

# Annegret Soltau: On the Photographic Skin

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*Skin is a limes—a porous threshold between interiority and exteriority. Annegret Soltau’s practice, beginning in the mid-1970s, stages the body as a means of reflecting on the representation of womanhood. Her so-called Fotoradierungen (photo-etchings) and Fotovernähungen (photo-restitchings) transpose body art onto the photographic medium, seizing photography not as an instrument for the documentation of ephemeral artistic practices—as was often the case with performance art in the 1960s and 70s—but as the very instance of a critical engagement with the female body and its aging.*

*This research article conceptualizes “skin” both as the bodily surface represented in Soltau’s work and as the “photographic skin”, the vehicle for the artist’s intermedial experiments between performativity and photography. From a postmodern perspective, Soltau probes the limits of representational media, transposing the graphic gesture first onto performance, and subsequently onto the photographic negative and positive print. Figuratively, “skin” also marks the margin delimiting the inner and outer worlds of the artist, the threshold between appearance and identity. The article examines how Soltau reconfigures the boundary between performativity and photography through the lens of “skin”.*

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## Threaded

*Ich wollte die Zeichnung spüren, “I wanted to feel the drawing.”<sup>1</sup> Annegret Soltau, in conversation with curator Ingrid Pfeiffer in 2021, recounts the origins of her performative work *Permanente Demonstration* (Permanent Demonstration) (Pfeiffer and Soltau, 2021). In January 1976, Soltau ran her performance each evening for a week at *Kunstwerkstatt* in Darmstadt—an*

experimental art space and a workshop for graphic arts.<sup>2</sup> It was consciously titled “demonstration,” instead of “action” or “happening,” more common in the art historical jargon, to echo the fever of radicalism by which students, feminists and anti-war movements were igniting the atmosphere in the 1970s. Ahead of her *Demonstration*, Soltau had tested the whole act on herself: she bound her body with thick black thread to probe the effects of transposing drawing from the material support of paper to the skin (Pfeiffer and Soltau, 2021). She had trained in painting and graphic arts at the Universities of Fine Arts in Hamburg and Vienna. In 1973, after finishing her studies, she moved to Milan, where she would draw portraits inspired by the southern Italian émigrés who lived in her building. Those women wearing head scarfs were translated in her drawings and etchings into heads wrapped in intricate spirals of cloth or in their own thick black hair (Seggelke and Soltau, 2008). *Permanente Demonstration* was to Soltau a transposition of drawing onto skin in an attempt to breach media conventions. On the first evening, January 19, 1975, the act featured one man sitting on a white plinth as a kind of living sculpture. Meticulously binding him in yarn, the artist saw her gesture as an act of “drawing” (Pfeiffer and Soltau, 2021). *Bezeichnen* in German raises an ambiguity of meaning between its direct meaning of “identify” or “designate,” and her play with the verb *zeichnen* (“draw”) turned into the transitive form *be-zeichnen*, which could be translated as “drawing on” or even “all over” somebody. Soltau intended her binding act to feel and read like drawing on skin. It echoed Günter Brus’ *Self-Painting* actions of 1964-70 in which the Viennese Actionist had made his own body the material support for paint and even the source of paint material with its fluids of blood, urine, saliva, and so on. Actions such as his *Zerreiprobe* (1970, “crucial test”) had captured Soltau’s interest in the radical potential of the body as art object (interview, 30/06/25).

After having “drawn” the thread all over the man’s body, Soltau’s *Demonstration* continued as she turned around to face the audience and addressed a few of them: “May I?” Four more people were invited to join the act. Using the same black thread that kept the first person wrapped, the other participants allowed themselves to be “drawn,” and in the process become unrecognizable. The thick black thread left traceable marks on the



ILL. 1

Annegret Soltau, *Permanente Demonstration am 20.1.1976* (Permanent Demonstration on 20.01.1976), vintage print on baryt paper, 40 × 30 cm. © Annegret Soltau, VG Bild-Kunst Bonn, 2024. Courtesy Galerie Anita Beckers, Frankfurt am Main.

skin of the participants: “The inside, or even the processes, become visible on the body, they can be read on it” comments Soltau (Schwarz and Soltau, 2016, 1:25). By intimately interlacing their bodies, the artist visualizes the reciprocity of the individuals’ actions, emphasizing their interconnect-edness (Schmidt, 2006, p. 27). Soltau remembers retrospectively: “It was more about making the picture physically, feeling it on the skin. (...) The thread became a haptic line, a trace on the skin. For me, it was really about touch. The threads that create the drawing are very visible, yet they can be perceived as restricting.” (Walton, 2021).

