

Todd, Monique 'You Can't Censor This', Dazed, (September 2015)

<http://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/25941/1/these-insta-artists-are-changing-body-image-arvida-bystrom-molly-soda>

You Can't Censor This

In their honest, no-frills approach to the body, artists like Arvida Byström and Molly Soda are changing perceptions on femininity, normality and self-acceptance

TextMonique Todd
A year ago



'Wow @instagram thanks for making it clear that an unshaven bikini line needs censoring' reads a [tweet](#) by photographer [Petra Collins](#) in response to [Instagram's](#) decision to [delete her profile](#) in 2013.

Two years on and female bodies that aren't waxed, smooth and squeaky clean still receive unfair treatment by social media. Just this year period blood, pubic hair and nipples have incited concern from Instagram, flagging the dominance of narrow feminine ideals on seemingly 'open' online spaces.

In fact, these instances of unfairness and sexism have actually exposed the faux neutrality of social media. It has become increasingly clear that subjective (and primarily male) forces are policing expression and consumption, abruptly censoring images and shutting off accounts with little or no warning.

With Instagram imposing a set of vague [guidelines](#) on what can be uploaded (nude photos and 'some' photos of female nipples aren't allowed, but nude paintings and sculptures are permitted) as

well as offering equally blurry explanations as to why images are pulled down, it seems we have a straight up scary situation where female bodies can't exist without an okay from anonymous authorities.

In many ways Instagram offers so much potential for diverse representation but it appears that this very platform is teetering towards the marketed insecurity shelled out by dominant mainstream media outlets. Sure, they've admitted to not always getting it right, but how many more times will they get it wrong?

Fortunately, this hasn't put off the five females on this panel. Armpit hair, body fluids and periods are proudly showcased on their feeds, revealing the female body as we rarely see it. Whilst run-ins with Instagram have been frequent and public, these women are still set on championing the female body – hair, gunk and awkwardness included. Below, they give their thoughts on Instagram politics, beauty ideals and whether complete body acceptance will ever be on the horizon.

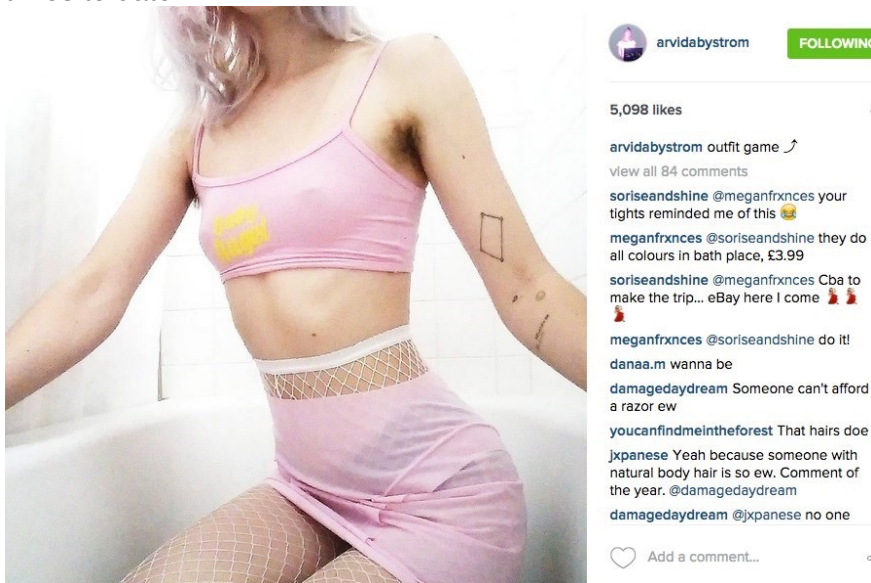
Rupi Kaur: A Toronto-based artist, poet and spoken word performer, Rupi explores the body and its place in society. Recently, she gained a flurry of media attention when Instagram removed her images of period stains.

Molly Soda: A digital artist, a cyber feminist, a self-proclaimed 'webcam princess' and a Tumblr queen (she amassed around 30,000 followers in the 00s), Soda makes work about the online female body through selfies, GIFs and other online projects.

Arvida Byström: A Stockholm native now based in LA, this photographer and artist primarily uses self-portraits to explore femininity, identity and gender ideals.

Saerah Lee: A Melbourne-based photographer, Saerah posts macro shots of her own body on Instagram, poking at ideologies framing taboos, eroticism and disgust.

Alexandra Marzella: Also known as Rosey Diamond and artwerk6666, Marzella uses selfies and performance art to explore notions of narcissism and self-image. Her account has been deleted 16 times to date.



