

The Artwork That Spawned 9/11 Conspiracy Theories and Mystery

[Kyle MacNeill](#) September 10, 2025

On the morning of March 19, 2000, Florian Reither learned what it felt like to scrape the sky. He'd just stepped out of the 91st floor of the North Tower of the World Trade Center through a hollowed-out window. Now, as Sunday's dawn cracked, Reither — dressed in a brilliant-white leather jacket and matching jeans — stood on a makeshift wooden balcony. It protruded a few feet toward the horizon. Looking down was OK, but gazing up made him nauseous. So he stared straight ahead, locking eyes with the pink sunrise. "It was fantastic. It was just a really sexy feeling."

This vertiginous performance wasn't the act of a brazen stuntman, crazed trespasser, or suicidal employee. It was the work of the Austrian art collective Gelitin, which consists of Florian Reither, Ali Janka, Wolfgang Gantner, and Tobias Urban. Titled the B-Thing, the feat saw the four men, now all in their fifties, secretly construct a balcony inside the World Trade Center, temporarily attach it, and briefly stand on top of it, floating dreamily above New York City.

The call of the void, that perverse temptation to jump when

you're high up in the sky, briefly beckoned. "We'll step out one by one, like lemmings," Urban is recorded saying just before he walks the plank. But any designs on self-defenestration soon faded. Instead, each artist stood still like statues, balancing on the edge of corporate America. One member of Gelitin (which one is a secret) stuck a piece of chewing gum on the wall outside, as if planting a flag in the moon.

A helicopter simultaneously circled the North Tower. Crammed inside the chopper were a small group of associates, photographing Gelitin as they stood 1,100 feet above the future Ground Zero. Less than an hour after it had begun, the balcony was hauled back in and the window was resealed. And just like that, the B-Thing was over.

In the 25 years since, those involved have largely avoided speaking about the event again. Outside of esoteric circles, it's still relatively obscure. For a long time, many skeptics believed it never even happened and claimed that it was a hoax on a vast scale. Now, almost everyone agrees that the B-Thing took place, but opinion is split on what it means.

Editor's picks

Perhaps it was a reckless stunt, a stand against capitalism, the first great artwork of the new millennium. Deeper, still: a way to better understand what would, a year and a half later in September 2001, be one of the darkest days in American history. Or, most explosive of all, to a small community

prone to unhinged conspiracy: It was the very thing that somehow caused it.

GELITIN'S CURRENT SPACE, THANKFULLY, isn't 91 floors in the air; it's just a few floors up in a Vienna studio. Reither greets me as I arrive on a stormy Saturday afternoon, a Bart Simpson tank top and ragged shorts hang on his slender frame. It's a capacious space brimming with Gelitin's madcap experiments: reconstructed wooden chairs, cuddly toy sculptures, "Mona Lisa" pastiches, and a toilet filled with foliage. In the basement, hundreds of banana boxes from the local supermarket are stacked to the ceiling and packed with retro tools, kaput machinery, and past artworks.



Austrian art collective Gelitin members Wolfgang Gantner and Ali Janka look out after removing the World Trade Center window. *Gelitin: Maria Ziegelböck, Thomas Sandbichler, Susanne Wimmer*

After originally meeting at a summer camp as kids in 1978, the Gelitin artists began officially working together in 1993. Their moniker, an intentional misspelling of gelatin, is inspired by their past use of the eponymous setting agent as a material for their sculptures. "It's a universal word, like *kebab*," Reither notes (he's right — almost every major language uses a cognate of *gelatin*). But conventional they are not; everything Gelitin does goes against the grain. They are impish agents of mischief, working in an absurd paradigm of their own.

Their art isn't aimed at squares. Gelitin frequently ends up naked, and their work often involves fucking (like penetrating clay for "New York Goelm") or pissing (like the communal urinal of "All Together Now") or shitting (like excrement exhibit "Vorm – Fellows – Attitude"). But where they physically bare all, they psychologically reveal little. They stand in stark opposition to, as Reither puts it, art that looks like art. "Our world is always trying to rationalize things, an approach that Gelitin deliberately refuses," art dealer Carol Greene says in the 2016 documentary *Whatever Happened to Gelitin?* This eccentric approach has been their passport to exhibit their art across the globe and earned them fans including Damien Hirst, Liam Gillick, Sarah Lucas, and John Waters.

