

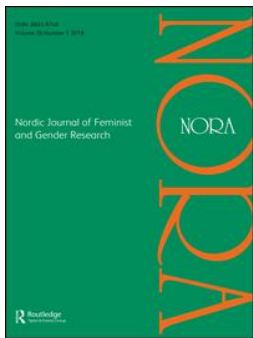
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ARTICLE

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Psychosocial and Symbolic Dimensions of the Breast Explored through a Visual Matrix

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ABSTRACT

This article explores knowledge about the breast in lived experience, addressing a gap in empirical research on a highly gendered cultural trope and embodied organ. We present findings from a study that used a free-associative psychosocial method—the Visual Matrix—in order to stimulate expressions of tacit aspects of the breast, aiming to generate an understanding of relations between embodied and enculturated experiences. Our data revealed how an aesthetic of the grotesque in one matrix allowed the mainly female group to use humour as a “creative psychic defence” against culturally normative and idealized aspects of the breast. This was expressed through symbolizations, affectively delivered in an exuberant mode, emphasizing the breast’s potency and its potential for nurturance and “weaponization”. Through this feminine poetic, life and death became inseparable yet ambiguous dimensions of breasts. The breast’s life-affirming qualities included the sensual, the visceral, and the joyful—a material-semiotic knowing. This was in contrast to a second matrix, which expressed a more ambivalent and troubled response, and in which associations were weighted towards the spectacular breast of an ocular-centric culture that privileges hetero-masculine looking. We discuss differences between the two matrices in terms of psychosocial tensions between embodied and enculturated experiences.

KEYWORDS

The breast; Visual Matrix; psychosocial studies; gender; sex; embodiment

Introduction

This article explores the breast in the psychosocial interplay of lived experience and culture. It addresses a gap in empirical research on this highly gendered trope and embodied organ through a study that used a free-associative, image-led, psychosocial method—the Visual Matrix—to capture tacit knowledge of the breast in a group setting. We start by highlighting its psychosocial complexity and note the scarcity of empirical work on the breast in gender studies. We consider it to be a “defended object” in that embodied experiences may arouse conflict and anxiety due to gendered and sexed investments in the breast as a cultural trope. We then describe our methodology, before moving on to the findings. This is followed by a discussion of whether, when the over-determination of an ocular-centric culture that privileges masculine erotic objectification

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is suspended, the Visual Matrix provides a space for *a new poetics of the material-semiotic breast* in resistance to dominant cultural ascriptions. We ask how this may be of interest to feminist and gender studies. Although the Visual Matrix is not designed as a feminist methodology, we consider how compatible it is with feminist methodological concerns for inquiring into the gendered and sexed complexities of matter and meaning.

What is it about the breast?

The breast is a central matter (*materia*) in the mammalian evolution of the human species (Yalom, 1998), and a foundational psychic signifier (Freud, 1905; Klein, 1975/1997, as well as a powerfully saturated “cultural imaginary” (Dawson, 1994). The persistence of the breast motif in many genres of ancient and modern art across cultures suggests an interplay between cultural forms and unconscious phantasies¹ related to this female organ (Gripsrud, 2008). The female breast frequently appears as a highly invested spectacular aesthetic object (Gripsrud, 2006). However, in cultures of fluid late modernity (Bauman, 2000), it is marked by paradoxical ambiguity: on the one hand fetishized in popular culture and pornography; on the other, exposed to moral censorship of women’s bodies in everyday life.²

Breasts may be perceived as life-giving organs related to reproduction and breast-feeding, or as life-taking organs through their susceptibility to cancer (Gripsrud, 2008; Gripsrud et al., 2014; Gripsrud et al., 2016; Solbrække, Søiland, Lode, & Gripsrud, 2017). Women with breast cancer describe losing a breast through mastectomy as a bereavement, or loss of identity, triggering existential thoughts of the transitory nature of life (Truelsen, 2003). Although mastectomy is a curative intervention, some women experience it as fracture of the corporeal imaginary, feeling mutilated by a “hole” which is impossible to integrate” and re-embody (Arroyo & Lopez, 2011, p. 1; see also Gripsrud et al., 2014).

Little research has been conducted on women’s *affirmative* experience of breasts, possibly because their bio-psycho-socio-cultural complexity affords an onto-epistemological and empirical challenge—not least in the light of the tension between women’s embodied experience of breasts and the breast as cultural signifier. This is in part produced and compounded by the gendered and sexed mind/body split, which has preoccupied generations of feminist thinkers from Wollstonecraft (1792/1999) onwards (see Ahmed, 2001; de De Beauvoir, 1949/2010; Butler, 1990/1999; Cixous, 1998/2005; Gallop, 1988; Haraway, 1988; Kristeva, 1977; Rich, 1976/1995). Contemporary theory, conceptualized as “feminist materialism”, “corporeal feminism”, and “post-constructionism”, has reinvigorated these concerns, calling for new perspectives “which can approach the agency of matter, including that of sexed bodies and bodily differences, in a non-deterministic and non-essentializing mode” and “can relate to pre-discursive ‘facticities’ of bodies and transcorporeal relations” (Lykke, 2010, p. 131) in hetero-normative and ocular-centric cultures, which tend to erase them. As part of this feminist (re)turn to lived embodiment and the ways in which its meanings are inscribed and generated, Donna Haraway offers the concept “material-semiotic” (Haraway, 1988, p. 595). She does so in order to underscore the inextricable relationship between lived embodiment (the material) and knowledges, imaginaries, language, and affects (the semiotic) relating to embodiment. Haraway’s conceptualization of the “material-

semiotic” as something irreducible to binary splitting resonates with our psychosocial approach to exploring knowledge of the breast.

