

HANS-PETER FELDMANN

JUNE 9–AUGUST 20, 2006

Hans-Peter Feldmann's oeuvre includes works in many media, from painting to sculpture, installation, photography, collage, bookworks, archives or collections of images, objects, among other things etc. However it is his photographic works and his largely photographic books for which he is most known and on which his exhibition for the Contemporary Art Gallery is focused. Where Feldmann does not use found vernacular images he often makes his own. These range stylistically from the casual snapshot, as in his series of pictures from windows of hotel rooms, to the refined, even masterful photograph, as in his portrait project *100 Jahre (100 Years)*.

100 Jahre (100 Years) is both a book and a photo work comprised of 101 photographs of friends and acquaintances ranging in age from 8 weeks to 100 years old. The *100 Years* book published in 2001 was produced by the prestigious European art book publisher Schirmer/Mosel. While many of Feldmann's bookworks take the ascetic, minimal forms that we associate with conceptual art, there are others that play with different book design vernaculars. The style of *100 Years* is very close to the famous Schirmer/Mosel publications on the Bechers or August Sander, but it also toys with the dry rules of that style through such choices as the scrapbook arrangement of images on the cover, or the use of the ubiquitous "Comic Sans" Microsoft font. These elements keep *100 Years* from looking too dry and serious about itself. It is characteristic of Feldmann to produce something ambitious and important—and then deflect from these qualities through humour. That he published *100 Years* with Schirmer/Mosel is fitting—in that this project can be seen in significant relation to the work of August Sander, the Bechers, and their students, such as Thomas Struth and Thomas Ruff.

August Sander produced what is undoubtedly one of the greatest monumental projects in the history of photography. During the Weimar era, Sander documented the German people in hundreds of portraits under the title "People of the Twentieth Century". This work

has been a benchmark for photographers ever since. Sander lived in Cologne, a short distance from Düsseldorf: his typological strategy and anthropological style were taken up in the '60s by Bernd and Hilla Becher in Düsseldorf, who catalogued aging and obsolete industrial architecture with an equally obsessive devotion. The Bechers in turn have mentored a slew of now famous students who have developed the typological study and objective gaze into aestheticised tableaux which have become a major presence in the international art market. Feldmann's *100 Years* would appear to reach back to the beginnings of this legacy for what was most valuable in Sander's work. Known as an artist who has championed the value of the vernacular, the family photo, the snapshot, and even the bad photo, Feldmann surprises us with *100 Years* by becoming a masterful photographer. He easily meets the stringent formal criteria of Sander's portraits: sharp, but not unnaturally sharp focus; even, diffused lighting whenever possible; contextualisation of the subject in their normal environment; and a meditative, calm, open-eyed pose where the sitter confronts the camera as though looking through the photographic apparatus at the viewer. But Sander's rules cannot guarantee results, for the matter of personality always trumps merely technical specifications. The contradictory essence of Sander's and now Feldmann's mastery is egolessness on the part of the photographer—they let the camera do its job, thus causing the sitter to emerge into the picture with their full dignity intact.

With the 20/20 vision of hindsight, Feldmann has avoided trying to say anything about his subjects other than that they are human. He has understood that Sander's portraits are astonishing and beautiful because of their mystery. In *100 Years* the organizing principle of age is not something that can be deduced from the photographs themselves but must instead be supplied as a caption. Feldmann is telling us that this is how a person might look at 8 weeks or 80 years but, as with all captions, their authority is based on how much we trust

their author. In the end, the photographs ignore any social differences and assert only that which cannot be argued: that we are born, we live, we die. _____

When I mentioned to Feldmann that I might cite Sander in relation to *100 Years*, he said that I should remember that there are also many vernacular studio portraits from the same period that share the characteristics associated with a Sander portrait. This is true, and we need only think of the American studio portraitist Mike Disfarmer, the Canadian C.D. Hoy, or the recently spotlighted studio portraitists from Africa. But the monumentality, quality and ultimate value of Sander's project towers over these comparisons. I think that Feldmann's objection is just more of his instinctive and characteristic championing of the underdog, the vernacular, the non-obvious. _____

Marcel Duchamp's protest against traditional art for being "merely retinal" and not intellectual enough, is routinely cited as the beginning of the tendency that flowered as conceptual art. By the 1960s intellectuality alone was not enough, and, inspired by theorists like Marcuse, many artists saw themselves as engaging in a "revolution" against bourgeois art. "Revolution" implies a clearly drawn line between right and wrong, where the revolutionary is good and the forces of reaction are bad. Feldmann never resorts to an easy demonisation of those of whom he is critical and constantly stresses the humanity and value of the individual. He is more of a reformer than a revolutionary. Feldmann's self-effacing humour has meant that many have seen him as a "light" artist, when in fact his oeuvre is like a Trojan horse. It seems inviting and fun at first, but then gradually draws one into its very serious concerns, causing the viewer to think and learn from their own exploration and introspection. Compared to most art, which usually focuses on a small area of interest, the expansive, encyclopaedic nature of Feldmann's art would seem to want to take in the whole world, yet his oeuvre feels united by his childlike and moral personality.

Through his art, he has caused us to get to know him personally, and when we do, he asks: "Well, so here is the whole world, here is what people have done in the past, what does it mean to you? How will you live in this world? How will you behave towards the others who also live in it?" _____

Roy Arden

(This text has been adapted from Roy Arden's text accompanying the artist's book *Birgit* by Hans-Peter Feldmann.)

BIOS

Hans Peter Feldmann was born in 1941 in Hilden, a small town near Düsseldorf, Germany. He has been exhibiting and publishing work since 1972. *Women in Prison* is his most recent solo exhibition and artist book work exhibited at Galerie und Buchhandlung für kunstbücher (with Klaus Heilmann) in Berlin, 2005. He has held solo exhibitions at the Guggenheim Museum Soho, New York and the Musée d'Arte Moderne de la Ville, Paris and has participated in numerous group exhibitions, including *Presumed Innocent* at capc Musee d'art contemporain de Bordeaux; do it curated by Hans-Ulrich Obrist at Ritter Klagenfurt and *Photography in German Art: 1960 to the Present* at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

Roy Arden is an artist living and working in Vancouver, Canada. He has been exhibiting his photographic and video work internationally since the late 1970s. Arden has also been an Instructor at the University of British Columbia and has curated several exhibitions of contemporary and historical art including *Consolation Prize—Mike Kelley & John Miller* for the Morris & Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver, 2000) and *Supematural*, a two person exhibition including Beau Dick and Neil Campbell for the Contemporary Art Gallery, 2004. His critical texts have appeared in numerous international publications and exhibition catalogues.

PUBLICATION

Birgit, 2006 by Hans-Peter Feldmann.

Birgit is a limited edition artist book work comprised of 72 successive colour snapshots of one of the artist's friend applying her make-up from beginning to end. The book also contains an insert with an essay by Roy Arden. *Birgit* is published by the CAG and is distributed by the CAG and Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln.

CURATOR'S TALK

By Roy Arden at the CAG with the artist in attendance
Friday, June 9, 7pm

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