But Austria has remained a key market for their work (they often summon the transgressive spirit of Viennese Actionism, a radical performance art movement from the

1960s). On the day I arrive, Reither drives me and his 20-year-old daughter Josephine out to Königshof, a town in the countryside, for the opening of a new show inspired by nature; Gelitin have contributed a steam sauna that looks a little like an alien egg. The main event, a live operatic performance combining apple farming and sapphic erotica, sets the tone. The next day, I chance upon some strangely fitting street art by Julie Hayward in the city's eighth district. "Don't try to be an apple if you are a banana," it reads. "You'll always be a second-rate apple."

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NEW YORK, PERHAPS MORE OPEN to the weird and wonderful, has always been a second home for Gelitin. Back in 1999, they were starting to make a name for themselves in the city. Janka's boyfriend, Lucien Samaha, was a lounge music DJ at the Greatest Bar on Earth. It was part of Windows on the World, the restaurant at the top of the North Tower of the World Trade Center. The Gelitin artists and their friends were permanent fixtures on the guest list to create a buzz. It was here they met Moukhtar Kocache, who was head of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Artist Residencies program. The LMCC offered vacant offices in the WTC to exciting creatives. Kocache encouraged Gelitin to apply for a studio residency, and they landed a six-month stay.

The city was at the edge of the dot-com peak, and a lively scene of art mavericks and tech wunderkinds were

bouncing. But the boom was about to implode, and Mayor Rudy Giuliani was cracking down on the city's scenesters. "There was crazy money flying around ... and super-alternative freaks," says Reither. Gelitin already had money and a studio in Austria so they wanted to use this new place to do something left field. Even on the plane to New York for the start of the residency, Reither remembers daydreaming about creating something that used the World Trade Center not just as a space, but also as a muse. "It was big and beautiful and classy ... but it was basically a dying dinosaur," he says in the studio, as he lights his daughter Josephine's roll-up cigarette with an industrial blowtorch.

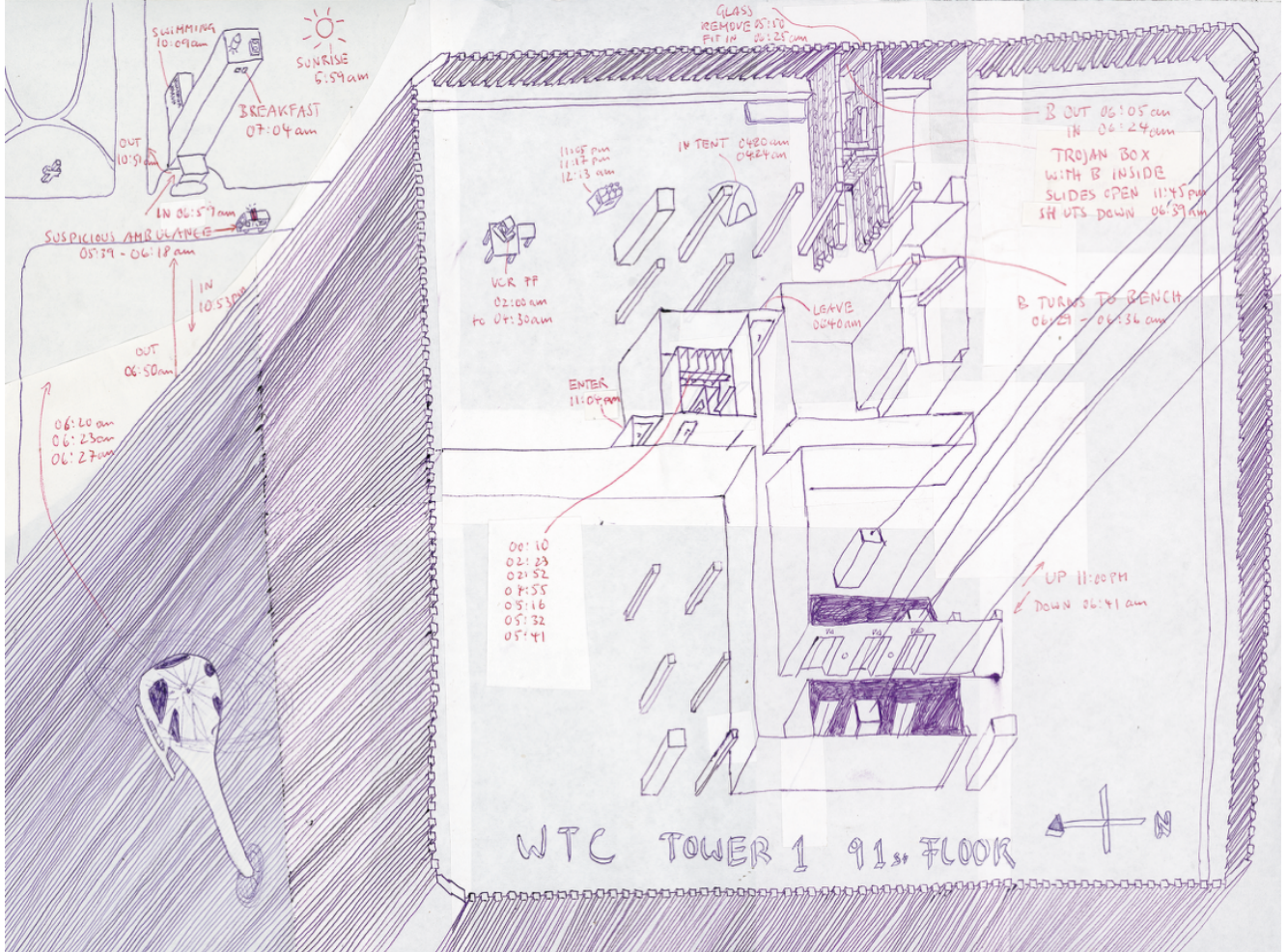
And the windows were frustratingly restrictive. They were extremely narrow — only 18 inches wide, reflecting architect Minoru Yamasaki's fear of heights — and extended out from the inside, meaning you could only ever look straight out of them rather than peer around the corner. And, crucially, they were sealed shut and could not be opened. But Gelitin became hyperfixated by a desire to remove them. "It was like stealing diamonds, like planning how to dig a tunnel under the safe box," Reither says.

