

DOWN THE CHUTE

AT TATE MODERN

Carsten Höller's London Tubes

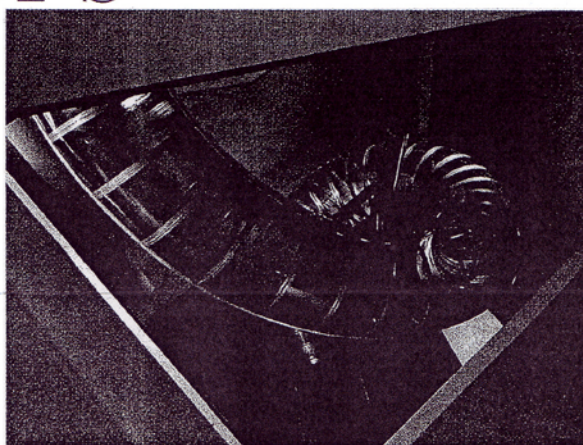
BY KAREN WRIGHT

Visitors to the Tate Modern this autumn will have five more options to consider when entering the Turbine Hall: Should they launch themselves down one of the two slides from the mezzanine level or one from level three, four, or five? Or should they refrain from sliding altogether? Following installations by illustrious artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Olafur Eliasson, and Bruce Nauman, Carsten Höller's "participative," playful works may seem an odd, even flippant choice for the Turbine Hall. But to this trim, dapper man—soberly dressed, when I met him, in gray and black, with stark black spectacles—slides were simply "an obvious solution to deal with the tall space."

As for his work's being continually labeled participatory, Höller is keen to point out that the slides are also sculptural. "Why can't we think of this work like Brancusi's endless columns?" he pleads. In fact, he envisages the Tate Modern's slides as "a big nerve system which will connect the building together. In doing so, they'll also connect the exhibitions, linking the contemporary with the less contemporary." He's eager to make it clear that "it is a misunderstanding to think you're obliged to join in the sliding," even admitting that "I'm not sure that I would dare to come down from level four or level five—it's very high up there!"

Höller was born in 1961, in Brussels, a town that seems to have been the source of much of his playfulness. Every day as he walked to school, he passed the house of Hergé—the creator of *Tintin*—and saw the artist hard at work through the window; this fueled Höller's imagination. In 1979 he moved to Kiel to train as an agricultural entomologist at the University of Kiel, where he received his doctorate in 1988. Kiel was a place that harshly contrasted with his childhood surroundings. "It was a dump, and I spent all my time working, as there was nothing else to do," he says. He remained at the university until 1993, when after a period of trying to simultaneously make art and lead a team of scientists, he finally left to become a full-time artist. He moved to Stockholm to be near his partner and still lives there today.

When I ask about his views on the relationship between art and science, Höller sighs. "I am constantly being asked to participate in conferences about art and science," he tells me, "and I constantly refuse. Science has a language, and art has a language. After painting, photography, and video, those languages have become very different from each other. My work is often of an experimental or explorative quality, but unlike a scientist, I keep no data. All my art is based on personal



