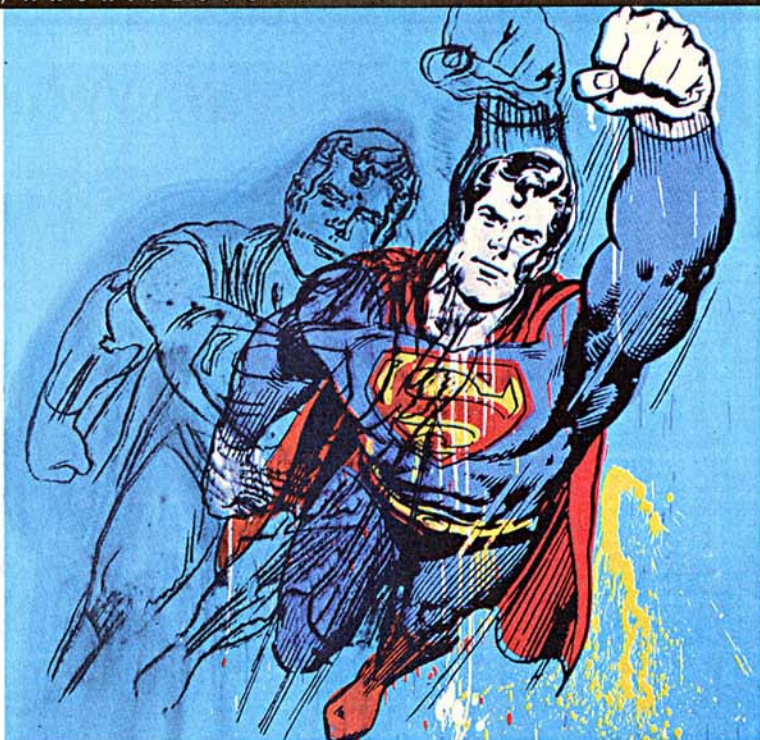


A Business Built on the Hard-to-Sell



Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Andy Warhol, "Superman," 1981.



Chris Burden, "Doorway to Heaven," 1973.



Hannah Wilke, "S.O.S. Starification Object Series," 1974.

By ANDRAS SZANTO

RONALD FELDMAN's art gallery is 30 years old, and he's not happy about it. "I never recognized the passage from risk-taking, aggressive gallery to more accepted, older, reputable gallery," Mr. Feldman, 64, said in his SoHo office over the summer. "You want to have respectability, but I'm more interested in being at the edge."

Over the years, Mr. Feldman has staked his reputation on difficult art, work that was unlikely to make any money. He championed performance artists like Chris Burden, who in 1975 fasted for three weeks on a ledge above the gallery; Conceptualists like Mierle Laderman Ukeles, the unsalaried artist in residence of New York City's Department of Sanitation; and trailblazers like Hannah Wilke, the pioneering feminist who unflinchingly used her camera to document her body, both when it was beautiful and when it was grotesquely marred by cancer.

Remaining on the edge for Mr. Feldman has meant staging ambitious installations and group exhibitions that could never recoup their costs. In some cases, he has had to hold on to unsold inventory for years while the careers of artists like Ida Applebroog, a painter who achieved commercial success only in her late 50's, slowly matured.

"He is a real good guy, a conscience," said the painter Chuck Close, who has collaborated with Mr. Feldman on various fund-raising projects. "I think he has tremendous respect for artists. You can see them talking him into elaborate installations and filling the gallery with things that may not be the most salable. He also takes a tremendous amount of time away from normal business practices to work for causes that he thinks are important."

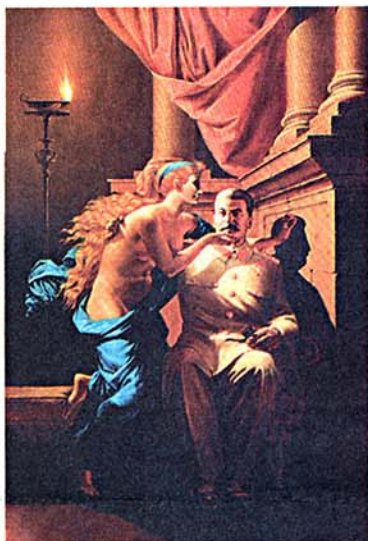
Mr. Feldman uses the term "managed fatalism" to describe his philosophy of art dealing. "I cannot twist somebody's arm to like a work," he said. "My agenda is to run the gallery so that when the artists are ready for



Nancy Chunn, "Spring Cleaning (Spring 1999)," 2000.