The B-Thing was, from the start, underpinned by this compulsion. There was no loftier philosophy, just an intense desire to step outside of their studio and circumvent the claustrophobia. "You can't even open the windows. You want to look out. Then the idea of freedom starts," says Gantner, who, with a curly mop of hair and a kind smile, is the dreamer of the group.

And the way to do that was the “B” of the B-Thing: a balcony. Urban space is sacred; to build an extension is to elongate your individual real estate. For Gelitin, it provided a new way to see the city and the facade of the building itself. It wasn’t the designated platform of Top of the World, the South Tower’s rooftop observation deck and tourist trap; it was their own, self-imagined, self-constructed view (Reither regularly jokes that they could have made a fortune from leasing it out). “An escape hatch into the gray concrete jungle of everyday urban life,” [wrote](#) Rainer Fuchs in a project statement for the B-Thing.

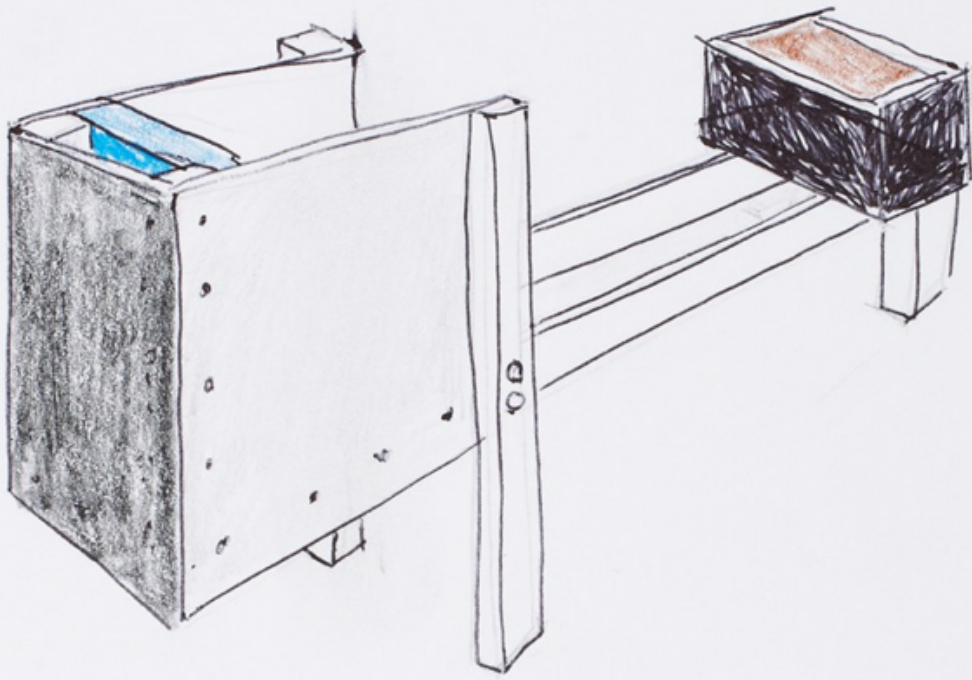
They did not intend it to be sensationalist or attract publicity (they dislike the word “stunt” in the context of the B-Thing). “It’s really a poetic gesture. A sculpture. A space in your head,” says Janka. As the only Gelitin member to sport a dress shirt and a snowy beard, he feels like the sage elder of the group.

