

BREAST

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
ELISABETH OHLSON WALLIN

March 4th – June 4th 2017



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How people are depicted shapes societal norms and our views of the body. *Breast* is a photo exhibition that wants to make us think about body ideals, the construction of norms and the way these norms affect how we view our own, and other people's, bodies. Naked breasts and the reactions they provoke depend on the person's body, age, ethnicity and gender.

For the images not to be perceived as sexist, Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin photographed the women's breasts separately – a black-and-white photo which they then held in front of their torsos. This allowed them to be fully clothed and still display their breasts. The idea was to create a protective effect in order to focus on the power of the images. Today, to be able to display your breasts is not a given.

The pictures were taken in aid of *Bröstcancerfonden* (the *Breast Cancer Association*) for their project *Klämkalendern 2016*. When *Kulturen* in Lund created this exhibition that same year, four writers contributed with their thoughts about the photographs and the depiction of the female body. Their texts are quoted in the exhibition and can be found in their entirety in the catalogue.

Writers:

Anja Petersen, PhD in ethnology and education officer at Dunkers kulturhus in Helsingborg.

Helen Fuchs, PhD and lecturer in art history.

Member of the think tank Humtank.

Julia Skott, journalist, author and MA in Film Studies.

Linda Fagerström, art critic and PhD in art history.

On the cover: Elisabete Catia Suzana

Photo: Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin

Exhibition idea

KULTUREN

KULTURHISTORISKA FÖRENINGEN FÖR SÖDRA SVERIGE

BREAST PICTURES AND REALITY

Pictures shape our perception of reality more than we may be aware of. What we see in a picture often seems more real to us than that which is never made visible. Pictures appear to have an ability to make the most unlikely fiction real, as if they are able to conjure up new realities. Through the history of art and picture culture, it has been considered much more important to portray fictional figures and ideal bodies than to show what human bodies really look like. Throughout history pictures have been efficiently used in “image making”, and we all know that this practice is now more widely spread than ever thanks to digital technology. Picture culture rarely reflects reality objectively, not even with a camera; it constructs and reshapes it. Pictures, quite simply, are highly efficient when it comes to giving shape and reality to dreams, ideals, thoughts and ideas. To function as a form of communication, however, a picture must focus on what is most important at a particular moment, and anything else must be ignored. In this way the picture is an abstraction of reality. This also applies to the image of ourselves that we communicate with our bodies, clothes, makeup and hairstyle. We make certain parts of ourselves visible more often than others, and some seem almost always to be made invisible.

Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin’s pictures let us contemplate twelve pairs of bare, natural breasts, something that hardly ever occurs in our picture culture without being associated with sex or motherhood. We are urged to gaze at, touch, and reflect on real breasts, for life, beyond the idealized pictures of breasts in common culture.

Changing the human body, whether in pictorial form or in physical reality, is not a contemporary phenomenon. Since time immemorial, people, perhaps foremost women, have had their body reshaped by more or less drastic methods. The body has been used to reveal values, power and aesthetic ideals. Severely shaping dresses, corsets, lacings, collars, trousers, skirts, bras, have emphasized, exposed and concealed different parts of the body. We dye our hair, accentuate lips and nails. We can shape our bodies with muscles, injections and implants. Modern medical and technological development has given completely new possibilities to transcend the body that our genes have given us, or the one that age and illness have deprived us of. As never before, we can reshape our bodies, not only in pictures and with

clothes, but also physically and technologically, to live up to our own or other people’s ideals. When contemplating on health and beauty, is it even interesting any longer to wonder what a natural body is? Perhaps there are existential reasons to reflect on this. Perhaps we should be aware of what different medical, technological and aesthetic body ideals communicate, what they do to our actual bodies, our notions about them, what is abstracted away and made invisible. Why do we seem so willing to judge and change our own bodies by implementing the ideal bodies of picture culture, even though we know that they do not exist? Although there does not appear to be any consensus about which ideals are acceptable to implement, the reality of the pictures, no matter how idealized they are, often seem more desirable than the physical body we actually have, the one that is never depicted.

