

The Collector

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Hans-Peter Feldmann's work draws on an enormous personal archive of material he has spent decades gathering



Among the many stark divides in this overburdened world is the one between those who have lots of things around them and those who don't. Given half the chance, it seems that everyone at some point or another ends up taking a furtive glance at the other side: it is easy for people choked by plenty to pretend that they don't care about possessions. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, Western art is full of both the explicit and the covert desire to be purged of things, to question their value or at least attempt to prune them back to mind-, body- or spirit-reviving essentials, while adding to their number to make that very point (a problem analogous to the everyday drama that you need to buy more shelves to reduce clutter.) This grossly disproportionate, unholy reservoir of objects, pictures and information is a kind of monstrous, collectively authored effigy of what we want and are. Bruce Chatwin, in a lecture, once put it like this: 'Do we not gaze coldly at our clutter and say: "If these objects express my personality, then I hate my "personality?"'"¹ Things can tell difficult, unsightly truths just as over-lit bathroom mirrors do, provided you're willing to stare at them long enough and can see past all the products that promised to make you feel young and confident.

It is perhaps the urgent need to come to terms with our relationship to things and pictures that drives an artist and collector of the everyday such as Hans-Peter Feldmann. Aside from the thrill of the hunt, the fascination of the new and a curious pleasure in the patently absurd – three truly renewable human resources – the need to select, categorize, preserve and store in bookshelves, attics, garages or sealed bunkers some part of the material evidence and images around us probably has to do with the hope that they might become more manageable, that some modicum of personal sense might be restored. Collecting is a discipline that requires both an encyclopaedic feeling for the overview and a sensitivity to minutiae and differences – whether shoes or Greek marbles. Whatever the psychoanalytical explanation (such as compensating for the traumatic withdrawal of a mother's love), it gives the adult a foothold on the first sheer cliff-face in the foothills of the seemingly infinite mountainous range of things. In postwar times people still started with stamps, as Feldmann did as a child in West Germany, because they gave him an imaginative access to the wider outside world. Feldmann has been an artist for decades and recently admitted that he's basically 'always been doing the same thing.'² Early on he realized that simply by putting two or more similar, ordinary images or objects together – regardless of whether they were produced by an artist

or not – it was possible to suggest narratives and meanings in a viral manner along an exponentially growing curve. If you're scrupulously careful with this effect and accept, like Feldmann, that art involves an expression of the self's most intimate memories and desires, of the things that trouble or move you most, and then acknowledge how this connects you to the world and everybody else's worries, you pretty much have the basic tenets of his practice as he explains it today. This is an experiment that he has often repeated in hundreds of variations, with combinations and groups of his own and found photographs, postcards, magazine and newspaper clippings, as well as all kinds of bric-à-brac. Over the years his work has been discussed mainly in relation to German Pop, Conceptual and Appropriation art, but for the artist himself such labelling is of little consequence, except perhaps for adding some flattering discursive patina. His work draws on an enormous personal archive of material composed of stuff that at one point or another has caught his eye. His emphasis is not so much on the Duchampian anti-heroics of finding and selecting as on the possibilities that his artistic diversion generates in terms of the destiny of his materials. His archive (which in fact isn't one in any strict sense), his numerous picture book publications on subjects ranging from women's knees to images of the dead resulting from the violent confrontation between leftist terrorism and the state in West Germany (*Die Toten, The Dead: 1967–93*) and, last but not least, his exhibitions all create a space where the profane is left to speak volumes by itself. The idea that objects and images designated as art don't have any special claim to importance over a lot of other creative, odd-looking, emotionally moving or conceptually intriguing stuff that you encounter (if you have an eye for them) along the way in your immediate surroundings, listed on eBay, sprayed on a wall or scratched into the bark of a tree in a park, is a simple and radical conviction that is one of Feldmann's favourite refrains. His point is not that there are no criteria for what makes an artist, or art, but rather that the art world as we know it doesn't have a monopoly on imposing them. Back in 1977, when he was struggling to think of an art work that couldn't possibly be acceptable (so as to avoid having to exhibit), he started what ironically became one of his most popular object series: hand-painted plaster reproductions (with varying degrees of reproductive accuracy) of classical and Renaissance sculptures in garish colours, among them Michelangelo's *David (1501-4)* and assorted armless Venuses – the kind of delicious campy stuff that you might see in niches in your local Greek or Italian restaurant or, for that matter, in more brazen museum shops. If you leave your art blinkers on, they might recall Jeff Koons' 1980s sculptural assault on good taste. Feldmann shares Koons' iconoclasm but not his ironic self-glorification and art-as-big-business stance. Feldmann paints these works much as anyone would, getting a kick out of bright colour like a sugar high. The results may seem sacrilegious to the white purity of Neo-classical taste, but, as we know, the ancient originals were often painted as well. Some years ago Feldmann had the opportunity to obtain an exquisite plaster reproduction that became *Untitled, Dream City, Munich (1999)*: much to the horror of the master craftsmen who had produced it, he gave the one-armed muscular hero, shown in a park pavilion, a coat of bubblegum pink, canary yellow hair and lips redder than a fire engine. The paint job makes him look like a big beautiful sissy – perhaps a sympathetic, knowing wink at the German classical scholar Johann Joachim Winckelmann. More directly, however, this series involves a direct lampooning of a strain of conservative taste in the classical that has been subjected to so much misuse by many empire builders.

