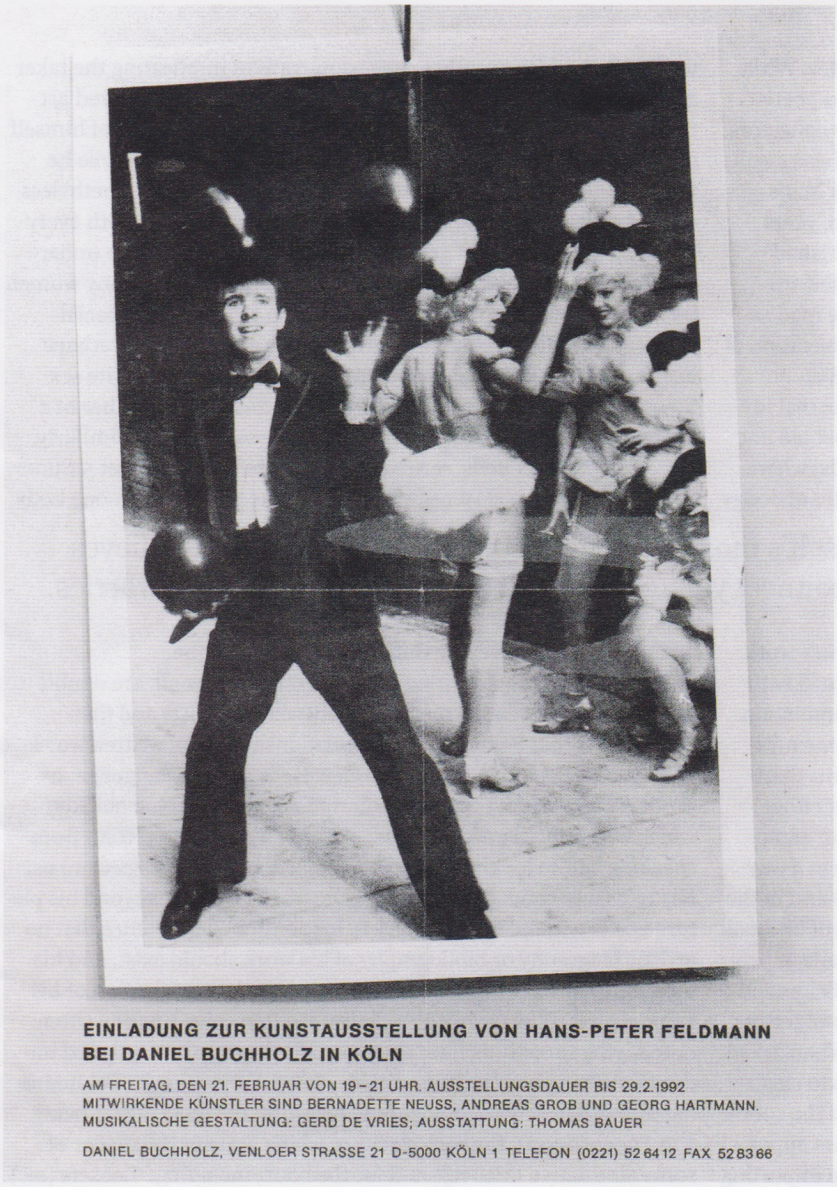


Poster for Exhibition at Daniel Buchholz Gallery, Cologne 1992
Courtesy: The artist

Hans-Peter Feldmann in conversation with Kaspar König

Kasper König: Mr Feldmann, it used to be customary to state one's profession when checking into a hotel. What would you write?
Hans-Peter Feldmann: Mostly 'merchant', because for over 30 years I really was a merchant and sometimes a 'photographer', because photographers are always very welcome. Everyone likes being photographed and looking good.

What about checking in as an 'artist'?
No, I've never done that. No.

But there's no doubt that you are an artist.
To be quite serious I'm not entirely sure. Because maybe I am only playing at being an artist to have access to a milieu that's closer to me than that of, say, engineers or truckers.

You've been doing what you do for 40 years now. The fact that you do many things differently to the way they're usually done in the art business – like not signing your works – has earned you admiration. How do you deal with that?
I only experience this admiration in a very peripheral way. But I couldn't go and do something just because it's the done thing or what people expect. The same applies elsewhere too. I try to only do things I think are right.

Much of what you have done has been independent of the art business and commissions. Presumably, this also means that you've had to keep your head above water with other sources of income?
Before the 1980s, practically no one could live from making art and no one expected to. So everyone had to earn money elsewhere. And if there were no art scene, then I would still cut out pictures and paste them down somewhere.