Gallery Arvida Byström's Instagram

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“It sucks to feel like a freak and be grossed out by your own body. This makes people sick” – Arvida Byström

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How has being a woman affected your experience online, as females with heightened visibility?

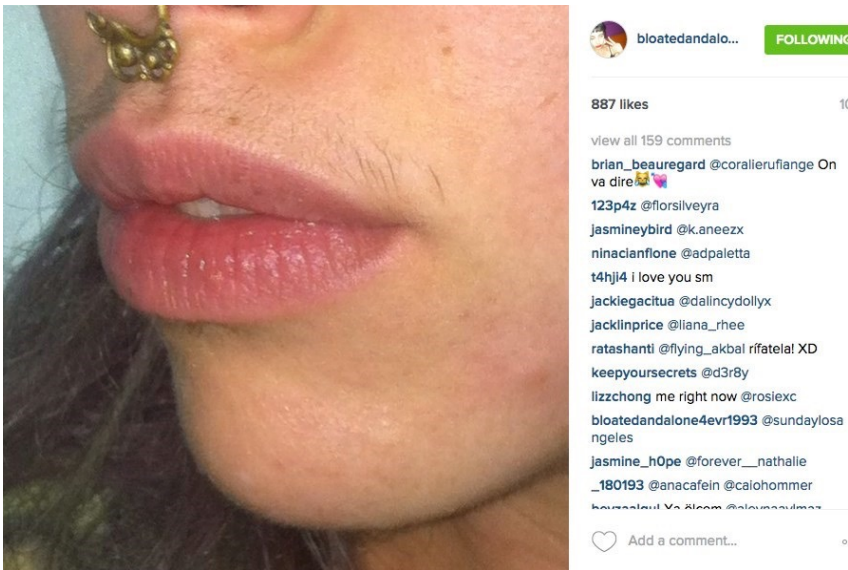
Molly Soda: The way women are perceived online is just a heightened reflection of society and the way women, and particularly their bodies, are treated in real life. Everything you put out there essentially invites others to criticise and interpret your image. As women, we grow up learning to be critical of our own bodies, as well as other women's bodies – there is a great sense of shame embedded into all of it.

Alexandra Marzella: Females are held to an unrealistic standard and have been for a very long time. We are placed into moulds and categories and when we don't quite fit we are scrutinised, called out and hated on. The artists on this panel are putting something out there that is pushing the boundaries of what is expected and it is seemingly working for us. The only reason I care about how many people follow me on social medias is because I could potentially put more good into the world than if I didn't. Haters aren't enlightened. They come they go.

Rupi Kaur: For a long time it was about looking beautiful, for as long as I can remember. The first social media account I ever made for myself was a hi5 account back in grade 8 I think. The site asked for a profile photo and so I put on a tank top I probably wouldn't ever wear outside the house. I took my hair out of its braid and wore it out – I had never worn it out before. I uploaded the photo in excitement because the photo did not look like me – the photo looked beautiful. And so it began – years of always trying to be better than reality, but I was lucky to quickly learn how damaging that entire world was and now I'm trying to go against those norms. Myself, along with the rest of the artists on the panel are examples of folks trying to go against that.

Saerah Lee: In my earlier years on the internet, like MSN and Bebo type shit, I would be conscious of my appearance in everything from my default picture to the way I looked video chatting. I've since kind of matured and realised that there's more to a person than looking pretty. I do still feel that

being a woman online makes you especially vulnerable to objectification and sexualisation but I also think this can be interpreted into a form of responsibility – a responsibility to challenge the notion of women as a mere sexual objects. Women should be empowered to be in total control of their bodies and I believe that it's their prerogative to share or keep private as much of it as they please without being labelled as promiscuous.



Gallery Molly Soda's Instagram

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“As women, we grow up learning to be critical of our own bodies, as well as other women’s bodies – there is a great sense of shame embedded into all of it” – Molly Soda

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All of you in some capacity use Instagram to challenge the representation of the female body. Baring in mind Instagram’s [Community Guidelines](#) (objecting female nipples, nude buttocks etc), what are your views on these rules regarding the female body?

Arvida Byström: This reflects society so bad. I saw *Purple Magazine* (hate to hate but lets be real – we have to be able to critique each other) where their series with (mainly, except one) naked women doing nothing sexual was labelled under the tag 'sex'. Why are all naked, especially cis or non-cis female bodies labelled under sex? A body has to be able to be

a body without being sex. I have sex, I love sex, sex is fun, I love feeling sexy, I like it when respectful people think I'm sexy, or like I wouldn't mind a person masturbating to a photo of me – but my body is also so much more. It's a body swimming and completely unsexy sometimes, it's a body feeling tired, feeling emotions, running, sleeping, pooping, getting break downs and doing a billion things naked or not.