Soltau’s act brings to mind 1970s Body Art’s preoccupations with transgressing canonical artistic media (in her case the graphic arts), as well as bringing “antispectacular bodily routines” (Foster, 2016a, p. 649) onto the stage to counter the “heroic,” “genius” gestures traditionally associated with male artists. In addressing perception through the haptic trace left on the participants’ skin, she employed Body Art tropes such as feelings of pain, entrapment, and body anxiety. *Permanente Demonstration* also recalls the collaborative performance *Ablutions* (1972) that feminist artists Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Sandra Orgel, and Aviva Rahmani put on in California, just a few months after *Womanhouse* in Los Angeles had been dismantled.<sup>3</sup> The performance revolved around the experience of rape and included the immersion of the artists’ bodies in different fluids, wrapping and binding them with bandages and ropes in a room surrounded by beef kidneys hanging from the walls (Foster, 2016b, p. 655). The feminist slogan “the personal is the political” was embraced by these artists with such radicality that they made their bodies the battlefields of their critique of the representation of women in art and society. Soltau’s association with feminism in art was further confirmed by the inclusion of her work in the seminal exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 2007, the first comprehensive survey of international feminist art featuring works by Marina Abramović, Louise Bourgeois, Judy Chicago, Rebecca Horn, and others. Yet a historical contextualization of Soltau’s work in the local feminist entourage of the 1970s and 80s, together with an analysis of its reception in the Frankfurt am Main region, demonstrate the irreducibility of her artistic practice to a uniform understanding of feminism or to feminist art alone. Besides

representing repressed subjects of womanhood, such as pregnancy and aging, a further leitmotif throughout her work is revealed to be her radical probing of the limits of the graphic and photographic media through postmodern strategies.

*Permanente Demonstration* reveals the political through its nonconformism on the institutional art ground. Its subheadings read “States of consciousness / through / t o u c h i n g of lines realized / in space / on the body / and the skin” (Soltau, 1976). Soltau’s statement accompanying her week-long performance unveils an endeavor to breach the margin between the artistic medium and bodily perception, or—in the language of Fluxus—to bring together art and life. Nevertheless, this message was lost on Darmstadt’s local audience, as newspaper accounts demonstrate. Art historian Elizabeth Krimmel, for instance, was careful enough to mention in her review that she left before the end of the act. Her critique is replete with self-stereotyping, anti-feminist tropes confining Soltau’s act to that of a “little witch” wanting to silence “the maltreated servant of female emancipation”<sup>4</sup> (Krimmel, 1976). As would often be the case with the reception of Soltau’s work, her use of the thread was reconnected to the practice of sewing typically associated with women’s agency within the private domestic sphere. Rightfully, author Karin Struck later emphasized how Soltau’s sewing had less to do with a traditional conception of femininity than with a surgical intervention (Struck, 2006, p. 10), a fact that might be validated by Soltau’s previous experience as assistant to a doctor in the injuries department ahead of her art studies (interview, 7/27/24).

A few months after *Permanente Demonstration*, another action by Soltau titled *Be-ziehungen Ver-bindungen* (Relations Connections) at Kunstverein Heidelberg found a similar reception in a local newspaper review titled “Public Sacrifice,” in which author Sabine Schultze appeared to have been troubled not only by the suggested physical violence of the act, but also by the fact that this (female) artist would shift the practice of over-drawing and over-painting typical of a (male) artist such as Arnulf Rainer from art theory to life itself (Schultze, 1976). Comments of this kind attest to the fact that the hostility Soltau met after relocating from Hamburg to the provincial cultural milieu of Frankfurt’s surroundings was two-fold: on the one hand, criticism was sparked by the provocative

