CARSTEN HÖLLER

the last avant-garde

interview

by
OLIVIER ZAHM

portrait

by

GIASCO BERTOLI

Belgian artist Carsten Höller is part of a generation of artists, born in the 1960s, including Douglas Gordon, Maurizio Cattelan, Pierre Huyghe, and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, to name a few, who, in the mid-1990s, made art from a different and much broader perspective, being influenced by the cinema, utopian architecture, and literature, and moving out of the typical artist's studio.

Höller trained and practiced as a biologist, specializing in the olfactory communication of insects, before abandoning science in the late 1980s to take up art, producing works imbued with laboratory-like curiosity, but applied to something like curiosity itself. His engagement, as such, tends to be emotional, physical, aesthetic, and experiential. He's made works with live reindeers and candy-looking, life-size dolphins, boa constrictors, and a baby elephant with artificial human eyes.

More recently he constructed huge slides that people can corkscrew down from ceiling to floor, such as in the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern in London. His works seem derived from the fantasy workshop of an imaginary creator, or maybe from a fiction writer who doesn't actually write. They show but never describe.

OLIVIER ZAHM — I've wanted to do this interview with you for a long time. You're an important artist of my generation.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — When were you born?

OLIVIER ZAHM — In '63.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Ah, me, '61.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Your work has taken so many different forms. I'd like to start from the beginning in the '90s. But first, I have to say that I'm not crazy about the way people describe your art as being interactive or a reflection of relational aesthetics. To me there's something deeper, more intriguing, more mysterious about your work.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — I don't like to be called an artist who does participatory work or is from the relational aesthetics generation. Even though I studied agriculture and specialized in pest control and the ways insects communicate, I don't like to be defined as a scientist making art either. I'm more of a mad professor.

OLIVIER ZAHM — To me, your work is not about science, except as a form of experimentation. And unlike scientists, who are locked into the scientific method and its paradigms, you experiment with experience. So how do you relate to science?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — I want to find a new way of experimenting because that's our mission in life. We can't go on reproducing ideas that we found early in our artistic career and simply repeat them through the rest of our life like you would decline a verb or a noun.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You don't have a repetitive artistic vocabulary.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — That's not my motivation. My motivation is to experiment with my life and see where I can go with my work. So in this sense, experimentation is very important, but there's a big difference between science and art. Science is very rigid.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Based on protocols?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Parameters — protocols, if you like; the reasons are obvious, because the scientist easily cheats. I'm speaking about proper natural sciences and not, say, quantum physics. The scientist has to make every effort to achieve a result. He or she has to build things up, put money into machinery, and work in a very controlled environment. He or she has to produce a result that is repeatable, under the same conditions, which is a beautiful idea. As an artist, you aren't obliged to have a repetitive result. You don't have the same rigor. You want to have something that is important for life but not about the predictability of life, which is very different. Life is not predictable in an artistic sense. Natural science makes life predictable; artists have the luxury to say fuck off to predictability, because artists have so many other things to

control. We don't have to be afraid of the laws of nature. Artists have the luxury to go another way. Individual experience is unpredictable, which maybe offers the entrance to a completely different experience of the world.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Would you say that your work is universal because you touch an elementary aspect of human psychology?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — I don't know. What I try to do, at least in large public installations, is something that is intended to work at very different levels, whether for a child or an art connoisseur, or somebody who doesn't know anything about art. In that sense my work can function at different levels, which I find very interesting. Then, all these terms that we mentioned before — participatory art, relational aesthetics, and the mad scientist — don't count anymore, because the reaction depends on who is experiencing the work. Therefore, the work can generate different reactions. When I did the installation at the Tate Modern, with the slides, I better understood the potential for this idea about different experiences.

