

Felix, Annie, 'Nsfw: Check Out Arvida Byström And Molly Soda's Collection Of Banned Instagram Photos', Paper, (March 2017)

<http://www.papermag.com/arvida-bystrom-and-molly-soda-have-a-new-archive-of-deleted-instagram--2306491758.html>

## NSFW: CHECK OUT ARVIDA BYSTRÖM AND MOLLY SODA'S COLLECTION OF BANNED INSTAGRAM PHOTOS



The iron hand of Instagram censorship is a source of both frustration and fun. There are those beating at the high gates of our corporate overlords to #FreeTheNipple, and there are others – **more tongue-in-cheek** – blurring that line between what the company deems appropriate and what's not. Two of Instagram's most familiar artist-celebrities, longtime social-media denizens **@arvidabystrom** (a.k.a Arvida Byström) and **@bloatedandalone4ever1993** (or Molly Soda), are exploring Instagram's censoring policy in a different light with their new book *Pics or It Didn't Happen*. The 300-page submissions-based collection features censored images courtesy of the likes of Instagram users Petra Collins, Harley Weir, Rupi Kaur, and Amalia Ulman, as well as from Arvida and Molly themselves.

*Pics or It Didn't Happen* is a political and historical statement in direct disobedience of corporation-dictated rules of which images are appropriate

for viewing and which must be taken off, removed from our feeds and minds. It's an addition to your coffee table that actually explores the power of the image in our collective memory, and how deleting an image is akin to deleting a piece of history – if there aren't any pictures, it *didn't happen*. We sat down with Arvida Byström and Molly Soda for an existentialist chat on politics, *Pics or It Didn't Happen*, and internet personas.

**Tell me more about the archival aspect of *Pics or It Didn't Happen*, and its role in collective memory.**

**Arvida Byström:** Instagram is like a big archiving tool, and the images that aren't allowed on the biggest platform of that sort, are left out and forgotten. It makes sense to remember them, and that's why we printed them in a book. This is an archiving piece, [because we are] compiling something that is basically unseen, removed from online history.

**Molly Soda:** And also just like, thinking about where Arvida and I work a lot in our artwork, we were questioning the archive - how do you archive non-physical space? And how do you take these things that we look at everyday and don't think about, or don't look at, at all – but know are there, and actually think about that maybe one day they won't be there anymore – or that they're always subtly changing. So it's also kind of like a time capsule in that way too.

**Why not a website? Why archive the internet on paper?**

**AB:** It is a really interesting question because a lot of digital formats do not really do well outside of the screen, or outside of like a projection – or something you can walk through in digital space, but Instagram is still structured in a very old school kind of way, you know? I mean, I guess we have some videos, and we just put them out as some kind of scroll or timeline.

It's just also funny because, I guess, me and Molly are kind of like the digital people, and Instagram is kind of more classical and corporate – and we're the ones doing things in a kind of more classical *corporate* way in a certain sense (by putting out a book). Also, putting something in a book is saying something in an art historical or classical way that we (as artists working primarily in a digital medium) are not allowed to be, and that itself is pretty interesting.

**MS:** Yeah, I totally agree. I feel like the printed image is always going to be elevated, no matter what. It's always going to be seen as more valuable

because its tangible – but it's not more valuable. This is a kind of silly way to take a jab at that, in a sense too.

**AB:** Yeah, I've been reading a lot about that too in terms of art history, and art history is centered around the book. And that's why digital art is kind of [excluded from the historical narrative of art]. Maybe that's a good thing, maybe we should go away from classic art history, but it's also kind of interesting to put yourself in an art historical context – being like, okay – we're also here.

**What was the process of picking these images like? Selecting which pieces go into this alternative archive of the archive that is the internet?**

**MS:** It was mostly submission based, and then, after, we sort of had to sift through all these submissions. It's interesting because we obviously wanted to pick stuff that is relevant, but we also want things to be aesthetically pleasing, and so I think there is a... you can tell that it's picked by us. It really reflects our aesthetics and what we find pleasing.

I think there's a lot to keep in mind, because you also want it to be an accurate representation – just because something got taken down, doesn't mean that it needs to be in a book, or it's a good photo..

**AB:** Yeah I guess it's really according to our standards, which is also why I do think it's good if people make their own projects like this or make websites. This is our personal pick of photos that we think are worth [remembering], and you know, we couldn't really fit all the pictures that we thought were beautiful or interesting – but these are the things that we are like sad that they got lost by censoring from the internet.

**The premise of the book really brings up themes of surveillance in the virtual world – how our IRL bodies are controlled by URL rules and regulations. How would you characterize social media surveillance?**

**MS:** There's a really good piece in the book about brands and marketing, about advertising sort of co-opting the way that we post online, like the style, like the aesthetics of what we post and what we like/comment on. They market to you based on your tastes, and it's sort of funny how it flips it back around on you. I just think about ads all the time and how I'm being watched anytime I'm on my phone or my computer. It's just something that's going to happen, so I'm not the kind of person who's like freaking out about it, but I know that it's happening, and it's funny to think about what's

being fed back to you. And the way that it's sold back to you – the personality, the brand that you're projecting is basically being sold back to you.

**AB:** Yeah, like buying a better version of yourself. Here, buy this product that looks like you, that we decided is perfect for you.

