

Artifacts | Greenbacks at the Guggenheim

By LINDA YABLONSKY



Hans-Peter Feldmann, above, with the installation of 100,000 one-dollar bills dressing the walls of the Guggenheim.

The next time someone tells you to show him the money, head straight for the Guggenheim Museum. There, in a second-floor gallery, \$100,000 in used one-dollar bills is on plain (and magnificent) view.

This veritable symphony of greenbacks is the result of the 2010 Hugo Boss Prize for distinction in contemporary art, awarded this year to the German conceptualist Hans-Peter Feldmann. Award winners are expected to use at least some of the money to create a new work for exhibition in the museum. Feldmann went whole hog.

His installation may be literal, and a wee excessive, but it also creates a sense of forlorn grandeur. All that money right there in your face — and yet no part of the installation worth more than a dollar. What can one do but laugh? And wonder, what would I do with \$100,000? What can it buy? In today's art market — or at the Guggenheim, where priceless masterworks are on view every day — maybe not so much.

But it's still a lot of money and Feldmann's piece makes its value very plain. At 71, he belongs to a generation of Düsseldorf-based artists who include Gerhard Richter and Georg Baselitz. Feldmann, a dedicated archivist, makes a practice of accumulating and assembling everyday objects and images into game-changing arrangements in which you can hardly see the trees for the forest.

For a 1971 work, he photographed every item in a woman's closet. In "100 Years," a 2004 exhibition at MoMA P.S. 1, he created a portrait of a century with photographs that began with 8-month-olds and finished with people whose age was 100. And in 2007, at the International Center of Photography, he covered the walls with the front pages of newspapers from all over the world, all dated Sept. 12, 2001.

At the Guggenheim, he worked with a team of installers to pin the dollar bills to the walls and columns of the gallery in vertical rows, one overlapping the next. From a distance they look like house shingles or climbing ivy. Because they literally eat up the walls, they make the room seem like an omnivorous padded cell, reminding us how easily money can drive people crazy. The sight of all those dollars is so ridiculous, it's sublime. But when examined one by one, it's also clear that, like people of a certain class, the dollar bills are not all the same.

In fact, it's uncanny how much character and texture each adds to the bigger picture. That's one reason Feldmann insisted on collecting only used money. Crisp new bills would not have curled or flopped the same way as those that have been repeatedly handled, and they wouldn't have little colored symbols or notes scrawled on them by previous owners, all of them so temporary it's almost touching. New money would have been harder to work with, too.

But it's not so easy to get so many dollar bills all at once. You can't just walk into a bank and cash a check in such small denominations. Most branches don't keep that many old bills around. You would also need several large suitcases, which might look suspicious on the street.

Such obstacles have led to much giggling as to Feldmann's sources for the cash. Had he cut a deal with drug dealers? Numbers runners? Loan sharks? Was he accompanied by armed guards?

Less open to question is the installation's commentary on the relationship of money to art. Clearly, art is money. "He should sell it for \$200,000," I heard one dealer say.

At the show's opening last week, I thought the work was so perfect, I wished it could be on permanent display. "No way!" Feldmann said. "I want the money."

The Hugo Boss Prize 2010: Hans-Peter Feldmann's installation remains on view through Nov. 2 at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue.