

PRESS RELEASE

UNCENSORED. ANNEGRET SOLTAU— A RETROSPECTIVE

8 MAY 2025–17 AUGUST 2025

Exhibition annex

Press preview: Wednesday, 7 May 2025, 11 am

Frankfurt am Main, 26 March 2025. The body is political—as the work of artist Annegret Soltau (b. 1946) impressively demonstrates. Her art has been causing a stir since the 1970s and remains as relevant as ever. Long considered an insider's tip despite her art historical significance, Soltau's work is now regarded as one of the most important positions in feminist photography and body art.

Over the course of more than five decades and in the face of much opposition, Soltau's independent, radically feminist visual language has established her as an indispensable voice in contemporary art. The Städel Museum is dedicating the first retrospective to her, developed in collaboration with the artist. With more than eighty works, the exhibition offers a comprehensive insight into her multifaceted oeuvre, which ranges from drawings to extended photography, video and installation. Among them are groundbreaking works from Soltau's studio, some of which are being exhibited for the first time. Important loans from renowned institutions such as the Sammlung Verbund in Vienna, the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, the Lenbachhaus in Munich and the ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe complete the exhibition.

The exhibition is sponsored by the Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne, the Cultural Foundation of Hesse, the Alexander Tutsek-Stiftung and the Städtischer Museums-Verein e. V. Additional support is provided by Yoram Roth and the Georg und Franziska Speyer'sche Hochschulstiftung.

Central themes in Soltau's work include feminism, body politics and the challenge of human and female identity. To this end, she has developed her own innovative techniques that transcend the boundaries of photography—photo-sewing, photo-restitching and photo-etching. In her self-portraits, Soltau questions female role models and sheds light on social norms by visualizing complex emotional worlds,

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inner conflicts and emotional states. Since the late 1970s, she has devoted herself to an artistic exploration of pregnancy and motherhood—themes that have been underrepresented in art for centuries and have only recently begun to receive increasing attention in both society and the art world. Her work is also a poignant expression of the ageing of the female body and questions of mortality. Soltau's work has repeatedly been subject to public censorship; her depictions deviate from established aesthetic conventions and are perceived as provocative. The exhibition at the Städel Museum is an important corrective to this reception and a long overdue tribute to this great feminist and artist.

“Annegret Soltau's radical formal language and fearless deconstruction of the human body open up new perspectives on identity, corporeality and artistic self-determination. Her art is highly expressive and ahead of its time. With this first retrospective, we honour more than five decades of Annegret Soltau's artistic work. At the same time, it underscores the Städel Museum's commitment to making pioneering women artists visible and to encouraging a broad public to engage with essential themes in contemporary art”, explains **Philipp Demandt, Director of the Städel Museum**.

Svenja Grosser, Head of Contemporary Art and curator of the exhibition,

summarizes: “Annegret Soltau uses the body, her own self, as a venue for negotiating social structures. With her radical photo-sewing, she has created an entirely new artistic language and established the female body as a medium of self-empowerment. While she is internationally recognized, she has repeatedly faced drastic censorship in this country. We would like to correct this contradictory reception and present the artist Annegret Soltau for what she is: a pioneer of feminist art in Germany.”

Tour of the Exhibition

The exhibition offers an encounter with Annegret Soltau's oeuvre in the form of a thematic and chronological tour. At the beginning, visitors are confronted with the artist's major works, as well as with the issue of censorship to which Soltau's work has been subjected. Her unique visual language, in which the female body appears in fragmented form, has repeatedly led to institutional and public backlash. Characteristic of her work is the use of needle and thread to manipulate photographs. She creates her stitched works by tearing photographs of her own body and those of people close to her and reassembling the fragments with black thread. Soltau transforms the traditional craft of sewing, often associated with female role models, into an artistic strategy that simultaneously documents, alienates and visualizes. She

is not only concerned with representing subjective experience, but also with revealing social patterns and prejudices.

The portraits of women from the early 1970s impressively reveal that her innovative approach to photography had its origins in **works on paper**. In *Overdrawn Woman* (1972), delicate strokes of fineliner pen encase the naked body, while in *The Swathed* (1973), the lines condense into a web that envelops the face. In the years that followed, these drawn works underwent a physical expansion: in her etchings, Soltau scratched and etched **lines** into copper plates. The motifs of threads, webs and hair as symbols of relationships and constraints have their starting point in these earlier works. In *Spider* (1978), she works with organic material, preserving real spider webs and making them visible as fragile but inescapable structures. A large number of these works are being presented for the first time at the Städel Museum.

