

Annegret Soltau: A Different Kind of Role Model

Next Article \ Annegret Soltau: A Different Kind of Role Model



By William Davie

Elizabeth Southerden nee Thompson, Lady Butler, was remarkable for two reasons. First, her technical abilities as a painter which, working within the genre of history painting, saw her works exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1874, where her painting *The Roll Call*, occupied an eye-level space in room 2, one of the most coveted places to exhibit. Then, following a period of lionizing, in 1879, Butler came within a hair's breadth of becoming the first woman to be elected as a Royal Academician; she missed out by only two votes.

And this brings us to the second reason, the way she summarizes this in her memoirs.

'I think the door has been closed, and wisely,' she writes. Soon after, her paintings began to fall out of favour with the public and her life shifted with the needs of her husband and young children.

But it is the inclusion of 'and wisely,' that is so remarkable – it's self-defeating, she is her doubting that she ever had what it took to belong, that she didn't measure up to the other elected members but we can see otherwise. She must have, to occupy the coveted space in room 2 and to get so close on her first attempt; surely it was worth another go.

Take this in to account, then, when you consider the life and career-to-date of Annegret Soltau, who was the subject of solo booth presentation at Frieze Masters, London with Richard Saltoun Gallery in October, 2018.

Her life and artistic practice have been rife with trauma and adversity that could just have easily led her down a very different path. But in looking closely at it, we see the ubiquity of self-sufficiency and perseverance, and ambition guided by an enviable personal strength that marks Soltau as something far too-often overlooked in the art industry: a very good artist who is ceaseless in her production and survival.

She is yet to reach the heights that some of her peers have and may never still, even in death, yet this makes the inspirational aspects of her story more humanising, even tangible.

"As a child who was not to be born," she tells me, "I had to spend a lot of energy in the womb to stay alive. This process seems to have released willpower and influenced my whole life."

She was born on January 16th, 1946, to Lisbeth Soltau, who had become pregnant shortly before she was evacuated from the village of Elbstorf, on the river Elbe, just south-west of Hamburg, Germany. She never knew her father, a soldier who was posted to the front before she was born. The only clue left as to his identity after her family home was destroyed in the final battles of the Second World War, was a single photograph that showed him posing in uniform with a white V on his sleeve, the rank of a lance-corporal.

Upon returning to the family home, Lisbeth felt unable to cope with her situation. She did not want a child that she didn't know how to care for and she believed that no man would accept her as a single mother, which was confounded by fears of how the other villagers would react once they found out she had had the baby out of wedlock.

She detailed the desperation of her situation in a letter to her daughter, recounting her attempts to induce a miscarriage during this time, years later, "I jumped off tables and chairs, I put my feet in hot and cold water, I stretched my body and drank herbal tea, but I stayed pregnant."

Nine months after giving birth, Lisbeth gave up and gave her daughter to her mother to raise along with her uncle.

While growing up with her grandmother and uncle and seeing her mother semi-regularly, she observed that they all lacked will power and the ability to assert themselves. 'I never wanted to be a victim.' She explained, 'I wanted to get to the bottom of things and to defend my convictions.'

This is quintessentially seen in the three-year period that led to her attending the Hamburg College of Art.

In the spring of 1964 Soltau was working as an au pair for Mr and Mrs Greenhouse in Aston, just outside London. Despite her hectic schedule, looking after their children, attending to household chores, and taking English lessons at a local college twice a week, she made time for drawing. A friend of the family, who was an artist, saw some of her drawings while visiting and was impressed, advising her to consider applying to art school.

With this, she wrote to Herr Schubert for advice. He had given her drawing lessons while at primary school and she trusted his judgement, viewing him as a father-like figure.

She explained that she had written to the College of Art in Hamburg, where she had previously been living, having taken a job as a secretary at a bank, and was told that there might be a place available for her, but she would have to send all her paintings and drawings to them by the following February for a review. Her guardian at the time, Herr Wenk, did not approve of her plan to study at the College of Art and she couldn't ask her mother because, she says, 'she never has her own opinion and just says 'yes' to everything. When Herr Wenk says the opposite she also agrees with him, so I'm never sure what she honestly thinks.'

Further on into their correspondence she pleads with Herr Schubert, who also advised her against it, urging her to pursue a teaching qualification instead, 'I have made the decision because I need it for myself, for my personality.'