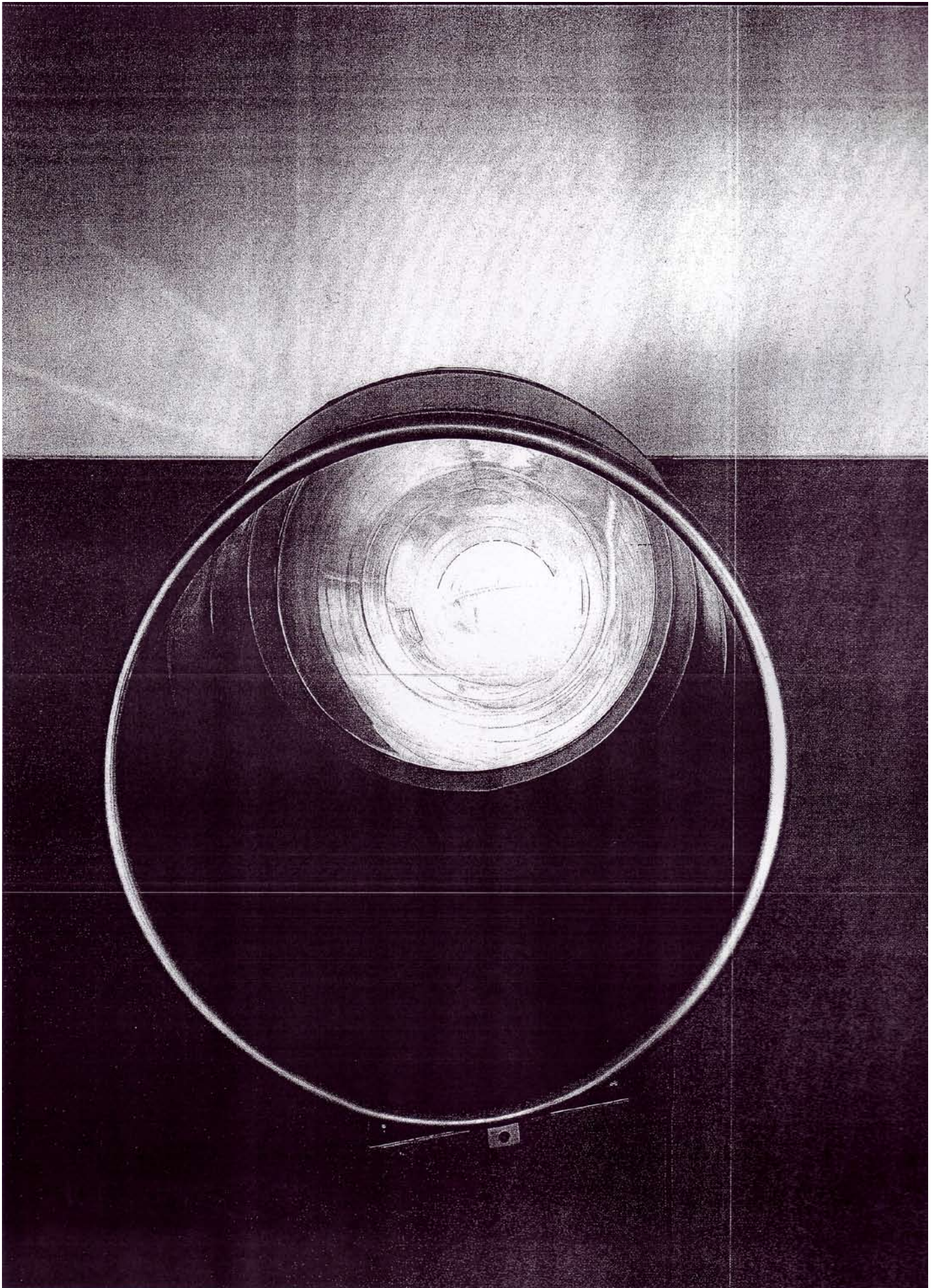
experience, which, of course, is the language of the devil to the scientist and is most unscientific. Science depends on objective and repetitive tools. There will be no scientific evaluation of the work in the Turbine Hall. Ultimately, my work is really about exploration of self, and that is a frontier that science doesn't pay too much attention to."

