Felix Gmelin was born in Heidelberg, Germany in 1962 and lives in Stockholm, Sweden where he teaches at Konstfack, University College of Arts, Crafts and Design. His multi-part installation Tools and Grammar was exhibited as part of The Power Plant’s summer 2008 exhibition, ‘Not Quite How I Remember It,’ that focused on historical remakes and re-enactments. In addition to participating in major exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale in 2003 and 2007 and the Berlin biennial in 2006, Gmelin has presented solo shows at institutions including Portikus, Frankfurt and Malmö Konstmuseum, and galleries such as maccarone inc., New York, Milliken Gallery, Stockholm, and Vilma Gold, London.

Helena Reckitt, the Senior Curator of Programs at The Power Plant and the curator of ‘Not Quite How I Remember It,’ chatted with Gmelin over the phone in June and July 2008.
I thought. Then a friend asked: if you are blind, what letters can you read? And, indeed, the engraved letters on monuments and gravestones were the only ones that these children could examine. So examining a graveyard was, finally, about teaching blind kids how to read. This education at a monastery in Stuttgart in 1926 was amazing. They taught children who can’t see to trust their remaining senses: their noses, ears and tactile sensibilities. Soon after, however, Hitler killed all these children out of ‘vitality’. So dealing with our understanding of the past became the work’s subtext.

FG: When did you come across the film?
HR: It happened when I was researching didactic films about liberal and progressive education with Bianca Rampas at the Bundesarchiv for the Berlin biennial in 2010. The weird nature of this film interested me immediately. The Nazi theme—that these children were to be euthanized under the National Socialist program Aktion T4—came later.

HR: But don’t Tools and Grammar include pictures based on Kunst und Rasse (Art and Race), Paul Schultz-Naumburg’s 1938 study about racial purity, modern art and disability?
FG: True. Two of my older paintings after illustrations from Kunst und Rasse were in my studio while I worked on Tools and Grammar. When I saw them together, I realized that they communicate with each other on multiple levels. The layers they added to the found footage created the entirety of Tools and Grammar. The innocence of the film in connection with what was about to happen in the future was striking.

HR: How did you go about copying sections of the film for the paintings and photographs?
FG: Some pictures were made by friends who I had told about the film. Others I made blindfolded, in darkness or in front of projections. None of them are direct copies, and they always entail some kind of perceptual interpretation. I imagined the process as an experiment in understanding.

HR: What about the rather lovely photographic of water?
FG: It’s actually a photograph of clay. Clay is used in daycare and I like its somewhat childish connotations. It’s close to something my eight-year-old son, David, might work with at school. In the film the children make copies of the gravestones in clay and sand. I wanted to repeat their actions and see what this meant physically, practically. What happens if I do it, or if my son does it? What happens if I do it this or that way? Will it be the same? That’s when the water came in. I adapted this approach to painting as well. I start to build my own tools, worked blindly or in darkness and began involving other people.

HR: Most of your earlier work combined wit or humour with a critical or deconstructive tone. Tools and Grammar feels less guarded, more intuitive.
FG: I would not agree with that, as the critical and deconstructive part is still present. But when I first started using video in 2002 I worked with a film production company and had to convince my producer and her team that my ideas stood up. This is maybe why my first video works were visually and conceptually so clear and simple. Initially I had no experience in making moving images, and my producer didn’t know much about art. So we talked a lot about whether our projects made sense or communicated. To me, as someone who knows my tools in painting, using my ignorance about moving images was magic. My not-to-know-how became a tool and it was exhilarating to work in a medium that I had no means to control. Now I use moving beyond and between these different media, and opening up my concepts to emotional narratives.

HR: In addition to your interest in surrendering control, destruction intersects you as a creative act.
FG: Do, undu, says Louise Bourgeois. Piet Mondrian said the element of destruction is far too underestimated in art. I love these quotes and find them inspiring. ‘Losing it’ is my starting point in the studio. Mostly I start from where I didn’t plan. Sometimes I immerse myself in the found footage so that what I say evolves from my understanding of the material and makes me get rid of my preconceptions. It’s important for me to be surprised within my process.

HR: It’s as if you become a student of the works that you appropriate.
FG: That’s a nice reflection. Sometimes these materials politicize my forms and invade my language, which I like.

HR: That happened with the ‘Art Vandal’ series of the mid-1990s for which you recreated modernist artworks that had been attacked or destroyed.
FG: Radical gestures changed art history in the last century. At the same time, art schools taught by copying. This work lovingly reconstructed art that was vandalized by artists or their other originals—with one exception: according to the Viennese police, Arnulf Rainer himself made the works that he later vandalized ‘Art Vandal’. I gave him a lot of trouble since they neither looked like Conceptual Art nor like traditional painting.

FG: Working in between the genres of Conceptual Art and painting at that time was dirty territory.
HR: Yes, but I later continued using the principles of the remake. Applying it to what was for me a new medium—video and film—with a new content—my personal and political history—and ‘leaving art about art’ behind gave me new confidence.

HR: Your most celebrated work to date, Farbest, Die Bote Fahne II (False Flag Test, The Red Flag II) (2002), remakes a film from ’88. The work presents two small puppet figures side-by-side: one shows a remake from 1988 of a relay of students (including your father) carrying a red flag to the Berlin city hall where they hang it from the balcony; the second, a remake from 2002, shows your students passing a red flag through the streets of Stockholm to the city hall. But this time they don’t reach the balcony. The theme of replaying the revolution in diluted form—the revolution as re-enactment—struck a chord when Farbest was shown at the Venice Biennale in 2003.
FG: My father was a teacher at the ddr, the Berlin film and television academy, in 1968. His doctoral thesis of 1966 defended the author as a driving force within television, and he had amazing students. One of them who participated in the flag piece, Gerd Conradt, gave me a copy of the film. Doing Farbest was super simple. I showed my students the film footage and said: let’s do it again.

HR: You made several other works from material in your father’s archive, including one that appropriates footage of him and a female lover covering one another in paint—Jye Klein meets free love. Did you enjoy pillaging your father’s archive? Was it awkward or embarrassing?
FG: I guess he was poking fun at the patriarchal artistic practices of Otto Muehl by making these silly paintings. I started to investigate my father’s archive in 2002, which I had inherited some years before. Organizing his archive was my way to deal with him. Misinterpreting his material was also a way to distance myself from him. Reading Musa Mayer’s honest book about her father, the artist Philip Guston, helped me a lot. This first psychologically truthful account about an artist’s inheritance freed me to tackle my story.

HR: Did you feel like you were communicating with your father?
Most people think revolution is liberating. While the consequences and goals achieved through revolution are, the revolutionary moment is often not. Do you what you are told by the leaders. Isn’t that terrible?