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We react to pictures of naked, normal breasts, where there are no allusions to sex or motherhood, because they are so unusual.

Throughout history, woman’s actual constitution has been rendered wholly invisible, for instance, that she actually has a stomach, two breasts and legs. It is as if the natural woman’s body has been used to embody ideas about the woman as form. Breasts, for example, allow themselves to be enclosed and reshaped particularly well, like no other parts of the body. Although breasts are associated with femininity and motherhood, the shapes that women’s breasts have been given through picture culture and dress conventions rarely have very much to do with natural breasts. For example, it seems as if the nipple is unduly perceived as something that disturbs the breast as an aesthetic idea. This wholly fundamental part of the human body seems to be entirely associated with the sphere of private nakedness and is thus made invisible in the public sphere. The focus of picture culture on the breast as an idealized, abstracted form means that we react

to pictures of naked normal breasts, where there are no allusions to sex or motherhood, because they are so unusual.

Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin’s pictures of breasts are so different on many levels from the ideal breasts of traditional art and popular culture. This makes them seem like an actual and possible alternative reality. The firm form that breasts usually have in pictures, on the other hand, can be perceived as protecting our body as something personal, by making their softness and changeability invisible. In Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin’s photographs, this protective shell is removed to make it possible for us to feel our breasts, with our gaze and our hands, in pictures and actions.

These pictures invite us to look at breasts in a way that rarely occurs. They address us through gazes aimed straight at us. Some of the people are serious, others smile and quietly express various emotional states. In contrast to that, the breasts appear neutral. They express no emotions. The absence of colour means that our reactions are steered away from the breasts as something emotionally charged, away from eroticism, motherhood and popular culture, towards documentary photography, perhaps to pictures of medicine and art. The pictures within the pictures, showing breasts without colour, make us perceive what breasts are like, what it feels like to have them, to touch them, and how it feels to be touched. The grave greyscale makes us aware that we may feel, or perhaps already have felt, the lumps that ought not to be there. But since they are held up by people who are enclosed in a world where colour exists, they also give us hope. Inset in the colour photos, the living skin is made visible, and we see how wonderful human breasts are in their infinite physical variation. The breasts are there, close to the heart and lungs. We know how the beating of the heart is felt through the chest and how our breathing is seen as it rises and falls. The breasts move in pace with heartbeats and breaths, with life.

The contact that so obviously exists between Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin and the persons depicted is transferred to us and becomes like a direct address. They have not been passively captured in the pictures, but participate actively by showing off something that is hardly ever visible in our picture culture. With one important exception, they seem to be wholly comfortable about displaying the pictures of their breasts, which is not the same as showing their breasts. The combination of a full figure in colour and a breast picture without colour, makes it possible to retain the personal bodily integrity and communicate that these real breasts are something that we should have control of. The absence of colour creates a kind of distance, while the sober documentary character simultaneously urges us to gaze. In a paradoxical way, we become aware of what real breasts look like, beyond the idealized forms of picture culture and clothes, despite the absence of colour. Through the context we understand that it is breasts like these, breasts like ours, that are afflicted by cancer. A recollection: during a student carnival I was dressed up as something that was supposed to be a live version of the sculpture “The Little

Mermaid”. I had a wonderful shining silver fishtail, false breasts, and was lying on a little float of my own in the carnival parade. I would never have thought of showing my own breasts. I, or rather my false breasts, attracted huge attention, and it only took a slight wiggle of my upper body for people to cheer. I have never, before or after, been photographed so as much. It was a strange but typical carnival experience. Masquerades give us an almost ritualized way to challenge and to gaze without shame, to be titillated by uncertainty about what is real and what is not. The masquerades of everyday life are more subtle, but perhaps they show an increasing uncertainty of, and decreasing interest in what is physically real.

Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin’s pictures provoke quite a different, low-key attention, far from the masquerade. The colourless nakedness of the breasts is nevertheless shocking since real people’s natural breasts are so seldom shown, that is to say, what could be us, her, him and them.

