



Play to the gallery

This crowd-pleasing show provides the space and tools to transform our physical experience – but it's up to us to jump into the fray and walk out with a smile

BEFORE you've even entered this show, you see Carsten Höller's *Isometric Slides*' serpentine journey to earth from the Hayward's roof. The slides, last seen at Tate Modern in 2006, are everything the Hayward is not: shiny, slithering, partially transparent and light against the impregnable Brutalist hulk of the building.

Ben Luke



EXHIBITION OF THE WEEK

CARSTEN HÖLLER: DECISION
Hayward Gallery, SE1
★★★★☆

I can't imagine many people have spotted this glimmering addition to the South Bank exterior and not longed to have a go.

But what about the slides' effectiveness as art? It's a subject that often comes up with Höller's work: can art be entertainment? What do we want from it?

Of course, many of us seek pleasure or beauty. We might also want reflections on the darker aspects of the human mind and the world around us. But often we want our experiences in an art gallery or museum to operate on a different, more profound level than we do at other visitor attractions.

Höller sees no reason why you can't simultaneously be educated, moved and thoroughly entertained. He wants to transform our physical experience.

And we're as much the artist as he is: he provides the space and the tools; it's up to us to exploit them. The 53-year-old Belgian shares this approach to different degrees with others who, like him, emerged in the Nineties, and became a loose group, including Philippe Parreno and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster in France, Liam Gillick in the UK and Rirkrit Tiravanija in the US (via Thailand).

Their approach to making art is often called "relational aesthetics", though they're uncomfortable being pigeonholed by the term. The man who coined it, curator and thinker Nicolas Bourriaud, described it as work that emerges from "the whole of human relations and their social context" – in other words, an anything-goes attitude to art, with human connection and collaboration at its heart.

Of the group, Höller is the most crowd-pleasing. As well as the slides, for his Hayward retrospective he's installed a machine that helps you hand-glide on one of the gallery's terraces, a giant die which you can climb into, and even moving beds that you can sleep in overnight at the gallery. It might sound frivolous but much of it is anything but.

In grasping what Höller is up to it is important to understand his scientific background and his doctorate in agricultural entomology. He studied aphids, and a giant pink sculpture of

one sits on top of a red wall painting next to one of the Hayward's stairwells. The painting takes a red rectangle at its left and then divides it in half repeatedly as it moves rightwards, reducing the amount of red pigment by half each time and leading to a sense of a shrinking, fading form. The work is loosely based on the complex mathematical principle of the "asymptote" as well as on aphids' non-sexual reproduction, just producing clones of themselves.

Where science is often used to explain the world, Höller uses scientific principles to unsettle, to disrupt, to play. In an interview with Hayward director Ralph Rugoff he describes the works as "methods for taking away what we take for granted... to destabilise you or free you from the dictatorship of the predictable".

This is clear from the start. To enter the exhibition you walk through a long metal corridor that rises and falls, twists and turns (there are two and you choose which route to take). But you do so in darkness, needing to feel for the walls to find your way. It's extraordinary how paralysing darkness can be; how one's sense of one's body moving through space is enhanced. The floors are galvanised steel, too, so your feet create a thumping din as you move.

I was alone in the darkness but when it opens to the public, the thudding will be cacophonous, only adding to the disorientation as other bodies move around you.

You emerge into a room with giant polyester mushrooms on metal fulcrums, which you can push so that they fly or dance, according to the artist. I'm not terribly convinced by this – however hard you push the fulcrum, the mechanism's presence, its very heaviness, prevents any trippy fantasy from emerging.

What comes next is much better: Pill Clock, in which every three seconds a red and white capsule drops from the ceiling into a pile, sometimes springing off the floor into another part of the



Creepy crawly: Divisions, 2015

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room. You can't help but tread on them, getting the white powder on your shoes. Höller likes the idea that you then contaminate the rest of the gallery, and perhaps the world outside, with the pills' contents.

But what's in them? A basin on the wall provides the water to knock one back, if you wish. I can report no ill effects – at least so far.

Load the dice: interactive works such as Dice (White Body, Black Dots), left, and Isometric Slides, above, encourage visitors to recover a childlike capacity for play

THE pills show that Höller's art requires your enthusiasm to work best. Adult reserve is almost one of his subjects – it seems he wants us to recover a childlike capacity for play and experimentation. Climbing into and out of the giant die in a vast mirrored room, I was supremely aware of how unlike my usual behaviour it was, but children in the gallery were fairly throwing themselves in, entirely free of self-consciousness.

Höller enjoys all this; he's got a manipulative edge. He says that watching kids squirming in and out of the die is like seeing maggots emerge from cheese.

In Fara Fara, an exhilarating two-screen film about the Congolese music scene (he loves Africa and lives for part of the year in Ghana), he includes false subtitles. He also jokes about the "stupid, happy expressions" and

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humiliation of people as they emerge from the slides. If you're concerned about looking like a fool then this show is not for you.

Indeed, as well as a participant, you're an observer, watching and listening to others. I can't imagine how ridiculous I looked holding my nose, eyes closed, while pressing a vibrating machine to my bicep, for instance. Here, Höller tests proprioception and particularly the "Pinocchio effect", coined by psychologist James Lackner. The illusion is both amusing and revelatory – one does genuinely imagine one's nose growing between one's fingers.

If this is at the more trivial end of Höller's work, two others are remarkable sensory experiments. For The Forests, you put on special goggles. At first, you see a snowy woodland scene but then each eye is given a slightly different film of the same scene to watch. And it's devastating. Suddenly, it's a snowy, woody blur, as your brain tries to form an image from two sources. I've never been so aware of the physical processes of looking, of my eyes straining to work independently.

Meanwhile, Upside Down Goggles, which you experience on another of the terraces, is even more disorientating: they're exactly as they sound, using mirrors to flip the London skyline. Trying to walk without tipping over is fiendishly difficult – a guide keeps you stable. I went to the edge of the rooftop and despite the high wall there, felt I would tumble onto the walkway below.

Höller's art can be hit-and-miss – the beds are probably only meaningful if you sleep in them overnight, the revolving mushrooms seem a vast endeavour for relatively little effect. But at its best, Höller's art offers profound sensory and intellectual stimulation.

Answering my own earlier question, that's one thing that I want art to do. If it's entertaining too, then so much the better. Which is exactly how I felt as I left the show, hurtling down an Isometric Slide, and emerging with a stupid, happy smile on my face.

■ Carsten Höller: Decision is at the Hayward Gallery, SE1 (020 7960 4200, southbankcentre.co.uk) from tomorrow until September 6. Tues, Weds, Sat & Sun, 11am-7pm; Thurs & Fri, 11am-8pm; Mon, 12pm-6pm. Admission £13.50, concessions available

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