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Take a Virtual Tour of Carsten Holler's Art Amusement Park at the New Museum



Photo © Kyle Chayka
Carsten Höller's "Animal Group" (2011) on exhibit at New Museum

By [Kyle Chayka](#)

Published: October 26, 2011

WHAT: Carsten Höller's "Experience"

WHEN: October 26 through January 15, 2012

WHERE: New Museum, 235 Bowery, New York, NY

WHY THIS SHOW MATTERS: The fact that you have to sign a waiver to participate in some of the more interactive pieces in Carsten Holler's "Experience" is a good tip-off that Belgian artist's New Museum show is going to be a good time. To up the danger factor further, visitors are able to obtain (if they hand over their credit card and take on a \$1,500 damage penalty) a pair of goggles that turns your vision upside-down and flips it left to right. And that's just an appetizer for what's further inside the museum — galleries full of amusement-park-worthy pieces that toy with sensory experience and perception in ways that disorient and delight.

Take the elevator up to the fourth floor for "Mirror Carousel," 2005, a surreally slow-moving ride whose chain-link swings hang limply from its reflective top, carrying riders at a snail's pace around in lazy circles. The slow motion is soporific, inducing a meditative state. (In that meditative state, some viewers might recall that this is the second carousel to be displayed at the museum, after the Charles Ray in last year's "Skin Fruit" show.)

More harrowing is the piece that's sure to be star of the show for art-loving public: "Untitled (Slide)," 2011, a giant metal slide — a kid's playground on steroids, really — that pierces two floors of the museum, stretching down to a spout that spits out visitors on the second level (a similar installation was created at Tate Modern in 2007, with "Test Site"). A small cloth bag protects visitors's feet and smooths the way down, which takes about four seconds but feels more like half a minute. Twisting and turning through light and dark, the slide is the most forceful piece in the exhibition, and will no doubt cause traffic jams on the top floor as visitors jockey for a spot.

Others works are more subtle. One such moment is provided by "Pill Clock," an aperture under the third-floor stairs that emits a white pill into a growing pile of the same every 15 seconds. A water cooler with paper cups is situated in front of the installation to ask viewers — will you take one? Reader, I took one, but I haven't felt anything (yet). Still, there's something harmlessly psychedelic about Höller's work, as illustrated in "Giant Psycho Tank" (1999), a built environment that, despite its aggressive name, looks like a New-Agey spa, complete with bathrobes. It's a sensory deprivation tank, meant to remove sensation rather than add it. Visitors can climb in, but heed a pro tip: bring a bathing suit, though no clothing is necessary. The tank water is extremely salty, and that stuff sticks.

Floor two is the circus's crescendo. Giant banks of fluorescent lights flash on and off intermittently ("Double Light Corner"), neon-colored animals made of polyurethane sprawl on the floor ("Animal Group"), and visitors come shooting out the slide while others stick their heads in a hollowed-out fish tank ("Aquarium"). As environmental intervention, "Double Light Corner" is the most overwhelming, a kind of seizure-inducing Frankenstein version of a Robert Irwin wall piece.

"Experience" as a whole is a crowd-pleaser, but its artistic highlights come in the slower moments. "High Rise Sculpture," 2006, is a transparent acrylic glass model of a skyscraper interior in which slides replace staircases and spiral chutes curl out of the building's façade. Here, Höller invents an alternate universe rather than an alternative sensory phenomenon. It's much easier to become stuck in this tiny world than it is to become absorbed in the hard-hitting-but-brief sensations of the larger pieces.



Photo © Kyle Chayka

A woman enters Carsten Höller's "Untitled (Slide)," 2011