When she returned to Hamburg from England, she was to meet her mother at the station at 6am. The train arrived several hours earlier than expected and, not wanting to disturb her mother or step-father, she decided to wait inside the cold station. A man struck up a conversation and learning of her predicament, offered to take her to his apartment nearby so she didn't have to endure the cold, promising to bring her back to meet her mother at 6am. She went, and once there the situation turned drastically and he beat and raped her. 6am came and her mother waited at the station but soon left. Eventually Soltau, bloodied, distressed and in torn clothing, made her way back to her mother's home with her luggage. When she told her mother what happened, instead of comforting her distraught daughter, she seemed embarrassed, scolding her that she should be glad that she was just starting her period, so that she didn't have to worry about an unwanted pregnancy like she did.

She remained in Hamburg drawing and painting in her spare time and in 1966, befriended an art student who was studying at a private art school. He gave her the address of the school after she

showed him her work. The fees were expensive. Not put off, Soltau moved into a small, dreary, room in a hotel, just big enough for a folding bed, and took a job there so that she could afford the costs.

Every morning she woke at 5am to prepare breakfast for the guests, which she served from 6am until 9am at which point, she would clean the rooms and change the beds. Whenever possible, she liked to be done by noon so that she could get over to the school for lessons which began at 1pm.

She had agreed with her teacher, Mr Freitag, that the portfolio she would need to apply to the College of Art with would be ready in six months.

Sure enough, six months later, Professor Hans Thiemann from the Hamburg College of Art, invited her for an interview. She was awarded a place without needing to pass the entrance exam, but she began to wonder whether or not she had made the right choice. She had been in Hamburg for a long time and it was deeply connected to traumatic experiences, and she wondered whether or not a different city would be more beneficial to her.

With that, she hitch-hiked to Munich with her portfolio and managed to secure an interview at the Munich College of Art and again, was offered a place. But after spending that night and the following morning exploring the city, she decided she would never truly feel at home there and returned to Hamburg.

She deferred her place at the College of Art in Hamburg, still unsure whether she should take the opportunity or not, during which time, she met another student, who was studying German in Berlin. She was fascinated by his tales of student life and his assertion that life in Berlin was easy and without worry. He offered her a place to stay if she wanted while she applied to the College of Art, and she soon found herself hitchhiking to Berlin.

Here, her portfolio was inspected by a group of tutors as opposed to just one, like in Hamburg. She enjoyed the city and agreed; the city was easy and without worry. She told the student she was staying with that she was going to stay, and he offered for her to live with him until she found a place of her own, much to the dismay of his landlord who, upon hearing about this arrangement, scolded him in front of her. Two days later, he went to Hannover to visit his parents. He offered to take her that far so she could then hitch-hike the rest back to Hamburg to get her things. They agreed they would meet back at his apartment in Berlin in a week – he tried to give her a key but she refuted telling him there was no need as he would be back before her.

She returned to his apartment a week later. It was locked and there was no sign of him. After waiting for some time, she managed to crawl in through a half-opened window. There was a pile of letters on the floor which she couldn't help herself from opening and reading, and then it became obvious; he was not visiting his parents in Hannover but his wife and new-born child. She was enraged and disappointed.

She returned to Hamburg the next day and continued living and working in the hotel where she made the decision to enrol at the College of Art for the spring term in 1967.

Here, during her second semester, she met Baldur Greiner, a sculptor. They were complete opposites. 'Never before had I been catapulted "close" to a human being,' she recalls. 'I was used to the free life and this close bond challenged me enormously, also artistically.'

He came from a middle-class background and already had a comprehensive rooting within the visual arts, 'so it was not enough that he criticized me more than me, I had to withstand him. Sometimes it went so far that I tore up my drawings or etchings with disappointment.'

But they have persevered together and have both gone on to notable careers as well as raising two children together, a decision, on Soltau's part, to be both a mother and an artist, that has been vital in cementing her commitment to and reshaping the subject of her practice.

It was at the time and continues to be today, a fiercely and publically fought point of contention.

In 2014 for example, Tracy Emin told *The Independent*, "I would have been either 100 per cent mother or 100 per cent artist. I'm not flaky and I don't compromise. Having children and being a mother... It would be a compromise to be an artist at the same time." Similarly, in 2016 Marina Abramović told the *Guardian*, "I had three abortions because I was certain that it would be a disaster for my work. One only has limited energy in the body, and I would have had to divide it."

"I was well aware of the dichotomy; I knew from art history this dilemma of assigning roles to female artists; only those who renounced and decided against it could preserve their art," said Soltau. "I took the risk."