For Feldmann, although museums and galleries have impervious walls, somehow the outside is always threatening to buckle or even implode them. His alternative is just to invite it in. Some of his recent exhibitions have looked like a cross between a boutique and a quirky junk shop with ordinary objects on cardboard plinths. His work has always addressed the conditions of

art, the art-making context and just what makes an artist an artist. His recent touring retrospective, for example, he drolly dubbed: 'Art Exhibition'. Although the temptations to behave otherwise are great these days, Feldmann has stuck to his rules of never signing a work; he doesn't like price lists lying around galleries, is intentionally irresolute about titles and dates, and if someone buys one of his handmade books or any of his other works, it is on the understanding that 'the edition' is potentially limitless. His artistic biography can be of comfort to every artist who finds themselves plagued by doubt, dissatisfied with the art world, feeling misunderstood or misrepresented, silently or openly objecting to demands for ever-increasing productivity or sceptical of public and institutional reception. In 1980, after making and exhibiting art for two decades, he mounted a swan-song – a solo exhibition in a museum in Ghent – and then, without much ado, quietly exited the art stage and destroyed and gave away whatever works were still in his possession. Among them were his 1960s paintings of ordinary consumer objects, such as a pencil, the backs of which are pasted with advertising clippings (Pencil, 1960s), and copies of his signature little grey handmade photography books, which have ink-stamped covers with his name on, such as 11 Bilder (11 Pictures, 1970s), a sexy series of images showing his then girlfriend dressed as a chambermaid making a bed. During his artistic downtime, however, he didn't stop 'making work'. Feldmann, like Joseph Beuys, thinks everybody is, actually or potentially, an artist or can make art, if you understand art as being any kind of truthful communicative sensory externalization – the only difference being that some people 'do it more than others'³ and, if you practise 'like any bathroom singer', you just get better. While out of the art world Feldmann devoted his time, oddly and poetically enough, to a mail order service and shop for thimble collectors, a curiosity shop and later manufacturing retro tin toys. These small businesses apparently did very nicely and exist to this day in his home town, Dusseldorf. More than nine, but not quite ten, years later – after sitting in the sidelines while German art flourished commercially as never before – he was coaxed out of his self-imposed exile by his friend the curator Kaspar König, and he made a comeback at Portikus, Frankfurt, accompanied by the publication of *Das Museum im Kopf* (The Museum Inside the Head, 1989).

The title of the book indicates Feldmann's sense that the real importance of objects and images is how they gather and resonate not in the market-place but in our muddled, self-serving minds, where actually everything except immediate experience is a matter of dodgy memories. Photography has a privileged place in Feldmann's work precisely because it is arguably the medium most intertwined with memory. His photography-based works are a detailed examination of the ménage à trois of photography, time and memory, the mysterious depths of which have been plumbed by bigger brains than mine. His image-based work is often installed in a manner either inspired by the arrangement of pictures in photo-albums or scrapbooks, or as series running in a line through a given space in a way that involves time passing both in the pictures themselves and in the act of viewing, such as his installation in New York's P.S.1 of his book and portrait series *One Hundred Years* (2000), 101 portraits of people aged 8 weeks to 100 years old. The main thing is that Feldmann knows that photography, whatever its source, is about never getting the whole picture, let alone the perfect or ultimate shot. When asked why he preferred series and combinations of photographs to single pieces, he answered: 'because you can get more 'truth'.⁴ In the 1960s getting the truth meant showing, on the one hand, the crass oppositions in West German society between new wealth and the importing of the American way of life, and on the other, the cultural and political repression of the recent fascist past – something that led to the open rebellion staged by the 1968 generation. When Feldmann uses antiquated or nostalgic images it is with this in mind. His Fluxus-style books, such as the sexy *Strapse* (Garters, 1970s),

consisting of erotic pictures put to bed in the folds of a novel (all books are keepers of secrets), and his collections of kitsch postcards of sunsets or the Eiffel Tower, with their 'anti-art photography' stance, also have roots in this period. In its more Conceptual art mode his work recalls contemporaries such as John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha, for instance his *Blicke aus Hotelzimmerfenstern* (Views from Hotel Windows, 1975–99) or the time-based series *Die Brücke* (The Bridge, 1974), a series of snapshots taken from a car.

