

PERROTIN

GELITIN

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When it comes to pushing the boundaries of contemporary art, Gelitin are no strangers to controversy. As Austria's premier artists' collective they have, since they started working together in the mid-90s, literally turned the art world on its head, transforming both themselves and the art institutions that have embraced them into a giant playground where anything goes. From careering around naked with gigantic hard-ons at their recent opening at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris to making multiple "failed" versions of the *Mona Lisa* out of plasticine. From converting the hallowed halls of the Gagosian Gallery in London into one colossal sweat-filled, water-soaked tramp onsen to sticking lighted candles up their arses. The crazed antics of Florian, Wolfgang, Tobias and Ali strip away the artifice of so-called "beautiful" and "sophisticated" art to expose the raw creativity beneath.

Vienna, Austria, and the boys from Gelitin are hanging out in their friend, stage designer Stefan Riedl's apartment. Ali, sporting an authentic Viennese handlebar moustache with accompanying salt and pepper

bearded profusion, is busy putting the finishing touches to one of the group's latest paintings, an entirely white interpretation of Picasso's masterpiece *Guernica*. Tobias, Wolfgang and Florian are making their own rather bizarre plasticine portraits, two of them paintings of the *Mona Lisa* and the other a picture of a man with a lime-green face, enormous white bulging eyes and a protruding aquamarine nose. In the far corner, Helmut, the Gelitin muse, has stripped off all his clothes to expose what he affectionately refers to as his "pee pee". Grinning from ear to ear, he howls uncontrollably before breaking out into lyrical verse. "When it comes to innate artistic talent Helmut is one of the most interesting people we know in Vienna," exclaims Ali. "He has a wonderful way with words and makes up the most obscene automatic poetry." Sideling over in a conspiratorial fashion, Tobias confirms what is patently obvious, that Helmut is one slice short of a full loaf. "He usually resides at one of the local nursing homes," he grins mischievously. "But today is a very special occasion. We thought he would enjoy a day out in front of the cameras."

Glancing around the decaying grandeur of this most Viennese of settings, with its faux marble interior and opulent crystal chandeliers, Helmut's presence is indeed most engaging. Surrounded by Stephan's social realist paintings of blue-eyed, blonde-haired Aryan supermen, he provides just the right tone of "positive" degeneracy. The same is also true of Gelitin, whose hilarious yet deranged plasticine paintings represent the perfect postscript to both modern and high-renaissance art. Childlike in their execution, these works embody an idiosyncratic take on creativity that is as refreshing as it is chaotic. In the past Gelitin have incorporated cuddly toys into their artistic repertoire, creating strange hybrid furniture and an entire soft-toy operating theatre cum play room in a children's hospital, as well as realising a giant disembowelled hand-knitted pink rabbit in the hills of Piedmont in northern Italy. Yet here in Vienna, the birthplace of Adolf Hitler's ideology and home to the Viennese Actionists, such high jinks take on a greater significance. "Many people when they first see our work are surprised," declares Florian.



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"They tend to be a little apprehensive to begin with, but pretty soon they get into it. Here in Vienna, though, the general attitude towards art is that it should be a serious activity with little or no sense of humour. We believe instead in the power of art to make us laugh and by doing so create a world of infinite possibilities." "Whether or not you agree with this approach the most important thing is that we are always honest," adds Wolfgang. "It doesn't matter whether you think our work is good or bad. The question is does it have an effect on you? Does it confront you with something new? Does it make you think?"

There are certainly very few artists working on the international art scene today that question the parameters of art with more infectious enthusiasm than Gelitin. Practicing their own unique brand of performance-based happening-inspired interventions, they continue to rethink the very nature of art. One of their first installation pieces in New York was back in 1998 when they turned the Spencer Brownstone Gallery into a giant inflatable lung. Covering the floor, ceiling and walls entirely with bin liners joined together with adhesive tape,

they installed an industrial motor and ventilation system that continuously sucked and pumped air in and out of the gallery every 15 minutes thereby deflating or blowing up the space. "With *Suck and Blow* we were thinking about what it would feel like to be inside a vacuum cleaner," smiles Tobias. "So we designed the piece to operate accordingly. When air was sucked out it created a vacuum that pulled the walls of the plastic bag towards you. It was as if the gallery space was melting, slowly enveloping you within this living, breathing organism."

