

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

# TheObserver

### Carsten Höller: 'It is impossible to travel down a slide without smiling'

*From the Tate's helter skelters to upside-down goggles and mushroom-munching reindeer, Carsten Höller is the most exciting of artists. Tim Adams meets him in Stockholm to hear what he plans next*

Tim Adams



*'I never feel it is really me making the art, it is more something I am containing, feeding, like a pet or an alien': Carsten Höller.*  
*Photograph: Phil Fisk for the Observer*

There must be a reason," Carsten Höller says, "why we don't remember early childhood. Maybe it is genetic, maybe it is something else..."

Whatever the reason, over the summer on London's South Bank, Höller – the authentic Willy Wonka of contemporary art – will do his utmost to return an adult audience to that forgotten infant world of signs and wonders. Höller is best known in Britain for the health-and-safety defying helter skelters he installed in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern in 2006 ("It is impossible to travel down a slide without smiling," he claims). Next month, art lovers can queue to re-engage those underused facial muscles at the Hayward Gallery, where a double helix of equally vertiginous slides will offer the quickest of exits from the gallery's roof.

There will be many other opportunities for legal highs in Höller's show. In one room, sets of his patented nausea-inducing Upside Down Goggles can be borrowed to view the gallery and the vertiginous London skyline as our eyes really see it. In another, a million pills will cascade from the ceiling with the *Alice in Wonderland* invitation, offered by drinking fountains on the wall, to "eat me" and accept the consequences. Höller will also be recreating his Upside Down

Mushroom Room, which is exactly as it sounds, (it can sometimes seem as if he once swallowed the *Magic Roundabout* whole).

I visited Höller earlier in the year at his studio in Stockholm, to ask him why he wanted the world to stop making sense. There was deep snow on the ground; up on the steep pitched roofs of the Gustavian buildings in his street, men were struggling to prevent mini-avalanches. Höller has lived in Sweden for much of the past decade. His parents were German and worked for the EU, so he grew up in Belgium (that ultimate exercise in national surrealism). He is 54 and spends part of his winter in Ghana in a concrete house he has built on the beach 70 miles south of Accra. He is, as his work suggests, a lapsed scientist – he did a doctorate in biology, specialising in the ways that aphids navigate the world. For about 20 years he has now directed that attention to his own species.

In an echoey, empty room at the back of his studio, and over a lunch of salt cod in a grand old restaurant up the road, then back at the apartment that he shares with his partner, 14-year-old daughter, two-year-old son and 20 rare songbirds, Höller does his best to explain his work to me – though on principle, as he says half-heartedly from time to time, he disapproves of the idea of explanation. He is in appearance an entirely sane, wiry, wryly professorial figure, but he is full of quiet surprise. He is much in favour of unknowing the world.

We talk first about how he will dramatise that sense of nonsense at the Hayward. About the twin entrances that will separate the unsuspecting and send them variously into corridors of darkness and light. About the pills and the goggles and the beds. His show will be called *Decision*, though it undermines that apparently logical directive at every turn. It will instead put the gallery-goer through something like the double bind of contemporary life, our desire for ever greater choice and our hatred of uncertainty.

“You know,” Höller says, “it is clearly impossible to have the first idea how animals close to us, dogs for instance, understand the world. Even a human friend you think you know well, you can’t understand the decisions they make. And then when you look in the mirror it becomes even more spooky, because can you really work out why this person you see there does the things they do?”

It is Höller’s belief that much of our current western existence is based on a dull and false promise of logical predictability, our version of fundamentalism. “It is rather comforting to think that things we think we can begin to predict, like financial markets, or the weather, have a habit of doing wild things unexpectedly,” he says. “Our utilitarian/scientific model improves the chances of knowing what will happen next, but there is always a remainder of something else.”

Höller is keen to access that remainder, disrupt the model. “The incomprehensible is an essential part of who we are,” he says, in his precise English, “but something we often try to deny.”

His own biography, the shift from science to art in the early 90s, seems to point at a loss of faith in narrow rationality. Did he get to the point where the scientific method was not explaining the world as much as he wanted it to?

“Yes,” he says carefully. “Though it was more that the science was always based on a set of assumptions. If you are doing modelling of how neurons function and fire, you start off always with a set of givens. The givens are something you just swallow without thinking how they taste.

When I submitted my first scientific paper to a journal, there were referees who read it, and they approved it, but they said the discussion part was full of speculation. There were red marks all over it. The red marks were on all the bits I thought were the best things I had done. I came to believe that the assumptions I made in art were more honest, really...”

What was the subject of his science paper?

“It was about aphids. They have a lot of enemies, but my concern were these little parasitoids, tiny wasps that pierce the aphid, lay an egg inside. The larvae eat the aphid from within. So it was about the dynamic between these two insects.”

When I wonder how that fascination arose, Höller talks about entomology being a safe surrogate for his real life-long passion, which is songbirds. He is, I discover later, at work training bullfinches, among other things, how to whistle a particular 18th-century love song, which requires isolating them for six months and feeding them by hand. He is nothing if not obsessive.

“Studying insects was really a way of keeping my fascination with birds somewhat in control,” he says with a smile. “Insects were cheating, really – they are little animals that fly, but they don’t sing.”

What is it about birdsong that attracts him?