HELEN FUCHS

**PhD and lecturer in art history.
Member of the think tank Humtank.**

CLAIMING SPACE

Claiming a space can be a revolutionary act. A protest, a demonstration, a signal. A demand. A challenge. A necessity.

To make an unrelenting claim for both physical and personal space, refusing to make yourself smaller or invisible. To let your body fill out its silhouette, to let your voice fill the air, to let your feelings be as big as they actually are.

This is activism. To actively make the decision and actively carry it out. The body itself, the cubic centimetres it occupies, can be an activist act. How it moves, how it sounds, how it struggles. We are not talking about filling space, using it – we are talking about claiming it. It is not something we can be given; it is not something that just is. It is something we must take. We must demand it, claim it, occupy it and make use of it.

It is provocative. It is noticed. It disturbs.

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For some people, space is self-evident. Those who belong to the norm don't even need to claim space since space is a part of them. They have space.

Claiming exactly the space the body needs means demanding too much. Claiming the space the soul needs is an attack, an unpleasant intrusion on everyone else's right to escape having to think and question.

Elisabeth gives space to bodies. Gives space to souls. Tells us about those who are not allowed to be seen or heard. She attacks and intrudes, disturbs and affects. Her camera sharpens contours and makes the shadows more distinct.

Perhaps you do not even know that you are doing it. You do not know that you are a protest, you do not know that you are a challenge.

For some people, space is self-evident. Those who belong to the norm do not even need to claim space since space is a part of them. They *have* space.

And if you do not claim the space you need, the space you want, then maybe you can fool somebody into thinking that you are the norm, since you do not need to make an effort. Because you are self-evident. Because you prefer not to be noticed. If you do not create a disturbance, perhaps you will be left in peace. But you will fail, over and over again, and you will be punished every time you try to exist. There are body activists who make it their job to question norms and challenge all the demands made of us. But there are also those who are forced to become activists merely by existing.

It can be a matter of being a woman. Being fat. Having a body that does not work the way most people's bodies do, having a skin colour or an appearance or an expression that is perceived as deviant. Moving the wrong way, sounding wrong, being too much of what you are. In different contexts it is different bodies that are allowed to occupy space, and everyone else has to try to demand it – and is punished for that.

There are bodies that are allowed to exist and bodies that are not allowed to exist. If you are not good enough you can be allowed to show yourself out of mercy, but you pay for the favour by shrinking as much as you can. Making yourself as small as possible. No strong colours, no big gestures, no loud voices. Show your gratitude and your shame. You do not take place, you are granted it as a favour and it can be taken away at any moment.

It is as if people see the world as a bus where it is clearly demarcated how big a seat is and how many there are, which means that any extra space you try to take is theft. My broad thighs squeeze you out, disturb you and make you uncomfortable.

But the world is not a bus. The world is much bigger than that, and it takes nothing from you if I am allowed to be the person I am, if I am allowed to be seen and heard and to move and to be the person I am. It does not mean that there is less sound in the world for you, or fewer words or poorer love just because I make sounds and talk and love. I do not wear out the earth very much with my heavy steps.

All bodies are allowed in front of Elisabeth's camera. All bodies, all stories. She creates a place for you and fixes it in time and space. The place is still there even at those times when you do not have the energy to kick up a fuss.

But people do not want to yield any space. They would prefer to have an empty seat next to them on the bus, for safety's sake. Then it is a protest just to exist. To claim place.

There are even individual body parts that are not allowed to take up any space. They have to be hidden. They are only given space on extremely specific terms. If breasts are to be allowed, either exactly the right amount must be shown, to the exact millimetre, or they must be exposed completely, and then it is a sexual signal. Bare breasts are never just breasts.

Here too one can talk about breasts that are allowed to exist, and breasts that are not allowed. The breasts we want to see are of a certain shape, a certain age, a certain size, a narrow spectrum of skin colours. The more of the demands you can tick off, the better. If they have been used for their biological purpose, we would prefer not to see any traces of that. If something serious has happened, it may only be displayed as a trauma, as a reminder of mortality and tragedy and people's inherent strength.

