

Issue 04
£4.90

Art Review

'Art is full of possibilities. That's the whole idea. It's one of the basic premises of art — why we do it. Nothing else has that.'

OCTOBER
2006

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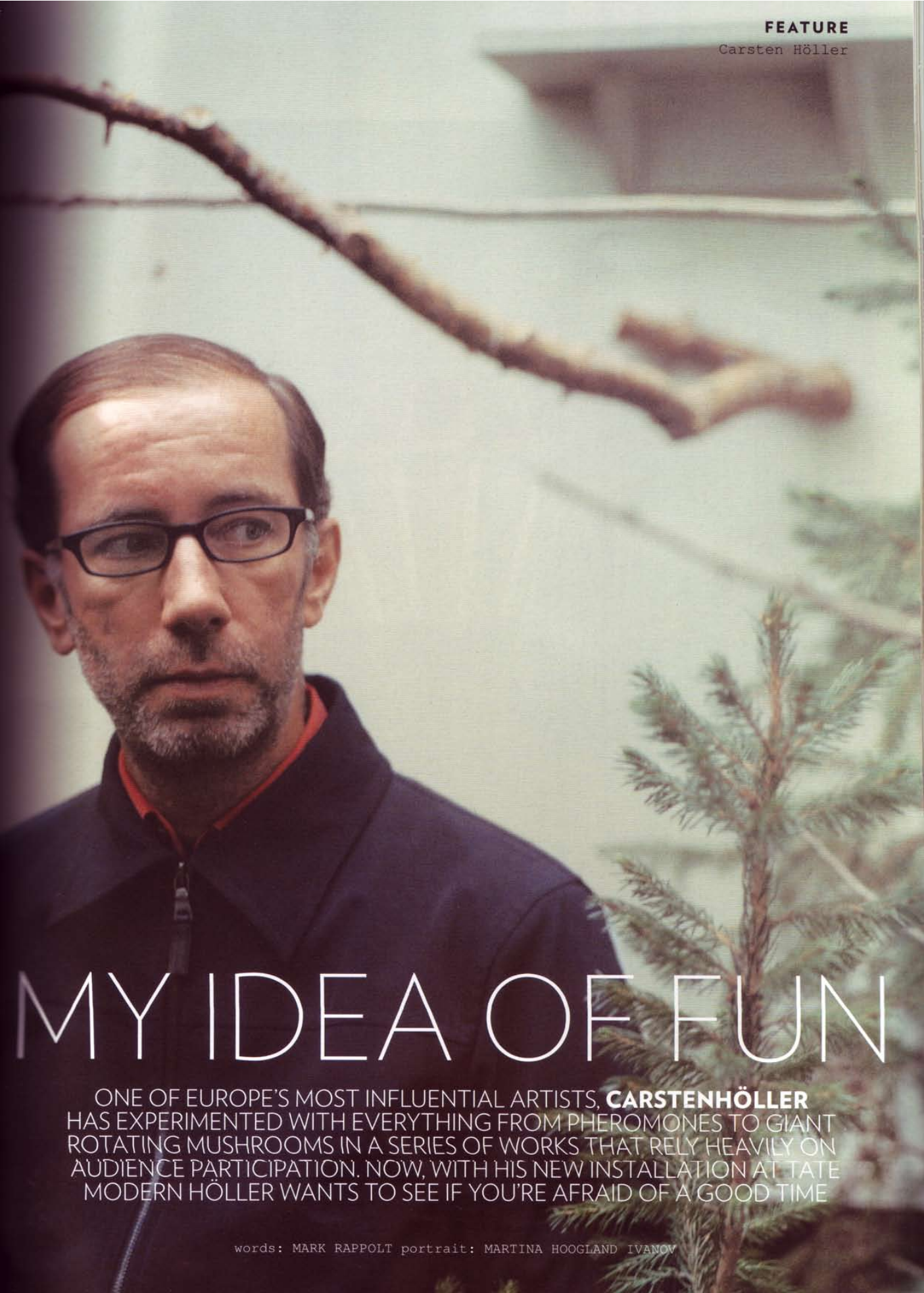
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**CARSTEN
HÖLLER:
THE DEVIL
INSIDE**

A portrait of Carsten Höller, a man with glasses and a beard, wearing a dark jacket over a red shirt. He is looking slightly to the left. The background is a blurred outdoor scene with a tree branch and a building.