The rethinking of the spatial boundaries that confine us is something essential to the Gelitin mindset. In the year 2000 the artists became famous for staging a covert performance at the World Trade Center in which they temporarily removed a pane of glass from a window on the 91st floor of the North Tower in order to install an impermanent makeshift wooden balcony. "*The B-Thing* was a work that we completed under a cloak of total secrecy," states Wolfgang. "We had been given a studio room at the World Trade Center, but immediately we entered the building we knew that we had to

somehow redefine the space." "It was just about letting the outside inside again," chuckles Ali. "A step out into the void in search of a new experience." In the following year, Gelitin also staged a series of performances in Venice under the title *Nellanutella*. Dressing in specially designed "bread suits" they proceeded to feed the pigeons in St Mark's Square before getting changed into casual attire and then taking it in turns to leap head first into the surrounding canals. "We wanted to know what it would feel like to fly," declares Florian. "At first you experience this great sense of release, of floating in space, until you hit the water and suddenly realise that you are sinking. You have to be super careful though, you never know what kinds of things you might encounter beneath the surface; old bicycles, bits of metal, even the odd scuba diver."

The early performances may be read as an attempt to experience the world from a different perspective, yet it would be a mistake to consider Gelitin to be little more than four thrill seekers out to get their next fix. It is a fact that many of the performances



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Pollo Feliz
Sofiensaele, Vienna,
Austria, 1999
(photo Bruno Stubenrauch)



*Les Innocents
aux Pieds Sales*
Galerie Emmanuel
Perrotin, Paris, 2006



*Chinese Synthese
Leberkaese*
- Schlommsool,
Kunsthous Bregenz,
Austria, 2006

Le Cadeau, Galerie
Emmanuel Perrotin,
Paris, 2002

that Gelitin have completed to date contain a lot of in-your-face nudity, all four artists prancing around in semi-drag, often with their dicks hanging out, but far from a gratuitous attempt to shock their audience, such behaviour is designed to challenge the social and cultural prohibitions that encroach on our collective sense of self. Interventions such as *Pollo Feliz* from the late 90s or *Les Innocents aux Pieds Sales* held in Paris in 2005 show the two sides of Gelitin's approach to performance art. The first witnessed the artists dressing up as chickens and transforming a theatre in Vienna into an enormous chicken coop, while the other was a celebration of the decadence of the French Revolution. "For *Pollo Feliz* we ran around for days posing coquettishly and laying a multitude of eggs," smiles Ali. "Every 15 minutes or so the light in the space would be subdued and we would pretend to fall asleep until the maid came in to feed us. Then her head would explode into this ball of confetti which would make us all become totally hysterical." "*Les Innocents* was a little different," recalls Wolfgang. "We enacted all the French clichés we knew in 40 minutes from having champagne

corks up our arses to installing a fake guillotine for the special entertainment of our guests. We even had this girl who could control her pee. She would piss into a jar that was marked with different levels to indicate which part of the body should be cut off. Needless to say it always ended with the head."

Speak to members of the audience who were present at these performances and they will tell you that Gelitin always manage to create an atmosphere of sustained chaos in which the creative spirit takes over in all its raw and visceral glory. A kind of amalgamation of the hard-hitting performances of the Viennese Actionists, combined with the pop-cultural relevance of artists such as Paul McCarthy, they redefine the parameters of performance art and in so doing reconfigure our understanding of traditional happening-inspired interventions. For their show at Bregenz in 2006, Gelitin transformed the top floor of the museum in one enormous mud room complete with a 12-foot high mud volcano by transporting over 50 tonnes of peat from the surrounding countryside and dumping it in the centre of the space. "It is very nice to get dirty and then

clean yourself again," declares Ali. "It has something to do with blurring your boundaries. When you think of a single cell organism, they have a protective skin around them, a membrane, that separates the inside world from the outside world. This membrane controls what nutrition comes in and what waste comes out. It is the same with our bodies. We have various openings that we use for our everyday needs, such as communication and sustenance. When you get dirty you blur the line between your interior self and the outside. I find this very relaxing. You are not sure any more where your outline is." "When you are covered by mud you feel as if you are without limits," agrees Florian. "It is a sensation that is purely physical, an experience that you have with your body." It is this attempt to redefine our limits, both physical and psychological, which has led Gelitin to develop ever weirder and more ambitious body-orientated interventions. They have created, and have plans to create, an improvised bathtub constructed entirely out of the bodies of their friends and a new turnstile-inspired installation work that substitutes their dicks in the



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place of the usual metal barriers. Of all their flesh installations to date it is *The Human Elevator*, a mega-manual flesh lift completed in Los Angeles in the late 90s, which pushes the idea of joint cooperation the furthest. Building a scaffolding rig right next to a three-storey building in downtown LA, they inserted six platforms, on each of which two volunteer bodybuilders stood ready to lift willing members of the audience, one platform at a time, all the way up to the roof. "To begin with the process was rather slow, but after the first couple of attempts the bodybuilders really got into their stride and you were lifted up to the heavens in a matter of seconds," recalls Ali. The reverse was true of the installation work *Der Schlund* (*The Throat*), realised in Munich in 2001. "*Der Schlund* was a human tunnel made of 20 or so over-weight volunteers covered in baby oil," says Wolfgang. "Visitors were invited to take off all their clothes and jump down the oesophagus feet first."

In both these installations, gaining the trust of the audience is central to the overall success of the work. "We tend to think out our interventions in stages so people can slowly warm to the idea of

direct participation," explains Ali. "With both of these works visitors learned about them first by talking to and seeing the reactions of other people who had experienced it. We never tell anyone they have to do something; no one is ever obliged to take part. Our work is entirely consensual." "That's right," agrees Florian. "Our aim is touch people in a way that can change them for the future. To truly experience our art you have to feel it from the inside. When you take a ride on *The Human Elevator* you are lifted high up into the air and it is like a memory of your super-early childhood when you are lifted up by your parents. It is the same with *Der Schlund*. You find yourself squeezed down through a wall of flesh, which is something you probably haven't experienced since you were born."

This tactile element associated with many of Gelitin's performance pieces is also repeated in their interactive sculpture. They have designed a series of sofas made of discarded furniture that fart when you sit down on them and also a chair with a hidden human being inside it, so that when you take a seat you are actually sitting on someone's lap. *Hug Box* is a machine constructed out of two

mattresses operated by a water pump that slowly close together over a five-minute period to hold you in a vice-like grip. "When you are inside the *Hug Box* you never think what might happen if it never opens again," smiles Wolfgang. "You just get in and enjoy the experience. After a few moments you feel an intimacy spreading all over your body, an artificial hug that transports you to an alternative mind space." Gelitin have even vacuum packed themselves and willing members of the general public to both walls and ceilings, using the simple method of encasing their bodies in two sheets of sealed polythene and then sucking the air out with a vacuum cleaner. "Once you have created a vacuum it is almost impossible to move and the only way you can breath is through a snorkel," smiles Ali. "The overall effect, though, is not unpleasant. The constant pressure on the body makes you feel all warm inside."

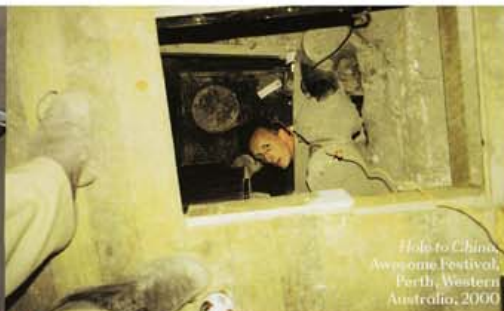
Enclosed spaces are for Gelitin somewhat of an ongoing obsession. They have not only built their own portable sauna, an object that looks like it has been teleported down to earth from outer space, and hand dug an elaborate tunnel complex under the floorboards



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of a Chinese restaurant in Australia, but they have also designed a number of do-it-yourself installations in various galleries and museum spaces around the world. In New York in the late 90s they reconfigured the courtyard at PS1 to create a giant watchtower made out of discarded furniture that they found in dumpsters in and around Brooklyn. The structure, the centrepiece for a show entitled *Percutaneous Delight*, rose over 30 feet into the sky and contained a bar on the ground floor, office facilities on the second floor and a viewing platform. Elsewhere in the courtyard the artists installed an improvised sweat box in the form of a black metal shed and an ice-cold refrigeration room made entirely of old refrigerators with their doors jarred open on the inside. There was even an enormous paddling pool so guests could take a swim. "We often use the method of building such environmental installations over the weekend so no one can give us a hard time or complain," explains Wolfgang. "That way when the museum curators come back to work on the Monday, we have already completed the piece." It was exactly through this clandestine method of

working that Gelitin managed to build an underground club at the Liverpool Biennial, four days before it officially opened to the public. "We found this very narrow space in a disused warehouse and we covered it from floor to ceiling in old carpet," explains Ali. "England is a carpet paradise, there is nowhere else like it on earth, so what better material to use to realise our dreams. By the time we had finished building the club it could hold 200 people, but only if they were all standing. It was more like a pit than a club and when it was full to capacity it looked like it was built entirely out of people."