The 1970s were marked by social upheaval and avant-garde movements such as Fluxus, feminist art and body art. Soltau also ventured into **performance art**: in *Permanent Demonstration* (1976), she used black sewing thread to connect viewers to a motion-sensitive network. At the same time, she experimented with photography: in *Self #1* (1975), she covered her face with thread, documenting the process of wrapping and cutting, as well as the tangle left behind as a real object. She developed this technique further into photo-sewing, in which she used needle and thread to reassemble various torn photographs of herself or her immediate surroundings. In *With Myself* (1975/2022), she combines her own portrait from different periods: past and present merge.

During her first **pregnancy** in 1977, Soltau incorporated into her work a subject that had been largely taboo in feminist art: the existential experience of becoming a mother. Her *Daily Diagrams* (1977) summarize thoughts, fears and doubts in mind-map-like notes connected by fine lines. They also illustrate the conceptual level of Soltau's work. In *I Waiting* (1978–79) she presents herself not in romantic anticipation, but with intense ambivalence, using a photogravure technique she developed herself. Image by image, the body dissolves more and more through the fine lines previously scratched into the negative. In *Divided MOTHER Column* (1980–81), the pregnant belly gradually increases in size until it occupies the entire pictorial space. In series such as *Closeness (Self with son)* (1980–85) and *Symbiosis* (1981), Soltau negotiates the complex facets of motherhood between unity and separation.

Between 1977 and 1990, she focused intensively on the **dual roles of artist and mother**, which are often considered incompatible. The series *Motherhood* (1977–90) asks, with unflinching frankness, what remains of one's own identity when social

expectations demand absolute devotion. For her collages, she tore up portraits of herself and her children and sewed them back together with black thread. Prints of negatives covered in writing, with phrases such as “Mother HAPPINESS Children HATE”, reveal the emotional conflict.

The close connection between personal experience and social issues runs throughout Soltau’s entire oeuvre. In her series *generativ* (1993–2005), for example, the artist photographed the female generational line of her family, linking past, present and future through the interweaving of the women. As early as the 1990s, Soltau took up the **debates of the third wave of the women’s movement**. Two bodies of work that emerged from the *generativ* series—*transgenerativ* and *hybrids* (1990–2010)—question binary gender categories: by combining fragments of different bodies, Soltau explores the biological limits of individuality. She also emphasizes that gender is to be understood as a socially constructed concept that is constantly redefined in social, cultural and political discourses.

The question of what identity means is central to Annegret Soltau’s work. *Father Search* (2003–ongoing) is an autobiographical long-term project in which she artistically explores her partly unknown family history. In a process lasting several years, she searched archives and institutions for clues to her father’s existence. She translated this search into her art by removing her own face from self-portraits and replacing it with sewn-in documents, letters and maps. The exhibition concludes with the series *personal identity* (since 2003), which reflects on **identity beyond the classical portrait**. Instead of a face, it shows official documents, bank cards and certificates sewn into the artist’s passport photo. In this way, Soltau discusses the transformation of the attribution of identity in the digital age. The series, which will be continually expanded, will only end with the artist’s death certificate—a final negotiation of the construction and transience of identity.

STÄDEL INVITES ANNEGRET SOLTAU

Live event with the artist, music & drinks

On Friday, 9 May 2025, the curator Svenja Grosser will talk with the artist Annegret Soltau about her exhibition “Uncensored. Annegret Soltau—A Retrospective”. Soltau will then present her performance *Permanent Demonstration*. Short guided tours in German and English invite visitors to discover the special exhibition. Drinks, food and a DJ set will round off the evening.

Tickets cost €10/€5 (concessions) and will soon be available online at shop.staedelmuseum.de. Remaining tickets will be available at the door. Doors open at 6:30 pm, and the programme begins at 7 pm

The STÄDEL INVITES series, in partnership with BMW, accompanies exhibitions of selected contemporary artists.

UNCENSORED. ANNEGRET SOLTAU—A RETROSPECTIVE

Exhibition Dates: 8 May–17 August 2025

Curator: Svenja Grosser (Head of Contemporary Art, Städel Museum)

Project Manager: Maja Lisewski (Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art, Städel Museum)

Location: Städel Museum, Schaumainkai 63, 60596 Frankfurt am Main

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Opening Hours: Tue, Wed, Fri, Sat, Sun + holidays 10 am–6 pm, Thur 10 am–9 pm

Special Opening Hours: For up-to-date information on special opening hours, please visit www.staedelmuseum.de/en/visit.

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Catalogue: The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue edited by Svenja Grosser, with contributions by P. Demandt, S. Grosser, S. Kampmann, M. Lisewski, G. Mattner and A. Soltau. German edition, 200 pages, 163 illustrations, 49.90 euros (book trade edition), 39.90 euros (museum edition), published by Hirmer Verlag.

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