

Hans-Peter Feldmann

An exhibition of art

When Hans-Peter Feldmann is asked to provide details of his career he generally limits himself to one piece of information: that he was born in Hilden, Düsseldorf, in 1941. If encouraged to offer further details, he considers it more interesting to supply a list of the films that he likes rather than the usual list of his exhibitions, which merely demonstrates his notable presence on the international art scene. From the late 1960s to the present day, Hans-Peter Feldmann's work has defined a very personal way of being. For example, he generally entitles his exhibitions "An exhibition of art". This seems an obvious description but, like many of his brief titles, it is also an affirmation. The artist is letting us know that everything that we see in his exhibitions is art. The objects that we see in them are, in fact, comparable to those that fill our daily lives: amateur photographs, postcards, photocopies, toys and other everyday items. Furthermore, the exhibitions' contents are not greatly elaborated: Feldmann selects from the objects that surround us and draws them to our attention using very simple procedures. He juxtaposes them (as with his series of images), applies colour to them (as with his classically-inspired sculptures), or changes their context (as in the objects that fill his "Wunderkammer" or cabinet of curiosities). It could be said that rather than making art, Feldman limits himself to finding and showing it.

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Feldmann grew up in post-war Germany in a world devoid of images. For this reason, the few images that he encountered in everyday life acted as windows onto other worlds. Fascinated by them, he began to collect them, cut them out and stick them into albums, as he continues to do today. It is therefore not surprising that when he embarked on his artistic career in the late 1960s he filled the backgrounds of his paintings with collages of photographs, or that he subsequently made a number of small, simple books with cardboard covers and offset images of recurring motifs: aeroplanes, unmade beds, women's knees, etc. He entitled them *2 Images* [2 Bilder] or *7 Images* [7 Bilder] according to the number that they contained. Feldmann also began to record trivial events in the manner of film stills on rolls of traditional, analogue film of 36 shots. These include a boat moving down a river, the woman opposite cleaning the window, or two girls getting dressed at the swimming pool. In this dry but poetic series entitled *Time series* nothing remarkable takes place; the invisible flow of time has been detained simply in order to scrutinise it. Years later Feldmann further developed his ideas in a book and a series of 101 photographic portraits that he entitled

100 Years, in which each photograph depicts a person (all family members or friends of the artist), aged between 8 months and 100 years. For Feldmann this was a way of confronting the passing of time, while for the viewer the series acts as a link between individual and collective memory, reminding us that time passes for everyone and that as we look through the series - inevitably comparing ourselves with individuals of our own age - we have passed through 100 years: an entire lifetime.



Bilder (Booklets),
1970s

For the book *100 Years* Feldmann created a series of carefully realised, black and white photographs that relate to the finest tradition of the photographic portrait, at the same time also producing a series of large-format photographs. In general, however, his work is inspired by snapshots in the amateur tradition and by the widest range of everyday images. He is not interested in the single image but rather in the series, or, more precisely, in what appears when various images are juxtaposed. As the artist frequently says: "The photos are scraps of paper, objects. If we look at them, they give rise to feelings, moods, etc. A photo of someone who has died can make us feel sorrow, and if it is a picture of a child, tenderness, but the feeling is in

one's mind, not in the photo. In addition, this happens with the widest range of good and bad photographs, group or individual ones." Since what interests him is the space that opens up between things and what they mean to us, Feldmann likes to investigate how we imbue everyday images and objects with sentiment. When not using photographs, his intention is to open up a mental image for us; for example, the room with the unmade bed, untidy clothes and a photograph of a woman on the bedside table is the first photograph in a story that each person must complete for himself or herself.



Untitled,
installation, 1980s

Feldmann's universe is that of ordinary life, from which he derives his subjects and the materials that he employs. The everydayness that is the context of his work is defined through contrast with other levels of human activity: it is the reverse side of the coin of that social, capitalist space filled with hyperbolic, retouched images that encourage us to consume. In contrast, Feldmann seems to wish to neutralise his images, presenting them as basic with regard to their materials and as aesthetically

undefined, as if wanting to force the limits of their expressive qualities. In addition, he remains emotionally apart, limiting himself to informing us or showing us something that he has found, hoping that we imbue it with meaning. For example, his series *All the clothes of a woman* presents exactly what the title describes: seventy items of female dress, one by one. These clothes, which comprise an archive of modest fetishes, may, even in their absence, still conjure up a (love?) story. Also completely bland are his serial photographs of car radios. In another context the viewer would undoubtedly pay little attention to them, but when seen in relation to the title, *Car radio when good music is playing*, we identify with them, given that we have all experienced such a moment.

