



Amusement Park, 2006. Courtesy: MASS MoCA, North Adams. Photo: Kevin Kennefick

CARSTEN HÖLLER

ELIZABETH MANCHESTER

HE'LL twist your tongue into tubes (*The Genetics of Tongue Tricks*, 1998), make your nose swell like a tomato (*The Pinnocchio Effect*, 1994) and your libido relax and expand as you make love in the air (*The Pealove Room*, 1993), deprive you of bodily sensations (*Psycho Tank*, 1999), give you visual hallucinations (*Two Snails*, 1994; *Movement as a Lie*, 1994; *Expedition Equipment for the Exploration of the Self*, 1995; *Light Wall*, 2000; *The Forest* 2002) and turn your world upside down (*Upside Down Goggles*, 1993 and 1994/2001). You could find yourself rotating like a giant magic mushroom (*Upside Down Mushroom Room*, 2000), hurtling in downward spirals out of the side of a building (*Valerio I and II*, 1998 and numerous *Slides*), multiplying endlessly in a series of mirrored doors (*Sliding Doors*, 2003), or simply getting a headache as your mind refuses to accede to the visual phenomenon known as Phi (*The Phi Phenomenon*, 1994; *Phi Wall*, 2002; *Flicker Film*, 2004).

Since the mid 1990s Carsten Höller has been using the art world as a place to experiment on the senses, in order to offer a different kind of art experience to viewers – one that finally, hopefully, will stick as they leave with the memory of an intense feeling that has made them think about the world in a new way. Like that of many artists today, Höller's practice cannot be slotted into any of the traditional moulds, falling instead into a new classification linked to Bourriaud's notion of relational aesthetics – the artists working in the in-between spaces, in between all disciplines of knowledge and cultural production.

Born in Brussels, of German parents, and currently living and working in Sweden, Höller is an exemplary member of this school as his practice has developed from no formal art education of any sort. In Kiel in the 1980s he trained as a phytopathologist and agronomic entomologist, specialising in insect communication while playing with art. His biology studies, particularly the processes of experimentation, have clearly strongly influenced his practice, as did growing up with a father who worked as an official for the European Community in Brussels, dedicated to order, control, certainty and to finding solutions for social problems.

In conversation Höller has more the flavour of a philosopher than a scientist or an artist, as his mission, subverting all that civil servants stand for, is doubt, uncertainty and the unblocking of limitations that define the known world. To this end, in 1999 he created the *Laboratory of Doubt*, a souped-up white Mercedes Estate with a loud hailer on the roof in which he drove around during the course of an exhibition in Antwerp and filmed going endlessly round and round at a crossroads, demonstrating, perhaps in spite of himself, the fate of one who is locked into a condition of eternal doubt.

Just as he rejects the banality of dualities like science versus art (even doubt versus certainty), preferring instead the Deleuzian multiple layering of and...and... and, Höller rejects the notion of finite meaning, conclusion or any other kind of definable end to his art. This is an understandable aim, but one that is difficult to effect in a world of products that must be marketed, funded and eventually sold. Höller's product is a unique experience – something one cannot or will not find anywhere else, and which is different for every individual, occurring uniquely in his or her head. Although he is often not certain himself what exactly this experience will be, immediate sensation – in himself and of course the viewer – is central to his vision. In his seminal exhibition 'Glück' [Happiness] at the Hamburger Kunstverein in 1996, with such wonders as the *Flying Machine*, *Happiness Pills* and *Massage Chair* (all 1996), viewers were given the real opportunity to lose their sense of self for a short time and return to the delight felt in childhood when many physical sensations are new and surprising.



Above: *Valerio II*, 1998. Photo: Jens Ziehe. Below: *Flying Machine*, 1996. Photo: Christian Bauer. Both images courtesy: Esther Schipper, Berlin