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Elisabeth had the idea of separating the breasts from the body and then giving them back. Making them into something of their own, taking up a space of their own; they are there but not on the body. They are a part of us but they are not us. Even behind the breasts we are still here, as different people in different bodies with different lives and conditions.

To expose oneself shamelessly, not to follow the rules, is a protest.

It can be a matter of showing that all bodies exist. All kinds of bodies. Big and small, wide, narrow, soft, firm, light, dark, strong, weak, with assistive devices, with injuries, with scars, with tattoos, with spots and lines and tinges and hair and all the things that can be found on a body. Teaching the eye and the brain that there is more than just one way for bodies to look like, that there are more bodies than all the perfect ones in the big pictures, and that your body is not the only one that is different.

Sometimes it is a matter of showing that all bodies can be beautiful and desirable. Using a customary and familiar pictorial language in an unexpected way, with bodies that are not usually included.

At the same time, this is not an end in itself. This is not how you find or show your value. You have no responsibility to be beautiful, or desirable. You have no duty to look after yourself, to make the best of what you have. You can have saggy breasts in a stretched bra, you can have elastic lines visible through your trousers, you can have a poor stance and rolls of flesh and bony shoulders and a straight waist.

It can be a matter of not making yourself beautiful – at least not in the way we have been taught. Not tricking the eye, not flattering, not reshaping, not highlighting, hiding, masking. Dressing “for” your body so often means dressing against it. You have to create the illusion of a different body from the one you have, or at least showing that you know about your defects and do your best.

It can be a matter of showing that we are not our breasts, we are not just our bodies. We are complete persons with so many parts, and all the parts are allowed to take up space.

They must be allowed to do it. Otherwise we make sure that they do. We demand it, we steal it, we occupy it, and for every little spot we occupy, the world grows so that there is room for everyone.

The task was not to be graceful. But nor was it to make yourself ugly. Just to be who you are. We have all expressed it in different ways, through something that Elisabeth has seen in us. We are ourselves in solidarity, in hope, in frustration. We are our bodies but at the same time we are not. We take our breasts in a firm grip, hold them in front of us and display them. Here. This is what it is about. But at the same time it is not.

I am my own protest march every time I leave home. In sweatpants, in a tight dress, in a loose sheet. In black, in dots, in strong colours. I exist and I fill the space I fill – and I take it. Every day, every time. I demand it, I carry it with me and I defend it with my life.

I do not apologize for the space my body takes. I do not apologize for the attention I claim with my voice, with my actions, with my activism and my opinions.

I ought to have been ashamed of my body. I ought to have asked Elisabeth to let me be dressed behind my breasts so that no one would understand how different my body is from the ones that deserve to be photographed. I could have camouflaged my stomach, my folds of flesh and tufts of hair. But Elisabeth pointed to my space, she gave it to me and I took it.

Because sometimes. Sometimes you can actually be given space.

JULIA SKOTT

Journalist, author and MA in Film Studies.

NURSING MOTHERS, GODESSES OF LOVE & BUST QUEENS

“I have spaghetti to thank for everything!”

The Italian actress Sophia Loren is supposed to have said this, with reference to her curves. And she was certainly well loved for her roles on the silver screen in the 1950s – but perhaps even more for her curvaceous beauty. The generous décolletage aroused particular attention, and in Sweden she was known as a “bust queen”.

Women’s breasts attract attention, in the past and in the present. And usually, as in the case of Sophia Loren, the reason is sexual attraction. Is it possible to depict naked female breasts without that sexualized undercurrent? If so, how? Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin suggests one possibility in her portraits of dressed women posing with black and white photographs of their own undressed breasts. The women’s gazes and body language radiate strength, confidence and power – and in this respect the pictures differ from the ways in which women’s breasts are portrayed in the history of art, where the intended observer has been a heterosexual man.