OLIVIER ZAHM — How do you make the curve of the ramp in a slide?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — You adjust the curve to get the friction just right for sliding inside it, which can also depend on the weight of the slider. To avoid too little friction, the slider shouldn't wear things like polyester training pants, because you go too fast and on top of that, they can catch fire if the material is polyester.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Ouch. Polyester can catch fire?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Yes, they're sliding down like a cannonball. [laughs] It can get too hot or make people slide so fast they shoot out, which is dangerous. Otherwise it's completely safe. You can make a slide safer than stairs. Escalators are actually more dangerous.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Participatory or interactive art is personal, but I don't see such a limit in your work. Sliding is exciting, it's fun; we all want to try it. It's also a game, and a metaphor in a museum for something that happens outside in a different context. Maybe it could be a metaphor for an alternative transportation system, which people might develop.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Doing something like this doesn't mean it should be read in one way or even follow an artistic reading. You read it according to who you are. In that way the slides work as something that's not participatory. They also, at least for me, comment on the straight lines and heaviness of industrialization, such as there might be in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern. Playful, almost free-floating tubes in such a space could as easily be read as sculpture or even be related to a type of painted image, because of what the space is now, a museum. I also wanted a pure sculpture statement to be a possible reading.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Is it a critique of the architecture?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Once you start to speak about it, you can say several things, which is the problem of language, but not the problem of art. Because it is art, it can become child-friendly or participatory. But I like the dirtiness of it.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What do you mean by "dirtiness?"
CARSTEN HÖLLER — That it's not simply an artwork, but also a tool for bringing people from one point to another. I've been really proposing this a lot. In the catalog we made for the show at the Turbine Hall, we published a feasibility study for Stratford, which is the part of London where the Olympics had been last year. We wanted to see how slides could be built into the existing architecture there, and how people's movement and life in general could be improved. We made a cost analysis; it's not even very expensive. But nobody took up the idea. It looks like a fun kind of game, but it's a serious proposition for me.

OLIVIER ZAHM — I see your art in a Situationist sense: you create a situation that changes the way people move, travel, exit, and interact. The interaction or movement or travel is also a critique or utopian possibility. Do you think in terms of such ideals?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — In a way...

OLIVIER ZAHM — Is this your way of proposing ideas?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Proposing is a strong word. It implies that you know what you're doing. Artists can produce model situations that can be stupid but meaningful as model situations. Art doesn't have a connection to utilitarianism, not in the first place. Art can be used as a platform, in a museum or a model situation, to test out things and see how they work. But still, it's frustrating that it doesn't also exist in so-called real life. It remains art, and maybe it becomes important, but that can take a longer time than you think.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Because the fairground and the business office can't mix?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Because in real life such slides are for children. But there have been propositions like this. Cedric Price, an English architect, has made them. He developed a Fun Palace for working and playing at the same time. A lot of propositions never get off the ground out of fear of unpredictability. But now, long after the '60s, we've covered enough ground so that we can lean a little bit further out the window.

OLIVIER ZAHM — [laughs]
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Since everything is secure and predictable — so tame and nice and all about money, why would a young artist want to be part of this circus?

There has to be some kind of new underground movement. I can't understand why that shouldn't be happening. Last weekend we were in Woodstock, New York. It's a big gift shop. It's past completely destroyed — it's terrifying. They're selling peace t-shirts, with chain stores moving in. Maybe a new underground is not an option. Why? Because any sort of anti-statement immediately becomes metabolized, morphed into utilitarian culture, which takes any kind of anti-thing and plays with it to make it into an aesthetic decoration. You must deal with this all the time, Olivier. So the underground is not an option unless it's an invisible underground, which I think might still be a possibility worth exploring, sitting somewhere in the woods, and not showing off to anybody.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Invisibility is an option, but it's becoming less possible today. You must be detectable by surveillance cameras. Your face should be seen when you enter a shop or public space. You have to be identifiable.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — The positive side is that they caught the guys from the Boston bombing through such visibility; the negative side, which is just as prominent, is that you can't do anything anymore, even at home, without being visible.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Yes. [laughs]
CARSTEN HÖLLER — It's not just the cameras in the street; it's all the time, using Instagram, like my 12-year-old daughter. I feel like I'm losing my privacy.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You built a home in Africa. Is that a possible escape?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — It's more that I don't believe in one place. It's such a simple but great idea to extend the concept of the city house or apartment and the countryside into two different places. I wouldn't like to live in New York exclusively, for instance, because I don't think this freedom can be contained in one place, even in a place like New York.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You want to stretch experience?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Yeah, like to have the office and the fairground; to live your life in two totally different places. Because we all know that places affect you. You become part of a place, which is something interesting that nobody can really explain. When you're in New York and become part of the New York thing, you feel a bit different, as if you're contributing to a sort of organism. If you move between two organisms, it's like you're moving from one body into another, which might be an ideal situation, because all the big tragedies in this one body are constantly looking for ways out.

