

ART PAPERS

STRIKING IDEAS + MOVING IMAGES + SMART TEXTS

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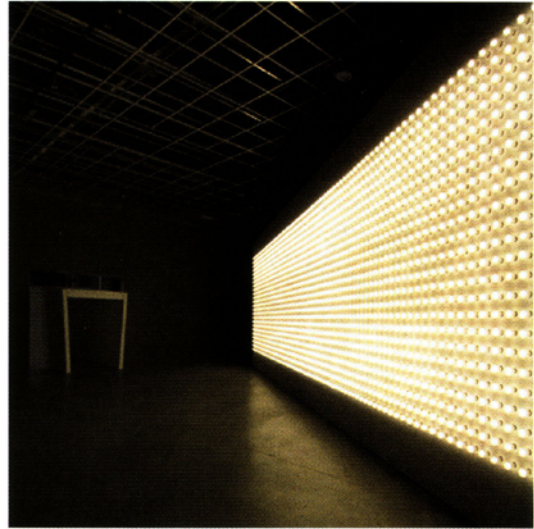
CARSTEN HÖLLER SHAWINIGAN, CANADA

Carsten Höller's work is well known for its drive to destabilize perception. For *One, Some, Many*, his first Canadian solo exhibition [Shawinigan Space, National Gallery of Canada; June 2—September 30, 2007], he has revamped some of his acclaimed projects. Advertised as three distinct shows "that will flip your world upside down!," the exhibition's three components lend each other a subtlety that prevents them from slipping into cliché.

In *The Belgian Problem*, 2007, two large symmetrical aviaries house dozens of singing starlings taken from two of Canada's different linguistic regions—Ontario and Québec. Höller titled the project after a 2006 Belgium State Television report that a linguistic group had seceded from the rest of the country. Doubt ensued before the hoax was revealed. Over the course of the exhibition, the birds will learn each other's incantations. Yet, a sinister note resounds in the midst of all the chirping: the wire-mesh architecture prevents promiscuity across the planned divide while the gallery seating—aluminum bleachers—looks onto the dead-zone between the aviaries, suggesting an impasse familiar to Canadians.

Shawinigan Corridor, 2007, offers a disorienting experience. Handrails guide our way through the tar-thick blackness of a narrow, maze-like architecture. As darkness disables our physiological navigation-system, entering this opacity creates anxiety—as a wall-label warns. Here, in the security of the gallery, this is rather pleasant. After meandering for some indefinite time, light literally appears at the end of the tunnel—thousands of incandescent bulbs fill our entire field of vision in *Light Wall*, 2007, Höller's largest version of this work to date.

If we were lost in the dark, so are we in this pulsating, booming luminosity: this enlightenment does not counteract the effects of darkness. Rather, it flows into us through the senses it heightened, seemingly compromising our boundaries and filling us with exhilaration. Sobriety comes when we turn back around toward the



corridor. Still, the walls of the antechamber appear to sway side to side. Is this movement internal, perceptual, or a fact of the environment? With our proprioception challenged and our retinas still filled with the pattern of the light, it is difficult to know. Of course it is Höller's doing. In *Shawinigan Swinging Room*, 2007, the suspended walls swing gently in the ambient air—inviting us to move forward in spite of doubt.

Many have claimed that "experiential" art installations challenge the rational bases of perception. Höller's work demonstrates that investigations of the perceptual apparatus, as well as its cultural solicitation, need not be immersive in order to be effective. Rather, it is the modesty and relative technological simplicity of his installations that allow us to meet the works halfway—instead of being overwhelmed in a totalizing aesthetic experience akin to popular spectacle. Creaking quietly in the next room, Höller's re-engineered *Amusement Park*, 2006, further makes this point. Here, the promise of an out-of-the-ordinary experience is reneged: slowed down to an occasional twist, the funfair rides prompt us to reflect on our thirst for sensory destabilization.

The juxtaposition of birds, corridors, and rides opens them to reinterpretation. Were it not for its strange echo of our own movement through the corridors of *Shawinigan Corridor*, *Amusement Park* might seem like a one-liner. Similarly, the lure of perceptual immediacy might smack of regression and media amnesia were it not for the birdsongs that fill the background, reminding us of the impossibility of extra-linguistic experience.

—Anja Bock