipating and post-gender space gradually faded as it became more embedded in our daily lives. Online cultures have become defined by the omnipresence of internet technologies and social media, and their digital networks configure a vast rhizome, a context which was impossible to imagine 25 years ago.<sup>118</sup> Back then, the liberation from gender visibility could easily be imagined and romanticized within the text-based communications of the early internet. The idea of bodies and minds as being somehow separated in digital spaces is premised on the invisibility of the physical body, and as online communications have become characterized by multimodal representations of the self and the body, it is harder to imagine an escape from embodiment.<sup>119</sup> Photographic technologies such as smartphone cameras and webcams, live streaming features on social media, and applications made for image and video sharing have all made images of bodies an ever-present part of the online world.<sup>120</sup> The cyberfeminists saw the Internet as providing a

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<sup>113</sup> Cornell, Lauren and (ed.), Ed Halter, *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2016). 203

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. 203

<sup>115</sup> Paasonen, "Revisiting Cyberfeminism." 347

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. 347

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. 347

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. 348

<sup>119</sup> Daniels, "Rethinking Cyberfeminism(S): Race, Gender, and Embodiment." 111

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

platform that enabled the escape from social prescriptions such as race, class and gender: supposedly, one could be whoever one wanted to be online. They recognized that digital technology and the presumed freedom of the web could be used to challenge dominant identity categories and foster new and diverse subjectivities. The Internet was, and continues to be, a site that provides critical space, but this is not a neutral space that is free from social conventions of gender, rather, it is embedded in the social relations of the material world. The internet user enters the online world from an embodied location, and this body is inscribed by systems of social categories which are then carried into the digital environment. This means that sexist and racist beliefs and stereotypes are also imported into and reproduced in online spaces. Furthermore, gender online is often expressed through the same performative conventions as in the offline world. This was explored in a study by Kira Hall, who found that "rather than neutralizing gender, the electronic medium encourages its intensification. In the absence of the physical, network users exaggerate societal notions of femininity and masculinity in an attempt to gender themselves."<sup>121</sup> Cadence Kinsey similarly observes that the process of self-representation online works to establish the online persona as a "site from which a politics of identity can be articulated," but it also serves to highlight how representations in themselves are "always already informed by circulating ideologies of sexual, racial and class difference."<sup>122</sup> Following Hall and Kinsey, it appears that with the conditions of anonymity of the web, gender has become more performative and more emphasized as a marker of identity, suggesting that the internet is a gendered space in which conventional gender binaries are reproduced and reinforced.

Anonymity has also served as a cloak of protection which offers exemption from accountability, and has enabled the proliferation of new forms of trolling and harassment online, much of which is gender-based. In their 2017 book *Sexual Violence in a Digital Age*, Anastasia Powell and Nicola Henry suggest that gender-based harassment online is indicative of a broader pattern of gender inequalities that characterize the development, access and use of internet technologies.<sup>123</sup> In the history of the internet as a technology, the people involved in its development and design have been and are currently predominantly male.<sup>124</sup> Internet

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<sup>121</sup> Hall, Kira, "Cyberfeminism," in *Computer-Mediated Communication: Linguistic, Social and Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Susan Herring (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1996). 165

<sup>122</sup> Kinsey, Cadence, "Matrices of Embodiment: Rethinking Binary and the Politics of Digital Representation," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 39, no. 4 (2014). 910

<sup>123</sup> Powell, A; Henry N., "Online Misogyny, Harassment and Hate Crimes," in *Sexual Violence in a Digital Age*, Palgrave Studies in Cybercrime and Cybersecurity (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). 32

<sup>124</sup> Van Zoonen, "Gendering the Internet: Claims, Controversies and Cultures."11

technology was developed in a collaboration between American military and universities, and many feminist theorists believe this constitutes it as a medium embedded in masculine codes and values.<sup>125</sup> Today, the online environment is still predominantly produced by men, as the founders, computer programmers, and software designers of the technology companies that have created the framework of the online world are overwhelmingly male.<sup>126</sup> This gender imbalance in new media companies affects their ability to understand how their platforms might enable discrimination and misogynistic cultures online.<sup>127</sup> As the group involved in the creation of online spaces is not the group that is most subjected to the sexism and harassment within those spaces, they are not as inclined to consider how such behavior is enabled, or could be prevented, online. Despite the gender gap in terms of access to the internet that leads to women being underrepresented as online users,<sup>128</sup> they are more likely to report incidents of online harassment,<sup>129</sup> and to report the most severe forms of online harassment, such as cyberstalking, sexual harassment and image-based sexual abuse, which are disproportionately directed at women.<sup>130</sup>

Online sexism and harassment occurs within a climate that is saturated by problematic stereotypes and norms around masculinity, femininity and sexuality. Women who challenge these stereotypes or online misogyny, or make themselves visible in traditionally masculinist online spaces, are more likely to be the targets of vicious online hate campaigns.<sup>131</sup> However, presenting as female online in it self can be enough to inspire harassment and abuse. A 2006 study by researchers at the University of Maryland's Electrical Engineering and Computer Department conducted an experiment where fake accounts with male and female usernames were dispatched into chat rooms. They found that accounts with female usernames incurred an average of 100 sexually explicit or threatening messages a day, while accounts with male

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid. 6

<sup>126</sup> Hess, Amanda, "Why Women Aren't Welcome on the Internet," Article, published 06.01.2014 *Pacific Standard* (2014), <https://psmag.com/social-justice/women-arent-welcome-internet-72170#.w5ffmp2c2> (accessed 15.08.2017)

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. 7

<sup>128</sup> A report issued by the United Nations' Broadband Commission Working Group in 2013 revealed that over 200 million fewer women have access to the Internet than men. Globally 41% of men and 37% of women have Internet access, and in the developed world (countries with wide-reaching access to the Internet) 80% of men are online, compared to 74% of women. See: "Doubling Digital Opportunities - Enhancing the Inclusion of Women & Girls in the Information Society," ed. The Broadband Commission Working Group on Broadband and Gender (UNESCO).

<sup>129</sup> Hess, "Why Women Aren't Welcome on the Internet". 2

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., Chemaly, Soraya, "There's No Comparing Male and Female Harassment Online," Article, published 09.09.2014 *Time* (2014), <http://time.com/3305466/male-female-harassment-online/> (accessed 18.10.2017)

<sup>131</sup> Powell, "Online Misogyny, Harassment and Hate Crimes." 169, Hess, "Why Women Aren't Welcome on the Internet".



usernames received an average of 3.7 such messages.<sup>132</sup> The misogynistic climate in many digital spaces has severe implications for women's equality and visibility. Online sexual harassment signals to women that they are not welcome, and causes many women to hide their identity and/or gender online.<sup>133</sup> This is seen in the world of gaming, where 70% female players in multiplayer games represent themselves with male avatars to avoid abuse.<sup>134</sup> Another significant consequence of online misogyny is that women withdraw from online participation. A Pew study found that internet users' participation in chat forums and discussion groups dropped from 28% in 2000 to 17% in 2005, entirely because of women's disengagement.<sup>135</sup> When online gender based harassment causes women to become invisible or absent in certain online spaces it contributes to the social exclusion of women. As the internet becomes central to the human experience in an increasingly digitized world, abusive online behaviors function as a form of social policing that "inhibits the exercise of digital citizenship, equality and freedom".<sup>136</sup>

## 2.5 Networked Feminism

Anonymity, which cyberfeminists championed as a tool for transcending the boundaries gender, is now a primary enabler of misogynistic language in online environments. At the same time, the expansion of digital networks also meant an unprecedented expansion of possibilities for collaboration, participation and collective action for marginalized groups. Feminists have taken up social media to mobilize and coordinate action, and networks such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and blogs provide platforms for sharing and addressing experiences and thought, and for raising awareness of sexism, harassment and violence against women. On Instagram and Twitter, the hashtag-system affords a wide dispersal of circulation, but it can also weave individual threads into a networked whole, as isolated voices connect through shared experiences and converge into collective political movements. Social media platforms such as Instagram can hence be useful for a feminist project for establishing discursive spaces that enable networking through affective solidarity,

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<sup>132</sup> Meyer, Robert and Cukier, Michel, "Assessing the Attack Threat Due to Irc Channels," *Proceedings of the International Conference on Dependable Systems and Networks* (2006). 4

<sup>133</sup> Powell, "Online Misogyny, Harassment and Hate Crimes." 180

<sup>134</sup> Chemaly, "There's No Comparing Male and Female Harassment Online".

<sup>135</sup> Fallows, Deborah, "How Women and Men Use the Internet," in *Pew Internet & American Life Project* (Washington, D.C.2005). 14

<sup>136</sup> Powell, "Online Misogyny, Harassment and Hate Crimes." 155

and for individual subjects to facilitate social change.<sup>137</sup> Prime examples of this is found in feminist activist hashtag campaigns, such as #FreeTheNipple, #HeForShe, #EverydaySexism, #YesAllWomen, and #MeToo, where the experiences and stories shared by participants worked to reveal the collective aspects of oppression and served as a basis for collective action and social change. This development is often referred to as “Hashtag feminism” or networked feminism, which is frequently associated with feminism’s fourth wave.<sup>138</sup> Defined by its use of technology, networked feminism actualizes many of the key ideas of cyberfeminism, which within the wave metaphor is described as part of the third wave.<sup>139</sup> Like cyberfeminism, the contemporary networked feminism celebrates a heterogeneous subjectivity, networks of feminist affinity and affective solidarity. The use of hashtags to establish these networks shows how Instagram can be an ideal space for feminist intervention and protest. At the same time, campaigns such as #FreeTheNipple were specifically aimed at the platform itself, and worked to highlight how Instagram’s policies restrict women’s self-representation.<sup>140</sup> This movement worked to address the double standard of Instagram’s nudity guidelines, in which images of male nipples are allowed, but images of female nipples are considered a violation and consequently removed. The aim of the campaign was to spread awareness of gender inequalities in contemporary media cultures and society in general, within which women’s bodies are defined as inherently sexual and therefore offensive, causing them to be objectified, stigmatized and censored.<sup>141</sup> By defiantly showing their nipples and posting ambiguous images of nipples that would elude censorship, the proponents of #FreeTheNipple pushed back against this convention, and highlighted how social media sites, and Instagram in particular, are structured by discriminatory frameworks that limit the visibility of women and forces them to engage in self-censorship.

## 2.6 Digifeminism

Within this context, a new generation of young, female artists has carved out a new brand of feminism. Their artistic practice is concerned with issues of identity, gendered embodiment

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<sup>137</sup> Washko, "From Webcams to Wikipedia".

<sup>138</sup> Washko, Angela, "Out of the Kitchen, onto Your Screen, into the Ether: A Case for an Online Art and Feminism Social Movement," PDF-file, published 26.03.2014, <http://netartnet.net/news/texts/item/830-a-feminist-art-movement-online> (accessed 02.08.2017)

<sup>139</sup> Trier-Bieniek, Adrienne, *Feminist Theory and Pop Culture*, ed. Patricia Leavy, Teaching Gender (Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2015), xxii.

<sup>140</sup> Myers West, Sarah, "Raging against the Machine: Network Gatekeeping and Collective Action on Social Media Platforms," *Media and Communication* 5, no. 3 (2017). 33

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. 31

and self-representation online, and received the moniker “digifeminism” in 2014.<sup>142</sup> Hashtag feminism first became a phenomenon in 2013, around the same time as digifeminist art appeared on the web, and they are frequently associated as part of the same brand of digital feminism. In her essay about digifeminism, artist and scholar Angela Washko makes the case for digifeminism as a social movement enacted online through affective collectives and solidarity networks.<sup>143</sup> I would argue that many of the practices Washko describes are more aligned with networked feminism, and that the digifeminist art practices of artists such as Amalia Ulman represent a development beyond the oppositional toward new articulations of feminism, towards a fifth wave.

What characterizes digifeminist art, and what sets it apart from other feminisms and other internet based art practices? It seems that all contemporary internet based feminisms are equally impacted by the blurring of social and technological boundaries. The possibilities afforded by the participatory web and new digital technologies for producing and sharing images have been embraced by a multitude of artists, but while many are described as ‘post internet’ or ‘net artists’, there are few who use the internet as both their medium and their subject and actively interrogate its culture. Digifeminists engage with the misogynistic climate and gendered stereotypes that permeate online environments, making visible the commercial forces and oppressive patriarchal systems of representation that shape internet culture.<sup>144</sup> Rather than protesting against the systems of oppression like the proponents of networked feminism, digifeminist artists are embedding their performances in these systems, taking them on from within. Created for and in social networks, their art is both immediate and processual, personal and political, reflecting that they exist in a time of technological and feminist progress.<sup>145</sup> These artworks are multilayered, conflicted and ambiguous, emerging in the intermediacy between high and low, online and offline, URL and IRL.<sup>146</sup>

In many ways digifeminists thus recall the moment of pronounced technological advancement described by Haraway, when the barrier between humans and technology would be broken down. The cyborg stands for the idea that if technological ideas and perceptions are embraced, “a way out of the maze of dualisms that have explained our bodies

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<sup>142</sup> Washko, "Out of the Kitchen".1

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Geurts, "Digi-Feminism".

<sup>145</sup> O'Regan, Kathryn, "Category: Feminism," Essay, published 27.10.2015 *Fragments*, <https://kathrynoregan.wordpress.com/category/feminism/page/2/> (accessed 18.11.2018)

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

and our tools”<sup>147</sup> may emerge. The digifeminists might very well be on the path to finding this way out.

Like their cyberfeminist predecessors, the digifeminists have not established any authoritative definition or framework, and do not constitute a unified, cohesive movement. They represent a range of scholarly, artistic and activist practices from different disciplines and parts of the world.<sup>148</sup> While this multiplicity and hybridity aligns digifeminism with the politics of affinity employed by the cyberfeminists, the lack of definition is not an expression of active resistance. More likely, it has to do with the way the collective identity of digifeminism is largely based on its deeply intertwined digitally networked existence.<sup>149</sup> All digifeminist action is coordinated through social media, email and browsers, and their networks are formed almost entirely online.<sup>150</sup> Social media platforms are essential to how digifeminist artists produce and promote their work, and are equally important for communication amongst individuals, collectives and collaborators.<sup>151</sup> Their networks are formed almost entirely online, as participants connect through closed discussion groups on social media and email listservs, and create websites to host online exhibitions and publishing projects.<sup>152</sup> Many of these artists display their work and inspirations in Tumblr blogs, and contribute to feminist collectives and zines, such as Bunny Collective, The Coven, SALT, Illuminati Girl Gang and Girls Get Busy.<sup>153</sup> Amalia Ulman is associated with the gallery and research and publishing project Arcadia Missa, run by Rozsa Farkas and Tom Clark.<sup>154</sup> Online collectives and networks such as these offer a democratic alternative to the hierarchies of the established art world. As discussed by Kathryn O’Regan and Jennifer Chan (following Linda Nochlin), the art world, like the mainstream internet, is a notorious ‘boys club’ where work by female artists is often overlooked, undermined and described in reductive essentialist terms.<sup>155</sup>

Digifeminist artists employ a variety of digital mediums, such as video, photography, animations and online performances, but frequently uses the selfie as their main tool for

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<sup>147</sup> Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." 181

<sup>148</sup> Washko, "From Webcams to Wikipedia ". 45

<sup>149</sup> Washko, "Out of the Kitchen". 3

<sup>150</sup> Ibid. 4

<sup>151</sup> Washko, "From Webcams to Wikipedia ". 45

<sup>152</sup> Washko, "Out of the Kitchen". 3

<sup>153</sup> O’Regan, "Category: Feminism".

<sup>154</sup> Petty, Felix, "Arcadia Missa," published 01.05.18 *Dazed* (2013), <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/16088/1/arcadia-missa> (accessed 22.11.2018)

<sup>155</sup> O’Regan, "Category: Feminism". Chan, "Why Are There No Great Women Net Artists? Vague Histories of Female Contribution According to Video and Internet Art".

dispersing the feminine image into networked spaces.<sup>156</sup> They are less concerned with the form and specificity of media, their feminine aesthetics distributed in many forms and networks, such as on Twitter, Instagram, vlogs and in gifs, and their artworks often perform across multiple platforms.<sup>157</sup> Rather, these artists concern themselves with the sharing and examining of contemporary expressions of feminine selfhood.<sup>158</sup> Whilst cyberfeminism, echoing postmodernism, considers the fragmentation of identity, digifeminism embraces this fragmentation by fusing the physical and virtual. Digifeminist artists alternatively interrogate and embrace the impact of digital technologies on the female subject, but they are not striving for the digital disembodiment romanticized by the cyberfeminists. Instead, the feminine body is very much present in the works of many of these artists. They use their own bodies to critique and engage with online cultures of sexual objectification and misogynistic trolling, and consider social media to be the primary context for such investigations, as a platform for art, activism and sexual expression, and as a site that facilitates the appropriation and abuse of images.<sup>159</sup>

Social media is centered around the production and presentation of the self through user profiles, a self constructed through images, name, gender, age, location, and other identifiers. This suggests that there is a particular emphasis on authenticity in social media networks, that it is important to show whose body is present.<sup>160</sup> Some digifeminist artists, such as Jesse Darling, Leah Shrager, Andrea Crespo and Bunny Rogers, work against this emphasis, using a strategy of self-representation based on concealment, in which the representation of the body is deferred and interrupted. Others, such as Amalia Ulman, Audrey Wollen, Petra Collins and Molly Soda, use a strategy of exposure. This latter group, who all create selfie-style artworks, subscribe to the notion that self-representation and therefore, social recognition, can be achieved through online visibility.

As noted by artist and curator Jennifer Chan, this kind of self-exposure involves a certain amount of bravery, because the threatening possibility that the images “could be decontextualized and aggregated for entertainment or ridicule produces an invariable amount of anxiety for any woman who chooses to show her face and body online”.<sup>161</sup> This possibility

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<sup>156</sup> Geurts, "Digi-Feminism".

<sup>157</sup> Walsh, "From Performing Resistance." 19, Farkas, "Immanence after Networks." 94

<sup>158</sup> Walsh, "From Performing Resistance."

<sup>159</sup> Fateman, Johanna, "Women on the Verge: Art, Feminism, and Social Media," Article, published 01.04.2015 *Artforum*, no. April (2015), <https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/johanna-fateman-on-art-feminism-and-social-media/1296> (accessed 12.10.2017) 2

<sup>160</sup> Farkas, "Whose Bodies 2".

