

Gelatin's *Tantamounter*



When I first heard of Gelatin I thought they were brilliant; when I first met them, I thought they were insane.

Backstory

The World Trade Center, 1997

This is how I first heard of Gelatin.

A group of artists constructed a small balcony and placed it outside a window on the 91st floor of Tower 2. For a few minutes, each member stood on the makeshift balcony and had their picture taken by a photographer circling the towers in a chartered helicopter. All of this was done during business hours, and all of it was totally illegal—a combination of extraordinary DIY engineering and the timing and precision of a Vegas vault heist. Penetrating the hermetic seal of the WTC was a political act, humanizing the cold abstraction of global commerce represented by the scale and blankness of the building with the vulnerability and specificity of the human body. Images from that performance are breathtaking, heroic and vulnerable.

Body surfing on the Rhine at the Basel Art Fair, 1998

This is how I first met Gelatin.

After seeing a few more of their installations/performances, I got the unfortunate sense that Gelatin was more or less a conventional update on Viennese Actionism. There was a heavy emphasis on the abject and lots of de-sublimation: shit play, exposed genitalia, hippies, etc. This heavy reliance on the tropes of transgression was little more than a conceptual feedback loop. The work sought to derive power by subverting middle-class values, but instead it reinforced the bourgeois idea of the artist as childish outsider, dependent upon the patronizing attention of collectors and audiences. Real subversion

happens when power structures become ambivalent, not when the child plays the child and the parent plays the parent.

Animalhouse

Group dynamics often lead to extraordinary behavior. A frat house is a great example. An individual rarely pushes himself to extremes without the cheering company of his friends.

This is the Frat Paradigm.

It's how *Jackass* was able to sustain itself, and how its cast members continue to work on "solo" projects. Johnny Knoxville originally conceived of a couple of simple physical gags. Only later, when the group formed, did the situations become really extreme and hilarious. Only a group can generate the kind of atmosphere necessary for certain kinds of gags.

Gelatin follows the Frat Paradigm. How else can you stand on a homemade balcony 1,300 feet above the pavement?

Sidebar

I met Lucy in 2000. After a few weeks, we started screwing and later we became a couple. While living with me, she went to graduate school and finished in 2005. Things were good but I had an unshakable sense of doom. Early in 2006, she ended our relationship. I was still in love. She left behind a small collection of photographs. I looked at them often.

Backstory 2

A few months earlier, I was in Gelatin's studio in Vienna. They showed me their latest project: a giant, homemade rollercoaster. The "car" for the coaster was an old Laz-y-Boy, the tracks were made of PVC pipe. It looked like shit. A scrap heap. This was death trap sculpture.

Watching videotape of people riding it was nerve wracking, their heads coming inches from sharp wooden supports and their bodies shooting in and out of alarmingly small holes punched through the walls. This was *Jackass* inverted. Like the WTC project, the rollercoaster project contained equal elements of danger and joy, only this time the audience/riders were in harms way, not Gelatin.

Turning a gallery into an amusement park is exciting, smart and astute. It is a fucking rollercoaster ride. Everything is. They told me that the show at Leo Koenig's was going to be even better. They told me they were making a "copy machine."

Animalhouse 2

Gelatin's *Tantamounter* opened at Leo's in February 2006. 90% of the gallery floor was taken up by a giant, makeshift trailer home made of scrap wood and junk. All that was visible from outside were walls made of crappy material and two small doors off to one side. The *Tantamounter* was open: inside were bunk beds, a sink, a toilet, food staples, art materials, etc. The whole thing had a bomb shelter feel: no windows, no clocks. Doomsday.

During the run of the show, for 24 hours a day, Gelatin lived and worked inside the *Tantamounter*, physically reproducing any object the audience put through one of the two small doors. They acted like a 3-D copy machine: original object in and original plus its tantamount out. This was all done for free: a sculpture give-a-way. Gelatin turned over their watches and cell phones and climbed into the box. We screwed the door shut behind them. They were going off to war. Animalhouse.

The shit was on. Everyone ran over to have personal items copied through the Gelatin filter—shoes, beer bottles, cellphones, ipods, cigarettes, everything.

In all, they must have produced and given away over a thousand sculptures. The audacity of this again reminded me of the WTC project. To come to Chelsea—the capitol of art commerce—and give away sculptures 24/7 was a political act. To do this when you have a proven market, when your work is commanding high prices, and when you have everyone's attention is a brilliant act of protest. It is the social aspects of this work I find most moving—an authentic collaboration with the audience—and one where everyone gets to be a collector in the end: totally democratic. At least for the run of the show, Gelatin totally undermined the nature of art economy. Power structures were in limbo.

Sidebar 2

I decided to try the *Tantamounter* very, very late one night. I took

with me one of the photos Lucy left behind. It was a photo of her in high school holding some type of bogus African antiquity. I thought I would send it to her as a birthday gift—a way to endear myself to her again. I never sent it. I kept the picture and its *Tantamounted* version in a drawer and finally showed it to her a few months ago. Lucy and I are now back together, happy, in a relationship that is something like the original.