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KUNSTHAUS IN POTSDAM

EXHIBITION TEXT

The exhibition *Soft Power* celebrates the ability of textiles to store and communicate a multiplicity of histories and to act as a disruptive force against dominant social and cultural narratives. Specifically, the exhibition looks at how textiles, fiber art, and soft sculpture have the power to move people, things, stories, and ideas in and out of visibility. The exhibition does not focus solely on textiles as crafted objects but understands them as being a part of systems. This includes the webs of production and trade that continue to move textiles and people across the globe; the histories, cartographies, and cosmologies that unfold around them; and also their use as an integral part of our daily routines and special rituals.

While tradition and heritage play a significant role in understanding the different roles textiles play in our lives, the exhibition *Soft Power* demonstrates how they can also be radically disobedient and unsettle established patterns and categories. Textiles pick at the seams of supposed opposites, such as art and life, and dismantle the hierarchical gap between fine arts and craft, offering more open and inclusive ways of seeing and engaging with the world. The fragility of the medium and the maintenance and repair it demands act as a reminder for how the threads that connect us can be severed and restitched into new configurations at any moment—of our own initiative but also through external forces. The works in the exhibition reflect the complexity of our times and are committed to a self-determined and life-affirming ethos of connectedness in a world defined by divisive political rhetoric.

While most of the artists in the exhibition engage with fiber-based materials and textiles as a central part of their work, a strict adherence to a single medium was not a criterion for selection. Instead, *Soft Power* adopts the irreverence toward categorization inherent to an art form that has perpetually found itself at the ever-fraying margins of (Western) cultural canons and embraces an expanded approach. The range of works in the exhibition stretches from traditional textile techniques such as felting, weaving, patchwork, quilting, embroidery, and needlework, through to other media including drawing, video, performance, painting, and photography, to show how textiles are entangled in art practices beyond their material presence.

Soft Power is divided into three intertwined chapters. The works in the chapter "Invisible Hands" look at the history of raw materials, textile production, and trade from the perspective of contemporary artists who ask questions about often unseen labor. Particular attention is given to the history of cotton, a material which like no other has defined the fates of individuals worldwide over the course of centuries. A selection of works offers space for reflection on cotton's entanglement in the transatlantic slave trade and looks at how the paradigm set by this triangle of enslavement and trade between Europe, Africa, and the Americas continues to leave its mark in the

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form of enduring asymmetrical relationships between the Global North and the Global South, and in neocolonial practices of resource extraction that damage the Earth and our environment. In the works, history itself becomes a raw material for the artists, who use textiles and textile structures to think through notions of repair, reinvention and the building of new worlds from their own individual perspectives. Alongside these international perspectives, two works look at the history of textile production in the GDR, focusing on the labor conditions of women workers at the VEB Baumwollspinnerei Leipzig and of Vietnamese contract workers in the East German textile industry, in this case at the VEB Vowetex in Plauen.

The second chapter "Ancestral Threads" demonstrates how threads possess a metaphorical power that has run through cultures across the world since time immemorial. They represent both singularity and interconnectedness, continuity, and finitude, and thus seem perfectly attuned to represent the complexity of human existence. The image of the thread can highlight not only the known and unknown networks in which we find ourselves in the present, but can also extend across time and trace lineages from generation to generation. The works in this chapter look at how textiles are used to commemorate those who have come before us, be it direct ancestors or those whose stories and ways of living touch upon our own realities. Particular attention is paid to histories that remain underacknowledged by official historical and cultural canons, such as the stories of queer and Roma communities, as well as those of overlooked historical women figures. Additionally, the chapter pays homage to artists of a generation passed who made a significant contribution to how textiles and fibers are seen and used in art today.

The works in the third chapter "Disrupting Patterns" demonstrate how the graphic elements of textile design can be harnessed to challenge social norms. In their infinite repetition, patterns can stand for continuity, lineage, and tradition, and have the ability project effusive joy through colours and shapes. Yet, patterns can also be seen as cool and systematic visualizations of conformity, as repetitive and stubborn iterations of an existing order that has no regard for those who fall outside its framework. The works in this chapter rupture existing patterns and call for new orders. While some artists encode personal stories and identities into new and exciting patterns, others show how a literal disrupting of patterns can act as a metaphor for moments of political change that affect whole societies.

In the cabinet space, a presentation is dedicated to the history of the *Zirkel für künstlerische Textilgestaltung Potsdam* (the Potsdam Circle for Textile Design) and its position within the state-sponsored program of free-time activity during the GDR, known as "künstlerisches Volksschaffen". The films, books, photographs, and objects on display offer an insight into the broad range of activities of the group and its leader

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Ingeborg Bohne-Fiegert, including the collective production of textile pieces and fashion collections, exhibitions and research trips abroad in socialist states, and the publication of books on the history and practical application of textiles. The two textile wall hangings on display were both produced for the 1,000-year anniversary of the city of Potsdam but within two different political systems, in 1988 and 1993 respectively. These appliqué works represent two of the last projects realized by the group in its original form under Ingeborg Bohne-Fiegert.

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