I doubt that.
I was already doing it as a child.

Yes, but of course you do it with a different degree of reflection. I mean, you publish these things.

Some I would never publish. They would be too personal.

Does this still have a certain therapeutic dimension for you?
Yes, absolutely. For example, if I do a series on beautiful girls' knees out of fashion adverts, then of course there's a sexual background involved. But I'm also making a book with pictures of bloody boxing scenes, and although I hate boxing, I find it therapeutic.

You once made booklets, once with just three motifs, once with seven, once with nine, etc. This was extremely deliberate. The production and distribution strategy were designed as if to say: I'm not doing an exhibition, but I have made a booklet and it contains the whole world, so to speak, or the complexity of an exhibition, totally reduced, compressed, to the point. And if someone were to simply reprint the booklet today, this intensity would not be lost.
That's not the way I see it at all. The booklets were the simplest, cheapest form of duplication. I made them and then gave them to friends as presents or sent them by post. In the Stone Age, people did their drawings in some cave where no one but themselves saw them. But later, everyone could see them. Everyone passed by the cave. Today, the same is true of men's toilets in pubs: people leave their marks, and no one knows who put them there, but everyone can see them. There is a tendency not to reveal oneself but to show something nonetheless. As I see it, my booklets fall into this category.

Fine, but you wouldn't present your work in public if it didn't go beyond the purely therapeutic. It takes on a form of its own. A peculiar, highly economical form of condensation, combined with learning, and with pleasure.
Every time I do something it's a kind of liberation. And of course, the reactions I get are a form of acknowledgement. Maybe public presentation is part of what makes the therapy effective.

Now for a very categorical question: would there be art if there were no academies and no museums? Would there be poetry if it were not published?
Definitely. And there would be better poetry, better art. Without our specialization and education in this direction, I think there would be art that would be more intense. Maybe not so sophisticated, but it would be comprehensible or accessible to everyone. Like something I saw recently in the neighbourhood where I live: one night, someone took some emulsion paint and a big roller and wrote 'Maria' again and again in the streets around. This desire on the part of a man to somehow bring this woman back – that is art.

But isn't that too coquettish and simple, seen in the context of your own work?
For other people maybe, but not for me.

I can't accept that from you, and I don't believe you mean it either.
I really do believe that in this respect, I am a very simple person.

I must disagree, and I have an example of what I mean. In the 1970s, my brother, the bookseller Walther König, was one of 30 recipients of a letter that contained a large number of pictures of yourself and two women fucking. My brother said his mouth literally fell open: not because the pictures were pornographic, but because he knew one of these people personally. By sending something like this totally unannounced, you're playing with what's private and what's public. It's not a staged scandal, because it's addressed to a small circle of individuals who knew you personally. But the whole thing did play a part later on during your divorce: the lawyer for your then wife presented it as evidence of psychological cruelty. Someone who goes this far and actually exposes himself, I don't want to say for art, but at least in the name of questioning conventions of perception, can't get away with saying the whole thing takes places on the level of things scrawled on toilet doors. This letter constitutes an invention, a formal step. For you, it was not about sex, but about the depiction of sex. That's something different.
True. But still, a counter-example: a different piece, one you cannot know because I threw it away without publishing it, also from the 1970s. It was quite elaborate actually, photographs of me on a ship, with the caption 'I had never been a sailor'; of me in Paris standing in front of the Eiffel Tower with 'I had never been to Paris' and in front of an easel with 'I had never been a painter'; me holding my son's hand on a beach somewhere on the Mediterranean with 'I had never been a father'. So what you saw in the pictures was negated in the text. But afterwards, I didn't have the confidence to publish these pictures, I didn't want to. So about your theory on my behaviour in art – how does this fit in?

Okay, you make the piece and then decide not to publish it ...
I even threw it away!

... but at the same time, there were things that found their own form. When Lawrence Weiner made his first book, that was when the penny dropped: instead of doing an exhibition, a little booklet will take the place of an exhibition. Right?
Right.

And something like that could be formalized. There were times when Bernd and Hilla Becher were subjected to the same reception as their work.
But there was also the pressure of financial impossibility. It always had to be the cheapest, because anything else was not possible.

But this impossibility has the major advantage of making you concentrate on what is essential, right?
Yes. Definitely. Having no money has its advantages. Over the last ten or 15 years, art has regularly got bigger, in terms of the size of the works. In my eyes, this is a form of mannerism. Art trying to use size to make even more of an impact.