content of the performances involving potential injuring and nudity; on the other, these critics, besides reiterating misogynist stereotypes, failed to grasp the meaning of the art form and situate it in the context of the genealogy of contemporary art. It was, in fact, between the 1960s and 70s that a number of feminist artists saw in performance art and in photography a means of exploring self-representation for the sake of contesting the politics of the representation of women. The exhibition *WACK!* mentioned above demonstrated the international reach of these developments, which an analysis of the German artistic landscape can only substantiate. The defiance of media conventions and the shift toward ephemeral art forms to the point of equating art with daily lived gestures had been underway since at least 1970, when Harald Szeemann curated “Happening and Fluxus” at the Kölnischer Kunstverein in Cologne. Two years later in Kassel, the *documenta 5* “Questioning Reality – Pictorial worlds today” marked “the institutional acceptance of Conceptual Art in Europe” (Buchloh, 2016, p. 630) and one of the first appearances of photography as a self-sufficient art form within the section “Idea + Idea/Light” curated by Klaus Honnef and Konrad Fisher, featuring photography alone or as part of conceptual works.<sup>5</sup> In the same years, artists of the Viennese Actionism, such as Valie Export and Friedl Kubelka, shared Soltau’s concern with female identity and iconography through performance and photography (Butler, 2007, p. 305). Yet while Soltau was drawing closer to feminist artists’ transnational concerns, she met rejection at a local institutional level, for example when Gisela Bergsträsser, formerly the chief curator of the graphic collection at the Landesmuseum Darmstadt, who had previously praised Soltau’s early etchings, withdrew her support of the artist after 1976 (Pfeiffer and Soltau, 2021). Meanwhile, Soltau’s photographic documentation of her performances paved the way for her experimentations with photography. From the mid-1970s onward she began transposing the movement and sequentiality of the performance, as well as her training in the graphic arts, to photographic paper. A shift from the real, physical skin to the photographic one: sewing together photographs of her children into idiosyncratic family portraits or scratching the photographic negative to the point where the image eliminates itself.

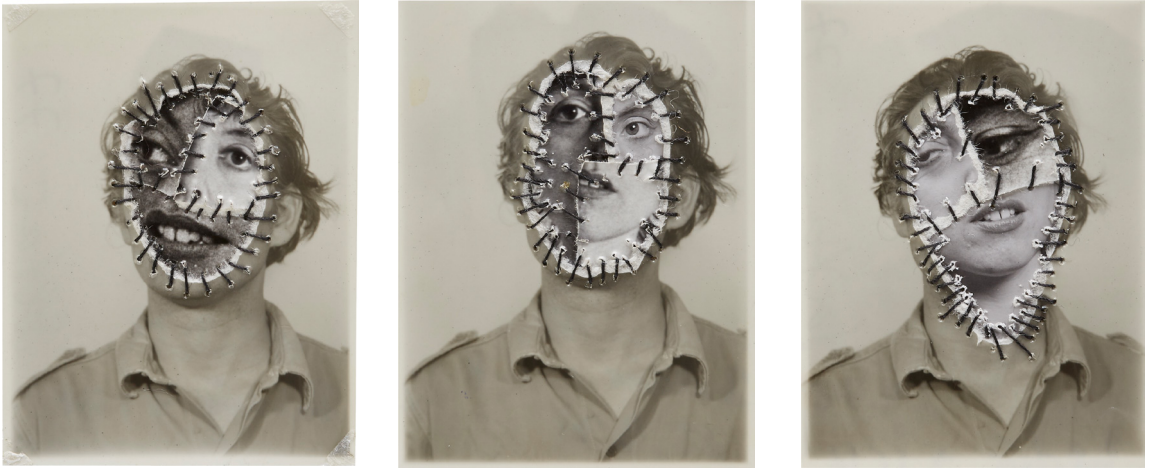
## Sewed

As John Berger writes in *Understanding a Photograph* (2013), the 20<sup>th</sup> century marks the time when “the photograph became the dominant and most ‘natural’ way of referring to appearances,” replacing “the word as immediate testimony” (Berger, 2013, p. 49). The ubiquity with which images began permeating daily life—from the journalistic coverage of war to advertising—led artists in the early 1970s to question the representational potential of photography. The question of representation became the core preoccupation of the so-called *Pictures Generation*<sup>6</sup> including artists such as Sherrie Levine and Barbara Kruger, who employed photography to trouble the relationship between original and copy, employing strategies of quotation, framing, and self-staging. As Douglas Crimp’s essay *The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism* (1980) testifies, this turn in photography is indebted to the consequences of mechanical reproducibility for the devaluation of authenticity, effected through the rapid proliferation of copies (Crimp, 1980, p. 94). In Crimp’s words: “That photography had overturned the judgment-seat of art is a fact which the discourse of modernism found it necessary to repress, and so it seems that we may accurately say of postmodernism that it constitutes precisely the return of the repressed.” (Crimp, 1980, p. 91). Postmodern photography’s way of releasing the “repressed” can be situated within those practices that upset the canonical notion of the art object, displacing the aura cast around a supposed “original”. This meant surpassing media specificity in favor of intermediality, introducing mass produced and found images in the artistic process, as well as exposing the material support of photography, for instance through damage and manipulation. Yet such a “return of the repressed” can be also observed in those reflections on representation which emphasize the constructed nature of (female) identity, for instance in Cindy Sherman’s self-staging of her body intended to expose stereotypes of femininity in visual culture at large and to manifest the fact that even the image of Self is a copy without an original.

Against this backdrop, Soltau’s own negotiation with undoing the limits of traditional graphic media unfolded throughout the 1970s. With her early performances she approached photography and video, first employed as recording tools, later integrated within her artistic process. An example of this transition is *Selbst* (1975), a sequence of 15 self-portraits displaying

the artist's face being wrapped in black thread until the moment it is cut off with scissors.<sup>7</sup> Along with the internationalization of contemporary art, Soltau's practice appears receptive of a postmodern attitude, both in her formal handling of the material photography, and in her reading of its representational potential. From the mid-1970s, the performative use of the black thread extended to her relationship with the photographic surface. She began sewing through her photographs, producing a body of work titled *Fotoübernähtungen* (Photo-overstitchings). Here the sewed lines imitate drawing by reproducing geometric patterns or nets which vaguely allude to the real wrapping of the body during her previous performances. In 1970, American photographer Betty Hahn had also begun stitching through her gum bichromate prints on fabric to highlight details, for instance, to sharpen the outline of her vegetable subjects or of the individuals portrayed in her *Passport Photos* (1970). Hahn referred implicitly to the practice of embroidery and to anonymous female labor—the stitching having been made not on photographic paper but through fabric—though she did not consider herself a militant feminist (Hahn and McDonald, 2022). On the contrary, feminist artists such as Miriam Shapiro and Faith Ringgold employed embroidery and fabric as artistic media to consciously revalue a practice traditionally associated with women and reverse the hierarchy of art versus craft. The use of stitching in the photographic work of Soltau and Hahn is an outcome of their reception of such feminist concerns within contemporary art, but it cannot be fully identified with them. While Soltau's work foregrounds a political feminist dimension through its dealing with identity and self-representation, her use of the black thread, as mentioned earlier, refers to a surgical act rather than embroidery.

The line traced by the black thread, in fact, is soon mutated from an aesthetic drawn element to a means of collage. *Fotovernähtungen*, photo-restitchings, are photographic portraits of Soltau or members of her family in which the core part of the head or body has been torn out and filled with fragments of other photographs. By tearing instead of simply cutting the photograph, the laceration, that is the haptic process, is emphasized. The restitchings made between 1977 and 1990 often take as point of departure photobooth-generated portraits. In *Selbst mit Baldur* (1977; Ill. 2) her husband's silhouette is filled with fragments of both their



ILL. 2

Annegret Soltau, *Selbst mit Baldur* (Self with Baldur), 1977, vintage prints, photo-restitching, each 5,2 × 4 cm. © Annegret Soltau, VG Bild-Kunst Bonn, 2024. Courtesy Galerie Anita Beckers, Frankfurt am Main.