<sup>161</sup> Fateman, "Women on the Verge: Art, Feminism, and Social Media".

was explored by Ann Hirsch, who performed feminine tropes of self-obsession and narcissism in her work *The Scandalishious Project* (2008–2009) (Figure 2). The performance was a parody of the young, attention-seeking ‘camwhore’ stereotype, and was carried out on a YouTube profile called “Scandalishious” where Hirsch danced seductively and vlogged from her bedroom.<sup>162</sup> Hirsch had observed that in women’s self-representations on video platforms, being sexy and serious seemed to be incompatible: “Women did not show their faces if they posted provocative clips of their bodies, and if they wanted their monologues to be taken seriously, they did not present themselves sexually.”<sup>163</sup> Her observation captures the self-censorship women engage in when presenting themselves in online environments, and speaks to the gender norms and hostility that circulates within these spaces. “Once you show yourself as sexual you immediately open yourself to trolling and harassment,” she said.<sup>164</sup> The aim of the work was to disrupt the norms that govern women’s self-representations by being both serious and sexy, in order to make room for more complex forms of female self-representation online.<sup>165</sup> Playing with tropes of both feminine and feminist identities in the same online persona, Hirsch complicates this dichotomy. As has been noted, feminine and feminist aesthetics have been conceptualized as antithetical, but artists such as Hirsch and Ulman use the tension between these positions to interrogate gendered representational conventions that are based on an essentialist notion of femininity as affective and corporeal.<sup>166</sup>

By making visible the sexual, feminine body in gendered digital space, these artists are in many ways picking up where the cyberfeminists left off. But these spaces have changed dramatically since the early internet, and imagery of the female body is now ubiquitous online. The development and proliferation of the technology that enabled the production and circulation of images and videos online is one that goes hand-in-hand with the development of the industry of pornography, and this has created a vast economy of images that present the sexual feminine body as an object for consumption.<sup>167</sup> Hirsch has asserted

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<sup>162</sup> Chan, "Why Are There No Great Women Net Artists? Vague Histories of Female Contribution According to Video and Internet Art".

<sup>163</sup> Fateman, "Women on the Verge: Art, Feminism, and Social Media".

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Farkas, Rózsa Zita, "Feminine//Feminist: Feminine Aesthetic as Feminist Aesthetic: Incorporation of the ‘Affective’ Sensibility," in *Dry Wipe*, ed. Nottingham Contemporary (www.sleepingupright.com: Nottingham Contemporary, 2013).

<sup>167</sup> Kinsey, CEC, "Skins\Screens\Circuits: How Technology Remade the Body" (Doctoral thesis, UCL (University College London), 2012), Retrieved from <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1354502/>. 26

that “whenever you put your body online, in some way you are in conversation with porn.”<sup>168</sup> What she means is that the ever-looming presence of pornography online has established a visual culture that colonizes the female image and works to counteract any dissent or difference within self-representations of the sexual feminine body, and reintegrates them into the image of the female body as fantasy. There is thus great risk involved in posting a self-image online, for artistic purposes or otherwise, because this means entering it into an economy of images, gender stereotypes and conventions where images circulate freely beyond control, exposing the subject to the commodification, sexism, symbolic violence, and real dangers this environment facilitates.<sup>169</sup> But in works such as *Excellences & Perfections*, artists are submitting themselves to this exposure, investigating and grappling with what it means to have and represent a body in a contemporary digital society marked by gender inequalities.<sup>170</sup>

While cyberfeminists used the feminine body to disrupt and provoke, the work of the digifeminist artists appears more complacent. Instead of using strategies of parody and irony, they use a strategy of what Maria Walsh has called ‘immersive mimicry’, performing codes of heteronormative femininity in their ‘natural’ environment.<sup>171</sup> They are playing along with the codes and conventions that structure these spaces rather than resisting them, creating ambiguous performances that often are hard to tell apart from the real thing. This is the case with *Excellences & Perfections*, which was received by its real-time audience as an authentic performance of lived experience. Ulman’s performance is embedded in the culture it portrays, and unlike the cyberfeminists who maintained a critical distance between text and context through strategies of resistance and irony, the work attempts to open up a new critical space from within the context. This is a central matter that will be discussed in the following chapters.

This chapter has established that digital spaces are not neutral spaces, and can serve to both neutralize and aggregate feminist critique. Dispersing feminine self-images into these environments also means dispersing them into their networks of cultural and social meanings and codes, which can inscribe the images with new meanings and violently transform them.

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<sup>168</sup> Chan, Jennifer et al., "Becoming Camwhore, Becoming Pizza," Article, published 08.11.2012 *Mute Magazine* (2012), <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/becoming-camwhore-becoming-pizza> (accessed 26.11.2017)

<sup>169</sup> Fateman, "Women on the Verge: Art, Feminism, and Social Media".8

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Walsh, "From Performing Resistance." 26

While this chapter has explored how digital space is structured by gender, there are other ideological frameworks at work in the architecture of social media platforms. The following chapters will explore how these platforms in general, and Instagram in particular, are governed by the logics of neoliberalism, and the politics of postfeminism.



### 3 The Young Girl and Digital Labor

As discussed in the previous chapter, Amalia Ulman is associated with the wave of digifeminist artists who explore issues of feminine self-representation online, interrogating the sexism and feminine stereotypes that thrive in networked online spaces by materializing their own feminine bodies in those very spaces. Their artworks perform feminine identity across digital platforms in the same environment and manner as other users, and are thus enmeshed with the preexisting circulations of femininity within these networks. However, by embedding themselves in the online cultures of visibility they seek to critique, they are also entangled with the ideological frameworks and commercial forces that govern these spaces.

This chapter is an analysis of the first episode of *Excellences & Perfections*, and will explore the connection between femininity, consumer culture and social media through the ‘cute girl’ character Ulman portrays in this episode. The character and aesthetic of the episode is described in the beginning of the chapter, and is then related to the context of ‘selfie culture’ and the perceived link between the selfie and feminine narcissism. This will allow me to discuss how the image of the young woman is raised as a symbolic figure for cultural anxieties. Introducing Tiqqun’s theory of the Young-Girl, I discuss how consumerism is associated with femininity, and how this connection can be traced in Ulman’s selfies. I will then outline the concepts of late capitalism and neoliberalism in order to understand the basis for Tiqqun’s critical argument, and its gendered implications. Using this framework, I will explore how the identities and experiences of female social media users are shaped by the struggles and anxieties of self-representation and lived reality in contemporary society, and how Ulman’s performance registers the impact of neoliberal ideology on feminine self-expression. By analyzing how the character of the ‘cute girl’ articulates the affective attachments to neoliberal ideals that operate as orienting forces within Instagram cultures, I will argue that this episode serves to highlight various forms of affective and immaterial labor involved in feminine self-production. This will lead me to discuss Ulman’s involvement in and complicity with the neoliberal logics of self-branding, and how this plays into the work.

The aim of this chapter is to provide an understanding of the connection between neoliberal ideology, femininity and affective labor, and how this labor and its product, the feminine image, is commodified and objectified for symbolic and economic purposes.

### 3.1 The Cute Girl and the Selfie

In the first episode of *Excellences & Perfections*, we encounter a version of Amalia who is a fresh-faced and cheerful aspiring model, posting Lolita-esque mirror selfies and a stream of pastel-tone images of desserts and cute animals (Figure 3). This first episode is color-coded in a fairly uniform scheme of pink, cream and white, hues that implicitly establish her as girly and young. For this trope, which she refers to as the ‘cute girl’, Ulman appropriates signifiers of teen-girl cuteness. Ulman describes her aesthetic in the following way:

*“For the first episode, I’d go for cute, pink, grunge, blonde, LA tumblr girl, the indie girl who has only read JD Salinger, the American Apparel model, pastel colors, pink nipples, and rabbits. Cats, pale models, kawaii, violence, flowers, bondage, bruises.”*<sup>172</sup>

The ‘cute girl’ trope established Ulman as an aspiring artist and model, who presents herself and her aesthetic taste through the careful curation of objects and images and colors. Her Instagram gallery reads more like a fashion mood board than a personal photo album, and is typical of the aesthetic of the highly curated online presence of fashion and lifestyle bloggers and micro-celebrities. In their self-representations on social media, they are not simply documenting experiences from their daily life or registering their authentic self in the network, they are carefully constructing how they want to be seen, producing the life they want to live and the image they want to live up to. In this sense, Ulman is exploring the methods and techniques with which we shape our own identities by performing something we want to be a part of or represent to others.

At the Rhizome “Do You Follow?” panel presentation Ulman explained that she chose to open her performance with this aesthetic because it was close to her own personal taste, and therefore would not appear as a sudden change that could raise suspicion.<sup>173</sup> She also disclosed that she wanted to appropriate the aesthetic style that she perceived to be the “most popular IT-girl trend on Instagram”<sup>174</sup>, because her strategy was to rely on narratives seen online before. Analyzing the aesthetic qualities of popular accounts, she used this content to inform her own constructed performance: “I guess out of their daily selfies, I wrote a story in pictures.”<sup>175</sup> Selfies are a central part of *Excellences & Perfections*, especially in the first episode. The term ‘selfie’, defined as “a photograph that one has taken of oneself,

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<sup>172</sup> Black, Shields, and Ulman, "Do You Follow?".

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media”, was officially recognized in 2013, the year before the performance of *Excellences & Perfections*, when it was named Oxford Dictionary’s word of the year.<sup>176</sup> Out of the 187 posts that make up Ulman’s performance, 83 can be described as selfies. In some of them, the photograph is taken at a distance with the help of an assistant or a camera timer-function rather than by her own hand, but they can be considered selfies because they are designed, composed and produced by Ulman in order to represent herself. However, the performance largely features conventional types of selfies, and the most recurring types are the mirror selfie, where Ulman photographs her reflection in a mirror, and the front-facing selfie, produced with the front-facing camera of her smartphone (Figure 4).

The front-facing camera was introduced with the release of the iPhone 4 in 2010, which coincided with the launch of Instagram. This new feature revolutionized self-imaging practices on social media, and contributed significantly to the rise of so called ‘selfie culture’, in which the selfie has become so ubiquitous as a means of self-expression that it has generated a new visual language. When taking selfies with the front-facing camera, users simultaneously see the camera’s view of themselves on the screen of the device, allowing them to immediately adjust their posture, expression and angles in order to capture the most flattering image of themselves. In this way, the front-facing selfie, like the mirror selfie, captures the subject in the act of gazing at their own reflection. In the first episode, Ulman’s front-facing selfies present multiple flattering images of her face as she reclines on unmade beds in moments that could have felt intimate and personal, were it not for the just barely detectable tension in her face and posture that betrays that she is holding a carefully controlled pose for the camera (Figure 5).

In many ways, the selfie can be considered a recent development in a long tradition of female self-portraiture, and Ulman’s performance has indeed been discussed and exhibited alongside female artists such as Cindy Sherman who work with performative self-portraiture to explore issues of female identity.<sup>177</sup> At the same time, the selfie is in a sense more complex than conventional mediums used to capture the female image. By appropriating the selfie, Ulman is not only engaging with its representational conventions, she is also appropriating selfie culture, where the gesture of selfie-taking is widely associated with stereotypes of feminine vanity and self-obsession.

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<sup>176</sup> "Word of the Year 2013," Oxford Dictionaries, 2013 <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2013>. (accessed 24.11.2018)

<sup>177</sup> Caplan-Bricker, "The Instagram Hoax".

As noted by Derek Conrad Murray, selfie culture is frequently discussed as a negative development in which the so-called millennial generation has become “subsumed within a troubling consumerist fixation with the superficiality of self-imaging and the cult of personality.”<sup>178</sup> These critiques are mostly focused on the self-imaging practices of young women, and frame selfies as expressions of their self-obsession, vacuity and insecurity.<sup>179</sup> Such characterizations frequently dip into discourses of pathology, linking selfies to narcissism, body dysmorphia, depression and compulsion.<sup>180</sup> Murray suggests that the steady stream of articles condemning the selfie-taking practices of young women, while at the same time keeping the selfie as a term on the table and thereby grounding it into the cultural consciousness, indicates that the selfie serves a unifying purpose; it provides “a type of ideological scapegoating that synthesizes a range of fears about technology’s creeping infectiousness into a legible subjectivity: a new Otherness designed to absorb our judgment and condemnation.”<sup>181</sup> This subjectivity is personified in the superficial, narcissistic young girl, she becomes the symbol of all the dangers that new digital technologies are believed to pose. The fear of technologies colonizing every aspect of modern life and turning everyone into screen-absorbed zombies manifests as a contempt for the iPhone-wielding youth who appear to have failed at resisting this colonization. As blogger Sara Gram points out in her influential essay “The Young-Girl and the Selfie” (2013), this contempt is also gendered: “it is disgust for bodies whose worth is determined not by those who inhabit them, but by those who look at them. It is disgust for bodies that run in emulation, whose primary labour is dedicated to looking a particular way rather than making a particular thing.”<sup>182</sup> In other words, the young female is the perfect foil for society’s anxieties about modern life, because she is seen as having succumbed to the narcissistic pursuits of producing the self as appearance, as image, that life with digital media entails. In this way, the feminine subject of selfie culture is erected as a symbolic figure, a cipher, that aligns with another the symbolic figure of the Young-Girl.

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<sup>178</sup> Murray, Derek Conrad, "Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media," Article, published 07.07.2015 *Consumption Markets & Culture* (2015), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10253866.2015.1052967> (accessed 23.11.18) And

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Gram, Sarah, "The Young-Girl and the Selfie," Essay, published 01.03.2013 *Textual Relations* (2013), <http://text-relations.blogspot.no/2013/03/the-young-girl-and-selfie.html> (accessed 15.08.2017)

### 3.2 Tiqqun and the Young-Girl

Where the feminine subject of selfie culture functions as a foil for the anxieties about digital technologies, the Young-Girl is a foil for the anxieties about consumer culture and the commodification of identity under late capitalism. The figure of the Young-Girl is originally introduced by the French philosophical collective Tiqqun in their manifesto-like text *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young Girl* (1999).<sup>183</sup> The text reads as both a parody and a direct manifestation of the misogyny within a culture that idolizes youth and feminine beauty, but simultaneously condemns those who embody these characteristics – young women.<sup>184</sup> The Young-Girl is more a general figure than a description of any particular person, and is conceptualized as the model citizen of consumer capitalism.<sup>185</sup> Tiqqun argue that contemporary capitalism has created mindless consumers, a society obsessed with buying things, and the Young-Girl is envisioned as the orienting ideal of this society, the perfect consumer.<sup>186</sup>

The text is written in a fragmentary form, with short statements and descriptions that together form an image of the Young-Girl, an image of a familiar feminine stereotype that is widely circulated in popular culture, the superficial young woman obsessed with shopping and her appearance. The fragmentary style also mirrors the way the Young-Girl produces her identity, her image is a collage made of advertisements and images torn from glossy magazines, and as she is void of any personality, she “resembles her photo.”<sup>187</sup> Described as vain, vapid and image-driven, Tiqqun’s characterizations of the Young-Girl mirror the accusations of narcissism leveled at the subjects of selfie-culture: “The Young-Girl suddenly feels dizzy when the world stops revolving around her”<sup>188</sup> and “The Young-Girl desires the Young-Girl.”<sup>189</sup>

As if to illustrate Tiqqun’s point, the ‘cute girl’ is defined by her youth and her femininity, and her character is articulated through her consumption of, and desire for, products. Tiqqun write that “The Young-Girl relates to herself like she does to all the

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<sup>183</sup> Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, trans. Ariana Reines (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012).

<sup>184</sup> Powers, Nina, "She's Just Not That into You," Review, published January 2013 *Radical Philosophy* (2013), <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/reviews/individual-reviews/rp177-shes-just-not-that-into-you> (accessed 15.08.2017)

<sup>185</sup> Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials*. iii

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.* iii

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.* 7

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.* 4

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.* 15

commodities she surrounds herself with”, and this is also descriptive of Ulman’s character.<sup>190</sup> In her selfies, the ‘cute girl’ frequently poses with her newest purchase, whether it is new clothes, new lingerie, a new manicure, sunglasses, shoes, food or haircut. A headless mirror selfie (Figure 5) of what is ostensibly Ulman in a long pink wig, pink bralette and white legwarmers sitting with legs spread apart and a pink stuffed bunny covering her crotch is captioned “Wat i bought today n\_n n wat about the pink wig yay or nai???”.<sup>191</sup> Although her pose is sexually suggestive and alludes to the visual rhetoric of pornography, the baby pink outfit and the stuffed toy counteracts the vulgarity of the image with a childlike innocence, evoking a Lolita-esque aesthetic of feminine cuteness and burgeoning sexuality. The caption, on the other hand, relates the content of the image to her shopping rather than her sexuality, but the image presents both the fashion articles and her body as objects for consumption. Other images are posted to express her desire for certain products, such as expensive designer clothes: an appropriated fashion photograph of a model’s bust adorned with a powder pink bustier and a sparkling rhinestone necklace is posted with the caption “I want want want waaaaaant”.<sup>192</sup>

As with the images for each post, Ulman crafted her captions with content appropriated from other social media accounts and aligned them with the tone and aesthetic for each episode. For the first episode, her captions are ripe with the naive luminosity of Young-Girldom. Her selfies and imagery of private girl-worlds are combined with cute emoticons composed with text symbols: “。°.(\*♡´∩ 人 ˘ ∩ `♡\*)° 〇”), infantilizing commentary, “Haha so dumb didn’t know I was recording”, and kitschy girl-speak, “A rose can never be a sunflower, and a sunflower can never be a rose. All flowers are beautiful in their own way, and that’s like women too. [...]”.<sup>193</sup> Ulman also made extensive use of flower emojis and exclamation points, and deliberately misspells words with repetitions of letters to connote the vocal inflections of a youthful, upbeat and feminine personality. For example, a flower-adorned mirror selfie at a hair salon is posted with the comment: “@mjaormoonn thank u soooo much for the beautiful haaaaair!”.<sup>194</sup> The aesthetic of the ‘cute girl’ frames her

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ulman, Amalia, *Excellences & Perfections*, (2014). Available from a reconstruction of Amalia Ulman’s Instagram account by Rhizome Webenact. available from: <http://webenact.rhizome.org/excellences-and-perfections/20141014155217/http://instagram.com/amaliaulman> (accessed 06.12.18)

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

as a happy, self-absorbed shopaholic who is seduced by desire for commodities, and thus fits the image of the Young-Girl.

