

## CARSTEN HÖLLER

MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN,  
MARSEILLE

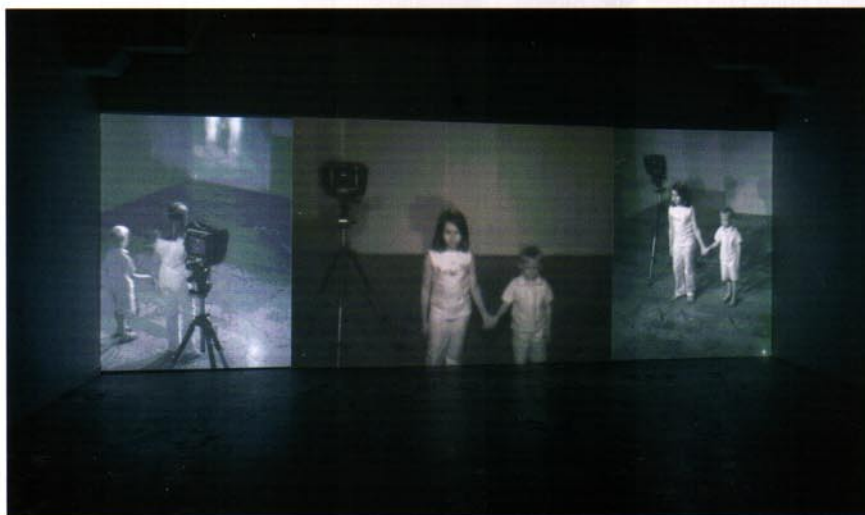
### JENNIFER ALLEN

Carsten Höller has come up with a novel approach: more of the same. For his current exhibition at MAC, Höller has simply duplicated a selection of his own works from the last decade, from *Moving Image*, 1994–2004, to *Hotel Room*, 2004, and placed both editions on view. These twin sets transform the museum into an architectural Rorschach blot, as each pair is separated and installed in parallel spaces at opposite ends of the building. The axial “fold” includes—what else?—a hall of mirrors, *Sliding Doors*, 2003, which extends Alice’s step through the looking glass: Five sets of mirrored doors open and close automatically around viewers, who are briefly trapped by their own reflections as they make their way through the passage.

Despite its retrospective and reflexive structure, Höller’s “Une exposition à Marseille” is less a career survey than a continuation of the artist’s recent experiments in self-reproduction. These all started humbly enough, with the letter *K* at the “4Free” exhibition at Berlin’s BüroFriedrich in 2001: For that show, Höller submitted nothing more than an alternate spelling of his name to be added to the list of participating artists (*Karsten Höller*, 2001). The homonym doesn’t hide much as a nom de plume but works well as an orthographic virus, simulating the artist’s real title while increasing the possibility of spelling

errors. In September 2003, Höller’s doubling technique crystallized into a full-scale exhibition, “One Day One Day,” at Stockholm’s Färgfabriken. The show was announced as one event but featured two press releases, two websites, two invitations, two openings, and even two artworks—*The Färgfabriken Light Wall* and *The Färgfabriken Phi Wall* (both 2003)—which were alternately shown and hidden every other day. For a January 2004 interview with the Italian station Radio Arte Mobile, Höller gave both live and prerecorded answers, discrete yet hardly distinguishable from one another: “I often wonder what is hidden behind reality”; “I wonder what is behind reality.” And *Artforum* readers may have wondered about the reality behind two copycat ads in the May issue: one announcing an exhibition by Carsten Höller, the other, a show by Karsten Höller—both taking place over the same dates in May and June at Casey Kaplan Gallery in New York.

In light of these interventions, the mirrored show at MAC may initially appear to be just another playful take on the real and the fake. Yet in confusing such distinctions, Höller also challenges the certainty of the exhibition as event, from its marketing to its installation—and even its duration (as this review went to print, the MAC show was extended by the length of its original run). Whatever Höller duplicates, his doubles are about doubt, not deceit; they question the finality of reception, not the truth of representation. By reproducing his identity and his oeuvre here and in other shows, Höller has effectively fused his earlier critical works on sexual reproduction with his roaming *Laboratory of Doubt*, 1999, a Mercedes sedan equipped with two loudspeakers designed to make public announcements



