




# Carsten Höller on the Magic of Slides

● By Carsten Höller    Feb 19, 2018 8:00 am      



Carsten Höller, Aventura Slide Tower, Miami Florida. Courtesy of the artist.

Once upon a time there was no such thing as a slide. There was *sliding*—sometimes deliberate, often accidental—but for the vast bulk of human history the slide itself, now a fixture of the playground and amusement park, did not exist.

In their early forms they were popularized as foreign novelties. Wooden platforms covered with ice, which riders would careen down on a sled, became common winter entertainment in 17th-century Russia, and these so-called “Russian Mountains” gradually spread across the continent.

George Drought Warburton, an Irish officer in the British military stationed in Canada, documented a similar activity among indigenous peoples in Canada, writing in 1846 of “one of the great amusements for visitors” there: to climb a cone of solid ice at Montmorency Falls in what is now Quebec, “and slide down again on a tarboggin.”

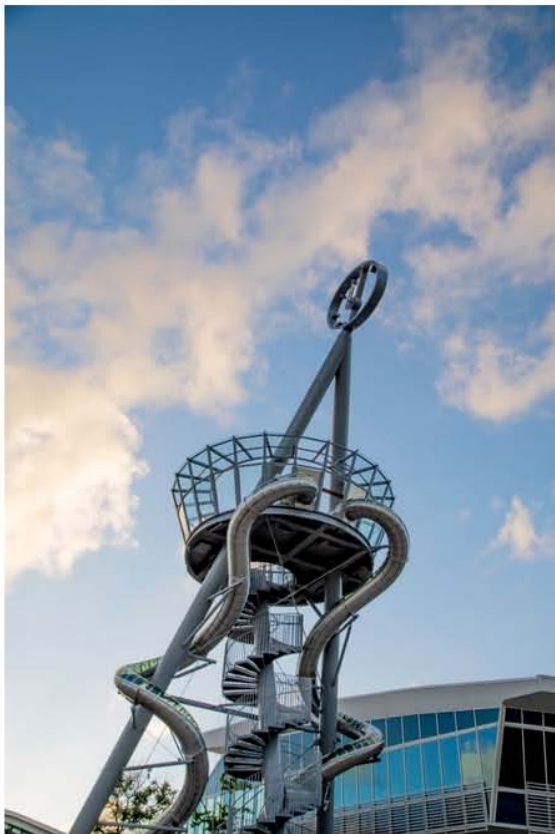


Like most things, our sense of what is fun, what counts as recreation, has shifted and evolved. The final emergence of the slide in what is more-or-less its modern form, in the late 1860s, was no different.

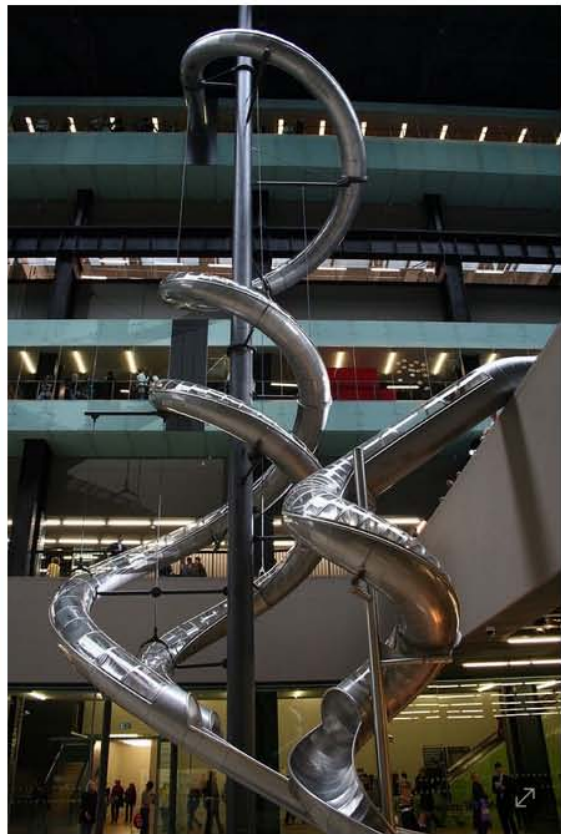
A reaction to the shock of industrialization, the metal slide was purely visceral, vaguely mechanical and a solitary, not social, entertainment. It was, in other words, a refashioning of the new industrial mode of relaxation. Humanity, the Victorian moralizers said, was fallen and corrupt; machines, however, were purposeful and pure. And so the amusement parks they built were full of high, twisting slides and roller-coasters and other machines: a new, more virtuous brand of fun, the implication was.

