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Outside Leo Koenig, Inc. for the debut of Gelitin's "Tantamounter 24/7," Nov. 16, 2005



The input hatch of Gelitin's "Tantamounter" machine, with instructions for use



Lights on the "Tantamounter" indicate when it is ready for a new item

RAGING WITHIN THE MACHINE by Ben Davis

"Gelitin's Tantamounter 24/7" at Leo Koenig, Inc., Nov. 16-Nov. 23, 2005 (structure on view until Dec. 3, 2005), 545 W. 23rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10011

It was raining on Wednesday night, Nov. 16, 2005, here in New York city, forcing the crowd to jam extra tight into Leo Koenig, Inc. at 545 West 23rd Street, as Gelitin's "Tantamounter 24/7" project got off to a rip-roaring start.

There was plenty of jostling for space among the damp, exuberant masses, since the four-person Viennese art collective had erected a (supposedly soundproof) plywood wall that blocked off most of the gallery, leaving only a narrow area for the crowd to press into.

Behind the barrier, the team was hard at work as the human cogs of their "gigantic, complex and very clever machine," alongside Miami photographer Naomi Fischer and the group's German therapist, with whom they would man the contraption non-stop through the 23rd. Gelitin had fitted its workshop with a full kitchen and spent five days prior to the opening hauling in flea market junk and all kinds of other supplies to stock the Tantamounter.

It functions as a kind of art-Xerox. On the outside, where the visitors gather, there's a counter-height wooden box, jutting into the space from the wall. You open a wooden hatch on top of the box, throw in an item that you want duplicated, and press a copy button. A light bulb comes on, indicating the "machine" is "copying."

A few minutes later, at another part of the contraption -- a large wooden cabinet by the wall at one end of the space -- you get a signal, and out comes your original, along with a Gelitin-designed duplicate, hashed together from their stockpile of junk.

Results were predictably unpredictable. Someone, rising to the challenge of trying to stump the chumps, brought a chintzy, brightly painted goddess figurine. After a bit of thought on the Tantamounter's part, out came a like-sized, brightly colored cut-out paper doll.

Sometimes the results were laughably slipshod. A shoe that went into the machine came out as a crudely taped together replica of corrugated cardboard. But then again, a friend of mine tossed in her bra, and out it came in ten minutes -- with another bra. It was cheaper than going shopping.

(Later in the show's run, in violation of Tantamounter rules against copying living things, artist Erik Parker popped his two-year-old daughter through the hatch. The tot reportedly spent three hours helping the Gelitin crew in their lab, before emerging with her "copy" -- nine Elmo dolls.)



A guest puts a figurine into the machine for copying



A Gelitin-made copy [left] and the original



Gelitin copies a shoe



Gelitin is here celebrating the same type of DIY crafts esthetic that many artists are mining right now, and the results are thoroughly likable, as the late-night crowds suggest. At the same time, it's so willfully fluffy that it's tempting to force some kind of interpretation onto it to give it some weight.

You could argue, for instance, that the project lampoons Plato's arcane idea that artworks are copies of copies (the deconstructionist thesis). Or, with its humans-in-the-belly-of-the-machine conceit, that it represents a kind of nostalgia for the touch of human craft in a world overcome by technologized rationality (the Frankfurt School thesis). Or that it is a blow against that old enemy, the barrier between artist and audience (the first-year art history grad thesis).

But these kinds of justifications would be superfluous; Tantamount's significance lies right there, in its lack of serious justification. Gelitin's machine willfully dissents from the idea of art-as-mystery -- the whole point of their slap-dash, jokey copies is their complete transparency; you can imagine exactly the process that goes into throwing them together. Likewise, the group makes a point of steering clear of even a hint of artist-as-commentator -- everything about what they do seems determined not to be taken seriously.

Rather, the whole force of the project lies in the fact that the members of Gelitin are visibly having a good time. The idea of a one-week arts-and-crafts slumber party seems pretty fun. So does the idea that they are back there, trying to top each other as to who can make the cleverest copy.

Jacques Lacan once argued that the source of artists' special place in culture is that they represent the ability to enjoy freely. What Gelitin's style of get-together-with-your-friends-and-have-a-good-time art plays to is this fantasy; it's the naked enactment of the idea of artist-as-enjoyer, stripped of any other end. In fact, its almost made into an end itself -- an unprofessional professionalism, an un-machine-like machine.

On the 16th, with the rain at your back, if you were invited to the party, this seemed like a pretty good deal.

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The "Tantamounter"'s near-exact
rendering of a mandala-like design
leaves the crowd astonished