**Anorexia**

This example of one’s relationship to information reminded me of my love for Avril Lavigne, or rather, her image, which motivated me to go to an internet café for the first time.

It was a hot summer day. I paid fifty cents for one hour of surfing on Google. Avril Lavigne’s documented stardom was big enough to occupy eleven tabs of image search results. Having one hour gave me enough time to carefully analyze these images as both containers of several images, and as individual ones.

The *vibes* of the first two tabs were my favorite, as they contained the images I recognized from my printed collection at home: portraits depicting her as a popstar, rockstar, sk8er girl, and complicated. Each image made me guess as to which context it was taken in. At the bottom of every tab, there was another bottom, revealing buttons to move onto a new tab.

It was a gruesomely hot summer day. I was not alone in my search. My sister, a Britney Spears fan, joined me to browse through Britney’s images on a computer next to mine. While our index fingers were scrolling down together, our analysis-immersed bodies seemed unaware of each other’s presence. These moments soon became our everyday activity. One hour of internet a day became a strategy to keep our minds sane.

After two weeks of reloading and anticipating new releases of Avril’s images, my skin started to itch. I started noticing the texture of the screen on top of the images grid: flat, shiny, unreal. I was bored.

The author and poet Ocean Vuong once read somewhere that beauty has historically demanded replication.[[1]](#footnote-1) That, in order to keep it alive through time and space, we make more of anything we find aesthetically pleasing. In this way, we allow ourselves to look at it over and over again. We (try to) make it last.

Unwilling to give up the beauty of my Avril appreciation just because I got bored, I started looking for ways to break out of my boredom. That’s when I spotted a *printer* in the café. This printer marked the beginning of my curatorial practice, one that emerged out of my intense ‘studies’ of Avril Lavigne. I started printing, then organizing a selection of images born out of various Avril settings: stage moments, backstage moments, collaborations, hangouts, dates. Right-click → Save Image As... → Left-click → Save to my personal folder called *Maisa’s Avril*, lounging cozily on the shared computer’s desktop. Double-click to Open Image, Click Print... Printing. Meanwhile, hold left-click and drag the folder to Recycle Bin. Right-click → Empty Recycle Bin. (I was afraid that the next user on the computer would steal the folder without having done all this research, curatorship and clicking that I was doing.)

I wanted to intellectually *and* physically own all of Avril’s images, to show my peers what it means to be the *biggest* AL fan. It didn’t matter that I was not surrounded by that many Avril fans, because deep down I knew that information travels quickly, and that I’d start to recognize them sooner than later. They would appear to me. Through bracelets, pink highlights, skull prints. Through chains worn around skinny necks and wrists.

As expected, Avril’s visually documented life became an ongoing topic during after-school hangouts with my friends. We’d ask whether anyone had seen pictures from her latest concert in LA. Or if we thought her nonchalant street outfit meant that she was breaking up with Deryck, her boyfriend.

Archiving images became a kids’ power play. Whoever discovered the latest images of her first got to be the winner—whatever this entailed.

As new strategies for practicing the hobby of archiving started popping up, I found myself questioning my research methods. This discontent led me to look beyond Google’s *All Images* and peruse for information in the web’s gutter. I was specifically interested in finding images with extraordinary gestures of guitar smashing, facial expressions, middle fingers, and preaching about stuff in some sort of a punk style. I managed to compile a folder depicting who I believed Avril *really* was, or at least who she had been at the start of her career. Finding these gems lead me to one day ‘become a winner’; again, whatever that entailed. Soon enough, the internet became a visible, rather tangible matter within my local surrounding: bracelets, pink highlights, skull prints, and chains. Skinny necks and wrists.

Where the capitalist class sees education as a means to an end, the vectoralist class sees it as an end in itself. It sees opportunities to make education a profitable industry in its own right, based on the securing of intellectual property as a form of private property. To the vectoralists, education, like culture, is just ‘content’ for commodification.

— McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker’s Manifesto*

One boredom followed another followed another followed another. Consuming information in a fast pace made me feel homeless in my own present, but hopeful about feeling settled in my future.[[2]](#footnote-2) My physical appearance manifested the information uncovered through all of my user curiosities: they caused me to wear black, to feel blue, and to be anorexic for seven long years of my teenage life.[[3]](#footnote-3)

At the age of thirteen, I got tired of manifesting these ‘informational changes’ onto my body so literally. I needed less obvious methods of relating to my subconsciousness. As I was searching for a new way to relate to the uncovered online information and my addiction to excavate it, I stumbled upon content-heavy Anorexia forums—a stream of information that soon became my favorite place for digital information.

Learning that deliberate hunger is a way of saying *no* to whatever the disordered is trying to negate felt just right. An act of reduction (of the body, of the self) seemed like a way to get rid of the information that, at that time, defined me so clearly.[[4]](#footnote-4) I longed to be something other than I was. De-creation, *of* and *for* me, was about to be cultivated as a new form of relationship with the information entering my life as a teenager.

Through these anorexia forums I learned about the many subjects one can negate, often being the image of oneself, and parental control. Many teenagers who wanted to gain control over their young lives found comfort in practicing eating disorders. They could eat and puke as much as they wished, in order to reach the weight that best defined the parameters of the space they wanted to occupy. The size of their bodies, according to them, manifested their relation to their domestic context. The healthier the body, the more representative of its healthy environment it is. In contrast, sick bodies are independent of the environment in which they are rooted and where they mostly operate. Sick bodies bite the hand that feeds them. Hard.

