

The Conception of Breasts in the Intersection of Age and Gender

Therése Persson

National Institute for the Study of Ageing and Later Life (NISAL),
Linköping University
therese.persson@isv.liu.se

Four interviews on the interviewees' notions about their bodies are used as a point of departure for a discussion on one part of the female body – the breast – as an arena where age and gender intersect. How is the relation between age and femininity given meaning in these narratives, and specifically in the interviewees' accounts about their breasts? The breasts play a part in everyday negotiations on femininity and, as I argue, also in the construction and reconstruction of age. Cultural norms and principles concerning gender order and age order work together, and I describe how the interviewees both adhere to and challenge cultural patterns. For example, in their notions about differences in how much of the breasts you can show when you are twenty and when you are fifty years old. The analysis is focused on negotiations about appropriateness and attractiveness. The results indicate that breasts are related to aesthetic, existential, sexual, reproductive and sensual dimensions. The paper demonstrates that different aspects of the breast are being brought to the fore in different phases of a person's life and in different times in history, and how this is conveyed in the embodied biographies of the interviewees.

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The following text focuses on how the female breast can be a part of the everyday negotiations on womanhood and age. The paper concerns intersecting notions about femininity and age. My aim is to illustrate how breasts are employed in the narratives of four persons. I will address questions such as: How are the breasts used and in what way does this change through life? In what way does the significance of the breasts change with age? How is the relation between age and womanhood given meaning in the narratives, specifically in the accounts about breasts? What is revealed from the way the interviewees handle conceptions and norms about age and femininity in relation to the breasts?

The data consists of interviews with four persons about their body through life. One topic in these interviews has been the breasts. Other subjects have been what they *do* with their own bodies, for example, how the interviewees arrange their appearances, and how this changes during the life course. How is the body used? How do the interviewees make sense of and interpret their bodies, age, ageing and womanhood? And in what ways do their perceptions of this change over the years and during their life course? I call the stories conveyed to me during the interviews *body narratives*. One reason to focus on the body in the interviews is formulated in an excellent way by Lena, one of the four interviewees:

“/.../ It is intertwined with all kinds of stratum and levels and contexts. In other words, the body is incredibly *important* for the whole personal identity, and a lot of things are expressed in relation to the body in some way, I think.” (Lena)

In these body-narratives, the conceptions of the female breast appear as an arena for the intersection of gender and age. By, in this paper, focusing on the parts of the stories that narrates the breast, I will present my first preliminary analysis on the subject. But first I would like to describe shortly from what point of view I approach these body narratives.

Perspective

Both the interviews and the analysis is based on a poststructuralistic perspective. From this theoretical point of view there are no natural, obvious grounds for gender or age, instead it points to the necessity of focusing on how these kinds of orders are created and made. I try to use the argumentation on gender performativity by Judith Butler in my attempts to understand how the breast, as well as the body, age and sex, is given meaning and is made understandable and real. I understand performative as “a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (Butler 1999:177). With the concept of performativity I bring into focus things like for example what one does and do not do with the body, or here specifically with the breast, what one puts on, takes off, shows or hide as well as any kind of gestures and acts. Butler’s questioning of the materiality of the body as something prior to the signification of the body is also used in relation to the material (Butler 1993). The physical bodies or breasts of the interviewees are not explored here, since it is how the interviewees use their breasts in everyday life that is highlighted.

“/.../ acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality.” (Butler 1999:173).

By the work of Butler the illusion of a genuine interior gender core is put into question, and the naturalness of the body and sex is discussed. Although only preliminary this is also inspiring for a possibility to put the naturalness and obviousness of age and ageing into

question. John Storey (2003) argues that the way Judith Butler theorises gender identities as performatively constituted by acts, gestures and so on, is possible to translate also to other identities. My ambition is to use a similar theoretical perspective on identities connected to age. Storey writes, using quotes from Butler: "What Judith Butler (1999: 33) argues with regard to gender identities also, I think, applies to identities in general; that is, an "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results." (Storey 2003:91). For Storey all identities are "a performance in culture" and not an expression of nature.

This theoretical perspective also influences the way I approach the interviewees. I focus on how gender is performed and not on the interviewees as women or men. Nor the femininity performed with breasts that started growing during puberty, neither the femininity performed with breasts that are detached on a flat and hairy chest, are perceived as expressions of a genuine gender core. Every kind of body is obliged to resort to perform gender.

