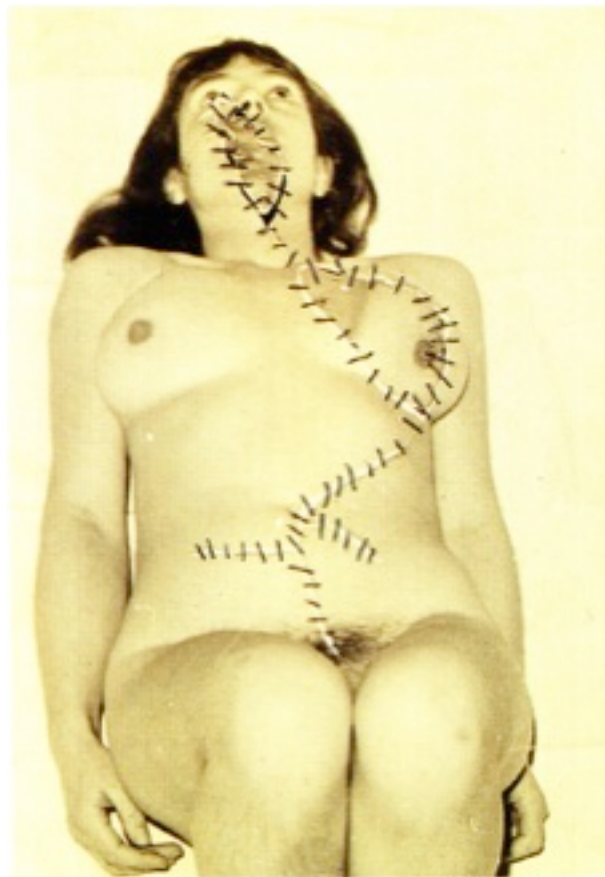


Heather Hanna

A Visual Essay: Interventions and Manipulations in the Maternal

In the collection of images discussed in this visual essay, two European artists explore themes arising from the maternal within the broad context of social relations. In her photographic works German artist Annegret Soltau (1946-) examines physical interventions into the female body, anxieties arising from loss of identity post partum, and metamorphosis through time. She does this within a concept of the haptic that makes tangible what she tries to show in her work; body, trauma and memory.



Annegret Soltau, Schwanger, 1977

Taken from a series of photographic stitchings, *Schwanger (Pregnant)* (1977), depicts a photograph of Soltau that she has torn through the mouth, breast, navel and down the abdomen into the pubic area. Roughly stitched together with black thread, the resulting scar intimates the vulnerability of the female body to traumatic intrusions of medical intervention

associated with pregnancy. In this sense Soltau's work might be seen as following in a tradition of other German women artists such as Kathe Kollwitz (1867-1945), and Maina-Miriam Munsky (1943-99). During the 1970s and 1980s Munsky's art practice centred on themes of pregnancy and childbirth within the clinical spaces of medicine. Her *Elektrode* (1973) depicts a woman attached to various monitors submitting her body to the clinical work of medical practitioners.ⁱ

Whereas Munsky appears to be concerned with reproductive technologies directed onto the female body as a passive site, Soltau takes on the roles of both surgeon and patient, deconstructing and repairing images of her own maternal body. In doing so she forces her viewer to be witness to the event. Through her use of black thread, she can be seen to move our understanding of the work away from the purely visual towards a notion of the haptic as an embodied encounter.ⁱⁱ In Deleuzian terms the haptic might be seen as a space of affects, an 'amorphous nonformal space', environment or landscape of disorganized matter that evokes a sensual or haptic response.ⁱⁱⁱ This might lead us to ask if such a tangible visuality can occur when we see the world as if we were touching it; that is, as if we experience or feel the wound in the photograph as our own. In *Schwanger* the slightly mis-matched suture line will never fully heal, a visceral reminder of the fragility of the body in the face of physical intrusion, as well as a mnemonic of violence against it.