The best way to share a personal ‘progress’ of shrinking with other users was to create an Ana story, a YouTube video made up out of images representing an authentic experience of the disorder.[[5]](#footnote-5) Most videos were accompanied by sad music playing in the background.[[6]](#footnote-6) Each story was told similarly:

(intro) What did the subject look like as a healthy and normal person?

(rising action) Until they discovered Ana online,

(climax) Then scaled down to their lowest weight (average was 112lbs)

(falling action) Ended up in a hospital,

(conclusion) And finally went back to being healthy and normal.

A lot of the stories were not fully developed before they were shared. If an Ana video story ended with the disorder’s climax—the lowest weight—it meant that the situation will end in one of two ways: recovery, or death. There was something alluring about a video ending with an established definition of the climax point. Elaborate were my many speculations about how their stories ended. I nourished the need to discover how the story ended, and kept going back to some of YouTube accounts.

Most of the sufferers were my age and came from America, a land I learned to be the land of excess. From the pictures I could get an insight into their rooms, families, pets, domestic vibes. Most of them took pictures of their progress from their closet, a safe place to hide in case one of their parents walked in. The outdoor scenery around their house always seemed vast, but also rather empty. There was not much going on, except more lawns and houses.

Through these images, I could feel the comfort of the lights projected by their screens. But I also felt their loneliness; how there was no one’s reaction to the video that could validate it.

The place where I myself was growing up did not occupy that much space on an urban scale, nor did it feel like my body was a manifestation of its size and the various eating rituals it hosted. Thus it was hard to point out the exact subject of my negation to eat: sometimes I would blame it on my parents, sometimes on missing my home country. In hindsight, I think it might have just been solidarity all along.

Even though I never shared my progress in these various threads, reading about the users’ obsessive practices of calorie counting, body weighing, controlled eating and puking gave me a feeling that if I participated, I could find a sense of belonging. To belong, I had to learn how to occupy the least amount of space in the room.

As my body was shrinking, the feeling of being part of the online community grew stronger. Once again I longed to display my learned information onto my body and into my surroundings. Weighing 45 kg at the lowest, I wanted to occupy the least amount of space in the many rooms I encountered.[[7]](#footnote-7)

It was not boredom that urged me to put an end to this de-creation of my own body—for this process was very tricky to beat. It was the malnutrition, which stopped me from practicing other passions I found more important in life. Next to this, it was the moment I read the *unable-to-recover* story of a 30-plus mother lamenting about the mental pitfalls of eating disorders, hoping it wouldn’t pass down to her daughter. It was her story that got lost in the thread, because she didn’t specify how much she weighed, nor how many calories she ate per day.

What I learned back then, is that information is not knowledge. A lot of information showing the reader which metrics and/or numbers one must reach to ‘prove’ that one does it right is, in the end, just a race to the finish line.[[8]](#footnote-8) An anorexic person becomes successful when she shrinks to the point of being hospitalized. In the hospital, she meets other anorexics who are counting and obsessing over their digits. Yet within this hospital context, the rules of the game change: instead of the lowest weight, death is the final destination of the race. The winner gets to die.

After seven years of practicing meditative hunger, the underlying irony of the situation helped me pull myself out of the race.[[9]](#footnote-9) Recovering from one eating disorder, and then another, challenged me to question how my identity could be based on finding meaning in nothingness, within the shrinking of my self. Recovery meant letting go of information that materialized nothingness, an emptiness that, as a user, made me feel so strangely fulfilled.

1. Ocean Young, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘The consumer must never feel completely at home in his present, or he will stop striving toward a more fully satisfied future’ — Douglas Rushkoff [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘All abstractions are abstractions of nature. To abstract is to express the virtuality of nature, to make known some instance of its manifold possibilities, to actualise a relation out of infinite relationality. Abstractions release the potential of physical matter. And yet abstraction relies on something that has an independent existence to physical matter—information. Information is no less real than physical matter, and is dependent on it for its existence.’ — McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker’s Manifesto* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ‘Anything a female person says or does is open to “interpretation.” If the female anorexia isn’t consciously manipulative, then she’s tragic: shedding pounds in a futile effort to erase her female body, which is the only part of her that’s irreducible and defining.’ — Chris Kraus, *Aliens and Anorexia* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ana is Anorexia. Similarly Bulimia is Mia, and Eating Disorder is, if not otherwise specified, Ednos. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The most popular song being ‘She’s falling apart’ by Lisa Loeb <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FS48eB3NAKI>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a 177cm tall person, this was bad, it amounts to a BMI of 14,3. A BMI below 17.5 in adults is one of the common physical characteristics used to diagnose anorexia. There are also different tiers of anorexia based on BMI ranging from mild (<17.5), moderate (16-16.99), and severe (15-15.99), to extreme (<15). A BMI below 13.5 can lead to organ failure, while a BMI below 12 can be life-threatening. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ‘He or she in some sense is comfortable because this world is so neatly organized and predictable, and value is placed on all the things the anorexic places value on (namely, food weight, and symptomology). For acute anorexics, everything becomes means for measurement.’ — Kelsey Osgood, *How to Disappear Completely* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. ‘Adolescent sexuality, which employs ignorance as aphrodisiac, can become a girl’s deepest experience of Marxian alienation from the fruits of her labor: as soon as a girl understands what she is doing, she is no longer fit to do it.’ — Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Bitch* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)