Molly Soda: It doesn't surprise me. The female body is constantly policed – why would Instagram be any different? I've had photos taken down that didn't even involve nudity. I had a photo taken down that was a screenshot of a text conversation that had the word 'sex' in it. There is a great fear that surrounds the female body – a nude photograph immediately becomes pornographic even if that is not the intent. It doesn't keep me from posting whatever I want though – enough people will see it before it gets taken down.

Alexandra Marzella: They are terrible and wrong. I agree it's not surprising. The world is corrupt, not the people fighting against that corruption. The human body is beautiful in all of its messy glory. There is nothing to censor. Nudity is not sacred, it is normal, and it's average. Children don't need to be shielded from legitimate truths. It is only hurting us. Men's nipples used to be covered whereas women's were exposed. History and 'Big Brother' media have an incredible way of skewing things. Nothing is about love and community. Everything is about greed.

Rupi Kaur: My views are simple: you want to make community guidelines? Fine. You want to restrict users from posting female nipples, nude buttocks, etc? Fine. But then do not pick and choose where you're going to enforce these guidelines and where you're not. I'm not saying it's right and wrong for them to ban certain things – that's a whole different discussion. I'm saying it's wrong to pick and choose what's convenient rather than going by the rules they make

themselves. Their community guidelines don't mean shit when they allow over sexualised nudity that is demeaning and violent.

Saerah Lee: What's regarded appropriate is purely subjective and I second Rupi's comment about enforcing the community guidelines fairly across the board. It's just a human body. Nipples are nipples; butts are butts, regardless of gender. I don't think a nude body or certain body part needs to be censored. Share what you want – it's your body!



Photography Arvida Byström, Rupi Kaur and Alexandra Marzella
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Some of you have had your images taken down by Instagram, often without initial warning or explanation. Why do you think the powers behind these platforms are usually opaque with their reasoning?

Arvida Byström: Hate when this happens. You rarely know even what photo they've taken down. I think they do this to minimise the turbulence around it that usually get spurred by people sharing how fucked up it is when photos get removed. I basically just think that is the smoothest way for them to get as little critique as possible.

Molly Soda: Usually I have an idea of which photos will be taken down when I post them. I still test the waters to see what is deemed acceptable and what is not. I mostly get afraid of Instagram just straight up deleting my account. I feel really silly admitting that. I wish I didn't care.

Arvida Byström: OMG I so wish I didn't care either but I think it's hard to know what gets taken down.

Sometimes about three or a few blurry pubic hairs are fine, but all of a sudden there is one too many and it gets removed. And butts seem to be okay? Which is nice but also a bit confusing to me?

Alexandra Marzella: There's nothing silly about fearing that a large body of your work will be ripped away from you. That is normal. Especially when it's for bullshit reasons. I've been completely deleted from Instagram 16 times. I've been advised to give up or move on plenty of times. I've considered creating my own app. These are not options. This is so much bigger than silly Instagram. This has nothing to do with anything but rules meant to control, to oppress. Facebook is big government at this point. Facebook is holding hands with Hilary Clinton skipping down the yellow brick road to hell. I've at least managed to keep an archive of my instagram images on my Tumblr because for some reason, with the exception of videos, they don't disappear which is amazing (Instagram if you're reading this please don't change this or I could die).

Rupi Kaur: Alexandra you kill me. *[laughs]* Instagram is a machine, run by a bigger machine called Facebook (or more like a monster) and yet here I am, with accounts on both platforms (the hypocrisy eh?). These companies don't see us as people. We're accounts. My photo was taken down twice and they only cared to offer reasoning when the media got a hold of the story and they offered an apology, said it was a mistake. Want to know the funny thing? That same time they took the photo down; Facebook (who owns Instagram) disabled my personal Facebook account for over a month. Their excuse was something about how my name wasn't correct – bullshit of course. They were trying to stop me from posting anything else on the matter, or punish me for the amount of attention I'd already brought to the issue. But you know what? They think have the

power to do anything cause they can come up with any excuse for it but the truth is we have the power.

