

Interview: Hans-Peter Feldmann

Hans-Peter Feldmann has an impressive retrospective exhibition at Malmö Konsthall. With no titles, or indication of chronology, this is an abundance of immediacy. Everything is strange and simple, like a soup plate with two spoons, or highly imaginative as the shadows of moving everyday objects, cast on the wall. But it also seems deeply emotional: A hundred different portraits stares back at you, one for each year. From zero to nothingness. This is what has been on **Hans-Peter Feldmann's** mind for almost forty years.

Kopenhagen met this great artist in the café at SAS Royal Hotel, where he used to do the dishes many years ago.

Hans-Peter Feldmann is born in Germany in 1941, and he lives and works in Düsseldorf. Around 1980 he left the art scene for almost ten years. Still, he has managed to produce an enormous body of works, and he is widely recognised for his conceptual approach to books, photography, objects, and found footage.

Interview: **Mikkel Carl**

Foto: **Mikkel Carl & Helene Toresdotter**

Hans-Peter Feldmann (DE)

Hans-Peter Feldmann

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Malmö Konsthall

S:t Johannesgatan 1, 200 10 Malmö

web site: www.konsthall.malmo.se/

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In a 1970s interview for an American magazine called *Avalanche*, you responded to each of the queries not with words, but with an image. Do you still have this urge, or should we conduct this interview in a more traditional manner?

We can use words, all right.

One of your trademarks has become small artist-books where series of pictures might be regarded in the light of some missing text. How do you determine the connection between image and text in art, or otherwise?

I don't know. I'm only working with pictures. I find them, and I present them, that's enough for me.



Regarding Lucy Lippard's much discussed idea of "dematerialization", one might distinguish between two kinds of conceptual art: On the one hand, actual text turned into an object, and on the other, objects presented as a kind of language.

This is all art theory, and it has got nothing to do with art. For me art is like breathing, or perhaps sneezing. I don't need a theory to do that. When I make art, the result is what happens. I've been around for a long time, and so I might seem old-fashioned. That's my fight. Today, people start out with some abstract idea, and then claim it to be art. Art simply doesn't work this way, at least not to me. But I'm also very lazy, you know. I don't want to write, or to discuss anything. I've no explanations what so ever.

I guess, then, that's it.

Thank you. (laughing)



Well, I might try to continue anyway. Disregarding your personal qualms, people tend to consider you one of the founding fathers of conceptual art, and – as time goes by – one of the grandfathers, or even great-grandfathers.

I have always made very concrete things, whereas conceptual art is only an idea. People have an idea about art, and then they go and write it down. At the last Venice biennale, in the German pavilion, you had to read two full pages before even entering; if you didn't you would have no clue of what was going on. This is why I have never understood conceptual art. To me, art is something real, something you need a hammer to do. At the show in Malmö, there are only "realistic" things, nothing abstract, no titles, no nothing. You have to act like a baby experiencing everything for the first time, completely rid of any background information. You go and look at the works, and either you feel something, or you don't.



I guess *Alle Kleider eine Frau* wasn't all her clothes, so I would much like to know how your logic of selection works, here and in general?

It actually was all her clothes. Forty years ago it was a different story, people didn't have all that much. She actually had step into another room and change, while I was doing the photography.

All right, I'll put it in another way: "Could it have been any woman?"

No, the work was about this woman. If I had come on to her in the streets, or somewhere else, she would probably have slapped me in the face, whereas with this approach it was all a bit more sophisticated. I got really close to her; do you know what I mean? *Alle Kleider eine Frau* was all about the woman, not the clothes. Anyway, I take things, I arrange them in a certain way, and that's it. For instance, I go and put two spoons in a soup plate. You can call it what you want, but I call it "two spoons in a soup plate". There's no need for any other name, since we're all quite familiar with the concept of one spoon. Making art is like eating a tomato, either you fancy its taste, or you don't.

I guess two spoons in one soup plate is a bit more like eating a tomato with the taste of an orange.

Art needs to be sensuous for the eyes to touch. You simply have to look at it, to hear the music.



In my mind, your golden shoes waded with pins presides along Dali's Lobster Telephone and Man Ray's Cadeau, the nail-clad iron. Even if one doesn't fancy the violent eroticism of surrealism, this is still pure pain and design. Can you say something about the allegorical dimension of the objet trouvé?

Shoes with high heels are not made for walking. Instead they work as some demonstration of...sexiness, perhaps? I just made this pair a bit more painful. The pins simply suited those shoes very well, with the colour of the material, and everything. It's like the flowers stuck to the wall. They're all plastic, so it doesn't matter if you put them like this. I love flowers, but they need to be outside, somewhere in the fields. Instead we put them in a garden, and then bring them inside in a plastic pot. Finally, we replace them with pure plastic, and add artificial soil. Putting the plastic flowers perpendicular to the wall was really just the next step.