Feldmann belongs to the generation that reached adulthood in the 1960s, a generation renown for its questioning authority in all its forms, and for its search for ways of living that would give sense to everyday existence. Much of the art of that era abandoned the solemnity and introspection of abstraction with the aim of establishing a new relationship with life itself. Interest shifted from the object to procedures, while systems of produc-

tion and the consumption of art were called into question. There was an accompanying rejection of the concepts of authorship, formal uniqueness and rarity on which the art market was based. In the 1970s a publisher tried to persuade Feldmann to design a book in the form of an art object, to be produced as an edition for sale. The artist attempted to avoid the commission but the publisher insisted and finally Feldmann made a suggestion: a valid 20 Mark note, unsigned, in an unlimited edition, costing 20 Marks. The publisher, who must have had a sense of humour, accepted. Feldmann continues not to sign his works, producing unnumbered editions of whatever size he likes. This attitude, a reflection of his dynamic, ethical world view, has made him a reference point for younger artists in recent years.



David,
coloured sculpture
1970s

When looking at collective experience, the artist generally makes use of reproductive media. His book *Die Toten* [The Dead], 1967-1993, is an exhaustive archive created from images taken from the press that depicts every person who died in the conflict between terrorists and the forces of the German State during that period. Each page has a photograph with the name of the person and their date of death underneath it. At the end of the book is an index listing the names of all these individuals, their place and cause of death. Devoid of commentaries, the book reflects the social conflict that took place during those years, respecting both sides. Despite this even-handedness, it has been the subject of controversy in Germany.

Mass media was used as a vehicle for a work on September 11 2001. Feldmann's installation "9/12"

records the reaction to the unthinkable event in 150 newspapers worldwide, all of which had that same news item on the front cover. It is interesting to observe how these publications each presented the news, what headline they used, the space devoted to it, etc. From the start of his career the media preoccupied Feldmann who has published various magazines that consist of images without text, such as *Ohio* and *Cahier d'images*. He has also tried, with variable success, to infiltrate other magazines and subvert their logic. In the late 1990s he managed to persuade the Viennese weekly current affairs magazine *Profil* to publish an issue identical to their normal one but solely comprising photographs without text. Feldmann's *Profil* is a



Untitled (Legs),
36 colour
photographs,
1970s

world of images that, lacking captions, does not tell us how to read its illustrations.

The work that perhaps best exemplifies Feldmann's spirit is his most recent installation, *Shadow Play*. As we enter the space we see that its end wall is completely covered with striking shadows that come closer then recede. In the centre, between the far wall and the viewer, are revolving tables covered with dolls and cheap objects that are lit from behind to create the shadows. The tabletops are messy and include elements used in the work's installation. Despite the fact that the artifice is evident, the magic survives. For Feldmann: "It's actually a bunch of trash and junk, which builds up something completely new in our brains for a certain while. A shadow on the wall." These shadows take us back to our childhoods where any image could become a window onto another world. Art, as Feldmann says, "is an event, an impression, a feeling and more. It's never really the object."

Helena Tatay

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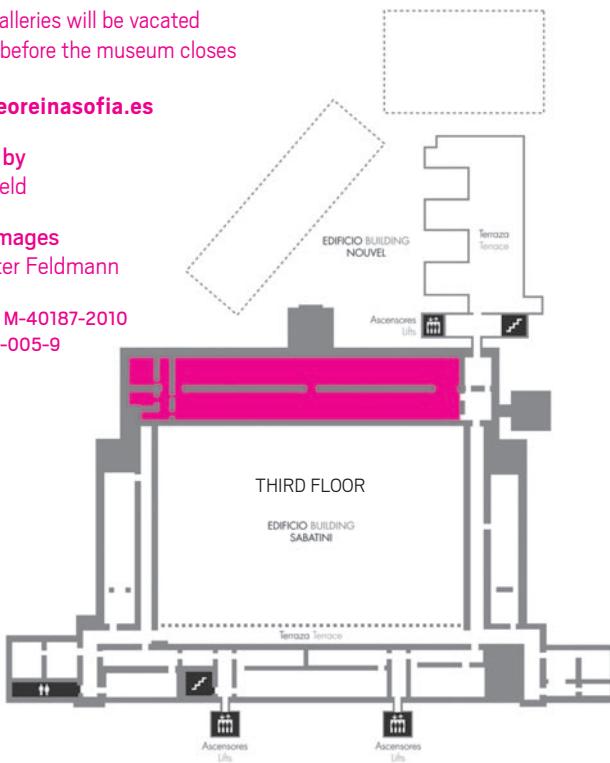
Laura Suffield

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