Saerah Lee: My posts on my Instagram page usually revolve around abstracted macro shots of various body parts including the skin, hair, lips etc. I accept the fact that some of my posts may be interpreted as 'risqué', but never have I posted photos depicting 'vulgar' or over sexualised nudity of any sort. To date, the majority of the posts that have been removed from my account were either close-up pictures of my lips or some form of goopy body fluid. How does a photo of lips or a bodily fluid breach the Community Guidelines?! I think Instagram just removes the post quickly and quietly to keep people from stirring up too much drama.



Gallery Alexandra Marzella's Instagram

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"The more I look at my body the more I find it fascinating. The more fascinated I am by it the more likely I am to take and post images of it" – Alexandra Marzella

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Well, it's clear from all your experiences that Instagram co-signs very narrow ideas of what's 'okay' about a woman's body. What are your thoughts on the strict markers of femininity?

Arvida Byström: Because gender binaries sell. Aiming products to a clear group have been shown to be very effective. Also, rules that are very restricting work well for capitalism too. If the norms are impossible to follow,

people will keep on buying products in the hopes of fitting into the norms.

Molly Soda: Arvida makes a good point – it is very very capitalist. If we are convinced that we need to look a specific way we will do anything we can to achieve that. It's a system built on shame and not being good enough.

Arvida Byström: Yeah and in one way I sometimes want to barf on myself when people want me to sell a positive body image, because I just don't think the 'revolution' should happen inside of capitalism, because capitalism will always do it with a selling point. Like that Always video '#LikeAGirl' – they are not doing this campaign to make people feel good about themselves, they do it because selling a restricting and hating body image is not as sellable as it used to be. There are no good capitalists.

Alexandra Marzella: I agree with all of the above. In a way looking a certain way has been derived from communities who use this tactic to bring them closer together or to set them apart from others. This is a mostly healthy standardised ideal. But it's gone too far and continues to do so. It is born out of money, power and greed and has been for a long time. Look how you feel or want to feel. Money ain't real.

Saerah Lee: What would happen to all these companies if all of a sudden women stopped caring about the superficial societal pressures of looking and being a certain way? No money for companies selling make-up, skincare, cosmetic surgery – the list goes on. There's nothing wrong with wanting to look your best but I think society in general is just obsessed with the ubiquitous worship of unattainable ideals.

The media still attaches a lot of shame to bodies that divert from the celebrated 'norm'. Why do you think it's important to be open and proud with the realities of the female body?

Arvida Byström: It sucks to feel like a freak and be grossed out by your own body. This makes people sick.

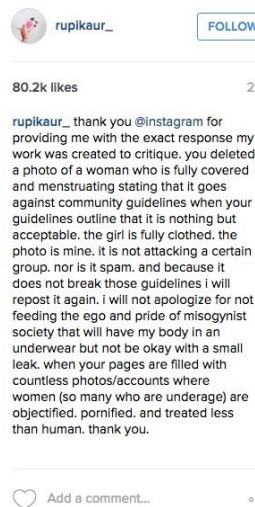
Molly Soda: Being open with your own body allows, invites and encourages others to do the same or to

at least feel good about their bodies. It's a chain reaction of positivity. Of course, a lot of people are going to see that and be rude and negative but I ignore that – I think there are a lot of benefits to sharing your 'reality' – hopefully someone can see my photo and think, 'hey, I have hair on my stomach too' or 'my boobs sort of look like that' and in turn, feel a little less self conscious.

Alexandra Marzella: What Molly said has basically been my philosophy for a while now. The more you share the more you can relate the more you can stop hating yourself. Walk around naked, be free, and wipe off your make up. When others follow suit you'll all realise how similar we really are.

Rupi Kaur: Because there's nothing you can do to change the human body and what it does and how it behaves and how it grows and blooms and blossoms. The sooner we learn to accept that the happier we'll be.

Saerah Lee: I think we are so exposed to the media's portrayal of what a 'perfect woman' looks like we sometimes forget that there are other also perfectly normal body types out there too! Similar to what Molly said, I think through being open and proud of your own body you can encourage others to be more accepting of their own bodies.



Gallery Rupi Kaur's Instagram

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“I don't know what the future of body acceptance is but I do know that as long as we continue to create intelligent art we're helping our societies move closer to acceptance” – Rupi Kaur

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How have you become comfortable in representing your body despite societal pressures?

Arvida Byström: Hmm, I mean I am fairly normative looking, so when talking about norms it's not like I fall very far from this. All bodies are beautiful and great no matter ability, skin colour, size and gender. Also, dating girls makes me feel amazing. Like I can do and be very gendered things and most girls that I hang out with know that all these sides are things you kind of can put on and take off.