Making your somewhat Duchampian pun at the public restroom in Münster, you did show the poster of a daffodil.

Yes, I added a few things to make this forsaken place a little nicer. Some stupid Japanese guy came, and wanted to buy the chandeliers.

Do you search with the pounding heart of a treasurer or the cool analytical mind of the faithful ethnographer? Either way, it seems like you have

always been somewhere beyond the profound irony of 80s' appropriation art?

Appropriation is a stupid name. But, to steal is okay. If I discover something in art that I really like, I take it. I don't care. On the other hand, it's very important that you find your own way with these things. I just saw a video by Ai Weiwei where he crashes a huge Chinese vase, which he claims to be antique, and very valuable. I know this female Swedish artist who did almost exactly the same 10 years ago. Weiwei's rendition is simply a show off. Maybe his grandparents, or something, were Chinese, but he's just another New York artist with too much success.



Rightfully, or not, I find your book featuring the images of 3 chairs, an interesting comment on Kosuth's One and Three Chairs, and Warhol is inevitably invited to your 'dance-floor'. Is it possible to experience your art – possibly a great deal of contemporary art – as kind of a reversed echo, the sound of which is growing louder?

I didn't know the Warhol piece, and I only heard about it much later. At certain times, artists simultaneously work with things quite similar, without knowing about each other. In the 70s, when I started to make these small books, I was not the only one around. But, because people didn't have the money, I was the only one who printed them.



Your series of Muybridge-like photographs made me aware of a strong bodily presence in your works; a physicality very different from the immediate perception taken for granted in most pre-conceptual art. One simply has to move along. Can you comment on this phenomenological aspect?

I try to understand time, so I call them "Time-series". What you see is time passing, different moments in different situations: a person working, a person walking, and a person talking.

That's three different kinds of time, isn't it?

If you make a thing, and it succeeds, why shouldn't you do it again? Why shouldn't The Beatles play their songs more than once? I don't believe in a unique specimen. In a series everything is clearer, and that's even more so with three series. It's all much easier to comprehend than if you look at only one example. To put it very simple: If you see only one Japanese guy, you imagine they all look the same, whereas if you go to Japan you realize that they are all just as different from each other, as we are. The 'unique' makes everything all too important, not least in terms of the art market. Recently, a collector bought the soup plate with its two spoons for 7.000 euros. He could have had a nice plate and spoons in any department store for less than 5 euros.



When confronted with 100 years – or a hundred lives, depending – I acknowledged, truly for the first time, Martin Heidegger's dictum: 'Sein zum Tode'. I therefore dare call your art humane, more human than humans, actually.

Death is coming. That's why I did it, to find out more about life and death. To look at my self, and determine: "Where am I?" The work contains pictures of my family, friends, and acquaintances. It's my life's circle. According to age, the work appears different to everybody. You're in your thirties, whereas the next person who enters the room might be fifty, or seventy-five. You're all confronted with the possible span of your own lifetime. From zero to nothing. That's what I wanted. And in some ways it helped me personally, getting rid of my fear of being old. I did this piece twelve years ago, and at least one quarter of all the people are already dead. The first one was my brother.



For some reason, I saved this installation for last, and having seen it I went straight to the exit. I just couldn't return to the pink statues.

Which are very humorous. In any case, art is communication by senses. You might, or you might not, get an experience, depending on the quality of the work.

What determine that quality? What's wrong with two forks on a plate?

It just feels wrong, like these french fries.

One can learn to like stuff, cornichons for instance.

Of course, when you are old you have a whole lot more experience, but at the same time your mind has become quite limited. You have lost the immediacy of being young and unimpressed. Much of the work, you see in the catalogue I would never do today.

Why?

I have changed my mind. You can be a pornstar at 20, but when you are 73 it doesn't work at all. On the other hand, some of the things I do today, I couldn't have done at that time. The *100 Years* for instance.



Taking the vast range of your work into account – the difference between, let's say, *9/12 Front Page* and the sunset postcards – is there anything left, ill-suited for art?

It's all just colour on paper. If you turn it around, there's nothing there. That's my point exactly. What you see are your own illusions. The *Shadowplay*, for instance, is all made from rubbish, but wonderful shadows are cast on the wall. At the table you see objects with no immediate value what so ever, but in your mind they are transformed. And this is actually my main interest as an artist. Why do some photographs make me sad, happy or even worried? Is it because they remind me of something? It's really not the picture that's on my mind; it's the situation it creates. You just go and show a photo to a dog, and, I guess, not much will happen.

