

No Numbers

Identity beyond measure

A film by Sonja Ruebsaat
and Dena Ashbaugh



No NUMBERS - Identity beyond measure

a film by Sonja Ruebsaat and Dena Ashbaugh

"I know for a fact that sickness is easier, but health is more interesting."

--Marya Hornbacher, *Wasted*

"Stories have to be told, to be expressed, for they are part of the narrative quality of existence that can be shared and that therefore compensate for all that cannot be shared."

--William Dotty (1975)

When society talks about eating disorders the focus seems to be on the spectacle of the illness and the criteria that define it. People going through disordered eating often latch onto these definitions to try to make sense of what they are going through. Lacking other resources, they identify with the illness rather than with themselves.

In order to recover, people suffering from disordered eating have to move past these definitions and find their own voice. Storytelling offers a way for people to re-claim their identities and take the first step towards recovery on their own terms.

In *No Numbers* we tell our stories, sharing our experiences and documenting our recovery in a way that illustrates how the creative process itself heightens possibilities for healing.

Synopsis

We tell our stories as we understand them to be and in doing so deconstruct intuitional "truths" that have spoken for us for long enough. Using film as a medium, we incorporate voice, sound, imagery and movement to construct narratives that replace self-destructive practices with those that are self-creating.

We explore how people with disordered eating can engage in recovery by challenging dominant conceptions of health, both within popular culture and Western medicine. We discuss how beauty is portrayed in popular culture and how these cultural ideals misconstrue what we perceive to be images of health. We also look at how practices of Western medicine constitute health and expose how these conceptions compromise full recovery. We illustrate how the language used and methods facilitated in treatment function within the same parameters that drive the disorder, that is, both focus heavily on food and body image.

Unlike other films on the subject of eating disorders that concentrate on the negative aspects of disordered eating, we move beyond the usual emphasis on the illness by focusing on health. Central to this idea of not focusing on the illness, we stay away from using numbers (weight, calories, measurements) or images of extremely skinny women in this documentary. Focus on such numbers and images is a driving force in disordered eating and hence can trigger more extreme behavior in eating disordered people.

We feel that our unique perceptions as people who have experienced disordered eating, which is very different from the diagnosed voice of "the Anorexic" or "Bulimic", will help others move past limited ideas of health and embrace new ways of existing that foster a more complete sense of self. In essence we offer a way of discovering identity beyond measure.

Context

Quotes from our journal entries:

"I think I'm fat, I hardly eat, I exercise all the time, but I still have my period. The doctor says there is nothing to worry about."

October 8th 1990

"How am I supposed to get better when everything around me tells me I'm not thin enough?"

January 9th 2000

"I gained all the weight they wanted me to and now what? I still feel the same inside, only now I have more to lose."

April 23rd 1985

We have been told time and time again by health professionals and the media what eating disorders are, yet we still don't really understand them. However, with 1 in 10

girls suffering from some kind of eating disorder, and 50% never recovering, there has to be a greater understanding of the scope of eating disorders, an understanding that moves beyond the strict limitations of medically defined criteria.

How can "the problem" of eating disorders be resolved when many girls' body concerns are being dismissed because they are considered a normal part of femininity in our society? In particular, how can it be resolved if this is the view not only in the health industry, but also in the media where popular culture encourages behaviour that is associated with disordered eating? The cultural beauty ideal of excessive thinness that is portrayed in the media gives the false impression that these goals and the behaviour to achieve them are not only normal, but desirable.

We as filmmakers and artists are women who have lived these frustrations and fallen into these shadow lands between health and illness. We have suffered from anorexia and bulimia, but now fail to meet the criteria that define these disorders. However, we still experience difficulties around food, our bodies, and identities that can propel us back into old self-harming behaviour.

So what now? We keep moving forward, reaching to achieve what we can consider to be full recovery. We feel there are many people in our position and a lack of resources for those of us navigating somewhere between the disorder and full health. We are creating this film to validate these experiences not represented in regular discourses on eating disorders. By doing so hope we such recognition will offer strength and possibility, as well as inspire people to embrace recovery.

Content

In *No Numbers*, besides our own stories, we include the story of one other woman, Joanne Wang. Joanne developed anorexia in China, but her disorder dramatically worsened upon immigrating to North Carolina. It was in the States, bombarded by media, that she learned the culture of weight loss and her extreme thinness was never questioned, only celebrated.

Each of us tell our story as we visualize the experience. We emphasize the use of imagery, poetry, movement, colour and other expressive means to capture what is lost when experience is logically explained. As part of encouraging empowerment through voice, each of us will contribute to the editing, sound and other aspects of cinematic narrative. Thus each story will be a unique individual expression, but will still resonate as a whole.

We also include additional voices in the film to both elaborate on and provide a greater context for the issues raised in each woman's story unfolds. To provide the medical context needed, we interview various medical practitioners about their views on eating disorders, the problems they see and the solutions they envision. Besides these conventional sources, we will also interview professionals working in various fields of alternative therapy (narrative therapy and body mind psychotherapy) to further explore the role of creativity and action in the healing process.

