



DOUBLE ACT

when Carsten Höller
met Mrs Prada

interview MARTIN HERBERT portrait MILES ALDRIDGE

The Double Club, an experimental art project by Carsten Höller – whose slides filled Tate Modern's Turbine Hall two years ago – supported by the Fondazione Prada, opened in London in November of last year. The club, which is open for six months, and its three sections – disco, bar and restaurant – is divided equally between Congolese and Western cultures (in the form of music, food and visuals), suggesting itself as a zone of some sort of exchange between them. *ArtReview* popped by to meet Höller and his 'nonpatron', Miuccia Prada, to find out what it was all about

ARTREVIEW: First of all, can you tell me how your working relationship began?

MIUCCIA PRADA: I remember being in London, and seeing his videos from the early 1990s, which involve children in danger, and this was one of the things that have most impressed me in my life. And I thought I should contact him to see if he wanted to do a show. [Höller's consequent solo exhibition at the Fondazione Prada, in 2000, unveiled the artist's celebrated *Upside Down Mushroom Room*, with its giant, inverted, rotating replicas of fly agaric fungi.] And around the same time as the show, he made a slide for me. It goes from my office to the courtyard.

CARSTEN HOLLER: I had no idea you'd seen those videos. You'd seen the slide I made in Berlin, at the biennial in 1998. I remember you gave your handbag to Hans Ulrich Obrist to look after, and he had to keep it all evening, because he didn't find you anymore. You just went down the slide and you were gone.

AR: Miuccia, Carsten has said he's in favour of there being slides everywhere, instead of only stairways, elevators and escalators. Are you?

MP: (*laughs*) Why not? I will tell you, I do use mine. It's so much fun to have that suspended moment. You lose contact with your body. Did I commission it for practical reasons, to save time on the stairs? I don't like the idea of being a collector, but I do like to have things that I like. I'm always struggling with that, so...

AR: You've kept in touch ever since then, and most recently you've produced *The Double Club* together, the category-evading half-Congolese, half-European bar/restaurant/nightclub/installation that opened in November 2008 in a disused Victorian warehouse in North London. On its website, this project is described as 'A Carsten Höller art project by Fondazione Prada'. What does it mean to be a patron of art today?

MP: I don't see myself at all like a patron. Actually, I hate the idea. I'm just interested in things that make sense, in general; that are intelligent. The work I'm doing, it's completely outside of that mentality [of patronage]. Carsten's show for the Fondazione Prada was a unique opportunity to make something, to go so far, and I was very happy about that. Over the last nine years, we've often met and talked, and while that doesn't necessarily produce any physical artworks, it's just rare when you meet someone with whom you can exchange ideas, and have an intellectual dialogue that can also become a personal dialogue.

AR: Still, might you compare your supporting activity to, or distinguish it from, the historical idea of patronage?

MP: You should ask other people. I can just tell you what I'm interested in. Why other people do it, that's their problem (*laughs*).

CH (to *MP*): Did you ever make a show with your collection? You didn't, did you, and I think that says everything.

AR: Is there a word you'd use, then, to describe your working relationship with Carsten?

MP: That's kind of difficult to answer. It's complicated.

CH: Especially as I'm sitting here.

AR: Carsten, over to you?

CH: You're asking how I'd describe my working relationship with myself?

AR: Um...

CH: Just kidding...

AR: A good deal of your work is rooted in the idea of collaboration, whether in your past projects with Rosemarie Trockel or the way in which your projects encourage the audience to engage with them. Do you see your working relationship with Miuccia as an extension of this?

MP (to *CH*): You can say no.

CH: Not in the exhibition at the Fondazione. The slide was getting closer to that, but *The Double Club* is something else, because it really evolved based on something that we talked about: we had this lunch meeting, Miuccia and I, and I spoke about this idea that's been 'in me' for some time, and that I'd been unable to suppress. I'd just presented it to her, and she loved it and said, you know, let's do it in London. There are not many people, I tell you, who could be a partner for this project: its dimensions are very hard to explain to someone who doesn't get it. It has to be understood on a formal level, too. But 'collaboration' is a difficult word. If you mention Rosemarie Trockel, at the time we had a love relationship; it branched out into making work together, and the same happened with Miriam Bäckström, my girlfriend after. But also a project like this is a collaboration, between many people: specialists coming together; people working in different domains; the light, the kitchen, the food, the music, the design, everything...

