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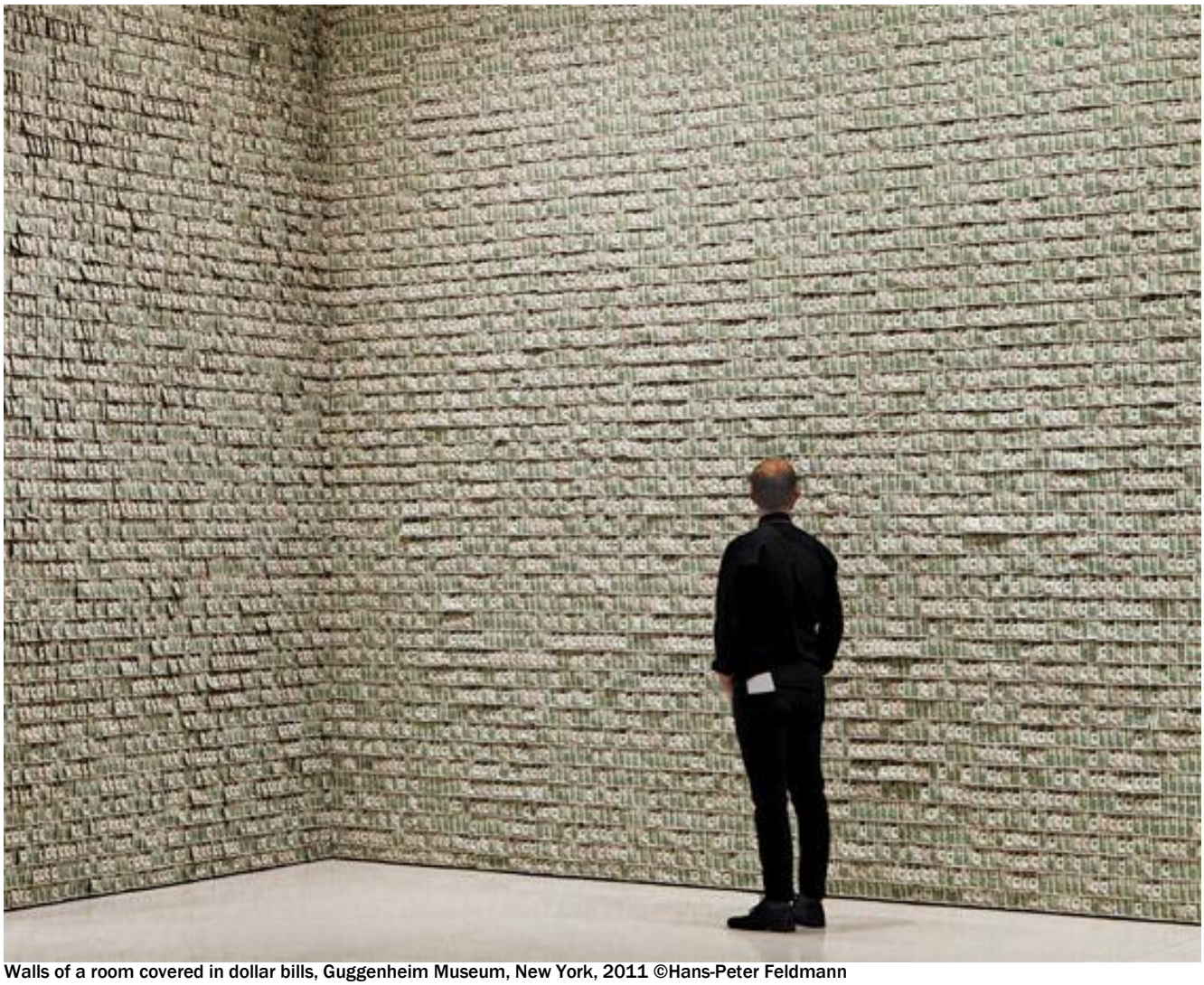
Vernacular spectacular

By Elizabeth Jobey

Hans-Peter Feldmann, a 'superstar' in Europe, brings his series of everyday images to a major London exhibition for the first time



Walls of a room covered in dollar bills, Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2011 ©Hans-Peter Feldmann

The first work that really drew my attention to the German artist Hans-Peter Feldmann was a small grey paperback book of photographs I found on a bookstall at a Paris art fair. *Die Toten* (*The Dead*) is a chronological index of the deaths on both sides in the struggle between the leftwing guerrilla movements of the 1970s and 1980s, including the Baader-Meinhof Group, and the German state. The book was a collection of images clipped from newspapers and magazines of the time, cheaply reproduced in black and white and arranged one photo to a page, with just a small, black cross symbol, the name of the victim and their date of death underneath.

This grim little memorial, which records the period with such economy and lack of sentiment, is, in fact, one of the simpler of Feldmann's works to read. Though there is little supporting text, the roll-call of names and the impersonal, poor-quality press pictures chillingly bring home the violence of the period and the futility of the deaths. As Feldmann says when I meet him in Düsseldorf: "To kill people to change the world – it doesn't work."