Throughout the ages, however, breasts have also had a symbolic dimension regarding strength, freedom and power. Just think of the Amazons, the women warriors of classical mythology who cut off their right breasts so that they could use a bow more easily – and unconcernedly suckled their babies with the left breast only.

The fact is that, until quite recently, suckling breasts were the only naked breasts that occurred in public. For several centuries, the many pictures of the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus in her arms were the only context where a breast could be seen outside the strictly private sphere. Paintings and sculptures of the suckling virgin could be seen everywhere: in churches and chapels, but also in people’s homes, at least among well-to-do families.

Often in these depictions, the Virgin Mary is wearing a dress that covers everything, with just a narrow slit allowing the breast to be seen. In some paintings the breast looks more like a decoration attached on the outside of the dress – high up, almost at the neck. It looks strange to our eyes, but for medieval artists the religious meaning of the picture was more important than the realism that a modern-day observer might expect. The aim was to display and emphasize Mary’s special position as the mother of

Jesus, and thus deserving of worship. And a mother suckles her baby, even if she happens to be the mother of God. The breast therefore had to be shown.

The influence of the medieval church over society and imagery was broken during the Renaissance. Secular lords then often became patrons of artists, and the range of possible motifs in art was radically expanded. With inspiration from classical art, Renaissance artists directed their gaze towards the naked body and often portrayed it realistically. Most women’s breasts nevertheless continued to be idealized rather than depicted in a documentary fashion. Renaissance breasts appear to show no traces of breastfeeding – but several of Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin’s photographs bear witness to this.

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Sandro Botticelli, for example, painted The Birth of Venus, where the goddess of love in her shell is shown with small, spherical breasts and broad hips. This kind of body was the ideal during the Renaissance: in letters and stories beautiful female breasts are compared to apples or peaches. There is a fascinating parallel in the double portrait of Gabrielle D’Estrées and Henriette d’Entragues, both of which were mistresses to Henry IV of France in the sixteenth century. With pale bodies and small, pointed breasts, they are portrayed together in a bathtub, which gives the scene erotic undertones. One of the women is pinching the other woman’s nipple – perhaps to say that she now has the king’s favour after the other one having died giving birth. The gesture might also be interpreted as sexual, and

if so it is an unusual example in art history of such signals between two women.

In 1520 Botticelli’s older colleague, Michelangelo, depicted an aged woman with breasts that are quite different from those of the goddess of love. The marble figure, called Night, which Michelangelo sculpted for the sepulchral chapel of the Medici family in Florence, has breasts that are anything but harmonious and idealized. They are asymmetrical, with an uneven surface. But this is a sepulchral chapel where Night is supposed to symbolize decay, death and darkness. Yet the odd placing of the breasts, right beside the armpits, has actually made some art historians wonder whether Michelangelo ever saw a naked woman.

We therefore cannot be sure that the many naked women’s breasts in the history of art are realistic depictions. The pictures testify to the ideals of their times, what was in or out of fashion. How breasts were depicted also had to do with the person commissioning the work – a chaste breast of the Virgin Mary for the church, as we have seen, was completely different from the bosom of a mistress painted by order of a prince.

Despite ample variation, breasts in the history of art have a great deal in common. Most of the paintings and sculptures we know of were created among affluent parts of society. Consequently, they reflect the needs and wishes of religious institutions or the top strata of civil society. These spheres, so closely associated with power and money, have been completely dominated by men throughout history. The artist profession, like so many other occupations, was also dominated by men for a long time. For that reason, most pictures of women’s breasts, at least up to the Renaissance, were not only commissioned by men but also made by men. What are the consequences of that?

One consequence is that the first genuinely depicted breastfeeding scenes in the history of art was not painted until the nineteenth century. Only then did women in earnest become professional artists, among them the impressionist Mary Cassatt, who lived in Paris at the end of the century. Mary Cassatt’s intimate scene Maternité from 1890 is quite different from the stiffly arranged madonnas of the Middle Ages – and perhaps a woman’s modern gaze was essential for a renewal of this motif so excessively used by Christianity?

