

New York Times Magazine

Mostly True

CULTURE | BY T MAGAZINE | FEBRUARY 13, 2015 11:30 AM

Two writers and one artist reflect on the slipperiest of all literary forms: their own diaries.

Amalia Ulman

An artist who, for a 2014 project called “Excellences & Perfections,” used Instagram to create a fictional alter ego that fooled thousands of followers.



Ulman, pictured at the Hotel on Rivington in New York, learned pole dancing and faked breast augmentation surgery for her Instagram art project.

NO FILTER Ulman, pictured at the Hotel on Rivington in New York, learned pole dancing and faked breast augmentation surgery for her Instagram art project. Credit Photographs by Nicholas Calcott. Still life: Marko Metzinger

AS A TEENAGER, I was so shy that I couldn't articulate my desires to myself, let alone write them down. My mother used to open my mail, and I had no doubt that she would read anything I hid under the bed. So my diary became a way to pretend I was normal, to edit out the thoughts I didn't want to be having. Eventually I stopped writing it. Now I just send long, confessional letters to a friend. I need an audience to make me explain myself.

But I've always loved reading other people's diaries. Growing up I was drawn to the autobiographical novels of the Belgian author Amélie Nothomb, who wrote about her childhood in Japan and China, with some artistic license, in books decorated with images of herself as a girl; she happened to look just like me. And I loved the "Claudine" novels by Colette, written in diary form and loosely based on the author's life as a sensual young woman. I liked the idea that the artist live whatever she preaches just as later, I would make work by putting myself in strange situations rather than inventing out of nothing.

It's interesting that one of the forms women have been most encouraged to write was traditionally meant to be kept private. A voyeuristic pleasure of mine is to seek out diaries published online. There are websites that women use to record their experience of fasting — the way, for instance, they become very lucid in the first three days and then fall apart, unable even to hold a pen. There are blogs in which sex workers describe their experiences of particular men in diaries that are at once essential for their colleagues' safety and surprisingly literary. There are forums for people transitioning genders in which they document the way testosterone changes their perceptions, or how, as they take hormones to transition into women, they become more emotional. One of my favorites is realself.com, where women can chronicle the process of undergoing cosmetic surgery in agonizing detail, step by step.

I've always used my iOS photo album as a sketchbook. Making the images public forces me to keep them in order, and stops them from getting lost in a jungle of folders that I would never be able to revisit otherwise. Among the still lifes and portraits, I take selfies — mostly to remind my later self of where I've been. But after being contacted by men who seemed to feel that they knew me from my photographs alone, I began to worry about my online presence, the lack of control I had over it.

And so the performance that I now call "Excellences & Perfections" began. I decided to fake an Instagram account to tell the story of a 25-year-old girl who was, in many ways, an absolute stereotype. The aesthetic of her feed was initially inspired by the Korean girls I saw on Instagram who seemed obsessed with beauty; they liked flowers, straightened hair, pale skin. I devoted two days a week to look for the right hotels to shoot in, buy clothes, get into character, take the photographs and return the clothes. Photoshop can only take you so far; to get my body into shape, I learned pole dancing.

I divided the project into episodes, phases in her story. In the second, "Amalia Ulman" had a break-up and — of course, as all girls do when they split from their nice college boyfriends — went crazy. I staged her relationship with a sugar daddy, her descent into drugs, the tearful

breakdown and then the apology to followers. I was interested in the “fake natural” aesthetic — those #nofilter, #iwokeuplikethis images that, despite looking effortless, also happened to reveal people’s beautiful houses, high-quality white sheets, good skin and lives of leisure. I faked her breast augmentation surgery. When it came time to post the final sequence of images I had taken — in which the character returns to her loving family, finds a new man and pulls herself together — I was on a meditation retreat. I have never felt a stronger disjunct between my fictional and real selves.

Since completing the project, I have returned to Facebook as myself, posting the sketchbook images that I didn’t publish during the time I was the fictional “Amalia Ulman.” I post them chronologically but with a lag of four months: pictures of L.A. when I’m in London, for instance, or of spring when it’s winter. It’s a small rebellion — more a confusion, really — but also a way of pointing out the manipulation inherent to social media, the way everyone’s public self, even in the most honest diary, is a fiction.