The difficulty of generating an adequate representation of the lived breast is revealed by gaps in the literature, which is unexpected, given the longstanding academic interest in the minutiae of bodies, sex, and gender (Gripsrud, 2006, 2008; Young, 2005). There have been some popular accounts (Ayalah & Weinstock, 1979; Dodsworth, 2015; Spadola, 1998). Some historians (Fildes, 1988; Leopold, 1999; Olson, 2005; Yalom, 1998), sociologists (Blum, 1999; Carter, 1995; Golden, 2001; Jacobsen, 2000; Maclean, 1990; Potts, 2000), and anthropologists (Maher, 1992; Mead, 1962) have engaged with breastfeeding or breast cancer as significant sociocultural phenomena. Nevertheless, it is still the case, as feminist theorist Iris Marion Young identified in 2005, that there is an “amazing absence of [academic] writing” (p. 75) about women’s lived experiences of breasts. Within feminist, gender, and cultural studies this failure to address the breast as a significant gendered trope is perhaps because of its category-defying complexity (Gallop, 1995; Gripsrud, 2008). Due to its “many powerful” and “disturbingly incompatible” meanings (McConville, 1994, p. 1), the breast may be difficult to reflect upon or verbalize through discursive methods. Our approach therefore sought to offer participants a setting in which the separation of embodied experience and cultural representation could be provisionally suspended. We used a psychosocial method—the Visual Matrix—led by imagery and affect, hoping to elicit tacit knowledge of the breast in a group-based setting.

Psychosocial studies involve a dialogue between psychoanalysis, sociology, and cultural studies, partly influenced by feminism (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009). By adopting a psychosocial approach (Woodward, 2015), we view “cultural processes [as] integral and internal to psychological processes rather than grafted on afterwards” (Urwin, 2009, p. 151). Correspondingly, we refer to Dawson’s (1994) “cultural imaginary” as “public forms which both organize knowledge of the social world and give shape to phantasies within the ‘internal’ domain of psychic life” (p. 48). As well as feminist thinking, this paper draws on object relations theory, since the breast in Klein’s (1975/1997) work is foundational in human development and the structuring of mental life, and also because of her emphasis on splitting as a primary defence against anxiety and complexity. From a Kleinian perspective, the ability to resist splitting and to accommodate paradox and incongruity is an emotional achievement of maturity involving a capacity to embrace contradictions without the need for splitting and projection into an ideal. This has a bearing on our understanding of the breast’s complexity.

Methodology

The Visual Matrix method³ (Froggett et al., 2015) is led by imagery and visualization, enabling hitherto unarticulated ideas to emerge into consciousness in a facilitated group setting. It is useful for the examination of “defended objects”,⁴ which are hard to consider and may be prone to splitting and projection, because they arouse fear, anxiety, shame, envy, or other forms of disquiet. In a matrix, an associative process is first set in motion by a sensory stimulus. This leads to a process of creative image production among the participants, who may associate in their minds, not only to the stimulus material but to one another’s contributions. The matrix facilitates a free-

floating state of mind in participants, which is akin to daydreaming. The images evoked are presented *verbally* in the matrix. To exemplify, one participant in the present study said: “My first image was . . . milk and honey”, leading to another participant’s association to “a real image from when I breastfed . . .”. From these examples, one can see how the matrix imagery can be biographical but is also shaped by or shared through “cultural imaginaries” (Dawson, 1994). Because these cultural referents are not metaphysical but rooted in the embodied life experiences of individuals, they can be seen to reflect participants’ “situated imaginaries” (Hellstrand, 2015). Expressions in a matrix are therefore neither uniquely personal nor wholly cultural; rather, they emerge in what Winnicott (1971) called a “potential space”—a third area of experiencing in-between the apparent “interiority” of the participants’ lived experience and the “exteriority” of culture. The intertwining of personal taste, disposition, biography, and sociocultural context in the matrix produces a form of shared thinking in which individual voices retain their distinctiveness within the matrix as a whole.

As a psychosocial method, the Visual Matrix is designed to overcome the individual/social binary that supports the mind/body split in culture and subjective experience. This third area of experiencing has been seen by feminist psychoanalyst theorists as the ground of the intersubjective relation: a three-way relationship that invokes the material world (Gentile, 2007). From this relation grows the possibility of communication, whereby the materiality of the “energetic (embodied) third” infuses the “symbolic third” of the cultural order (Benjamin, 2004). The Visual Matrix produces a setting for intersubjectivity, apprehended through the “aesthetic third” of its shared imagery and verbalizations (Froggett, Manley, & Roy, 2015). The importance of this thirdness from a feminist perspective is to establish the potential for repairing a splitting dynamic between “doer and done to” (Benjamin, 2004), exemplified in our study by the conventions of the “active male gaze” (Mulvey, 1975/1992) in relation to the female as “passive bearer” of this look. In the context of our study, the Visual Matrix was presented to participants as a space where the breast, implicated in this split gendered dynamic, can be newly perceived. The hope was that this would release it from its potential preconception as an object split off from the subjective self (as indicated by the difficulty of articulating the breast affirmatively; see above). The participants’ mutual acknowledgement of the shared intersubjective space of the Visual Matrix could rather create a third potential space of free association, where the intersubjective third is not the object of the individual subject but rather is *shared* by the group.

The associative thinking in a Visual Matrix is impelled by unconscious phantasy appearing in imagistic expressions, related to, but not confined by cultural-discursive tropes. Language employed in a functioning matrix typically has an experience-nearness and metaphorical density. Therefore, our study sought to stimulate and capture expressions of tacit aspects of the breast that have evaded discursive representation. The aim was to generate understanding of relations between embodied and enculturated experience of the breast.