It was a clandestine operation. So, they shut down any rumors among the other resident artists to avoid getting busted, built a fortress of cardboard boxes in their studio (known as the “Trojan Box”) to conceal their activity, and kept their inner circle tight.



A sketch of Gelitin's plan to create a balcony with a wooden pallet railing outside of the WTC while a helicopter flew by to collect footage. *Gelitin*

One of the initiated was Leo Koenig, an American art dealer who established his titular gallery when he was 21 years old. He had befriended Gelitin and began bringing their work across the pond to the States. They filled him in on the balcony idea and he agreed to get involved. "I was a little scared. But I was very young and not thinking of the consequences. It's like making a big plan of spray-painting a giant subway car in the middle of the night," Koenig says over Zoom. He saw the work as a response to the rising draconianism of the political class. "The United States of 1999 seems feeble compared to what we have to go through now. But it had an oppressive quality. The project was born from a gesture of sticking it to the man."



The balcony was secured after removing a window on the 91st floor. *Gelitin*

The construction of the balcony itself only took half a day (Gelitin have built wooden sculptures and structures of far greater complexity over their career). The window took more work; it was like a car windshield, a frame with black rubber around it. They realized they needed to pull out the rubber like the tube off a bicycle, attach suction caps to hold the pane in place, and then hook it out with a small tool. They prepared for every outcome, including procuring a near-identical backup window from a manufacturer in case it smashed.

Gelitin utilized the WTC's antiquated freight system to painstakingly cart up equipment and wooden beams; logistically this proved challenging as they had to be

shunted in diagonally, and there were several different elevators to negotiate. Fortunately, security wasn't much of an issue (although it had been tightened since the 1993 attacks on the World Trade Center). "If you showed up with a pizza in the lobby for the 46th floor, you walked in," Reither says. They would regularly sign in visitors and sometimes even stay overnight. Once, they even had to cut a beam down to size in the lobby with a jigsaw, and no one said a word. "It was classic New York. Everything was possible. Nobody used the word security."

They contacted a lawyer as a precaution and drafted a statement summarizing their exact plans. "What I remember is that he suggested we have 25-cent coins on us and a blow-up pillow. The 25 cents to make phone calls from the jail and the pillow for sleeping better, because U.S. jails do not provide pillows to the inmates. And he said, don't do it. That was his advice," Reither says. But they didn't take too much notice. "Not falling out and not getting caught was the most important part of the operation. Our focus was fully on that."

Nor were they concerned about irrational fears surrounding the window being a gigantic vacuum. "There was a myth that if you opened the window, you would get sucked out of it. But there's no pressure difference," Reither says with a laugh. Surely he was a little anxious about what might happen? "No, we grew up in Austria. We know what mountains are."

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE B-Thing, the wind was perfectly still. "The building was empty. The streets were empty. There were no cleaners or security or maintenance. It was March, so the facade faced the sunrise, which was perfect for the sunlight," Reither says. Gelitin had entered the building on the evening of March 18 — set up the balcony, mounted a camera, and prepared counterweights made of sandbags — then slept in their studio.

They woke up before the crack of dawn, nervously ate breakfast, and attached a rope harness to the ceiling in case the weight of the glass pulled them out of the building. "Every step of this was very precise and was executed slowly," Reither says, noting that the window pane, after it had been removed as per the practiced procedure, was kept safe in a purpose-built stand.



Gelitin members Florian Reither and Wolfgang Gantner with Lucien Samaha and photographer Maria Ziegelböck at the hotel across from the WTC. *Gelitin: Maria Ziegelböck, Thomas Sandbichler, Susanne Wimmer*

The only onlookers were directly opposite, hanging out in a suite of what was then known as the Millenium Hilton (it has since changed hands and is now the M Social Hotel New York Downtown). A congregation of New York's kooks had gathered to witness a private viewing of the B-Thing. It was a pre-party, a watch party, and an afterparty rolled into one. The host and benefactor was Josh Harris, a larger-than-life character (his passport, he says, has him down as a "young 64"). The perception of Harris ranges from charlatan and narcissist all the way to prophet and genius. The entrepreneur — once suggested to be "the first internet millionaire in New York" by *Wired* — built a cult reputation with the early online streaming platform Pseudo and social experiment "Quiet: We Live in Public" (*Big Brother* on acid, basically).