FEATURE
Carsten Höller

MY IDEA OF FUN

ONE OF EUROPE'S MOST INFLUENTIAL ARTISTS, **CARSTENHÖLLER** HAS EXPERIMENTED WITH EVERYTHING FROM PHEROMONES TO GIANT ROTATING MUSHROOMS IN A SERIES OF WORKS THAT RELY HEAVILY ON AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION. NOW, WITH HIS NEW INSTALLATION AT TATE MODERN HÖLLER WANTS TO SEE IF YOU'RE AFRAID OF A GOOD TIME

words: MARK RAPPOLT portrait: MARTINA HOOGLAND IVANOV

FEATURE

Carsten Höller



above: *Kerussell/Carousel*, 1999,
installation view *La Belgique Visionnaire*,
BOZAR Palais des Beaux-Arts, Antwerp 1999,
photo Thorsten Arendt, © VG Bild Kunst, Bonn

HÖLLER IS HAPPY
SOMETHING “DEVILISH”

SHOULD CARSTEN HÖLLER SHOVE HIS MOTHER DOWN A FIVE-STOREY SLIDE?

We're sitting in his house, just outside Stockholm, and the forty-five-year-old German is thinking about it. Maybe seriously. He's certain, he concludes, that it would be better to drop his mother rather than his daughter down the chute. Fine; but would he actually go ahead and give his progenitor the push? "Possibly," he says from behind a wicked grin.

Perhaps it's no surprise, after that, to discover that Höller is happy to admit that there is something "devilish" about his art. Perhaps, in fact, it's so obvious that there's no need for him to make such an admission at all. His exhibitions from the early 1990s included *Killing Children* (featuring a range of devices, among them a child's bicycle rigged up to a jerry can full of petrol that ignites when the juvenile victim starts pedalling), and works like the *Pealove Room* (1993; a room containing two sex harnesses, a phial of PEA – phenylethylamine, an amphetamine-like chemical (famously found in chocolate) reputed to induce feelings of love – and a syringe). But Höller's devilishness has also taken far subtler forms. He operates under a number of more or less transparent pseudonyms ("only for the dirty work," he emphasises; "I always put my name to the real work"), among them Baldo Hauser, "an ideal writer who says the things I want to be said but don't really mean" (Hauser's descriptions of Höller's works were included in the press releases for a 2004 show at New York's Casey Kaplan gallery, for example), and Karsten Höller, a complex, idealised mirror image of the artist himself. More recent works, such as *Amusement Park* (2006), a collection of five large funfair rides (Gravitrons, Twisters, etc.) that is currently on show at MASS MoCA, have fused the subtle and the dramatic. Gaily decorated (in the colours of, um... fun) and luridly illuminated in classic carnivalesque fashion, the machines look as ordinary as such rides ever get. Except each has been set to operate at a barely perceptible speed. The idea is that they should serve to confound and disorientate viewers, that they should "throw you off balance" as Höller puts it, but by operating on the audience's minds rather than – as is the norm with such devices – its bodies. "You see it [moving ever so slowly]



above: *Pealove Room*, 1993, installation view, *New World*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1995, photo Pers-Anders Allsten, © VG Bild Kunst, Bonn

out of the corner of your eye," the artist says, "and after a while the room is almost stretching, not really having a shape anymore".

What with the pseudonyms and the bewilderingly wide range of media in which Höller operates (other ingredients have included videos, cars, houses, pigs, chickens, lights, giant rotating mushrooms, lederhosen, mirrors and plastic seagulls) you often feel that similar distortions will mar any attempt to give a coherent shape to his oeuvre. "I really don't like the idea of having a brand," he says, barely concealing his enjoyment of the difficulties faced by anyone who tries to summarise his work. "I think my brand is kind of unpredictable. I think that's a more interesting strategy, if you want to call it that."

Despite his confidence in his ability to sow the seeds of doubt and confusion, Höller does admit that (sadly, to his mind) his is not an easy strategy for any artist with pretensions to becoming successful to follow. "When you are a young artist you want to become somebody who is able to show his work outside of the studio. Often it takes a while before one of these works gets out. But when get some kind of public approval for what you're doing it's actually very hard to stop doing that. It's not only art magazines and journalists who are branding you; in some ways you are branding yourself. You say: 'Oh, well I did so many other things before and nobody really showed an interest in that, but suddenly I have something that people get interested in, which also means that the art magazines are writing about it, so I will

have a very hard time trying to change that into something else.' So I think a lot of branding is a secondary effect of a more psychological difficulty of the artist to overcome this problem." >



above: *Laboratory of Doubt*, 1999, installation view, *Laboratorium*, Provinciaal Museum voor Fotografie, Antwerp 1999, photo Thorsten Arendt, © VG Bild Kunst, Bonn

TO

ADMIT THAT THERE IS ABOUT HIS ART

FEATURE

Carsten Höller



above: *Valerian II*, 1998, permanent installation at Kunst-Werke e.V Berlin, photo Jens Liehe, © VG Bild Kunst, Bonn

But while Höller may feel that he has triumphed over that particular psychological problem, there is one thing that has become something of a signature work: slides. That five-storey monster is the sixth in a series that began in 1998 and famously includes a chute that leads from Miuccia Prada's personal office to her car.

