

## Hans-Peter Feldmann. Pictures at an Exhibition

20 May — 21 Jun 2020 at the Simon Lee Gallery in London, United Kingdom

NEIL POWELL



Hans-Peter Feldmann, Untitled, Oil on Canvas, Diptych, each: 55 x 49 cm © Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery

Whilst my title may imply some shallow meaning, it is intended to echo the deadpan and non-egotistical approach to the titular taken by the artist, on which more later. Worth mentioning of course that this masterpiece by Modest Mussorgsky was based on a largely lost series of watercolour sketches in an exhibition by the artist and architect Viktor-Edouard Hartmann (1834-1873), who had died a year previous to the suite's production. This in itself is curious fact in that we understand the inspirational impact of the work by proxy, but not by the works themselves.

In a similarly disembodied vein, there are few things weirder than writing a thought piece based on remote viewing an [online gallery exhibition](#), the hazard being of course that we play out, in public, a game of critical Chinese Whispers based on Photoshop phantoms. In fact, I have no idea if this exhibition is 'real', other than it is as real and unreal as any other screen-based entity or object in my current, screen-bounded world. As a reassurance though, I would defer to the view of a contemporary of Feldmann, Lawrence Weiner (1942-), in the form of his *schema*, which I shall come to later in the piece.

Since the 1960s, Düsseldorf-based Feldmann (b.1941) has accrued a prolific collection of photography, painting, postcards and everyday ephemera. With the majority of his work untitled and undated, he gives away as little empirical information as possible to his audience, instead of encouraging an uncoloured and unconditional viewing experience.

In ethical mode, I also need to confess to you, dear reader, that I love Hans-Peter Feldmann's work, and more precisely, I am smitten with the way in which his works offer an insight into the mine-workings of a creative who renounces holistic perceptual scanning in favour of a rare and focussed dissection of the banal. I would like to believe that this a sacrifice made for our viewing enjoyment – taking one for the perceptual team if you like.

Feldmann's filleting of the everyday leads us into a psychedelic and conceptual realm where the meaninglessness of individual 'things' is brought into sharp focus. Through his work we perhaps begin to understand for ourselves that it is in the accretion and replication of the everyday, that truths about humanity reveal themselves. The uniqueness of this artist's vision is not then in the traditional handling of paint or of physical craft, but the craft of insight and his dismantling of the constructs of classification/perception. Once the classification is revealed, we can re-see the objects as 'new', relieved of their classification-baggage albatross, artless and craft-less perhaps.

The works themselves are disarming and delightfully playful, *A Pound of Strawberries* or *Beds*, for example, but the underlying ideas are profound in terms of the transient states of these 'things' as signs and the metaphorical, mortal symbolism of their passing significance. Feldmann's Wunderkammer, or Room of Curiosities, presents three glass vitrines in which Feldmann has painstakingly laid out a collision of objects for us to connect or perceptually discard: a Magritte-style pipe, a telephone, a hipflask, a shaving brush, a lipstick, dentures, a large silver spoon, boxing gloves, a mousetrap, et al.

Through the portal of the Wunderkammer, Feldmann allows us a privileged view into, what might best be described as a private, encyclopaedic or even savantic world. It's great to look into, and very revealing, but perhaps less appealing if one imagines having to inhabit this imagination-perception place on a full-time basis.

The exhibition also features the multi-part painting installations in the form of his classic Untitled (seascapes). Gleaned from auctions, second-hand shops and markets, these grouped works open up a space for viewers to make connections and associations between otherwise discrete images, creating a disjuncture between intention and reception, while simultaneously bestowing upon them new life and narrative meaning. In essence the focal point of the images have all been removed, usurping our expectations of valiant sailors on tempestuous oceans; i.e. the sailing vessels have been excised, very skilfully, from the paintings.

To return to an earlier point, whilst Feldmann really doesn't fit the canon of Conceptual Art at all, and I wouldn't be so contentious as to claim so much, the impact of his thought, even in the imaginative virtual realm, might be deciphered by related means: In 1968 Lawrence Weiner formulated his, now famous, (but sadly generationally neglected), *Declaration of Intent* which stated:

1. *The artist may construct the piece.*

2. *The piece may be fabricated.*

3. *The piece need not be built.*

*Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.*

What we can discern from this is that both artists recognise the reciprocity of the handshake process that takes place between the authorial/didactic (artist) on the one hand, and the interpretive/existential (viewer) on the other. The upshot of this reciprocity means that the planting of the work in the viewer's mind, whether this implanting is done visually or by other means, creates an entity that effectively *exists*.

Now there are other artists, such as Pistoletto, who have explored this concept as an alternative or parallel reality, but I would say that the roots of Feldmann lie exposed, psychoanalytically at least, by Jacques Lacan (1901-1981). I don't say this lightly either. There is a disconcerting absence lack of egocentricity in Feldmann's work that is signalled in a number of ways: he rarely attributes titles (at least of any poetic significance) to his works/catalogues/exhibitions; he doesn't attend openings (generally); and he declines to claim artistic authorship in relation to his production. Because of this, I think I am on fairly safe ground in asserting that ego or any associated sense of autonomous agency most certainly are not the central subject in Feldmann's works.

I might be bolder here by asserting that Feldmann recognises, like Lacan, that egotistical production is essentially a compromised and neurotic indulgence for the artist, and this in itself represents an assault against the dominance of Anglo-American ego art-psychology. It might also be construed as a rejection of the romanticised idea of the artist-as-seer and the charismatic existentialism of practitioners such as Beuys or even, at a stretch, Dürer (1471-1528) (see the self-portraits).

I normally close with a quip or pithy summary, but in keeping with Feldmann's sentiment, I don't have words that can offer greater closure than the pictures at an exhibition.



1. Hans-Peter Feldmann, Untitled, Colour photograph, 173 x 123 cm © Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery

2. Hans-Peter Feldmann, Lovcouple (Liebespaar), Black and white photograph glued in an open wooden box 40 x 60 x 5 cm © Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery

3. Hans-Peter Feldmann, Untitled, Colour photograph, 173 x 123 cm © Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery

4. Hans-Peter Feldmann, Untitled, Hat with black and white photograph, 33 x 26 x 19.5 cm © Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery

5. Hans-Peter Feldmann, Untitled, Colour photograph, 173 x 123 cm © Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery

6. Hans-Peter Feldmann, Two Sisters by Shadow (Zwei Schwestern von Shadow), Painted plaster, 56 x 29 x 20 cm © Courtesy of the artist and Simon Lee Gallery