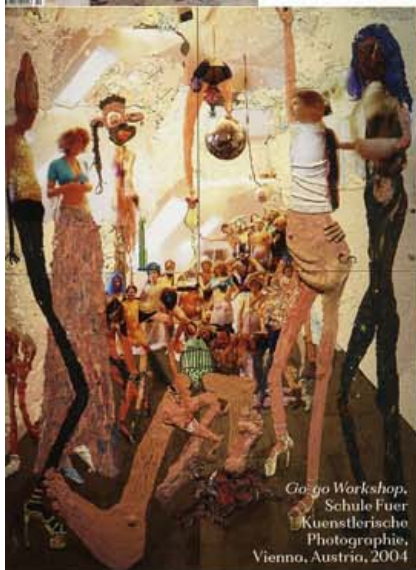
The Armpit, as the club in Liverpool became known, was an immediate success with both the local party crowd and visiting artists from abroad until it was eventually closed down by the fire department on its fourth day. Occupying space in the form of a living entity, the piece functioned somewhere between a sculptural environment and ad hoc performance work where members of the audience were invited to first leave their inhibitions at the door before subsuming their identity within the mass. Such seemingly anarchic practice has gained Gelitin quite a reputation over the

past decade, but in all their installations the ideal of a two-way communication between the artist and the spectator is something that remains fundamental.

"When we conceive of a new work we always consider what effect it will have on both us and our audience," explains Florian. "We believe that art should be more than just a reflective process, it should also be part of a wider journey where you discover something new about yourself." It can be fun as well, which is why Gelitin like to mix it up a bit and create opportunities where the unexpected can operate on an equal footing alongside careful planning and design. This is one of the more admirable aspects of Gelitin's working practice, what may be termed an "aesthetics of generosity", where art becomes a creative catalyst, the gift of a new experience that changes the way we see and feel about our lives. In the past they have organised a spontaneous go-go dancing workshop at a psychiatrist's office in Vienna, as well as a tickling symposium in an art school in France. They have even installed a homemade roller coaster in the Massimo de Carlo Gallery in Milan. Yet of all the installation



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Gogo Workshop,
Schulte Furer
Kuenstlerische
Photographie,
Vienna, Austria, 2004



Inside Tantamounter
24/7 (left); objects
being copied,
Leo Koenig Inc.,
New York, 2005

performance pieces that they have completed so far, the construction of the *Tantamounter* in New York at the Leo Koenig Gallery perhaps best exemplifies this new spirit of inclusion.

"The *Tantamounter* was a 24-hour handmade human facsimile machine that controlled communication between the outside and the inside," declares Tobias. "We designed it to operate rather like a submarine in which all four of us lived for a week with two invited guests, one was a fully qualified psychiatrist who had recently suffered a nervous breakdown. Inside there were cooking facilities and beds to sleep in, while on the outside we placed a top-loading pulley system. Visitors to the gallery were invited to place any object they had with them on to a shelf, close down the hatch and wait for their original item with added replica to be returned to them. This could take a few minutes or sometimes over an hour depending on the complexity and nature of the items that needed to be copied." "We would get the sweetest things being sent in to us," smiles Ali. "Diaries, art works, a small dog, someone's clothes, a gnome, even a two-year-old child. We copied everything. On one occasion when

someone had sent something through to be duplicated, but had not received their replica, they sent in a note to ask how long we were going to be. We simply copied the note and sent it back to them."