All of which brings us back to Carsten's mum. But don't worry too much about her. Despite her son's apparent tendency towards moments of matricidal madness she'll probably be OK. The slide is the longest of five that Höller plans to install in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. And it is, he assures me, perfectly safe. It's been carefully engineered so as to control the effects of any dangerous variables such as speed (mother won't be pulverised on impact when she flies out the other end) and friction (her nylon skirt, should she be wearing one on the fateful day, won't go up in flames). And even if she tumbles off the specially constructed landing table at the bottom, there will be rubber mats around it to break her fall.

This month, Höller becomes the seventh artist (after Louise Bourgeois, Juan Muñoz, Anish Kapoor, Olafur Eliasson, Bruce Nauman and Rachel Whiteread) to take part in Tate Modern's flagship Unilever Series, the annual commission for a big work of art to fill the Tate's big empty space. His tubular slides will run down from each of the institution's main gallery levels (levels two to five) and wind up (literally – the slides are curved and twisted like children's fun straws) at a communal landing space under the bridge that breaks the Turbine Hall in two. Höller is particularly pleased with that last bit. The bridge, he feels, is something of an obstacle to creating a work that truly fills the Hall (so, to overcome its divisive presence two of the slides will run off it). And, most of the time, the space underneath that bridge is almost totally neglected: "it feels like it

was six o'clock and the architects wanted to go home when they did this," he says. It remains unclear whether Höller's landing area is designed to draw attention to what he perceives to be an architectural failure, or to be some sort of exhortation designed to encourage the Tate administrators to think about how best to use the space. But that ambiguity is the kind of thing he enjoys.

Yet setting up some sort of critique of the Tate's architecture (or, if you want to be more formal about all this, creating something that is truly site-specific) is only a small part of what Höller hopes to achieve with this work. (Although he also enjoys the way the slides contrast with the more overtly controlled circulation provided by Tate Modern's system of lifts and escalators.) And while he hopes that his audience will be able to enjoy the purely aesthetic and sculptural qualities of the work, and perhaps even tune in to the familiarly suggestive metaphors about circulation and nervous systems that accompany any conjunction of tubes and architecture, that's not really the point either.

"I don't believe it works on its own. It's stronger if it's always taking itself back than if it's standing there like it's a fully formulated thing that you're supposed to contemplate in some way or other. I don't think that's really my idea of art."

Höller's idea of art is one in which the viewer is an essential component of the work. "You could say that the real material I'm working with is people's experience," he says. In a work like *The Pinocchio Effect* (1994/2000) Höller provided electric vibrators to stimulate the participant's biceps or triceps, which then affects their nerves in such a way that they imagine that their nose is growing either inwards or outwards. People going down the slides at the Tate are going to experience a "moment of madness" or freedom as they slip on down, because once they are in the tube there's nothing to do but go with the flow. And Höller is keen to observe the effects this will create. At a previous slide installation at the Boston ICA, he offered \$100 to anyone who could go down the slide without a smile on their face. Apparently Höller never had to part with a dime.

In the past this kind of work has been described as 'relational aesthetics'. And, in a strange way, one of the real effects of something like the slides is to flip the traditional relationship



above: *Slide No. 5*, 1999-2000, installation view *Synchro System*, Fondazione Prada, Mailand, 2000, photo Attilio Maranzano, © VG Bild Kunst, Bonn

"I DON'T BELIEVE SUCH. I DON'T"



Hülle und Lederhosen, 1992/1998, installation view
Berlin/Places to Stay. Courtesy Esther Schipper,
Kunstsammlung Bonn

IN THE ART OBJECT AS
BELIEVE IT WORKS ON ITS OWN

FEATURE

Carsten Höller



Left: *Nirxor Carousel*, 2005, aluminium, mirror, lights, motor, 500 x 750 x 750cm. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, London

Below: *Carrara Star and Roller Coaster and Giant Wheel*, 2005, C-print, 149 x 118cm. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, London



between artist and viewer. In the Turbine Hall, it is the audience that makes the art, and Höller who gets his kicks out of watching them, not of being a voyeur.

