

## **[fore-words]**

by David Brittain + Bob Jardine

Ohio was founded in 1995 as a collaboration between the artists Hans-Peter Feldmann, Uschi Huber, Jorg Paul Janka and Stefan Schneider. Issue #1 announced itself as "guaranteed free of text". It was agreed that images, whatever their source, would appear without the support of critique or comment. The title was chosen because it is meaningless in a photographic context. Each publication is a unique portable artwork. This retrospective was the first exhibition of Ohio in the UK, and the world premiere of issue #13, published in DVD format.

The first six issues were produced as a magazine in printed form. But after 1998, when Feldmann and Schneider left to pursue separate projects, Huber and Janka broadened the project to include video editions. Each issue is accompanied by an exhibition in a street vitrine in Cologne - "open 24 hours a day".

Ohio re-presents work from diverse sources, without regard for the usual genres of photography and without any editorial text or critical analysis. In this respect, although Huber and Janka call themselves editors, the project is aligned with curatorial practice. They describe Ohio as a "photo magazine", but in contrast to most photography titles, it is not concerned with "high culture". Instead of portfolios of master photographers, the magazine contains material culled from a wide range of still and moving images - amateur collections, commercial, civic and scientific archives, advertising, porn, film stills, news media and the internet. All kinds of images are grist to their mill and up for grabs.

Since 1998, Huber and Janka have made Ohio more network-oriented. In July 2004 they produced their most ambitious exhibition yet for the Kunstverein in Düsseldorf. The installation of e.V. [an abbreviation of the German term for a small non-profit club or society] re-presented images by literally hundreds of such anonymous producers. Issue #12 is an edited version of e.V.

One of the aims of Ohio is to allow images to be read in a "new and more open way". At first sight, it seems designed to frustrate every expectation about how photographs are meant to operate within the pages of a magazine. Without text and ill-equipped with signposts or clues, Ohio is largely unreadable, especially for those who demand that art magazines reinforce their prejudices.

Ohio's stern negations and maddening inversions of conventional editorial practice are revealed to be aesthetic experiences produced especially for the magazine's fans. They are invited to participate in a playful and ever-evolving critique of what passes for "official culture".

As an art project, Ohio publications and exhibitions resist categorisation because they favour untutored producers over validated artists. Refreshingly witty and mischievous, yet without any obvious irony, Ohio shows great respect towards its contributors, treating them as artistic equals. To achieve this uncynically is an impressive feat. In this respect the complex practice of Huber and Janka alludes to the "everyone an artist" programme of Fluxus and Joseph Beuys.

## **[re-enchanting the camera image]**

by David Brittain

The eve of the 10th anniversary of Ohio seems an appropriate moment to examine the influences on the project and to consider how it has evolved. If there can be said to be an 'art' of Ohio it is the transformation of the rejected and the found into the fascinating. The raw material of this Ohio retrospective is its own archive.

Ohio has appeared nine times in print (in various formats) and four times as a VHS video/DVD compilation. At first sight the magazine seems designed to be unreadable, or at least engineered to frustrate every expectation about how photographs are meant to operate within the sign system of the conventional magazine page. Perhaps the first thing that strikes the reader is that there is an inversion of the hegemony of text to image. Text does not accompany images (there are no texts, not even captions, though picture credits appear at the end). As a result, the signs habitually float free of their nominal signifiers. There is a heterogeneity of images - snapshots, magazine ads, movie stills, posed studio photographs, pack shots of products and porn. Images are not organised - at least not in ways you would associate with magazines - and the effect is to negate communication and thwart resolution. Furthermore, it seems that little attention has been paid to enhancing the magazine's aesthetic appeal which is consistently low key.