MP: It's his idea, it's his work, but he found someone who could help in effecting it. And I really liked the idea of this project, *The Double Club*, because it goes in the direction of what interests me. And because of the organisation we have, maybe even the money we have, or the will to put people together... because to make a restaurant, a bar, a dance floor, and combine two cultures and make it real – it takes a lot of great people.

AR: The 'direction' that interests you – that, assumedly, is art that moves into the social sphere?

MP: Yes, in general. Is it a creative act for me, to be involved in it, to enable it? No. I'm just interested in things that explain life to me, that make me understand things better – a learning process – and that push things forward, that's what interests me.

AR: Carsten, you've said in the past that some of your projects don't work. Has *The Double Club* been a success?

CH: Some of them don't work because they're a prototype, and if you continued to work on the prototype, you possibly could make it work. It's often enough for me to stop there, at the prototype level,

because I'm not interested in doing all the detail work; it's really more of a proposition. It's an artwork, and that's enough for me. *The Double Club* is a different situation. A place like this costs a lot of money: you have to pay all the wages, the rent, buy all the food for the kitchen. This is beyond the pure prototype; it has to work on all levels, including the propositional aspect of the prototype.

MP: But of course it's not a business intended to make money.

CH: We're not filling our pockets, and, by the way, you know that half of the profits from *The Double Club* go to charity [the UNICEF charity City of Joy, which campaigns to end violence against women and girls in Eastern DR Congo]. So it's not about this, really. The way I see art, and maybe it has to do with my scientific background, is as a space and time where you can try out things that you can't try otherwise. It's somewhere between a nature reserve and a test site, where you bring out things that could possibly be functioning in other ways, too. But, so, while I don't think it could really change anything major, it's functional in a sense that it allows you to experiment and produce experiences, and then it gives you something to talk and think about. Now that's an important thing about art: that you cannot really talk about it; it's beyond language, like thinking is, too, and there's always a kind of frustration there that you cannot grasp it verbally, really. It's hopeless, in a sense, to do interviews, because you can't... you can never say it. It's like a strange dance in some way.

AR: Miuccia, how do you correlate your interest in art with your work in fashion?

MP: My work in fashion is my work, first of all, and there is no direct relationship – except, sometimes my fashion work allows me to be really 'stuck in the ground', because when you see, through your work, what women want in China, or Russia, or America, it's quite an observation about people. That's interesting, I realised recently,

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because it's real, no? You can understand things through what people buy, and why, in different places. When we started the Fondazione, I was worried that people thought we were doing it to embellish my work. And I want my work to be good by itself, not because I need someone else to make it good. So at first I kept the art and fashion very separate. And now I've gotten over that complex, and I can just do things that I think are relevant.

AR: When you were both interviewed recently in *The New York Times*, you, Carsten, said you thought that Miuccia's motivation was that she wanted to avoid being vulgar.

CH: Did I say that?

MP: Mentally vulgar? (*laughs*)

AR: Would you agree, Miuccia, that that's a fair characterisation of your reasons?

MP: No.

CH: I think there's probably many better things to say about you.

MP: I agree. Actually, I have the opposite problem. I would like to be more vulgar, because deep down I'm so much not vulgar, but I'd like to confront this vulgarity, because it's so much a part of the world. This vulgarity in a way is life, and it's much more complicated than good taste. In my work, I struggle to be more vulgar.

CH: We had a discussion about *The Double Club* where we spoke about the title, what we should call the place, and we first wanted to call it the *Prada Congo Club*. And Miuccia, you said that what interested you about this title was that it addressed the whole problematic of being a fashion designer, doing the kind of thing that you're doing in this world. So it's reflecting upon the vulgarity of it, to an extent; it's an interesting title for a place like this.

MP: In itself, it was a provocation, no?

CH: Yes, but it also works because it's like a perfect little piece of poetry. It makes no sense at large, but then, with all that it could possibly mean, it opens up a whole world of possibilities.

AR: You don't think it's a bit similar to [Tom Sachs's 1998 artwork] *Prada Death Camp*?

CH: Well, I didn't think about it. But we didn't use it, because with all the bad news [of warring] from the Eastern DR Congo, we didn't want to appear to be playing with the word 'Congo' in a cynical way. Because the word 'Congo' is such a very strong elicitor for all kinds of projection, you know. *The Double Club* is more of a neutral name.

AR: OK, last question: what's the main thing that you gain from your working together?

CH: I think we're just good for each other, to be honest. We understand each other, and it's a perfect working relationship, and also based on friendship. Do we have complementary personalities? I don't know (*laughs*). It's a good time to find out. •