

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



A First Look At The Carsten Höller Decisions Exhibition

James Drury



Londonist Rating: ★★★★★

The exhibition starts with a decision — do you take the left door, or the right door, A or B? These are Carsten Höller's first works: A B Sign and Decision Corridors. We pick left and march straight into a pitch dark metal tunnel. Gingerly feeling a way along with one hand on the wall, after a few seconds your eyes get used to the dark and it becomes easy to spot pin-pricks of light poking through the metal surrounds. Shrieks of delight and fear come from other people in the passageway, which undulates up and down, snaking left and right for what seems like an uncomfortably long time. Are we going to bump into someone ahead of us? Will someone behind stumble over us?

Eventually the light grows and we emerge, a little relieved, into an area in the gallery hosting Flying Mushrooms — large-scale models of the hallucinogenic-if-eaten fly agaric mushroom. These are impaled on a mobile which can be pushed around by the public. After the journey

through the Decision Corridors, this feels like arriving in another world and a tone of exploration and adventure is set for the remainder of the exhibition.

This major retrospective of Höller's works at the Hayward Gallery ranges from specially-commissioned new pieces to key early works by the Belgian artist like *Upside Down Goggles* and *The Pinocchio Effect*. Many of the works are participatory, asking questions about the nature of art — is it the work itself or our interactions with it? We're presented throughout the exhibition with motifs connected with the idea of choice: doubles, twins, mirrored experiences and forking paths.

A wonderful example of this is *Pill Clock*, which sees a red and white pill fall onto a pile on the gallery floor every three seconds. Visitors can decide whether to pick up one of the pills and take it, using the nearby water fountain. What do these pills do if taken? You'll have to find out for yourself.

Another gallery space offers *Two Roaming Beds*, a pair of comfortable-looking single beds which move restlessly around the gallery floor on wheels, guided by lasers (you can spend the night in one should you have £300 to spare).

Entering *Half Mirror Room* we're immediately confronted with how many other people are in the space. The room has floor-to-ceiling mirrors positioned at 90-degree angles to one another, inverting the usual mirror image and forcing you to become aware of everyone else who's there, as well as the other items in the room. One of these is the *Dice* (White Body, Black Dots), an over-sized die with holes for spots, which kids can climb through. But a closer look shows it to be not quite as child-friendly as it seems — some of the holes look quite tricky to escape through.

Outside on the Waterloo Terrace there are *Two Flying Machines* — and you have the chance to be strapped into a hang-glider-style contraption and winched out above Waterloo Bridge in circles, your speed controlled with a motorbike-esque handle. Having completed one trepid loop, we start to notice the people who are — and aren't — looking at us in our peculiar position. Pedestrians often don't look up and don't notice, but the people on top decks of buses do, and especially passengers on open-top tourist buses who grin and wave or look taken aback. Then there's the people waiting for their turn, looking at us with a mixture of envy and not a little ridicule. It's a joyous experience and, while not an adrenaline ride, requires a little courage to take the first step off the platform.

Also on the upper gallery is the perception-altering *Upside Down Goggles*. First made in 1994 based on an experiment by George Stratton in the 1890s, it's a visor which has a mirror inside to invert your vision. Hugely disorientating, we take a few tottering steps before almost falling over. It's like being very dizzy and a bit seasick at the same time. But stick at it and things do get easier. We manage to slowly plod from one side of the terrace to the other without cheating. There is only one thing that appears the correct way up when wearing the visor — and that's Höller's other artwork out here, the *Adjusted Hayward Sign*, created especially for this exhibition.

The penultimate decision is whether you take the left or right staircase up to the *Isometric Slides*. As we came in through the left door we decide to stick with that choice... only to emerge at the right hand slide.

Gripping the mat, we clamber onto the lip of the metal slide, and await the green light before slipping away down and around and around until finally emerging, grinning and exhilarated.

This is a delightful, fun, joyous exhibition that may on the surface appear frivolous, but has many opportunities to consider your own decision-making process, perception, why you find things fun, and whether you should put aside your inhibitions and try something new or not. There'll be plenty of people pondering whether it's art or not, and points made about the infantilisation of adults, but this is genuinely the most fun we've had at an art exhibition, and the whole experience was incredibly uplifting and thought-provoking.

There's only one decision about this exhibition you don't need to make — and that's whether to go or not.

Decisions is at the Hayward Gallery from 10 June-6 September. Tickets are £15 adults, £13 seniors, £10 for 12-18s and should be booked in advance.