He was, undoubtedly, impossibly ahead of the curve. "I made my bones by being able to accurately predict the future," Harris says over Zoom. He thinks he has a "preternatural" ability and repeatedly describes his younger self as a "*Young Sheldon* spy brat" with precocious abilities to understand the intelligence world. Since his heyday, he's lost around \$50 million (mainly due to the dot-com crash). He's now holed up in Las Vegas playing professional poker (after a long stint, funnily enough, as an apple farmer). "He was super-interesting in his maniacal, strange, misguided

way of wanting to create something that was quite profound," Koenig says of Harris.

Harris remembers first discussing the B-Thing with Gelitin and Koenig back in 1999 over a game of Risk in Harris' apartment. Together, they hatched a plan to rent out the top floor of the Millenium to watch the B-Thing happen and book a helicopter to fly down the Hudson River to capture the event. Harris says he invited his favorite artists for the ride. "It was a funny party. It wasn't, like, a fun party," Harris says.

Koenig's account differs: "We partied the entire night through. We got there at 10 p.m. and just ripped it until 6 a.m., when they actually performed the removal of the window." Maria Ziegelböck, the main photographer, recalls being more sober than everyone else, as she was there for work. She says Harris suggested she strap herself outside the helicopter with the door open to take better pictures (thankfully, she says, the pilot wasn't able to arrange that). "I have a vague recollection [of this] but am not sure," Harris says. "But if I didn't [suggest it], I wish I had."



Host and benefactor Josh Harris (left) in the helicopter passing by the tower.

Gelitin: Maria Ziegelböck, Thomas Sandbichler, Susanne Wimmer

The helicopter, paid for by Harris, was late taking off from the Millenium Downtown heliport (as Gelitin found out through staying in contact via a cache of clunky cellphones). And Koenig didn't make it on as he was too drunk and high. "Everybody was just like, stay the fuck here," he remembers. Harris was on board, though. "I had two or three other beautiful women with me in the back of the helicopter. It was kind of cool. It was like, this is how do you New York City," he says. Alongside his girlfriend Tania (videoing the B-Thing) was Ziegelböck, who desperately grappled with the long lens on her small analog camera, poking out of the tiny chopper window.

Then, the tiny Gelitin figures appeared on the balcony. Koenig recalls just about making out a small speck through

a pair of binoculars. "I remember sobering up and thinking, oh, my God, that is so high. It was something. It was amazing," he says. He pauses. "But it was also sort of anticlimactic," he concedes.

After the B-Thing performance had finished, the window was resealed, the tools were packed away, and Gelitin headed to the hotel. Thomas Sandbichler, an artist and friend, was standing at the door of the hotel room to stop any smuggling; he collected every single roll of film and tape, giving Gelitin full access to the assets. "At the time, you could still control images," says Urban, a soft-spoken man and the "guinea pig" of Gelitin's skywalk. As far as Gelitin are aware, no passersby saw the B-Thing take place (there was a "suspicious ambulance" positioned on the street below, but no authorities were alerted).

Then, Ziegelböck remembers her and the Gelitin artists having breakfast at the hotel, still rushing on adrenaline. "We got room service. Eggs Benedict with whiskey. And we joined the party as we couldn't do it the night before," she says. They got the elevator all the way to the fifth-floor swimming pool, as the spring light hit the water. "We were just in our underwear," she says. "And we jumped in."



A photo taken from Hilton Millenium suite shows the helicopter approaching the balcony. *Gelitin: Maria Ziegelböck, Thomas Sandbichler, Susanne Wimmer*

WHEN IT CAME TO PRESENTING the work of their residency in the World Trade Center during an open studio event, a month after the B-Thing, Gelitin were typically opaque. They exhibited a bench that had been made from disassembled parts of the balcony, the cardboard-box fort that had provided a distraction in their office, and the chewing gum. But they kept mum on what actually happened. This artifice became part of the artwork, mystifying the whole event. It was more about suspending belief rather than disbelief. "The photography is in the realm of UFO photography. If you keep it open, it's more interesting," says Janka.

It almost went completely unnoticed; no news outlets picked up on the B-Thing at the time. "We decided that the

less one talks about it, the more exciting it is," Koenig echoes. Only their close associates were shown four photos, carried in each of their wallets. Ziegelböck's heart sank when she saw the full range of imagery for the first time. They were grainy. But the artists were enamored by them, and she had a change of heart. "You can call it a problem, or you can call it the character of the images," Ziegelböck says.