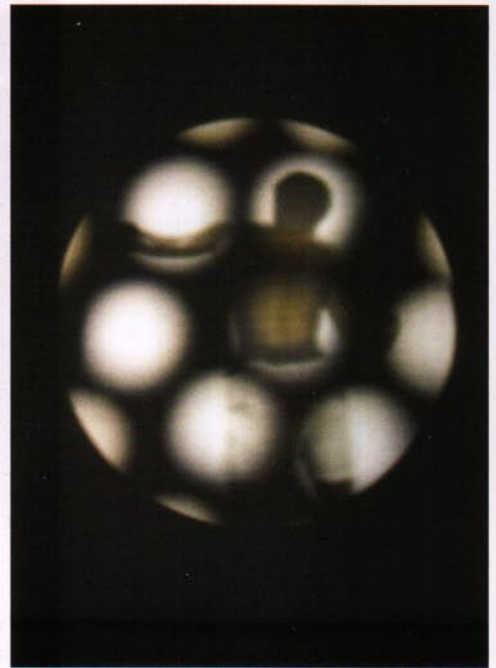
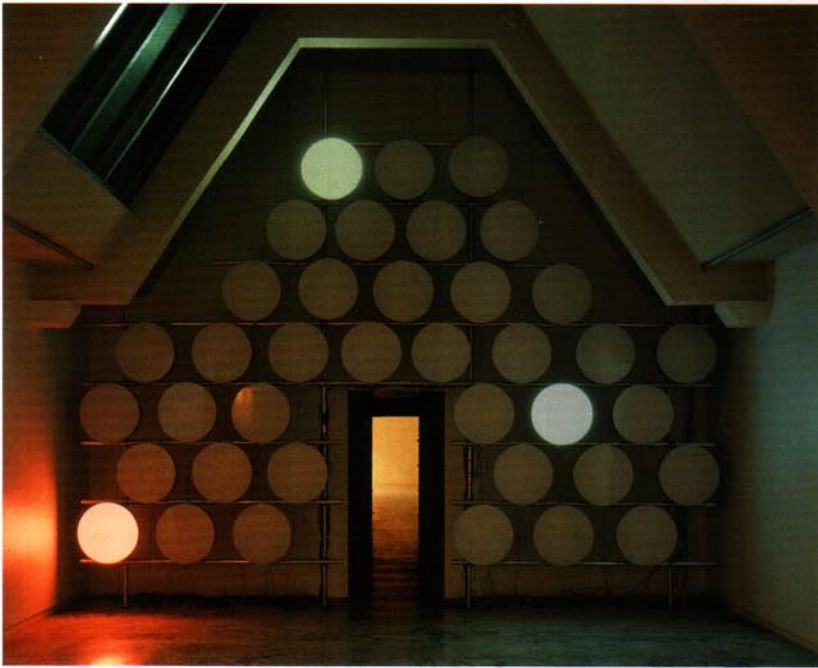


Installation views, Musée d'Art Contemporain, Marseille, 2004. Photos: Attilio Maranzano. Clockwise from bottom: Carsten Höller, *Infrared Room*, 2004. Carsten Höller, *Sliding Doors*, 2003. Carsten Höller, *Hotel Room*, 2004. Carsten Höller, *Hotel Room*, 2004.

about the artist's various uncertainties. His copies might also be compared to Felix Gonzalez-Torres's user-friendly multiples, whether take-away posters or ready-to-eat candies. In the case of both artists, it makes no sense to inquire after the original—though that did not prevent people from asking which opening party for "One Day One Day" was the "real" one, once word got around that there were two slightly different invitation cards. Ultimately Höller offered not posters or candies but two distinct experiences, which, as visitors disputed what they saw at what they thought was the "same" event, gradually transformed the exhibition into hearsay.

In Marseille, Höller has used multiples to disseminate doubt not in a collective oral realm but within the body of the individual viewer. Since this exhibition will remain unchanged throughout its extended run, visitors will not dispute each other's experiences but, confronted with the "same" installations twice in the same museum,

may wonder if they have taken a wrong turn. Perhaps as a warning of sorts, Höller has placed a statement on the wall at the start of his maze denying the existence of any doubles: "They are only resemblances." Of course, the existence of resemblances depends on our ability to recognize them—an ability that the individual works provoke in invasive and subtle ways. After seeing each work's doppelgänger, one can see the whole exhibition as if walking on the ceiling, by donning *Upside-Down Goggles*, 1994/2004, Höller's homage to George Stratton's 1897 research on vision without the natural inversion of the retinal image. In addition to reading Stratton's article, one may borrow this portable device for eight days and relive his experiences. Elsewhere, Höller recreates optical illusions that play on the foibles of the human eye, from the mural *Zöllner Stripes*, 2001, to the flashing colored spheres of *Phi Wall*, 2002/2004, which depend upon a phenomenon discovered in 1912 by Max



Above: Installation views, Musée d'Art Contemporain, Marseille, 2004. Photos: Attilio Maranzano. Left: Carsten Höller, *Phi Wall*, 2002/2004. Right: Carsten Höller, *Moving Image*, 1994/2004. Below left: Carsten Höller, *The Forest*, 2002. Installation view, Musée d'Art Contemporain, Marseille, 2004. Photo: Attilio Maranzano. Right: Carsten Höller, *The Forest*, 2002, still from a color digital video, 6 minute 15 second loop.