### 3.3 Late Capitalism and Neoliberalism

Despite being conceptualized as a feminine figure, the Young Girl, according to Tiqqun, is not a gendered concept.<sup>195</sup> They argue that consumer culture has turned everyone into Young-Girls, because every aspect of life has been colonized by capital. They see this as a result of the shift from “Fordist seduction, with its designated sites and moments, its static and proto-bourgeois couple-form, to post-Fordist seduction, diffuse, flexible, precarious and de-ritualized, which has extended the couple factory to the entire body and the whole of social time-space.”<sup>196</sup> In other words, a shift from a mode of production based on traditional industrial labor to one based largely on immaterial forms of labor performed in the service industry and the realms of management and technology, which has created a society that requires workers to be flexible, entrepreneurial and individual. This post-Fordist society is governed by the logics of neoliberalism, which can be defined as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade.”<sup>197</sup> Neoliberalism is also an ideology of the integration of this framework into all aspects of life, compelling individuals to self-regulate according to market principles of entrepreneurialism and competitiveness.<sup>198</sup> In a neoliberal post-Fordist society, everyone has been called upon to “self-valorize”, to turn themselves into “living currency” for capitalism.<sup>199</sup> Life has become completely colonized by capital, and every aspect of it, including social, private and personal life, has become a source of value, everyone has become a commodity.

The reason Tiqqun has chosen a feminine figure to represent this condition, is that they recognize that the spheres of youth and femininity have been the first to be commoditized by capital.<sup>200</sup> As females and youths historically have been exempted and excluded from the productive labor force, they have been made useful to capitalism by

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<sup>195</sup> Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials*. ii

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.* 68

<sup>197</sup> Harvey, David, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). 2

<sup>198</sup> Gill, Rosalind, "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 6 (2017). 608

<sup>199</sup> Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials*. V and 38

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.* iii

buying things, and have thus been targeted the most by the realm of advertising. According to Tiqqun, capitalism has put women and youth to work, their job is to consume and be seduced by commodities:

*“By investing youth and women with an absurd symbolic sur- plus value, by making them the exclusive bearers of the new esoteric knowledge proper to the new social organization—that of consumption and seduction—the Spectacle has thus freed the slaves of the past, but has freed them AS SLAVES.”*<sup>201</sup>

What Tiqqun mean is that as consumers, they are valuable to capitalism, but this job is a form of slavery, as consumption requires them to engage in labor that doesn't produce anything other than more consumption. As both youth and female, the Young-Girl is twice excluded from the sphere of productive labor, and prior to the event of consumer capitalism, her body could be read as the most useless to capitalism.<sup>202</sup> Now, she has been made useful, and her identity as the ideal consumer is performed by working on and through her body. The product of this labor is nothing but herself, she produces herself as a consumer, over and over again. Her job is never finished, as there are always new products and fashion trends to try, and she must relentlessly work at maintaining her desirability, because her body is her only commodity and it is her responsibility to maintain its value.<sup>203</sup> In this way, the Young-Girl can be read as the representation of the victims of capitalism, a symptom of a larger societal problem. However, she is also presented as the cause, she is a personification of neoliberal ideology, a figure for the power of capitalism.

While Tiqqun assert that the Young-Girl is not a gendered concept, the misogynistic tone of their descriptions of her seem to suggest otherwise. This was noted by many when the first printed English translation of *Preliminary Materials* was published by Semiotext(e) in 2012, and it received criticism for the gender choice for their ideal figure of capitalism.<sup>204</sup> As Maria Walsh points out, by arguing that submitting to the forces of consumer capitalism is to be made a girl, Tiqqun repeat earlier Marxist ideas that relate the sphere of production to masculinity and the sphere of consumption to femininity.<sup>205</sup> There have been numerous responses to the text, and many argue that the criticism of the symbolic and real Young-Girls with their shopping habits and vanity were aimed at the wrong target. In the words of Nina

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid. 2

<sup>202</sup> Gram, "The Young-Girl and the Selfie".

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Powers, "She's Just Not That into You". Black, Hannah, "Further Materials toward a Theory of the Hot Babe," 2013 <https://thenewinquiry.com/further-materials-toward-a-theory-of-the-hot-babe/>. (accessed 15.08.2017)

<sup>205</sup> Walsh, "From Performing Resistance."



Power, “Behind every Young-Girl’s arse hides a bunch of rich white men: the task is surely not, then, to destroy the Young-Girl, but to destroy the system that makes her. [...]”<sup>206</sup>

These critics make an important point about the sexism of Tiqqun’s text, and the harmful stereotypes it perpetuates by giving consumer capitalism a female face. The figure of the young woman seems to lend itself to appropriation and signification, and is invested with meaning which will then be identified as a fault. Like the critics of selfie culture, Tiqqun uses the general category of ‘young woman’ as a scapegoat for their anxieties about society. In both these instances, the feminine figure is presented as the cause, the effect and the problem itself, and she is blamed and condemned for her participation in a system she didn’t create and cannot control. However, to write it off entirely as sexism is to dismiss the critical point of the text; that there is a specific connection between the neoliberal ideology of consumer capitalism and femininity. It is through this connection that the feminine subjectivities portrayed in *Excellences & Perfections* can be understood.

### **3.4 Neoliberal Ideology in Instagram Cultures**

Tiqqun wrote their theory of Young-Girl at the turn of the millennium, and since then, the condition they described has become even more pronounced. According to Rosalind Gill, neoliberalism now has a firmer grip on society than ever before, and its ideas have been internalized as a form of “sense-making characterized by relentless individualism”, in which narratives of personal responsibility work to hide structural oppression and inequality by diverting liability away from the institutions of patriarchal capitalism and onto the individual.<sup>207</sup> As a result, women are encouraged to see themselves as individualized, entrepreneurial actors who are responsible for their own success and happiness, compelling them to monitor, regulate and work on the self.<sup>208</sup> The neoliberal ideology requires of women to regulate not only their body and self, but also their affective dispositions, compelling them to cultivate the ‘right’ attitude for success, such as aspiration, entrepreneurialism, confidence and positivity.<sup>209</sup> Digital technologies have further amplified these requirements, and the rapid proliferation of image-based social media apps such as Instagram have created a discourse in which women are encouraged to engage in self-surveillance and self-enterprising

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<sup>206</sup> Powers, "She’s Just Not That into You".

<sup>207</sup> Gill, "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On." 609

<sup>208</sup> Ibid. 609

<sup>209</sup> Ibid. 610

practices to construct their self-representation and perform femininity in accordance with neoliberal ideals. It is this discourse that is the context for *Excellences & Perfections*, it provides the stage, script, characters and audience for Ulman's performance.

The Instagram culture Ulman's performance engages with is part of what Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund refer to as a "proliferation of socially mediated cultures of creative production located in the traditionally feminine domains of fashion, beauty, parenting, and craft," in which women aspire to the image of feminine perfection and success, and engage in endless labor of self-fashioning and consumption to achieve this goal.<sup>210</sup> The tropes Ulman performs in *Excellences & Perfections* are all representative of this culture, not only because they are all recognizable as ubiquitous types within it, but also because they all reflect the affective attachments to neoliberal ideals by which it is engendered. In the case of the 'cute girl,' it is the fantasy of celebrity that drives her self-production, and she forms attachments to ideals of consumption, self-surveillance and entrepreneurialism, because these are the paths that have been promised to get her there. In this way, the 'cute girl' can be read as the embodiment of the site in which selfie culture and consumer culture intersects. The selfie is her main tool for performing the labor of producing her image, her self, so that she can become visible and desirable to others, and be validated and valorized. The selfie is thus an image of the self produced for the consumption of others. She is the narcissistic subject of selfie culture who is obsessed with cultivating her image, and she is the Young-Girl who produces herself as consumer and commodity, and mediates and circulates this ideal as a 'happy object'.

### **3.5 Consumption, Aspiration, Entrepreneurialism**

How do we read Ulman's selfies? Are they the images of a narcissist, a slave of capitalism, or a commodity? As described, the selfies of the 'cute girl' are used to express her consumption of and desire for products. In Instagram cultures, self-representation and the expression of identity is intimately tied to consumerism, and fueled by affective economies of desire. Desire is a cornerstone in the ideological framework of neoliberalism, because in order to be good consumers, people must want things. Desire orients subjects towards objects that pulls them into the future. For the 'cute girl', consumption is presented as a pleasurable activity through which her identity and subjectivity are articulated, a means to feel and look good,

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<sup>210</sup> Duffy, Brooke Erin and Hund, Emily, "'Having It All' on Social Media: Entrepreneurial Femininity and Self-Branding among Fashion Bloggers," *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 2 (2015). 1

which holds the promise of the good life by taking her one step closer to her ideal self. As Lauren Berlant writes, “when we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make possible for us”.<sup>211</sup> In this regard, the ‘cute girl’s’ selfies can be interpreted as a way of articulating her desire, an aspirational gesture of asserting her progress in the process of becoming her best self. At the same time, it is also the product of the labor she is performing to ensure that process – her labor of consuming and her labor of self-production.

The ideal self that the ‘cute girl’ aspires to and orients her consumption and self-production towards is the glamorous life of the Instagram model. It is a dream of fame and fortune, of being discovered, which would represent a validation of her image and desirability. As Ulman suggests: “The model fantasy is probably the most widespread contemporary dream shared by young women of all backgrounds. Being watched means coming to life and being someone.”<sup>212</sup> On Instagram, the model dream somehow seems more attainable. While modelling jobs in the fashion industry are inaccessible to most because of specific height and weight requirements and sizing standards, the modelling opportunities on Instagram are available to anyone, as long as they are desirable, popular and willing to promote their sponsors’ products - all of which can be acquired through the digital labor of what Tiquun calls “self-valorizing,” producing the self as value.<sup>213</sup> By labelling their images with location tags and hashtags that are trending or appeal to certain interests, users can increase the number of views on their posts, and attract a target audience. The accumulation of followers, likes and comments validates the image and confirms the success of their digital labor. Ulman experienced this success: “Only after one week of posted images of my new persona, the likes went up. Very soon I started receiving messages from men who wanted to [photograph] me. The very phallic camera lens. I even received an e-mail from a professional photographer in the line of Urban Outfitters and American Apparel. I accepted, and I modeled for an unpaid photoshoot.”<sup>214</sup> In this sense, the selfies of the ‘cute girl’ become a marketing tool, a way to promote herself and increase her desirability.

Ulman has revealed that her interest in the way feminine identities are performed on Instagram began with a questioning of her own self-representation online:

*“In December 2013, I was invited to participate in a talk on self-branding. The term nauseated me. Was I self-branding? My openness had become a commercial*

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<sup>211</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. 23

<sup>212</sup> Black, Shields, and Ulman, "Do You Follow?".

<sup>213</sup> Tiquun, *Preliminary Materials*. v

<sup>214</sup> Black, Shields, and Ulman, "Do You Follow?".

*strategy. No filter. I was unintentionally performing the stereotype of the artsy brunette [...] So if self-representation was an asset, if Facebook selfies overshadowed works of art themselves, I'd have to boycott myself to undermine the capitalist undertone of my online presence.*"<sup>215</sup>

Ulman's realization was that her online identity conformed to a feminine stereotype, and that the labor that went into producing and maintaining this identity could be likened to the commercial strategy of marketing a brand to increase revenue. In a neoliberal digital culture, self-representation on platforms such as Instagram increasingly requires the performance of such self-branding. This has been noted by Sarah Banet-Weiser, who observes that women's contemporary self-representation is informed by the commercial context of branding and advertising, and that women are increasingly encouraged to brand themselves through normative and hegemonic ideals of femininity.<sup>216</sup> Self-branding can thus be understood as an attachment to the neoliberal ideal of entrepreneurialism, which encourages subjects to relate to themselves as living currency that can be infinitely increased. An entrepreneur of her own image, the 'cute girl' is value and must forever continue to self-valorize.

Duffy and Hund have analyzed how fashion bloggers on Instagram articulate a form of what they call an "entrepreneurial femininity" in which the role of consumerism is depicted as a form of work that women should perform, while obscuring the labor, discipline and capital that goes into obtaining and maintaining the self-brand.<sup>217</sup> The self-brand cultivated and regulated by Instagram bloggers is constructed through the display of their bodies, narratives of authenticity, and performing affect, which relies upon their emotional labor.<sup>218</sup> Following Hochschild, they define emotional labor as the work of inducing or suppressing emotions in order to sustain the outward facade for the sake of others' feelings.<sup>219</sup> The upbeat, cheerful disposition of the 'cute girl' is an example of this kind of labor, she regulates her affects in order to present the neoliberal ideal of positivity, and mask the burden of her continuous labor. Emotional labor, as a form of affective labor, is deeply gendered, as it is "part of a long history of 'women's work' comprising activities that are undervalued and unpaid - despite their central role in maintaining the capitalist circuit of

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Banet-Weiser, Sarah, *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2012). 66

<sup>217</sup> Duffy and Hund, "'Having It All' on Social Media: Entrepreneurial Femininity and Self-Branding among Fashion Bloggers." 2

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.3

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.3

production.”<sup>220</sup> This connection between gendered emotional labor and the capital circuit plays out in Ulman’s selfies. Many of the products in her selfies are presented as commercial gifts, and she tags the sponsors’ brands in the captions: “So happy i received this set from #PeachJohn”, “Wearing the PRETTY PLEASE tshirt in retro print from @momotrapots ^•^”.<sup>221</sup> For the ‘cute girl’, the gift represents endorsement of her self-brand, and tagging the company is public recognition of that endorsement. In their analysis, Duffy and Hund found that this form of tagging generated substantial feedback for the brand, and represents a widespread marketing strategy of harnessing the data of female consumer audiences.<sup>222</sup>

Posting selfies and creating content for social media can thus be understood as a highly performative enterprise, but also as process of self-valorizing that involves several kinds of continuous affective and immaterial labor. However, users are not only self-valorizing for their own benefit. Their labor value is converted into literal capital as their images, preferences, patterns, and relations are transformed into data by social media companies and sold to marketing companies, who then can offer them algorithmically constituted recommendations of what they should view, what they should buy, what they should do, who they should be.<sup>223</sup> The consumer is made into a commodity for the corporations, and the self is constituted as something the user can *be* and consume as a commodity.<sup>224</sup>

### 3.6 Ulman as Brand

Tiqqun writes that “In the Spectacle, the Young-Girl is, like woman was in the primitive world, an object of Advertising. But the Young-Girl is, furthermore, a subject of Advertising, who buys and sells herself.”<sup>225</sup> In *Excellences & Perfections*, Ulman engages with both the optimism of the aspiring artist/model who presents her image on social media in the hopes of being discovered, and the cynicism of strategically building a self-brand to attract sponsors and generate income. She is thus both the object and the subject of her advertising. By emulating the stereotypical ‘cute girl’ aspiring to become a model, Ulman’s performance

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid. 3

<sup>221</sup> Ulman, *Excellences & Perfections*.

<sup>222</sup> Duffy and Hund, ““Having It All” on Social Media: Entrepreneurial Femininity and Self-Branding among Fashion Bloggers.” 6

<sup>223</sup> Horning, Rob, “Notes on the “Data Self”,” Essay, published 02.02.2012 (2012), <https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/dumb-bullshit/> (accessed 15.08.2017)

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Farkas, “Feminine//Feminist: Feminine Aesthetic as Feminist Aesthetic: Incorporation of the ‘Affective’ Sensibility.”

could read as a bleak critique of the way real women on Instagram manipulate their online identity to become more like the popular stereotypes in order to increase their visibility. But the performance has a message beyond simple verisimilitude. *Excellences & Perfections* is less about capturing the identity of a certain kind of girl, and more about the way online identity has been reduced to generic templates that the user has to work to reproduce. In her critique, Ulman is not targeting the desire for visibility or the women who fall within the stereotypes. She is becoming one of them, becoming Young-Girl.

While Ulman has stated that her project was motivated by the idea of “faking it until you make it”,<sup>226</sup> the point is not simply to trick her audience. Rather, the performance is a commentary on the idea of ‘playing the game’ in order to climb the social and economic ladder, the entrepreneurial and aspirational ideal of neoliberalism. Her body, presented in the image, became an object to be marketed and improved, as a vessel that could transport her to the good life through the avenues of self-improvement, self-branding and consumption.

Catering to popular tastes and trends, Ulman’s Instagram account gained visibility and attracted a larger audience, and in this way demonstrated an ability to create an authentic identity that was appealing and engaging as a brand. It could be argued that by strategically marketing her online persona, and by extension her performance, Ulman was complicit in the culture of self-branding she wanted to distance herself from. While she expressed a desire to “boycott” herself to prevent further self-branding, the performance served to catapult her to art world fame, and successfully build her brand as artist. Rather than ascribing this to hypocrisy or insincerity on her part, the complicity in self-branding should be taken as indicative of the neoliberal demand of subjects, including artists, to self-brand and self-enterprise in order to have career success. In many ways, this cuts to the crux of the performance; participation in neoliberal logics of self-branding reinforces capitalist consumer ideals, but there is no other option. Refusing to participate means invisibility. As Sarah Gram writes, the Young-Girl must maintain the femininity of her body, her commodity, as it is her “ticket of entry into the world of consumer capitalism (outside of which she is not only useless but also illegible)”.<sup>227</sup> Engaging in the labor of maintaining its desirability and femininity is thus her only option for survival in contemporary neoliberal society.

In this way, we can consider how the ‘cute girl’s’ selfie represents the way in which she is objectified and commodified through her image. As a consumer made useful for buying things, as the product of her self-brand, as data to sell to marketing companies, and as

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<sup>226</sup> Smith, "Fake It until You Make It". 6.

<sup>227</sup> Ulman, *Excellences & Perfections*; Gram, "The Young-Girl and the Selfie".

a figure to serve as example and trap. But if we are to see her as a mere victim of capital whose image has been hijacked for symbolic and capitalist purposes, doesn't that deprive her of her agency and evacuate her image of any signifying potential beyond the meaning invested in it by others? Her image and identity is expressed in the selfie, the selfie is the product of her labor – but importantly, it is also the documentation of that labor so that it can be recognized and validated.

In this chapter, I have explored how the first episode of *Excellences & Perfections* critically examines the conditions for feminine self-expression on social media, and how the 'cute girl' trope relates to selfie-culture and the figure of the Young-Girl. I discussed how the Young-Girl is a feminine personification of capitalism – but also the personification of a culture that demands participation in femininity of women and then scrutinizes them for it. By performing a character that embodies this feminine trope, Ulman is calling attention to the affective and immaterial forms of labor that goes into maintaining acceptable feminine visibility on social media. I have argued that feminine ideals are influenced by neoliberal ideology, but also by the symbolic uses of the figure of the young woman in pedagogical stories that warn against the threats of contemporary society.

In the next chapter I will investigate how feminism comes into play in this context, both in the form of postfeminist articulations of empowerment and as critical resistance to neoliberal ideals of femininity through affect.

