

Hans-Peter Feldmann: Museum Ludwig, Cologne

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In the 1970s, when the American magazine *Avalanche* requested an interview with Hans-Peter Feldmann, he responded to each of their queries not with words but rather with a single image. For example, he answered the question of whether it was exciting to work on a vast scale with a view of a newsstand; and as his reply to an inquiry about the relationship of his work to language, Feldmann supplied a black-and-white photo of a young woman in a phone booth.

Though this might at first seem like sophomoric mockery of the interview format, it is in fact a considered and witty reaction to it. Indeed, the association of text and image leads to the very heart of Feldmann's visual experiments, in which the deployment of pictures resembles that found in newspapers and popular magazines, reflecting his intention to develop forms of artistic communication that can reach an audience beyond the art world. Among Feldmann's earliest works is a series of booklets titled *Bilder* (Pictures; 1968-76), initially offered for free, depicting recurring motifs such as views of women's knees (*II Bilder*) or shots of chairs (*3 Bilder*). Lacking any commentary, these pictures remind us--as does the photo of the woman in the phone booth, later to appear in *Telefonbuch* (Telephone Book), 1980--that images accrue different meanings according to the context in which they appear. And it is this politics of the image that Feldmann has reminded audiences of throughout his career.

Organized by independent curator Helena Tatay, Feldmann's traveling retrospective, the most comprehensive show of his work to date, brings together pieces from the late '60s to the present and playfully pursues these ideas while following the disparate branches of the artist's production. Feldmann's connection to Gerhard Richter is clear, for example, in the portrait series *Der deutsche Bundestag* (The German Parliament), 2002, which echoes Richter's well-known *48 Portraits*, 1971-72. At the same time, his Duchampian attitude--perhaps apparent in all of his work--achieves its purest expression in his assemblages of cheap household objects, or "*Asthetische Studien*" (Aesthetic Studies), 1995-2000, while his use of found images, from the late '60s on, casts him (as the press release duly notes) as an early precursor to the appropriationists. The exhibition, which does not follow any chronological order, recognizes the necessarily fragmentary nature of any oeuvre and refuses the typical museal wish to reduce the artist's work to a single coherent narrative.

That decision is especially apt in Feldmann's case, given the interplay of continuity and interruption that has characterized his career (most notably, in 1980 he retired from the art world for nearly ten years) and the way in which he has throughout his life depended on traversing different contexts in his art. In 1968, he gave up painting, arguing that photographs were "fully sufficient" to convey the idea of his art, and he has ever since worked primarily with reproduced images found well outside any fine-arts context. He takes them from the mass media or finds them at the flea market--magazine clippings, family snapshots, pinups, photo albums, posters, placards, amateur photography. Feldmann's reservoir of images spans the wide world of kitsch: pictures of sunsets, cute puppies, and idyllic landscapes, which even in grainy reproductions still harbor the promise of "beauty"; a trove that reflects the allure of advertising and personal and collective longings, as well as the banality of the (*petit bourgeois*) everyday. "I am not interested in the high points of life. Only five minutes of every day are interesting," says Feldmann in the exhibition catalogue, which is largely of his making. Hence his focus on poetic moments of the ordinary: the piles of folds on unmade beds (*5 Bilder*); the slow passage of a freighter on the Rhine, captured in the thirty-six frames of a standard film roll ("*Zeit-Serien*" [Time Series], ca. 1970-); "car radios photographed while good music was playing" ("*Ansichten von Autoradios, in denen gerade gute Musik spielt*," 1970s-90s). Feldmann's various "Time Series," each of which constitutes thirty-six images of a mundane scene taken in a matter of minutes, if not seconds, attempt to capture a fleeting moment while paradoxically recording the inexorable passage of time.

Feldmann's archaeology of mass-media imagery is characterized by a particular attention to the influence pictures exert on our thoughts, emotions, and actions, to the categories of perception that order our worldview, the mechanisms of in- and exclusion, which are always attended by value judgments, if never explicitly stated. This, among other things, is what grounds the artistic relevance of Feldmann's approach--and what makes his work at heart political.

Feldmann once said that the significance of a given image can be decided only in a specific context, or, as he put it, in a "borderline situation." Accordingly, he arranges the most varied genres and collections in his oeuvre in radical juxtaposition, which can be read as an ironic break with the conventions of museum presentation, given the exhibition's crudely built cardboard display stands; its vitrine installations, or "*Wunderkammer*," 2000-2001; its alternation between salon-style and rational hanging; and so on. Near the end of the exhibition are three reconstructed prison cells from Cologne's Ossendorf district detention center (untitled, 2003). Their interiors are decked out with scads of photographs and inmates' drawings--images that have special meaning for their possessors. Transferred to a museum context, they represent an intentional confrontation of different types of collections and value systems.