

Arts

'At 3.43am my bed crashes in slow motion'



Forget armchair critics – **Adrian Searle** got into bed to tour Carsten Höller's new exhibition of giant dice, monster spiders and magic mushrooms. So what happened when the lights went down?



It might have been the pills and it could have been the trick toothpaste. Whatever it was, I didn't sleep. The array of flashing discs that blinked on and off across the walls all night long might have had something to do with it, or maybe the giant model of an aphid, giving birth behind the Hayward's rear staircase was to blame.

I have just spent the night at the Hayward, ranging slowly around the gallery in a wandering bed, part of

Carsten Höller: *Decision*, which opens tomorrow. Höller, who trained as a biologist, regaled me with the aphid's life cycle, their parthenogenesis, their parasites and their symbiotic relationship with ants, when we met a few days earlier. It seemed innocent enough. But as much as Höller studies the natural world he studies us. I think he was eyeing me up, as part of his latest experiment.

All tucked up and nowhere to go, I hid under the duvet as the computer-controlled and radar-assisted bed slowly turned and rolled about the creaking wooden floor. My companion's cot was out of order, immobilised near the ramp. She slept like a baby and didn't even stir when, at 3.43am, my roaming gurney ran into hers in a slow-mo collision. I heard a motor revving uselessly somewhere under my mattress, half expecting smoke to billow from below.

The bed was comfortable enough, but there are teething problems. Höller's beds are supposed to make graceful, synchronised arabesques

around each other as they circumnavigate the gallery in a somnambulistic dance, and even to travel up a ramp on to the mezzanine, and back again. Originally, Höller planned to have the beds and their slumbering occupants roam even further, and to take the lift to the upper gallery and down again. Should you have woken, you'd have been disorientated, finding yourself somewhere unexpected.

But you should expect the unexpected if you've just paid £300 to book the pair of ambulant beds, and to spend a night going wayward in the Hayward. *Decision* is a combination of new and older works, and the beds are already booked up for the first month.

I was disturbed even before bedtime, wandering the galleries in my nightshirt. You can continue to explore the exhibition during your overnight stay. Making your way down one of the dark, clanging corridors that lead visitors on a half-blind route from the lobby into the gallery is like entering a weird behavioural labyrinth.

Decisions, decisions: there are two

Night terrors ... clockwise from main, Adrian Searle fails to get any sleep; the giant dice; giving the mushrooms a whirl; raining pills

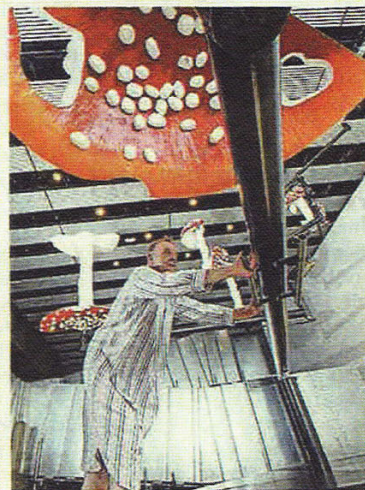
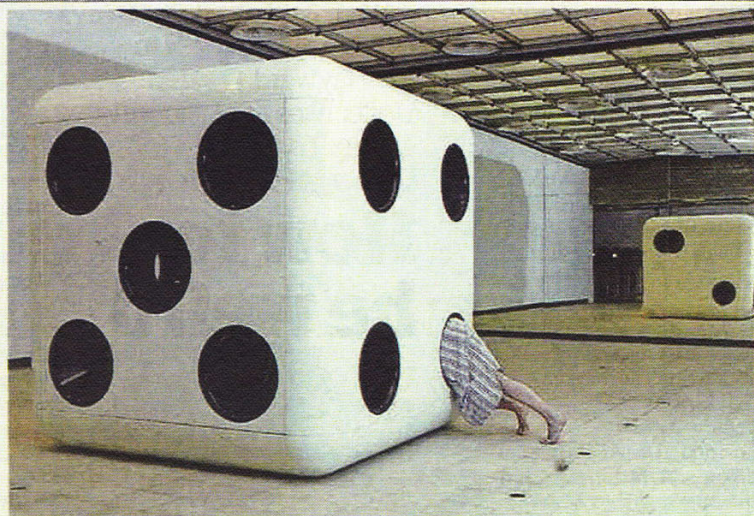
ways in, down corridor A or corridor B, although the signs shuffle from the one to the other the moment you enter. A becomes B and B becomes A. The corridors are all dimly lit metal sheeting and scaffolding. Get more than a couple of people in there and it'll be as noisy as a shipyard. Höller intends more fear than fun. The corridors pass over and under each other, turning and turning again until you exit at the giant mushrooms.