A Visual Matrix session accommodates 6–25 participants and has two parts: a matrix and a post-matrix discussion. The first part presents participants with a visual/sensory stimulus which serves to prompt or encourage images and associations with the subject matter. Then, the participants are seated in a “snowflake” pattern (Froggett et al., 2015) to avoid eye contact, reduce group dynamics, and discourage direct addresses to one

another or the facilitator(s), whose role is to model the visual thinking process for the participants. This encourages contributions in the here-and-now of the matrix, rather than discursive or argumentative reflections, revealing what is being produced in participants rather than their judgements or opinions about the research topic. For 45–60 minutes, images and associations with one another interweave to form a “collage” of images, affects, and ideas. This collage contains clusters or nodes of imagery and intensities of affect from which other associations proceed. Part two takes place after the matrix and a short break during which the chairs are re-arranged into a semi-circle. Participants then image-map the proceedings together, establishing a frame for subsequent research team analysis. The matrix and post-matrix discussion are audio-recorded, transcribed, and interpreted through a sequence of research panels (Froggett et al., 2015).

Our two Visual Matrix sessions took place consecutively on the same day at a university campus in Norway in 2013, involving a convenience sample of 10 participants who all took part in both matrices, mostly recruited by invitation. Our interdisciplinary team consisted of researchers from Norway and the UK, combining sociology, psychosocial studies, the humanities, and health, gender, and cultural studies. Three researchers participated in the matrices. The group’s ages ranged from mid-30s to late 60s and included people with a personal, professional, or academic interest in the method or the topic. The group was educated and middle-class. Matrices were conducted in English. Co-incidentally, but with a bearing on our findings, one participant was male; the remaining nine were female. All of the women were mothers, and the man was a father. Participants were fully briefed about the method before the session, consenting verbally to take part and for anonymized data to be published.

In the first matrix (VM1), the only stimulus was a spoken invitation to share “images and associations to do with breasts/the breast”. This was done in order to elicit initial material that was close to lived experience. In the second matrix (VM2), we presented images of the breast sequentially in a slideshow in order to encourage participants’ associations with a wide range of cultural referents. The slideshow was selected, through careful consideration, by two of the researchers beforehand.

The participant discussion after each matrix was recorded as a mind map on a whiteboard and then photographed for use by the research panels in conjunction with the transcripts of the Visual Matrix sessions. Research team panels took place over several months. A key principle was to recall the experiential immediacy of the matrix and ensure that the researchers resisted foreclosing the flow of associative ideas. This was done through reading the transcript aloud, followed by five minutes of uninterrupted feedback of the personal experience of the reading for each panel member (Manley, Roy, & Froggett, 2016). Ideas at this stage of analysis were formulated as working hypotheses rather than full-blown interpretations. In an adaptation of the Dubrovnik depth-hermeneutic method (Bereswill, Morgenroth, & Redman, 2010; Froggett et al., 2015; Gripsrud, Mellon, & Ramvi, *in press*; Salling Olesen, 2012), the panels then worked through the transcripts. Working hypotheses had to find iterative support (established through researcher consensus) in the data set to survive. The significance of each idea or image cluster was considered, but also how these could relate to each other “rhizomatically” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) in complex and non-linear ways, while constant return to the transcript supported an imaginative and

affective return to the lived matrix experience. Scenic Compositions (Froggett, Conroy, Manley, & Roy, 2014) were created to experientially reconnect researchers with the “feel of” the matrices during the latter stages of the interpretation process (see Appendix). This is a self-reflexive creative writing device designed to capture a “syncretistic” view of a data set as a whole, seen through the lens of researcher response. In earlier sessions, closeness in time to the matrix enabled a discussion of substantive and performative dimensions (*what was presented and how*) and was supported by thematic cluster analysis. In later sessions, this developed into discussions on the associated psychosocial implications (*why it was presented in this manner*). In what follows, we introduce and discuss our findings from the two matrices.

Visual Matrix session one (VM1)

Below, we present the imagery from the first matrix related to our interpretations of burlesque humour, cancer as interruption, eroticism and sexual difference, and a sensual undercurrent (see above for details on the stimulus material, and see the Scenic Composition in Appendix to get a sense of the matrix as a whole).

Burlesque humour and the aesthetic of the grotesque

We were initially struck by the humour of this Visual Matrix, which puzzled us. For example, one image cluster included: “balloons, in the air”; “mountains, peaks, a sponge”; “fish balls”; and “a Dolly Parton kind of breast—surreal and fantastic”. There were hints that burlesque humour occurs in mundane interactions between women, implying a sisterly camaraderie: “[I was with] a friend who had her baby with her in a meeting and the baby was crying and disturbing [us]. I said, ‘throw up the melons!’ She replied, ‘*you* shouldn’t talk, you have melons yourself!’”. This kind of frivolity sometimes merged with the grotesque, redolent of the freak show, illustrated in the following example of a childhood memory of when a woman in a swimming-pool shower “took out her breast and put it over her shoulder”. Visual images were accompanied by acoustic suggestions (“chug-chug”), relating breast-pumping with “milking time and cows were milked”. After a disturbing interruption, in a series of images related to breast cancer—involving putrefaction, death, or fear of dying—humour re-emerged in an image of a lactating woman running after her husband, “squeezing the breast and chasing him with the milk. And he *didn’t* like it”, followed by an image of throbbing, milk-bursting breasts and “actually taking them [her full breasts] up to my mouth and emptying them myself”. Many of these images symbolize an assertive and, at times, aggressive potency, tempered by humour—the husband-chasing breast is “weaponized” and “persecuting” in its milk-squirting ferocity, but also theatrically hilarious.

In the interpretation, we engaged with theoretical conceptualizations of the grotesque in order to consider this matrix’s peculiar aesthetic. According to Bloom (2010), the grotesque reconciles paradoxical qualities by exaggerating incongruity. It represents the “incursion of disorder” (Bloom, 2010, p. 94) and is often associated with the horrific. In this matrix, abject imagery and strong sensory associations with breast cancer punctuated images of “non-conformist” female bodies: squirting, sagging, and

bursting. In this juxtaposition, the grotesque acted, as Bloom suggests, in a way that holds together a paradox: the deathly versus the life-giving breasts. The aesthetic third of this matrix took form through the combination of this grotesque aesthetic and its accompanying humour. It allowed participants to take pleasure in symbolic exaggeration, which included implicit aggression. Sometimes its use was frivolous, recalling the carnivalesque grotesque—a literary trope associated with Bakhtin (1968) in which the body is exaggerated, abject, deviant, and always in flux. According to Russo (1994, p. 8), whereas the classic body is represented as “static, self-contained, symmetrical and sleek”, the grotesque body is something quite *other*: “open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple and changing—identified with non-official ‘low culture’”. The data from VM1 resonated strikingly with the terms in which Russo reflects on the qualities of the grotesque body, and in this way signalled an opposition to conventions of breasted beauty, the containment of fluidity, and disciplining of the female body in late-capitalist cultures.