Wertheimer: When two dots flash in rapid sequence, observers see an imaginary third dot bouncing between them.

Given such precise references to historical research in perception, much has been made of Höller's doctorate in science. But this artist would make a strange scientist, since he clearly prefers experimentation for its own sake to the production of conclusive results. His studies—in phytopathology and entomology—along with his interest in ornithology seem to have expanded his model of human sense perception by referring to oddities from the plant, insect, and bird worlds. Many works appear to mix Descartes's *Meditations* with Kafka's *Metamorphosis*: While *Infrared Room*, 2004, simulates night vision, *The Forest*, 2002—a pair of glasses incorporating two mini LCD screens showing footage of a snowfall in the woods at night—gives a good idea of what it must be like to have antennae, as the two images gradually diverge until one is inverted. A mole would have no problem navigating *Corridor*, 2003–2004, but humans must use touch to get through the darkened, twisting, seventy-eight-yard-long passage. Höller's play on resemblances may begin with recognizing the same works but ends up rewiring the body's instant reproduction of its environment through the senses.

Whatever senses they attempt to rewire, each of these works demands the viewer's interaction: an approach to reception found

in both Op art and relational aesthetics. In contrast to these practices, Höller does not make fixed images, nor facilitate social relations, but creates experiences that come to life inside the viewer's body. The third colored circle in *Phi Wall*, for example, exists *only* in the eye of the beholder. Despite the

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slick design of such pieces, their resistance to collective perception lends them an almost iconoclastic edge. The closed-circuit system in *Infrared Room* projects viewers' images on to the museum wall in a way so subtly out of sync with their actual movements that it is only by studying one's own image in isolation from one's neighbors' that any delay may be discerned. The glasses and goggles replace the collective gaze directed at one image—a painting or a film—with a distorted interior view, which is as difficult to share as an acid-induced vision. Indeed, Stratton's difficulty in locating his limbs in the upside-down world of his experiment recalls a bad trip, if not the dissociations of psychosis. *Psycho-Tank*, 1999, a womblike saltwater

tank for one, uses sensory deprivation to revive our archaic biological form, indistinguishable from its surroundings.

By presenting these hallucinogenic and intimate appendages together, the exhibition at MAC evokes an uncanny recollection of Lygia Clark's series "Máscaras sensoriais" (Sensorial masks), 1967. (*Upside-Down Goggles* is a dead ringer for her *Mask with Mirrors*, of the same year.) Höller may not share Clark's interest in psychological healing, market critique, and ritualized group dynamics, but both artists have made works that disorient the senses; both have replaced art's conventional methods of representation—whether figurative or abstract—with a concentration on the distortions of internal, bodily perception. Their gadgets can be photographed, but it is impossible to take pictures of what each person has seen and experienced while wearing them.

By taking apart our senses from the out-

side in, Höller facilitates an exceptional experience of time. Duration is decided not by the work (as it is in time-based media like video), nor by the artist (as in performance), but by the "wiring" of each viewer's body. His glasses, tanks, mirrors, and dark passages all produce sensory jet-lag: a shock of disorientation, sluggish adaptation, and eventual delight or dismay. This delay is not the quantifiable time of the scientific experiment, nor the collectively determined time of Clark's séances, but an immeasurable experience determined by one's own physicality that is as unique as each person's recovery from a trip to a distant time zone. Giving rise to a resolutely personal present, Höller's perceptual zones remain anti-historical, anti-utopian, and, again, imperceptible to those who are not direct participants—no small feat in a society governed by mass spectacle and quantifiable duration.

There are, however, two startling exceptions to this characterization at MAC. These might also function to generate doubt, though Höller's method here is ultimately a questionable one. The body emerges as an icon in a mass spectacle in both *Moving Image*, 2004, which features an image of Muhammad Ali about to knock out George Foreman at Kinshasa in 1974, and in *Flicker Film*, 2004, which deploys the phi effect to make a dancer jump between two flashing, identical projections of a Werrason concert, filmed at the same stadium in 2001. Showing these works together may be a nod to Leon Gast's 1996 documentary *When We Were Kings*, which showed the music festival leading up to the infamous "Rumble in the Jungle." But however celebratory it may seem, the use of an African-American icon and a Congolese pop idol to effect an optical trick is troubling in a show that otherwise avoids picturing the body. This stadium is what haunts Höller's own zone of perception, and it does so with the persistence of an afterimage. □

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