Depending on discipline and perspective age and ageing can be considered in different ways. Social or cultural age and ageing is socially and culturally constructed (in difference from biological or chronological age and ageing) (Närvänen 2004:67, Krekula, Närvänen and Näsman 2005:83). Social age refers to socially defined life phases and the meaning of these, to age norms about what is considered appropriate or acceptable for a particular age. Social ageing also relates to cultural patterns and schedules for a socially expected life course. "/.../ age norms are not equal to all, in different life phases, but are also genderized." (Närvänen 2004:68). The social norms on how to be and act in different ages vary according to gender. Cultural patterns on how to be and act as women and men vary according to age. Age, like gender, is a ground for relations of power and practice. Segregation and discrimination based on age can involve different ages (Krekula, Närvänen, Näsman 2005:84). Age can be used to create difference and these differences are often hierarchical.

In her book *A history of the breast* (1997) Marilyn Yalom discusses the different signification of the breast. On one hand, the breasts are associated to the transition from girlhood to womanhood and to sexual pleasure and nursing, and on the other hand they are increasingly associated to cancer and death, says Yalom. According to this it is possible to imagine the contradictory understanding of the breast that may be the result when the cancer affects a very young woman like one of the interviewees, Elin. The socially constructed life course is broken in a threatening way when cancer strikes a person who is in the beginning of adulthood.

Yalom also problemize the ownership of the breast. Does it belong to the hungry baby, to the fashion designer, to the artist who shapes it, to the doctor, to the pornographer or to the woman who wears it? Yaloms questions lead the thought further, and I would like to continue interviewing concerning the breast in the different stages of life. For whom does the breast exist? Does this change over time? How is the significance of the breast changed through life? How does gender performances change over time, with age, and what role may the breasts have in this?

The Breast – A Sign of Femininity

The breast is perhaps the most evident symbol for femininity. If you put a pair of breasts on a body, you make it feminine. Breasts are used in the construction of femininity.

The breast is an aesthetic sign for womanhood possible to put on and take off, accentuate or conceal. Sometimes persons wire cloth or bandage round their chests to hide their breasts as a way to make their bodies masculine.

During the interview with Rebecca we talk about appearance and how she deals with her own appearance. She shows me some photographs of herself where she is having different styles; with long hair, as a brunette, as a blonde, with short hair and a beard, all dressed up

with a pink suite, with make-up and without make-up. Rebecca tells me about the wigs. The blond wig is the one she uses mostly and she tells me about when she tried it out and bought it. We talk about make-up, which is something she uses quite often. She also tells me about the “boobs” she bought, making a real bargain, from a scrap dealer who had bought up a whole bankrupts stock. She informs me that there are different variants; the kind you fix directly on the skin with adhesive tape, the kind you put into pockets on the brassiere, as well as the latest kind that you fix directly on the skin and you even can use when you are swimming or running. Her breasts are manufactured by a company that specialises on persons who have been operated from cancer.

When Rebecca told me about the breasts, the make-up and hairstyle, what she *does* with her body and how she arrange her appearance, I got the impression that some parts go together and are used at the same time. Rebecca does not use the breasts alone but together with make-up and a wig. Rebecca considers lipstick as a distinct marker for a female body. She says that even if men make themselves up, they rarely use lipstick. Rebecca thinks it looks strange if she uses the wig without the breasts, but considers that there are many women whose breasts do not show very much.

Thérèse: Okej, hm. (.) But is it possible that you wear a wig without boobs?

Rebecca: No.

Thérèse: Do they sort of go together?

Rebecca: They go together. Otherwise it looks strange.

Thérèse: Yes.

Rebecca: But there are actually lots of women who don't have very much of breast either.

Thérèse: Yes, really.

Rebecca: But they must, kind of accentuate that in some way.

Thérèse: Mm.

Rebecca: Especially if you are almost one and ninety [metre], then there must be some external characteristic to make it (...). To make tits and lipstick work. Lipstick is a bloody good thing.

Thérèse: Yes.

Rebecca: Because guys may kind of have eyeshadow and mascara, with lipstick it is typically female.

Thérèse: So tits and lipstick become kind of symbolic?