In July 2001, the photographs were revealed in *The B-Thing* book, published by Buchhandlung Walther König (owned by Leo's uncle) and containing sketches and photographs related to the project, bound in a cover that's printed with the full-bleed image of Reither. He stands in the dead center of the spine. Tex Rubinowitz's text describes it as a "surgical intervention" on the 148th floor (an impossibility to further disorientate their audience).

The book caught the eye of *The New York Times*, and on Aug. 18, 2001, the paper ran a story on the cover of the Metro section. "Balcony Scene (Or Unseen) Atop The World," read the headline. The lead image of the B-Thing was front and center. "The amazing thing that happens when you take out a window, is that the whole city comes into the building," Janka is quoted as saying.

Not everyone was a fan. Sound artist Stephen Vitiello, who had recorded the World Trade Center like a "stethoscope" by putting microphones to the windows (he didn't illegally open them) in 1999, was disappointed. "It just pissed me

off. It seemed irresponsible. I wanted to honor the opportunity [of the LMCC residency]. It seemed to manipulate it and put everybody else at risk," he says over Zoom. He was horrified by the potential pitfalls. "I can imagine the people who ran the residency saying, what the hell, we gave you this space and people could die." Gelitin emphasize that they took all necessary precautions.

Kocache, the LMCC artistic director, did have to put out some fires. "The purpose of this letter is to categorically deny and refute Gelitin's (the Austrian art collective) preposterous claim to have removed a window and installed a balcony from the 91st floor of Tower 1 in the World Trade Center ... no one in his or her sane mind would believe such an account!" started a memo to the rest of the LMCC residents. In it, he appeals to their nature as "pranksters" and "masters of deception" and claims that any sort of evidence is entirely fabricated.

A point-blank denial was also fired off by Koenig, who lied and told the reporter that it didn't happen. It wasn't *just* more mystification; they were also covering their backsides from any potential legal repercussions. Everyone implicated was acutely aware of the scale of their sabotage. "This is terrorism!" an unidentified partygoer is recorded as saying in footage of the B-Thing. "This is *art* terrorism," another qualifies.



The Gelitin artists on the balcony, as seen from inside the WTC. *Gelitin: Maria Ziegelböck, Thomas Sandbichler, Susanne Wimmer*

It's why Janka called the *Times* reporter back, asking them not to print the piece. But it was too late. The *Times* conscientiously spoke to digital manipulation experts and security to prove it could have happened. But an element of mystery endured. "The affair has taken on the outlines of an urban myth, mutated by rumors and denials among the downtown cognoscenti," the article stated.

And then, a final, prophetic statement from Janka that appears in the article, dated Aug. 18, 2001: "This building needs things like that to happen, because otherwise it would die inside."

SEPT. 11, 2001: A DAY THAT still holds an unbearable weight. "The ultimate event, the mother of all events, the

pure event uniting within itself all the events that have never taken place," philosopher Jean Baudrillard wrote. American Airlines Flight 11 and United Airlines Flight 175, hijacked by Al-Qaeda terrorists, hit the Twin Towers and brought them crashing down. The 91st floor of the North Tower, where Gelitin worked, had a disturbing significance; it was the line between life and death (no one on the 92nd floor or above survived).

The Gelitin artists seesaw when talking about their reaction to the attacks. Reither tells me that "it was like this virginity of innocence was completely lost in New York." Urban emphasises the aftershocks. "I had the feeling that it's after an earthquake shakes. Everyone thinks, OK, there are bigger problems than mine. You have this grounded perspective." Then, on my final day in the studio, Reither is much firmer: "From our side, we have nothing to say about the attacks ... nothing artistically relevant."

But Sept. 11 was, strangely, already going to be a day of at least *some* artistic relevance for Gelitin. It happened to be the date that the imagery of the B-Thing was meant to go on display at Koenig's gallery as part of a far larger exhibition titled "Gelitin Is Getting It All Wrong Again." "We even had a plan to go and get the wood structure out of the World Trade Center, where it was still stored. It still haunts me," Koenig says. The exhibit, revolving around a purpose-built amphitheater, eventually took place about two weeks later, with all imagery of the B-Thing removed. "It was not the time to show it. We took them out because we didn't

want any connection between [us and the attack]. We didn't want to sensationalize it," says Janka.

But this distancing from the event didn't stop the phones ringing and the burning questions igniting once the dust settled. What are the chances that Gelitin just *happened* to create the B-Thing — which involved an aircraft flying next to the Twin Towers, looked like a scene from [9/11](#), and took place on, of all the possible floors, the 91st floor — a year before the attacks?

