Gabler, Jay, ‘ “Pics or It Didn’t Happen” Shows What Instagram Shuts Out’, The Tangential, (April 2017)

http://www.thetangential.com/2017/04/14/pics-or-it-didnt-happen- arvida-bystrom-molly-soda-review/

“Pics or It Didn’t Happen” Shows What Instagram Shuts Out

Pics or It Didn’t Happen, a potent new book of images collected by Arvida Byström and Molly Soda, opens with Instagram’s republished Community Guidelines. In the name of maintaining “an authentic and safe place,” the guidelines forbid nudity.

This includes photos, videos, and some digitally-created content that show sexual intercourse, genitals, and close-ups of fully-nude

buttocks. It also includes some photos of female nipples, but photos of post-mastectomy scarring and women actively breastfeeding are allowed. Nudity in photos of paintings and sculptures is OK, too.

Given that most of the images in *Pics* — all of which have been blocked by Instagram — were removed because they depict female nudity, photographed by the subject or another

woman, the painting-and-sculpture exemption might remind the reader of Guerilla Girls' tally.

"Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections [of the Met] are women," their famous billboard noted, "but 85% of the nudes are female." So, a bare breast can appear on Instagram: it just has to be grandfathered in (the patriarchal idiom is all too appropriate here) via the respectable art establishment.

Lynda Benglis's nude self-portrait, a 1974 photograph of the artist with a giant dildo that appeared as an advertisement in Artforum, appears in *Pics* by way of a shot of that picture taken and shared by Maja Malou Lyse. Benglis's cameo both nods to the history of provocative self-portraiture in photography and illustrates a tension that's raised repeatedly in the five essays that open the book: privilege.

Benglis had access to the capital and cachet to have her photo printed in a major art-world publication. That kind of access was, and remains, rare — which is, in part, why so many latter-day artists following in her footsteps are taking to social media platforms like Instagram.

Social media have been remarkably liberating for artists, particularly young artists who are still building their audiences and their practices. Some, like the editors of *Pics*, make social media integral to their work. This collection serves as a reminder, though, that Instagram is only a public space in the sense that a shopping mall is a public space: you're meant to feel comfortable there only insofar as you continue to, in one way or another, fill the pockets of the proprietors.

Instagram has become a flashpoint for criticism because it's highly popular, it's tailored specifically for the sharing of images, and it has a content policy far more restrictive than platforms like Twitter or Tumblr. Instagram (like Facebook, more consequentially but less likely to be seen as a medium of artistic expression) imposes a bathing-suit rule: no genitals, thongs are okay but not bare butts, and nipples are permissible only when male.

The policy would be contentious enough if that were the end of it — but wait, there's more. Instagram also, as *Pics* demonstrates, doesn't like pubic hair. Want to show a woman in underwear? Okay, but only if she shaves, and doesn't have visible period blood.

A central argument of *Pics* is that Instagram perpetuates a culture of sanitizing and homogenizing women's bodies, experiences, and sexuality. The network also forces a binary, since any nude upper body that has any seemingly feminine characteristics — that is, any nude upper body that's not unambiguously and exclusively male — is subject to censorship.

Pics presents the negative space of Instagram: it shows us what we're *not* seeing. Well, some of what we're not seeing. The editors are conscious of the fact that the submissions elicited by their call tended disproportionately to come from people like them: young, light-skinned women. There are other worlds of censored content that we don't see here.

What we do see ranges from the candid to the computer-generated: selfies by people who were feeling their look, nipples or not. Carefully staged portraits. Digitally manipulated images. Funny photos, like an image of a toy Spider-Man clinging to either end of a nipple stud. Photos expressly intended to show what is normally hidden: pubes, stains, grit.

Does Instagram have to be a venue for such images? Yes, the authors seem to argue, if it wants to illuminate and empower instead of to constrain and obscure — if it wants, as its own Community Guidelines state, to be a genuinely "authentic and safe place."

Sarah T. Roberts, in her introductory essay, adds a kicker to this discussion: she points out that monitoring content requires actual labor, and that labor is commonly outsourced. Sending that labor offshore, Roberts writes, allows companies like Instagram to "focus on the fun and more glamorous aspects of product innovation at their Silicon Valley headquarters, while making the task of clean-up, and the risks of exposure to inappropriate content, a problem mostly for people on the other side of the world."

Pics or It Didn't Happen complicates the idea of Instagram — or any other online social network — as a "community." In a world where it sometimes seems like we see *everything* on our smartphones, Molly Soda and Arvida Byström are calling our attention to the fact that there's a lot we don't see. "Safe" and "authentic" can be loaded words.