So successful was the *Tantamounter* in New York in November 2005 that it became a gathering place for art lovers across Manhattan, with hoards of people arriving both day and night to have their belongings copied by the artists. Looking back on the event now it is easy to see why this work was so popular. It captured the imagination of New Yorkers used to the concept of art being above all else a financial investment. By turning on its head the notion of the monetary value of art by giving away hundreds of art objects for free, Gelitin successfully underscored the creative enjoyment of making art over and above its apparent worth. "Some of the copies that we made out of vegetables or other organic matter are still kept by people in their freezers," smiles Florian. "The amazing thing is that because there is no money attached to these objects people had to look at them in an entirely new way. By removing their price tag we freed the objects to exist independently without any quality

control whatsoever. In many ways it really was the ideal encapsulation of what it means to be an artist. A freedom to create without the super restraints of the art market."

Back in Vienna, Gelitin have moved to a new location. Earlier in the afternoon they donned white sports gear and took to the park for a game of tennis, and now they are back at Stefan's apartment busily patching up one of their cuddly toys. "When people think about us they always imagine that we live together as one big happy family," says Ali. "In fact, I live separately from the others in my own hotel suite right in the centre of Vienna." "We do though have very defined roles within the group," says Tobias. "Ali is the creative director, Florian is the mama, Wolfgang is the president and I am the German. You always need a good German for the successful running of a company."

Looking at the boys now seated together around the kitchen table they do indeed project the perfect image of communal bliss. Within the artistic context of Austria, this happy collective conjures up memories of the



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*Chinese Synthese
Leberkaese - Kacksaal,
Kunsthau Bregenz, Austria, 2006
(photo Markus Tretter)*



*Zapf di Papi,
urine ice sculpture,
First Moscow
Biennale of
Contemporary Art,
Lenin Museum,
Moscow, 2005*



*Chinese Synthese
Leberkaese -
Kacksaal,
Kunsthau Bregenz,
Austria, 2006*

60s, in particular of the Friedrichshof art commune founded by Otto Mühl in 1970. One of the leading members of the Viennese Actionists, Austria's visceral answer to American art happenings of the 60s, Mühl was well known for staging hard-hitting body performances often including sexual intercourse, piss and excrement. Gelitin are also no strangers to the scatological and have too created works centred on shit, albeit in a highly entertaining manner.

Kacksaal or *Shit House*, realised at the Kunsthau in Bregenz in 2006, was a raised wooden hut on stilts with a ramp leading up to a nondescript front door. Inside, the artists placed a fully functioning Turkish toilet entitled *Locus Focus*, a simple hole in the floor with a wooden seat above, on to which members of the audience were invited to sit down and take a shit while looking in a mirror located directly in front of them. Through a series of reflections the image that they saw was that of their own arsehole in all its forbidden splendour. "To sit in *Locus Focus* is to create a short circuit with yourself," declares Ali, "like pissing into your own mouth. You can see your arse actually taking a shit, which for most

people is an entirely new experience. It is like looking into a blind spot and discovering this strange unknown space where what you see is what you feel."

The symbolism of shit holds a contradictory place within the history of western thought. In ancient Rome, ladies of substance would use the shit of their slaves as face packs, while in the 16th and 17th centuries the kings of France created an elaborate public ritual in which they would take a shit in front of invited guests. In our present society the idea of shit is all too often considered something repulsive and yet what comes out of our bodies continues to hold a special fascination. For Gelitin, the waste products associated with the body are to be seen as something positive. They represent that discarded part of ourselves that can be reincorporated back into their art, often in a collective manner that transforms their work into a cooperative statement. *Urinebladder*, an as yet unrealised work originally proposed as an outdoor sculpture in New York in 2001 and again for the Frieze Art Fair in London in 2003, is designed to pump the hundreds of gallons of piss urinated into VIP toilets each day into

a giant bladder cum seating area to be situated in the centre of the fair's VIP room. Similarly, *Zapf di Papi*, unveiled at the Lenin Museum in Moscow in 2005, was an open urinal attached to the exterior facade of the building, which over a one-month period created a seven-metre long amber-coloured collaborative ice sculpture. Gelitin have staged a performance in which they have transformed themselves into a human fountain, standing on different levels of a wooden rampart and pissing into buckets worn on each other's heads. Yet of all the scatologically inspired artworks that Gelitin have produced over the years it is the creation of the *Shit Alphabet* that has had the biggest audience reaction.