This use of archival images, and their disinterested re-presentation will be familiar to anyone who knows the work of Hans-Peter Feldmann prior to 1995. Since the 70s, Feldmann has been recognised as a prominent exponent of the textless presentation of photography within a conceptual tradition that encompasses the parody and/or pastiche of bureaucratic styles of presentation, as well as the appropriation of popular photography. This has given rise to comparisons between his practice and those of Christian Boltanski, the Bechers and Ed Ruscha, as well as the work of image scavengers such as Richard Prince. Since the first artist's books, Feldmann's sources have always ranged from personal albums and the albums of strangers, to the pages of newspapers and magazines, including his own pictures. Images tend to be formally unspectacular and are arranged "functionally" and exclusively without text. The first books were small and unassuming with grey, cardboard covers bearing the stamped title, *Bilde* (image) or *Bilder* (images). Each book was illustrated with similar photographic reproductions of the same type of object (e.g. 6 football players, 12 snow topped mountains, 1 Zeppelin, 7 actresses, 11 pairs of knees). They were issued in small editions and sometimes displayed on tables of art galleries or hung on strings from the ceilings. From this work, David Strobland has identified a Feldmann iconography comprising: "a tiny universe with snapshots of actresses or people who would like to identify with them, porn stars, horses, people playing in the sea, clowns, elephants, many girls, seagulls..." (1)

Ohio has always described itself as both an art project and a magazine, and from the start there have been Ohio exhibitions. Precedents for the art-project-as-magazine are to be found in the ill-documented field of "assemblings" (this encompasses artists' publications and other types of mail art). In a recent history of artists' ephemera, Anne Moeglin-Delcroix notes that in the 60s, "the traditional relationship between publication and exhibition is reversed." (2) This is because radical groups such as Fluxus, the Nouveau Realistes and the Conceptualists enshrined self-publication as a primary means of pursuing ideological and aesthetic aims. Feldmann began his self-published art projects in 1968. His assembling activities have been linked to both a desire to explore an aesthetic that Henri Lefebvre called "the everyday" and an ethical resistance to the logic of the art market, shared by artists of Fluxus. (3) Feldmann began with the first of 37 small, self-published grey books then founded the text-free magazine, *Image* (1974), of which only one edition was ever produced. Then, in 1977, he began a collaborative relationship with the publisher of an art magazine called *Salon*.

Salon magazine, founded by Gerhard Theewen in 1977, could be considered as a forerunner of Ohio. A student of Klaus Rinke, Theewen admired Feldmann's "cheap publications" (4) and approached him as a collaborator and mentor. As with Ohio, the catalyst for this collaboration between artist and student was a shared passion for collecting. Theewen, a connoisseur of British Teddy Boy culture, collected artists' publications and used Salon as a kind of notice board. As artists, both Theewen and Feldmann were involved in the stimulating art scene in Düsseldorf and nearby Cologne in the 70s. Wolf Vostell, Naim June Paik, Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke were working there at the time. Feldmann arrived in Düsseldorf in 1973, a year after Beuys had stopped teaching at the Kunstakademie. The galleries contained the work of the new avant-garde, many of them producers of assemblings like Dieter Roth and Marcel Broodthaers. Via the mail, self-publishing artists in Germany reached an international network and more significantly, were linked to a wider public than that provided by a gallery.

The virtually textless Salon, which published 11 issues between 1977 and 1983, was one of three artists' magazines published in Germany in the 70s. In addition there was Kunststoff, produced by Jürgen Klauke and Marcel Odenbach and Palazzo edited by Heinz Zolper Jr.. The wanted ads Theewen placed in Salon, offer a glimpse of the rough outlines of a larger, international network of 70s artists' publications that formed the context of Salon; these range from Avalanche, a critical title from the USA, to Image Nation, a photographic periodical from Coach House Press, an alternative publishers in Toronto. Theewen announced: "as publisher I have more influence on society than as artist." (5) He invited some of the most important artists of the time to fill the pages of Salon with special page projects. Contributions took the form of drawings or text-based works, but a large proportion of each issue was derived from photography, reflecting its importance to contemporary artists at that time. In issue one, Feldmann contributed several spreads of "found" post-card views of cities, their crude dot screens over-emphasised as if to stress their mass market origins. Feldmann, whose practices as artist and collector were closely intertwined, agreed to design each cover. In this role he contributed significantly to the magazine's public face, sourcing images from his huge collection. Each distinctive black and white picture - a toy robot, radio, a child's pram and kitsch pin-ups - is an icon of the 50s: the decade of German reconstruction. Like the title, Salon - selected because it can describe an institution of either high or low culture (painting salon or hair salon) - the cover images announce the magazine's playful, irreverent critique of "good" taste. This attitude, already present in Feldmann's book works, makes Salon an important forerunner of Ohio. And like Ohio, Salon was an exhibition project too. Issue 6 became the basis of an installation Theewen staged at the Folkwang Museum, Essen, in early 80s. "Original Reproductions" (an allusion to Benjamin's famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction") effectively reversed the value equation between "original" and "reproduction" by showcasing magazine pages and treating the art works (by Feldmann, Chris Burden, Walter Dahn and others) as printers' art works.