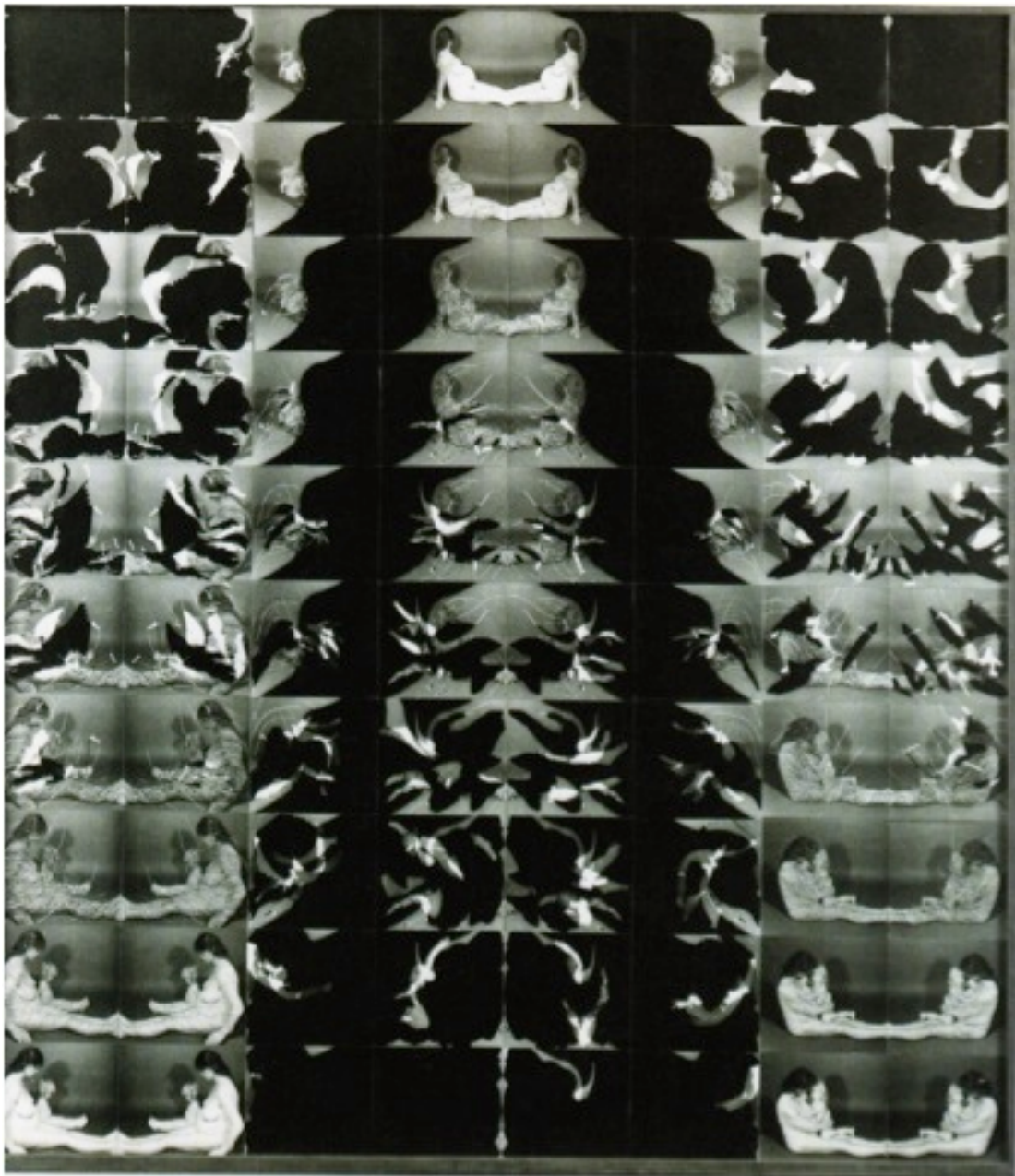


Annegret Soltau, *Im Gleichgewicht*, 1980-1 (detail)

Heather Hanna, A Visual Essay: Interventions and Manipulations in the Maternal

Studies in the Maternal, 4(1), 2012, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

During the early 1980s Soltau also used an innovative technique of etching into the photographic negative to investigate her concerns that artistic identity might be subsumed into motherhood. In the photo-tableau *Im Gleichgewicht (In Equilibrium)* (1980-1), she repeatedly scratches into the photographic negative of herself and her child, taking prints after each phase of etching. Rhythmic effects in the tableau reflect the cycle of life. The position of the child mirrors that of the mother, and as Soltau scratches the image, the two figures appear to become wrapped in an increasingly dense series of bindings, until the two become one, and eventually when all the negative is erased, a formless black shape.



Annegret Soltau, *Im Gleichgewicht*, 1980-1

The nexus of issues Soltau raises in *Schwanger* and *Im Gleichgewicht*, including disintegration of the self, changes of the maternal body, and anxiety about renouncing part of one's identity to motherhood, call to mind Julia Kristeva's attempt in *Stabat Mater* (1977) to discover a philosophical understanding of how women who choose motherhood are in a bind between motherhood and relinquishing their own desires and direction.^{iv}



Annegret Soltau, *Generativ*, 1994-2005

In her series *Generativ* (1994-2005), Soltau returns to photostitching to explore metamorphosis of the maternal body as it is subjected to ageing. In terms of social science this series suggests generational coexistence; genealogical amalgams which enable new meanings, and which remind us of the importance of family albums.^v However, this work has also been the subject of censure on several occasions; seen as 'ugly' and 'unfeminine', and withdrawn from several exhibitions in Germany.^{vi} Torn and reformed photographs of the bodies of four generations of women are intermixed; the youngest has the grandmothers'

Heather Hanna, *A Visual Essay: Interventions and Manipulations in the Maternal*

Studies in the Maternal, 4(1), 2012, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

stomach, the mother has the daughter's mouth, and so on. In this way Soltau again demonstrates the amalgamation of the maternal body genealogically (as she arguably also does in *Im Gleichgewicht*), whereby each generation contains aspects of those earlier and later; the great grandmother retains the spirit of youth, while her great granddaughter has her genetic characteristics, and the possibility of motherhood. As Soltau says, 'The tears in a life history remain visible like the wrinkles as traces of life.' Central to all these works is the artist's stated concern to explore social issues around discrepancies between what was the maternal body and what it becomes, and how tracing the resultant wounds can enable a haptic experience.^{vii}