HARRIS REMEMBERS THE MOMENT PEOPLE started trying to connect dots. "Can you *imagine* the shitstorm?" he asks me. The first [conspiracy theories](#) — which alleged that the B-Thing proves that, in some convoluted way, the U.S. had prior knowledge of 9/11 or that Gelitin were secretly in on it — spread across niche radio stations and obscure blogs. As social media evolved, they metastasized. Sprawling YouTube videos emerged, weaving intricate patterns with all the deftness of a kindergarten textiles class.

There had been, of course, other artworks focused on the World Trade Center prior to 9/11, ever since highwire artist Philippe Petit walked a tightrope between the Twin Towers in 1974. Notably, William Basinski finished his cult project "Disintegration Loops," uncanny repetitions of decaying tapes, on the morning of the attacks. The E-Team, part of the LMCC residency, had lit up rooms of the tower to spell out their collective's name. Part of Vitiello's residency

project had also included recordings of passing planes.



Wolfgang Gantner sticks his head out of the open window and looks down. *Gelitin: Maria Ziegelböck, Thomas Sandbichler, Susanne Wimmer*

Most strikingly, LMCC resident Michael Richards had built sculptures inspired by aviation, on the 92nd floor. "The idea of flight relates to my use of pilots and planes, but it also references ... the idea of being lifted up, enraptured, or taken up to a safe place — to a better world," he wrote in an artist statement. He died on the morning of Sept. 11, while working in his studio.

But it was the B-Thing that online conspiracy theories have focused on. The evidence for any sort of connection is, of course, exceptionally tenuous. Some content suggests that Ali Janka had Islamist connections due to his first name, but it's actually short for Alexander (he dropped his

nickname for a while to avoid heat). Others suggested Gelitin were planted into the building by Mossad, linking them to the Israeli art student mystery (in March 2001, the U.S. Office of the National Counterintelligence Executive had warned of people proclaiming to be “Israeli art students” and trying to gain entry to federal buildings. It’s often connected to 9/11 conspiracy theories). Gelitin, though, were neither students, nor Israeli.

Other conjecture supposes that Gelitin planted explosives on the 91st floor and, as per many 9/11 conspiracy theories, that this was the real cause of the World Trade Center falling. “Gelatin may refer to explosive materials, possibly linked to nano-solgel compounds believed to be capable of targeting structural elements,” reads one recent Instagram post by Instagram account questionantiquity.

The “proof” pivots on the fact that the cardboard boxes, used to conceal the B-Thing, were all marked with BB 18, a type of electrical terminal sold by a company called Littlefuse, implying some sort of explosive intent. And the rest hinged on the eerie coincidences between the stories of 9/11 and of the B-Thing — the fact that texts published and footage shot by Gelitin related to the project before September 2001 used words like “terrorism” and “intervention.”

Recently, there’s been a resurgence of these “false flag” fantasies on Instagram and Reddit, virally mutating as they find new host servers. One image of Gelitin setting up the

B-Thing on X, posted by an account called illuminatibot in 2023, has been viewed 4 million times. Gelitin say over lunch that they still receive emails from conspiracy theorists every year, always on the same day.

GELITIN HAVE DONE THEIR BEST over the years to block out the noise. "You read one or two and it's funny, then it gets really boring. It's like a stoner conspiracy. It's very thin," Reither says. "They're powerful and strong. All you need is a good story and some logic," Urban says of conspiracy theories.

At times, they express frustration — even perhaps fear — at the endless paranoia that latched onto the B-Thing. Their tranquil act had, after all, been corrupted by misinformation and hijacked by the tin-foil brigade. Harris, though, seems hooked on the lore that surrounds the B-Thing. He frames it as less of a rabbit hole, more an entire warren.

He claims that he was followed by the FBI for years after the attack. "I know I was/am under surveillance due to my colorful record," he says. (Harris shares a FOIA from the United States Secret Service dated May 4, 2015, concluding that there are no records pertaining to his request. "FOIA is bullshit," he says. The FBI didn't respond to a request for comment.)

He also still questions whether Gelitin had prior knowledge of the attacks. "The question I ponder is whether Gelitin knew of 9/11 in advance? If so, how did they know? Did a

third party engineer the B-Thing installation?" (Gelitin unsurprisingly refute this vehemently). While Harris isn't peddling conspiracies online, he seems enticed by the intrigue that surrounds the B-Thing. "[The mystery] is a crutch for him. He's a strange bird," says Koenig. "To be involved in this was one of the greatest moments of his life ... He embraces all the weird things I would shy away from."