In total, Feldmann collaborated on six issues of Ohio. After his departure in 1998, the remaining co-founders, Uschi Huber and Jörg Paul Janka extended and diversified the project. Since 1990 they have been staging regular small complementary exhibits of source material in a vitrine in a Cologne street that is "open 24 hours," as Huber likes to say. Another stage in its evolution was to vary the Ohio format. Issues # 7,8,9 were issued as grey, boxed VHS tapes. Huber and Janka claim that Feldmann was not enthusiastic about video. Each issue comprised a "themed" compilation. Ohio #7 used a sequence of moving images from widely different web sites; #8 - a "slide show" of repetitive stills of helicopters taken from the ground - provoked one reviewer to remark: "For 24DM you get, in six second intervals, 289 snapshots, one after the other, no text or music added." (6)

Huber and Janka have also observed some important continuities that attest to the

contribution to Ohio of Feldmann. A recent Ohio press release states, that pictures are published without text so that, "the images can be seen in a new and open way." Feldmann has often expressed his interest in "re-enchanting" the photographic image via page presentation. Recently (in collaboration with the museum in progress, Vienna) he realized a long-held ambition to produce an issue of an illustrated magazine minus texts. In 2000 a special edition of the Austrian current affairs weekly, *Profil* (7), appeared, leaving readers to decipher the meanings of the news photographs that floated, apparently at random, spread after spread. While commentators such as Barthes (8) have argued that the power of the photograph lies with its relation to time, Feldmann views photographs as mandalas that can be "read in the light of personal experience." (9) At the end of his recent book, *1941*, he has written: "It is each person's brain which is self-supporting. It spontaneously looks for interpretations, connections and stories in the haphazard flux of images and therefore it finds them. This is a function which is always active in us and which nobody can get rid of." Feldmann's conviction that the production of meaning should always be the work of the viewer is implicit in his (and Ohio's) refusal to "direct" the material.

Sometimes Ohio styles itself a "photo magazine" - perhaps in order to highlight the differences between its project and the advocacy function of most of the photographic press. The photography historian, Beaumont Newhall, once appealed to all advocates of photography to weed out the "good" pictures from the bad so that a "visual literature"(10) of photography (its great novels, poems and epics) could be allowed to emerge from the image-saturated morass. Within a purely photographic discourse, Ohio might be viewed as a magazine that critiques this modernist defence of the "good art" photograph as autonomous and transcendent of its social context. Ohio's (and prior to this Feldmann's) reply to the problem of image-saturation has been opportunistic, not cautious. In place of "good over bad", Ohio proposes an "inclusivity" that abolishes the hierarchies that determine good taste or the moral worth of art, or indeed, who is the author and who isn't.

It might be more appropriate to discuss Ohio, as it is today, as an aesthetic (or anti-aesthetic) project whose meanings reside in its uses within a small network. Under the co-editorship of Huber and Janka, Ohio has become more network-oriented. Initially, the magazine exploited the personal collections of a small elite of artists, but now Huber and Janka source material exclusively from networks of earnest amateur and professional image producers.