Finally we include voices representing the general public. We conducted several interviews with both women and men about media, body image and general health and happiness. Through these interviews we illustrate how the culture and society we live in create a general sense of "dis-ease" that works to support an increasing normalcy of hating ourselves. In this people struggling with disordered eating are dealing with many of the same stresses and emotions "normal" people experience but they are they are experiencing them more acutely and coping in a way that is both addictive and self harming.

Audience

We want to speak to those who struggle with the complexities of disordered eating, those caught in the grip of these disorders, their friends and families who are in it with them, and the community of health professionals involved in treatment.

With this film we hope to offer insight into the complexities of recovering from disordered eating. In presenting these stories from a more visual and creative perspective that captures the experiential over the cerebral, we hope to present a more visceral understanding. We hope with this to initiate dialogue that will bridge the gaps that exist between those living the disorder and those standing on the outside attempting to help.

On the one hand, we hope that those struggling will be empowered to not only challenge the obstacles they face and ask for what they need, but take the steps to participate in and create their own healing process instead of merely accepting the limitations of health and wellness set by social institutions. We also hope that friends, family and health practitioners will learn to listen and understand in new ways that also move beyond conventional approaches and will enable them to better aid in supporting full recovery.

However, the stories we plan to tell are not limited to those touched by disordered eating. These are stories about truth, pain, and the courage to overcome. Thus, the film speaks to the human experience, and we would not place limits on who could benefit.

The venues we envision for this type of documentary are international film festivals , public broadcasters, and libraries and classrooms. The content best suits documentary and educational programming, while the visual style will appeal to festival audiences.

Technical Treatment

This film is an hour and a half creative documentary. It was shot with digital video cameras (DSR 300 and Canon Optura) on mini dv and DV Cam tape. A non-linear digital system was used for editing (Final Cut Pro). Much of the visual material was treated with digital imaging tools in post-production (Adobe Photoshop, After Effects and Flash). Audio post production and music composition for the body of the film as well as Dena's story by Luke Martin . Music for Sonja's story composed by Sonja Ruebsaat, music for Joanne's story composed by Andrew Ellis. Sounds provided by Hildegard Westerkamp. The soundtrack was edited using ProTools digital editing software.

Artist's Statement - Sonja Ruebsaat

No matter how indescribable it seems, I have to try, or these moments overwhelm me."
-journal entry 2001

When I experience a piece of art that strikes me, I react in these ways:
I either feel that my inner images have been expressed so perfectly that I need say nothing, or I feel as if a whole new universe has been shown to me.

The first feeling validates my experience; the second gives me new perspective. Both feelings give me crucial guidance as I develop my own art.

I see artistic expression as a necessary mode for expressing the indescribable, the overwhelming, the magical, the unbearable. My video work is my voice; it is the mirror I create to reflect my thoughts about society; and because it is multi-sensual nature (images, movement, sound, voice, music, text) it can resonate with people in many ways.

I believe that each person within a culture has a unique perspective from which to speak of that culture. In the sharing of these perspectives we create community. Community

creates possibilities for better communication and a wider understanding of people and their experiences. With art, we tell the stories that represent culture. In this way we are all cultural producers and can all help in bringing about the changes needed to create healthier communities and people. This process of discovery and communication through art never ceases to challenge and amaze me.

Whether independent or commercial, my work always comes from a personal place. My objective in my work is to always be open to whatever new facet of culture I may discover through a project. The challenge then is to express my experience of the subject while still making it accessible and understandable to a wide audience. I use editing and sound composition as tools to create an overall rhythm for a piece that I believe accesses the deeper reaches of the viewers emotion while still allowing space for the viewers own imagination and interpretation.

I try to tell stories in a way that leaves room for the viewer's own questions and ideas. In "The Mirror's Voice" my first short video about disordered eating, I used timing, colour, music and sound as a means to evoke the emotions surrounding eating disorders, and with voiceover and interviews I create a layer of direct vocal storytelling.

In this way I work first intuitively, then systematically. I have come to trust the intuitive voice to bring out the essence of a story, while the process of re-working and editing allow me to organize my thoughts and make them accessible to a larger community.

Now that No Numbers is completed I see that it was indeed a self-fulfilling prophecy. Our message that telling one's story is healing has become a reality for me. Through the process of making this film, I have healed to a much deeper level than I ever thought possible.

Artist's Statement - Dena Ashbaugh

As an artist, I challenge people to question their "reality" and to discover new meaning and possibility. I'm interested in deconstructing "truth" by exposing what is not usually seen or talked about, that which is overlooked, uncomfortable. My re-telling resonates with peoples' own lived experience at depths that initiate transformation and empowerment by engaging not only inner reflection, but sparking dialogue and action. The themes I explore are the body as a site of negotiation between the private and public, the personal as the political, and empowerment through the reclaiming of voice and identity.