## 4 The Postfeminist and Cruel Optimism

This chapter is an analysis of the second episode of *Excellences & Perfections*, and provides a reading of this narrative as a presentation of, and critical commentary on, postfeminist femininity. The progression from the first to the second episode of *Excellences & Perfections* is marked by a significant shift in visual aesthetic, affective expression, and overall tone. Ulman's character morphs into a new persona, the 'sugar baby', which enacts a different feminine trope than the previous episode. After an introductory description of this trope and aesthetic, this chapter presents the term 'postfeminism,' which can be understood as a sensibility that characterizes cultural representations of women in contemporary neoliberal society. Outlining the ideologies and representational framework of postfeminism, I identify practices and affective orientations embodied in the 'sugar baby' that can be read as an attachment to the feminine ideals of postfeminism. Relying on Sara Ahmed's theorization of happiness and Lauren Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism', I analyze how this attachment becomes unsustainable and detrimental to Ulman's persona, and that this is the reason for her breakdown. This breakdown, which is the dramatic climax of the plot in *Excellences & Perfections*, has previously been attributed to the character's drug use, but I argue that it can be read as a traumatic loss of the fantasy, an alienation from the postfeminist ideology that has been the orienting force in her life. To make this point, I draw on Berlant's notion of the 'impasse', Ahmed's concept of the 'affect alien' and artist Audrey Wollen's theory of the 'Sad Girl', and I propose that this affective disorientation from postfeminist ideology creates a possibility for criticality.

The aim of this chapter is first of all, to show how this episode of *Excellences & Perfections* highlights the cruel optimism of postfeminist ideology, as well as the embodied pain and labor that attachments to these ideals entail, and thus acknowledges the lived reality of the many women who aspire to them. Second, it provides an account of the negative reactions Ulman's character received from her audience, which is not merely a representation of, but a true instance of the hostility that many women are subjected to online, which was discussed in chapter two. Third, this chapter proposes a new reading of the breakdown-narrative that locates a possible site of feminist resistance within femininity.



## 4.1 The Sugar Baby

Self-representations of the sexualized female body is a constant throughout *Excellences & Perfections*. However, this is especially prominent in the second episode as Ulman becomes the ‘sugar baby’, exploring a pastiche of the American celebrity archetype that projects an image of a strong, supposedly more empowered and aggressive persona (Figure 6). This aesthetic emulates the kind of femininity embodied by Kim Kardashian, the celebrity with the most followers (22.2 million) on Instagram in 2014,<sup>228</sup> whose fame is largely produced through aesthetic labor and marketing of her body. The ‘sugar baby’ expresses a different feminine aesthetic than the ‘cute girl’, and her femininity is configured as a bodily quality rather than an aesthetic, social or psychological one. Beyond this aesthetic shift, the transition into the second episode also entails a significant change in the feminine ideals performed through the female body. Compared to the coy, Lolita-like poses of the previous episode, the ‘sugar baby’ has a more overtly provocative and porn-inspired projection. Her body appears in various body-centric poses, in videos while dancing suggestively, and in close-up images showing isolated abstractions of sexualized body parts. Whereas the ‘cute girl’ is represented through a body inscribed by ideals of burgeoning sexuality, delicacy and youthfulness, the body of the ‘sugar baby’ expresses self-confidence, sexual assertiveness and liberated sexuality. The desirable, hypersexualized body is now represented as her key source of identity. (Figure 7)

The hypersexual images of the ‘sugar babe’ can be read as acts of self-objectification and as referencing the aesthetic of pornography, reducing her to a commodified and objectified body colonized by male desire. Simultaneously, she asserts her subjectivity and claims ownership of her image by adopting a stance of feminine empowerment and emancipation. This can be seen in the way Ulman uses captions and hashtags to articulate empowered individuality in her posts, such as “#bossbitch”, “I might not be the nicest. But i’m real and dont give a fuck about standing alone”, “#got #em #cakes dun care bout all ur negativity”, ”U see thers leaders n followers, n i rather b a dick than a swallower” and ”fun date idea: go down on me while I shop online with ur credit card see how many things I can buy before u make me cum literally this”<sup>229</sup> Ulman appropriated these statements from the

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<sup>228</sup> Duboff, Josh, "Which Celebrity Has the Most Followers after the “Instagram Rapture”?,“ Article, published 19.12.2014 *Vanity Fair*, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2014/12/instagram-purge-justin-bieber-kim-kardashian> (accessed 29.10.2018)

<sup>229</sup> Ulman, *Excellences & Perfections.*, Black, Shields, and Ulman, "Do You Follow?".

blogs of real sugar babies,<sup>230</sup> in order to highlight how such notions of empowerment are deeply problematic, referring to them as “faux-feminist.”<sup>231</sup> Presenting herself as empowered and in control of her own image, while still conforming to patriarchal sexualized ideals, the ‘sugar baby’ articulates a form of femininity that draws upon the logic of postfeminism.

## 4.2 Postfeminism and Feminine (dis)Empowerment

The term postfeminism does not refer to a specific movement, but rather to a set of conflicting discourses about femininity and feminism situated within the context of contemporary consumer culture and neoliberalism.<sup>232</sup> Postfeminism has been theorized in many ways - as a backlash against or break from second-wave feminism, a historical shift towards the third wave, and as a sensibility that characterizes popular culture which enforces neoliberal ideals of femininity.<sup>233</sup> In *Interrogating Postfeminism* (2007), Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra explain that postfeminism appeared as a buzzword in the 1990s as popular culture and began to increasingly address women as both consumers and subjects.<sup>234</sup> In their definition of postfeminism, it is “inherently contradictory, characterized by a double discourse that works to construct feminism as a phenomenon of the past, [...] postfeminism suggests that it is the very success of feminism that produces its irrelevance for contemporary culture.”<sup>235</sup> Angela McRobbie similarly suggests that postfeminism can be understood as a “double entanglement”, as it “comprises the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life [...] with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations.”<sup>236</sup> Central to postfeminism, following these accounts, is the assumption that feminism has achieved its goals of liberating and empowering women and thus is no longer needed, accompanied by a celebration of

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<sup>230</sup> ‘Sugar baby’ is a colloquial term that refers to a person who is financially supported by one or multiple ‘sugar daddies’ (male clients), where an intimate relationship is exchanged for monetary value.

<sup>231</sup> Black, Shields, and Ulman, "Do You Follow?"

<sup>232</sup> Gill, Rosalind, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility," *European journal of cultural studies* 10, no. 2 (2007). 148

<sup>233</sup> Ibid. McRobbie, Angela, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture," *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 3 (2004). Tasker, Yvonne and Negra, Diane, "Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture," in *Interrogating Postfeminism*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>234</sup> Tasker and Negra, "Introduction." 8

<sup>235</sup> Ibid. 8

<sup>236</sup> McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture." 255-56

empowered femininity, in which women are constructed as free to shape their own destiny.<sup>237</sup> Although postfeminist discourse is characterized by its emphasis on women's independence, individual choice and empowerment, it also emphasizes that these liberties require ongoing self-monitoring and self-disciplining labor, and are only accessible through the construction of a self that conforms to heteronormative expectations of femininity in which a woman's value is determined by her ability to maintain her desirability.<sup>238</sup> In other words, the postfeminist subject is free to pursue sexual adventures and career aspirations, but is expected to balance this with maintaining her feminine image, and the true measure of her success is her ability to produce herself as a desirable subject. The "double entanglement" of feminist and anti-feminist ideology represents a central paradox within postfeminism, and produces conflicted subjectivities that engage with both 'feminine' and 'feminist' aesthetics and discourse.

According to Rosalind Gill, postfeminism is best understood as a specific sensibility that characterizes cultural life, which is marked by a number of interrelated themes.<sup>239</sup> These include an intense focus on the body as the site of femininity, specifically the transformation and monitoring of the body, an emphasis on empowerment and choice, sexual subjectification and self-objectification, as well as personal empowerment through intensified consumption.<sup>240</sup> These themes are most prominent in pop cultural artifacts from the 1990s and early 2000s, a time in which feminist politics became more visible in public discourse, and were more widely circulated across the landscape of popular culture.<sup>241</sup> Cultural products from this period, such as *Ally McBeal*, *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Sex and the City*, reflect a postfeminist sensibility in which consumption, self-fashioning, and sexual objectification are presented as sources of empowerment, and a rejection of engaged feminist politics and their condemnation of femininity. As noted by Tasker and Negra, postfeminist rhetoric frames feminism as negative and disagreeable, referring to it as "the F word", and postfeminism is constructed as the relief, as feminism's happy *Other*.<sup>242</sup> In this way, feminism was constructed as a socially undesirable subject position, which worked to deter women from engaging and identifying with feminist politics, which suggests that the postfeminist and neoliberal ideals of feminine individualism work to prevent collective action and social

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid. 255

<sup>238</sup> Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility." 153

<sup>239</sup> Ibid. 147

<sup>240</sup> Ibid. 149

<sup>241</sup> McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture." 256

<sup>242</sup> Ibid. 259

change.<sup>243</sup> Although popular culture has since embraced the term ‘feminism’, the ideologies of postfeminism still permeate contemporary media culture, albeit in slightly different forms. This is most visible in advertisements using feminist messages of empowerment and body-positivity to sell beauty products, in websites such as Pinterest which has become the shrine of new cults of domesticity, in fitness cultures focused on monitoring and improving the female body, and in the image-based social media platforms where women present themselves in hyper-sexualized images in the name of empowerment.

### 4.3 Self-improvement and Body Labor

A postfeminist sensibility understands femininity as a bodily display, and Gill identifies a shift in representational practice where the body becomes a defining feature of womanhood. She writes:

*“The body is presented simultaneously as women's source of power and as always already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodeling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever narrower judgments of female attractiveness.”<sup>244</sup>*

In the feminine aesthetics circulated on Instagram by Ulman and real Insta-girls, looking good and doing well, emotionally and otherwise, are one and the same. This is a pattern characteristic of postfeminism in which appearance and happiness are conflated.<sup>245</sup> In postfeminist culture, a woman’s body is read in psychological terms as a reflection of her interior life, an indicator of her success and happiness.<sup>246</sup> The successful performance of commodified beauty and self-confidence is taken as an expression of mental well-being or as a triumph over sadness.<sup>247</sup> As Alison Winch writes: “In the hypervisible landscape of popular culture the body is recognized as the object of a woman’s labour: it is her asset, her product, her brand and her gateway to freedom and empowerment in a neoliberal market economy.”<sup>248</sup> Investment in the body is thus regarded as a pathway to self-actualization, success and happiness, and this has fostered an aspirational culture of bodily self-improvement. In this way, the feminine aesthetic of a sexy, desirable body functions as a ‘happy object’ that orients the happiness of women toward body-focused labor and consumption: If I improve

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid. 260

<sup>244</sup> Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility." 149

<sup>245</sup> Ibid. 150

<sup>246</sup> Ibid. 150

<sup>247</sup> Ibid. 150-1

<sup>248</sup> Winch, Alison, "Brand Intimacy, Female Friendship and Digital Surveillance Networks," *New Formations* 84 (2015). 21

my looks, I will increase my value and live the good life. This ideology is especially pervasive in contemporary Instagram culture, as manifested in the abundance and popularity of content that falls within themes of ‘fitspiration’ (fitness, exercise, weight loss), ‘healthy living’ (diets, self care), fashion and beauty. Apart from the ‘healthy living’ theme, which is not taken up until the third episode of *Excellences & Perfections*, these aforementioned practices of self-monitoring and self-improvement are all adopted by the ‘sugar baby’. In this part of her performance, Ulman appropriates gestures common to online fitness communities, for example poses in which she lifts up the front of a shirt to reveal her abdomen (Figure 8). In Instagram cultures that are specifically devoted to fitness, it becomes particularly clear how neoliberal messages of self-monitoring and entrepreneurialism become intimately tied to the act of working on the body. Here, the body is conceived as a project to work on, and fitness is constructed as sexy and empowering, a ‘happy object’ that promises health, a lean, toned body, beauty, confidence and happiness through commitment and self-discipline. The optimism of bodily transformation through exercise is further emphasized in Ulman’s hashtags, such as #workout and #strongisthenewskinny, and in her captions: ”so so happy all the workouts r paying off, sersly #sweat is #gold”, ”caaaaaaaant wait to hav abs #work #it #bitch”, and “ive realised that ive been reducin my worth by being self destructive. no more smoking, bad eatin or bad thoughts, i can still follow my desires without@givin into every whim. #no #excuses #workout #strongisthenewskinny”.<sup>249</sup>

However, the ‘sugar babe’ episode features the most apparent and extreme way in which Ulman transforms her body in order to better herself: plastic surgery. The narrative of her breast augmentation begins toward the end of the first episode, when Ulman posts a mirror selfie in which she is wearing scrubs and smiling, and the accompanying caption implies that she has been to a doctor’s consultation: “Doctor was soooo kind! First visit went super well so far. He was very helpful and give me information necessary”.<sup>250</sup> In the ‘sugar baby’ episode, her surgery journey is chronicled over several posts. She posts a “pre-op” selfie taken in what appears to be a hospital bathroom, with a caption that both expresses her anticipation and reveals the nature of her impending procedure in technical detail: “nervous and excited!! Getting 450cc high profile anatomical silicon gel... massive butterflies n anxiety. Im sure i’ll be fine.”<sup>251</sup> This is followed by several posts about her recovery, with close-up images of what is ostensibly Ulman’s breasts covered by bandages and surgery-bras

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<sup>249</sup> Ulman, *Excellences & Perfections*.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

(Figure 9). The sentiment of the captions is initially positive, she thanks her followers for their support and is happy with the results of the surgery, “I really wanna help all girls out there considerin ba, really worth the pain lol”.<sup>252</sup> She then becomes increasingly impatient, tired of the pain and being bedridden. The diaristic style of the surgery narrative was inspired by the community-driven website realself.com, where users can review their plastic surgeons and chronicle their surgery journey.<sup>253</sup> Ulman had noticed that these online surgery diaries were written in a style where “the painful experiences were deeply infantilized”, and mimicked this by using hashtags such as #morningboob, #frankenboob, #boobgreed.<sup>254</sup>

While the breast augmentation surgery was faked, fabricated with images that were either appropriated or staged, Ulman did undergo some real cosmetic procedures: She received facial filler injections and a non-surgical nose job where dermal fillers were used to contour her nose.<sup>255</sup> At the Rhizome panel, Ulman stated that she is not opposed to plastic surgery, but wanted to expose the conditions of neoliberal femininity in which the pressures to conform to certain body ideals have led to body dysmorphia and a normalization of cosmetic surgery.<sup>256</sup> She observed that in Korean Instagram culture, it has become very popular to undergo and document cosmetic surgery procedures, and that it increasingly represents something more than just a means to the end of looking good.<sup>257</sup> But what? Ulman doesn't say. While economic status would be an obvious answer considering the high prices of plastic surgery, I would argue that surgery also has come to represent an investment in the body, a testament to the will to transform and improve and the money and labor that goes in to this. In this respect, it is perhaps telling that undergoing such procedures is often referred to as “getting work done”.

Ulman chronicled her (feigned) breast augmentation, and in the captions of the posts that followed, she justifies both the surgery and her other bodily self-improvement 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”.<sup>258</sup> Gill argues that such notions of ‘doing it for myself’ and presenting practices as freely chosen are central to the postfeminist sensibility, and that it

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> "Realself," website, <https://www.realself.com/>. (accessed 09.12.18)

<sup>254</sup> Black, Shields, and Ulman, "Do You Follow?"

<sup>255</sup> Kissick, Dean, "From Plastic Surgery to Public Meltdowns Amalia Ulman Is Turning Instagram into Performance Art," Article, published 24.10.2014 *i-D* (2014), [https://i-d.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/7xvbg9/from-plastic-surgery-to-public-meltdowns-amalia-ulman-is-turning-instagram-into-performance-art](https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/7xvbg9/from-plastic-surgery-to-public-meltdowns-amalia-ulman-is-turning-instagram-into-performance-art) (accessed 15.08.2017)

<sup>256</sup> Black, Shields, and Ulman, "Do You Follow?"

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Ulman, *Excellences & Perfections*.

resonates with the narrative of empowerment, autonomy and taking control seen in advertising, talk shows and reality makeover shows.<sup>259</sup> By juxtaposing images that show the graphic reality of surgery with captions that make light of the pain and emphasize personal choice and empowerment, Ulman highlights the contradictions inherent in the notion of doing things ‘for myself’. On one hand, this sentiment reveals an internalization of hegemonic beauty standards and the idea that beauty and sex appeal are central and integral to a woman’s personhood, to the point where plastic surgery is seen as a welcome and necessary option. On the other hand, it also reveals a desire to distance oneself from the concern with appearance. Instead, self-improvement of the body is framed as looking beyond idealized constructions of feminine beauty, beyond the opinions of others, and towards body positivity, drawing on feminist critique of body policing. Going through surgery in order to attain beauty standards is thus rebranded from representing female oppression to representing women’s empowerment, by a postfeminist rhetoric of individual choice and personal happiness. But despite being produced through a language of empowerment and freedom of choice, this new self-loving femininity must nevertheless engage in the same kind of body improvement labor as before.

## 4.4 Cruel Optimism

The anxieties that the idealizations of certain body images generate for female subjects of Instagram culture is made visible in *Excellences & Perfections*. Ulman exposes the compulsion to pursue the perfect body by emulating both the insecurities this pursuit generates, and the labor of self-improvement involved. The postfeminist self-improvement imperative epitomized by the ‘sugar baby’ can thus be understood as part of an affective dimension of neoliberalism that Lauren Berlant calls ‘cruel optimism’, which refers to those optimistic attachments to the fantasy of ‘the good life’ that come to stand in the way of its fruition.<sup>260</sup> A relation of cruel optimism occurs when the validation and circulation of certain feminine body images within Instagram culture establishes positive attachments between women and hegemonic ideals of feminine beauty, and causes them to engage in demanding or even self-destructive behavior. Women may continue to engage in arduous beauty and body labor in the effort to live up to the ideal because they “might not well endure the loss of

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<sup>259</sup> Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility." 153

<sup>260</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.24

their object/scene of desire,” even when it becomes harmful and counter-productive.<sup>261</sup> While this attachment is cruel and unsustainable, “the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world.”<sup>262</sup> In other words, these ideals teach women that they are inadequate, yet women still hold on to them, not only because they cannot risk becoming undesirable, but because the attachment itself has become part of their life. As postfeminist media culture perpetuates the idea that women’s worth, success and self-esteem depend upon their desirability, the documentation and sharing of their body labor on Instagram provides a certain validation and affirmation. In this way, the ‘happy object’ of the desirable body, established through the circulation of body images in the realms of fashion, advertising, entertainment and social media, and the cultural products that romanticize makeovers and bodily self-improvement, becomes an “enabling object that is also disabling.”<sup>263</sup>

This is the dystopia that afflicts the ‘sugar baby’: she commits to transforming her body, training, surgery beauty products, but her hostile captions, blank facial expressions and stance of false empowerment betray the unhappiness that attends her lack of progress. She acquires the expensive clothes, the new hairstyle, the toned physique and the new breasts, she has fulfilled the fantasy, but that fantasy is festering from within.

