

Greenberger, Alex: *Hans-Peter Feldmann, German Conceptual Artist with a Prankish Love for the Ordinary, Dies at 82*. ARTnews, June 3, 2023 (online)

www.artnews.com/art-news/news/hans-peter-feldmann-dead-1234670437/

Hans-Peter Feldmann, German Conceptual Artist with a Prankish Love for the Ordinary, Dies at 82



BY ALEX GREENBERGER June 3, 2023 10:57am



Hans-Peter Feldmann, 2016.
PHOTO CHRISTIAN MARQUARDT/GETTY IMAGES

Hans-Peter Feldmann, a conceptual artist whose tricky works composed of seemingly banal images that gained him a cult following in Europe, died at 82 on May 30.

His eight galleries—303 Gallery, Martine Aboucaya, Mehdi Chouakri Berlin, Konrad Fischer Galerie, Simon Lee Gallery, Galerie Francesca Pia, Projecte SD, Galerie Barbara Wien—jointly announced his death on Saturday.

“His unique personality and his artistic understanding of the world we are living in will stay alive in the art he has left behind,” the galleries wrote in their statement. “Our hearts and thoughts are with his beloved wife Uschi, with whom he shared art and life for many years.”

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Many of Feldmann's artworks would have been considered stunts if they were done by lesser artists. In 2011, when he became the oldest artist to win the Guggenheim Museum's \$100,000 Hugo Boss Prize, he pinned that amount in \$1 bills to the institution's walls. In 1999, he had master craftsmen produce a plaster replica of a Neoclassical sculpture; Feldmann then painted it bright pink.

But critics saw these works as more than just pranks. His works, many of them composed of pictures he'd collected over the years into a massive archive, are today considered important, if under-known, forerunners to appropriation art of the '80s. Some have even grouped his art in with the strain of Pop that could be found during the '60s in Germany, his home country.

Some of Feldmann's earliest notable works involve groupings of appropriated images that seem banal. Known as "Bilder" ("Pictures"), these booklets, produced between 1968 and 1976, were made available for free. *11 Bilder*, for example, consisted of fewer than a dozen pictures of women's knees. Divorced from their original contexts, these shots took on new, strange meanings in the hands of Feldmann, who circulated them in ways their creators may not have intended.

Feldmann's photographic works grew more expansive during the course of his career. He produced two books, both titled *Voyeur*, in 1994 and 1997, that featured a wide array of images, from documentation of plane crashes to nudes. At the P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in 2004, he showed *100 Years* (2001), a work whose title suggested a survey exhibition, only to subvert that logic. Instead, the installation was composed of 101 pictures of people aged 8 months to 100 years old that Feldmann had sourced from his family and friends.

While these works could've been written off as unserious endeavors, Feldmann was clear that they were, in fact, rooted in something serious: his experience in postwar Germany.

"After World War II, there were very, very few pictures in Germany," he **told *Art in America*** in 2011. "It was nothing like today. And it was actually the fact that there was such a small quantity of images around that made me so interested in them. The few I could get, I really wanted to see."



Photographic works by Hans-Peter Feldmann often involved seemingly banal images culled over the course of many years.
PHOTO CHRISTIAN MARQUARDT/GETTY IMAGES

Hans-Peter Feldmann was born in Düsseldorf, Germany, in 1941, and would remain in that city for much of his career. He studied painting at the University of Arts and Industrial Design Linz in Austria, only to leave that medium behind in 1968.

During the '70s, Feldmann appeared in two editions of Documenta, the famed recurring German art show in Kassel, cementing his reputation in the country's art scene. Until his 2011 Guggenheim Museum show, Feldmann's fame remained largely confined to Europe.

With his career on the rise, Feldmann had a museum survey in 1980 in Ghent, Belgium. Then he quit art-making for roughly a decade, working at a thimble shop, creating tin toys, and helping to operate a mail order service. It wasn't until 1989 that he returned to art-making; his friend, the curator Kasper König, had urged him to do so, and later organized a show of his art at Portikus in Frankfurt.

Some exhibitions by Feldmann felt more like junk shops than art shows. One 1992 exhibition at New York's 303 Gallery consisted of postcards of the Eiffel Tower, chintzy picture frames that held images of people like Greta Garbo, and photocopied pictures of things like washing machines. "Trafficking in banality unredeemed by glamour, Feldmann produces work that is modest to a fault — more F. W. Woolworth Co. than Saks Fifth Avenue," critic David Rimanelli **wrote** of that show.

His idiosyncratic habit of collecting seemingly random objects reached its apex with *9/12 Front Page*, a room-size 2001 installation composed of the front pages of 117 newspapers, all from September 11, 2001.



Hans-Peter Feldmann sometimes repainted plaster reproductions of Neoclassical sculptures in gaudy colors.
PHOTO MALTE CHRISTIANS/DPA/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

During the course of his career, Feldmann appeared in two editions of the Venice Biennale, one edition of the Bienal de São Paulo, and one edition of the Gwangju Biennale. He had a retrospective at the Museum Ludwig in 2003, and in 2007, he was included in Skulptur Projekte Münster, the public art show founded by König, where Feldmann's contribution involved the redesign of a public bathroom facility that was lent a new paint job and high-quality ceramic furnishings.

The bathroom work was a fitting one for Feldmann, who seemed most fascinated by things people consider boring or not worthy of attention. "I am not interested in the high points of life," he once said. "Only five minutes of every day are interesting."