**MS:** Exactly! It's insane!

**Yeah – it's weird that we don't talk about online personality anymore – it's a brand, and it gets reflected in actual marketing campaigns for products that you end up buying. Internet marketing is basically a mirror – the brand is you, and you are a brand.**

**MS:** It's not natural – I mean, it is natural in that we go in that direction because we live in a capitalist society where self-promotion is the thing to do. Even today, I got an email from these people that were like we run something called Self Made, which is basically a professional editing service that basically edits Instagram so that it's a more authentic you. Like this is where we have gotten to – where you have to consult like what your internet brand will be.

**AB:** It's also like all those click factories that generate clicks, just because there are not enough clicks in the world. It's like capitalism just has to grow and grow and grow, and if there's not enough people in the world to make it grow, we will create that.

**MS:** We will create like bots – it's just all going to be bots, and brands, and advertising.

The things about the internet that were so like organic and beautiful still exist, but it's so different now how everyone uses the internet. Instead of being like a place to release – especially, I'm thinking a lot about how when I was a teenager (I cannot imagine being a fucking teenager online now) it was like Wow, I'm just going to write my LiveJournal entry, like I feel really good about this. I'm really happy that these internet friends are here for me. And now it's so like – Wait can I post this? Is this okay? You know?

Now it's so intertwined [with who you are IRL] – like how will I be perceived if I post about this; how will I be perceived if I don't post about this.

**Like your internet personality is also intertwined to your IRL identity?**

**AB:** Yeah, it's like technically more tied to the idea of your identity, which – the internet earlier, you made an account and you didn't have to put a lot of personal information. You know, today – like Facebook and Google make

sure everything is linked up. Which, I see, is also a problem – say, like, you are a teen and you want to be anonymous to your parents online – I feel like it's harder to do that today, because everything is linked up to one identity ideally. Because corporations want that, because corporations want a coherent data of you, so they can sell you the right things – but they always phrase it in the terms of safety so you know who you are connecting to. Our ideas of safety are structured around corporate interests! Like to catfish people is the worst thing in the world. That's actually good, because you know, people can be whomever they want to be online you know?

**MS:** Catfish are actually the purest form of the internet – maybe I love catfish?

**That really speaks to the idea of having a coherent identity, either IRL or online, and the idea of a natural or "authentic" persona (brand?).**

**MS:** The thing about authenticity – I perceive a lot – is that [it] is used a lot in terms of marketing and branding. Authenticity is fake, because you can't be your authentic self – ever.

**AB:** Yes, nothing is authentic – it's just like something that gets told to you that you have to be. Yeah, that's a marketing tool.

**MS:** Yeah, but this is what we go online for – I remember like when we were in school they would tell us that the internet is not a reliable source – I don't know if they say that anymore in schools, but that's how I've always taken it. The internet is - everyone has an equal part, and therefore it is insanity. I mean, it should be chaos – you shouldn't take everything at face value, but that's what we do because we want to believe what we see. [Arvida: There's also a problem with the marketing algorithm these days] The algorithm is what's ruining things

**AB:** Because people want to see a reflection of themselves in a good way, or in like a positive way. And yeah, here we are again.

**Yes, and if the algorithms of tailored marketing that reflects only us keeps on – the internet will turn into a completely personalized experience.**

**MS:** And that's always how it's been, and it's been going in that direction – because that's why we sought out the internet in the first place, because oh – I want to find myself. That's why I used it when I was a teen – I want to figure out what I like, but I think that there's a little bit more room there. But now it's like – oh you like this? We're going to only show you this. You like

this person – then we're only going to show you this person. After deciding what I find valuable The fact that Instagram switched to an algorithm is like so stressful to me, and should be stressful to more people, but I don't think we really like think about it as long as we're getting enough likes on our pages. So the fact that you don't see someone could be the fact that you forget who they are – do you know what I mean?

**AB:** Again with archiving, almost – it's our public digital mind, but it's formed in groups. For some reason when I go on Amazon – like when I go on Amazon TV – and looking through what the free movies I have are – it seems to have gotten the algorithm wrong so I get a lot of like Trump-related things and weird racist things. This is like a part of the internet that I never see

**MS:** Maybe we should be creating all these accounts that get different types of information sent to them, so we can have a better view of the internet – Do I need to make a fucked up account?

**It's funny how you're so ready to build another online personality – like internet identity is so fluid for you, not authentic at all.**

**MS:** But I think me and Arvida get sold to people as authentic, because people think that our feeds are more *real* – they're not, it's just branding.

**AB:** We're not authentic – we're not real. Our feeds are just as charaded, just around different themes.

**MS:** We're all fake as fuck – the thing is, if we take what we see online in face value. We're basically just all sitting around projecting onto each other, all fucking day – and it's not.. you know, its still a *thing*. We're still curating a *thing*.

**I love that – We're all fake as fuck, and projecting onto each other. So in terms of you guys' art and how you are perceived as "real," are you performing authenticity then?**

**AB:** I think people just *like* to read it that way. I'm not personally trying to perform authenticity. To me it's not about creating an authentic self, but just like not trying to create a coherent picture of yourself, because it's never that easy – you're never one thing (like the corporations want you to be). And also, just not creating a picture where you look super super happy – I think things like that are more important to me.

**MS:** I definitely think about authenticity and how a lot of people perceive my "brand," or whoever I am, or the performance of what I am doing as being authentic. There's a lot of like TMI – I post a lot of like unflattering pictures, but also like people don't understand that I'm the one who is posting it, so I'm still in control. My curated self may be different from other people's curated selves – but we're all playing the same game. You know, I always tell people – I'm the same as a cat avatar, like it doesn't matter.

*Pics or It Didn't Happen* is published by Prestel Books, and will be released in the US on April 27, 2017.

*Splash image courtesy* Pics or It Didn't Happen.