Driven by a fear of losing her artistic output, she incorporated her pregnancy, the transformation of her body, directly into her work.

This is can be seen in her arresting triptych, *Körper-Eingriffe, Schwanger [Bodily Attack, Pregnant]*, (1977 / 1978), which took centre stage in the booth. It contains her recognizable aesthetic where she collages different areas of photographs showing particularly body parts by sewing them into three nude portraits of her standing, leaving a thin white line where this has been done, paralleling the permanently altered and scared skin her pregnancies had on her body.

It was an attempt," she says, "to find the integrated whole of me and the condition of my changing body."

In *Vagina (danach) 1 + 2 (Vagina (afterwards) 1+2)*, (1978), also seen in the booth, the surfaces of two close-up photos of her vagina after giving birth are sewn through, mirroring the brutality of the

episiotomy she was given. She recalls the doctor roughly doing the procedure while cynically adding, "Oh, we'll do a few more stitches, so the man is happy!"

Over time has come a modicum of recognition and acknowledged respect, most notably it feels, in the form of nostalgia, her inclusion in *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, the first comprehensive exhibition to examine the international foundations and legacy of Feminist art, organised by MoCA, Los Angeles in 2007 being a pivotal moment, but this has not necessarily made it any easier for Soltau. In 2011, for example, works from her *Generative* and *Transgenerative* series were exhibited in Frankfurt, Germany. The works consist of photographs of body parts, including genitalia, from herself, her husband and their son and daughter, sewn together to draw attention to and question the connections between intergenerational family members. However, they were done so with dark cloth covering them for fear they would be viewed as obscene or would cause offence, undermining the work's universal message.

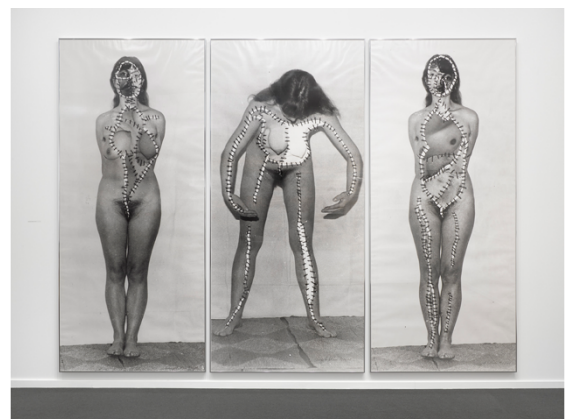
This echoed earlier career reviews where her work was labelled as 'ugly' and critics accused her cashing in on sensationalist exhibitionism, with one critic referring to her as "The sewn-on ego."

But as we enter a period of collective examination of previously given social mind-sets – beauty, ugliness, nudity, perversion, gender equality, to name but a few, - Soltau's work remains decidedly at its apex, vocalizing a long and bitterly fought battle to be heard and make change, and all this among the hubris of an ever spectacle-dependant industry, it's easy-cum-saddening to see why her work has been overshadowed.

We only have to look at the premise of Ordovas Gallery's recent exhibition, *In the Studio*, which featured a single nude portrait of Freud's daughter Rose Boyt, along with studio photographs taken at the time it was painted; to glimpse a larger, unnerving hypocrisy at work.

Perhaps the current zeitgeist will ignite a late-career surge for Soltau, perhaps it won't. But whatever may come, one thing is for sure; she will remain steadfast in her perseverance, convictions and her survival, and that means so much more.

William Davie is a writer and curator based in London. He writes art reviews for *Frieze*, *The Brooklyn Rail* and *The Seen*, Chicago.



Images in order of appearance:

1. *Selbst [Self]*, 1975/76

Gelatin silver print with thread
39 x 29 cm

2. *Selbst [Self]*, 1976

Gelatin silver print with thread
9 x 9 cm

3. *Schwanger [Pregnant]*, 1978

C-print with thread
10.7 x 7.8 cm

4. *Allein [Alone]*, 1979

Set of 8 gelatin silver prints
Each: 24 x 18 cm
Edition of 3

5. *Körper-Eingriffe, Schwanger [Bodily Attack, Pregnant]*, 1977/78

Set of 3 gelatin silver prints
Each: 250 x 115 cm

6. Richard Saltoun Gallery solo presentation of Annegret Soltau at Frieze Masters 2018

All images courtesy of Richard Saltoun Gallery, London

