Balcony Scene (Or Unseen) Atop the World
Episode at Trade Center Assumes Mythic Qualities

By SHAILA K. DEWAN

The affair of the balcony ended, if indeed it ever began, with the appearance in July of a slender book of curious title, obtainable in very few places, one of them being an art gallery in a frosted storefront on Broadway near Franklin Street.

Called “The B-Thing” and produced by four Vienna-based artists known collectively as Gelatin, the book is demure to the point of being oblique. What little explanation it contains appears to have been scribbled in ballpoint. Among the photos and schematic drawings, there are doodles of tarantulas with human heads.

In short, the book belies the extravagance of the feat it seems to document: the covert installation, and brief use, of a balcony on the 91st floor of the World Trade Center, 1,100 feet above the earth. Eight photographs — some grainy, all taken from a great distance — depict one tower’s vast eastern facade, marred by a tiny molelike growth: a lone figure dressed in a white jacket, standing in a lectern-size box.
The contemporary art world, of course, is rife with acts of subversion followed by boasting, which is known as “documentation.” In that context, the beauty of the balcony was that it so literally pushed the envelope. Yet since that Sunday morning in March 2000, when the balcony was allegedly installed and, 19 minutes later, dismantled, the affair has taken on the outlines of an urban myth, mutated by rumors and denials among the downtown cognoscenti.

Although the book appears to seek notoriety, the

Members of Gelatin in 1998, when their exhibition at the P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center included a 25-foot walk-up tower of discarded furniture parts.

artists have gone coy. Their dealer, who witnesses say watched the event from a hotel suite, now claims it never happened. Either the balcony was an elaborate hoax meant to look real, or the inverse is true: it really happened, and the closer it comes to being found out, the more those involved would prefer for everyone to think it was a hoax.

In the spring of 2000, Gelatin and 14 other artists shared free studio space on the 91st floor, where the group’s artmaking appeared to consist of building a clubhouse out of cardboard boxes.

But Ali Janka, a member of Gelatin reached by phone in Vienna, said that the blindered view afforded by the narrow windows had inspired them to find a way to step outside. “After you have a certain idea, you can’t go back,” he said, “because everything else

Continued on Page B4

Photographs from “The B-Thing,” a book produced by Gelatin, show someone on a temporary balcony on the World Trade Center, top; a drawing of the cantilevered balcony, above; and a view from inside the 91st-floor studio from which the balcony was hung, left. Unless the whole episode is a hoax, which some of those involved would prefer that people believe. So they say.
towers in the world? An examination of the security system revealed that it was focused on the ground floor and basement, Mr. Janka said, adding, “There’s no surveillance on the facade itself.”

That is true, said Cherrie Nanninga, the director of real estate for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which until recently ran the World Trade Center. Port Authority officials, shown a copy of “The B-Thing” by a reporter, reacted with disbelief, then outrage. Although their own investigation turned up no evidence, Ms. Nanninga said, “we have no reason to believe it didn’t happen.”

Window removal is considered so dangerous that when it is done the streets below are cordoned off, she said. “It was really a stupid and irrational act that in my view borders on the criminal,” she said, adding that the stunt had jeopardized the studio program, whose space is donated by the Trade Center.

Removing the window may have been dangerous, but according to Walter Friedman, the owner of Dependable Glass, which performs that service for the World Trade Center, it is not that difficult. All it takes is four guys, some readily available equipment — and nerve, Mr. Friedman said.

Nerve is not something Gelatin lacks. They specialize in projects that require participants to sign a waiver.

In a piece called “The Human Elevator,” strong men on scaffolding hoisted people to the roof of a three-story building in Los Angeles. And patrons in Munich were greased with baby oil and invited to slide naked down an esophaguslike chute formed by the bellies of a crew of overweight Germans.

Although Gelatin, which is representing Vienna in the Venice Biennale, has not shirked from physical risk, they seem to think that merely discussing the balcony

An elaborate hoax made to look real, or just the opposite?

with a reporter was dangerous, perhaps because they are currently seeking permission to live on a vacant lot on Canal Street, as part of a forthcoming exhibition.

“If you write about the balcony, maybe you can just not write about it too much,” Mr. Janka called back to say after the initial interview, the first of several calls protesting the appearance of an article, despite the fact that the artists had published the book.

To others involved in the project, it seemed reasonable that the appearance of “The B-Thing” meant secrecy was no longer necessary. Josh Harris, the Internet entrepreneur once known for holding extra-

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