The fact that the artist herself had female breasts, of course, also affected how she represented this motif. Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin’s pictures likewise depict encounters between two people who both share the bodily experience of breasts: the portrayed person and the photographer. Recognition creates trust between motif and artist, charging the pictures in a way that we are unaccustomed to when it comes to bare women’s breasts. In that way Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin’s portraits function as counters to all the sexualized breasts in art history and contemporary popular culture, where the relationship between the portrayed and the observer more often implies overtones of voyeurism, prohibition and shame.

In the 1960s female artists began to question and discuss the idealized breasts that they saw, not just in art history but everywhere that women’s breasts were exposed in mass culture. The photographs that Ana Mendieta took in 1972 of her own breasts, pressed against a sheet of glass, were one of many forms of protest against the way that pornography and advertising offered retouched breasts for quick visual consumption. In early years of the 1980s, when she was suffering from cancer, the British artist Jo Spence took a series of disturbing self-portraits. In front of the camera, and in view of us observers, she poses naked with breasts like deathbringing boils.

Not long after, a pair of breasts caused a scandal in the advertising world. The Italian company Benetton, known for its provocative advertising campaigns, launched an advertisement in 1989 with a photograph of a black woman nursing a white baby. The picture illustrated the company’s motto, “United Colors of Benetton” – a formula that not only refers to the company’s range of garments in bright colours, but also conveys an undertext of a life in togetherness where everyone is welcome. Roughly: We can be united even though our skins are of different colours. The advertisement was intended as an extreme example of this: a union between two people who so obviously have different skin colours.

For American observers the photograph in the advertisement evoked thoughts of all the black women who were forced to act as wet nurses for white children in the days of slavery – and the reactions to the picture were therefore highly negative in the USA. The photo, of course, can also be seen as an illustration of how the whole rich wealthy white world literally milks people whose skin colour is not white. A photo like that would probably not be used in advertising today, but the vehement response to the picture back then shows that pictures of naked women’s breasts always have dimensions with a political and social charge.

This was confirmed in 2004, when the singer Janet Jackson happened to show her breast on television when she was taking part in the half-time show at the Super Bowl, the annual championship game in American football. The incident, which lasted less than a second, was witnessed by more than 100 million television viewers and sent shock waves throughout the USA. “It’s only a breast, I don’t understand the fuss!”, said the singer herself in a comment on what was called Nipplegate, alluding to the political Watergate scandal. Was the flash deliberate or merely, as it was explained afterwards, a wardrobe malfunction? We will never know. But we can be sure that, no matter how many bust queens come and go, interest in breasts will remain unchanged.

LINDA FAGERSTRÖM

Art critic and PhD in art history.

GAZE ON BREAST

In the 1860s carte de visite portraits became popular. For a modest sum you could obtain a visual visiting card with a photograph of yourself. The art of photography made it possible to have your portrait painted – in light. The photographs all looked very similar: the pose, the forwardlooking gaze, the background, even the clothes. Carte de visite portraits became a visual reiteration; a repetition of the norm, the ideal, what was expected. Perhaps the most characteristic feature of these portraits is the very repetition; the quoting. What happens when one and the same visual expression is repeated over and over again, in a supposedly objective medium? Is this how truths are created? The templates made it possible for people to recognize themselves, and the identical forms of presentation functioned as a shortcut to interpretation. The templates can also be regarded as politics. How are norms, ideals, and aesthetics spread? Mass-produced pictures contain a possibility. Back then and today. What kind of photographs are cited in the media today? Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin's portraits are a part of this larger photographic portrait tradition. They reproduce parts of a visual narrative tradition, but they also challenge; defy and change. They expose the template for portraits while simultaneously breaking it. They are like other full-face portraits but at the same time they differ because of the photograph in the photograph. What kind of truths do Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin's photographs create?