OLIVIER ZAHM — For ways of escape?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — It sounds unfeasible and almost ridiculous, but that's an example of why we say this is something that cannot be changed. Who you are. Of course it can. Some people have two or more personalities. We all have several ideas of ourselves, which are connected in ways that are impossible to separate. The idea that you could also live in another body is most easily achieved when you move to a completely different place, one that just makes you feel so different that everything changes — the way you talk, walk, sleep, think, everything.

OLIVIER ZAHM — How is your life in Ghana?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — It's hard to say in words, but I'm generally quite unproductive.

OLIVIER ZAHM — [laughs] Really?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — I don't know what it is, but the first time I went to West Africa — to Benin in 1995 — my doubt project started. My Laboratory of Doubt had to do with that.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You call it a Laboratory of Doubt?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Yes. Because until then I was making art objects

Test Site, 2006, five slides, site-specific work,
installation view, *Unilever Series: Carsten Höller,* Turbine Hall
Tate Modern, London 2006, photo by Attilio Maranzano
courtesy of the artist, Tate Modern, London, and VG Bild Kunst, Bonn,
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that were somehow representational. Then, in Benin, I thought this cannot be it. It was really just a feeling. Maybe it was the distance, or the West African influence, I can't really say. But once there, I saw something pretentious about an artist who produces a finished artwork that's shown to the public and then maybe sold and has an afterlife. To say something is finished and worthwhile to exhibit is tricky. To work on a new idea for an artwork is like making the distinction between the saturated and the unsaturated.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Saturated and unsaturated?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Yeah. A saturated artist is really one who decides when things are ready.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Like Jeff Koons?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — For instance. Most art is like that. That idea has dominated the artistic production of the last hundred-plus years. That's one way to go. But there should be others. That just can't be "it."

OLIVIER ZAHM — Even within the deconstruction ethic?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Yes, even in that. Yes. Even a Yoko Ono instruction piece in which she only states, "dream," or other works like that, are still saturated. It's a sculpture in a physical sense.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Saturated?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Yes, because the artist decides it's finished. So there's a kind of rift between the artist, his or her work, and you as a user, onlooker, spectator, dreamer, or whatever you want to call it.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Can you give an example of unsaturated art?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — No. Art always involves some kind of experimental situation and openness, so that the artist, at some point, makes what you called a proposition, and the strongest ones, I think, are those where the proposition is only experienced in a specific place or in a specific installation, where it gets physical and where you have to give yourself in to it. It's more like a tool that contains the artist and possibly a symbolic message.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What do you mean by a symbolic message?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — It's a kind of openness, a message that is not really defined until the very end. The unsaturated artwork comes with a proposition that is not finite. The saturated artwork is finite in its possibilities; it is not defined at the very end — otherwise it wouldn't be an artwork as we know it. Let me say those terms were proposed by Daniel Birnbaum, when we had a public talk together. He's the director of Moderna Museet, and a philosopher and a good friend. We had this talk about when an artwork is finished. He borrowed these terms from the German logician Gottlob Frege, who used "saturated" and "unsaturated" in relation to meaning.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Would you say that we are living in a saturated world?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Saturated, utilitarian, and money-oriented — especially in art. You know, art got stuck, like a car in the sand.

OLIVIER ZAHM — To you, what is the biggest challenge that the art world is facing?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — There are no big discoveries anymore. The big discovery times are over, in music, in fashion, in art.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You might say that since the '90s, art isn't about novelty, it's about remaking, reproducing, and reassembling. So I have a question. You emerged with a generation of artists like Maurizio Cattelan, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Philippe Parreno, and Rirkrit Tiravanija. Is this generation the last of the avant-garde in the historical sense?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — In some ways...

OLIVIER ZAHM — You all refused that terminology.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — We're individuals who do different things. We're not concerned with a specific concept, but we have a lot in common, because we grew up together. We share ideas and ways of doing things, but we develop different directions. It was a question of timing. The '90s were the last time when new artists could come up. That's not really possible anymore. I mean, there is still an art scene, but I don't think it's possible to last long in it as a young artist. Everything moves so fast. There's much more cultural production. There are many more artists in this world right now than before, and this influences the nature of art. The production side is completely saturated, which I don't think is so good.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Is desaturation possible?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Art might deflate or desaturate simply because it can't go on like this without loosing its credibility. I read an article by Dean Keith Simonton with the title "Scientific Genius is Extinct." Simonton says there is no Einstein today because there are many more scientists than there used to be. There is greater knowledge, and he

says that's what's killing science. It's totally impossible to imagine that somebody today, alone, could think everything out simply in the mind, which is what Einstein did. This approach to science has been exhausted. I mean, even the Internet doesn't help. It's like a mine whose big pieces of gold are gone. So you find maybe tiny ones and keep digging. That's a tragic situation — filling small gaps, doing tiny work.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What interests you today then?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Maybe the only new and significant thing, in the way you were just talking, is cooking in a so-called molecular way. That changed cooking. But that was also the last big change in convention, so maybe even cooking is finished now. No more avant-gardes... [laughs]