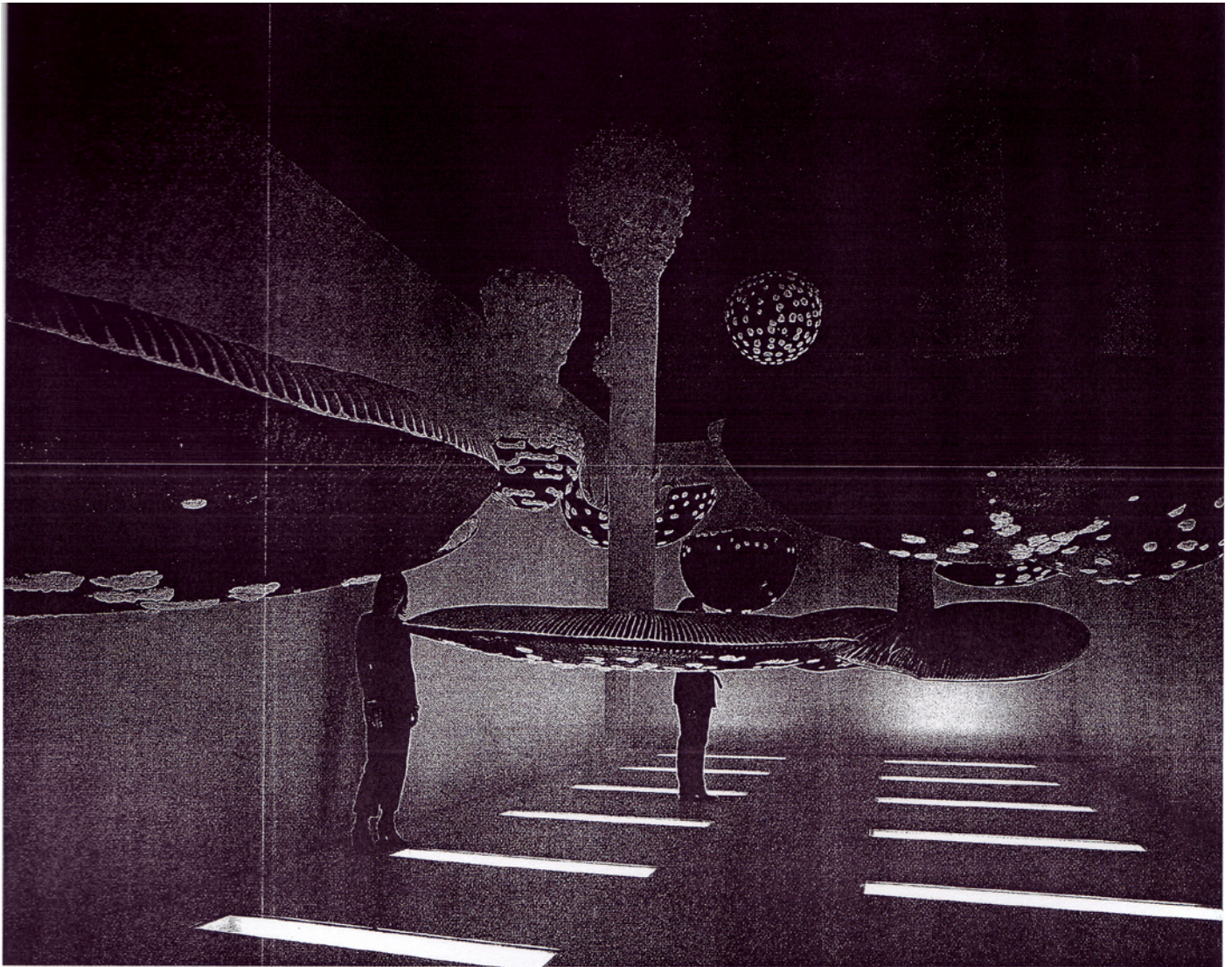
There is no doubt, however, that if one looks back at Höller's oeuvre, he has, consciously or not, exploited scientific works as source material. When I suggest this, he replies, "Yes, but they are old theories, not contemporary," pointing out that his *Upside-Down Glasses* was based on the experiments of American psychologist George Stratton in the 1890s. He tells me that his own scientific work explored the ways that organisms use scent to increase their chances of survival: For instance, wheat produces an odor that attracts insects that attack wheat's primary predators, aphids. Here the discussion becomes increasingly scientific, and at some point I become lost and decide to bring Höller back to the present. I ask him why, when I visited the *Solandra Greenhouse* (2004), shown in the last Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, I didn't feel as engaged with the installation as the catalogue promised I would. "That is because many of my pieces don't work," he confesses without embarrassment. "Those flowers, which have aphrodisiacal effects, bloom only at night in Mexico, and we couldn't get them to flower in the greenhouse in Pittsburgh. This is a work that is based on people's expectations, and there is also a placebo effect." This level of expectation clearly divides spectators into two categories: those who have an active imagination and those, like myself, who don't.

Some of Höller's viewers have been horrified by the ideas expressed in the works. *Come Dear Get Something Nice* (1991) is from a series of artworks based on the idea of trapping toddlers. This is a simple piece: An upturned playpen is precariously balanced on a stake, and under »

OPPOSITE PAGE
SLIDE #5 (DETAIL),
1999-2000,
INSTALLATION VIEW,
FONDAZIONE PRADA,
MILAN, 2000
PHOTO: ATTILIO PARANZANO
COURTESY ESTHER SCHNEIDER
GALLERY, BERLIN

ABOVE
SLIDE #6, 2003
INSTALLATION VIEW,
INSTITUTE OF
CONTEMPORARY
ART, BOSTON
PHOTO: JOHN KENNARD
COURTESY INSTITUTE OF
CONTEMPORARY ART, BOSTON





ABOVE
 UPSIDE-DOWN MUSHROOM
 ROOM, 2000
 INSTALLATION VIEW,
 SYNCHRO SYSTEM,
 FONDAZIONE PRADA,
 MILAN, 2000
 PHOTO: ATTILIO MARAZANO
 COURTESY FONDAZIONE
 PRADA, MILAN

