

GRENOBLE, FRANCE

CARSTEN HÖLLER'S JAPANCONGO

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Following collector Jean Pigozzi's invitation to curate an exhibition of his two collections of African and Japanese art, Belgian artist Carsten Höller created JapanCongo, an installation in which 16 works by Congolese artists dialogue with as many works by Japanese artists, respectively hung on curved and straight walls that constitute a corridor that becomes most narrow at its center where the works with more similarities are installed. JapanCongo will tour from Le Magasin (Grenoble, until April 24, 2011) to the Garage (Moscow, from June 2011) to Palazzo Reale (Milan, from September 2011).

ALESSANDRA OLIVARI: You stated that JapanCongo is "a new Double Club of sorts." While The Double Club was created in an abandoned Victorian warehouse in London, with JapanCongo you go back to the institutional context of the museum. How would you differentiate the experience of your work by the general public in and outside of the institutional museum setting?

Carsten Höller: JapanCongo is similar to *The Double Club* in the sense that it is about a confrontation, a juxtaposition between two cultures. You have the Congolese wall, which is curved, opposite the Japanese wall, which is straight. These two walls together form a corridor that gets narrow in the middle because the curve of the Congolese wall is approaching the Japanese one, with the works facing each other. What happens to the visitor is that when going through the corridor there is an almost physical contact with the works because there is only about 1.6 meters distance between the two walls at the narrowest part. If you spread out your arms you can really, literally, make a link between the two. It's a physical interaction in the sense that you are producing the link between the two sides; but, as compared to *The Double Club*, it is still an exhibition in a classical sense: it is about looking at different artworks that you cannot mix. But

you can get the essence of it — that there is something that they also have in common. If you put it together you have a thematic situation; you have something defined in its aesthetics by its origin compared to another thing, also defined aesthetically by its origin. What remains is hopefully something that is a more pure form of the language of art.

AO: In a conversation with Germano Celant, he observes that "there are two extremes in your work: one is the physicality and the other has more to do with the eyes." Then he asks: "Do the eyes change your physicality?" JapanCongo seems to investigate that direction. Did you think about the interaction of these two components?

CH: I am the curator of this exhibition but I also wanted to make an artwork out of it. It is good that you speak about eyes because I have always been interested in the idea of seeing different things with each of the two eyes. The work *The Forest* (2002) is made with glasses that you have in front of your eyes. You see two different films, one with each eye. The beginning of the film is the same, with the cameras going between the trees in a forest, back and forth; but then the two cameras come to one tree and one camera goes left and the other goes right. It is a very shocking moment, and people fall out of their chair when they see this. Coming back to *JapanCongo*, I think the best way to see the show would be to go along the corridor, to take your hand and put it in front of your nose as if it were a kind of dividing wall so that you see Japanese art with one eye and Congolese art with the other.

AO: Among the artists included in Jean Pigozzi's collection of African art, you have selected only those from the Democratic Republic of Congo. This brings up *The Double Club*'s dialogue between Western and Congolese cultures, in which the West was represented with a narrow selection of works. Did you



CARSTEN HÖLLER, *JapanCongo*, Carsten Höller's double-take on Jean Pigozzi's collection, 2011. Installation view at Le Magasin, Centre National d'Art Contemporain de Grenoble. ©Magasin de Grenoble. Photo: Blaise Adilon.

have reservations about representing African art in the same way for JapanCongo?

CH: For Pigozzi's collection I wanted to have this juxtaposition between African and Japanese art, but I did not think it was a good idea to put a selection from the whole African collection against the Japanese collection because it was so unbalanced. There is a huge body of works from Africa, and there are only about 500 works from Japan. That does not create a balance between the two. There was another possible country from Africa, but I chose the Democratic Republic of Congo because it is the country where Pigozzi has collected the most. I thought it would be good to put those countries together because they are two countries without similarity, but have roughly similar populations and, in the collection, they are represented in a roughly similar way. For *The Double Club* it was another situation because it actually happened where we are — it was about showing our own world in relation to a situation of social encounters (a restaurant, a bar, a discothèque) against something that is not our own world. It happened to be the Congo but it could have also been something completely different. Here we have two different forms of human cultural expression that this exhibition embraces and puts together in a way that is not a fusion. The only fusion is the one happening in the people visiting *The Double Club* or *JapanCongo*.

In this sense, yes, they are very similar.

AO: Visitors are also able to decide to take the route behind the walls. What kind of experience would that choice make?

CH: For the route behind the walls I just want to show a Potemkin village. You don't see any artworks, you just see the construction side of the project, in order to make it even more evident that you are really constructing a situation here. I wanted to give it a bit more spice.

AO: You just mentioned people falling off the chairs. Have you ever been surprised by any reaction of the public to your work?

CH: It may look like I am watching the visitors because it is always some kind of experimental situation. You might feel like a guinea pig but there is really nobody looking at you. That's important to emphasize. The case of the people who fall of the chairs is just to say that the work has created a very strong reaction. [My work] is really there to be experienced, and the "Soma" exhibition [Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, 2010] is a good example because it is a unique situation; it is something that can only be seen once. Now, in this show, the set up is very unique. You just cannot do this again. That creates a very specific result that is dependent on who you are. But why should I look at the way people react or respond? No, I don't do this.