My work is based on my own experience as someone who has spent the last 20 years recovering from and trying to understand disordered eating. With a degree in Anthropology and Arts & Cultural Studies, as well as theatre training in Boal's "Theatre for Living", I uphold the importance of subjects speaking for themselves rather than being spoken for by "experts". Inspired by artists such as Jo Spence, I construct my own narrative instead of being subjected to the dominant discourse of others. This process of reclaiming voice is integral given my focus on recovery as my history as a "medicalized" subject has involved others reinterpreting my words to rationalize my feelings, explanations that have fallen short of my reality.

I have learned to speak for myself and find that I can best articulate the complex intricacies of living with disordered eating through creative expression. I have also found that this more holistic way of expression has helped in moving beyond the limits of "illness". In the lines I draw upon my body, a video commissioned by CBC, I begin with my body and map out the social constructs that have shaped my identity as "an Anorexic and my attempt to rework that identity on my own terms. In attempt to move away from Descartes dualism, I juxtapose narrative poetry and imagery to unearth those places in between, capturing the experiential, not the cerebral. In my Outfront piece, I build upon the narrative in lines, adding the voices of other women who have suffered from disordered eating.

Though these voices at times echo each other, they still remain distinct. In a world that tends to see the disorder before the person, I wanted to stress the importance recognizing the individual. Currently, I am writing an auto-ethnography in partnership with sociologist Dr. John Bogardus. Here I continue with my explorations of self, but delve into the Eastern influences of body-mind oneness that have driven my creative expression and recovery.

This procession in my work reflects the progression in my own healing. The reason I continue to push forward with this journey is because what I glean from such creative expression is not only meaningful for me, but significant to others. What marks this work is a rawness and honesty that evokes empathy and draws people to scrutinize their own lives and society with the same openness. Though the work begins with me, it resonates on many different levels with many people in ways I never could have imagined.

I see this documentary as an opportunity to return to the creative and experiential sensibility of lines, while also incorporating reflective insight about these discoveries that is integral to continuing dialogue and bringing the work back to community. In this I hope to share wisdom and put forth tangible tools that people in recovery, as well as

those attempting to help them, can utilize. Moreover, we hope to inspire others to tell their stories, stories that need to be voiced, need to be heard.

Description of Research:

Sonja and I (Dena Ashbaugh) met in 2001 after seeing each other's short videos on eating disorders (The lines I draw upon my body and The Mirror's Voice), both commissioned by CBC's 120seconds.com. We have spent the past two years discussing and researching this project.

The majority of our initial meetings were spent discussing our pasts and working out how to communicate our stories to each other. This was by far the most intense aspect of our research in that it both helped us to clarify our stories for ourselves as well as learn from each other's stories.

But the longest and most in depth research was going through anorexia and bulimia ourselves. We were both treated by doctors and psychiatrists and learned much of what we know about the medical approaches to eating disorders in the process.

We both kept journals religiously during our eating disorders. These journals have been invaluable in helping us work out the various stages of our illnesses and to discover the moments in life that helped or impeded the various stages of our recovery. We have both read extensively in other writings on the subject of eating disorders, from novels to autobiographies to medical texts to poetry on the web.

We spent much time bringing all this knowledge together to try to work out what we actually wanted from this project and how to translate our experiences into a language accessible to a wide audience. We watched many videos made on the subject of eating disorders, and we noticed a theme that ran throughout them, numbers. There was always talk of weight, measurements, calories consumed, miles run etc. We both noticed that these numbers jumped out at us as we were watching the videos. The numbers are presumably used to try to communicate the severity of eating disorders. However, to someone suffering from disordered eating these numbers can become not only goals for their own bodies but become the defining criteria for being "anorexic" or "bulimic", thus invalidating the experience of that individual. We feel that the use of numbers keeps the focus on the illness and its extremes. We are trying to explore recovery; therefore, we have decided that the numerical details of our eating disorders are unnecessary and may even cloud the focus of this video. Hence: "No Numbers - Identity beyond measure".

Music in No Numbers

Music is the language of the soul. We hear with our whole bodies.

We hear differently depending on our moods and our moods can be altered with music. If you've ever watched a dramatic film scene with the sound off, you know what a huge influence sound has on our level of emotional involvement. Traditionally in film, music has been used to heighten the emotions of a scene while sync and production sound have been used to describe its' more concrete aspects. In this way, we could say that traditionally music describes the internal world while sound effects describe the external. But often, in emotional situations, certain sounds stand out where they wouldn't normally. Our listening is altered by our emotional state, just as our emotional state can be manipulated with sound.

Our approach to the sound for No Numbers is to meld these aspects of music and sound design to create a soundscape for the video in which the edge between the external and internal world is blurred (In the style of the sound design in Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* and the soundscapes of composer Hildegard Westerkamp). We will use the sounds of our bodies (breath, heartbeat) and those of our environments (city sounds, water, wind, voices) as musical elements, thus composing the sound design as an integral part of the music.

The music will primarily be a part of the personal stories, and each of the three women will have a very different approach to the soundscape of her story. The music will range from experimental, to abstract sound design, to electronic dance beats, bringing out the individual experiences and perceptions of these women on a deeper level than can be reached with imagery.

for inquiries contact: sonja@beatrouteproductions.com