Three recurring themes emerge in Feldmann's carefully orchestrated cacophony of images past and present: the documentary, the clichéd or stereotypical, and the erotic image. Plucking images with déjà-vu compositions and subjects from the mass media mainstream, he rescues meanings that otherwise might have drowned unnoticed. He does so by isolating them, and either serialising them in like-motif groups, or taking the other extreme, by expressing harsh dissonances through jarring combinations such as in his two *Voyeur* (1994 and 1997) books, in which a plane crash might share a page with a nude. He is also challenging the viewer's visual critical faculty by opening up a Pandora's box of ancillary meanings. That goes for the photographs he takes himself or could have taken too, for instance an untitled collection of snapshots of the backs of women's heads which, as single images, might not attract much attention, but which together suggest narratives implicating the taker and his Hitchcockian eye. In the 1970s Feldmann scandalized art friends by sending them some pornographic photographs of himself and two women, accompanied with an explanation that while he was ashamed to expose his own sexual practices, there nonetheless existed other disgusting things that are shown in public with everybody's connivance.⁵ But generally his erotica is confined to underwear ads, photographed knees, portraits of lovers, and many women he has admired. As a child of the 1950s the pin-up has a special place, as Francis Picabia's nudes do for the grown artist. Perhaps his most eloquent visual statement on gazing at the opposite sex however, is his series *Alle Kleider einer Frau* (All the Clothes of a Woman, 1977) that consists of what its title says it does. Similarly his 'Slept in Hotel Beds' series (such as those in the booklet *5 Bilder*, 1970s) expresses a closeness that reveals the gulf between one body and another, whatever we think our feelings may be.

The twist for me in writing this text (critics, after all, are double agents couriering coded messages between the artists and their audience) is that Feldmann's own relationship to the written word is characterized by a certain reticence. He is not anti-language; he probably just doesn't want us to jump to conclusions too quickly, which words often encourage us to do. He wants us to refrain from speaking before looking, before the objects and images speak to us. His refusal to validate his own work textually extends beyond his picture books without commentary to his continued insistence that no artistic biography or bibliography of his work should exist, and his tongue-in-cheek scribbled-note approach to the certification of his work. An art collector might be surprised to receive a handwritten note saying something like 'Thank you for buying this unsigned undated work in an unlimited edition – I hope you enjoy it.' Feldmann has allowed only two catalogues of his work, the most recent being *272 Pages* (2002), the back sleeve of which informs the reader of some alternative titles rejected for the book, including: 'Losers [sic] are more interesting' and 'H.P. Feldmann: Trying to be an artist'. The danger of immodest self-aggrandizement that such monographs entail is obviated by the inclusion of other artists' work and a scrapbook aesthetic in which over a thousand pictures rub shoulders. The art historians who contributed essays were asked to write in a way that their mothers could read and, in keeping with this familial vein, photographs of them as pretty children at play are included.

A sense of play and pleasure have remained faithful companions to Feldmann's muse whatever his subject, and they have stood him in good stead. Some recent object works have

taken a turn for the surreal – a cloth thrown over a sculpture on a plinth (Mit Tuch verhülltes Objekt, Cloth-covered Object, 2002), a half-man opening his jacket at the gallery wall (Exhibitionist, 2002) – but for me it is little Fritz (2003) who stand outs. The work consists of a loitering boy manikin manufactured around the date of Feldmann’s birth, which he contributed to a group exhibition of the ‘first works of art’ by established artists – a self-portrait of the artist as a child having an idea.

1 Bruce Chatwin, ‘The morality of things’, in *Anatomy of Restlessness: Selected Writings 1969-1989*, Viking, London, 1996, p.170

2 Hans-Peter Feldmann in discussion with Michelle Nicol
‘Talk Show #1’, BüroFriedrich, Berlin, 6 September 2002

3 Ibid.

4 Hans-Peter Feldmann in conversation with the author in Düsseldorf
15 March 2005.

5 Helena Tatay, ‘272 Pages – Hans-Peter Feldmann’
exhibition catalogue, 2002, p.30

6 Ibid. p.11