Rebecca: Yes.

In the quote above, Rebecca says that she thinks it looks strange wearing a wig without breasts, and she mentions that if you are flat-chested you need to “accentuate that” in some way. I feel curious about what “that” alludes to, which must be accentuated. It may seem as what must be accentuated is not having “very much of breast”, but is this really what Rebecca means? It seems natural to interpret “that” as dealing with being a woman and femininity. Is femininity what should be accentuated? Being a woman without “very much of breast”, you need to accentuate your femininity in some other way than by way of the breasts. The less bodily signs of femininity, the more one needs to accentuate the gender performance.

What we do and what we do not do with our bodies could be looked upon as performative practices through which we construct and reconstruct femininity. Accordingly the body can be coded as female or male and the sex is materialised in the body. Which aesthetic signs or elements that comes in use is something to explore further. In Rebecca's story the boobs, red painted lips and the long blonde hair is mentioned as reliable signs of an attractive

womanhood. One way to analyse this is femininity as an active performance, as practice and doing, hard work to convince as a woman and to pass as an attractive, normal, authentic woman.

In sign language the word woman is signed by drawing the contour of a breast with the hand outside the body. Lena tells me how she enjoys playing with different signs of womanhood. She describes how she plays with female attributes and codes, especially in interaction with men. Things that Lena uses in that game are for example high-heeled shoes, short skirts, low cut skirts and lipstick. She calls these things sexy, feminine and stupid at the same time. The response from men seems to be a part of the game. There seems to be a difficult balancing of the work of creating a proper and attractive femininity. One important aspect here is that what is considered a successful, attractive and age appropriate femininity is also connected to class and class bounded taste.

The First Brassiere

The female body is expected to change during puberty with for example menstruation and breasts that start to grow. These changes also induces the young female body to be apprehended and looked upon in a new way, something which may lead to various feelings, such as delight, embarrassment, awkwardness, excitement, fear or indifference. During my conversation with Lena she laughs and tells me about how she felt when her breasts were growing:

“I remember that the first thing that happened was that the nipples grew and I found it so damn embarrassing. Before the breasts sort of grew, the nipples got bigger. And I found it so embarrassing that I took adhesive tape and taped them up! ((Laughter)). Because they kind of showed under the sweater.”

The bulge under the sweater becomes comprehensible in relation to the cultural expectations on what is supposed to happen with the female body in different ages. The growing of the breasts is a physical phenomenon but it is also something that people interpret and understand in different ways. The thoughts about the growing of the breasts are often related to notions of age, female ageing and life course. Ideas about what is considered natural or unnatural for that particular age become present here. Lena, even though she felt embarrassed, tells me about how positive it was for her when her breasts grew, and to buy her first brassiere: “But then, then I wanted breasts too and it was a bit fun to have breasts and to buy the first bra and so, though I didn’t really have so much to put in it.” (Lena).

Lena tells me that it was fun to have breasts and to buy her first brassiere, despite the hard work taping the nipple. A feeling of embarrassment at the same time as wanting to have breasts is another example of the ambiguous attitude towards breasts, expressed in the narratives.

The first brassiere is a theme present in the narratives and I would like to expand on this topic for a while. Maybe one could resemble buying – or acquire - the first brassiere with a kind of modern ritual that has to do with both age and femininity, and perhaps mostly with the relation between both. Here the boundary between being a girl and becoming a woman is brought to the fore. Acquire the first brassiere could be described as a rite of passage, a social transition in which you become something else than you were before. In that sense you can say that you *do*, *make* or *create* age and also womanhood or femininity. If you try this thought in the perspective of Judith Butlers theory of gender, buying and then carrying the brassiere will not be an expression of womanhood or age, but the action itself will be considered an act that constructs age and gender. Wearing a brassiere is in this case a practice that creates age and makes the body feminine. Age and gender-identity then becomes effects of wearing a

brassiere. Is it possible that the brassiere in some cases becomes a more powerful symbol than the breast itself?

Above you can read what Lena says: “/.../ though I didn’t really have so much to put in it.” To get dressed with a brassiere when there are no visible breasts does not have the purpose of holding or carrying the breasts. That makes the action of wearing a brassiere interesting. This could concern a woman with rather flat breasts, or a teen-ager such as Lena whose breasts still were not fully grown, or Rebecca, who puts the brassiere with fill-ins on her flat chest for another purpose, as a way to make the body feminine. For whom is this femininity created? Questions rise about which signification the brassiere might have, and to whom the carrying of a brassiere is directed.

