

Mortal Coils

DANIEL BIRNBAUM ON CARSTEN HÖLLER

CARSTEN HÖLLER'S five silvery slides in Tate Modern's massive Turbine Hall in London are elegant sculptures that spiral down like giant serpents from the gallery floors, curling and twisting their metallic bodies before reaching the ground with open mouths. They are roofed with transparent acrylic plastic, allowing glimpses of people sliding down. And everyone in the hall can certainly hear them screaming—with excitement, perhaps with fright, and no doubt also with joy. Groups of enthusiasts linger in the arrival area. The ride from the top level, nearly 90 feet high, is terrifyingly fast—the tube itself is 182 feet long and slants 30 degrees downward—but when travelers shoot out onto the floor, they can't keep from smiling; some of them laugh hysterically.

On view until early April, these slides are, of course, not Höller's first. The originals are two comparatively modest cylinders installed at the Kunst-Werke Building for the 1998 Berlin Biennial. A small drawing that accompanied them, titled *Hochhausrutschbahnverbindungen* (Skyscraper Slide Connections), 1998, depicts longer slides transporting people between buildings. Höller thus envisioned the installation as a model for extensive architectural interventions that could be realized in almost any city. When the artist and I discussed his project in these pages eight years ago (*Artforum*, March 1999), Höller stated that he also sees his slides as a critique of the boring utilitarianism that increasingly governs our lives. "The mass hysteria of cost avoidance and benefit maximization," he told me, "suppresses other concepts to the point of extinction—like unproductivity, unreasonable behaviors (for instance, passionate devotion), exaggeration, tranquility, and intrepidity." The slides are, he said, a means of "letting go," allowing you to "travel without motivation to some specific place. It's a very special state of mind. Maybe 'happiness' (or 'pleasure') isn't the right word, but it has to do with relief or even freedom."

The installation at Tate Modern is Höller's largest to date, but the title, *Test Site*, implies that these slides are still only prototypes. The name hints at other meanings as well—what, after all, is being tested? It could be, equally, the courage of museum visitors, their physiological and psychological reactions, or how

they relate to one another in an unexpected environment. This relational aspect of Höller's work has been discussed at length since Nicolas Bourriaud first described the aesthetics Höller shares with others who emerged in the early 1990s—including Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Philippe Parreno, and Rirkrit Tiravanija—all of whom "construct models of sociability suitable for producing human relations, the same way architecture literally 'produces' the itineraries of those residing in it." What they create, according to Bourriaud, are "inter-human experiences" and "relational space-time elements." Meetings, appointments, encounters, various types of artistic collaboration, games, even parties, can take over the role pictures and objects previously played in art. As an immediate response to the work of this group of artists, Bourriaud's thesis was important. However, in his attempt to theorize a common strategy for them, he overstressed their novelty. We find ourselves, he wrote, "in the presence of a group of people who, for the first time since the appearance of Conceptual Art in the mid sixties, in no way draw sustenance from any re-interpretation of this or that past aesthetic movement. Relational art is not the revival of any movement, nor is it the comeback of any style."

But of course there were antecedents. One precursor to relational aesthetics that is particularly relevant to this discussion is Danish artist Palle Nielsen's 1968 *Model for a Qualitative Society*, in which—at the invitation of museum director Pontus Hultén—he transformed the entire Moderna Museet in Stockholm into a playground where children could amuse themselves all day for free. During the course of three weeks, more than twenty thousand children visited the museum to

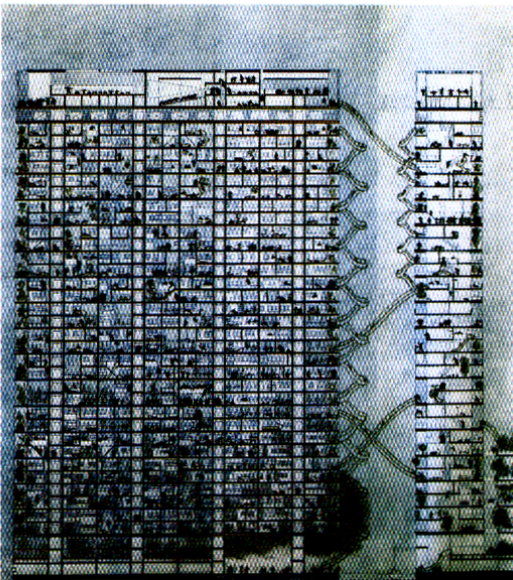
play on swings, slides, and ropes. "There is no exhibition," claimed the press release. "This is only an art show because the children are playing inside a museum. This is only an exhibition for those who are not playing. That's why we are calling it a model." An assiduous promoter of antielitist forms of art, Nielsen celebrated the undisciplined and imaginative child as a model for a more humane society.

