

Turning Tables

DANIEL BIRNBAUM ON CARSTEN HÖLLER'S DOUBLE CLUB

I WENT TO A BAR, restaurant, and dance club where the Congo meets the West. And then, a few weeks later, I went to a bar, restaurant, and dance club where the West meets the Congo. Both were located at 7 Torrens Street, a tiny alley in East London, so one could say they were the same place. But Carsten Höller's Double Club, a Fondazione Prada production that opened last November and will close later this year, emphasizes ambivalence and puzzling duplications to such an extent that this sameness becomes less and less evident over time. Already, at the entrance to the large bar area, you have to decide which "slice" to enter—one of the angled "African" sections, furnished with bright plastic chairs and a wooden bar (designed with Bellou Luvuadio Bengo), or a slicker "European" section with lots of neon and shiny metal (designed with Reed Kram and Clemens Weisshaar). In fact, the entire space is sliced like a large cake: This emerges clearly in the wedgelike divisions of the floor, the geometry of which is repeated in a painting by legendary Swedish modernist Olle Bærtling in the adjacent restaurant. According to his "Prologue to a Manifesto of Open

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Form" (1971), Bærtling wanted his painting to become "a part of the universe, a sun, a power center broadcasting its poetic message" in order to "liberate infinity." Who knows—perhaps this is the liberation his work finally offers, by providing the blueprint for a fashionably libertine nightclub: On a busy night, you might find Mick Jagger, while Bryan Ferry and his entourage go unnoticed in a corner.

So what is the Double Club—a countercultural artists' restaurant in the tradition of Gordon Matta-Clark's Food, or an attempt to create a glamorous Studio 54-like gathering spot for creative types, or an

homage to Congolese club dandies and musicians, at an economic moment when looking anew at the underpinnings of culture in situ seems an attractive alternative to obsolete events such as art-auction extravaganzas? It is probably all these things and more: Anyone familiar with Höller's work will recognize signature elements, such as the large wall drawing of a flying city originally designed by Russian utopian architect Georgi Krutikov in the late 1920s and, perhaps more important, the artist's continuing will to stress alterity over identity. Höller is no friend of reconciliation and synthesis: He often invites viewers into situations in which they are confronted with irreducible difference and plurality, both in their surroundings and ultimately within themselves. Yet the Double Club is hardly an attempt to create a unified crossover expression mixing African and Western cultural elements. The strict geometry of the layout makes this abundantly clear: Things remain separate. They are not merged; instead, they are simply placed next to each other as different zones (with all the historical conflict this implies). The restaurant, for example, serves Congolese dishes as well as a standard Western menu on unmistakably African tablecloths or on European designer tables, depending on whether you end up in a section with art by, say, Andy Warhol and Carla Accardi, or by African contemporaries such as Chéri Samba and Moke the Painter.

"I truly believe in the power of letting things stand next to each other with identical claim to importance," Höller has said, adding, "and the more I think about it, the less I see any real reason for making up one's mind choosing one over the other." The Double Club adheres to what the artist has called his "'and . . . and . . . and' model"—an alternative to utopian attempts to bridge the gap between art (understood as something autonomous) and some other field, be it science, music, or everyday life. Indeed, this may be Höller's most ambitious attempt at a total work of art—not a Wagnerian



Interior of Carsten Höller's Double Club, London, November 17, 2008. Photo: Attilio Maranzano.

synthesis, but an ensemble that allows a bar to be a bar, a mural a mural, and a Congolese pop concert a Congolese pop concert. The Baroque had dreamed of such open-ended additions of aesthetic expression, with one art form transcending itself into the next yet remaining distinct. "From one end of the chain to the other, the painter has become an urban designer," writes Gilles Deleuze about the Baroque city, continuing, "The sum of the arts becomes the Socius, the public social space inhabited by Baroque dancers." Höller's dance floor rotates, and after it has gone full circle, the African club you were just getting used to transforms into a European disco. I'm not claiming that you have to visit the place to fully grasp the possibilities of difference and repetition, but if you go you might want to come back later to see if it's still the same. □

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