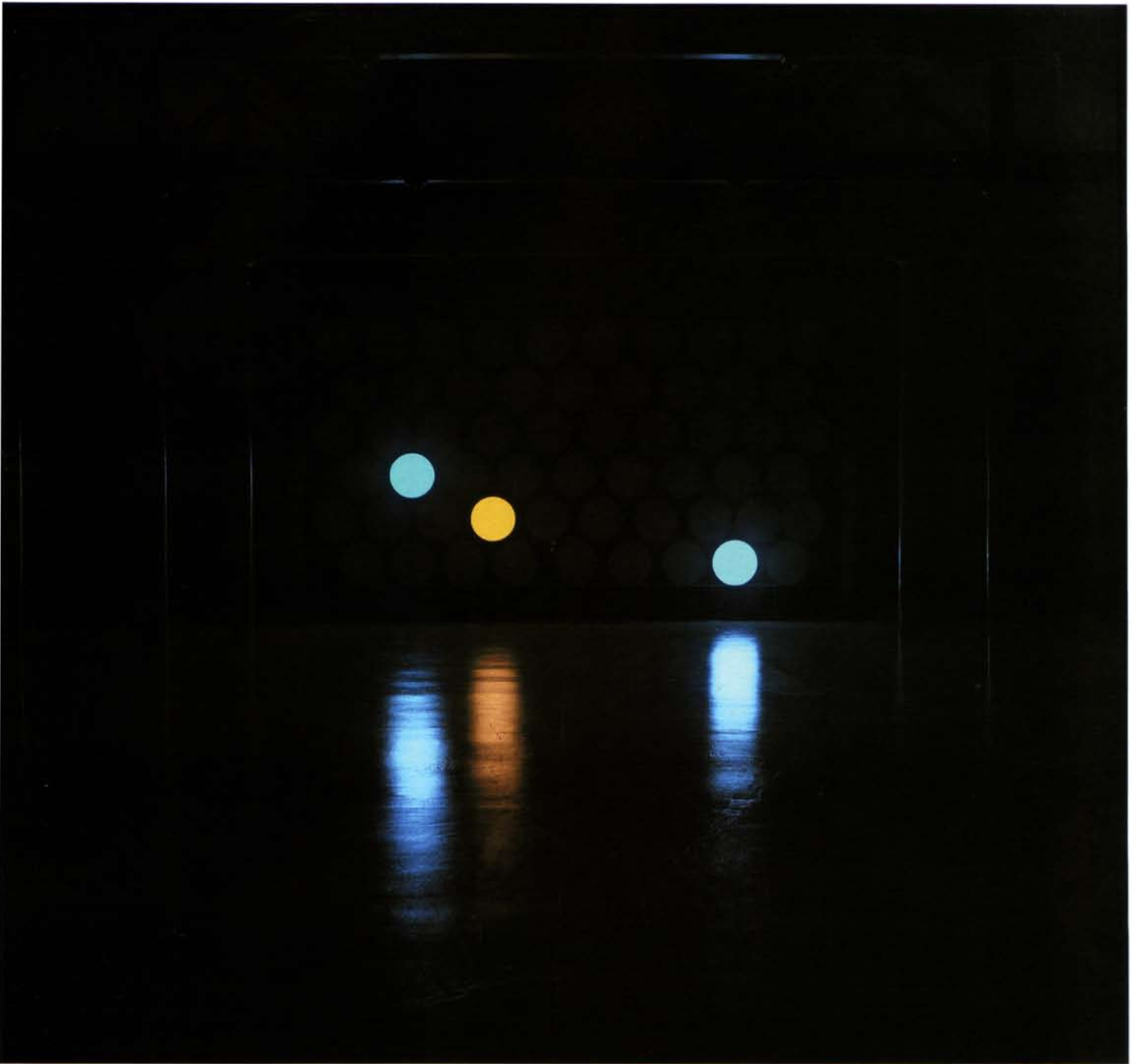


Above: *Upside Down Goggles*, 1994/2001. Courtesy: Esther Schipper, Berlin. Photo: Attilio Maranzano. Below: *Hard, Hard to be a Baby*, 1992. Courtesy: Air de Paris, Paris



As he becomes increasingly successful and enters the list of big international players competing for the large commissions, high kudos and much-visited public spaces like Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, Höller confronts the place where audience participation meets crowd control. These days a small number of the lucky elite attending a private view may be permitted to enjoy the full experience of Höller's slowed-down carousels and dizzying slides, but if his *Amusement Park* (2006) – a monumental installation of five modified carnival rides in the vast sculpture hall of MASS MoCA – is anything to go by, the artist is reverting to a surprisingly cruel and slightly nasty tactic exemplified in some of his early work. *Hard, Hard to Be a Baby* (1992), a child's swing installed on the border of the roof of a 13-floor house in Paris, seems to mock an infant's frustrated desire for pleasure. Officially packaged as deliberately frustrating the audience's wish to participate, the more recent works provide formally beautiful spectacles that have turned into 'kinetic sculptures', becoming essays in physical disappointment rather than existential doubt.

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Above: *Phi Wall*, 2002. Photo: Stefan Frank Jensen. Below: *Laboratory of Doubt*, 1999. Photo: Thorsten Arendt. All images courtesy: Esther Schipper, Berlin