Chrystl Rijkeboer, *Het Verlangen*, 1999

Dutch artist Chrystl Rijkeboer (1959-) explores the maternal primarily through her use of hair, revealing contradictions in the social relations of the mother to her children. In *Het Verlangen* (*Desire*) (1999), an egg encrusted with sperm surrounding a vagina of human hair, Rijkeboer examines the conflict between love and desire. Rijkeboer has said that this could be seen as a 'guilty' egg; concerning those who long for a child but cannot conceive, and those who might conceive but want no children. Such a dilemma might be seen as part of the increasingly pertinent question of reproduction and, in particular, issues arising around

Heather Hanna, *A Visual Essay: Interventions and Manipulations in the Maternal*

Studies in the Maternal, 4(1), 2012, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

fertility and voluntary childlessness, such as Catherine Hakim's work on childlessness in Europe.^{viii}



Chrystl Rijkeboer, *She only wanted a boy*, 2004

In *She only wanted a boy* (2004), Rijkeboer explores the maternal as a site of gender manipulation of the unborn child. Her interest in this topic stems from her own mother's preference for boys; when her mother was pregnant with Chrystl and her sisters, she knitted only boy's clothes. Then later, when her daughters became pregnant Chrystl's mother again knitted boy's clothes, but they too had daughters. Sociologists Karsten Hank and Hans-Peter Kohler explain gender preferences as being fixed in cultural and religious traditions and community norms, or to provide particular advantages.^{ix} Sons, for instance, might provide specific religious roles and ensure uninterrupted kinship lines that are seen as desirable in some patriarchal societies and cultures.

Family Ties 3 (2007), is suggestive of what might occur in a mother/son relationship. A mother winds her braided hair around her son, reminiscent of the half-woman half-viper Echidna from Greek mythology who reputedly lured men into her cave before devouring them. By contrast Rijkeboer's *Family Ties 2* investigates maternal connections between female bodies. By plaiting together the hair of the mother with that of her two daughters, a maternal

Heather Hanna, A Visual Essay: Interventions and Manipulations in the Maternal

Studies in the Maternal, 4(1), 2012, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

constraint is evoked that will inevitably be broken once the daughters move away from their mother.



Chrystl Rijkeboer, *Family Ties 2*, 2007



Chrystl Rijkeboer, *Family Ties 3*, 2007

Heather Hanna, A Visual Essay: Interventions and Manipulations in the Maternal

Studies in the Maternal, 4(1), 2012, www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk

These two works demonstrate the possible difficulties faced by the mother, that of following a course that leads to neither negligence nor over-protection, but in which dependency and attachment play significant roles. As Rozsika Parker argues, ‘While harmony, unity and the attainment of ever greater emotional closeness are held up as the norm of mothering, the pursuit of oneness is simultaneously considered to be a symptom of the maternal inability to separate’.^x

ⁱ http://www.jan-schueler.de/sammlung/sammlung-detailansicht.html?tx_jsgalerie_pi1%5BshowUid%5D=98&tx_jsgalerie_pi1%5Baction%5D=single&cHash=3f7085dac4

ⁱⁱ This notion of a haptic visuality has been inspired by Catherine Dormor’s article ‘Skin:Textile:Film’, *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture*, 6, 3, (November 2008), 238-253.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 523-6.

^{iv} Julia Kristeva, ‘Stabat Mater’, in Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans by Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp. 234-263.

^v See for example the following projects: http://www.open.ac.uk/hsc/__assets/yqwnotatstun71rdbl.pdf or <http://www.open.ac.uk/hsc/research/research-projects/making-of-modern-motherhood/momm2.php>, and Gillian Rose, *Doing Family Photography: The Domestic, The Public, and the Politics of Sentiment*, (London: Ashgate, 2010).

^{vi} Benz, Peter, and others, *Ausgrenzung der Frauen in der Kunst am Beispiel Annegret Soltau*, (Darmstadt: Magistrat der Stadt, 1997).

^{vii} Annegret Soltau in conversation with Heather Hanna, ‘Women Framing Hair: Serial Strategies in Contemporary Art’, unpublished PhD thesis, (The Open University, 2010), Appendix 2.

^{viii} http://178.79.155.39/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/2006_Childlessness_inEurope1.pdf

^{ix} Karsten Hank and Hans-Peter Kohler, ‘Gender Preferences for Children In Europe: Empirical Results for 17 FSS Countries’, <http://www.demographic-research.org/Volumes/Vol2/1/2-1.pdf>. See also Arnold, F. ‘Gender Preferences for Children’, *Demographic and Health Surveys Comparative Studies No.23*. (1997), 28.

^x Rozsika Parker, ‘Why Study the maternal?’, *Studies in the Maternal*, 1 (1), 2009,

http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/back_issues/issue_one/Rozsika%20Parker_1000%20words_new.pdf