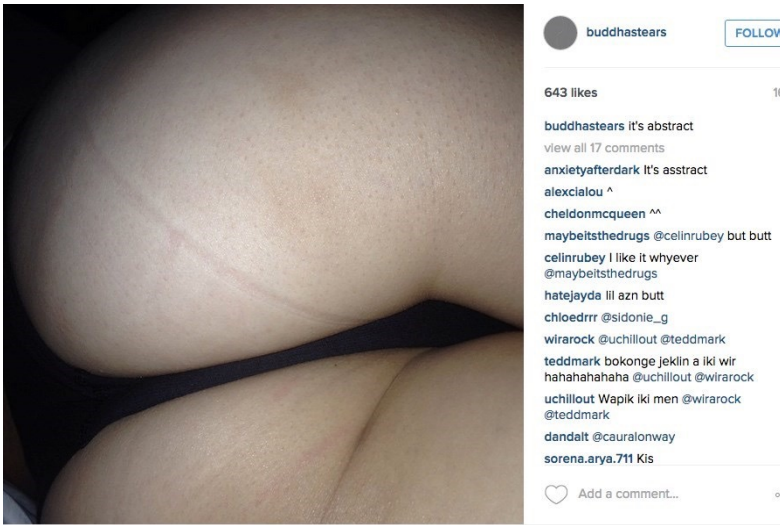
Molly Soda: I agree, I am also fairly normative looking – I am fair skinned and relatively thin – I don't think my body is particularly 'shocking' (I personally don't think anyone's body is shocking) but I'm also not surprised when people react negatively to it. There's no way to 100 per cent 'win' when it comes to putting images of yourself out there. I became more comfortable once I came to terms with that.

Alexandra Marzella: Arvida and Molly make good points. I don't disagree. The more I look at my body the more I find it fascinating. The more fascinated I am by it the more likely I am to take and post images of it. Insecurities are very real but they feel externally provoked. I fall into the category of a conventionally beautiful person. I'm white, thin, tallish, have long, thick hair, supple breasts. I hate it. I hate that that's the end goal.

Rupi Kaur: I agree Arvida and Molly. I've honestly been trying to unlearn a lot of things society has taught me. Trying to strip away the question of 'do I look beautiful in this' when I see a photo of me hasn't been easy but I'm moving in the right direction. I've been growing a lot more comfortable but of course I'm not 100 per cent comfortable. I have my insecurities, as does anyone else. Sometimes I feel them a lot and

sometimes I don't, but I also tell myself how superficial the externalities are.

Saerah Lee: I can't say I've never struggled with my body image and I'd be lying if I said I'm completely comfortable in my own skin even now but through sharing pictures of my body I feel a sense of acceptance within myself. I think I became comfortable representing my body because I guess you could say that I'm wearing a mask on Instagram. As funny as it sounds the anonymity of it all make it easy for me to be and show my true self.



Gallery Saerah Lee's Instagram

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“What would happen to all these companies if all of a sudden women stopped caring about the superficial societal pressures of looking and being a certain way?” – Saerah Lee

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Do you think we're moving towards accepting bodies that don't necessarily match the femininity marketed in the mainstream? What's the future of body acceptance?

Arvida Byström: I'm going to be all anti-capitalist and say: it is very hard to achieve body acceptance in a society built on the idea of selling more products faster and faster. There is a problem with companies buying into the body acceptance because they only do it as long as it's sellable. It's good for the general public to see more diverse bodies though, but I just wish this wouldn't have to come with the idea about having to buy something.

Molly Soda: I think there is a nice little bubble on the Internet that allows me to believe that body acceptance is a thing that we are closer to – and maybe we are – but when I look outside of that bubble I'm not so sure.

Arvida Byström: Very true. I live in this bubble in a way. I think also sexual education is so important! I think I got all this from both growing up in Sweden and further education online. So much guilt is tied to sex and sex in our society so linked to the body. The future of body acceptance feels like it's on the brink of becoming real every day. But it might never get there – it's hard to imagine.

Rupi Kaur: 'Body acceptance' – that sounds like quite a paradox to me. I agree with Arvida, the people I surround myself with have a similar mindset as me. I don't know what the future of body acceptance is but I do know that as long as we continue to create intelligent art we're helping our societies move closer to acceptance.

Saerah Lee: If we look back and see how far we've come in terms of accepting bodies outside of the 'norm', we're moving in the right direction. I mean sure, there's a long, bumpy road ahead of us but as long as we girls stick together and keep being open and sharing with the world, I'm sure one day body acceptance is something we can achieve. I think if we as individuals become comfortable in our own skin and just stop caring about societal pressures we can work towards it.

