

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



## Artist in Wonderland: Carsten Höller at the New Museum

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Round and Round: Höller's mirrored carousel, a sculpture from 2005, moves at almost imperceptible speeds. There is something incredibly soothing about it.

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Giant mushrooms in the lobby. Pills that pop from the ceiling. And a sensory deprivation pool where museum-goers can float weightlessly in a body-temperature solution of salty water. Oh, and did I mention the 100-foot slide that runs from the fourth floor to the second? Carsten Höller's new exhibit "Experience" at the New Museum is all about messing with your sense of perception, like a drug trip without the drugs.

A native of Brussels, Höller got his start as a scientist (he studied agricultural entomology), before abandoning the field to become a full-time artist. His work, however, never leaves the sciences far behind. His pieces -- many of them environmental installations that do everything possible to mess with your head -- are like demented experiments in which the viewer is turned into unwitting lab rat.

Certainly, the work that is likely to get the most buzz is the 100-foot tube slide that takes viewers flying down through two stories of building in a couple of high-speed loops. (This is a theme that is an

obsession for Höller -- finding ways to add whimsy to what can be the severe, blocky aspects of modern and contemporary architecture. He did a similar piece at the Tate Modern, in London, back in 2006.) But the thrill in this one is the uncertainty. From the access point, it is impossible to see the whole slide or where it ends up. You climb into a tube that emerges from a hole in the floor and are spit out two stories later into a room filled with flashing lights. The disorientation and the adrenaline blast are all kinds of excellent. (The best part of attending the press preview: watching members of the over-dignified art press prattle on excitedly about how many times they'd been down it.)

And that's just the beginning: there's a sensory deprivation pool (dubbed the "Psycho Tank") where you can float weightlessly in warm water. Close your eyes and lie on your back and let the current push you around and it's as if you're floating through space. Or at least as close to what I imagine space could be. I was a little dizzy (and caked in salt) when I emerged, as if my sense of perception had been slightly shaken. Likewise, a massive mirrored carousel, located on the fourth floor, distorts the passing of time. Set at an absolutely glacial speed, it forces you to experience life in slow motion. It's the most relaxing piece in the show. I didn't want to get off.

Certainly, there is a sense of carnival-esque spectacle that permeates the whole Höller show. This is not austerity art. But there's a certain morbid grotesqueness to the exhibit that makes this more than just a pile of money on display. The plastic sculptures of animals in odd colors (a bright yellow walrus, a blue orangutan, a pink rhino) -- all of whom sport real-looking nails crafted out of cow horn -- are like dystopic L.S.D. nightmares. An infrared video room shows you three streaming videos of yourself in a darkened room, one of which runs on a split second delay, as if your own reflection were refusing to obey the laws of time. The "Upside-Down Goggles," available in the lobby (for a credit card deposit of \$1,500) allow you to see the world upside down. Take them into the gallery full of mushroom sculptures and you'll feel like you're in some nightmare *Alice in Wonderland* parallel universe. It's as if Höller torques reality just enough to make it freakier than it already is.

It's all real, but it isn't. Or is it?

*"Experience" opens on Wednesday at the New Museum and will be on view through January 15. If too much Höller is not enough, his photos of birds and mushrooms will also be on view at the Carolina Nitsch project space in Chelsea, starting on Thursday.*