"It took us over four years to complete the whole shit alphabet," smiles Tobias. "Florian came up with the idea by accident after he laid this giant turd in the toilet which looked just like the letter 'B'. After that it became a bit of a competition as to who could shit what letters. You could say it was a little like the discovery of cubism where each of us was inspired by the results of the other to even bigger and better formed shits. Of course, there was always that one



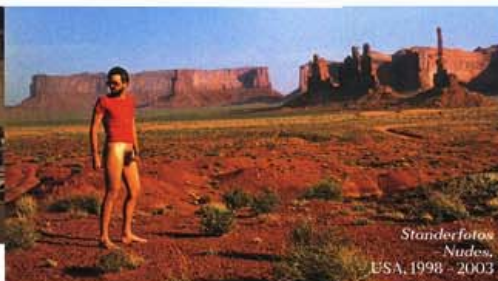
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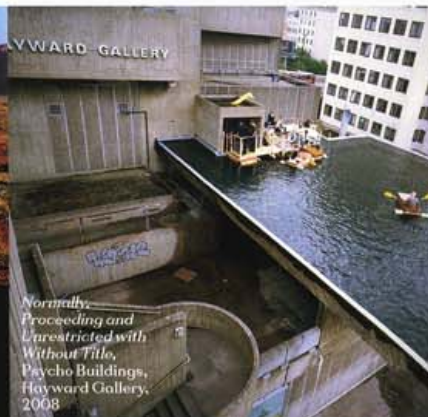
*Bunter Abend,
Deitch Projects,
New York, 2007*



*Standerfotos
Nudes,
USA, 1998 - 2003*



*Hugris,
Kling & Bong
Gallery, Reykjavik,
Iceland, 2006*



*Normally,
Proceeding and
Unrestricted with
Without Tills,
Psycho Buildings,
Hayward Gallery,
2008*

elusive letter that always escaped us. For me it took years of practice to learn how to make an 'O', and I still haven't managed yet to shit a question mark." "I think if people took more of an interest in what they shit there would be less problems in the world," agrees Wolfgang. "The first reaction to the shit alphabet is that we did it to provoke, but in fact it was a very serious exploration for us, just as serious as painting. Even though shitting letters can sometimes seem like child's play, it is in fact indicative of our very direct approach to life."

Such an open attitude towards the illicit and often socially proscribed realities of our everyday existence is a central component in Gelitin's approach to art. The body and in particular the sensual physicality of being remains paramount at all times. In many performances Gelitin openly display their genitalia, once even injecting their penises with chemical stimulants obtained from a local veterinarian to keep themselves erect for prolonged periods of time. "The tip is loose but your dick stays hard for at least two hours," declares Ali. "It is a little like having a headless erection. You remain stiff

but you are in no way sexually excited." At all other times the boys prefer either old-fashioned handwork or the power of thought, and have staged not only their own naked self-portraits against a backdrop of the Austrian mountains or deep in the Californian desert, but have also been responsible for the creation of a new word in Icelandic, *Hugris*, which means "concentration hard-on" or "elevating an object with the mind". However to read these acts as blatant exhibitionism is to misconstrue the intentions of the artists. "Sexual arousal is a fundamental energy, but it is not that we want to use our work to fuel our sexual fantasies," states Tobias. "In fact, it is the complete opposite of this. We want to do something different that might make other people feel that they can do something different too. It is therefore more about creating an atmosphere that can surprise you; a place where there are no rules any more and anything can be possible."

Indeed, it is towards the celebration of an all-inclusive raw creativity over and above the slick solitary veneer of contemporary art that Gelitin's activities can best be understood, a search for an innately honest approach to what it

means to be an artist in today's media-driven, money-orientated society. Looking at their work over the past decade - from their appropriated porn collages to hybrid furniture designs, ad hoc multifarious installations to their obsession with holes and orifices - they take the ideal of art and transform it into something else, a sensual, often contradictory world that is nevertheless open to the free flow of the imagination.

Back in London at the Hayward Gallery's *Psycho Buildings* exhibition, Gelitin have created one of their most ambitious projects to date, a boating lake installed in one of the gallery's outdoor balconies that overlooks both the Thames and the Palace of Westminster. As the sun sets on the horizon you find yourself rowing around in a wooden boat without a care in the world. Rarely does art provide you with such a surreal happening as this, but for Gelitin it is all in a day's work. The reconfiguration of how we see art and its potential to change the way we feel about ourselves is always at the core of their artistic genius, not to mention the strength of purpose to never take no for an answer, which gives them the ability to realise their dreams.