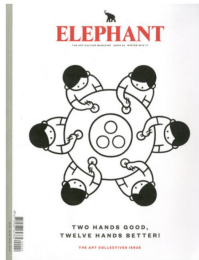


PRESSBOOK

GELITIN

ELEPHANT

November 2016

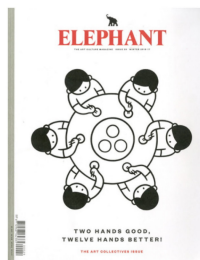


Elephant
Winter 2016-2017
Charlotte Jansen



Gelitin

As malleable as the substance they share the name with, Gelitin is a synthesis of people and personas, waiting to be mixed up and moulded into a spectacular new form by the next unknowing participant. They are unconcerned with boundaries—as they don't perceive any themselves. "We like to make things our own, devour the world. You can absolutely transform your surroundings and your own mind by a poetic gesture," they tell Charlotte Jansen.



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This page: La Louvre, Paris, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France, 2008

The four members of Gelitin met at a summer camp in 1978. "We cannot remember our first encounter. But our mothers can. They keep telling us different versions every time we get together." They do recall, however, seeing an awkward-looking Tobias (Urban) "already growing a beard although only eleven years old" and playing by himself. The other three went over and asked if he'd like to join their gang. The rest of the kids then rejected them. "Liam Gillick once wrote in an essay about Gelitin: 'Gelitin were abandoned rather than formed by choice.' This pretty much explains everything about how we met and got together."

From that happy abandonment in Austria nearly four decades ago, the collective of comrades have been all over the world with their performances and installations, as they put it, "innocently stumbling through all this madness", everywhere from Puerto Rico to

Piedmont, often inviting other artists and friends to participate. "In the beginning we changed our name for almost every project we did. We were more interested in creating shows than being known for them," they tell me in an email. (I've no idea who I'm talking to specifically.) "One time we were advertised as Gelatin [spelled with an 'a']—it was for a show at PS1 in New York in the late 90s. We guess it was a good show, because nobody called us different names after that for quite a time." (They changed the spelling to Gelitin about ten years ago.)

The twists and turns of uncontrollable caprice seem to guide the group from one project to another. Each new venture is approached as if they were at the beginning again, and the action—since it relies on the audience to complete it—is invariably unexpected. At Manifesta 11, the poster for their performance, *The Guild of Giving*, was

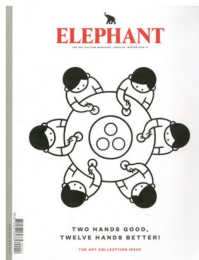
a human centipede-esque drawing, a circle of characters eating each other's shit. It's an image of collaboration that stays with you. At the performance at Cabaret Voltaire there was luckily no poo, but they cavorted riotously with floury concoctions and costumes alongside Kris Lemsalu, Penelope Hemon, Judith Hofer and Mundi Vondi.

"We are pulled by the horses of our hearts' desires. We find missing places, things that need to be called into existence, and create them," they explain. "Most of the rock bands keep playing their old hits from ages ago. We prefer to work on new and future ideas for every show that comes up." At the start of their process in their studio in Vienna, "ideas and inspirations are tossed around, and all of a sudden something clicks and all entities in one, all group members know, 'That's it.' No further discussion needed." They work with their intuition, and it just so happens that they are very good at winding up in "situations full of pure madness and finding all these allies, saunas, creatures, rabbit holes and fountains of pleasure and wisdom".

They're in Hong Kong as we exchange emails, preparing to open a mini-retrospective, *Gelatin, Gelitin, Gelitin* at Galerie Perrotin. The resulting exhibition—remarkably clean and neat compared to their usual affairs—included works from the last twenty years. Among them was their *Mona Lisa* series, where they rendered the masterpiece in plasticine. It is typical of the fun they like to have with their art. Is it fun being on the road together? "Being on the road together is better than sitting at home together. But sitting at home together is better than being on the road alone."

Gelitin's perception of their collective is completely fused with the meaning of their work and the way they interact with their audience: attitude and participation is their material. Their work is an invitation to let your hair down and possibly get naked (many of their exhibits, including sections of the Perrotin show, are strictly 18+). "We like to create non-hierarchical, open spaces. We make machines that change the way one acts and perceives and can temporarily alter a social fabric." Those machines have included a giant knitted rabbit installed in a village in the Italian Alps, for people to clamber over and slide down, and a six-day-long performance at 21er Haus Vienna, where the artists, together with twenty friends, chipped away at a massive polystyrene cube, creating an exhibition of new sculptures live in front of the audience—with the atmosphere of a rave party. There was also the time they pickled soft toys and put them in a children's hospital ward, inviting children to confront their fears of hospitals by engaging in a role play where they were doctors. (The jars from the commission, *Operation Lila*, were also part of their Perrotin survey).

PHOTO: MARIA ZEGLER/BOOK © GELITIN 2008

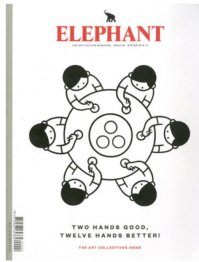


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Waldschrad, 2006

COURTESY MASSIMO DE CARLO, MILAN/LONDON/HONG KONG

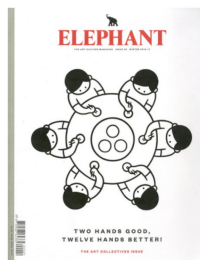


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“Gelitin is something different than some people working together. It’s like a person growing and changing”



Hase, 2005



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Mister Üääüäh, 2004

Four heads are better than one when it comes to ideas, and four pairs of hands are probably better than one when it comes to building things; but four egos might be more of a problem. Could that be the reason that there are fewer artists working as collectives? “Nobody works totally alone. Art is communicating and as an artist you are always relating to things around you. You are always part of a conversation. Working alone, one realizes: there are always so many entities within oneself that talk to each other: the excited part, the doubting part, etc. It’s already a bit like working in a group.” Yet the fact the four have grown up together, bound by a silent pact of solidarity made decades ago, gives them their special synchronicity. “Gelitin is a universe and an individual as well. Gelitin is something different than some people working together. It’s like a person growing and changing. It started young as a zygote, moving on to become an infant, a toddler, the whole childhood thing, into puberty and adulthood. Being Gelitin is all about looking for stress, getting focused and ready and lost again.”

What kind of strengths do they think each of them has? For Wolfgang, it’s his oesophagus; for Florian, his stomach; for Tobias, his intestine is his best bit; while Ali has a particularly good sigmoid colon. “Between mouth and asshole, those are our special places.” You can imagine how they might put each of them to use. It might explain the motif of asses and assholes popping up in their work over the years. I am still not certain, though, that they don’t also have hard times. Surely they must argue? “Gelitin is sometimes a prickly cactus, sometimes a soft slug. We like the holes and the lofty heights.” There must be something that annoys them about one another? “The hardest things you have to share are the smell, personal speed, the sound of walking, eating, sleeping.” Anything else? “The way to drive a car.”

Gelitin are a family and all their dysfunction comes out in public through their anarchistic art. “When you are working together you need to be concentrated, same as when you are working alone. Working together should create a more satisfying output than doing it alone. It’s not about hardest things or disagreements. It’s about carrying a heavy ladder from one place to another. It is easier to do that together than alone.” When they do have a difficult moment—if they even start to think about things with egotism—they say, “It’s probably time to move on or to step back and to read a book and join the others a little later.”

COURTESY MASSIMO DE CARLO, MILAN/LONDON/HONG KONG