Cancer as interruption: life, death, and potency

As mentioned above, at certain points in the matrix, the breast imagery turned into something radically undesirable and repellent. Cancer of the breast appeared early and was said by two participants to “disturb” their associations with the breast, as friends and family had been affected by the illness. An image was presented of tending to a man who had breast cancer (“I didn’t know men could have breast cancer”). There was a reference to a woman who died from breast cancer as she struggled to tolerate chemotherapy: “she had it once and felt so poisoned and horrified by it that she stopped and let life go”. Graphic imagery then followed with the image of a cancerous breast that “was just ... lumps and sores and blood. The whole breast was just not there anymore”, followed by an association with a woman with advanced breast cancer and “that smell ... I had problems staying conscious. It was just something I’ll never forget”. This was a shocking and uncompromising interruption, which was neither defensively sanitized nor repudiated by the matrix. Two images then referred to scars involving “mother’s breasts which had scars from ... removing benign lumps”, followed by an elderly mother who had her breast removed “and she has a scar, and she is ... not afraid of showing it and making fun of it”. Even here, however, we are aware of the burlesque–grotesque mode we have already discussed, as this mother “wants to scare anyone [male intruders] who comes into her house” by exposing her scar: “*then* they will run! she says”.

In our interpretation, the disintegrating breast, and the mastectomy scar as a repellant against male attackers, signalled a transgression of the gendered “economy of vision” in VM1 (Rose in Pollock, 1988, p. 120). Instead of evoking mutilation and loss (Arroyo & Lopez, 2011; Gripsrud et al., 2016), and in defiance of mastectomy as “castration”, the absent breast was “weaponized” by power in this matrix. Mother’s milk and ageing bodies, as well as abject breast cancer mutilations, were used in what we call “creative psychic defences”⁵ against masculine threats of invasion or sexual objectification, metaphorically and concretely. A life/death split was evoked: abundance and fullness in lactation contrasted with cancerous deformity, lumps, sores, blood, and the stench of putrefaction. This was further supported by the associations with women with

breast cancer who had accepted death, contrasting with associations with nurturing, life, and survival.

Eroticization and sexual difference

Early on in the matrix, the male participant introduced the following scene: A young woman who was “so proud when she looked up to the sun and showed her [naked] breasts to the whole beach”. This was followed in counter-point by a woman referring to a film scene of an elderly female stroke survivor:

she was sitting in the shower naked and was washed by a nurse and she had the most beautiful body of an older woman with sort of heavy, hanging breasts and a really feminine shaped body. It was just a beautiful sight.

This appeared to be offered as a correction to the male participant’s introduction of a soft-porn tabloid image. He was reminded not to forget the solemn grace of the helplessly disabled older woman—a scene that we considered as a geriatric “cooling-off”. Subsequently, there was some attempt at achieving a rebalancing effect as he then provided another image, this time of a breastfeeding infant: “After being fed and satisfied ... the little baby won’t leave the breast ... he’ll just want to stay there by the breast”. This shift to the *infantile* need and desire for the maternal breast secured him the women’s tolerance in the matrix. He then flagged a final surrender to the female group hegemony with: “My neighbour as a child, a girl. We just played in the water and then I realized she had ... there was something that I didn’t have”. This appeasement through “breast lack” or “breast envy” highlighted a boy’s first realization of sexual difference. By subtly bringing the male participant into line in this way, the female group appeared to reinforce its own sense of potency. The women, all mothers, continued to refer to breastfeeding as an expression of this potency, defying further erotic idealization. Sexuality was not absent in the matrix—rather it was deciphered through metaphor and allusion in a form that could be recognized and owned by the women.

For this group of women, breasted experience had been profoundly shaped by the intimacy and sensuality of maternity. We accounted for this prominence partly through the ways in which Norwegian second-wave feminism re-appropriated breastfeeding as a crucial mothering device (Gripsrud, 2008), thereby shaping the cultural imaginary of the breast by emphasizing women’s ownership of their breasts as female-specific nurturing organs, over which battles have been fought and won. This has influenced cultural and health policy discourses about mothering and parenting (Andrews & Knaak, 2013; Henriksen, 2015). Despite this discursive prominence, the life-giving breast in VM1 was neither idealized nor clichéd, but frivolous and burlesque or grotesquely dark and fearsome, supporting an assertive feminine potency. It is in this context of feminine potency that the matrix considers the sensuality discussed in the next section.

A sensual undercurrent

Whereas the first-level analysis concentrated on the experiential immediacy of visual and sensory associations (*what*), the second was more concerned with the language in

which (*how*) they were presented. In attending to the clustering of imagery and affective intensities around potent breasts (nurturing or punishing), we discovered a pervasive sensuality in all but three clusters: 1) *the iconic nursing Madonna*—“giving breast to one of my sons was the luckiest moment in my life”; 2) *the detached breast in an artwork*—“on a big plate, like ... an art object, white and pure, beautiful”; and 3) *the abject cancerous breast* “just ... lumps and sores and blood ... the whole breast was just not there anymore”. Every other image in this matrix evoked sensuality—delicately condensed in: “a Japanese painting ... of a kimono ... with an opening. The picture is just smoke, tiny grey smoke, which reminds me of the breast with its explosiveness, feeling”. Other sensual metaphors included the giving and taking dynamics of rhythmic in-out pulses (breast and udder pumping), sounds (slurping, swishing, sucking), and taste: “a feeling, having the nipple in my mouth—how wonderful!” Images of lactation were abundant: “the joy of my daughter when she looks at the full breast and I have to hold it because it’s so full, it’s about to spill over ... and we are just laughing, the two of us”; or “my breasts were just exploding—they were so full of milk”. Other associations with the plentiful included: “my breast was too full with milk and hardened on the inside”; “lots of small square boxes full of milk ... to donate to the hospital”; or “a sponge—wet and warm, soft and cuddly ... You can squeeze it and it’s juicy”. In the discussion, we explore this expressive palate of imagery as a material-semiotic mode of feminine joy in this matrix.