The time when a female body is expected to begin to wear a brassiere might depend more on age than on some biological need. The wearing of a brassiere could be seen as a practice that initiates a special phase of the body, also the time in history when a person is a teen-ager have an impact on the expectations of wearing or not wearing a brassiere. During one period a woman might be expected to wear a brassiere, while at another time or place wearing a brassiere might represent repression. The variations of what is common or normal, dashing, well, sound or good is accomplished by the context of time, space and culture.

The social and cultural expectations on if, how, when and why you should buy your first brassiere vary through time and place. I hope to get a clearer insight in *how* this varies with the interviews I accomplish with persons of different ages. The interviewees have different ages, consequently they have been able to relate about their experiences when they were for example 15 or 45 years old, during different times in history. However I do not assume that the situation is the same for everyone who happens to be in the same age at the same time. Katrin, who is 41, relates that the first time she bought a brassiere was in connection with pregnancy and nursing, when the breasts became filled with milk, heavy, aching and leaking.

The Biography of the Breast: Breasts – Life Course

As discussed above some of the persons I have interviewed have told me about breasts that appear or start growing during their first years of puberty. Some of them remember their first brassiere, how their breasts refer to sexual relations, breasts that prepare for nursing, which aches, and leaks, or breasts that hinder you during athletic lessons. They told me about how they tried to hide their breasts, or that they wanted to show them and even enlarge them. But in the stories there are also breasts that just exist, that you do not even notice. It is evident that breasts are a part of the female body that the interviewees shape and use in a numerous ways throughout life. The breasts manifest, or are given, different meanings in different phases of life and in different contexts.

How the female breast is perceived and how it is used vary through different times, contexts, ages and phases of life. The interviewees tell me about norms about how for example young women are welcome to expose their breasts whereas they rather should be covered after a certain age. Concurrently the interviews contain a degree of ambiguousness in relation to these types of recommendations.

In the interviews are also accounts of how the women have been afraid of their own breasts, and how they’ve been searching for lumps and deviations. The breasts appear as ambiguous parts of the body. They can simultaneously serve as an asset and a threat. These narratives intercommunicate with bigger cultural stories, notions and norms about the female body and breasts. Aesthetic, medical and moral ideals change over time – even so those related to breasts. The breasts shall sometimes be shown topless on the beach and sometimes be hidden in a swimsuit or bikini. At some times it is perceived that it is preferable to be topless while at other times it is appropriate to covering the breast. Sometimes big breasts are considered attractive whereas at other times the ideal is small breast. In certain times and

contexts the breasts shall be used to nurse a baby – preferably as long as possible – in other times and places, breastfeeding is considered bad and wrong. Depending on current ideals the breasts are either preferred to be uncovered and bared, or dressed and concealed. They are pushed up, pressed in or padded with a brassiere, or sometimes let loose without a brassiere.

The biographies of the breast in my material often adhere to a socially expected agenda over life and the phases of life, accordingly they show a normative life course where special content is expected in relation to different ages, to let a person be considered normal and desired. It is important to point out that this pattern is gender-specific, concerning bodies who are called men it looks in one way and concerning bodies who are called women in another, but the pattern is also heteronormative. According to the notion of a good life, a woman and a man are expected to meet and desire each other, have children and create the heterosexual and normative nuclear family. This notion is normative for how we imagine a good and successful life. Sometimes heteronormativity becomes present in the body narratives, even though the interviewees to some extent also play with, and cross over, the normative boundaries in this matter.

Because the interviews have had a certain biographical approach, the persons who have been interviewed have looked back into the past of their body narratives. They have told me about how their view of their own body has changed over time, as well as what they have done when their bodies have changed. Sometimes a photograph has been used as a support during the interviews. When Katrin shows photographs from the 80's on a beach where she is sunbathing topless, she tells me that she would never sunbathe topless today. The photographs show that in those days she could lay topless in the sun only wearing a pair of very small bikini-trousers, even in front of the camera. Katrin means that doing the same thing today would feel very odd; in the 80's it was very common, contrary to what it is today. The story of topless-fashion shows that what is regarded as attractive and appropriate varies over time.

