

ARTFORUM

Carsten Höller

HAMBURGER BAHNHOF

Museum für Gegenwart - Berlin, Invalidenstrasse 50-51

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At the center of Carsten Höller's 2010 installation *Soma* is a raised circular platform where, over the course of eighty nights, paying guests will sleep in the Hamburger Bahnhof. On arrival, these visitors are greeted by a concierge who checks them in, hands them a flashlight and a walkie-talkie, and then leaves them to their own devices. Except that they're not completely alone: Below the platform, in two identical animal pens, live reindeer roam about. And above, in identical birdcages dangling from scales, canaries chirp happily. A circular dais crosses over the two pens, adorned with giant mushroom sculptures and thick branches that the reindeer scratch against.

Höller's work is ostensibly a reference to soma, a hallucinogen described in the *Rig-Veda*. Scientists in the twentieth century tried to rediscover the drink's active ingredient, with the fly amanita mushroom—or, more specifically, the urine of reindeer that consume it—emerging as one possibility. Höller's installation is an elaborate double-blind experiment, with the human visitors cast as the experimenters: In theory, elements of the concoction are administered to one side of the work but not the other. Of course, none of this actually matters, because *Soma* isn't about scientific discovery at all; it is a test of one's vision and credulity. By mixing soma's constituent parts, Höller has produced its mind-altering effects. While on the sleeping platform, an exhilarating paranoia kicks in, as it becomes apparent that the animals aren't the alien elements within the work. They're right at home; the guests are the contaminants in Höller's system, disruptive interlopers in his pseudoscientific, hallucinogenic world.

A few weeks after the show's opening, the Hamburger Bahnhof reeked of reindeer urine. One suspects, given the precision of everything else, that this was planned too—part of *Soma*'s visceral, lyrical, hilarious ability to overwhelm the senses of anyone brave enough to enter it.

— Anthony Byrt



Carsten Höller, *Soma*, 2010, mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view.

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