The fantasies attached to the ‘sugar baby’s’ sense of sexual empowerment also begin to come undone. During this episode, her sexual empowerment is asserted in both the hyper-sexualized selfies, and in the posts that suggest she is involved in some kind of sex work. In a post with an image of a wad of fanned out dollar bills, the caption reads “1k-1nuit”, which can be interpreted to mean that she was paid \$1000 for services provided while spending the night with someone.<sup>264</sup> Sex work, in itself a form of affective labor as it is performed in ‘the bodily mode’, is configured as empowering for the ‘sugar babe’, as it allows her to realize a monetary return from her investment in her desirability, which then can be used to finance her lavish lifestyle and further investments. Traditionally in postfeminist media culture, hyper-sexualization and self-objectification are the means to a domestic end.<sup>265</sup> This represents a central narrative in several of the media texts that have dominated the discussions of postfeminism, including *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001), *Pretty Woman* (1990)

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid. 24

<sup>262</sup> Ibid. 24

<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> Ulman, *Excellences & Perfections*.

<sup>265</sup> Petersen, Anne Helen, "In "Trainwreck," Amy Schumer Calls Bullshit on Postfeminism," article, published 18.07.2015 *Buzzfeed* (2015), <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/annehelenpetersen/postfeminist-bullshit> (accessed 05.12.18)



and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004). These all follow a storyline where the initially promiscuous female protagonists find their happy endings in the arms of a husband.<sup>266</sup> Ulman's 'sugar babe', on the other hand, is stuck in a holding pattern of working on her body as sexual object so that it will generate income that can fund more of the same work. In her narrative, postfeminism stops functioning as the building blocks for 'the good life', and instead becomes an obstacle to her happiness. Her unraveling expresses a fraying ideology, and is thus much closer to what Lauren Berlant refers to as the 'impasse', which she describes as "a holding station that doesn't hold securely but opens out into anxiety, that dogpaddling around a space whose contours remain obscure. An impasse is the decompositional – in the unbound temporality of the stretch of time, it marks a delay that demands activity."<sup>267</sup> Berlant argues that when the narrative supports of an attachment or fantasy begins to break down, over time the framework that a culture uses to make sense of its present also undergo a similar diffusion, fraying, and unraveling.<sup>268</sup> For the 'sugar babe,' the impasse is a break from the storyline of improving and progressing that the fantasy of the good life has cruelly promised, which has been the structuring framework for her life. But the impasse, as a moment of "stuckness", is also a moment of recalibration, from which new political possibilities can be opened up.<sup>269</sup>

#### **4.5 “The sadder the girl, the happier the troll”**

As Ulman asserts herself as the postfeminist trope of empowered femininity and “doing it for myself”, she conversely spirals into a performance of the feminine as it historically has often been portrayed: hysterical, crazy, vain, infantilized, suffering. As the episode progresses, her selfies become increasingly gloomy, unflattering and seemingly haphazard. She posts glamorized images of drugs and guns, and images with resentful quotes that appear to be directed at people in her life whom she feels abandoned by: “The thing is the older I get, the less people I trust.”, “How many people said they got you? And forgot you?”.<sup>270</sup> Such statements work to establish the 'sugar baby' as increasingly isolated and unstable. Through this character, Ulman explores the phenomenon of the mental collapse played out within the public sphere. She observed that women's online popularity is directly proportional not only

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. 199

<sup>268</sup> Ibid. 200

<sup>269</sup> Ibid. 199

<sup>270</sup> Ulman, *Excellences & Perfections*.

to their sex appeal, but to their failures as well.<sup>271</sup> Whenever a celebrity loses control, such as Amanda Bynes, Britney Spears and Lindsey Lohan, a public schadenfreude is ignited, making the media coverage about such episodes wildly popular.<sup>272</sup> The public shaming of the female celebrity can be read as a moralizing narrative, meant to teach us that too much fame and visibility will destroy a woman, and she who is ‘too much’ – too famous, too attractive, too bewitching – deserves to be punished.

Taking inspiration from the voyeuristic public reactions to the actress Amanda Bynes’ symptoms of mental illness that were projected online, Amalia Ulman replicates a narrative of breakdown, apology and rescue that fuels an economy of likes, comments and shares. The media story of Amanda Bynes’ unraveling began with manic, consistent oversharing on twitter in 2010, and by March 2013 she had caused seven traffic accidents and become a trending topic online due to frequent, deeply concerning public outbursts.<sup>273</sup> Compared to other highly publicized celebrity breakdowns, the media coverage of Bynes’ breakdown was not the most extreme, - one need only think of Britney Spears and Lindsay Lohan a few years prior - but it stands out as the most immediate. Taking place largely on social media platforms such as twitter, it played out almost entirely in the public eye, and thus the public could follow the story in live updates and respond immediately.<sup>274</sup>

Rather than focusing on Amanda Bynes as spectacle, Ulman turned her attention to the response it elicited from the audience: “It wasn’t her, it was the way people reacted to her behavior. It was a collective trolling experience. Seeing someone cry brings people together; it’s not about the object itself but about the feeling of closeness among the trolls. Other people’s tragedy as a nexus for camaraderie.”<sup>275</sup> In *Excellences & Perfections*, Ulman attempts to recreate this collective trolling. The work’s real-time manifestation online allowed her to “let the trolls in,”<sup>276</sup> exposing the abuse enacted against women online by making the comment section of her posts a part of the performance. The aim is not to portray a tragic feminine character or romanticize her sadness, but to show the way the sadness of the

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<sup>271</sup> Smith, "Fake It until You Make It".4

<sup>272</sup> Horning, Rob, "Hi Haters!," Adapted version of talk given at University of Southern Maine, November 16, 2012., published 27.11.2012 *The New Inquiry* (2012), <https://thenewinquiry.com/hi-haters/> (accessed 15.08.2017)

<sup>273</sup> Gruttadaro, Andrew, "The Amanda Bynes Breakdown Story," Article, published 07.07.17 *Complex* (2017), <https://www.complex.com/pop-culture/amanda-bynes-breakdown> (accessed 19.11.2018)

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

<sup>275</sup> Corbett, Rachel, "How Amalia Ulman Became an Instagram Celebrity," Article, published 18.12.2014 *New York Magazine* (2014), <http://www.vulture.com/2014/12/how-amalia-ulman-became-an-instagram-celebrity.html> (accessed 02.08.2017)

<sup>276</sup> Black, Shields, and Ulman, "Do You Follow?"

subject registers affectively in the network. Ulman's comment, "the sadder the girl, the happier the troll"<sup>277</sup>, pointed to the increasing abuse she felt from online voyeurs throughout her performance of depression and addiction. She describes how it played out:

*The trolling became more acute, and my fictional self was becoming sadder with the time. She was just trying to be prettier and perform the social role assigned to her at birth as a cis-female, but all she got was hate. The meltdown took place. The crazy bitch went into this black hole of depression, and her social interactions became weirder with the time. The crazy bitch got hurt; the bitch didn't trust no one no more, and she gets to her lowest point, and the audience loves it. [...] I had succeeded in providing the most entertaining content: another human's sorrow.*<sup>278</sup>

As this narrative unfolded, Ulman's posts received many different reactions from her commenters. Some of their comments were criticizing her appearance and her sadness: "You lukded", "Getting boobs won't change the fact that you're ugly :( think you need your whole face done", "<3 cry me a river <3", "Seems like you wanna be a noir stripper. You're beautiful, ...but borderline boring. #kindawhiney!".<sup>279</sup> Others appeared to be reactions from people who knew her as an artist and were surprised by her changes in behavior, interests and style: "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", "Have u as a facebook friend. Have no idea what to do next. It's bad when u have a huge I.Q.but at total loss on Instagram. I'm a easy learner."<sup>280</sup> The last posts uploaded in this episode were two ten-second videos of Ulman crying in the middle of the breakdown. In these videos (Figure 10), Ulman appears in a dark room, her eyes and nose appear red from crying, and she is sobbing softly. In the comments posted to these videos during the performance, there are some viewers who express their concern and empathy: "Why are you crying," "miss you so much," ":(".<sup>281</sup> Others appeared unsympathetic to her sadness, and responded with criticism: "A N N O Y I N G" and "All this shit is so fucking pretentious oh my gah."<sup>282</sup> Some, however, appeared to be amused and excited by her pain: "Thats right, cry. Im getting hott watcheing this," "#crybitch!," and "It sounds like you're #cuttingyourself #lolol,".<sup>283</sup> In this way, her narrative worked to highlight the type of schadenfreude in online voyeurism where the audience is enraptured by the pain of the fallen

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<sup>277</sup> Ulman, Amalia, "Miami Basel - Instagram Script," livejournal.com, Performance script 2014 <http://amaliaulman89.livejournal.com/17444.html>. (accessed 15.08.2017)

<sup>278</sup> Black, Shields, and Ulman, "Do You Follow?".

<sup>279</sup> Ulman, *Excellences & Perfections*.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

woman. However, it seems that it is her affective state, her tears and sadness, that provokes them the most.

## 4.6 The Sad Girl and the Impasse

The reaction from her audience suggests that the display of sadness is not deemed an acceptable expression of her brand of femininity, because it breaks with the postfeminist ideal. In her discussion of what she calls the affective life of postfeminism, Gill notes how postfeminist culture works to police and regulate the feelings and emotions of women, setting up norms that dictate what kinds of emotions are deemed permissible.<sup>284</sup> As Gill notes, this is simultaneously affective, aesthetic and political. The aspirational ideal of neoliberalism expects women to remain happy and positive despite continuing inequality, and affective responses such as sadness and anger are systematically outlawed and pathologized. Such feelings are seen to represent psychologically and aesthetically undesirable subject positions of female complaint.

However, there is also a political potential in these kinds of undesirable subject position, as they provide an alternative set of imaginings from which a site of resistance may be articulated. This has been explored by Sarah Ahmed. In “Happy Objects”, Ahmed discusses the cultural tropes of the feminist killjoy, the unhappy queer, the angry black woman and the melancholic migrant as ‘affect aliens’ that demonstrate how the Western obsession with acquiring and maintaining happiness can be problematic for those whose experience interrupts the happiness narrative.<sup>285</sup> Ahmed explains that affect aliens can serve to destabilize normalizing trends of happiness and reclaim and repurpose unhappiness. Normativity requires that its subjects show signs of happiness, as happiness signals that they have adjusted to the norm. She notes that “the demand that we be affirmative makes those histories disappear by reading them as a form of melancholia,” which can be either pathologized or politically dismissed, rather than being acknowledged as the sign of protest and discontent that it signals under the oppression of excessive normativity.<sup>286</sup>

The political potential of sadness has also been discussed by digifeminist artists. Audrey Wollen, a contemporary artist associated with digifeminism, proposes a “Sad Girl Theory” which, rather than romanticizing and eroticizing mental illness or sadness, “proposes

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<sup>284</sup> Gill, "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On." 618-20

<sup>285</sup> Ahmed, "Happy Objects." 38-9

<sup>286</sup> Ibid. 50

that the sadness of girls should be recognized as an act of resistance.”<sup>287</sup> Since “political protest is usually defined in masculine terms – as something external and often violent [...] this limited spectrum of activism excludes a whole history of girls who have used their sorrow and their self-destruction to disrupt systems of domination.”<sup>288</sup> Referencing historical and literary figures like Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and Frida Kahlo as models of this type of feminism, Wollen explicitly rejects the optimistic kind of feminism that promotes empowerment, body positivity and professional egalitarianism despite persisting social divides and apparent inequalities among genders, in favor for what can be viewed as a more subversive call to pay attention to the tragedy of lived gendered embodiment in a patriarchal-capitalist society.<sup>289</sup> In other words, a pervasive cultural sadness affecting women more so than men should be taken as a testament to the pains and struggles of being a woman dealing with misogyny in the world, and this pain should be given aesthetic and political attention instead of being discarded in the name of empowerment. Wollen’s artistic practice is inspired by art history’s representations of women as tragic figures and passive objects being looked at and acted upon, what she refers to as “a history of anonymous, naked girls.”<sup>290</sup> She re-performs these classical images in order to on one hand reclaim them, and on the other to acknowledge that they are inescapable – they inform the ideals of femininity that women aspire to and strive to emulate. The image culture of Instagram is haunted by this representational tradition, and as it has been blended with the aesthetics of pornography and technology, it has created a “whole generation of girls who endlessly repeat their own image.”<sup>291</sup> While contemporary selfie culture is frequently accused of being narcissistic, Wollen argues that “we can use the products of the patriarchy as tools to dismantle it: the objectification of girls can be re-staged and read differently.”<sup>292</sup> She goes on: “So let’s flip it around: what if the naked horizontal girl wasn’t a symbol of subordination, but a symbol of rebellion? What about the nature of objects can be used to our advantage?”<sup>293</sup> In this way, sharing sad selfies is framed not in terms of narcissism or passivity, but as a gesture of

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<sup>287</sup> Watson, Lucy, "How Are Girls Are Finding Empowerment through Being Sad Online," article, published 06.01.2016 *Dazed Digital* (2016), <http://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/28463/1/girls-are-finding-empowerment-through-internet-sadness> (accessed 16.11.2018)

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

liberation, a way of making visible the disenchantment and everyday anguish of failing at empowerment, and reclaiming agency by resisting and emancipating from patriarchal norms.

While the protagonist of this episode is a “faux-feminist” feminine character that epitomizes the postfeminist ideology of false empowerment, this does not mean that Ulman’s performance should be taken as a fetishization or parody of such disempowerment. Instead of viewing Ulman’s sexual selfies, tearful videos and plastic surgery as expressions of feminine disempowerment, they can be interpreted in a way that relates the performance to Wollen’s theory of the ‘sad girl’ theory, Ahmed’s perspective on unhappiness, and Berlant’s notion of the impasse. During her breakdown, the ‘sugar baby’ shares her sadness rather than hiding it under a mask of empowerment and optimism, and in this way, she refuses the neoliberal postfeminist ideal of perpetual happiness in favor of a sad girl-aesthetic. The harsh reality of escorting, mental breakdown and trolling works against the romanticizing and aestheticizing forces of representational tradition, and indicates that the episode is not some glorification of feminine sadness. Rather than romanticizing feminine melancholia, *Excellences & Perfections* provides crucial understanding of the devastating impact of postfeminist cultural discourses on feminine subjectivity, and offers some existential legitimacy to the complex subjectivities that experience this. As Ahmed argues, “Unhappiness is not our endpoint. If anything, the experience of being alienated from the affective promise of happy objects gets us somewhere.”<sup>294</sup> In this light, the breakdown of the ‘sugar babe’ reads as this kind of alienation from the postfeminist culture and its promise of the good life as attainable through the continuous labor of self-improvement and self-objectification. The ‘sugar babe’ thus functions an ‘affect alien’, one who is disenchanted with the objects that have oriented her life toward a promise of fulfillment and happiness. If the postfeminist ideal of femininity provide the happy objects that promise a good life within neoliberal consumer culture, then her disruption of its affective and aesthetic image becomes an act of resistance with feminist potential. This way, the ‘sugar baby’ is not merely reinforcing the status quo, she is refusing and protesting it. Paradoxically, she is most empowered in the very moment in which she appears to be the most disempowered. Her breakdown serves as an impasse, which, if only for a brief moment, opens up a space of resistance from which the possibility of a way out may emerge. Through the sadness of its main character, this episode locates an affective and aesthetic site within femininity that holds the potential for feminist resistance and

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<sup>294</sup> Ahmed, "Happy Objects." 50

reimaginings, while negotiating and highlighting the contradictions, complexities, and impasses that feminine embodiment in a neoliberal, postfeminist era entails.

This chapter has analyzed the narrative development in *Excellences & Perfections* as it reaches a dramatic climax in the second episode. By tracing the affective forces that shape and drive this progression, I have attempted to discern the cruel optimisms of postfeminist ideals, as well as the embodied pain and labor that attends the attachments to them. While my reading of the breakdown as the articulation of an impasse presents a possibility for feminist criticality, the abrupt shift to the next episode is marked by Ulman once again inverting her aesthetic and affective orientations toward neoliberal ideals. The following chapter will explore the significance of this reorientation with regard to the possibility for resistance, and use the final episode of Ulman's performance as a backdrop for my final discussion about the work's critical potential.

## 5 The Basic Bitch and the Authentic Self

This chapter provides an analysis of the third episode of *Excellences & Perfections*, in which the character of the ‘life goddess’ will be used to discuss wellness culture and issues of authenticity. This will lead me to return to themes of feminine self-expression, gender performativity, feminine representation and subjectivity that have been presented in the previous chapters, and allow me to present my main arguments about the feminist potential of femininity within Amalia Ulman’s performance.

The chapter opens with a description of the ‘life goddess’, which is followed by a presentation of the wellness culture this episode is tailored after. I will discuss how this discourse is influenced by neoliberal ideology, and analyze how the ‘life goddess’ takes up ideals of individualism and authenticity, and how this represents a continuation of and reaction to the plot development in the previous episode. Drawing on the writings of cultural critic Rob Horning, I discuss how notions of authenticity are employed in contemporary consumer culture, and examine how the ‘life goddess’ articulates an aesthetic of inauthenticity. The reactions to this aesthetic from her audience will lead me to introduce the figure of the ‘basic bitch’, which shares many traits with the Young-Girl, but is mainly a figure that represents certain tastes. Because the ‘basic bitch’ is a negative stereotype characterized by unoriginality and mainstream conformity, I will argue that the ‘life goddess’ episode serves to highlight the double bind of femininity, in which women are scrutinized for both conforming and not conforming to feminine ideals. Returning to Judith Butler’s theory of performativity and Donna Haraway’s theory of the cyborg, I propose that Ulman’s performance of feminine tropes not only subverts femininity by exposing the mechanisms involved in its construction, she also demonstrates the feminist potential that lies in reconstruction and reconfiguration of feminine forms. Drawing on Haraway’s concept of partial perspectives, I argue that Ulman’s use of femininity represents a strategic rejection of an outside-in critical perspective and its assumed neutrality, in favor of an embodied position that both legitimizes the lived experiences of young women who engage in femininity, and empowers them as productive subjects, authors of their own stories.

