

## SHAWINIGAN, QUEBEC

### Carsten Höller SHAWINIGAN SPACE

I ALWAYS SAY THE OPPOSITE OF WHAT YOU SAY was the apt greeting at Carsten Höller's recent exhibition "One, Some, Many" at Shawinigan Space, an enormous former aluminum smelting factory that served as a summer outpost of the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. The phrase is repeated textually and orally—as an English subtitle and spoken Japanese—by a pair of identical Japanese women in Höller's *Tokyo Twins*, 2005–2007. The two talking heads appear on monitors that here faced one another, sentinel-like, across the gallery entrance. Recalling Bruce Nauman's absurdly reductive enunciations in his video *Thank You*, 1992, Höller's work introduced themes—including the questioning of cultural assumptions about language, entertainment, and the centered self—that ran throughout the show.

Höller's *The Belgian Problem*, 2007, consisted of two enormous aviaries situated, like the twins, opposite one another in a naturally lit space the size of a football field. Housed in these netted structures were a number of starlings, songbirds known for their complex and constantly evolving vocal patterns and their tendency to proliferate to the extent that they are often branded as pests, insufficiently exotic or rare for zoos to devote much space to. Centrally positioned metal bleachers provided an ideal site for surveying and listening to chirped exchanges between the two populations, each of which was derived from a locale with its own distinctive language (one group originated in Ontario, the other in Quebec).

Höller took great care in arranging—and duplicating—*The Belgian Problem's* cages: Each aviary featured the same configuration of three dead birch trees, a floor of sand partially covered with overlapping squares of grass sod, precisely positioned logs, water containers, and feeding dishes. In contrast to the static, sterile beauty of the photographs in the catalogue, the actual surfaces of the aviaries were well worn and plastered with guano; the grass was decomposing, and the birds occasionally swooped downward en masse in menacing Hitchcockian fashion. Given time, *The Belgian Problem* served to complicate and make strange what appeared at first to be simply a playful—if spectacular—conceit. Its ultimate effect thus differed from that of the gigantic slides of Höller's *Test Site*, 2006—installed in the similarly vast Turbine Hall at Tate Modern—which did not stray sufficiently from the logic and culture of "attraction"-based tourism.

Another work on view at Shawinigan, *Amusement Park*, 2006, featured a display of weathered midway rides. Contemplation of these battered relics as gargantuan readymades—salvaged perhaps from

some abandoned fairground—provided an initial thrill, but this proved short-lived as one stumbled about in a space illuminated only by the lazy glow of machines ticking over at a radically decelerated pace. One of the aged circular cars on a Twister ride rotated ever so slightly, triggering an uncanny reminder that we are as captive as the birds, confined by our passive, regressive desire for entertainment.

—Dan Adler



Carsten Höller,  
*Amusement Park*  
(detail), 2006,  
mixed media,  
26 x 56 x 47".  
Installation view.