The smaller playground slide followed the same course. As child labor was outlawed and compulsory education took its place, playgrounds sprung up in response to concerns that children, no longer working, needed somewhere to go to keep them out of trouble. Slides, and the sense of vital danger that going down one engenders in the slider, were excellent substitutes for the temptations of the streets.

And so, conceived as recreation and mostly associated now with childhood, the slide has remained in the popular imagination as a frivolous thing. The exception is the emergency slide on planes and, sometimes, buildings, which makes explicit its vertiginous mix of fun and danger. It was four of these, attached to a home for the elderly that I passed on my way to school every day as a child, that first attracted me to slides. The slides made perfect sense as a practical means of escape and were visually striking, curving out onto the grass.



Carsten Höller, Aventura Slide Tower, Miami Florida. Courtesy of the artist.



Carsten Höller, *Test Site* at Tate's Turbine Hall. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

But this evident practicality has been undercut, in every other application, by the slide's supposed childishness. The result is that we have difficulty reconciling our stolid workweeks with the feeling of madness a slide can inspire; a sensation the French sociologist Roger Caillois described as "a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind." That this is a bad thing, or somehow out of keeping with an adult's day-to-day existence, is an assumption we take for granted. There is something that frightens us in the madness of sliding, compelling us to shy away; I propose, however, to embrace it.

As part of my 2006 installation *Test Site*, in the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern in London, we commissioned a feasibility study from the consultancy firm General Public Agency exploring what slides might look like as a feature of the urban landscape. Anywhere there's a difference in height—and our cities are growing up as quickly as they're expanding outwards—slides provide an opportunity.

Imagining them in this context, as integral to our architecture, is not as difficult or strange as it might seem. Slides are a uniquely efficient mode of transportation. They are safe, fast, and cost-efficient to construct. As they require no energy to operate, they're uniquely environmentally friendly. And, of course, they are fun. As the globe continues its rapid urbanization, our understanding of what a city looks like will naturally evolve. Whether or not that includes the use of slides is a question worthy of experiment.



Installation view from *Carsten Höller: Experience*, New Museum. Photo by Benoit Pailley. Courtesy of the artist.

Around the same time, we asked Foreign Office Architects to collaborate with me on the conception of a house entirely built out of slides—where the slides are the walls, a sort of exoskeleton. In every space the walls would have holes, functioning as accesses to different slides that bring their users to different parts in the building, or out of it.

For a new project that opened this past December at the Aventura Mall outside Miami, Florida, I've constructed two slides which spiral in mirror image of one another from a central clocktower. The clock, in a public context, has always indicated a place of some importance: a government building, a church, or a transit hub. My hope is that, while these slides don't connect two disparate spaces, they imply the possibility of it. For those who've never ridden a slide before, they have a specificity to them; the experience of riding any one slide is particular to that slide. When I discovered this, I started constructing slides that were almost identical, but inverse mirrors of each other, and which have remarkably different effects—they not only bring you to a different place, but the feeling each inspires is slightly different; an inkling of the possibilities they hold.

As we hurtle ever deeper into the Anthropocene, itself a concept many of our leaders have yet to fully grasp, we'll have to challenge more and more of our assumptions. The slides I construct in my work are art objects—with them, I hope to inspire, to induce questioning, to recalibrate a person's understanding and experience of their self. The madness of a slide, that “voluptuous panic,” is a kind of joy. It is an experience with value far beyond the confines of a museum, or a playground. It might be time, for all our sakes, to begin to explore exactly how far that might be. ●

**Carsten Höller**