Craig J. Saper's writings on assemblings -especially Fluxus, whose affiliates made "networking situations into artworks" - is useful here. Saper argues that much of these works on paper were made for the consumption of small "knowing" groups. Lacking any claims to aesthetic quality, assemblings may resist most theoretical analyses. Saper has devised a "rhetoric of the receivable" from Barthes' notion of "receivable" texts. (11) (Barthes categorised "the receivable" as works that are "unpublishable" and belong in a "third category" that generates intense, intimate sensations in contrast to the politeness of "readerly" magazines or the sophistication of the "writerly" modernist poem). Rather than dealing with the "internal workings of the text" (as does, for instance, semiotics), Saper's method focuses on "social situations that function as part of an artwork." The artists' magazine, writes Saper, is a hybrid of two "quintessential 20th century forms": the artist's book and bureaucracy. Artists' magazines "use the book artists' craft as well as bureaucratic production and distribution systems." (12) The social situations surrounding an artwork that is a magazine can involve quite simple forms of interaction and exchange, such as subscribing to the publication, collecting it, passing it on or attending exhibitions; or more complex activities, for instance making and contributing material for publication.

He calls such artworks "sociopoetic" to indicate that their "poetics" are produced by social situations. The type of situation will depend on the object and the network. The audience for

such circulating material is "part of the code." The experience of the sociopoetic is intended to be "intense" but not necessarily critical, for even though they may parody signs of the mass market (logos or slogans), artists' publications share with consumer publications a dependence on systems of reproduction, distribution and even, to a limited extent, marketing. Ohio, for instance, has a very small distribution - via subscription and the König bookshops - but the editors are proactive in trying to promote their magazine.

The shift towards a wider networking project began with the VHS editions. The raw material for #9 was 21 sequences videoed by staff from the Stiftung Warentest, Berlin (a consumer product testing organisation). To make #8 the artists negotiated with Heinrich Dubels, whose archive of helicopter snaps constitutes one of the main activities of the Berlin-based Institut für Erratik. An excellent demonstration of the bureaucratic and social activities involved in producing issues of Ohio (contacting, negotiating, confidence building, and so on) was Huber and Janka's installation "e.V.", at the Düsseldorf Kunstverein (13). The title "eV" is an abbreviation for the official term for an authorised non-profit organisation, such as a dog club or traffic safety group, that does "useful work" in communities around Germany. To make "e.V." the artists contacted and gained the co-operation of a variety of producers from a network of over 20 clubs and societies that practice and promote a professional, cultural or leisure activity. Visual documentation is a ritual activity among members. Images are used in brochures or web sites, but are mostly made and stored for archival purposes (one wonders what a hypothetical national archive of such work could mean).

One of the defining outcomes of a sociopoetic work, argues Saper, is to "create intimate aesthetic situations, including the pleasures of sharing a special knowledge or a new language, among a small network of participants." "e.V" was the largest public demonstration of the sociopoetic "codes" that bind the editors of Ohio to its consumers. In many respects the exhibition was a walk-in version of the magazine. The installation - like the publication - was essentially formal and self-reflexive. Much effort went to transform the "art space" into a more neutral "public space". This was achieved by an arrangement of "bureaucratic" tables and chairs that dominated the gallery, under "faulty" strip lighting. The exhibition equivalent of runs of pages was a maze of small "self-presentations" depicting such group activities as fund-raising and so on, delivered by rotary slide projectors (reflexive signs of a dying or threatened species of public communication) and murmuring wall-mounted video monitors. One projector clicked up scenes, apparently randomly selected, by members of the Düsseldorf scuba diving club. Viewers became immersed in the mystery of the possible significance of these signs for the Düsseldorf divers and their friends. Careful editing ensured that the slide show by Aachen anti-vivisectionists failed as a chronological narrative of their protests, but became instead (by hinting at the limits of what photographs can show) a critique of photo documentation. At the back, another projector beamed colour pictures from the all-male model railway club, based in Wuppertal. They showed various views of their "realistic" set, in which trains traverse a rocky landscape via an industrial complex and a series of small towns. Things revealed seem to reveal themselves. One view showed the painted sky and mountains ending abruptly and somewhat comically (in light of evidence of the solemnity of the participants). As with the publication, an illusion of minimal intervention and randomness was achieved by the virtual abolition of text: there were only dry identifying labels. Image content dominated form (each presentation represented an index of all the "typical mistakes" of the amateur photographer). No image or sequence was edited to be more "interesting", formally, than any other.