This has always happened of course, in all periods.
But not in photography: until 1960, the maximum format was A4. I know of no photographs by the great masters that are bigger than A4.

Fair enough, but the Dusseldorf photographers, like Andreas Gursky, enjoy such massive popularity and success not least because they are actually creating pictures as ersatz 19th-century paintings.
Yes, that's the way I see it too.

Even into the 1950s and 1960s, the function of photography was always a matter of information with a very strongly anthropological aspect. It's remarkable that there are a thousand times more photographers than painters – even professionals, not just amateurs – but that there are far fewer singular photographers in this century than singular painters, meaning those without whom the history of photography would be inconceivable, exceptions like August Sander.
Incidentally, just to get this straight: I don't see myself as a photographer.

Pardon?
I don't see myself as a photographer.

But you ...
I see myself as someone who looks at pictures. And also as someone who steals pictures, from all over. That means ...

Okay, but you have also taken on commissions that were purely photographic, like the 'Essen' book – a great city portrait.
... with mostly really bad photos.

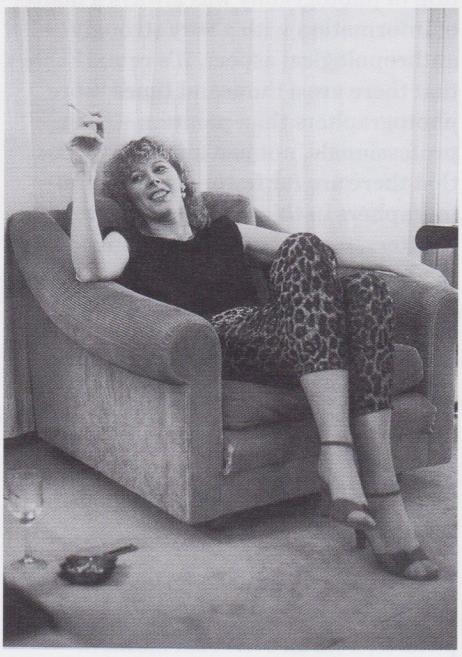
Well, I don't know if they're bad. Maybe it's less a question of either good or bad, and more about a certain casual quality. It's about showing what is not usually shown: the uninvolved gaze of a passer-by driving to work who sees something and immediately blocks it out.
I also think individual photos are not right for me. I find them too loaded with meaning, too elitist. The mood of a whole series is more important than an individual picture. When things are repeated, then there's an average value that's more correct than an individual picture can be.

When did you start doing creative things? As a child?
My father had a shop that received a great deal of post. I was maybe five or six, and I liked the stamps. I cut out these lovely little colourful pictures and stuck them into notebooks with a thick kind of glue.

And did you sort them by motif?
No. I cut them out and stuck them in as they came.

And did you look at them all the time?
I can't remember. I don't think so, collecting was and still is a very important aspect. Even today, I very much enjoy making small books of my own which I bind or stick together myself.

When did you first become aware of art?
In the small town of Hilden where I lived, the cultural scene in the late 1940s and early 1950s was seriously underdeveloped. In my family, no one talked about art. So eventually I found out about that such a thing existed for myself from postcards and books.



You mean classic art postcards with Piero de la Francesca and Rembrandt.
Yes, going as far as van Gogh. I went through anything I could find on the shelves at relatives' houses and I immediately wanted to become a painter, because back then art meant painting. Later I applied for a course in painting at art school and soon realized I couldn't do it.

At the Academy in Dusseldorf?
Yes, in the 1950s, with a portfolio of drawings, but they turned me down straight away.

Did you know anyone in Hilden who was an artist?
There was a sculptor, who happened also to be called Hans-Peter. This man was certainly a symbol of a free, different life. He didn't have a permanent address, lived alone, very spontaneously, a bohemian, because he had little money and only earned sporadically, for designing a fountain or a plaque for the town hall. The way he lived made a big impression on me. There was also a very small man who was also an artist. He painted all the signs for my father's shop. He had had to learn, presumably during the Nazi period, to survive by means of a special sense of humour and friendliness. Whenever he came, there was always a party atmosphere, plenty to laugh about. With his integrity, he always remained a role model for me as a human being.

Was your wish to become an artist linked with exhibiting in galleries?
No. It was about getting out of the stuffy world of this small town. I knew there was a different world, the art scene. With different people, a different atmosphere, a different horizon.