“I can’t even speak about it,” he says. “It is more how you hear it, how it occupies a certain range of thoughts, how you can be deeply satisfied by hearing the first skylark, for instance, singing in February. It produces a profound happiness in me, is all that I can say.”

Höller gave up on formal science in 1993. The following year a friend gave him one of those books that changed his life. The book was by R Gordon Wasson, a former employee of JP Morgan investment bank, who devoted 25 years of his life from the 1950s to the study of the hallucinogenic properties of mushrooms and their anthropological history. In particular, Wasson speculated that the substance “soma”, which forms the basis of pagan and shamanic societies in certain ancient texts and oral traditions, was derived from the fly agaric mushroom.

One part of Höller’s life, ever since, has been an experimental kind of artistic homage to that theory. In one of his most memorable shows, he installed 14 live reindeer in a gallery in Berlin at Christmas time. Seven were fed on fly agaric mushrooms, seven, as a control, not. The urine of all of the reindeer was collected, bottled and stored in fridges in the gallery. Couples could rent an elevated bed in the room overnight and, if they liked, drink the fabled hallucinogenic urine and see if they believed Santa could fly. Half of it, of course, was simply reindeer piss.

Höller sees hallucinogens in part as a short cut, like early childhood or dreams, to a “different kind of rational”.

How much has he experimented on himself?

“I have never been a big druggie,” he says. “Drugs are not useful, really, but they are super-interesting in that they show you how simply your everyday drug-free experience can be altered. I think it is almost like a must for an artist to at least experience that.”

Did he approach that experience in a scientific way?

“Yes. I had to do it on my own. I never went to art school, so there was no other option. That was the handy part about science – because I was working mainly in biochemistry, I could order anything that I wanted. For testing. And you want very pure substances in the lab, of course.”

So you could get the good stuff?

“Yes, the very good stuff. It was a long time ago.”

Out of that range of substances, which did he find the most interesting?

“Ketamine,” he says. “I didn’t try LSD, because I was scared of it. I think I would be less scared now. Ketamine only lasted half an hour. It paralyses the body. You don’t feel good at all, really, but it changes your perception of yourself in the world. I could feel that I was kind of a liquid, and the liquid was spreading from me not only where I was lying on the floor but through the apartment and, gradually, over the whole earth, including every little detail on the map. I was totally conscious, and I can keep it as a memory very clearly from 20 years ago. I didn’t need to repeat it.”

Mushrooms, of course, formed part of that experimentation. “There are two kinds of mushrooms,” he continues. “The magic mushrooms, the psilocybin-based ones, the funny ones, and then there is the fly agaric mushroom, which is extremely toxic and not so funny. But I was mainly interested in the fly agaric.”

Höller got hold of some mushrooms and tried them in different ways, six times. Four times he passed out for long periods and threw up on waking. On the sixth occasion, he says, he started chanting like a Tibetan monk.

“It was not very scientific,” he says. “You should really get the first ones of the season, then it also depends on where you get them. I went to Kamchatka once, fly-fishing with some friends, and on the way back we stopped by the side of the road and there was a woman selling this beautiful big fly agaric. She just had one. And I couldn’t communicate with her. She was saying it made people crazy. I didn’t buy it. But I regret it. That must have been the quality the shamans used to use. It was very expensive.”

There aren’t many shamans left, I say. Does he think artists have assumed their function?

He laughs. “You might say someone like [the German conceptual artist] Joseph Beuys had that quality. Being a shaman was about becoming a vessel, or a message carrier, the person who finds a way to bring the news. The process itself is probably similar in a way...”

How so?

“Well, when you have an exhibition there is a set of constants: the date the show opens, the size of the gallery space, the budget and so on. But on the other side it becomes more complicated. I never feel that it is really me doing it, making the art – it is more something that I am containing, that I am feeding, almost like a pet or an alien.”

Is that alien an aspect of himself he has come to understand?

“I think it is really because I have spent so much time with this now that I have this vessel-like function. The talent is really understanding the way you want the thing to develop. But there is certainly an automatic process in there and you are more like the judge, saying yes or no. Very often the judgement itself is automatic. Like when you come back to birth, or like a rush of euphoria, like I said when you hear the skylark for the first time, a good artwork can be the same.”

These are all things, of course, to hold in mind if you get the opportunity to spend milliseconds defying gravity on one of Höller’s slides. Later, back at his apartment, he shows me the room where he keeps the rare, caged songbirds he breeds. Among them is a single nightingale (they are too aggressive to keep as a pair).

The bird will not sing while he is the room, but at night Höller sits in the adjacent living room with the door ajar as the bird goes through its full repertoire. He has tubs of live beetles and worms to tempt his birds to good voice. “It’s not for everybody,” he says, “but it is for me.”

Does he see, I wonder, the caged bird singing in terms of the traditional metaphor of the artist and creation?

“That’s for you to say,” he says. “I have no answers, but I suppose I am just trying to give people a few of the tools.”

Before I leave he gives me three small tubes of his own recipe toothpaste, “one male, one female, one child” version, each laced with an “activator”. He says I should use before bed to improve my dreams.

I duly go through the ritual back at home. Does the toothpaste work? I’m still in two minds.

*Carsten Höller’s exhibition Decision runs at the Hayward Gallery, London SE1 from 10 June to 6 September 2015 (southbankcentre.co.uk)*