Between Life and Death – On the Different Dimensions of the Female Breast

A biography of the breast tells about fears according to the own breast as well as the searching for tumours and anomalies. Searching through the breasts could be considered an everyday activity that intensifies with ageing, and mammography could be looked upon as a part of a normal female ageing. When the tumour appears “too early” the socially and culturally expected female ageing is interrupted and violated.

The existential dimensions of the female breast are observable in the body narratives. Life-giving nursing as well as breast cancer and death are associated to the breast. This part of the female body is able to create desire and represent sexual and sensual pleasures. The breast has a strong connotation to reproduction and childbirth, but also to mammography, cysts, tumours and fear of death. Different phases of life and different ages bring to the fore different dimensions of the breast.

There is a tension between breast as life-giving and breast as life-threatening, which reveal the ambiguity of the breast. The relation between childbirth and breast may be complicated for some women. Elin, who is 29, had a hormone-conditioned breast cancer a few years ago, and for her a pregnancy may imply new risks. She has a vigilant attitude towards her own body and it is uncertain what the disease and the treatments have lead to, which is a reason for her to worry as soon as she feels pain somewhere. Since the tumour Elin feel afraid about her own breasts and body, a feeling that has lead to a sensation of distance and unfamiliarity to her own breasts. She recounts how this also has made her feel less female or “less as a whole woman”.

Elin: Earlier I sort of, I have had difficult and eh, I have sort of been afraid of my own body quite a long time. And as soon as I feel pain somewhere I think that “Now there is something there.”

Therése: Mm.

Elin: So I have been living with fear and also felt very rigid because of that.

Therése: Mm.

Elin: And there is kind of the same thing with the breasts. That I like, that they sort of seem totally unfamiliar and this also kind of makes me, eh, you kind of feel less like a woman.

In her essay *Kvinnobröst och kvinnlighet – om bröstens symboliska betydelse vid bröstcancer* (Female breast and femininity – about the breast’s symbolic significance with breast cancer), Renita Sörensdotter (2000) discusses the experiences of the body, of women who have been treated from breast cancer, in relation to the discourses on the female body and femininity in the occidental culture. Her study treats the female breast as a strongly symbolically loaded part of the body, surrounded by criteria for femininity. The cancer struck women’s apprehension of their body and identity is affected by discourses about symbols of femininity, symbols like for example breasts. The breast is used in the construction of femininity.

Breasts relate to death in a specific way, by way of breast cancer. Death is also part of the ageing and all ages are related to that in different ways. Elin is happy about having kept her breasts, despite the fear that the cancer might develop again. She believes that the loss of a breast should make her feel less female, just like the fear of her own breasts.

The feeling of being less female is not only related to the personal experience of the own body. Elin tells me that it also has to do with how she believes that men perceive women’s breasts. Elin is in a phase of life when she enjoys meeting new people, as well as dating. The aesthetic aspect of the breasts is important to Elin. “/.../ this kind of going out and dating should be very difficult for me, if I did-, if I had lost a breast.” (Elin). Therefore, she is pleased that she decided to have only a small part of her breast removed, so small that the surgery today is unnoticeable. Earlier on she felt forced to tell the men she had relations with about the operation of breast cancer, however, now she has finished doing that which makes her feel relaxed.

Elin: I met someone a while ago who not even, he hasn’t even questioned it. We keep in touch but we don’t date but he didn’t notice anything. It felt really good!

Therése: Yes, to feel that you didn’t have to tell him?

Elin: Yes, to feel *normal*. Like he, because he really didn’t notice *anything*.

Therése: No, exactly.

Elin: Also that helped. So it also contributed to make me more relaxed.

Therése: Okay, that he, they, well that it doesn’t show.

Elin: That’s right.

Therése: But you think, in what way do you think it would have been different if it showed, or if--?

Elin: But then I think I would have felt less like a woman. Because I know what men kind of think. Or how they think.