The aim of this chapter is to bring together the discussions in the previous chapters to advance an argument about the feminist critical potential of femininity in *Excellences & Perfections*, that answers the research questions that have guided this thesis.



## 5.1 The Life Goddess

In the third and final episode of *Excellences & Perfections*, Ulman performs the trope of the ‘life goddess’, a zenned-out self-loving figure (Figure 11). The hyper-sexualized poses and gloomy selfies of the ‘sugar baby’ are replaced by images attesting to domesticity and self-care. Ulman, who had returned to her natural hair color, stated that she “was now a brunette whose boob job had been concealed under a flowery Zara shirt.”<sup>295</sup> The shift to this episode is marked by a post with an image of a heart drawn on a frosty windowpane, captioned by a long apology letter to her followers. She writes that she was “acting weird” because she “wasn’t at a good place” in her life, but is now in recovery and feeling better.<sup>296</sup> She is becoming *herself* again. Images of yoga poses and beautifully arranged breakfast spreads dominate her journey to redemption, captioned with contemplative sentiment, such as “The view from my window~ There is so much beauty in this world” and hashtags such as #health, #interiordesign, #yoga, #simple and #family.<sup>297</sup> With the shift to the ‘life goddess,’ there is also a shift in the style of Ulman’s captions, they begin to form complete sentences, with fully spelled-out words and correct grammar. In this way, she presents herself as more mature and balanced, rid of the saccharine naivety of the ‘cute girl’ and the vulgarity of the ‘sugar baby’. She returns to a pale color scheme of whites and creams, but instead of the girly pink pastels of the first episode, she uses accents of browns, greens and grays to express a calm, earthy aesthetic typical of lifestyle blogs and online communities devoted to wellness and health.

The episode is tailored after Goop, a popular lifestyle brand-blog-community run by actress and wellness-guru Gwyneth Paltrow, which is devoted to clean eating, healthy living, and self love.<sup>298</sup> However, Goop is first and foremost a brand, and a part of a wellness industry which targets women with messages that they must detox their bodies and let go of their negative energy, and that they need jade eggs, crystallized water and meditation classes to do it.<sup>299</sup> It sells you the idea that your current lifestyle is bad, perhaps even toxic, but there are things you can do and things you can buy to fix it. It is a common marketing strategy to appeal to the insecurities and fears of consumers so that products can be presented as a

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<sup>295</sup> Black, Shields, and Ulman, "Do You Follow?"; Ulman, "Miami Basel - Instagram Script".

<sup>296</sup> Ulman, *Excellences & Perfections*.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> "Goop," website, <https://goop.com/>. (accessed 08.12.18)

<sup>299</sup> Reynolds, Megan, "I Exhausted Myself Relaxing at the 'in Goop Health' Summit," published 29.01.18 *Jezebel*, <https://jezebel.com/i-exhausted-myself-relaxing-at-the-in-goop-health-summi-1822496360> (accessed 29.11.18)

‘solution’, but in the wellness industry, the consumer *is* the solution.<sup>300</sup> Doling out advice such as “police your thoughts” in their newsletter and online articles, Goop sends the message that if you are stressed, sick, depressed and full of toxins, it is because you’re *choosing* to be, but if you discipline yourself, you can choose to be happy instead.<sup>301</sup> The rhetoric of the wellness industry promotes self-care as a liberating, consumption-based and entirely individualistic pursuit of self-actualization. It is thus distinctly in touch with the entrepreneurial and aspirational ideologies of neoliberalism and postfeminism, and similarly calls for an introspective turn to self-monitoring, whereby any social struggles and structural inequalities are pushed back onto the individual.<sup>302</sup> In author Laurie Penny’s words, (and while the yoga pants-clad women of the Goop brigade seem to think otherwise,) “downward facing dog is not a radical position.”<sup>303</sup>

The wellness paradigm constitutes a discourse that centers on the ideal of an authentic self that can be discovered and actualized through acts of consumption.<sup>304</sup> The imperative to live ‘authentically’ takes form as an individualist quest of ‘finding oneself,’ finding one’s true inner self.<sup>305</sup> Subscribing to the culture of wellness and self care, Ulman’s ‘life goddess’ takes up this individualist approach to life. Throughout this episode, positive sentiments are asserted through appropriated images with inspirational quotes, such as “Do not compare yourself to others”, “make time for yourself” and “start each day with a grateful heart”.<sup>306</sup> These circulating feeling-instructions convey messages of self-policing veiled in a sense of hope and aspiration, reflecting a neoliberal entrepreneurial sentiment to live authentically. Oriented by what Rosalind Gill describes as a “feminized inspiration industry with its posters, memes and signage,” the ‘life goddess’ is responsible for creating her own happiness by regulating her thoughts and actions.<sup>307</sup> She has wiped her tears and put on a smile, the frayed ideology appears to have been woven back together to once again orient her life toward a fantasy of feminine perfection. It thus seems that the site of possible resistance opened up by her sadness has closed, and that she has successfully navigated her way out of

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

<sup>301</sup> Morris, Bob, "Martha, Oprah ... Gwyneth?," article, published 21.02.09 *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/22/fashion/22gwyneth.html> (accessed 08.12.18)

<sup>302</sup> Cronin, Anne M., "Consumerism and ‘Compulsory Individuality’ - Women, Will and Potential," in *Transformations - Thinking through Feminisms*, ed. Sarah Ahmed, et al. (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>303</sup> Penny, Laurie, "Life-Hacks of the Poor and Aimless," published 08.07.18 *The Baffler*, <https://thebaffler.com/war-of-nerve/laurie-penny-self-care> (accessed 29.11.18)

<sup>304</sup> Cronin, "Consumerism and ‘Compulsory Individuality’ - Women, Will and Potential." 275

<sup>305</sup> Ibid. 275

<sup>306</sup> Ulman, *Excellences & Perfections*.

<sup>307</sup> Gill, "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On." 620

the crisis that caused the impasse. But following Lauren Berlant, crisis does not occur as a life-shattering event that knocks one off one's feet, it is an ongoing process of negotiating and adjusting to the overwhelming present in neoliberal society, a "crisis ordinary".<sup>308</sup> She writes that "in the impasse induced by crisis, being treads water; mainly, it does not drown. Even those whom you would think of as defeated are living beings figuring out how to stay attached to life from within it, and to protect what optimism they have for that, at least."<sup>309</sup> In this way, Ulman's shift to the 'life goddess' does not represent the overcoming or resolving of her situation, but a process of finding the skills to adjust and survive. When she is apologizing for her "weird" behavior and announcing she is recovering, the 'life goddess' is effectively pathologizing her former self. She is distancing herself from the 'sugar babe' with her troubled lifestyle of substance abuse and materialistic pursuits, and searching for a better, more *authentic* way to live. As Ulman's curated stream of inspirational images demonstrates, life in late capitalism looks a lot less grim through an Instagram filter.

## 5.2 The Authentic Self

The ideal of authentic living rests on the assumption that there is a more 'true' alternative to the current condition. The rhetoric of authenticity, as manifested in wellness discourse, takes the form of nostalgia for some simpler time, or some pure space of genuine affect and experience uncorrupted by the commodification and artificiality of contemporary capitalist society.<sup>310</sup> In this sense, it articulates a form of distrust of the present, a desire for some truth that is hidden or lost and must be rediscovered.<sup>311</sup> But authentic living does not reconstitute a way of life that we have lost touch with because of consumerism, it is consumer culture's way of picturing what that life may have been, so that it may be consumed in the present.<sup>312</sup> According to Rob Horning, the contemporary notion of authenticity is a product of consumer culture, and an integral part of the discourses of branding and advertising.<sup>313</sup> As it points to something genuine and essential that is always external to the current condition, authenticity serves consumerism by creating a gap of desire and promise, while structurally ensuring that

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<sup>308</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. 9

<sup>309</sup> Ibid. 10

<sup>310</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Authentic*<sup>TM</sup>. 5

<sup>311</sup> Horning, Rob, "Mass Authentic," Essay, published 03.10.2016 *The New Inquiry* (2016), <https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/71825/> (accessed 15.08.2017)

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

it can never be bridged.<sup>314</sup> Branding culture relies heavily on authenticity to establish such gaps, as affective cultural spaces that provide consumers with feelings of belonging and validation.<sup>315</sup> A dangling carrot, the authentic self is always *just* out of reach, but through consumer choices a social identity and personal individuality can be experienced and expressed.<sup>316</sup> Horning describes how neoliberalism has fostered a culture of creative expression through consumption, motivated by the pursuit of ‘cool’ as a form of social and cultural capital, where everything is reduced to signifiers of personal identity and taste.<sup>317</sup> However, this curation of desires and commodities is meaningless unless it is displayed and surveilled, and thus can only be performed against a social backdrop – it requires both the validation from an audience, and a sustained distance from mass conformity.<sup>318</sup>

As she pursues her authentic self, the ‘life goddess’ seems to conversely be expressing herself through signifiers of inauthenticity. She posts worn-out inspirational platitudes in images that have been reblogged so many times they are visibly degraded and grainy (Figure 12). Other images feature interiors and cakes which are aesthetically styled and professionally photographed, and are most likely appropriated from magazines or blogs. There is a noticeable difference of quality between these images and Ulman’s low resolution selfies, and it is apparent they were not produced with the same apparatus. In fact, it seems that only 13 of the episode’s 39 posts feature image content produced by Ulman, the rest appear to be appropriated material. It seems her #simple authentic life is performed through visual signifiers rather than lived experience.

By the time the third episode of *Excellences & Perfections* began, Ulman had successfully grown her self-brand and increased her account's likes and followers in a short period of time. While the aesthetic of the images and dramatic events of the narrative might have been the draw for many of her followers, it is the posts’ hashtags that brought them to her account in the first place. By strategically using hyperproliferating or provocative hashtags and trending topics, Ulman increased her posts’ visibility and circulation through the Instagram network. Such hashtags include #tbt (throwback Thursday), #brunch, or #undies as well as generic descriptive hashtags like #happy, #cool, #LA, #girl and

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.; Banet-Weiser, *Authentic*<sup>TM</sup>. 5

<sup>316</sup> Horning, "Mass Authentic".

<sup>317</sup> Horning, Rob, "The Primitive Accumulation of Cool," Essay, published 04.06.2013 *The New Inquiry* (2013), <https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/the-primitive-accumulation-of-cool/> (accessed 15.08.2017)

<sup>318</sup> Horning, "Mass Authentic".

#iPhone.<sup>319</sup> These widely used hashtags serve an aggregating purpose by increasing her visibility and audience, but they are also recognized by her audience as thus, framing her self-brand as less authentic and more mass-market.

Instagram culture is massively vested in the proliferation of fantasy and desire, and users go to great lengths to present themselves and their lives as glamorous.<sup>320</sup> While constructing a glamorous self-brand may take a lot of work, the end result must give the impression that it was achieved effortlessly, without trying too hard. Instagram users make elaborate efforts to conceal their labor, for example by using hashtags such as #nofilter, #nomakeup and #wokeuplikethis, in order to represent the constructed as authentic. Nigel Thrift has identified this tendency as a marketing strategy of producing affective value for a brand through the allure of glamour, describing it as “a form of secular magic, conjured up by the commercial sphere,” that makes a product stand out in a busy market.<sup>321</sup> According to Thrift, glamour “betokens making what is difficult appear easy,” concealing the calculation, meticulous selection and control involved.<sup>322</sup> By using hyperproliferating hashtags, Ulman lets the mask of effortlessness slip, revealing her labor of constructing and marketing her self-brand.

Her followers reacted negatively to her generic content and strategic use of hashtags, and responded to her posts with critical comments. In a post featuring the handwritten inspirational quote “simplicity is the ultimate sophistication”, a follower commented: “Pointless moronic quotes like this show the true intelligence of the one who posted it. This account is extremely pretentious and as much art as I am kangaroo.”<sup>323</sup> He seems to equate her unoriginal taste with low intelligence, and indicates that this aesthetic is bound up in a stereotype of the stupid, uncreative girl. Other followers posted sardonic comments mimicking her use of generic hashtags; “#sure#whynot”, and, “#classic #effortless, boyfriend jeans, chambray shirts #toms, a gold bangle and a messy bun”.<sup>324</sup> This latter comment seems to be calling out her self-branding strategy of using hyperproliferating hashtags, and in particular “#effortlessness” seems to be an ironic comment on how her presence is constructed with effort. However, these comments are also making a point about her identity,

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<sup>319</sup> Ulman, *Excellences & Perfections*.

<sup>320</sup> Duffy and Hund, ““Having It All” on Social Media: Entrepreneurial Femininity and Self-Branding among Fashion Bloggers.” 7

<sup>321</sup> Thrift, Nigel, “Understanding the Material Practices of Glamour,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). 297

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.* 299

<sup>323</sup> Ulman, *Excellences & Perfections*.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*

as these tastes and hashtags are signifiers of a particular feminine trope, and the commenters are identifying her by listing other well-known signifiers of this trope: the ‘basic bitch’.

### 5.3 The Basic Bitch

‘Basic bitch’<sup>325</sup> is a colloquial term used to describe someone who prides themselves on possessions or preferences that they consider to be unique or aspirational, but which instead are recognized as representative of styles, behaviors and interests that are conventional and commonplace.<sup>326</sup> The word ‘basic’ has by itself become an increasingly expansive label for anyone or anything that is associated with mainstream preferences, but the stereotype is most commonly wielded at white middle class women, typically represented as the generically pretty girl who loves brunch, yoga pants, pumpkin spice lattes and Ugg boots, and obsessively posts about these pleasures on Instagram with hashtags such as #thankful and #blessed. Characterizations of the ‘basic bitch’ usually reference particular brands and products, but the hallmarks of a ‘basic bitch’ are not universal, rather, they are relative to current conceptions of ‘cool’, usually representing the most ubiquitous and mass-marketed trends of the moment – the uncool. However, the signifiers of basicness are overwhelmingly products and brands that are explicitly marketed to women or so widely considered feminine that they don’t need to be.<sup>327</sup> A central aspect of the ‘basic bitch’ is thus her femininity, she is a feminine stereotype about feminized ways of consumption.

In this way, the ‘basic bitch’ bears a striking resemblance to the Young-Girl.<sup>328</sup> Like the ‘basic bitch’, the Young-Girl is constructed as a negative stereotype of feminized consumption, and is similarly conceived as a figure for the mainstream. Furthermore, the Young-Girl, like the ‘basic bitch,’ thinks that she is special, somehow more unique than the rest: “The most extreme banality of the Young-Girl is still to have herself taken as something ‘original’.”<sup>329</sup> Both defined by their femininity, consumption and unoriginality, these two figures are so similar that one could easily read the ‘basic bitch’ as a re-packaging of the

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<sup>325</sup> The term ‘Basic Bitch’ entered the vernacular in 2010, and reached its height in 2014. The term first gained traction via rap music: ‘Don’t compare me to no basic bitch/I’m better, stop debating motherfucker’ (Tyga, ‘Hard In The Paint’)

<sup>326</sup> Cartner-Morley, Jess, "'Basic': The Biggest Insult of 2015," published 23.12.2015 *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2015/dec/23/basic-insult-kate-moss-lil-wayne-sylvia-plath> (accessed 29.11.18)

<sup>327</sup> Petersen, Anne Helen, "What We're Really Afraid of When We Call Someone "Basic"," published 20.10.14, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/annehelenpetersen/basic-class-anxiety> (accessed 30.11.18)

<sup>328</sup> Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials*.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.* 2

Young-Girl. However, there is a subtle difference. The Young-Girl, as discussed in chapter three, is faulted for consuming, and this makes her unoriginal. The ‘basic bitch’, on the other hand, is faulted for consuming unoriginal things. In other words, the critique of the ‘basic bitch’ condemns the *way* in which she consumes, without condemning consumption itself.

The ‘life goddess’, with her cliché quotes, yoga poses and avocado on toast, fits the bill of the 2014 version of the ‘basic bitch’. For this episode, Ulman frequently used hashtags such as #blessed, #gratitude, #namaste, #foodporn and #cutegasm, which are all hallmarks of the trope. However, such a description is highly problematic. The implicit critique of the ‘basic bitch’ meme is that she is proudly upholding the stereotypes of her gender without realizing it herself. The derogatory term is used to shame women for liking mainstream and stereotypically feminine things, and perpetuates a notion that most women have no individuality and are all the same. As pointed out by Anne Helen Petersen in a lucid article on the ‘basic’-phenomenon, stereotypes are used to construct and define a group as representative of a certain thing, and to distance oneself from that thing by defining one’s own group in contrast to it.<sup>330</sup> Moreover, stereotypes are “deployed most fervently — and with the most hostility — when the group wielding them is most anxious to distance itself from another group that, in truth, isn’t so distant after all.”<sup>331</sup> Following this, the ‘basic bitch’ meme can be read as an expression of a cultural anxiety about mass conformity and loss of individuality, and as a means to denigrate and *Other* specific feminized consumption patterns and cultural habits. Thus, it also has a pedagogical function; it polices the kinds of tastes and interests that are permissible, and orients women’s behavior and self-expression away from the mainstream by telling them that it is bad to be like most women.

## 5.4 The Scripts of Femininity

The ‘basic bitch’ is thus another feminine figure held up as an example and trap, a symbol to keep us from becoming too set in our ways, keep us consuming in original ways, keep us on track in the individualist pursuit of our ideal, authentic self. Like the narcissistic subject of selfie culture, the shopaholic Young-Girl, the angry “F-word” feminists, and the *too* famous celebrity, the ‘basic bitch’ constitutes a cultural pedagogy designed to discipline feminine subjects and teach us all a lesson. These pedagogies steer women’s self-performance and identity production toward acceptable gender scripts and normative feminine aesthetics.

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<sup>330</sup> Petersen, "What We're Really Afraid of When We Call Someone "Basic"".

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

As discussed throughout this thesis, there are many forces at work in the shaping of women's identities, and many hands writing the scripts that define femininity. To recapitulate, this research has identified several ways in which women's self expression on social media is funneled into stereotypical templates of feminine identity, which can be summed up in four main points.

The first point is aesthetic ideals. The pervasive idealization of certain forms of feminine beauty, within social media cultures specifically and in society in general, serves to establish beauty standards and body images that provide women with narrow definitions of feminine perfection for them to aspire to. As new digital technologies and online social spaces have dramatically increased our exposure to image based communication, and every sphere of contemporary life has been colonized by the marketing forces of late capitalism, images of idealized feminine bodies have become ubiquitous. The feminine subject cultivates and models her image after the images of feminine perfection as it has been played to her, in the form of idolized celebrities, TV-characters, bloggers, models, painted nudes and pornstars. Her image is thus informed by a mediatized representational tradition in which women's bodies have been sexualized and objectified.

