

# Carsten Höller

NEW MUSEUM, NEW YORK

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**CARSTEN HÖLLER'S "EXPERIENCE"** at the New Museum was perfect—perfectly wrong. If the artist's goal was to embody the values contested by the most important social justice movement of our present moment, Occupy Wall Street, he succeeded brilliantly. For the "experience" furnished to visitors was uncompromisingly private—typically involving sensory and/or physical isolation—while the museum's institutional responsibility was disavowed. Höller's two main rides and environments, a sinuous slide traversing two floors of the museum and an enormous sensory-deprivation tank filled with salty water in which a single person could float, were accessible only after the visitor waited in line to waive her rights to hold the museum responsible for injury. Similarly, an unwieldy set of goggles that turn the world upside down would not be dispensed until you surrendered your credit card as security, after waiting in a separate line (if you broke it, you bought it, for fifteen hundred dollars). In other words, the museum's status as a public space was evacuated. Instead, the institution offered a fiercely private experience, while externalizing responsibility for the safety of visitors. This was really and truly relational aesthetics from the perspective of the 1 percent, with the New Museum channeling the neoliberal state by transferring liability (whether physical or financial) onto its "citizens" (museumgoers). But unlike the United States, the New Museum isn't afraid to raise its taxes—or in this case the price of admission, which has been "temporarily" raised from twelve to sixteen dollars to "help it pay for the extra staff needed to shepherd museumgoers through Mr. Höller's carnival-like pieces," as reported in the *New York Times*. Like so many other museums and their accessible blockbusters, the show capitalized

on expanded audiences drawn in by "carnival-like" art.

If you find it unfair of me to speak of waivers and lines, "shepherds" and admission prices (this is *art* after all!), let me quote Nicolas Bourriaud's well-worn definition of the work of art according to relational aesthetics, as reiterated in the glossy catalogue that accompanies "Experience." The book contains short thematic essays ordered alphabetically ("Amanita Blue," "Animal," "Artist," "Automaton," for instance, are the A's), written by an impressive roster of art-world luminaries. Bourriaud's first description of art, which appears under the rubric "Artist," runs as follows: "An activity consisting in the materialization of relationships in the world by means of forms, signs, objects, or gestures." In my view this is a good definition, and it logically implies that Höller's experiences must encompass all of the relationships they touch on, including waiting in line three times and signing long and very detailed waivers; and then waiting in more lines to reach the mouth of a slide that only one person was permitted to enter at a time. After all this waiting, here are the terms of your "personal experience" (according to the "Visitor Guidelines and Waiver" that you signed):

## INSTRUCTIONS

On the 4th floor, wait for the Gallery Guard's instruction. One rider at a time, no exceptions.

You must use a sliding mat and helmet provided. Protective elbow pads are available if you so choose.

All visitors must ride feet first on their back. Elbows must be tucked in and arms placed across the chest or on your lap.

Slide down with head slightly raised. **DO NOT attempt to sit up, rotate, or stop by using your arms or hands in the Slide.** You may injure yourself and others if you attempt to stop.

Remain flat until you come to a full stop at the end.

Please leave the landing area promptly at the end of slide and adhere to all instructions given by the Guard.

One might be excused for feeling that this "experience" sounds more like an army drill or filing through an airport security checkpoint than visiting an art museum. Even so, all this trouble might have been worth it if the artworks themselves provoked something meaningful, like the kind of phenomenological dislocation that Bruce Nauman accomplished so powerfully in his *Live-Taped Video Corridor*, 1970,

where viewers were submitted to a disorienting disconnection between their bodies, pressed between narrow walls, and their images fed back to them as seen from behind. In Höller's slide, by contrast, one zoomed so quickly through the floors of galleries that I, for one, could think of little else beyond maintaining the "safe" posture I was instructed to assume by the friendly guards (by far the nicest part of my "experience," by the way). Since, as a reviewer, I was encouraged to try again, I did my best to imagine how strange and wonderful it was to glide through spaces where I had actually looked at art standing on my feet before. But even this second trip only made me wish that I had gone instead to Disneyland or the Met. Indeed, Höller's games give up on art (after all, what else could it mean to send us through galleries, incapable of looking?) while refusing to give us anything other than "experiences" that often feel embarrassingly simpleminded: Can one really "slow down" while jerking along with other sheepish-looking adults on a mirrored carousel ride, and is it truly so easy to have a psychedelic experience by inserting one's head into a tank full of fish?

I suppose that Höller would answer in the affirmative, and advocate that we edit out everything beyond his modest perceptual tricks of sliding, floating, or regarding the world upside down. But if relational aesthetics means anything—and in the right hands, I think it does—it means that every social connection pertaining to a work of art must count as part of its material nexus and be fair game for analysis. Höller blocks off those intersubjective dimensions and the possibilities they present. Instead he has blithely reintroduced the various types of enclosure that "experience" has been subjected to in our late-capitalist consumer world—including legal liability, high prices, and endless waiting on the one hand, and the pressure to rush through "experiences" on the other. Perhaps if he had been aiming at a dystopic reflection of our everyday encounters with such modalities of power, his exhibition would have had some integrity. But its ideology of individual sensation above all else offered a different model: experience as privatized "fun" whose substantial social costs are suppressed. This show succeeded in dispensing with the hope (or fantasy) that museums can offer an alternative to the mall. In doing so it narrowed rather than expanded the space for experience. □

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From left: Carsten Höller, *Giant Psycho Tank* (detail), 1999, polypropylene, rubber, steel, PVC tubes, filter, pump, water heater, switch unit, water, magnesium sulfate, cotton bathing gowns, cotton towels, flip-flops, 19' 8 1/4" x 13' 1 1/2" x 12' 1 1/2". Carsten Höller, *Untitled (Slide)* (detail), 2011, stainless steel, steel, polycarbonate, canvas mats. Installation view, New Museum, New York. Photo: Jesse Untracht Oakner. View of "Carsten Höller: Experience," 2011, New Museum, New York. From left: *Minor Carousel*, 2005; *Singing Canaries Mobile*, 2009; *Untitled (Slide)*, 2011. Photo: Benoit Pailley.