Though the method of construction is typical of most of his works, its linear narrative is less ambiguous than many, which are made up of thousands of vernacular images taken from every possible source – magazines, newspapers, mail-order catalogues, cigarette cards, family albums, art books, children's books, stamp collections, postcards – clipped out and arranged serially, or in groups. Much of the imagery is so familiar as to go by largely unnoticed until, as in Feldmann's work, it is brought together in ways that refocus our attention on what else it might signify.

For almost 50 years Feldmann's art has taken the same form: a mixture of found images and photographs he takes himself in a straightforward "amateur" style, and then arranged in series or randomly and published as books. With its roots in Dada, his work has survived pop, conceptualism, postmodernism and neorealism, with links to each movement, while sharing some of the concerns of contemporary practice – seriality, process, the archive, the found photograph, the mediated image.

"For such a long time he has worked to legitimise common and overlooked objects of the media as the stuff of art," says Hans-Ulrich Obrist, co-director of the Serpentine Gallery in London, who has admired Feldmann since he first encountered his work as a student in the late 1980s. "I was incredibly inspired by his ideas that one could do an exhibition in many different contexts. He had done projects in his car, given away images in the streets of Düsseldorf – all of that, for me as a curator, at the beginning was super-super-inspiring."

Next month a major Feldmann exhibition opens at the Serpentine and, despite his popularity in Europe, it will be the first survey show of his work in London.

At a time when contemporary artists' strategies have never been more evident, Feldmann's disavowal of any specific artistic intention can seem a strategy in itself, but in four decades he has never expected to make money from art. Although his works sell through galleries across the world, and come up regularly at auction, he does not limit the number of editions of his works, nor does he sign them.

He lives in Düsseldorf, high up in a wedge-shaped modern apartment block whose windows give him a panoramic view of the city. I was warned he didn't like interviews but he was courteous and talked easily, pulling down books from the crammed shelves to show me pictures that have inspired him. He forbids the use of a tape recorder, though, and, seeing my notebook, advises me: "Just put it down so it can be changed. I might not say the same thing tomorrow."

Hans-Peter Feldmann with one of his works at the opening of an exhibition at the Reina Sofia museum, Madrid, 2010 © Getty

Feldmann made his first series of books between 1968 and 1971. "I learned at art school I couldn't paint, so on to the back of my paintings I glued photographs. And I thought: 'Why shouldn't I print them in a book?' So I had 1,000 sheets printed, and I made about 30 booklets."

They were simple folders with brown card covers, titled *Bild* or *Bilder* (Picture or Pictures) depending on the number of black and white images inside. One has 11 pictures of women's knees, another a series of 12 images of an aircraft in flight. The photographs are bland in style and the books are not uniform in shape. Some contain just one picture. Despite their opaque qualities, they have become seminal documents in the development of a conceptual approach to photography.

"You learn more about images when you work with them, when you collect them," he says. "When I see one thing, I have an idea about it. When I collect more, I have a different idea." In 1972 he took his early books to *Documenta 5*, the big European contemporary art gathering in Kassel, but there was little interest. By 1977 he was having more success and exhibited at *Documenta 6* that year. But in 1979 he decided to pull out of the art world altogether and just make books and pictures for "I always made a living from things other than art," he says. "Art and money started in the 1980s. Before that, artists didn't expect to grow rich from their work. Everybody makes

art in a certain moment. It happens by itself. Art is a natural function, like coughing, like breathing. You do it to heal yourself."

Instead he made his living by selling antiques – nautical and medical instruments mostly, tin toys and curios.

In 1989 the curator Kasper König persuaded Feldmann to exhibit in a gallery again. When I ask why he went back, he says, as if it were a failing: "I needed the recognition." Then adds: "Art changes the way you look at things. The point of art is to find somewhere where you can express your emotions, and you find something in it that expresses emotion back. I use images to express myself because I can't paint."

Since then his work has been exhibited round the world, celebrated as an important precursor to the use of found and appropriated imagery by artists such as Christian Boltanski and Richard Prince. The photographer Martin Parr, who shares a love of vernacular photographs, says England has been "typically slow" when it comes to appreciating Feldmann's importance. "In Europe, he's a superstar."

Among the works coming to the Serpentine is one of his most recent installations, a series of vitrines containing his collection of the contents of women's handbags.

"I have always wanted to look into women's handbags," he says, "but I never knew how to ask. So I decided to offer them money: €500 for their bag and its contents, minus whatever they needed – money, keys, passport, ID cards. I just stopped women and asked them, maybe in a restaurant. Some of them I knew."

His fascination with women is obvious throughout his work, and for his pleasure in looking at them he is unapologetic.

"Men like looking at women. They check out their gender-specific characteristics. They look for a sign of assent – which is rare. So you have to look at a lot of women before you get that sign."

Without doubt one of his favourite women is Queen Elizabeth. He prefers her in 1950s mode: crown, covered in diamonds, smiling, like a fairy princess. So what better year to be showing here than her diamond jubilee year? And, as if images of the Queen aren't going to be everywhere, every visitor to the Serpentine exhibition will be given a picture of the Queen, selected by Feldmann, to take away.

"England," he declares with considerable authority, "is the biggest kitsch country in the world."

'Hans-Peter Feldmann' is at the Serpentine Gallery, London, from April 11 to June 3; www.serpentinegallery.org