OLIVIER ZAHM — You've always been interested in food; you created a restaurant.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Yeah, The Double Club, a restaurant, bar, and discotheque in an old warehouse in London. That was another project that I call "dirty" in a positive sense. Like the slides at the Tate's Turbine Hall, it's obviously an artwork, but you don't think about it simply as art, even though you could experience it as an artwork and as a club.

OLIVIER ZAHM — How so?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — It had three different spaces. You entered the bar space, which was quite big, with a glass ceiling, but divided into four vectors, almost like slices, like a cake composed out of pieces of different cakes. The Western bar, in copper, was nicely polished, with yellow light, and all the bottles aligned. It sits back-to-back with a Congolese bar, as if cut by a laser. A virtual line divides the two. A corner, including ceiling and floor, would look like it's in Kinshasa, while the next slice had the slickness of what we call the Western world.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Like a newly designed London bar?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Yes, but produced for this purpose. We bought wood, corrugated iron, furniture, beer, and a blinking plastic palm tree in Kinshasa to set this up like a collage, next to a clean, geometric tile garden with Portuguese *azulejos*. If I would talk to you there, I might see in the background something that could be Congolese. And while you talk to me, you see something Western. This produces a kind of social schizophrenia.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Which reflects the duality of your life between Sweden and Ghana?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Yes, it's a double concept, but somehow in the social context of "going out" it makes you feel good.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Was there an artist or kitchen or restaurant that you were thinking about when you created The Double Club?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Ole Baertling was a reference. We had one of his paintings hanging in the restaurant. The place was not organized in slices but in cubes, like a three-dimensional checkerboard — one square Congo, one square West, including floor, ceiling, and walls. The Western tables were the Breeding Tables of Kram/Weisshaar, while the Congolese tables were covered by a pink tablecloth. The menu was the same, but it had a Congolese and a Western side. Then we made an exhibition on the Western walls because a Western restaurant would have artworks, including some Congolese artworks of a type that would be collected in the West so that it still made sense.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You had food and drinks from Africa at the Double Club, but you also made sculptures of a rhinoceros, elephant, and crocodile.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Yes, but the animals we made are not necessarily from Africa. It was more like I wanted a certain kind of animal, either a baby or a very old one. It started with an old dolphin. I wanted to have an animal that triggered emotions, which is completely meaningless with a rubber-cast sculpture. The idea was that it would be artistically meaningless, even stupid, but emotionally effective, like a trigger.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And popular?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — They are very popular, especially with collectors. What surprised me was that collectors don't care that I think these animals are ridiculous and meaningless; they simply love these animals. Maybe some of them are relieved by their artistic emptiness.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You also combined it with the monochrome tradition in art, the use of one striking color.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — But it's monochrome with a twist, because all the animals have human eyes, prosthetic glass eyes. We choose the color of the eyes especially for the color of the animal. We are now making a big, long, fat snake in orange, which has brown human eyes. When my girlfriend was pregnant her engorged belly reminded me of a python that has swallowed its prey.

OLIVIER ZAHM — [laughs]
CARSTEN HÖLLER — The snake is similarly meaningless, but people like it because there's such a high level of symbolism. A symbol is always a trigger. A symbol can also confuse you, because it's not always an obvious sign.

If I clap my hands in front of your eyes, your eyelids close for a split second. There's nothing you can do about that. Making this kind of artwork also creates a bodily reaction. I wanted these works to be thought-free.

OLIVIER ZAHM — That first snake is a kind of Catholic symbol mixed with the color of danger on the highway.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Yes, but there's nothing to read into it. That's it.