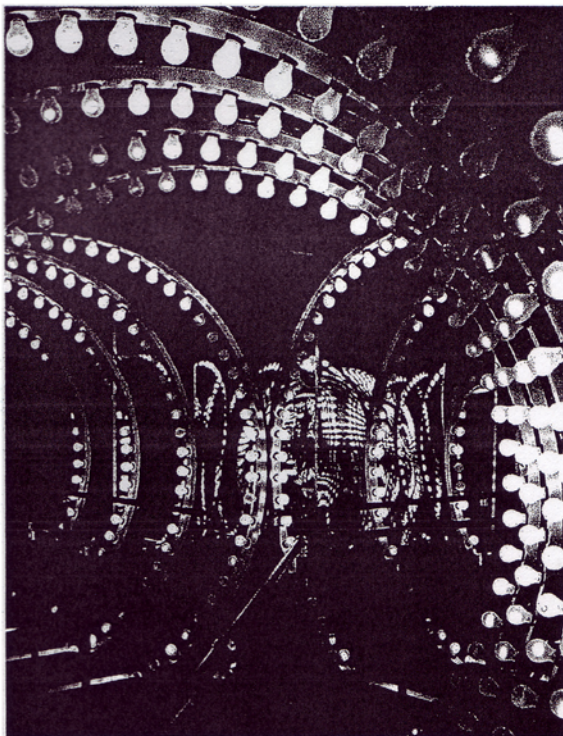
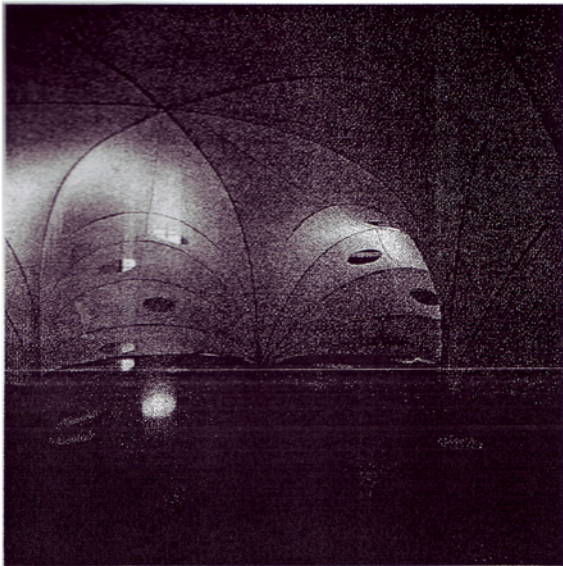
the playpen is bait, a Kinder Egg, to entice a child. The Kinder Egg is attached to the stake so that when the unsuspecting toddler removes it he is trapped. "Do you hate children?" I ask. "No, of course not!" he replies. "I have a daughter. I just want people to free themselves from the biological goals imposed by the evolutionary process." After a moment, he adds, "But of course the works are filled with black humor."

As with all his endeavors, Höller takes the slide project seriously—and well he should. The sponsors for the Tate's Turbine Hall series will pay in excess of £400,000 (around \$750,000), some of which will go to the Wiegand slide company, Höller's engineering and design collaborators on the project. There will be two books published in support of the work. One will be an investigation of the history of the slide, the other a feasibility study of how slides can be used for the transportation of humans around cities. Höller warms to the subject, asking, "Why are slides used only in the playground? Why not to get adults from one place to the other?" Having once actually seen a nursing home use slides to help move its patients from place to place, Höller is particularly interested in the slide's pragmatic uses. He already has one unusual patron using his sculptures in her daily life. Miuccia Prada, who works at Prada's Milan headquarters, uses a slide she commissioned from Höller at the end of every day. "She is a busy lady," he explains, "and doesn't

have much time for the stairs." The slide propels her through the center of the building, through the wall, and around the outside of the building, eventually depositing her at her car, where her driver awaits her. Höller's first slide was commissioned by Kunst-Werke in Berlin, in 1998. Other institutions followed, with the artist creating slides for the ICA in Boston and the Kiasma in Helsinki from 1998 to 2000. While Tate Modern is his most complex and ambitious slide