For your book *Die Toten* (The Dead, 1967-1993), which you published yourself, you researched very conscientiously over a period of years exactly who lost their lives as a result of Red Army Faction terrorism – policemen, chauffeurs, targets and perpetrators which you lined up in chronological order, with one photo each. These pictures mourn no more and no less than the loss of those who are no longer alive – regardless of the reason for their death, of fanaticism or dependence. It's about the dignity of human existence, and of the end of that existence. At the same time, the series is not illustrative. In some cases, you established contact with the families ...
Not until later, when the protests came. Then I had to talk to the mothers or siblings and try to explain to them that it was not a matter publicly denouncing their son or daughter as a terrorist, but of pointing out that in each case, however they described themselves, people died. Death is a line that should not be crossed in efforts to make the world a better place. After all, the original idea was to make the world a better place, to make life more human.

I think there are universal aspects in your *oeuvre* that are rendered understandable by your very everyday use of media that for a long time was not associated with art. At the moment of course, this is being integrated or coopted but for a long time, other artists or people with a deep interest only noticed it. But the fact that *frieze*, for example, is now showing an interest in your work, that a different generation wants to know more about this Feldmann character, what did he do, what's he about – that's symptomatic, don't you think?
I find it extremely astonishing. I am amazed that after 30 or 40 years of my messing about with pictures, people are suddenly interested in what I did at some point in the past. I mean, there have always been people doing this kind of thing. Hannah Höch for instance. Or John Heartfield.

But Heartfield had to be rediscovered.
Sure, but what I mean is I'm not someone who did something for the first time. On the contrary, there's a whole tradition of people cutting out pictures and sticking them in books. It's a tradition in Central Europe. I myself have collected around 30 or 40 books dating from 1850 to the present. Some of them are fantastic, things that would take pride of place in any museum. That's the way it is, as I see it the personality that shines through behind the art is the main thing. Art solely or primarily as a way of making money can't work.

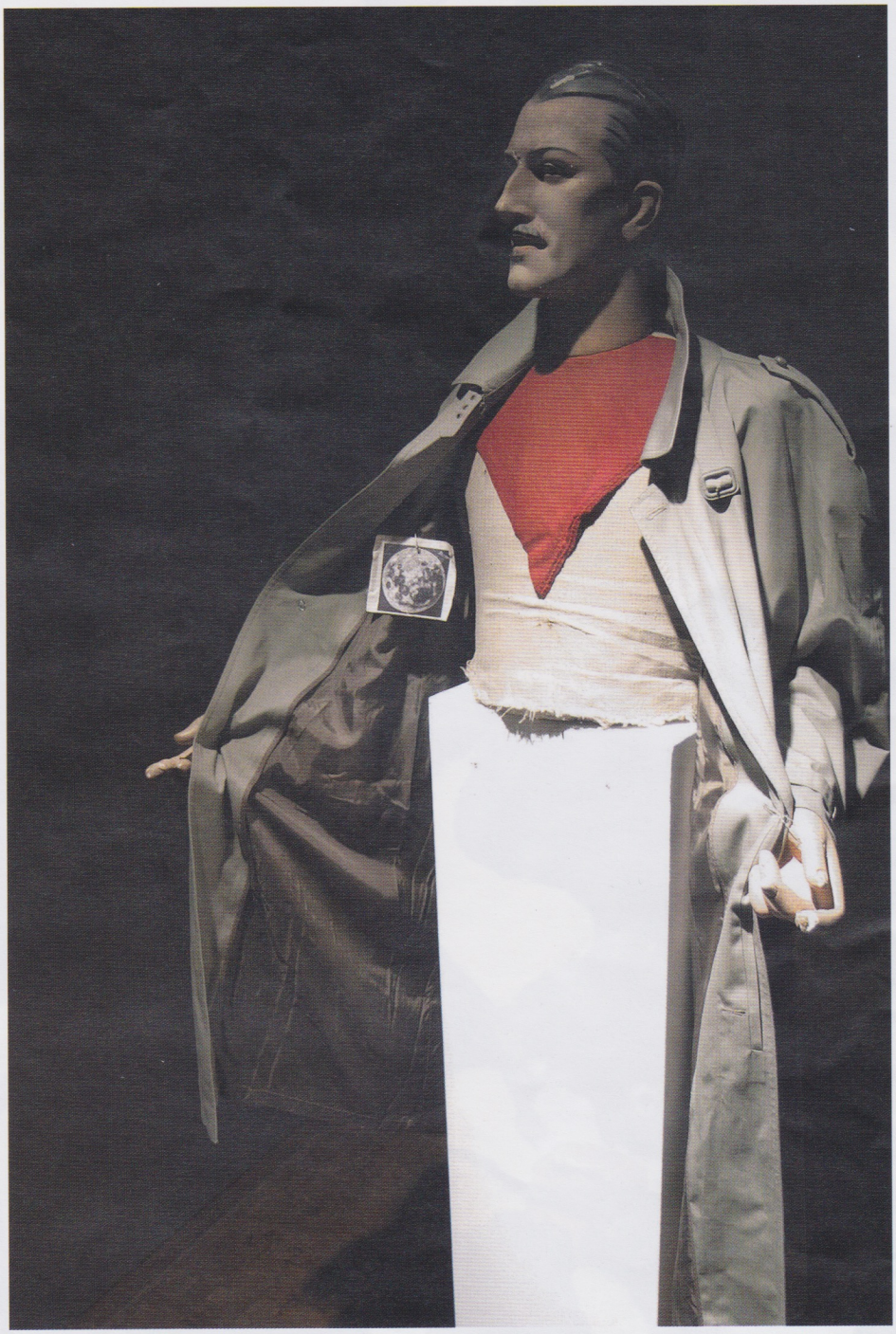
On the other hand, you've always distanced yourself from the kitschy idea of 'art for art's sake'. Which is why we have to be careful. Statements like this can be very simplistic. If you send a letter, then that is a quite deliberate statement that you put into circulation.
But I'm looking for a response in the exact same way many people try to get a response with their clothes, their haircut, their car or lifestyle. Even if it's not conscious, most people have some channel for non-verbal self-expression.