The second point is behavioral ideals. The entrenchment of traditional gender roles and the neoliberal ideology of individualism and self-governance in contemporary society have instigated social norms and ideals that police and limit women's ways of being in the world. Women conform to and internalize these norms, engaging in self-monitoring practices of regulating their bodies, attitudes, thoughts and affects in accordance with neoliberal ideals of femininity. Their self-expressions are policed and limited by themselves and by others, and, as called attention to by the #FreeTheNipple movement, even social media platforms themselves.

The third is the demand to self-valorize. Social media has become a site for self-expression where users construct and perform their identities for an audience, but some forms of feminine expression are valued more than others, and granted more visibility. Seeking validation in the form of attention, many users engage in self-branding practices whereby they emulate the aesthetics of popular accounts, and appropriate ubiquitous mainstream content that will appeal to a wider audience and make their self-brand more valuable. They are funneling their identities into tropes to increase their likes and followers and value, but losing their individuality in the process.



The fourth point is the influence of algorithms. The data generated by users' online activity is processed to algorithmically define their consumer identity, which is mirrored back to them in the form of content recommendations. Users are in this way exposed to content that affirms their assigned identity type, and consuming it reinforces this type, both in the algorithm and in the subject.<sup>332</sup> This allows the feminine subject to consume herself as feminine subject, cementing feminine consumption patterns and limiting her exposure to other content.

The consumerist fiction of the authentic self, the idea that there is some external truth to discover and actualize, relies on the distance between the current self and the authentic ideal self, in order for desire to be maintained. As discussed in chapter three, consumption is fueled by desire, and works by ensuring that the fantasy is never fulfilled but always tantalizingly within proximity. As thus, femininity is an ongoing iterative process, and the feminine subject can never be done, she must engage in the continuous labor of consuming and producing herself. There is a circularity to this process - women perform the narrow scripts of femininity which hold the promise of bringing them closer to the ideal, and their performances and expressions are circulated, which reinforces these scripts as the paths to achieving the ideals, but simultaneously reproduces the distance between themselves and the ideals in the process. This is not to say that women have uncritically internalized neoliberal ideals and become enslaved by capitalism, but that there is no other option to enter the economies of attention, they must play by the rules to stay visible and valuable.

Through *Excellences & Perfections*, we can begin to grasp the pressures of feminine self-representation in contemporary digital society. We can also begin to understand why the tropes Ulman chose for her performance were so ubiquitous in the social media landscape in the first place. They represent the pervasive homogenization of feminine aesthetics that occurs when the pressure to self-produce is high, but the available options for expression are limited, policed, and pre-defined by ideological and economical forces. The 'cute girl', the 'sugar baby' and the 'life goddess' are all representative of the way in which young women are expected to conform to narrowly defined scripts of femininity, ushered into feminine stereotypes, and punished when they divert from these scripts. As this thesis has attempted to show, the punishment comes in the form of censorship, scrutiny, invisibility, harassment, trolling and image abuse. Yet, when women *do* conform to the scripts of femininity, they are faulted for this too, and scrutinized for being stereotypical and inauthentic. By reading the

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<sup>332</sup> Horning, "Mass Authentic".

‘life goddess’ as a performance of the ‘basic bitch’ stereotype, it thus becomes particularly clear how Ulman’s work highlights the impossible double bind of feminine self-expression. Othering sameness, the ‘basic bitch’ is a charge that ensures that there is no way out, because conforming to gender scripts is somehow just as bad as not conforming.

## 5.5 Performativity

How can the belief in an authentic self be sustained when it is pursued through performative acts that are meticulously calculated and constructed, and modelled after commodified scripts about what constitutes it? The character tropes in Ulman’s performance are so stereotypical that they border on caricatures, but while the work could read as satirical, it is only parodic in the Butlerian sense of imitation of gender performance, which was discussed in chapter two. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler uses the example of drag to theorize the subversive potential of imitating gender, where the parodic repetition of the “original” gender “reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the idea of the natural.”<sup>333</sup> *Excellences & Perfections* is about taking these scripts as tropes, performing them *as* performances. Ulman herself contextualizes her practice in relation to drag performance, noting how naturalized gender conventions are analyzed by drag kings, then imitated and exasperated until they are denaturalized and revealed to be social constructs.<sup>334</sup> However, Ulman’s mimicry of feminine tropes was hardly subversive in this manner while the performance was carried out, as it was perceived by her real-time audience to be her genuine self-expression and thus did not unsettle or de-naturalize gender conventions. Rather, it reiterated and circulated the aesthetics and ideologies by which these scripts of femininity are constituted. It was not until the later revelation that her social media presence had been an elaborate performance that conceptions of authentic self-representation on social media and feminine identity were destabilized.

Unlike the drag performer that subverts hegemonic gender systems by revealing their performative structure and inherent fictions, Ulman’s performance is rooted in realism. *Excellences & Perfections* legitimizes the real labor performed by real women in their self-expressions, and the very real struggles and anxieties that attend this labor. The experiences portrayed by Ulman represent the lived realities of many women, who use social media to

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<sup>333</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*. 31

<sup>334</sup> Horning, Rob and Ulman, Amalia, "Perpetual Provisional Selves: A Conversation About Authenticity and Social Media," Transcript, published 11.12.2014 (2014), <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2014/dec/11/rob-horning-and-amalia-ulman/>. (accessed 15.08.2017)

document and validate their ongoing labor of self-production, by constantly posting the things they buy, the places they go, the way they look, their #inspo and #goals. Furthermore, the events that structure the narrative of *Excellences & Perfections* reflect the pain and trauma of women's embodied experiences related to engaging in this labor; loss of personal relationships, sex work, surgery and mental breakdowns. Moreover, the real reactions from her audience and the hateful and demeaning comments they posted to a profile they presumed to be a genuine representation of Ulman and her life is not only a simulation, but a true instance of the trolling and gender-based harassment representative of what many women experience online. Ulman is therefore not performing a parody of neoliberal feminine subjectivities, she is joining them. She not only looks like them, but is also situated right amongst them in their natural environment, indistinguishable from her real counterparts.

## 5.6 Cyborg Femininities

In this context, the limit between the real and the simulated is irrelevant, because while Ulman's online self-expression was fictional and fabricated, the reality she depicted is a truth, and all identity is fiction. In *Excellences & Perfections*, the subject/object binary is obscured and deferred: the subject positions of artist, performer, observer are intertwined with the artwork, the digital technology, the platform and the images. Ulman embodies both subject and object simultaneously, constructing the self in a way that blurs the limit between the artist, the woman and the characters, as well as the objects, images and comments that constitute her performance. Ulman produces herself as Donna Haraway's cyborg, immersed in an intertwined reality of artificial, digital, organic and physical environments. Her body and self are unfixed, and experienced in and through technology, both by herself and by her audience. She emerges as a "hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction."<sup>335</sup>

The 'cute girl', the 'sugar baby' and the 'life goddess' might be fictions, but they are also represented as real individuals, as lived subjectivities with their particular desires and anxieties, ways of experiencing the world, and personal presence. Yet, they are also *not* present, they are emptied out by the layers of representation and meaning invested in their image. Like the aforementioned motivational memes that have degraded in circulation until they are rendered pixelated platitudes that can no longer contain their message of

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<sup>335</sup> Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." 150

authenticity, the figure of the young woman is endlessly recycled and reused until her identity is inscribed with so many meanings that it no longer means anything at all. The young woman is always already the ‘basic bitch’; anonymous, generic, commutable, a mere body to be vested in costumes of signification for her various roles in commercial and pedagogical productions.

The fact that the female image is so easily employed to serve symbolic and economic purposes highlights that the figure of the young woman is malleable and unfixed. She is simultaneously a blank slate, void of any content, and brimming with expressive potential. Ulman utilizes this malleability to show that feminine identity is constructed, a process of becoming through mediations, images and performances, making use of the images and strategies that have traditionally been played to her. *Excellences & Perfections* exposes that, like Haraway’s cyborg, Ulman’s body and self and image are inscribed by systems of signification. They are constituted as assemblages in and across digital platforms, online and offline environments, technological representation and algorithmic processes, gender scripts and feminine myths and tropes. But rather than subverting the expressions of femininity, the work is calling out these processes and forces that shape feminine self-expression. In other words, she is not unsettling the scripts of femininity, but the acts of writing them.

As discussed in chapter two, Haraway argued that the cyborg must write, by which she means that women must figuratively and literally reclaim the power to signify, and seize “the tools to mark the world that marked them as other.”<sup>336</sup> These tools, according to Haraway, “are often stories, retold stories, versions that reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities.”<sup>337</sup> Ulman is writing, seizing the pen of neoliberalism from which the ink of patriarchy flows. She is embodying visual and narrative tropes that specifically relate to the way feminine figures have been constructed as emblems that synthesize cultural anxieties, stories used to marginalize and discipline women, and reuses them in productive ways. *Excellences & Perfections* foregrounds that these tropes are constructions that can easily be reconstructed, deconstructed and repurposed, while also giving existential legitimacy to the lived subjectivities that are made to emulate them. This way, the work critically subverts the feminine image and celebrates its feminist potential, without erasing the real experiences that are framed by it.

In chapter two, I described how the cyberfeminists inserted feminine bodies and new gender identities into digital spaces in feminist acts of resistance and disruption. Unlike

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid. 176

<sup>337</sup> Ibid. 176

cyberfeminists, Ulman is situating herself within the spaces in which she performs, not by disruptive insertion, but through the immersive mimicry of particular gendered identities, taking on their un-neutral, embodied position as the perspective from which her performance is articulated. Her approach can be seen as a rejection of the outside-in perspective of the cyberfeminists, instead embracing a situated politics whereby there is no outside point from which to make such critical insertions. While articulations of Networked feminism are also embedded in the social media networks as affinities woven together by hashtags and networked relations, Ulman is not merely using the digital platforms and technologies to locate her performance within an online environment and critique it from within. Rather, her performance presents new ways of thinking of the feminine subject, as cyborg, already enmeshed within the networks by which she is constituted. Her use of feminine aesthetics involves taking on a partial perspective, and acknowledging that there is no neutral point of view. As Haraway has argued in her seminal essay "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" (1988), the speaking subject is always speaking from somewhere, from their embodied specificity.<sup>338</sup> This embodiment does not refer to a fixed position in a physical body, but involves thinking about the subject not as separate from the world, but rather as nodes in networks, relationally constituted and "always already immersed in the world."<sup>339</sup> For Haraway, taking on a partial perspective means exposing and rejecting the universalizing and disembodied 'God's eye' views of the world that obscure the mechanisms through which silencing and marginalization can be sustained.<sup>340</sup>

Ulman's use of feminine aesthetics as a starting point can thus be seen to represent a critical feminist maneuver of calling out and de-neutralizing the oppressive forces that operate within the spaces and networks in which feminine subjects come into being, and carving out the possibility for authorship and self-definition. Her feminist message is about taking the image of femininity that has been hijacked and used to portray women as passive objects and mark them as other, and reusing it to foreground acts of making. *Excellences & Perfections* highlights how women are makers of images, not only objects within them. The

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<sup>338</sup> Haraway, Donna, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988). 589

<sup>339</sup> Haraway in Kunzru, Hari, "You Are Cyborg," article, published 02.01.97 *Wired* (1997), <https://www.wired.com/1997/02/ffharaway/> (accessed 04.01.19)

<sup>340</sup> Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." 590

work thus presents femininity not only as labor and construction, but as creative production with endless potential.

## 6 Conclusions

This thesis has analyzed the feminine aesthetics of the characters performed by Amalia Ulman in *Excellences & Perfections*, and put forward a reading of how these characters negotiate and produce femininity in ways that aesthetically registers the affective forces of the economic and ideological structures that govern contemporary life. At the onset of this thesis, I asked if the master's tools could dismantle the master's house. In order to answer this question, my research has attempted to identify what these tools are, and how they are utilized in Ulman's performance. If we understand the house to be patriarchal late capitalism, then the logics of neoliberalism and postfeminism must be the tools with which it is constructed. My analysis has brought to light how Ulman's characters articulate the way ideals of individualism, entrepreneurialism and consumerism have engendered forms of femininity that women form attachments to, leading them to engage in endless labor of self-production that generates the images, gender scripts and commercial industries that build the master's house and keep it in place.

Through the 'cute girl', I established a relation between femininity, consumer culture and affective labor. This led me to explore how women's self-representation practices in Instagram cultures are influenced by the ideology of neoliberalism, which not only compels them to produce themselves as image, but commodifies their image and their labor of producing it. The 'sugar baby' served to highlight how postfeminism, through the appropriation and distortion of feminist discourse, produces a form of femininity which works as an affective shroud that conceals the sexism and gender inequality in contemporary society, and its exploitation of women's images, bodies and labor. The 'life goddess' allowed me to discern how symbolic uses of feminine figures constitute cultural pedagogies, and create a double bind in which women are scrutinized if they don't conform to narrowly defined scripts of femininity, but also faulted if they do.

In the introduction, I questioned whether Ulman's performance of these tropes could challenge representational conventions that promote oppressive ideals of femininity by reproducing them and disseminating them into the environment in which they are enforced. The aim of this thesis has been to find out if feminine aesthetics can be used for feminist purposes, and to understand how exactly femininity is employed in Ulman's performance to assert her critique.

I have argued that her performance of femininity calls attention to and legitimizes the lived experiences of women who engage in feminine self-representation in digital society. Her performance is not about mimicking the representations themselves, but the processes by which they are created. My analysis has examined how *Excellences & Perfections* acknowledges and enacts various forms of affective labor that women perform to enter the economy of visibility and produce themselves as value, such as the digital labor of producing content for social media corporations, the emotional labor of maintaining an identity with a perpetually happy projection, the enterprising labor required to produce themselves as brand, the labor of maintaining and improving their feminine body and their desirability. Chapter four discussed how the performance registers the affective and social costs of engaging in this labor, and the pain that cruel attachments to unsustainable and detrimental ideals of femininity can cause. By reading Ulman's performance of negative affects as the articulation of the traumatic loss of these attachments, I proposed that her breakdown represents an impasse, which temporarily opened up a space of possible feminist resistance. However, reverting back to neoliberal ideals in the following episode, this space was quickly closed, and Ulman demonstrated that there are no other options than submitting to the forces of power.

In this way, Tiqqun's claim that neoliberal consumer culture has turned everyone into Young-Girls is particularly resonant in *Excellences & Perfections*. The performance works from the position that there is no evading capitalism, there is no neutral space outside the current condition where authentic selves can be realized or disembodied alternative gender identities can be created. We are all trapped in the master's house, his are the only tools at our disposition. To not participate in the available forms of self-expression means dropping out of the conversation, leaving the pen that writes one's story in the hands of others. Yet, Ulman is not only telling us that we are all Young-Girls, she is also telling us that we are all cyborgs. Her performance evidences the way in which hybrid subjectivities emerge in the affective interactions between objects, subjects and technology, and are enmeshed within the networks of cultural meanings, conventions, ideology, algorithmic code and social relations that structure the online spaces in which their images are circulated. Ulman's stated goal was to reveal the fundamental constructedness of femininity, and this thesis has discussed how her work demonstrates the way in which feminine subjectivities are constituted performatively through acts of consumption, consuming products, images, ideals, their commodified self. My claim is that the work highlights how women are not just passive consumers of these things, but also active producers of them, and herein lies its feminist



potential. By approaching *Excellences & Perfections* from the framework of affect, performativity and cyborg theory, we can begin to understand the critical and empowering potential of feminine aesthetics, and recognize the creative and entrepreneurial possibilities of using social media platforms to produce new femininities. In seizing the master's tools, Ulman is empowering women as makers of their own images, showing how the feminine image can not only be claimed and reclaimed, but also constructed and reconstructed for feminist purposes. As she has stated, "If we can make our own porn, we can make our own romantic comedies too."<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Black, Shields, and Ulman, "Do You Follow?".