Visual Matrix session two (VM2)

We now present imagery and our interpretations from the second matrix relating to spectacular breasts and the male gaze, the exotic breast, aesthetics and functionality, and the corrupted breast related to shame and disgust (see above for details of the stimulus material, and see the Scenic Composition in Appendix to get a sense of the matrix as a whole).

Spectacular breasts and men who like to look

The opening contribution to a Visual Matrix frequently frames the subsequent associative contributions. In this matrix it was: “men are very occupied with big breasts and ladies want to show them”, which was re-introduced at a later stage by the man’s association with a teenage girl in a wet T-shirt: “her breasts suddenly became visible and there was chaos in the group. The boys went mad!” As in VM1, this reference, implying an invitation to look and show, was countered by geriatric associations with “the old woman’s breasts: looks like a landscape, a valley”; and “my grandmother in her old house, she was wearing a girdle, it was a ‘shield’, strapping her in, [it] squeezed her into something hard”. This was followed by an image of pointy breasts: “Madonna, [in] the famous bra designed by Jean-Paul Gaultier”, and then an “image of the cleavage” as in *Playboy Magazine*, signalling a return to the opening idea: the force of the male gaze on the breast. There were also references to how women judge other women’s breasts and compare themselves, and with young versus old women and how both ages mourn the loss of a breast due to cancer. For elderly women, “breasts were still important to them in old age”. Echoing VM1, the weaponized breast made a brief appearance: “To put out the chest ... to be brave,

you put forward your chest. A woman in the war, she was standing there, chest put forward”. However, courage was not further elaborated as an idea. This matrix was weighted towards the idea of the constrained, aesthetically manipulated, or subjugated breast.

The exotic breast

Subjugation also appeared in relation to colonial exotica and to naked, uncovered breasts: “I like to look at the African women; young girls—so natural. They just are what they are”. But a “naturally” topless African woman was then said to have become shy when a white male doctor touched her breast. African erotic exotica were further invoked in the image of Afro-American dancer Josephine Baker, and 1950s decorative colonial kitsch objects—a vase in the form of a full-breasted African woman (“just awful”). Another association emerged with Indian temple sculpture—a voluptuous feminine figure, irresistible to the many hands impelled to touch and polish her stone breasts over the centuries, and in contrast to the prudish English boarding-school culture of the 1950s, where “there was a real horror of the naked breast”.

Aesthetics and functionality

Exotic “naturalism” was then contrasted with images of “engineered” bras: the pointed Madonna bra (as mentioned above), push-up, padded, and fancily patterned bras. This brought to mind saggy, thin, hanging, moving breasts, and the breast variety revealed through the bralessness of second-wave feminism (“it didn’t last very long”). There was the ambiguity of the first bra (“shame and pride at once”) and ultimately a dejected notion that breasts should be protected and stabilized: “they shouldn’t move because then they will be hanging down”. In contrast to VM1, where pendulous breasts produced grotesque fascination, in the second this seemed to be an abomination. The breastfeeding that in VM1 sustained life, in VM2 ruined the breast itself as an aesthetic object. The image of an emaciated African mother (a negation of the erotic-exotic breast), appeared death-like, with a famished infant “trying to suck the empty breast”. In contrast to the full, milky, overflowing, potent breast in VM1, *sagging* breasts appeared repetitively in VM2 and always negatively: neither life-sustaining nor an object of desire. Both the shape and implied depletion of the pendulous breast became a mark of shame, of female “impotence”.

The corrupted breast: shame and disgust related to eroticization and the gaze

Shame in VM2 compounded with eroticism turned to disgust: a sexual invitation to the cleavage appeared through an association with the euphemistic “cavalier’s path” [from Danish: “*kavalergang*”], insinuating that a woman’s cleavage is an invitation to male courtship, and transmuted into the association of trying on a dress that made the cleavage “look like a butt crack”. There was reference to the mass allure of the opening of Victoria’s Secret underwear store—purveyors of bra-engineered cleavage for profit, followed by associations with women hiding diamonds and money there and

intimations of prostitution. The dirtying or corruption of the breast was alluded to with the idea of spoiling by spilling food “on the balcony” of the breasts; and trying to breastfeed and eat one-handed, “spilling food on the baby”. In contrast to VM1, breastfeeding evoked frustration related to the Norwegian “duty” to breastfeed; the softening and stretching of the breasts; the societal taboo on breastfeeding for longer than six months, and breastfeeding as a challenge to heterosexual relations.

There were flashes of the grotesque in the second matrix too, but confounded as it was by the idea of hetero-masculine looking, the group seemed less able to resort to this creative defence. Instead, it opted for a more “primitive defence”: evacuation of unwanted feelings. In our interpretation, disgust with the sexualized breast in VM2 arose from the financialization of the otherwise valued cleavage, implying corruption, degradation, seediness (prostitution, filthy money), excrement (breasts resembling butt cracks), and soiling (spilling onto the breasts). The need to evacuate unpleasant feelings was strong, and this meant that attempts to integrate derided and unwanted aspects of breasted experience into a stable and authentic resistance were less successful than in VM1. Contributions were positioned as either projectively antagonistic to cultural gender norms, or introjectively captured by them. Third-position thinking, in which the tensions between representation and embodiment are accommodated did emerge—for example, in the sexual radiance of an elderly aunt (see below)—but were not sustained. This matrix was both critical of hetero-masculine looking and at times seemingly trapped within it, enacting a pervasive dilemma of contemporary femininity.