Of course there is order and logic (at least in a counter sense) in Ohio's knowing reversals of conventional editorial practices such as editing, sequencing and presentation. Ohio's "fans" take aesthetic pleasure in perusing "bad" pictures, interrogating disorienting combinations of images and indulging in the "frustrated narratives" that feature in every issue. #3, for instance, contains a grid of 12 stills from the film "Casablanca", appropriated

from a sequence that illustrates the moment when Peter Lorre interrupts Humphrey Bogart playing chess. Careful inspection reveals that the sequence refuses to obey the logic of its cinematic original, so subverting efforts to "read" narrative. There are the memory games that compel viewers to return repeatedly to the contents, so that the publication becomes something mutable. Take #10, which re-presents the work of J.M. Arsath Ro'is, who worked for the authorities in Amsterdam, documenting the city's expanding transport infrastructure. Eventually viewers will realise that each image, while quite distinct, is similar to every other in one sense. Each contains a motorcycle; closer inspection reveals it to be the same one. Here, at last, a narrative of sorts promises to reveal itself. Whose bike? Why? But no, the signposts are missing or have been removed. Around halfway through the video montage that is #9 we witness a staff member testing a video camera by soaking it ritually with a watering can. From this point on the viewer becomes highly attuned to the "bad production" of all the clips that follow (could the camera have been that one?). Frequently readers are invited to compare images of the same subject (say a woman alone or couples indoors) for no apparent gain. Ohio includes regular references to Peter Lorre (Feldmann and the Ohio team have been covertly initiating a fan club for the creepy German actor) and aficionados tune into this game. David Strobland has observed that, via frequent contact with the publications of Feldmann, "you will become something of a professional viewer." (14) This is especially true of Ohio. Viewers are challenged to become "readers" and vice versa.

To this list of "intimate aesthetic situations " one would need to add a category called, say, "consumer games". Mainstream magazines frequently invent promotions or offer incentives to encourage reader loyalty - usually in the form of reader polls, spurious competitions and trinkets. Ohio has its versions of this journalistic institution. Ohio #6 came with a free 45 rpm vinyl single by The Red Krayola (Side A: "I'm so Blazé", Side B: "Father Abraham") illustrated with an improbable picture of a masked and hatted Michael Jackson embracing Walther König, the famous Düsseldorf book seller. Then there is the seemingly random insertion of "found" or "improvised" place/book markers. Past issues have contained a hand-written shopping list and a crude map of Italy scribbled onto a receipt bearing the logo of a drink called Pago, a press clipping with an illustration of the opening ceremony for a new bridge over the Rhine, a black-and-white publicity still of Peter Lorre smoking, a reject colour photocopy, a doodle in which a series of dots seem to have been joined, forming a zig-zag line, a partially translated message in what appears to be Morse code, among other things. Even the videos come with book markers inside their boxes. Ordinarily, book markers contain clues about a previous user or uses of a publication. A baggage check with a foreign destination, or a bus ticket can suggest a journey taken with the book; its page position might indicate the place where a previous reader gave up. The markers inside each issue of Ohio can trigger complex responses. #11 features the black and white images of Burkhard Brunn, a sociologist, writer and amateur photographer who documents the makeshift hides of hunters, marking each picture with its location and date. Slipped inside each copy of #11 is a shiny, blurry photo of a deer looking askance at the camera. As it flutters to the floor - as if in flight - symbolic correspondences are invoked between camera-gun, hide (the noun) and to hide (the verb). Readers "in the know" would recognise the marker as a Duchampian pun about the notion of genius as a "mark" or trace and a see it as a comment on the contradictions of art and the marketplace (15). Like other aspects of Ohio, the markers present a sort of test. The reader /collector may hesitate to remove a marker from its place for fear of somehow altering the integrity of the "original" (which is, of course, a multiple). Craig J. Saper describes a similar feeling of disorientation after his answer machine taped a phone message from a man identifying himself as Ray Johnson, the mail artist. At first he was uncertain whether the voice was Johnson's, or part of a hoax acted out with or without Johnson's knowledge. Soon his attention shifted to the status of the recording: "And, if it actually was Johnson, then what should I do with the tape recording? Is this an artwork? Should I save the tape? What does this mean?" (16)

