

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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## Is It Art, Science or a Test of People?

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Over the past several years art museums have begun to place much more emphasis on a concept they call the “visitor experience.” Few, though, have attempted to define that concept quite as broadly — or as bodily — as the New Museum, which is mounting a career survey of the Belgian-born artist Carsten Höller that opens on Wednesday.



Carsten Höller at New Museum. His show opens on Wednesday.

A (greatly abridged) menu of the experiences available to viewers — after they sign a legal waiver and abandon all hope of conventional museumgoing decorum — would read something like this:

Walk around while seeing the world upside down and backward. Hurtle two stories toward the earth in a metal and plastic tube as others watch and, almost certainly, laugh. Ingest an unidentified white pill, or a fistful if you choose. Inhale an amphetaminelike substance said to induce amorous feelings. Feel your nose grow. Feel the walls shift around you. Feel yourself slam face first into a tree at high speed. Or, if you really want to prove your dedication to art, take off all your clothes and lie with friends or strangers in a modified sensory deprivation tank in heavily salinized water, heated to the temperature of human skin.

Mr. Höller, 49, began his professional life as a scientist, and it is perhaps because of this that a bit of a Dr. Moreau reputation has always clung to him, though it is not wholly undeserved. He did, after all, once design wickedly funny Swiftian traps for children. (The simplest involved a seemingly live electric cord lying on the floor surrounded by pieces of candy.)

But as he walked around the New Museum on the Lower East Side one recent morning, trying politely to stay out of the way of the construction workers installing his pieces, diabolical was not a description that

leapt to mind. Slim and balding, he could still easily pass for the agricultural entomologist he once was. Except that now his deeply inquisitive, German-accented musings refer not to cereal aphids but to the humans who consent to participate in his thoroughly subjective experiments, which stand science on its head, yielding results for the sake of the test subject rather than that of the tester.

The devices and environments Mr. Höller has conceived since he began to make art 18 years ago — he prefers to think of them not as art objects but as “confusion machines” — require a great deal more planning and money than conventional lab equipment. In front of him that morning on the museum’s fourth floor, a man with a metal saw was completing the topmost part of a piece that has become one of Mr. Höller’s signatures: a corkscrewing tubular metal slide for grown-ups. It was installed by cutting large holes through the concrete and steel of the museum’s third and fourth floors.



Visitors to the Carsten Höller show at the New Museum will be able to hurtle two stories down a corkscrewing metal slide. They will also be able to feel their noses grow, among other pursuits.

As intrepid visitors did when a more complex version was installed in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern in London in 2006 and 2007, visitors to the New Museum will grab a cloth pad, sit on it and plunge into the tube. A few moments later they will squirt out the other end on the second floor, their expressions and bodily contortions during the drop having been visible to everyone else in the museum through the slide’s windows.

“You will be able to see the madness in their faces for a split second, and then — zup — they will be gone,” Mr. Höller said with a smile. “It’s a very odd thing with a slide; it’s quite an efficient way to go from place to place, but it is also like a barely controlled fall. It’s a very specific kind of madness to go down one.”

Mr. Höller’s works also set out to induce a general kind of madness: a troubling, anti-Enlightenment awareness that despite the certainties won by science over the past three or four hundred years, human beings still know relatively little about the world around them and have no good reason even to trust their senses. While such a state may seem disturbing, Mr. Höller views it instead as “truly productive,” an existential means of throwing off the bonds of determinism and treating human experience, if only for a little while, as a kind of artwork to be shaped and played with.

“What I’m doing is certainly not science, but maybe it’s not art, either; it’s something in between, a third thing,” said Mr. Höller, who was raised by German parents in Brussels and has lived and worked for the past several years in Stockholm.

One of his pieces, called “The Pinocchio Effect,” tricks the mind into believing that the nose is growing: you hold your nose with your fingers and place a small vibrating device on one of your upper arms. Another piece, using a small video screen in front of each eye, mimics the effect of moving through a forest, except that at one point, the eyes go in different directions, around a tree.

“I’ve actually seen people fall backward out of their chair when this happens,” Mr. Höller said, adding, “I hope everyone will be O.K.”

A pair of wraparound prism goggles, which visitors can use while seeing the exhibition or even take home for a few days, turns the world upside down and flips left and right, an effect that is more terrifying than it sounds. (I tried on a pair, attempted to take a single step and had to grab a table to keep from falling. Mr. Höller assured me, “The first hour is really the worst, then it gets much better.”)

Even at a time when contemporary art is inviting much more participation on the part of the viewer, the Höller show will be interactive to a degree not seen outside a children's science museum. And with the potential for nudity, shrieking and pratfalls, it will put the New Museum's staff and security guards to a test unlike any they have experienced, said Massimiliano Gioni, the museum's director of exhibitions, who organized the show with Gary Carrion-Murayari and Jenny Moore.

"There's the old question of whether the scientist trains the mouse, or vice versa," Mr. Gioni said. "In this case I think Carsten will be forcing the museum to train itself. But this is good. It's the kind of thing we're supposed to be doing here."

For his part, Mr. Höller simply seems happy to have been given a new place to experiment and a whole new city full of willing subjects.

"For every person who comes in, it will be like exposing a film to the light and seeing what image develops," he said. "I try to make the conditions for the development. But I, personally, have no idea what the image will be."

*"Carsten Höller: Experience" runs through Jan. 15 at the New Museum, 235 Bowery, at Prince Street, Lower East Side; (212) 219-1222, [newmuseum.org](http://newmuseum.org).*