

A handbag? Surely you're joking, Mr Feldmann ...

Humorous German artist Hans-Peter Feldmann's show at London's Serpentine gallery includes contents of women's bags



The London Serpentine gallery retrospective of Hans-Peter Feldmann, known for his use of collected objects and humour, includes the contents of women's handbags

In a show opening in London, the contents of women's handbags – crumpled receipts, the roll-up tobacco, shoes – are spilled out into glass cases. But isn't it intrusive, displaying such personal items in a public art gallery for all the world to see? "Oh God, of course," said gallery director Julia Peyton-Jones cheerfully. "But it's fascinating isn't it?"

The six bags and their contents are new works by the German artist Hans-Peter Feldmann at the Serpentine gallery as part of a major retrospective of his work from the past 40 years.

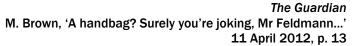
The women are identified by first name, age and city and any reluctance they might have had in giving over their bag there and then, with no opportunity for a quick tidy up, was quickly overcome by the offer of €500, said Feldmann. He also asked women he knew, although some only slightly. "I didn't go up to women randomly," he said. "They would have called the police."

The works are typical of the artist, who has spent his career collecting as wide a collection of cultural artefacts as is possible to imagine. His interest in handbags goes back to his childhood. "I remember my mother and her handbag and it was a taboo to look at what was in it, a really strict taboo."

The owners were allowed to keep really important things such as a passport or credit cards and any paper money in the bag was photocopied. All of the contents are precisely placed in vitrines and visitors to the London show will learn that Susanne, 38, from Berlin, smokes an awful lot of Van Nelle tobacco roll-ups; that Stephanie, 43, from Paris, likes Hari gum sweets; and Oriane, 27, from Berlin carries Ohropax classic ear plugs, aspirin, sunglasses, the single button in a plastic bag that you get from new clothes and never use, Issey Miyake deodorant, a city transport map and a well-used pair of flat shoes.

Peyton-Jones said the bags were "a fascinating snapshot of contemporary design", which also got her thinking what her bag would look like if she spilled the contents. "Which I do on a regular basis – it's handbag cleansing because otherwise you amass the most incredible things and you come across a half-eaten sandwich, or whatever."

What is also interesting is how vintage and retro much of the contents are. "And how much paper is still there in all kinds of forms," says Hans-Ulrich Obrist, co-director of exhibitions and programmes. "In every bag there are business cards, name cards, postcards, invitation cards to exhibitions, tickets to see shows – in the digital age there is a lot of paper."





Feldmann has been making art from ordinary items he has collected or photographed for almost 50 years. The Serpentine show includes a wall of seascapes, six photographs of car radios "while good music is playing", images of a bath before and after use, and eight drawings of Feldmann himself made by street caricaturists while he was in Madrid two years ago. All visitors to the show will receive a gift in the shape of an "unlimited edition" photograph of the Queen as a child.

His work is playful and funny but Feldmann concedes not everybody would call it art. "In Cologne, they are a very polite people but some visitors came to the show and said 'we want to have our money back'. I don't think they got it."

There will be no such demands at the Serpentine as the show is free and the gallery hopes it will introduce Feldmann – who was a key figure in the Dusseldorf art scene and a contemporary of Joseph Beuys, Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke – to a much wider British audience.

"There are still pockets of artists – and Hans-Peter is one – who have this astonishing reputation internationally but really his work is not known here," said Peyton-Jones. "So it is a great pleasure to do this survey here at the Serpentine."

She added: "I find him incredibly fascinating as an artist. It is how he re-presents the everyday. For me, one of the things that is absolutely fantastic about Hans-Peter Feldmann is his humour. He tells stories with such a light hand."

The show is the first in a public gallery in London for Feldmann and represents a pleasing circularity for Obrist in that the first show he curated at the Serpentine was a group show called Take Me I'm Yours which included Feldmann back in 1995.

The artist arrived in London on Monday and to make minor changes to the show preparations for visitors in a room in which he has constructed an elaborate and mesmerising shadow play. "Can we have some chairs or a bench?" he asked Peyton-Jones. "So people can sit and contemplate and maybe have a nap?"