Carl Fudge, "Mobile Suite (1)," 2001.



Komar and Melamid, "The Origin of Socialist Realism," 1982-83.

their next show, I'm still in business."

Easily excited and given to mercurial soliloquies on almost any subject, Mr. Feldman has been called the best "artist" in his gallery. It's a characterization he flatly rejects, but it provides a clue to his popularity in the art world. Even a casual encounter makes it obvious that he is "playing for history," as he likes to say. As a gallery owner, he has modeled himself after Leo Castelli, the worldly and erudite patriarch of New York contemporary-art dealers. But the parallels end right there. If you heard the Bronx-born Mr. Feldman's voice on tape, you could easily mistake him for Woody Allen.

The 40-odd artists of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts make up a smorgasbord of the dealer's eclectic interests. A longtime advocate of political art, Mr. Feldman currently represents Leon Golub, Pepón Osorio and Nancy Chunn. His was the first American gallery to



Librado Romero/The New York Times

Ronald Feldman and his wife, Frayda, left, at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, in front of Pepón Osorio's "Beating Heart" (2002). Elsewhere, other works by the gallery's artists over the years.

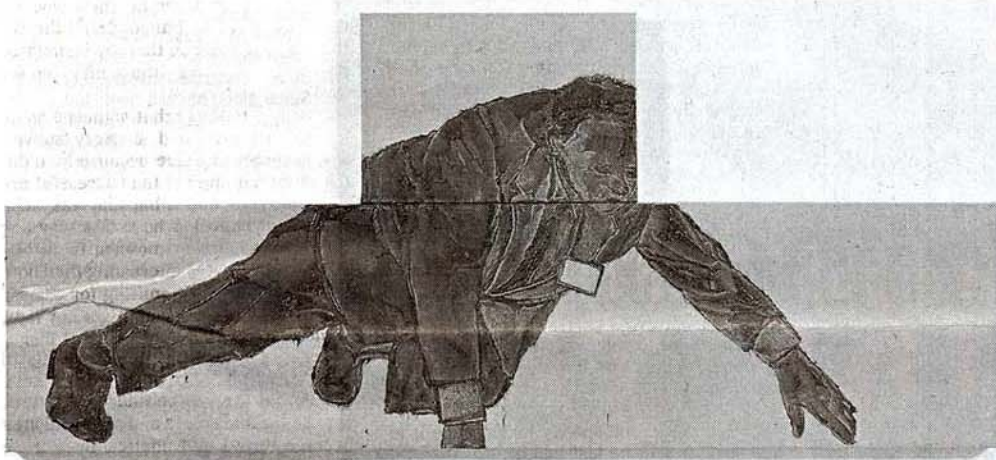
exhibit several leading Russian artists, notably Ilya Kabakov and Komar and Melamid, the duo whose paintings had to be smuggled out of the Soviet Union by diplomats and journalists. And then there are Mr. Feldman's scientifically oriented artists — among them Shusaku Arakawa and Todd Siler — who share his belief that the real competition for contemporary art is not popular culture but technology.

Mr. Feldman calls his survival a "miracle," but much of the credit goes to his publicity-shy wife, Frayda, who oversees the gallery's business operations and staff of 15. The Feldmans are the last people you would expect to make a living as art dealers. They met and married while he was at New York University Law School, and they commute daily to Manhattan from Chappaqua, N.Y., where they reared their three children. They refrain from the kind of nonstop socializing that is considered de rigueur by so many art dealers.

The Feldmans' life in art started in 1969, after Mr. Feldman made partner at Helfand, Lesser & Moriber, a corporate-law firm. Under tremendous stress, he was soon passing out from fatigue on his bathroom floor at night and realizing that he needed to make some changes. Enrolling in an art class was a first step. Next came a foray into selling prints. He began with Miró and Chagall and moved on to Jasper Johns and other Pop artists. Soon he quit his job and went to Europe to learn more about dealing art.

"I didn't start with a concept or a business plan — I just did it," he recalled. He immediately gravitated to contemporary art. "The real challenge was to see art in

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Dennis Cowley/Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

"Marginalia (Crawling Man)," 1996, by Ida Applebroog, a Feldman client who found success in her 50's.