Everything goes on in our heads. For the two of us sitting here eating, there's this practical thing called 'a table', but it's not actually here. If we turn it around, or upside down, something else will appear. We all live in our own separate universe, and we arrange the world around us accordingly. We want to feel safe and

comfortable, and so we add decoration. You go into any apartment, and it's all an illusion. That's why I made "the cushion", showing the German way of making it look nice in the sofa. Personally, I would prefer a simpler world, but it's very difficult to live as if. In order to feel more comfortable myself, I try to understand what's going on around me.

The 'zebra-painting' immediately brings forth this illusion.

People even try to bring Africa alive in their homes by cutting off and displaying some elephant's feet.

I believe Haim Steinbach once did that. And, I guess, in a way that's also what you do with your works; make your world present in people's lives.

That's how I try to find my peace. Like I had to do it with women. It never came easy; you just take a look at all those pictures of knees, all the pin-ups.



Is there a political point to your altered guidelines for exclusion and inclusion? You constantly disregard most high culture references, but always seem in touch with what is often considered banal?

There is nothing political or social about my works. They represent only my very personal points of view, not some abstract or all-encompassing idea. The "Karl Marx-painting" is a joke, not a political comment on the trajectory of Marxism, or whatever. I would never come up with some political idea, and then try to express it in my work.



I guess what I'm talking about is the implicit politics of the general avant-garde idea that hierarchies of culture can be reversed. You put kitsch flowers on the wall, and have people look at them like it was a Monet.

I once made this book about women in prison. I didn't know anything about what's going on in there, and so I decided to find out. I got the chance to work with women incarcerated in Germany's largest female prison, and for a whole year I went there once a week talking to them. But, the book itself is all documents: pictures and texts by the imprisoned and people who work there, nothing from me. Of course, you can see a socio-political end to all of this, but for me personally, it was a matter of curiosity. I really wanted to know what these women were like.

You also made an installation featuring some of these prison cells, didn't you?

Yes, in Cologne. The women I was visiting had added a very personal touch to their cells, putting up posters, drawings, postcards, and so on. I wanted to show just that. Having been on the inside, I believe these women to be victims, first and foremost. They are just ordinary people, who had the misfortune to find themselves in a situation they couldn't control. And so it went the wrong way.



You once said: "The significance of a given image can be decided only in a borderline situation". Conventions still exist, of course, but is it possible to juxtapose anything nowadays? Doesn't one just tell another story?

In the old portrait paintings I only changed one of the eyes a tiny bit, and look what happened. The appearance of the depicted men and women totally changed. They were already an illusion, as it was, but due to my little alteration, this has now become very clear. But I really don't want to lecture people. The important thing is what the works teach me. As it turned out, the plastic flowers were the main mistake, not the dislocation on the wall. Actually I find that most big exceptions are not that exceptional anyway.



At first, hearing about this huge 'retrospective', I remembered an article I once read, and I quote: "In 1980, Feldmann destroyed all the works still in his possession, and applied himself for some time to the collection and distribution of tin toys."

I was really bored with the art scene, specifically the art market with all the galleries, museums and magazines. So I left it. Together with my wife I opened an antique shop, and it was quite successful. I still did a lot of stuff for my self, though; I just didn't show it anywhere. And it's true that I actually did get rid of all of my works. Those I couldn't destroy, because they were too valuable for me, I gave to my friends.

So, your temporary exit was kind of an artistic, or at least public, gesture?

I don't know. But here I go again: Two years ago I decided not to do any more gallery shows. There's nothing wrong with making money, and the galleries hand me my fair share. But I've already had enough. Now I can once again do whatever I want. People constantly asked me to participate in all sorts of things, but it was too much. I can't stand making art all the time. You can't make love all the time either, or eat all day long. I have never wanted to be a professional artist, with an office, and lots of assistants. I don't want to run it like a real business. You simply lose the overview, and become distanced to your own work. I like to have my stuff hanging on the wall for weeks. Some of it proves worth saving, the rest is trash. Many contemporary artists are too busy. They have a gallerist looking over their shoulder, ready to sell the work as soon as it might be finished. I don't like it when everything goes.



You were here more than 30 years ago. Is there something that hasn't changed?

Yes, humans. In general, they are always the same. When I was young I travelled a lot around the world, and what struck me was that people were doing all the basic things in the very same way; patching up a hole with needle and tread, making love. In the beginning of the sixties, I lived for one year in Copenhagen, and I was actually doing the dishes right here at the SAS Royal Hotel. This has changed. But the essential things remain the same, and that's the sense of life.

Thank you.