



HOW ARTIST AMALIA ULMAN FAKED-OUT 90,000 INSTAGRAM FOLLOWERS

BY [JENNIFER GARNER](#) ON JULY 7, 2015

Ulman's early posts portray her character as a carefree, young girl. (image [via](#) Amalia Ulman)

Does art imitate life, or as Oscar Wilde claimed, does life imitate art?

Over four-months' worth of [Instagram posts](#), artist [Amalia Ulman](#) presented a story of a young woman from a small town who came to the city with hopes of succeeding as a model. She eventually falls in with the wrong crowd, hits rock bottom, and then starts to rebuild her life. Her project, entitled *Excellences and Perfections*, blurs the boundaries between art and life, complicating our view of online social interactions.

The story, of course, is a familiar trope, seen in numerous movies and TV shows, and yet over the course of the project, nearly 90,000 people followed Ulman, some expressing sympathy, others trolling her. That according to Ulman is part of her point — to create “a persona that would bring up mixed feelings: on one side, attraction and on the other deep repulsion, even nausea.”



(image [via](#) Amalia Ulman)

Ulman's early posts show brightly-lit, soft-focus images of her wearing white and pale pink, many staged like soft core porn in their voyeuristic and suggestive nature. Later posts indicate the subject's increasing fascination with material possessions, her own physical appearance, and living the high life followed by a public breakdown, including an intimate video of her crying.



Some of Ulman's early posts juxtapose innocence with sexuality. (image [via](#) Amalia Ulman)

Numerous art critics laud Ulman's work as a fresh take on the male gaze or on society's obsession with designer products and status. Others praise Ulman's use of social media in distributing her work as an innovative and clever approach to performance art.

No doubt *Excellences and Perfections* is provocative; it highlights and critiques society's continued messaging that women are valued primarily as objects of physical beauty whose bodies can be made into symbols of wealth and status through plastic surgery and other beauty treatments.



This selfie hints at a reoccurring theme in *Excellences and Perfections*, a fixation on physical attractiveness and consumerism. (image [via Amalia Ulman](#))



Ulman pretends to have undergone a breast augmentation by using someone else's post-operative image as a stand in for her. (image [via Amalia Ulman](#))

Art and life should be in dialogue, yet where should the line be drawn in misrepresenting oneself online? Most of us are selective about how we represent ourselves on social media, but complete fabrication of our online selves violates a social contract. Is Ulman's work any different than Brian Williams [pretending his helicopter was shot down in Iraq](#) or blogger Belle Gibson's claim to have survived cancer in order to [gain followers and get a book deal](#)?

Although Ulman knew her Instagram persona was a construction, thousands of followers thought they were interacting with a *real* person. Perhaps they saw something of themselves in this woman's story. Maybe they grew up in a small town or maybe they struggled with addiction, body issues, or a toxic relationship. Whatever the reason, her story resonated and that very human response of empathy left those followers emotionally exposed.



Ulman's persona comments on the results she hopes to see from using the extreme Zao Dha Diet. (image [via Amalia Ulman](#))



Near the conclusion of Ulman's project, her character finds peace through eating organic foods and doing yoga.

(image [via](#) Amalia Ulman)

In an interview with [Vulture](#), Ulman expressed surprise at followers' reactions when she revealed her story was made up; she says many "kept on believing it was true. [She] found this dichotomy between what they wanted to believe and what was actually happening very interesting." When Williams and Gibson came out about lying to the public, many were outraged. So, is it justifiable to intentionally manipulate people in the name of art? Our rapid access to others through technology has drastically altered the way we interact, but has it altered our ethical responsibility as well?