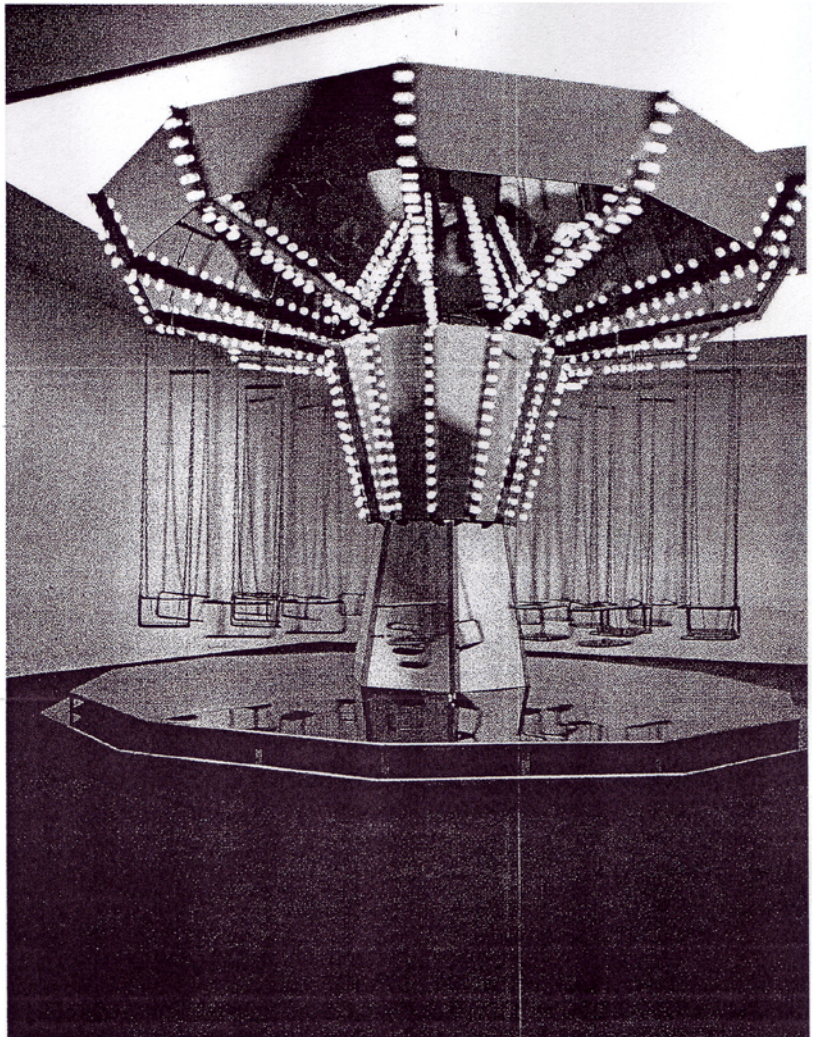
“I’ve commissioned a 23-story house that would be made entirely of slides. They’d virtually be the building’s skeleton, but without a spine, like the body of an insect.”

project, he doesn't want to stop there. "I have commissioned the architectural practice Foreign Office to design a house that would be built entirely of slides," he says. "The slides would virtually be the skeleton of a building, but like the body of an insect, which doesn't have a spinal cord. They have designed an inspirational space." When I inquire about the likelihood of such a structure being realized, he shrugs. "Well, it is 23 stories high," he replies.



TOP
FRISBEEHOUSE, 2000
 INSTALLATION VIEW, TATE
 MODERN, LONDON, 2003
 COURTESY TATE MODERN, LONDON

BOTTOM
Y, 2003
 INSTALLATION VIEW,
 VENICE BIENNALE, 2003
 PHOTO: ATTILIO MARAZZANO
 COURTESY THYSEN-BORNEHMSZA ART
 CONTEMPORARY, VIENNA



ABOVE
MIRROR CAROUSEL, 2005
 ALUMINUM, MIRRORS,
 LIGHTS, MOTOR, 15 3/8 X
 24 5/8 X 24 5/8 FT
 COURTESY GASOBIAN GALLERY,
 LONDON

Like so many of Höller's previous projects—such as the bullfinch trained to whistle a pop song; the large, carefully detailed, revolving mushrooms suspended upside-down from the ceiling of the Prada Foundation in Milan; or the fairground installed in Mass MoCA through the 30th of this month—the slide project makes me smile. This year in Basel, visitors to Art Unlimited were introduced to the latest of his mirrored carousels. His proposal for the Arsenale Venice Biennale in 2005 was simply to remove all the labels. Utopia Stations, as he dubbed the unrealized work, would do away with authorship and would enable artists to take more risks and be more exploratory. I say, "Oh, that explains why there was such chaos in the Arsenale that year, with critics miscrediting works," and he says, "No, my project was too late." Ironic, perhaps, that I was negative about a project that never saw the light of day.

Whether the installation in the Turbine Hall will succeed—or be yet another valiant failure—remains to be seen. During an age in which safety issues increasingly inhibit our freedom, it is exhilarating even to contemplate the idea of someone whizzing through the center of Tate Modern. Following *Embankment* (2005), the rather dour Rachel Whiteread installation, it should be an enormous hit with visitors both young and old, if not with critics. I, for one, am prepared to give this engaging and thoughtful artist a chance, and will be lining up to swoop down—from the mezzanine, at least.

THE UNILEVER SERIES: CARSTEN HÖLLER *will be on view at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall from October 10, 2006 to April 1, 2007.*