Perhaps most astonishingly of all, Harris is open to the idea that Osama bin Laden may have even been aware of the B-Thing and seen it as proof of concept. "Three weeks before 9/11 [with *The New York Times* article] I literally exposed a huge hole in security," he says. He describes the B-Thing as a "dress rehearsal" for 9/11 (in the sense that it featured an aircraft flying towards the World Trade Center).

But Peter Bergen, author of *The Rise and Fall of Osama bin Laden*, debunks this theory. "It's highly unlikely he would have heard of this. He was living in Afghanistan, and there was no internet to speak of or TV because of Taliban bans. Also, planning for the 9/11 attacks began in earnest in 1999 and was on the drawing board as early as 1996."

While much of the conspiracy can be easily dismissed as entirely delusional, the level of coincidence that surrounds the artwork is enough to unnerve even the most committed rationalist. It's hard to imagine the sensation it would attract if it had somehow happened in the present day. "It would be off the scale," Scott Clifford Evans, an artist and filmmaker, tells me at the private viewing. "People would

lose it. I mean, this would be something that fucking Trump would tweet about or Alex Jones jump on. It would be insane."



The balcony was affixed to the outside of the tower. *Gelitin: Maria Ziegelböck, Thomas Sandbichler, Susanne Wimmer*

It's why the original photos of the B-Thing have rarely made

it out of storage for the past 25 years (the main appearance was a skyscraper-themed exhibition in Chicago in 2012). Most institutions have avoided taking the risk of showing something so loaded. Curators have always been torn on what to do with depictions of 9/11, an event that in itself Damien Hirst described in a 2002 interview with the BBC as “kind of like an artwork in its own right” (he later apologized). Even sincere, poignant responses have attracted derision. Eric Fischl’s September 2002 sculpture “Tumbling Woman” — a bronze bust of one of the “jumpers” — was widely criticized for its apparent fetishisation of such unimaginable pain (it was removed from the Rockefeller Center within a week of going on display).

And “The Falling Man,” the haunting photograph of an unidentified “jumper” shot by Richard Drew, was pushed into taboo territory due to its disturbingly intimate depiction of death. It’s hard not to see it when looking at the imagery of the B-Thing. But unlike the subject of Drew’s photograph, Gelitin are not forced to sacrifice themselves to gravity.

ON THE FINAL DAY OF my Vienna trip, I get the real scoop: All four Gelitins are digging into a tub of assorted ice cream, mixing everything from mint chocolate chip to mango together in a swirly mess (every Gelitin requested a different flavor). We’re discussing the B-Thing for a final time, flicking through an inconspicuous gray folder of images from the project.

Whether the original photographs will ever be exhibited again remains to be seen. Koenig thinks the B-Thing could return to a gallery wall. "I've never shown the photos since. When I was asked about it, I always said it was too soon. Maybe it's [now ready] for a different generation to rediscover it," he says. (Gelitin say they have no current plans to do so.)

I transport myself to the scene of the B-Thing by peering through the magnifying lens of a loupe, hovering it over the contact sheets that seem to hum with a mysterious energy. Immersing myself in one image, which looks downward from the balcony at Lower Manhattan, nearly makes my legs wobble.

Several things become clear. First, 9/11 could, in some warped way, be a vehicle to retroactively understand the B-Thing and vice versa; both say something about the atmosphere of New York, before and after. Second, the B-Thing, obviously, did not *cause* 9/11. But a glitch in perspective has soldered them together: two parallel moments across time that seem to impossibly cross. A beguiling act of synchronicity.

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The B-Thing could mean many other things. "You could say it's a critique on capitalism. A critique on New York artists who sit up there and paint and develop their trademark through repetition," Reither says, seemingly doubting his

own attempts to try to rationalize it. Vitiello is still unconvinced of any intrinsic value. "It's hard not to be impressed by the feat of pulling it off, but it doesn't give me a sense of poetry." He pauses, grimacing. "It feels like someone on an airplane trying to open the door or cut out the window. It's an adrenaline rush, but there's a whole lot more on stake." Harris is on the other side of the spectrum. "It was the first great artwork of the 21st century," he says definitively.

If the imagery of the B-Thing is somehow able to be detached from what came next, it should be seen as a monumental act of freedom.

It's why Gelitin still, all these years on, recite the epic poetry of the balcony scene. "It's a very romantic image," Reither says, projecting it onto his mind's eye. "It was the possibility of stepping out of your life, your shit job. To just step out for a moment. And enjoy the sunrise."

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