The eroticization of the breast in VM2 contrasts with the feminine sensuality of VM1. In the former, unconscious phantasy fell prey to the hetero-normativity of the breast as spectacular object, and the shame of deviation from societal aesthetic norms. This matrix seemed especially concerned with the look of a woman, which, according to Pollock (1988) has a particular imaginary function as “visibly different, yet fantasy, [a] sign of masculine desire” (p. 121). Within this cultural imaginary, woman as fantasmatic sign “depends on a particular economy of vision” (Jacqueline Rose quoted in Pollock, 1988, p. 120) that privileges “the male gaze” (Mulvey, 1975/1992) (also referred to as hetero-masculine looking), and its accompanying ideological construction of femininity as a mask of visual perfection (Pollock, 1988), ubiquitously depicted, advertised and commodified in the digital age. From a Kleinian perspective, the objectifying male gaze can be considered an example of a culturally supported splitting that enables breast fetishization, dis-connected from sexed, embodied relations. However, even in VM2, we found moments of female resistance to objectification. For example, in the image of an elderly aunt getting dressed for a date with her man:

She came out of the bathroom with jeans and a necklace around her neck and nothing else—she said: “is this an appropriate outfit for tonight?” We were laughing very much, my mother and I. I had never seen her breasts before. She was very strict and a little religious. This is what love did to her. And she had breasts like a young girl.

Sustaining female resistance to the look was a struggle for this matrix: the image of this elderly woman, in love and sexually “liberated”, is a counter-point to shame. She playfully shows her breasts to the women in her family, but gains approval *because they are the breasts of a young girl* and thus conforms comfortably to the matrix’s gendered “economy of vision”.

The situated and cultural imaginaries of the breast

The imagery and affects of the matrices were formed by the “situated imaginaries” (Hellstrand, 2015) of the participants. These are intertwined with cultural representations, but rooted in the body, drawing on the unconscious “primary processes” (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973) that occur when enculturation is still at a very early stage and transmitted through the relationship with the mother or other primary caretaker. In VM1, a shared space was created for expressing feminine corporeal experience—rooted in nurturing, desire, and relationality—and offered ways to develop symbolization impelled by unconscious phantasy: making sense of breasts as materially raw and sensual, reproductive yet destructive. VM1 emphasizes the breast’s “material-semiotic” qualities, in what Lemma (2010, p. 63) describes as “internal representations” of the body in the mind, “an unconscious psychic organisation powered by particular phantasies of the self-in-interaction-with-an-other”. The body represented in the “unconscious mind of the matrix” was powered by the phantasy of the breast as a relationally potent female organ with subversive qualities—a force to be reckoned with.

In VM2, “cultural imaginaries” (Dawson, 1994) concerning the constructed ideal and stereotype of breasted femininity and its established cultural tropes were more clearly in play. Here, the breast is a signifier of feminine allure—an object for masculine visual incorporation, implying woman as “bearer, not maker of meaning” (Mulvey, 1975/1992, p. 159) in a manner evocative of the splitting dynamic in “doer and done to” (Benjamin, 2004). The diverse image-based stimulus in VM2 was a deliberate framing device, but unexpectedly this invoked an ocular-centric culture that in many ways fetishizes the spectacle of the female breast. Possibly, this provoked a sense of feminist disquiet within the group, with overtones of political correctness, but also an ambivalence and an uncomfortable inversion whereby natural breasts were re-cast in phantasy as depleted and thin, deviant, shameful, and dysfunctional and where an artificial perpetuation of youthfulness through disciplining the body remained—inescapably—the norm for women. There were elements of censorship and rejection of hetero-masculine eroticization in VM1, whereas the breast iconography in some of the stimulus images presented to VM2 seemed to produce an acute discomfort, disgust, or alienation, which interrupted the flow of imagery related to the lived sensuality and intimacy of the breast in the first matrix. In support of this, we refer to the very different strategies of resistance to hetero-masculine looking adopted by the two matrices. The censorship in VM1 occurred with brisk determination as soon as eroticized looking was introduced by the lone male in the group, thus making way for a distinctively feminine sensuality. This situated imaginary was grounded in the female participants’ lived experience of breasts, which had been transformed by their experience of suckling infants—in some cases many years previously. We must nevertheless acknowledge that any attempt to disentangle the situated and cultural imaginaries risks imposing a false binary, and that in both matrices it is a case of material-semiotic engagement. It is a question of *weighting*, and this, as we have shown, is clearly reflected differently in the two matrices.

Although the findings from VM2 highlighted “the [cultural] imaginary dimension of the regulative power concerning gender, sexuality, and subject formations” (Sabsay, 2016, p. 9), we argue that in VM1 there was a profound working through in the orientation towards material-semiotic negotiations of the breast. The data in VM1

hint at psychological processes that are animated, free associative, and free-flowing, at times interwoven with the cultural imaginary but relatively autonomous with respect to gendered stereotypes. In VM1, we also find evidence of creative psychic defence (grotesque humour), allowing for the processing and regulation of primary psychological content, as aggression and self-deprecation are owned and inverted into something that works towards women's self-acceptance. This matrix appeared to have accommodated an uncomfortable conflict between the desire to be seen as gender-normatively sexually attractive and beautiful and the painful realization that one never will be. This can be lived with. We account for this as a struggle between phantasy and reality in the "potential space" (Winnicott, 1971) of the matrix, indicating movement from the paranoid-schizoid (defensive splitting) position on to the depressive position (integration), where good and bad may co-exist (Klein, 1975/1997).