faces sewed together as defamiliarizing family portraits. Such small, cheap and quickly produced portraits have a long tradition that goes back to early *cartes de visite*, but especially to tintype portraits common between the second half of the 19th and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century made by itinerant photographers on street corners or even on battle fields (Lavédrine, 2009, p. 34). Through such early photographs, the bourgeoisie gained access to their own image, inaugurating a social practice of exchanging portraits to visualize one's own social network. Automated photography today is mostly associated with bureaucratized identity verification, implying full light and a standardized pose of the photographed subject. Soltau's idiosyncratic photocollages defy the medium's value as an identity-machine, and more broadly the genre conventions of family photographs. By sewing through the skin of photography, Soltau materializes the implicit genre conventions behind a family portrait and, by extension, the social construct of "family" itself. In *Selbst mit Baldur*, the stitching together of a male and female body might even point to the role of images in the construction of gender identity. Her adoption of automated photography reveals a truly



ILL. 3

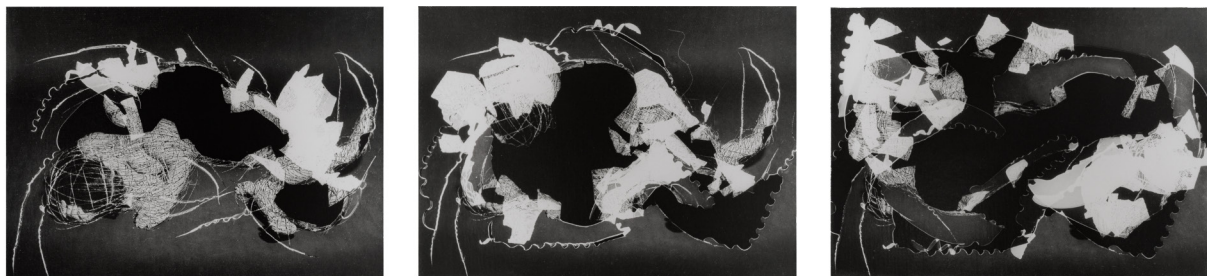
Annegret Soltau, *zusammen*, 1-6 (together, 1-6), 1980, vintage print on baryt paper, photo-etching, each 13 × 18 cm. © Annegret Soltau, VG Bild-Kunst Bonn, 2024. Courtesy Galerie Anita Beckers, Frankfurt am Main.

postmodern defiance of authorship and the demise of the aura. A similar case of artists' interest in ordinary, mass produced, "low quality" photography is the aforementioned series by Hahn, *Passport Photos* (1970), in which she stitched through her gum bichromate prints on muslin reproducing the negatives of passport photos. Here, Hahn too defies identification by printing the negative (instead of the positive) image on textile and adding embroidery, against a conventional, straight image on photographic paper. Yet Soltau's work directly reflects on its own medium by exhibiting the small, automated photographs. She disrupts their representation, and reconstructs them through a performative gesture that aims to question the societal norms underlying the construction of an image—of woman, of the pregnant body, of motherhood, and of the aging body, all major subjects of her subsequent work.

### Drawn

At the end of the 1970s—and parallel to her photo-restitchings—Soltau's experimentation with manipulating the photographic material resulted in another technique, her so-called *Fotoradierung*, (Photo-etching). In an unpublished letter most likely addressed to the art historian and curator Udo Kultermann, Soltau describes the procedure:

I worked on these negatives of my self-portraits with a needle, similar to an etching. I scratched lines into the layer of the negative with the



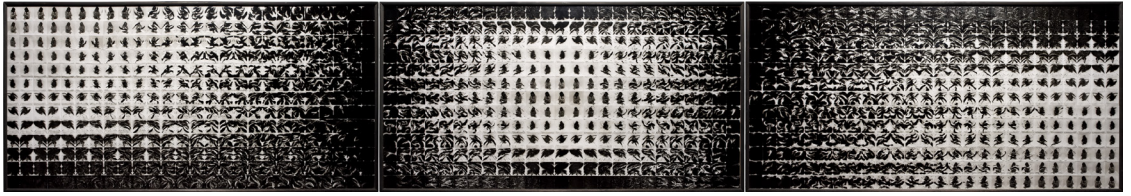
needle. These lacerations appeared as black and white lines in the positive print. In the process, I kept destroying the negative until I had completely metamorphosed and erased my own image. I documented each stage with a print. The positive prints thus became a document of the dissolution of the negative as well as of myself. (Soltau, c. 1980, pp. 3-4)