But the differences between Nielsen's playground and Höller's slides are instructive. While Höller might well define his Turbine Hall as a playground for adults as well as for children, he would not, I think, claim



Carsten Höller, *Test Site*, 2006. Installation view during construction, Tate Modern, London.

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Top: Palle Nielsen, *Model for a Qualitative Society*, 1968, mixed media. Installation view, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1968. Bottom: Carsten Höller, *Hochhausrutschbahnverbindungen* (Skyscraper Slide Connections), 1998, pencil on photocopy, 16½ x 11¼".

that his slides are not also sculptures. But perhaps the biggest difference between Nielsen's playground and Höller's project stems from the evolution of our belief in the concept of—the possibility of?—utopia. Nielsen's vision for a better society, his belief in the promise of children at play, appears somewhat naive to us today. I don't believe that Höller sees his *Test Site*, 2006, as a place where a new society will be born. As I wrote in 1998, "The joy of losing control while sliding down may not

be a viable alternative to the sober rhythms of competitive capitalism, but it certainly does provide a form of pleasure unconnected to the fluctuations of the market."

How, then, are Höller's London slides different from his earlier efforts? Like their precursors in Berlin, Milan, New York, Boston, and Helsinki, they react to their architectural site. Yet the Tate project seems to me to represent a radical shift: The massive increase in scale creates a qualitative difference, reflecting how society has changed in the past decade. The power of spectacle in our culture continues to blur the divide between individual play and mass experience. Today it is no longer enough for us to sing along to a favorite song; we videotape ourselves, then upload the file to YouTube for thousands of strangers to watch. To the counterargument that the placement of Höller's slides—i.e., in a museum—clearly sets this work apart, I would posit that, in fact, there is now hardly a more spectacular place to put oneself on display than in the central space of the most prominent museum in the global über-city of London.

As if the millions of visitors were not enough, Tate Modern has even installed a live webcam on its website, enabling viewers all over the world to see museum visitors spat out of the tubes; tellingly, the camera does not even show the full length of the slides—the sculptural component of the artwork—but is focused only on the base, where people emerge.

As the slides have grown larger, the strangeness of the experience has also increased. I have traveled down a number of Höller's slides, and at Tate Modern

I find that the trip now has a hallucinatory aspect. Middledescent I lost all sense of where I was. "Is this really happening to me?" I wondered while accelerating down the slippery tube. For a few seconds I seemed to become someone else—my body felt different, alien—and then I shot back out to "normality," adrenaline pumping. This kind of perceptual self-exploration has long been a theme of Höller's work. For instance, his *Upside-Down Glasses*, 1994–, an optical device worn like a helmet, turns the world upside down until the wearer's brain learns to adjust—which supposedly takes eight days. More bizarre is the sensation produced by the machine of *The Pimocchio Effect*, 1994/2000, which uses vibrations to create the feeling that one's nose is growing longer. These works make use of technical devices and physiological research to create optical and kinesthetic effects that can only be experienced by one person at a time and are not visible to an outside observer. We can talk about what occurred with others and compare notes, but in the end, the experience is intensely personal.

All this is a far cry from Nielsen's ideas of society. Rather than drawing people closer to others and to themselves, Höller introduces alterity into individual experience. This internal displacement of the gaze crops up everywhere in his works: photographic prints (from 2005) of Ferris wheels, merry-go-rounds, and roller coasters in amusement parks, their colors separated and printed off-register so as to frustrate the viewer's ability to focus; a series of concert films (*Flicker Films*, 2005) that are shot from multiple perspectives and projected sequentially to create a sense of movement. Our brains struggle to make sense of the images and form a coherent picture.

The most far-reaching transformation created by Höller takes place on the level of the perceptual apparatus itself. His test is to place us in a "laboratory of doubt," to quote the title of one of his works. Instead of a model for a new society, he offers us caesuras, disruptions, cracks that change not the social order itself but our sense of ourselves and of our possibilities within it. Questioning our most basic concepts of ourselves might not be utopian, but it reveals that relational art can be about more than playing games with others. Plenty of people exist inside each one of us, people whom we do not yet know. Some we will probably never know. □

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