Methodological reflections on the Visual Matrix in relation to a feminist perspective

Our findings indicate that the Visual Matrix, as a psychosocial method, provides a relevant (potential) space for exploration and articulation of the complex experience of breasts within encultured embodiment. Does it show promise in relation to Lykke's (2010) desire to address "the agency of matter" (p. 131)? Testing the matrix as a feminist tool was not a primary objective of the study, but our findings are suggestive of its ability to symbolize tacit aspects of embodied experience, in a way that may be sympathetic to Lykke's outline. Hence, we believe that this study can inform and enrich feminist "practices of thinking [that] are not separated from the realm of the body but are implicated in the passion, emotions and materiality that are associated with lived embodiment" (Ahmed & Stacey, 2001, p. 3). The theoretical turn to affect has suggested how individual matters of the body and bodily responses can provide information about social worlds and realities (Clough, 2010). The Visual Matrix appears particularly apt for investigating these kinds of interconnections, as it moves beyond the individual as object of inquiry and instead seeks to identify shared affect, activated by aesthetics and collages of images and ideas (Ramvi et al., 2018).

Stylistically, in VM1, prominent clusters of associations with the breast were delivered in a tactile-sensory mode (taste, smell, sound, feel). This unique mode of delivery—playful, rhythmic, metaphorical, and multi-sensory—touches on what Kristeva (1977, preceding Haraway) termed "the semiotic". The semiotic concerns a kind of poetic speech intimately related to the Kleinian universe of infantile-maternal impulses which defy subject/object, reality/phantasy, matter/meaning divisions. Divisions related to the body/mind binary are characteristic of the phallogocentric symbolic order of culture and language, which "relies on a severance of [this] relation to maternal dependency" (Butler, 1990/1999, p. 105; see also Kristeva, 1977), whereas poetic language "always indicates a return to the maternal terrain" (Butler, 1990/1999, p. 107). Such a return can be recognized in Hélène Cixous's *écriture féminine*—as writing in white ink, suggestive of mother's milk: an invisible yet magically transforming ink. In Cixous's (1998/2005) associatively-driven writing, *jouissance* precedes object-desire and is a feminine recourse to "joy [...] the thing that escapes all economies"—with an extensive poetic reach to "the poetry of upper and lower depths" (p. 176)—where "evil and good happily

mingled” (p. 175). This is evocative of the exuberant joy (*jouissance*) in VM1, where the matrix facilitated related modes of figurative speech on the good and the bad, life and death, hilarious and serious, evading clichés and well-worn cultural tropes, interlinked with assertive expressions of female potency in the breast. The imagery and tactile-sensory mode of delivery indicate how phantasies “continue throughout development and accompany all activities; they never stop playing a great part in all mental life” (Klein, 1975/1997, p. 251). As a partly symbolic space, the matrix prompts participants to occupy the position of third to the dyad of matter and meaning—seeking through their free-associative shared setting to re-unite the energetic, sensuous, and symbolic thirds at the level of embodied experience. The more a matrix develops its own distinctive aesthetic (as in the grotesque aesthetic in VM1), the stronger the sense of shared thirdness and the more it is able to elaborate on and take pleasure in its own productions. In VM1, it was a process of finding adequate form (Ramvi et al., 2018) for the feeling of joy and vitality evoked by the breast. As our findings suggest, this confers a freshness and originality to its visual and verbal language that defies cultural and stylistic conventions, in a manner reminiscent of an *écriture féminine*.

Concluding reflections

As both matrices indicate, “cultural imaginaries” (Dawson, 1994) concerning breast-feeding and the breast as “spectacular object” (Gripsrud, 2006) reverberated with associations, discursive themes, narratives, images, knowledge claims, and phantasies about the breast, interweaving with “situated imaginaries” (Hellstrand, 2015)—confirming the complexity of the breast as a “meaning knot” (Lode, Søliland, & Gripsrud, 2012). At a basic level, VM1 appeared to be “wrestling with [the] matter” (Gentile, 2007) of breasts, whereas VM2 was “wrestling with the culture” of the breast. But as we have shown, culture is psychosocially entangled with, rather than deterministic of, embodied experience.

There is a counterweight to dominant cultural representations, given the primacy of the breast in the earliest developmental phase (Freud, 1905), which means that human beings have a material, affective, and symbolic relationship to it as a primary object. This object concerns basic needs for love, care, warmth, nourishment, and a sustaining environment, as well as the ways in which we (self-) attack and destroy these “good objects” in order to rid ourselves of frustrating or destructive impulses (Klein, 1975/1997). Through enculturation, relationships to the breast become differently gendered and sexed. This may account for how heterosexual male “stakeholders” can complicate women’s relationships to their own breasts, without, however, defining them, as VM1 indicates. Due to the convenience recruitment for this exploratory study, there was an unintended “over-representation” of women and mothers in the group. As the findings reflect, this composition led to the emergence of a female hegemony, drawing back from eroticization, opting instead for a revelling in feminine symbolizations of the breast that perhaps would not have emerged had there been more men and fewer mothers present in the matrix. Hence, we do not consider this a limitation of our study.

In assigning a *jouissance* to breasts that were deviant, deformed, dysfunctional, or diseased, VM1 could weave together incompatible dualities, inherent to the “economy

of vision” that emerged into consciousness through VM2. We also interpreted the grotesque aesthetic as an expression of female resistance (Russo, 1994), and reflective of a political unconscious that defies normative sexual and gender relations by celebrating heterogeneity. This matrix eschewed temptations to split the sensual and maternal breast, or to idealize breastfeeding. Instead, it opted for grotesque humour as a creative psychic defence, which worked towards a firm and reparative realism, especially in relation to cancer and disfigurement, whereby the matrix condensed several meanings in the image of the “too-full” lactating breast, “hardened on the inside” and deformed like a “lump”, which was at the same time grotesquely “funny”. Both matrices were concerned with breasts in life and death: sensual, nurturing, and potent, but also destructive and vulnerable to decay, ageing, and disease. “Managing” these contradictory bio-psycho-socio-cultural aspects is a complex task that women perform throughout their life-course. It is here that the poetic language of the Visual Matrix comes to the fore, allowing for an integration of apparent contradictions.