Soltau's photo-etchings stage her alone, during pregnancy, or alongside one of her newborn children. Although each series stems from a single photographic negative, they are arranged chronologically in sequence according to the stage of image degradation. In *zusammen*, 1-6, (together, 1-6) (1980; Ill. 3) the straight image of her body lying down next to her son is progressively erased by means of the needle's work on the negative, which is exposed five more times, making mother and son disappear into abstraction. The sequential aesthetic recalls the frames of a film or of a photographic contact sheet from which the numbers have been edited out. Starting from the third image, the scratched lines increase, apparently merging into wider portions of white and black, meaning that some broken pieces of the negative have been laid over the photosensitive paper during exposure. From a technical perspective Soltau makes use of two practices with a long history: the *clichés-verre* and the photogram. Both can be traced back to William Henry Fox Talbot's early cameraless experiments between 1834-39. His "photogenic etching" entailed creating a matrix by drawing with an etching needle on a coated glass plate exposed to smoke and then contact-printing it on salted paper, a technique that would become better

known as cliché-verre (Schenck, 1995, pp. 112-113). Talbot's later "photogenic drawing"—today generally termed "photogram"—was obtained by placing translucent objects, such as flowers and leaves, directly onto photosensitive paper (Lavédrine, 2009, pp. 98-99). Avant-garde artists during the 20th century, most notably Man Ray, were particularly drawn to such techniques, as these allowed them to explore abstraction, create oneiric scenarios, and employ unconventional materials. Soltau's "photo-etchings" are connected to this history. The term "etching" does not refer, in fact, to the acid alteration of the plate of an etching, but simply to the needle used to draw into the surface of the negative, producing the black lines typical of a cliché-verre. The white areas visible in the positive prints, on the other hand, correspond to the residues of the negative scratched by the needle, which are exposed as in a photogram.

Soltau's engravings into negative images of the body thus bring to mind surrealist experiments such as Brassai's portfolio *Transmutations* (1934-35; published in 1967): these twelve gelatine silver prints were made by drawing on the plates of camera-made images of female nudes, metamorphosing them into objects, musical instruments, fruits, and odalisques reminiscent of Cubism (Schenck, 1995, p. 115). Contrary to Soltau's feminist approach, in Brassai's prints the body literally undergoes a transmutation, dissolving into a passive object or even an ornament. Decades later, Soltau's work tackles instead the underrepresentation of female experience. In *zusammen, 1-6*, motherhood is figured as both an erasure of the Self and as a symbiosis of mother and child (Soltau and Weidner, 2024).

Pregnancy and motherhood, and the states of mind related to them, dominate the artist's work in the years surrounding her two pregnancies in 1978 and 1980. Some photo-etchings from this period acquire monumental dimensions, as in *Alleinsein (tausendundeneinacht)*, (Being alone (thousand and one nights)) (1978/79, Ill. 4), a three-part tableau made of 1001 prints out of a single negative. Soltau's naked body is curled forward to hold her knees, bending her head in shadow. Every other print is a mirror-image of the previous one. As a result, pairs of bodies face each other in about five hundred mute dialogues depicting solitude. The multiplication and erasure of Soltau's body proceeds in diagonal waves from a clear image to pitch black. Viewed from a distance the result is an abstract image in black and



ILL. 4

Annegret Soltau, *Alleinsein (tausendundeinenacht)* (Being alone (thousand and one nights)), 1978/79, silver gelatine print, photo-etching in 3 parts (1001 mounted pieces), 116 × 690 cm. © Annegret Soltau, VG Bild-Kunst Bonn, 2024. Courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery, London, Rome and New York.