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your time," he said, "and become an advocate for it."

In November 1971, the Feldmans opened a gallery on East 74th Street in Manhattan, in a space that had housed the Stable Gallery, where Andy Warhol once showed. Their inaugural exhibition, by the California painter Ed Moses, stayed up for seven months. There were no other artists yet.

Starting a gallery was easy back then, compared with the financial risks today, but the realities of the business were daunting nevertheless. It takes the same effort to sell a picture for \$5,000 as it does to sell one for \$5 million, Mr. Feldman asserts. Commissions on historic work can yield a handsome income, but keeping a contemporary gallery afloat is almost invariably a struggle. He learned how to subsidize his "front room" with secondary-market deals and a brisk trade in prints. This "mercenary financial aspect was difficult to reconcile with aesthetics at particular moments," he said. But the strategy paid off.

Mr. Feldman's 1974 collaboration with Joseph Beuys, the legendary German Conceptual artist, put the gallery definitively on the map. It was the artist's first American tour, and it included a series of public dialogues, or "social sculptures," in several cities. Beuys's inclusive philosophy of art — enshrined in the motto "Everyone is an artist" — left a deep impression on Mr. Feldman. Beuys was famous for scribbling on chalkboards while he lectured. During one of his speeches at the New School for Social Research in Manhattan, collectors passed notes to Mr. Feldman offering to buy the boards, but he and Mrs. Feldman erased them.

By the late 70's, the Feldman gallery's extravagant installations were being noticed: Chris Burden constructed a working television station, Les Levine erected a house of gloves, Beuys shipped over the demolished remains of his Berlin gallery. Joining the exodus of contemporary-art dealers from uptown to SoHo, the Feld-



D. James Dee/Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York
Chuck Close, "Untitled (President Clinton)," 1996.

mans, in 1979, relocated their gallery to a former saddle and feather-baling factory at 31 Mercer Street, where parts of the Statue of Liberty had once been stored. The look and feel of the place haven't changed much since.

The booming 80's ushered in a new era of prosperity for the gallery, almost entirely because of one artist, Andy Warhol, who had befriended the Feldmans after they rented his former dealer's space on the Upper East Side. The Feldman gallery eventually commissioned 54 paintings, drawings and prints by Warhol and published a catalogue raisonné of his prints, edited by Mrs. Feldman and Jörg Schellmann. When Warhol unexpectedly died after gall-bladder surgery in 1987, "it was as if a tidal wave had hit us," recalls Marina Batan, a dealer at the gallery. As prices for Warhol's work skyrocketed, Mr. Feldman found himself a major player in a big market.

Recently, more artists have joined the gallery roster (Carl Fudge and Bruce Pearson are among the new names), and a flush art market has allowed Mr. Feldman to spend on luxuries like printed catalogs. "I am not as concerned about survival economically as I was in the past," he said. So far, Sept. 11 and the turmoil

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on Wall Street have not affected the business. Mr. Feldman chalks that up to collector psychology: "People are living as if now matters," he said. In fact, demand has never been better: sales have doubled since January (the gallery does not disclose its sales figures).

But there have been conflicts and setbacks. Over the years, some artists have complained about lackluster promotion, while others have been lured away by competing dealers. The departures of Mr. Burden, Mr. Levine, Mr. Kabakov and, more recently, Roxy Paine were disappointments. Yet, a majority of the gallery's artists have stayed put, opting for steady commercial and, above all, intellectual and emotional support.

Meanwhile, the ever-restless Mr. Feldman is dedicating more of his energy to politics. In 1990, the gallery began a campaign to raise money for voter registration drives and candidates who support free expression. The project has produced new works by Jenny Holzer, Roy Lichtenstein, Cindy Sherman and William Wegman, among other art stars, raising over \$8 million. For his efforts, Mr. Feldman was invited by President Bill Clinton to serve a five-year term on the National Council for the Arts.

After 30 seasons and more than 1,500 exhibitions by his artists around the world, Mr. Feldman's main concern is finding voices who can speak to a younger generation. "My predicament is not that I don't think the excitement is there," he says. "My predicament is only the fear of whether I'll catch it. Will I see it? Will I know it? I hope so. When I do, I will never be afraid of taking the risk for it. Never. That's what I live for."