In the woods of Lapland, the poisonous, psychotropic *amanita muscaria* funghi, a staple of fairytale fiction, have been used by shamens as a portal to another world. You let your reindeer eat the red and white caps, and then you drink the deer's urine, by now filtered of noxious agents. The funghi here are giant replicas, mounted on a revolving spindle that visitors turn manually, setting the funghi spinning on geared rotating arms above your head. Get a bit too high and they'll knock your block off.

I am not Alice in Wonderland, though I gave the mushrooms a whirl. And I did eat one of the red and white capsules that rain, one every three seconds, day and night, from the gallery ceiling. I tried to catch one in my mouth, feeling like a performing seal. The pills spill across the floor in a colourful scatter. They are not suitable for vegans, the gallery host told me. I thought I was done with eating pills from the floor, even if they are placebos. I've put that sort of thing behind me, though there's a handy water station plumbed into the wall nearby to facilitate easier swallowing.

Höller's show is funny, but it is even more disturbing. The experience is not entirely benign, despite the funfair rides and the jokes. It is also much more than just another tatty South Bank feelgood fest like this year's Festival of Love, which dresses up the brutalist concrete as a British seaside holiday resort or fete. The exhibition is not without its physical, not to say mental, dangers, and I did myself a mischief sliding into one of the holes in a giant dice, whose interior is a dark, womb-like cave. A limber six-year-old could do it with ease, but I almost required the fire brigade to get me out. I also need an osteopath. I thought of suing the gallery, but I'd already signed a disclaimer.

I also lack the bravado to exit the gallery down Höller's serpentine slides that take you from the top floor to the open-air South Bank concrete below. I avoided Höller's slides when they occupied the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern too. Nor did the carousel that slowly turns on a sculpture deck, perched next to Waterloo Bridge, appeal. You hang in space, to the alarm of people



on the buses passing by. Luckily, the carousel wasn't ready.

Mortal danger and mental distress aren't in my critical remit. But I did don the mirrored helmet that makes wearers see the world upside down. This is a familiar viewpoint for a critic, according to many below-the-line commentators. Taking a few wobbly steps, with arms outstretched like a sleepwalking zombie, I soon staggered drunkenly to the floor and nearly threw up. Nor could my mind construe the stereoscopic video goggles that plunge you into a wintry nocturnal forest somewhere in Sweden. Snow patters through branches, and as you approach a tree, the view diverges, seeming to take you straight through the trunk. My brain refused to cope with this illusory splitting of the self.

There's another thing you can do with your nose and a vibrator. It is too complicated to go into here but in any case it didn't work for me. It is supposed to make you feel like Pinocchio. Höller, once again, is toying with us.

Whether it is the film of battling Congolese bands in Kinshasa that makes you want to dance, different toothpastes to make you have male, female or infantile dreams, or the dice to throw your back out, I think Höller encourages us to take risks, destabilises us and make us feel more alive. He also wants us to think about our subjective experience, the things our bodies are telling us and making us feel. How far can you go? Even everyday decisions come at a price. Höller makes just getting into bed a risk. Some day, the artist and I are planning to go pike fishing together. I think he intends to use me for bait.

i Carsten Höller: Decision is at the Hayward Gallery, London, from tomorrow until 6 September.

There's another thing you can do with your nose and a vibrator, but it's too complicated to go into here

→ To play Höller's mind games, turn the page