

**WALL TEXTS**

# **UNCENSORED. ANNEGRET SOLTAU— A RETROSPECTIVE**

**8 MAY 2025–17 AUGUST 2025****Exhibition annex****Proponent of Feminist Art**

Annegret Soltau (b. 1946) is considered to be one of the most important representatives of feminist art in Germany. In her work with various media, she conducts an unswerving investigation into issues of corporeality and the social role of women. Created ever since the 1970s, her works have lost nothing of their immediacy and timeliness, inasmuch as they revolve around central aspects of feminine existence: the vulnerability of the body, the incisive experience of pregnancy and motherhood, and the ongoing search for one's own identity. The artist makes primary use of her own body as object and medium.

What is furthermore characteristic of Soltau is her working on photographs with needle and thread. For her over-stitchings she photographs her own image as well as the bodies of persons close to her, rips apart the prints, and sews the fragments back together with black thread. The act of sewing is traditionally connected with prescribed roles and activities for women. Its transfer into art gives rise to fascinating, striking pictures. In this way Soltau documents, distorts, and visualizes her own psychological and physical conditions. The pictures reveal socially-rooted patterns and prejudices even as they simultaneously stimulate self-reflection and empathy.

**In the Beginning There Was the Line**

At the start of her career in the early 1970s, Annegret Soltau works on paper and creates drawings and prints, giving rise to richly varied depictions of female figures which are surrounded by delicate lineation and netlike structures that anticipate her later use of sewing thread. The lines surround the women's bodies like cocoons, fragment the faces, and thereby engender a dynamism alternating between a feeling of constraint and a simultaneous sense of being sheltered.

In some instances, the artist also uses organic materials such as spider webs which she integrates into her work. They already point towards the experimental handling of unusual materials. The netlike structures – whether of organic origin, drawn or printed – can be read as symbols for the complex meshwork of human interrelationships. In

subsequent years, Soltau will explore them further by means of performance and photography.

### Connections

During the 1960s and 1970s, the students' and women's movements lead to far-reaching changes in society. Social policies and cultural production have a mutual influence on each other. In this context, Performance Art and Body Art attain increasing importance. Currents of feminist art make use of these new forms of expression in order to focus on female gender roles and identity issues. Photography acquires a new status as a medium for documenting ephemeral artistic presentations. From the mid-1970s onwards, Annegret Soltau likewise explores the possibilities offered by Performance Art. In the framework of the performance *Permanente Demonstration* ('Permanent demonstration'), she winds black thread around the torsos of several audience members. The work series *Selbst* ('Self') takes up the elements of performance and ushers them into the medium of photography: the artist wraps her face with thin yarn and expands the prints through embroidery so as to create her first so-called 'photo over-stitchings'. This serves as the basis for Soltau's experimental handling images in conjunction with needle and thread. In Soltau's oeuvre, photography transcends its former function as a mere means of documentation and becomes an independent work of art.

### Pregnancy

In numerous works, Annegret Soltau focuses on the theme of pregnancy, motivated by the personal experience of her first pregnancy in 1977/78. Bodily changes, psychological states, and the sense of an externally imposed identity become the point of departure for Soltau's works. The tension between individual experience and social expectations comes into focus. Soltau engages in subliminal reflection concerning the medical and cultural objectification of pregnant women and their bodies. She makes use of different techniques and media for that purpose: In addition to videos, she creates numerous so-called 'photo-etchings'. Here she manipulates the photographic negative with a needle in such a way that the image of her own body is altered, rendered abstract, or fully extinguished.

At this time, from 1977 onwards, there arise the first 'photo-sewings', in which Soltau rips apart paper prints of photographic portraits, sews them back together, and creates vividly distorted pictures. She explores pregnancy as a phase of radical transformation – an approach that engenders controversial discussion in the feminist movement of the 1970s. Within feminist circles, pregnancy was then considered to be a regressive decision in view of the call for the socio-political liberation of women.

Long viewed as a marginal theme, pregnancy is now increasingly emerging into view as an artistic motif.

### **Maternity – The Joys of Motherhood?**

In her series *Mutter-Glück* ('The Joys of Motherhood'), Soltau examines the traditional notion of fulfilling motherhood: she combines fragmented, sewn-together portraits of herself and her children with writing such as 'Mutter GLÜCK Kinder HASS' ('Mother JOY Children HATE'). Through the technique of sewing, she gives expression to the opposition between profound connectedness and inner conflict. In an intensive exploration of her double role as artist and mother, she confronts individual experience with social expectations and gender roles. In her artistic practice, she thereby links up with the creed of the women's movement in the 1970s: the personal is political. Soltau simultaneously sees women's ability to give life in the context of the act of artistic creation. With her works, Soltau breaks through the traditional separation between motherhood and art and allows the two to blend productively. Thus, she impressively reveals the potential of this connection and at the same time visualises the complex emotional worlds in an unembellished way.

### **Generational Lines**

For decades, Annegret Soltau has made unswerving use of her technique of photo over-stitchings in constantly new realisations. In so doing, she continuously directs her attention towards processes of social transformation and ongoing debates. Thus, in the 1990s and 2000s, Soltau develops the work complexes of the *GRIMA*, *generative*, and *hybrid series*. There arise collaged hybrid creatures consisting of photographs of the artist in selective combination with animal pictures, portraits of her relatives, and digitally manipulated images. Inasmuch as Soltau assembles fragments of different bodies, she explores the biological limits of individuality. At this time, the feminist and philosophical debates concerning stipulated gender borders and identities are highly topical: traditional patterns of social narrative patterns are fundamentally questioned. With these works, Soltau maintains her undeviating approach of depicting the complexity of the self.

### **Search for Identity**

The question as to what identity means is a central foundation in Annegret Soltau's practice. At the beginning of the 2000s, the artist expands her technique of stitching through the inclusion of found objects. Here she endeavours to explore the autobiographical and social anchoring of her own person, especially in the series *personal identity*. A wide range of everyday materials – from birth certificate to SIM card – replaces the face in portrait photography. There is an examination of the

question as to which bureaucratic documents, certificates, or souvenirs such as admission tickets and postcards serve to establish identity. At the same time, Soltau thereby elevates everyday elements to artistic objects, using them in her artistic expression as part of her lived reality. In contrast, the series *Vatersuche* ('Search for a Father') conveys the empty space left in a biography by having an unknown parent. The archival documentation of Soltau's search for her father is inscribed right into her face in the shape of bureaucratic records and correspondence. Soltau repeatedly combines biographical elements with each other in order to give artistic expression to generally valid aspects of human identity.