white. The “injuries” inflicted on the photographic skin reflect a figurative gesture of self-harming. “Skin” appears to refer metaphorically to the surface separating psychology from appearance, while at the same time “skin” as the negative, the matrix of photography, might allude to the Self as origin, as the material substance of which the positive, the appearance, is made. Photo-historian Geoffrey Batchen has attempted to open up the history of photography to the role of the negative, which, for one, defines photography’s basic reproduction principle as a play of repetition and difference. Soltau’s work, in effect, visualizes the negative as a matrix capable of engendering a possibly infinite number of positive images. The negative/positive relation is further emphasized by the specular self-portraits, by their continuous erasure through the manipulation of the negative, and by the black-and-white chromatic contrast on which the work is built. In this sense, photography as negative/positive relationship can be seen as “the embodiment of a binary opposition in which each part is continually dependent on, and yet separated from, its other (...).” (Batchen, 2021, p. 259) Through repetition and variation the speechless dialog in Soltau’s tableau is multiplied *ad libitum*, with the bodies progressively sinking into one another in an almost seven-meter wide, monumental work.

*Alleinsein (tausendundeinenacht)* and *zusammen, 1-6* transpose Soltau’s introspection onto the photographic surface. Between the two, is the porous yet impenetrable, frangible yet solid layer of skin. The time-frames of both works correspond to Soltau’s experience of pregnancy, which stirred reflections on several grounds. For one, the compatibility

of an artist's career with motherhood became a major concern which left her partly ostracized from the local feminist community. Indeed, as art historian Sabine Kampmann noted, the reappropriation of the image of the female body was understood by feminist artists in the 1960s and 1970s as a liberation from such traditional roles as motherhood (Kampmann, 2024, p. 123). But the alteration of the body during pregnancy and the states of mind connected to it gained importance in Soltau's artistic practice as she attempted to undo taboos related to the representation of motherhood. In video works such as *Schwanger-SEIN II* (1979-1980, Being Pregnant II) the psychological states of the woman are outlined in nine phases going from panic through loneliness and separation until birth. Her addressing of the subject of pregnancy was indeed ahead of its time, and it meant to shed light on how female experience essentially deviates from the aesthetic ideal and normative behavior that patriarchal societal structures attributed to it. In fact, while Soltau's work is intrinsically autobiographical, her subjective experience is staged as an instance of a collective one. About the specificity of self-representation in the photographic work of feminist artists in the 1960s and 70s Abigail Solomon-Godeau wrote:

Such distortions or defacements are no self-masochistic acts, but rather symbolically point to a collective violence or a deconstruction of a certain representational canon in the representation of women. (...) the artist presents herself as an impersonal screen, a field of projection, upon which what is otherwise culturally and socially disavowed, repressed, or even taken for granted may be ritualistically expressed. (Solomon-Godeau, 2007, p. 343)

Soltau's photographic work in this sense turns the personal into the political, as the feminist slogan goes. Making the personal an instance of collective experience, Soltau's photo-etchings seem to narrate pregnancy through titles such as "Expecting" (*Erwartung*, 1980-81), "Unity and separation" (*Einheit und Trennung*, 1980-81), or "Divided MOTHER-column" (*Geteilte MUTTER-Säule*, 1980-81), pointing to feelings of anxiety and fear traditionally excluded from art historical representations of motherhood.

All in all, Soltau's photo-etchings appear to scratch through another "skin", that is the thick layer of media conventions, by means of postmodern strategies. Besides exhibiting the negative, the contact-sheet-like aesthetic,

and mass-produced automated photographs, works such as *Alleinsein* (*tausendundeinenacht*) foreground another attribute of postmodern photography: the use of monumentality to address a private subject. In this sense, Soltau transgresses another modernist genre convention which would see such grandiose dimensions fit for painting rather than for a graphic medium. Yet Soltau monumentalizes a rather intimate subject, the unspoken topic of female psychology during pregnancy.