Our findings come with implications, as the Visual Matrix method tapped into the complexly intertwined imaginaries of the breast, allowing for the sharing of difficult ideas and images related to cancer, death, mutilation, fertility, and sensuality. A surprising and novel feature is how the mainly female group embraced an affective mode of delivery characterized by exuberance and joy—in defiance of masculine eroticization and fetishization. We conclude that, when the over-determination of an ocular-centric culture that privileges hetero-normativity is suspended, the Visual Matrix provides a space to express tacit knowledge of material-semiotic aspects of the breast. Furthermore, it appears to offer a way of “thinking through the body” (Gallop, 1988) in a poetics of affective visualization and symbolization that is resistant to dominant cultural ascriptions.

Notes

1. In psychoanalysis, “phantasy” refers to largely unconscious phenomena emerging in early infantile life, bordering between the physical and the psychological. At this early developmental stage, phantasy is not differentiated from reality, but rather links the infant’s feelings to objects. “Fantasy” is closer to “waking life” (surface-close): reverie and day-dreaming are typical examples. Fantasies may include aspects of unconscious (below the surface) phantasy. The Visual Matrix stimulates this in-between (referred to as “potential space” or “third”), as even “the mature imagination [is linked] to primitive unconscious phantasies” (Steiner, 2003, p. 3).
2. To illustrate, Facebook censors “offensive images” of the breast in art (even the ancient Venus of Willendorf), breastfeeding mothers, and mastectomy scars, which in practicality signify “non-breasts”). Resistance against the censorship of breasts surfaced in 2012 in a “Free the Nipple” campaign, to bring attention to US legislative discrimination against the exposure of women’s breasts and breastfeeding in public. Before this, the feminist anarchist movement Femen gained international attention through the media by baring their slogan-inscribed chests and breasts during demonstrations.
3. Previous studies on the Visual Matrix include: Froggett et al., 2015; Liveng et al., 2017; Manley et al., 2016; Manley & Roy, 2016; Ramvi et al., 2018; and Roy & Manley, 2017.
4. This is an appreciative pun on Hollway and Jefferson’s (2000) concept of the “defended subject”.
5. We use the psychoanalytic term “psychic” synonymously with “psychological”; meaning “of the human mind or soul” (not to be confused with the paranormal).

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Appendix: Two Scenic Compositions on the Visual Matrix Data Set

The Scenic Composition is a creative writing device designed to preserve a data set “syncretistically” as a whole, including its mood, imagery, affect, and aesthetic (Froggett et al., 2014), so obviating the tendency to deconstruction (and the reproduction of the mind/body, individual/society split) that can accompany thematic analysis. Whilst not integral to the Visual Matrix method, we employed it in this study to make reflexive use of researcher visualization, affect, and aesthetic disposition through highly condensed, associative writing that re-captured the overall feel of the matrices, in line with the “scenic understanding” encouraged in a depth-hermeneutic interpretation approach (Gripsrud et al., [in press](#)). The Scenic Compositions helped to guide our analysis and understanding, while rooting us in the experience-nearness of the matrices, during the latter stages of our interpretation, when some time had passed after the actual data collection. We believe that they may also confer to the reader a holistic sense of what a Visual Matrix has to offer, compared with other methods of data collection. Below, we present two Scenic Compositions written by researchers after revisiting the transcripts:

Visual Matrix Session 1

Breasts are in ferment. They squelch, ooze, squidge, and flow for hungry babies who laugh with their mothers in joyful complicity at exploding Dolly Parton melons. The chug, chug, slurp of a mechanical pump lowers the pressure—the simulated sucking of milking-machines in a ripe, warm cow-shed. Excess milk is packed in identical little boxes and sent off to hospital for sickly neonates. Without the pump, “relief” depends on the furtive indignity of a hand job, or suck your own [breasts] if blessed with the pendulous variety. Otherwise wanton and unwanted leaks embarrass polite society, heedless of pinched nipples or prayers, even in church. Superabundance flows from a secret earthy potency belied by the seraphic smile of maternal nurture.

Warrior breasts, on the other hand, terrify, overwhelm, and attack. They chase husbands, spurting incontinently, and the scars of their absence scare off burglars. The suppurating stench of the cancerous breast brings another fear: woman eaten from within, a ruinous corruption of the sanctified source of life.

“Ideal” breasts in “re-touched” fantasy perfection are witnessed by a lone male as a young girl turns naked to the sun (and an appreciative audience)—but the sexual breast is out of place here and smartly checked, along with its aestheticized sister—the art breast—cold, white, disembodied on the gallery wall and all but ignored by this matrix.

Visual Matrix Session 2

The breast being looked upon—an object to be hidden, kept, stowed away, and not to be visible. To be visible is to be vulnerable. Becoming a woman, being a woman: innocence versus vulgarity (or knowing/knowledge). White soft breasts of grandmothers—impossible to comprehend their sexuality, or their sex—which are contained by an unapproachable/untouchable shield . . . put in a bra, which may do things to breasts like accentuate the bust, or show off cleavage, or turn a cleavage into a “dirty” butt crack. Rules for the appearance of the breast. What is a beautiful breast? Natural breasts, enveloped breasts, exposed breasts (seen, touched, noticed). The look of the breast is not the same as the feel of the breast. But the breast can be many things: intimate, exposed, practical, sexual. The desire and shame of having breasts, wanting breasts, growing breasts: shame and pride at the same time. The African other—naturalized with no shame in having her breasts looked at, but embarrassed to be touched; or exotic object to decorate with flowers in a (Western) living room. The scandal of a free breast, a flauntingly sexy aunt, a thin dried up breast, empty of sex, softness, milk. We all notice the breasts around us. The African kitsch vase and the Indian sculpture invite the look and touch, apparently shamelessly.