In this way, the imagined male observer may influence the way Elin perceive herself. The sexual and sensual dimensions of the breast may be a matter of attraction, desire and pleasure, but also a matter about suffering, anxiety about meeting up with ideals, or perhaps a matter of indifference. In these four interviewees’ narratives about the breast, the male

observer of the breast has a distinguished position. The connection to normative conceptions about heterosexual desire and love is present. In the continuing work with the dissertation as well as the interviewing, it will be important to pay attention to how different types of sexuality, desire and fantasies are admitted space.

A person's self-image is influenced by the perceptions of other people. Rebecca, like Elin, mentions the male gaze as important. For her an appreciative gaze from men helps to deal with the more critical and questioning attitude of others.

Rebecca: Well, it's not very fun when everybody look in a strange way. But sometimes, as in one occasion last summer, I realised that people were looking, I went to work like that, with long hair, short skirt and boobs.

Thérèse: Mm.

Rebecca: And saw people looking, but good heavens ((laughing:)) tall, blond, long legs, big boobs, of course they're looking!

Thérèse: ((with laughter:)) Yes, we all look at that. We do actually.

Rebecca: And, so sometimes you got this positive response, even if I wasn't interested in guys, it was kind of... we were sitting here having a coffee or a smoke, me and a girl who works here during the summers, a very cute girl who is sixteen years old.

Thérèse: Yes?

Rebecca: And she sat a bit away from me, and then some [men] from abroad, south somewhere, walks by and kind of ((shows, sounds)) starts waving at me!

((Both laugh))

Thérèse: How nice! How do you feel about that?

Rebecca: Well, that was fun.

Thérèse: That's fun, right, that's like really a kind of appreciation or compliment.

Rebecca: And I thought of something. Earlier I avoided mirrors a lot, but I don't do that anymore.

Thérèse: Okay.

Rebecca: It's kind of the opposite.

Thérèse: Okay.

Rebecca: Now I look in the mirror all the time.

Thérèse: What has changed?

Rebecca: Well it's because I'm more satisfied now with how I look and, well.

Thérèse: Mm, um, good for you. That must make you feel good?

Rebecca: Yes.

At the end of the conversation above, Rebecca moves on to a subject that other narratives also touch upon, that of being more satisfied with your appearance as you grow older. Rebecca is 56 years old. Katrin describes the same thing, and Lena exemplifies this subject by telling how she, earlier in life, could worry about how she looked, the form of the breasts and the buttocks, and that she felt unsure if she looked good enough; however, today, as a woman in her late forties, she does not care about what other people think. Elin, on the other hand, does not feel very satisfied with her body and does unwillingly show her body undressed, or for example in a bathing suit, to other people.

The breast is a symbolical part of the female body. However, in some passages of the interviews, the physical aspects of the breast are highlighted, that is the part of the body which is not always easily controlled. They might be leaking milk, hurt, or slip out from the brassiere in public places. The practical or material dimension is another aspect of the breast.

Katrin relates about how much pain she had when the milk was beginning to be produced after having her children. She recounts about how the breasts grew, leaked and how she had to

pad her brassiere. The usage of a nursing brassiere became a way to keep control. Body fluid in the wrong places can be regarded as a cultural taboo, or at least provoking or unpleasant. The same thing may be valid for breasts in the wrong place or for breasts that can not be controlled. Katrin describes in an entertaining way a situation doing aerobics, when her loosely fitting brassiere (it was actually an old bikini top that had lost its elasticity, which she used because she thought it would be less warm than an ordinary brassiere) went up above the breasts because of the lively aerobic movements, leaving the breasts to bounce unobstructedly. "And you could really see how it bounced in there, luckily I had a big T-shirt. But then I thought that I really must buy that kind of great sport bra, I can't go on like this." (Katrin)

When the breast is filled with milk it becomes comprehensible as a food reservoir for the usage of a small child, but the shape and the feel of the breast are also changed. The aesthetic dimension is brought to the fore in this part of Katrins narrative, especially concerning the size of the breasts.

Katrin: Well, it was kind of fascinating, this with the breasts when having babies, that they could get *so damned* big .

Therése: Mm.

Katrin: I mean it's unbelievable. They were like melons!

Katrin, who earlier in life always had rather small breasts, found it nice to suddenly have big breasts. Afterwards, when she ran out of the milk, the breasts became smaller again. Nowadays she sometimes uses insertions in her brassiere to make the breasts look bigger, because she thinks it looks more attractive.