## Openings

Annegret Soltau's work has been read predominantly through the lens of her being a woman. She was both acclaimed and reprehended for her work's feminist posture and shunned by other feminists for her departure from dominant feminist positions. It has been the aim of this text to read Soltau's work not only through the somewhat obvious feminist framework, but also through the lens of postmodernity and its interrelation with the history of photography. It has been a kind of sewing together by which "skin" acquires multiple meanings: from being a physical surface in her early performances to becoming a material one in her photo-etchings and -restitchings, to figuratively becoming the superficial layer of the representational and media conventions she questioned and made porous. This skin, both photographic and bodily, was cut open for the sake of testing other possible representations of woman, motherhood, gender identity, and lately the aging body. "Openings" is thus this text's closing word. It refers to the artist's series *Körperöffnung* (Body opening) started in 2011, which explored the representation of the aging body and the unaesthetic visceral. One work from this series, *Haut* (Skin) (2016), is a color photograph of two women standing and facing each other, which has been cropped out, its core filled with an enlarged detail of the artist's skin with a tiny red scar. The vulnerability of the human skin is exposed as much as its potential for healing and reconstruction. The phenomenon of dermatographism—the writing on human skin—caught the attention of George Didi-Huberman in his writing about the history of Jean-Martin Charcot's study of hysteria at the Salpêtrière clinic in Paris toward the end of the 19th century. Charcot had appointed a photographer, Albert Londe, to document the symptomatology



ILL. 5

Annegret Soltau, *Körperöffnung – mit Ute #Haut* (Body opening – with Ute #Skin), 2016, vintage print and collage, photo-restitching, 30 × 24 cm. © Annegret Soltau, VG Bild-Kunst Bonn, 2024. Courtesy Galerie Anita Beckers, Frankfurt am Main.

of the mostly female patients, among them the dermatographic symptoms deriving from “the ‘autographic’ capacity of the skin, a phenomenon both figurative and scriptural” (Didi-Huberman, 2004). Rather than a clinical manifestation, dermatographism evidences for Didi-Huberman the intricate power dynamic between the male doctors and the female patients who,

reduced to passive objects of study, are literally being inscribed into illness when doctors wrote their own names and diagnoses on the patients' skin. When one doctor came up with the concept of *femme-cliché* (photographic woman) he might have had the gesture of inscribing on a matrix of the cliché verre in mind (Batchen, 2021, p. 42). The male doctors' taxonomic intent turned into pseudoscientific acts of violence that are all the more staggering for their heavy reliance on visuality, as they produced images in the form of "photographic women" and subjected these women to documentation by a male photographer.

With this history in mind, it is insightful to look at Soltau's *Haut* as a revolutionary act of double inscription: the autographic scarred skin and its photograph's inscription within the carved outline of two women's shapes. At any rate, not (merely) a "photographic woman," but a woman-photographer. Gazing backwards at Soltau's interventions on negatives and positive prints, *Haut* appears as a meta-reflection on the basic principle that spans her whole body of work. The opening generated by cutting through the photographic skin reveals this time the real skin's own mechanism of repair. Indeed, Soltau never hid her means of interfering with the apparently impenetrable surface of representation: be it in the form of the thread's traces left on the skin at the end of her demonstrations, of the negative's residues exposed in her photo-etchings, or of the thread keeping together her photo-restitchings. Such means refer to acts of interference as much as acts of repair, openings but also closures, provided that new forms are allowed to emerge in the process.

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#### NOTES

- 1 This and all following quotes from Annegret Soltau and her artwork titles have been translated from German by the author.
- 2 The performance took place in the week between January 19 and 23, 1976.
- 3 In 1972, a group of artists from the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts, featuring Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro, created the temporary exhibition space *Womanhouse* as a space for collaboration and feminist critical expression (Foster, 2016b, p. 654).
- 4 The author’s translation from German.
- 5 Honnef’s later activity as curator at the Rheinisches Landesmuseums Bonn between 1974 and 1999 played a significant role in endowing photography’s legitimacy as an art in the German contemporary art landscape.
- 6 The term *Pictures Generation* was derived from the 1977 group exhibition *Pictures* curated by Douglas Crimp at Artists Space in New York. The exhibition featured works by five artists: Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith. However, the *Pictures Generation* became a comprehensive term to identify the work of Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, and others.
- 7 This work featured in the aforementioned exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 2007.