

Carsten Höller Creates a Playground of Choices at the Hayward

Imagine you are at a fairground. What are your feelings while waiting in line for a rollercoaster? Excitement or dread? Discomfort or pleasure? These are the kind of questions that come up when engaging with the participatory practice of Belgian artist Carsten Höller. His exhibition "Decision" at the Hayward Gallery is something you will either love or hate—yet it is impossible not to respond to it.

ARTSY EDITORIAL

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Carsten Höller

Dice, 2014

"Carsten Höller: Decision" at Hayward Gallery at Southbank Centre, London (2015)

This is the last show at the institution, located in London's Southbank Centre, before the building undergoes a two-year refurbishment. Höller has been given free reign to completely rethink the approach of this brutalist concrete space—from the way you enter the exhibition (through a pitch-black metal maze that takes five minutes to navigate, using your hands) to the way you exit (down his infamous, enormous slides).



Carsten Höller
Decision Corridors, 2015
"Carsten Höller: Decision" at Hayward Gallery at Southbank Centre, London (2015)

Curated by director Ralph Rugoff, who is also overseeing this autumn's Lyon Biennial, the show can sometimes be claustrophobic, uncomfortable, disorienting, and frustrating, and at other times playful, childlike, and entertaining. *Alice in Wonderland* seems to be a running reference—red and white pills drop from the sky in piles that viewers can take from. This is a land of giant mushrooms and optical experiments and doubling.



Carsten Höller
Pill Clock, 2011-2015
"Carsten Höller: Decision" at Hayward Gallery at Southbank Centre, London (2015)

Without participation, the exhibition falls flat—you need to strap yourself into the flying machine and spin on the roof or put on upside-down glasses and stumble around. This is a show that demands to be played with, and if the games are uncomfortable or impractical, then tough. (Wear sneakers and trousers, and leave your vertigo and claustrophobia at home.)

The simplest games and rules in Höller's world work best—such as a giant set of dice to crawl around and stick your head into, or a blurry fairground memory-card game. The anomaly of the show is perhaps the true highlight: a two-screen film titled *Fara Fara*, also shown at this year's Venice Biennale. The piece documents the buildup to a sound clash between local musicians in Kinshasa, Congo. Beautifully shot, the installation has little of the playful fantasy of the rest of the exhibition and feels like a genuine engagement with passion and experience.



Carsten Höller

Snake, 2014

"Carsten Höller: Decision" at Hayward Gallery at Southbank Centre, London (2015)

Sometimes, Höller's science-museum-on-acid works aren't successful. His Oculus Rift forest at night doesn't really technically work as a virtual-reality space. An experiment involving putting a vibrator on your arm while touching your nose just leaves you with buzzing nostrils and fingers that smell of latex.

Yet there is something original about Höller's approach to ideas around science, art, and entertainment. This isn't a show you need to read a press release about to understand or be confused by. In fact, confusion itself is really the whole point of the works here.



Do we really want to make choices when we experience art? The forthcoming exhibition catalogue for Höller's show includes short stories about decisions by Ali Smith and Jonathan Lethem, among others. It is interesting in this context to revisit one of the most popular TED Talks (viewed more than 7 million times) called "The Paradox of Choice" by Barry Schwartz. In it, Schwartz argues that the plethora of choices embedded in modern (capitalist) life falsely presents itself as real freedom. Höller's world of decisions overlaps with some of that territory. Here, to quote the catchphrase of the defunct British game show *Blind Date*, the choice is yours.

—Francesca Gavin

"Carsten Höller: Decision" is on view at the Hayward Gallery, London, June 10–Sept. 6, 2015.

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