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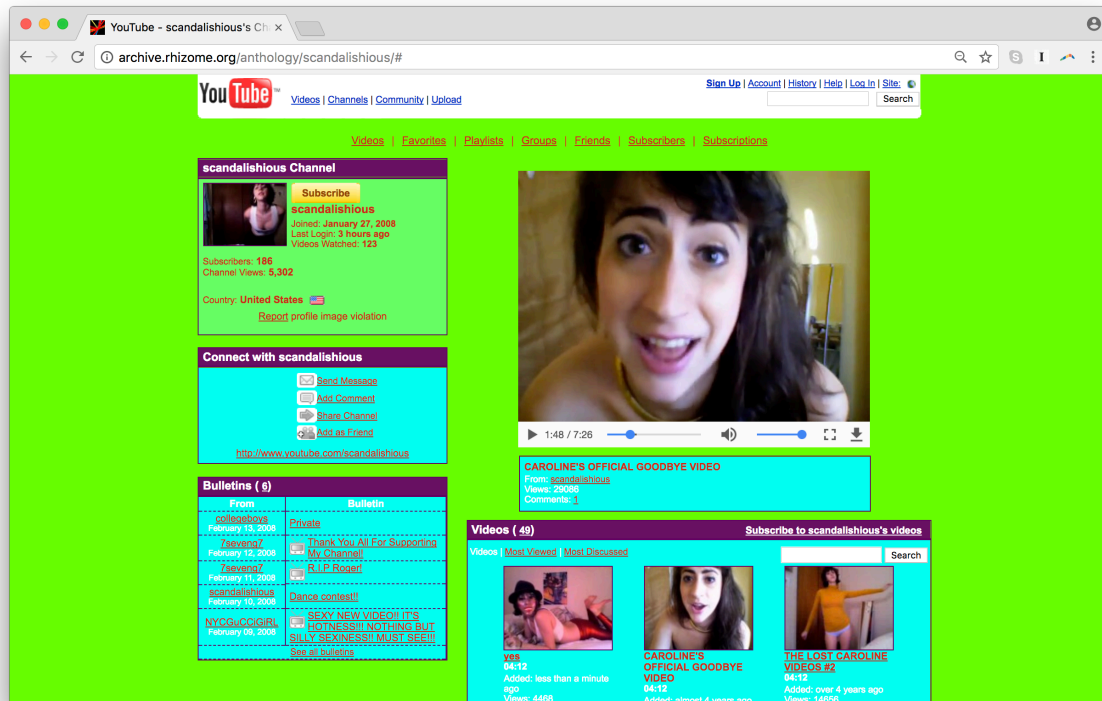


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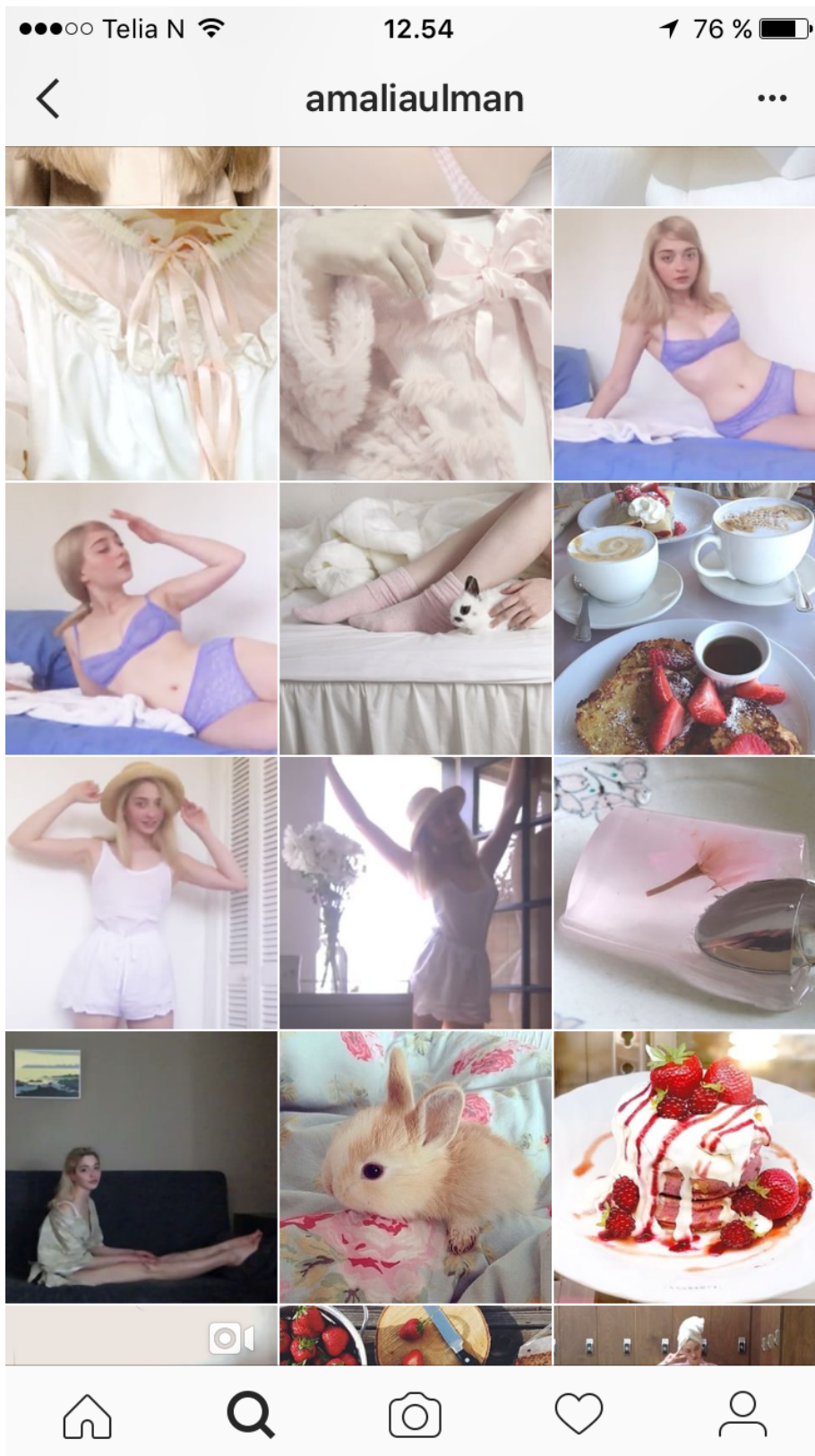


Figure 3. Ulman, Amalia. "Cute Girl." in *Excellences & Perfections* (online performance, Instagram, 2014). Screenshot from Amalia Ulman's Instagram account. (Accessed: 10.12.18)



Figure 4. Ulman, Amalia. "Cute Girl" in *Excellences & Perfections* (online performance, Instagram, 2014), screengrab from Amalia Ulman's archived Instagram account. Available from <http://webenact.rhizome.org/excellences-and-perfections> (Accessed: 07.01.19).

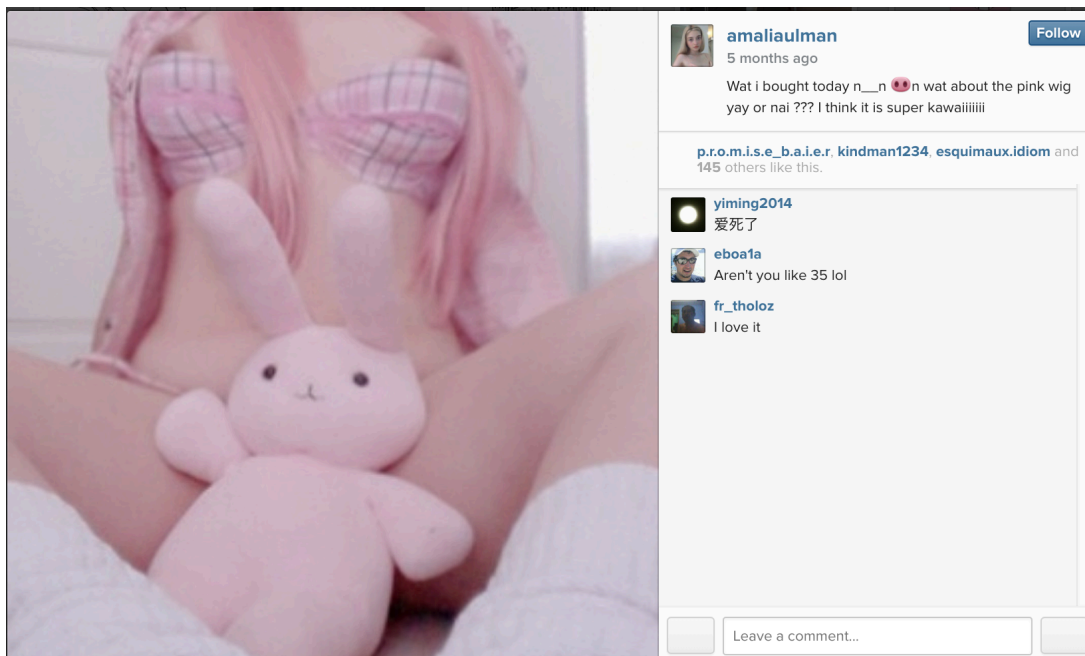


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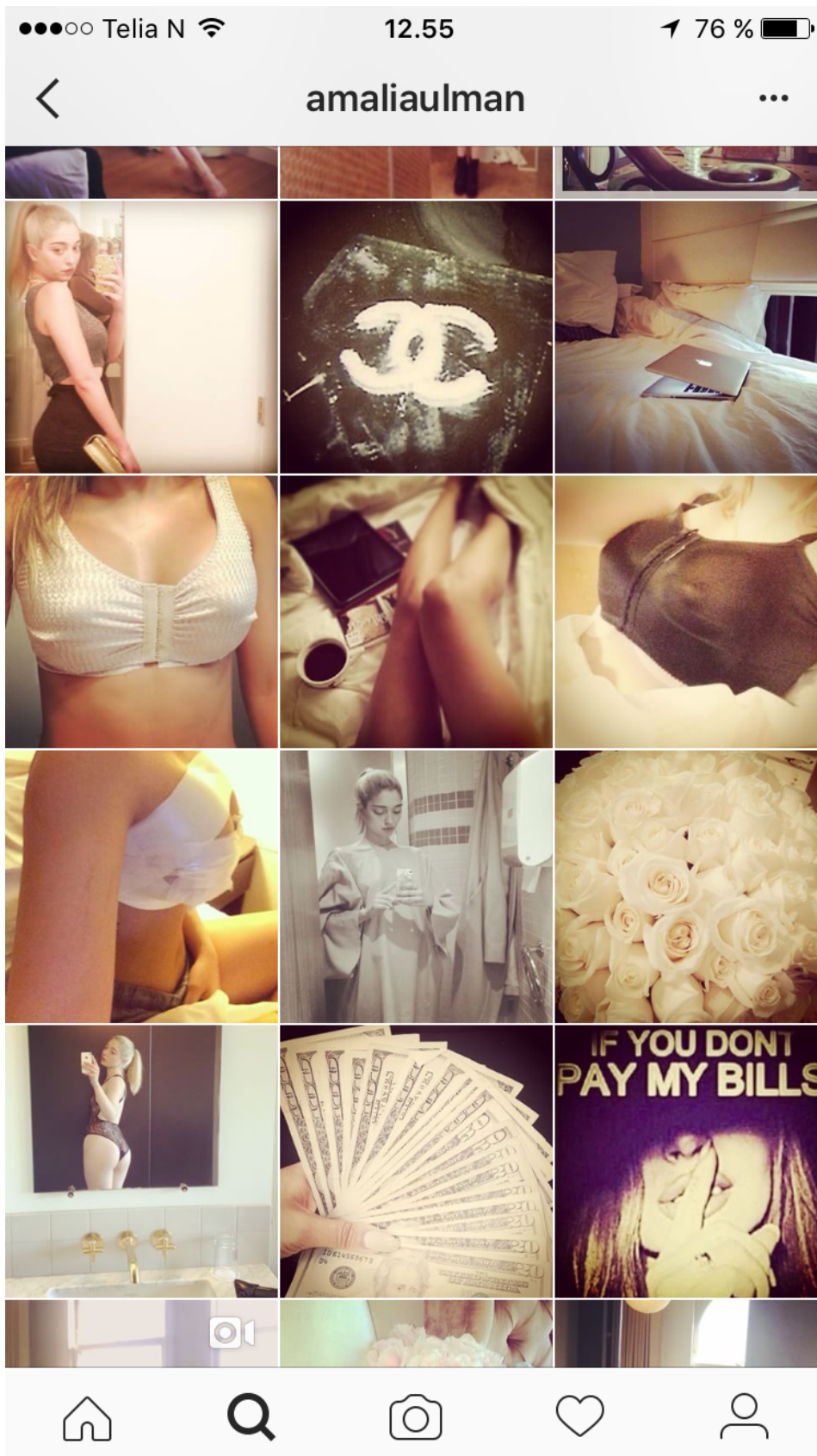


Figure 6. Ulman, Amalia. "Sugar Baby" in *Excellences & Perfections* (online performance, Instagram, 2014), screengrab from Amalia Ulman's Instagram account. (Accessed: 10.12.18).



Figure 7. Ulman, Amalia. "Sugar Baby" in *Excellences & Perfections* (online performance, Instagram, 2014), screengrab from Amalia Ulman's archived Instagram account. Available from <http://webenact.rhizome.org/excellences-and-perfections> (Accessed: 07.01.19)

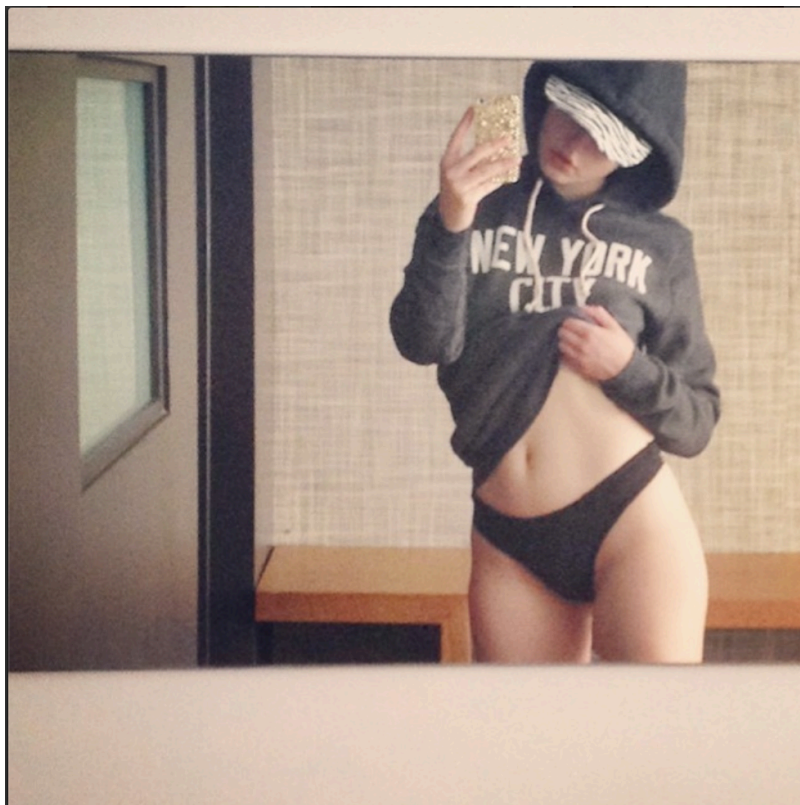


Figure 8. Ulman, Amalia. "Sugar Baby" in *Excellences & Perfections* (online performance, Instagram, 2014), screengrab from Amalia Ulman's archived Instagram account. Available from <http://webenact.rhizome.org/excellences-and-perfections> (Accessed: 07.01.19)

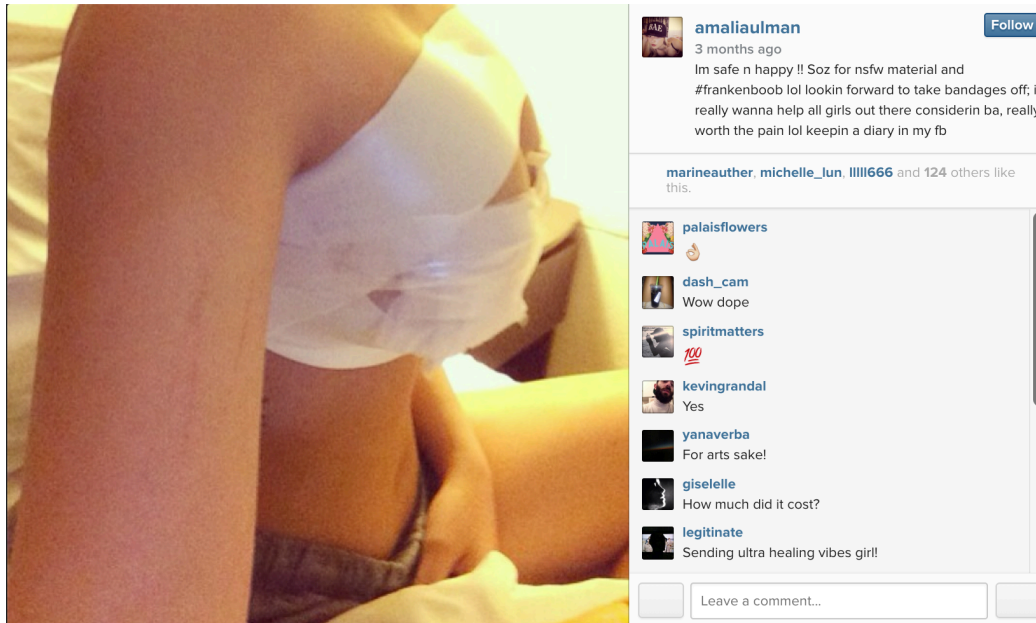


Figure 9. Ulman, Amalia. "Sugar Baby" in *Excellences & Perfections* (online performance, Instagram, 2014), screengrab from Amalia Ulman's archived Instagram account. Available from <http://webenact.rhizome.org/excellences-and-perfections> (Accessed: 07.01.19)

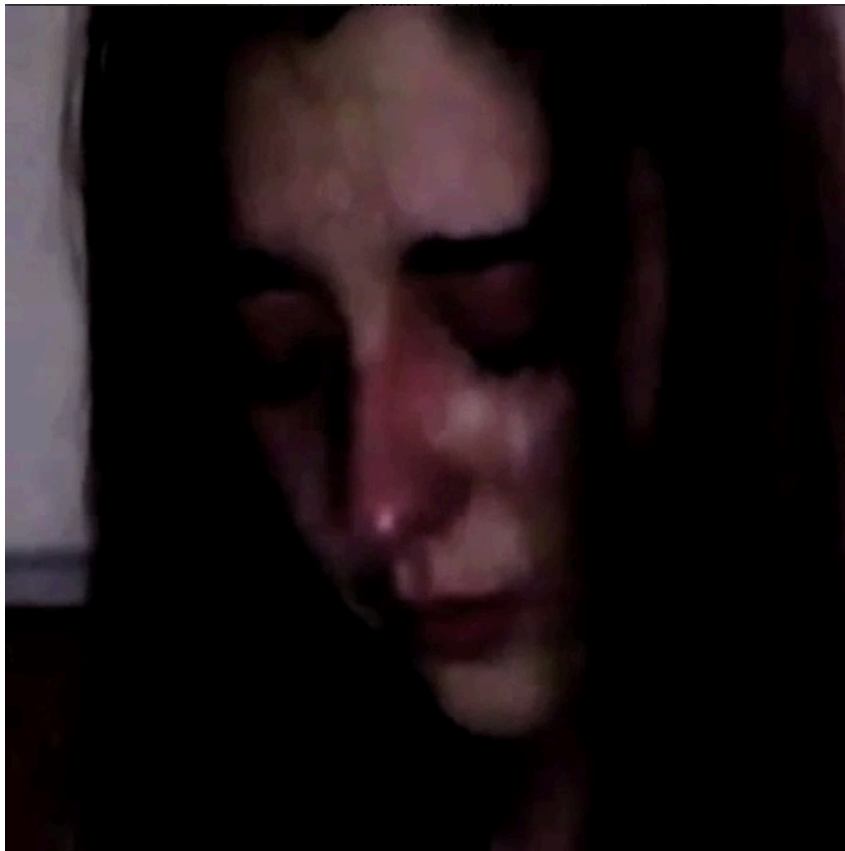


Figure 10. Ulman, Amalia. "Sugar Baby" in *Excellences & Perfections* (online performance, Instagram, 2014), screengrab from Amalia Ulman's archived Instagram account. Available from <http://webenact.rhizome.org/excellences-and-perfections> (Accessed: 07.01.19).



Figure 11. Ulman, Amalia. "life goddess" in *Excellences & Perfections* (online performance, Instagram, 2014), screengrab from Amalia Ulman's Instagram account. (Accessed: 10.12.18).



Figure 12. Ulman, Amalia. "life goddess" in *Excellences & Perfections* (online performance, Instagram, 2014), screengrab from Amalia Ulman's archived Instagram account. Available from <http://webenact.rhizome.org/excellences-and-perfections> (Accessed: 10.12.18).