Listening to these stories is a way to move between different contexts, for example the workout gymnasium or the situation of nursing, That provide differing prerequisites for "breast-performance". And attention is paid to the different ways the breast can be used in different situations. In my dissertation I want to continue investigating the breast's different signification in different contexts, and how the different dimensions may be connected.

The Menacingly "Pathetic"

What is revealed in the way people handle conceptions and norms about age and womanhood in relation to the female breast? One interview express that to show part of the breast in a low neckline may seem attractive on a woman in her twenties but pathetic at a woman in her forties. How do we construct this kind of difference? What kinds of breaches are there in this kind of logic?

23 of January 2005. It is time for an interview in the somewhat worn premises of "The Tenant's Association" (Hyresgästföreningen) in Solberga. Almost opposite to me is Katrin sitting in the rather uncomfortable corner sofa. We are having some coffee and are talking about body, appearance and age. There is a microphone, an according device and an interview guide on the table. Katrin has makeup on and is wearing jeans and a low-cut shirt. I ask questions about if age matters in what one do with the own body and how one arrange ones appearance, as for example when choosing clothes. Katrin tells me, among other things, that she thinks low-cut sweaters look nice at young women, but "pathetic" at forty-year-old women. Katrin herself is 41. (Notes from interview with Katrin)

The situation described above raises many questions. What does Katherine mean when she talks negatively about women in their forties who wears low neckline, when she herself is 41, and furthermore at the moment in question is wearing low neckline. What does this mean? When a woman in her forties, refers to women in their forties wearing plunging neckline as pathetic, and at the same time wear just that, she opens up for an interesting ambiguity.

Katrin's statement points to conceptions of age and sex in our culture. The conceptions are norm giving and imply a kind of social expectations of how women of different ages are and should be. Here it is a question of how a woman in a specific age should dress. This section shows how cultural notions about age and womanhood, as well as the relation between them, are expressed in Katrin's narrative, but also how the conceptions are formed in her narrative. The section also shows what Katrin actually *do* with these norm giving notions, by means of everyday actions such as her attitude towards norms and expectations of herself, being a 41 year old woman and the way she dresses. "I think it looks pathetic at a forty-year-old woman and it is as if you want to, it is so evident that you want to look a lot younger if you do that [is wearing a low-cut sweater] when you are forty." (Katrin).

The word "pathetic" has an accusing signification and seems loaded and menacing. It is not only Katrin who uses the expression pathetic. In the narratives the word is applied quite often. Sometimes regarding a skirt considered being too short for the age of the person who wears it and sometimes trousers to tight to be grasped as an age appropriate way to dress.

What is regarded as pathetic here? It is seemingly not only the low neckline itself, but rather wanting to look younger than what you are. In this reasoning, the plunging neckline seems to connote youth, or might even be an aesthetic sign that belongs to youth and young female bodies. Wearing a plunging neckline at other ages is not considered age appropriated. This reveals age norms about what is considered acceptable for a certain age. Just like the brassiere, wearing or not wearing a plunging neckline can be a practice that do, or upholds, differences between people of different ages and different sexes. The breast plays a part in the construction of age.

In Conclusion

The interviews bring about an array of dimensions of the relations between femininity and age. Not only is the female breast used to create and uphold femininity, it is also used in the construction and reconstruction of age. How the breast can, may, or should, be used in the construction of a credible, appropriate and attractive femininity follows an age order. An order that, for example, decides how much of the breast that is socially acceptable to reveal in a plunging neckline. On the one hand the interviewees subsides to norms and ideas on age appropriate behaviour and appearance, since choosing not to, puts them at risk for epithets like "pathetic". On the other hand they challenge social and cultural expectations on how to be, look and behave, being a woman of a certain age. In conclusion the paper illustrates the ambiguous work creating a "proper" breast performance.

We live with and against the existing orders of age and gender in our society. How do those orders interplay, and how do we make them present in our daily life? What characterises the relation between gender and age? How is womanhood constructed over time and life and in relation to age? And how is age constructed in relation to femininity? The purpose of the continuation work of my dissertation is to gain knowledge about how conceptions of age and womanhood, as well as the relation between them, are formed and become understandable in the body narratives. An underlying aim is to make something visible, where age and womanhood and what they mean in relation to each other, seemingly is neutral and evident.

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