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***Do you own the presentation of your body?
Do you own your gaze?***

I find that Elisabeth's portraits have a more direct feel. They are photographed from straight in front. The people they depict seem to own their pose and their gaze. They look into the camera, some with pleasure, others with an air of calm. Perhaps it is confidence? Humour, attitude? Most are dressed. They seem to own their own gaze. They are holding black and white photographs of their bare breasts in front of

themselves. They are simultaneously presented in parts; two portraits in one. One dressed and one naked, one in colour and one in black and white. As a consequence, they almost reinforce the subjectivity of the people portrayed rather than disarm it.

Perhaps it is twentieth-century photographs of prisoners they remind me of. Those photographs of people who had no choice whether to be photographed or not, who look straight into the camera and hold a sign with their inmate number over their chest. Or for that matter, nineteenth-century photographs of prisoners, with elegantly written numbers under each portrait. Some of the portrayed prisoners raise their chin and observe the photographer almost from above. Some of Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin's models have a gaze like that too. Some prisoners smile even though that was not customary in portraits during the nineteenth century. Several of Elisabeth Ohlsson Wallin's models smile. Despite the gravity.

This matter of the gaze is interesting, I think. Art historians have often discussed people's gaze in portraits. Who is allowed to retain his or her own gaze? Who are able to choose? In the nineteenth-century carte de visite portraits the bourgeois people look ahead, beyond the camera and the photograph. With confidence? Perhaps. In the photographs of prisoners the gaze has to be captured in the pictures. Why do we choose to look into the camera today? Is it safe?

The significance of the gaze as a gender marker has been fundamental in feminist picture theory. Being denied a gaze of one's own has often been equated by picture scholars with the dehumanization of the person portrayed. Since gazes have been regarded as threatening, strategies have been developed to disarm women's gazes in art. The averted gaze has been regarded as one such strategy. The depicted person is thereby made more accessible as an enjoyable eye-catcher. Another strategy has been to depict women with their eyes closed. Yet another way to disarm women's gaze and women's subjectivity in pictures has been to present them in parts.

Can one avoid a voyeuristic gaze? I can gaze upon Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin's portraits as long as I want to.

Yes, they look back but they can't gaze upon me. They do not even know that I see them, that I can see them right now. I compare. I wonder why the breasts are naked and photographed in black and white whereas most of the models are photographed in colour with their clothes on. I read somewhere that the seriousness is important, and that the models are supposed to be able to show their breasts without feeling undressed. Why do the models need to be able to show their breasts and still feel dressed? Is it so that women can regain power over their bodies or at least over the presentation of their bodies? Sometimes I am amazed at that photographers who want to reclaim power over the presentation of the female body go about this by doing exactly the same thing as before. Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin's models own their bodies, but do they own the presentation of their bodies? Do they have power over what the photograph will look like? There is a template for what Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin's portraits should look like too. Perhaps not as rigorous as the nineteenth-century carte de visite portraits. The subjects seem to use different strategies to respond to it or perhaps manage it, just like the inmates in the prison portraits.

There is no nakedness in the nineteenth-century carte de visite portraits. The people are dressed, often up to the neck and down to the hands. This applies to both men and women. Nudity had other arenas. Art, for example. Nakedness in pictures often required, and still requires, objectified women, and men as the creating subjects. Nakedness in pictures often created and still creates, a voyeuristic gaze. But in the dressed photographic portraits of the nineteenth century, the women's arms are carefully bent to emphasize the ideal narrow waist that many women had worked hard for. The bodily ideal of the narrow waist is clear in all its dressedness. Many women today work just as hard on the shape and size of their breasts as nineteenth-century bourgeois women did on their waists. But what about the naked breasts in Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin's photographs? Do they require objectified women or voyeuristic gazes? What happens when the photographic artist is a woman and the breasts are platonically visualized as inserted black and white name signs?

In the nineteenth-century photographs of inmates, the prisoners are forced to meet the gaze of the observer. I don't think that Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin forced anyone to look into the camera. But who knows how to break the template? Do we say no? How many of us understand the consequences of our own portraits? Is it even important? Do you own the presentation of your body? Do you own your gaze? Do you choose to meet the camera's gaze or do you instead let yourself be observed, perhaps from the side?

ANJA PETERSEN

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BREAST