"These works can create very interesting situations where, due to the effect of the work, you start to behave in a different way," he says. "It's almost like creating a micro-society of a different form of behaviour. This is something I'm interested in, not so much in terms of taking notes of what people are doing, but in offering the possibility of different behaviour."

Before he began to work in art, Höller (who has no formal art training) was an agricultural scientist, specialising in insect phytopathology. While he goes to great lengths to emphasise that he's not trying to create any fusion of art and science ("my work is almost against science") and that an artist's personal biography should not be used to explain their art ("I'm not really interested in someone else's feelings when I see a work of art. I mean, it's interesting to know that Barnett Newman liked birds like I do, but that's more like something amusing. Otherwise I don't care about Barnett Newman"), Höller does concede that his works do have something of the nature of an experiment. And as a result of that, as much as his slides represent a liberating moment they are also,

perhaps in a somewhat sinister fashion, incredibly manipulative. "Yes, in terms of the slides it's extremely manipulative," Höller says. "You don't really have any choice. The only choice is to do it or not to do it. But even then, even if you don't do it, you don't have a choice [but to think about the slides] because you still see the people coming down, experiencing something that you haven't, so you still try to imagine how it would be. That's the paradox of the slide: that there is a certain dominance that then opens up into a sense of being unconstrained."

So is Höller no different from a scientist monitoring his lab rats? Does he feel powerful, like some sort of benevolent dictator, when he sees people using the slides?

"Yeah, but I don't have a goal really. Apart from the goal to dictate," he says laughing. "But there's nothing to dictate really," he says, in what is a rather typical denial of the fact he has just asserted. "It's only about offering an experience that can take place in a context like this. Once you take it out of the art museum, it will be more about architecture and the functionality of it. Here the beauty is that you have all these different ways to use and approach it."

So, Höller must be readying himself to bask in the glow of the publicity and attention that comes with any Unilever project these days. The only thing he has to worry about is that his slides will be seen as the ultimate confirmation that museums like the Tate, with their gift shops, expensive restaurants and publicity departments have become little more than theme parks – the high-cultural alternatives to Disneyland and Alton Towers. That maybe there'll be some guy selling you photographs of yourself as you pop out of the slide.

Perhaps as a way of combating this, Höller has commissioned case studies of the use of slides as a means of transport in Stratford. And Foreign Office Architects, currently working on London's Olympic constructions, have designed a mixed-use building that deploys slides as its primary transport and structuring system. Slides are something he wants us to take very, very seriously. "The main question I want to ask is how come we don't use slides everywhere and use them all the time? Why is it connected to children and playgrounds? It doesn't make any sense to me. I really wonder what it would do to us if we had slides everywhere. I can imagine it would change everything in the long run," he muses.

There aren't really too many limits to Höller's ambition for his art. But you can't help feeling that his vision of a slide-filled urban future (which, it seems, might look a bit like the network of pneumatic confusion in *Futurama*, and will probably be taken just as seriously) is little more than a pipe dream. Something that merely reveals, as much as it pushes, the limits and effectiveness of art. So does he often get disappointed about the fact that the physical realisation of his projects might sometimes fail to live up to the dreams in which they were conceived? "Everything is a bit disappointing in the end," he says. "But you need to get disappointed. Not only because things don't work in the proper way but also because disappointment is part of the whole inner monologue that art is all about. To be disappointed is a good and honest feeling." Great: however the Turbine Hall project turns out, Höller is going to feel good. Everything is looking rosy. Or so it seems.

"I often think about what I should do after art," he says. Crikey. Is he thinking of giving up making art then? On the eve of his big show in the big museum? "No. I just think about whether there could be anything better." Aha. Is he actively looking for something better? "Always." And has he tried out other things? "Yes, I have my hobbies, like the birds [he has several aviaries in his garden], but I don't feel any sense of starting to write novels or becoming an architect or whatever. It doesn't make it any better. It would just make it more complicated. Becoming an artist really helped me get rid of a lot of problems I had before." Such as? "Problems like... I don't know why we are using that word all the time today... but really problems of constraint. At least art is full of possibilities. That's the whole idea. Even if something is not there yet it could possibly be. That is one of the basic premises of art – why we do it. And nothing else has that." At least nothing else he's tried up to now... :



Upside Down Mushroom Room, 2006, installation view Ecstasy: In and About Altered States, MOCA, LA, 2006, © VG Bild Kunst, Bonn

The Unilever Series: Carsten Höller is on show at Tate Modern, London from 10 October 2006 to 1 April 2007. Amusement Park is at MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA until 30 October