

Spendable Art That's Not for Sale

By KAREN ROSENBERG



The Hugo Boss Prize 2010: Hans-Peter Feldmann at the Guggenheim features 100,000 \$1 bills pinned to the walls and two columns.

It's been a Warholian spring in New York: Warhol films at the Museum of Modern Art, Warhol paintings driving the May auctions, and a silver statue of Warhol in temporary residence at Union Square (Rob Pruitt's "Andy Monument"). And now the winner of the Guggenheim's Hugo Boss Prize has cashed his \$100,000 check and pinned the money, in \$1 bills, to the museum's walls. Doesn't that sound like something Warhol might have done?

Yet the man behind this gesture, Hans-Peter Feldmann, isn't one of the many contemporary artists indebted to Warhol. A 70-year-old German who is based in Dusseldorf and not very well known outside Europe, Mr. Feldmann was a surprise pick for the Boss Prize honors (typically awarded to an emerging artist). His signature works — archives of photographs and found objects — have a recalcitrant charm but are hardly boundary-pushing.

And his Guggenheim display, when seen in person, is the mildest of provocations. It's about money, yes, but not in the sense of Warhol's breathlessly affirmative adage, "Making money is art, and work is art and good business is the best art." Rather, it's about the bits of paper we exchange for goods and services, which have a physical life quite apart from their use as currency.

In a process that took nearly two weeks, Mr. Feldmann's assistants covered the walls of the Guggenheim's second-floor Tower Gallery with exactly 100,000 \$1 bills. Held by simple metal pins, the notes overlap like shingles. Not an inch of wall space has been left bare; the room's two round columns have also been papered over, giving them the appearance of tropical tree trunks.

If the sight of all that green conjures an enchanted garden, the smell of all those used bills — which have passed through thousands, possibly millions, of sweaty palms and picked up who knows how many microbes — instantly disturbs the fantasy.

Closer examination reveals further traces of circulation: creases, small tears, cryptic jottings. One bill has an orange paint splotch over Washington's face; another bears the carefully lettered message, "Whoever lives and believes in him will never die."

The money will eventually return to the system, as Mr. Feldmann banks or spends it. Katherine Brinson, an assistant curator, said that the work would not exist independently of this installation — meaning, among other things, that it can't be bought or sold. (Here you think of Warhol's 1962 painting "200 One Dollar Bills," which fetched \$43.8 million at Sotheby's in 2009.)

Still, this bank vault of a gallery is likely to make people uncomfortable. Some might find it in bad taste. Others might feel cheated by a prize exhibition that simply recycles the prize.

But if you know Mr. Feldmann's work — and, to be fair, many American viewers don't — his project makes sense. He's assembled archives of photographs that seem to be neutral, encyclopedic and well organized but that sneakily resist these concepts. For one project he photographed each item in a woman's wardrobe; for another he assembled the front pages of newspapers published on Sept. 12, 2001.

In his work, seriality — that cherished legacy of Minimal and Conceptual art — is vaguely suspect. There's always a sense that accumulating can tip over into hoarding. And when the object being serialized already has a serial number, printed by the United States Treasury, the act becomes playfully absurd.

Although the work "raises questions about notions of value in art," as the news release has it, Mr. Feldmann's prize show isn't as provocative in this regard as Tino Sehgal's solo exhibition at the Guggenheim last year. Mr. Sehgal insists that his performance-based pieces leave no paper trail in the form of news releases, photo documentation or sale agreements.

Mr. Feldmann's installation also looks conservative within the context of the Boss Prize. One recent winner, Rirkrit Tiravanija, set up a [pirate-television station](#) in the museum; another, Emily Jacir, [memorialized](#) a [Palestinian](#) intellectual killed by the Mossad.

For all its filthy lucre, the current prize show is a low-key affair. That, in a way, is the point. Mr. Feldmann is making money look boring — a welcome gesture, after the theater of high auction season.

It's worth remembering that bidders competing at one of those auctions for an early Warhol self-portrait provoked [boos and hisses](#) when they moved in atypically low increments of \$100,000. The piece eventually sold for \$38.4 million — enough to make you envision a whole museum covered with \$1 bills.

"The Hugo Boss Prize 2010: Hans-Peter Feldmann" continues through Nov. 2 at the Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street; (212) 423-3500, guggenheim.org.