When you work with media images, you try to do so with a certain naivety. Maybe that's just a protective strategy to allow you to keep doing it. But if one takes a close look, it's clear that you've found your own, highly economical form.
But each of my works is egocentric. I can explain every precisely, tell you exactly why I did it and its context. Without exception.

Fine, but that's just your own personal relation to the work. As soon as you let it loose on the world ...
... we have reached the point where art happens. When someone works things out about themselves in a very egocentric, very stupid, very plain way, but also very honestly, very sincerely, and turns these things outwards, and other people suddenly recognize their own problems in these things made by someone else, and they understand something, feel something, then and only then does art happen. You can't make art, art happens. And there are always two sides involved, one that does something and one that perceives this work.

But beyond that, it also has to expand or change our notion of art.
There are thousands of works of art than no one is interested in, that no one wants to see. Gerhard Richter once said, for example, that some amateur photography is better than the best work by Cézanne.

But such a statement is only interesting coming from an artist who claims Cézanne-like status for himself. And without such a claim, it may be totally impossible to make art. But then again, you're not at all interested admiration.
No, my ego is completely balanced. Or is admiration what I want after all?



Opposite page: *Photograph of the artist's wife* Undated Above: *Exhibitionist* 2002 Mixed Media
Courtesy opposite page: The artist Courtesy above: Mehdi Chouakri, Berlin VG-Bild-Kunst, Bonn

Yes. In the 1980s, when you had that shop and made those magazines about thimbles and such like, you saw yourself as some kind of weird private scholar.
No, I got involved in that for purely pragmatic reasons, to earn some money. And then it turned out to be a success.

But in the broadest sense, it also had to do with your interests.
Certainly, yes. I got hold of bizarre scientific instruments, for example, some of which were sold to museums: nautical and photographic instruments, lots of old metal toys, that kind of thing. In some ways, that shop was more art than the things I did later.

This once again raises the question of the function or non-function of art?
For me as a producer the function is purely therapeutic. Do all artists have a screw loose is a very important question. And I mean having a screw loose in a bearable sense, not a serious mental problem.

Of course, you can turn this round and say: Everyone has a screw loose, but they refuse to admit it, and then it becomes a collective loose screw.
There's a lovely thing Gustav Metzger once said that people always mention. Beuys said 'Everyone's an artist.' And Gustav Metzger said 'Does that include Goebbels?'

What Beuys actually said was 'every human being is an artist, as long as they really are human'.
That's right.

In which case ...
You have to make the distinction. If you say every human being is also a singer, then that's certainly true. But not everyone's singing is so beautiful that you'd necessarily want to listen to it. But of course, in some way, everyone really is a singer, for themselves at least, at home.

... in the bathtub.
And the same is true of art.

Yes, in the bathtub.
At home, exactly.

Kaspar König is Director Museum Ludwig, Cologne.