From whichever angle one chooses to view Ohio, one encounters a determination to frustrate each and every expectation. With a stable title, frequency and (limited) distribution, Ohio fits the description of a periodical; yet without text, eschewing "good" taste, and ill-equipped with sign posts or clues, the magazine is largely "unreadable" especially for the "cultured" who demand that art magazines reinforce their prejudices. Refreshingly witty and mischievous, yet devoid of any obvious irony, Ohio materialises as a serious contemporary art project. Ohio's editors - as editors have in the past - reject the validating contexts of high art. Instead they unsentimentally elevate "uninteresting" images by "untutored" producers. The practice of Huber and Janka is revealed to be more "bureaucratic" than "creative" (from contacting, gathering, editing material, to negotiating with contributors, printers and distributors). Ohio eschews authors, yet it is a highly mediated production - the site, in fact, of a collective artistic identity. If Ohio is considered as a sociopoetic work, these stern negations and whimsical paradoxes take on the characteristics of a "code". To an extent, all magazines are clubs that their readers want to belong to. Every title is a token of belonging. Ohio is an invitation to its fans to participate in a playful and ever-evolving critique of what passes for "official culture".

Who are the fans of Ohio? According to David Abrahamson, a cultural historian of journalism, the readers of magazines are people like the editors. " In most cases, the editors and writers of magazines share a direct community of interest with their readers. They are often, indeed literally, the same people. There is no journalistic distance." (17)

So, if Ohio gives aesthetic pleasure by its re-presentation of "non-art", and its audience comprises artists and connoisseurs, is the "secret knowledge" of an elite gained at the expense of the "non-elite"? It would be ungenerous to criticise Huber and Janka of exploitation - not simply because Ohio's projects convey great respect for the contributors and their material - which is in some cases "public" - but because Ohio's editors consider all contributors to be part of the same artistic project. To achieve this, and to achieve it uncynically, is an impressive feat. In this respect the practice of Huber and Janka alludes to the "everyone an artist" programme of Fluxus.

It seems that Ohio is in transition from being a project that delights one peer group to becoming one that will contain different meanings for divergent groups that may, in future, comprise its network. In responding to this diversity, Ohio can only grow richer.

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footnotes

1 David Strobland, Hans-Peter Feldmann's Snapshots, 272 Pages, Fondation ?

2 "Art for the Occasion" by Anne Moeglin-Delcroix, Extra Art: A survey of Artists' Ephemera, 1960-1999, CCAC Institute

3 Helena Tatay, 272 Pages

**4 David Brittain interviews Gerhard Theewen** [link to interview]

5 Gerhard Theewen interviewed by Heinze Zolper Jr., Salon no 3, 1977

6 Daniel Kothenschulte, Frankfurter Rundschau, 9 December 2000 (translated by Stefanie Braun)

7 Helena Tatay, 272 Pages, p13-14

8 Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, Fontana Paperbacks, 1984

9 Helena Tatay, 272 Pages, p 32

10 Jeffrey Whitmore, Beaumont Newhall and the Image Environment, Untitled 2&3, 1972

11 Craig J. Saper, Networked Art University of Minnesota Press, 2001

12 ibid

13 e.V. (Uschi Huber and Jörg Paul Janka), Kunstverein, Dusseldorf, from July 04

14 David Strobant 272 Pages, p. 123

15 Feldmann was invited to design a book mark that would be sold as a multiple art work he proposed an unlimited edition of 20 Mark bank notes, costing 20 Marks.

16 Craig J. Saper Networked Art, University of Minnesota Press, p 32

17 David Abrahamson, Magazine Exceptionalism, CD-Rom Proceedings of the First Mapping the Magazine Conference, Cardiff University 2003