

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Fungus Among Us

Culture

By SAMEER REDDY

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© VG Bild-Kunst 2010 / Carsten Höller, Foto: Attilio MaranzanoCarsten Höller's installation at the Hamburger Bahnhof.

“Soma,” Carsten Höller’s enormous installation at the Hamburger Bahnhof — Museum für Gegenwart in Berlin, is quite a trip down the rabbit hole — complete with a host of special psychedelic effects and strange supporting characters. The title refers to the drink central to Vedic and greater Persian religious rites, the active ingredient of which some scholars believe was *Amanita muscaria*, a kind of psychoactive mushroom. Höller has constructed two long, fenced-in corrals with hay-lined floors, gigantic sculptures of

magic mushrooms and an elevated, cushioned platform on which a limited number of visitors can sign up to spend the night. There are also freezers stocked with actual — enormous — samples of *Amanita muscaria*.



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Supporting characters include 12 free-roaming, castrated reindeer; 24 canaries in oversized metal cages; eight mice; two flies — and anyone who happens to wander into the exhibit, of course. Visitors can try to determine behavioral differences between the two groupings of animals, some of which, it is noted, consume these mushrooms as part of their normal diet. Slowly you find yourself participating in the hallucinatory experiment, and as the environment absorbs you, any claim to objectivity is erased. The resulting critique suggests that so-called rational and logical worldviews are much closer than you'd think to the altered states of deeply subjective experience. In addition to being one of the world's best-known contemporary artists, Höller holds a doctorate in biology, and he has long sought to integrate his interest in both methods of inquiry. Who knew?

It's difficult to imagine a public (or private) American institution allowing visitors to spend the night, let alone in a room with live reindeer and a freezer full of psychedelics. But that's the beauty of a less litigious society in which expanding your mind isn't a capital crime, and where state financing for the arts is a priority. You might have to catch a flight to experience it, but it's a trip worth taking.

Through Feb. 6.