OLIVIER ZAHM — If you connected the danger of speed and a Catholic symbol for sin, wouldn't that evolve into a new symbol?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Yes. But it's meaningless. It's empty. It's like a sign on the motorway. It gives you some kind of pictogram-like information, but in contrast to the sign on the motorway, there's nothing behind it, nothing to look for, no danger, no belief system, no proposal, no vision, nothing.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So what do your animals elicit with their flashy colors?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Attention. Like the clapping of hands, and you have to close the eyes. Same. I want to make some meaningless artworks, which is of course a challenge.

OLIVIER ZAHM — In a way it's like minimal art.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — That's a nice one. I don't think the minimalists would agree. [laughs]

OLIVIER ZAHM — To come back to the idea of the end of the avant-garde — this is something I'm writing about in terms of our generation — I have a feeling, which I'd like to share with you, that maybe you and the artists of our generation are the last avant-garde without accepting it, without even recognizing it.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — If we are the last avant-garde, it's because the ones who came later didn't have a chance to be one, because of their sheer numbers and the sheer number of things that have been done, as we said before. It all collapses into mainstream. It becomes mainstream because of sheer numbers and because the hunger for something new is so big, as a general attitude, that whatever comes along is immediately exploited and mainsteamized.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Why do you like to work with drugs in your installations? Is it a way to alter perception?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — It seems like you need to do drugs in order to understand what certain possibilities are. Drugs give you a sense of how powerful things can be. The situation that we're stuck in at the moment is not how it has to be. It's a disease, like avian flu, a very contagious one. We are all very sick. I think the disease should be called utilitarian thinking, which is reproducing itself in a hyper-efficient way in our minds and in our behavior. It's like a parasite that manipulates our bodies and minds. We should find a medicine or a cure for it.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Inoculate ourselves?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Well, it's so contagious it spreads all over the world down to the last little Amazonian village. Terrible. It's destructive. I really believe it is. So what could be a way out?

OLIVIER ZAHM — So in a big installation like the one you did with the reindeer at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin, they eat mushrooms and their urine is supposed to be hallucinogenic, right?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Yes.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Is that an ancient tradition?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — It's still used by some people. This fall I'm planning to go to a place on the peninsula of Kamchatka, where shamans seem to still use the fly agaric mushroom and the reindeer — though most of them have switched to vodka. The fly agaric mushroom from there is

Top: *Killing Children, 1991-1994*
Quaint Devices That Look Like Toys, All the Better for Trapping Babies and Toddlers
courtesy of the artist, copyright Carsten Höller, 2013

Bottom, right: *Snake*, 2013, photo by Marc Domage
courtesy of the artist and Air de Paris, Paris

Bottom, left: *Rhinoceros*, 2005, photo by Attilio Maranzano
courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery, London,
copyright Carsten Höller, 2013

apparently more powerful than the ones you can find here, because it grows with certain trees, and they symbiotically exchange nutrients. Apparently it's not the same mushroom in Kamchatka that we have in Europe. I've been to Kamchatka once, and at the market in Petropavlovsk, which is the capital of the region, a woman was selling one very big fly agaric mushroom. That was all she had to sell. I tried to ask how to use it, but she wasn't able to tell me. She laughed and communicated something that seemed to mean it makes you crazy.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Did you try it?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Yes, several times, but German ones, German fly agaric mushrooms.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Did you drink urine from the animals in your show?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Yes. It was disgusting. This was mostly just a proposition.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Because visitors were *not* supposed to drink it?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — We left that open. It was possible to book the bed in the center of the space and to sleep the night there. That's when we opened all the fridges with the mushrooms inside, which were locked during the day. Basically, you could feed the reindeer and there were buckets on a pole available to catch their pee.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So no one told them they couldn't do it?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — No. But for the visitors, during the day, it was a double situation, because the space was divided in the middle, with six reindeer on one side and six on the other side. They got the same food and it all looked the same, but one group got the mushroom in the food and the others didn't. We collected pee from all the reindeer from both sides. Both kinds of pee were used to treat the food of canaries and also mice and flies, and you could watch them to see if there was a difference in behavior, because some got their food treated with the pee of the reindeer that had eaten the mushroom and the others were controls.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Eating the mushrooms affected the behavior of the animals?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Possibly. It was like a scientific test without scientists. The visitors wouldn't know which reindeer ate the mushroom and which didn't, and where which kind of pee was applied. Even the animal handlers didn't know which kind of pee they were using. It was like a double-blind experiment in which nobody knew anything and in which everything was possible. It encouraged you to look carefully at the behavior of the animals: compare the reindeer on each side, maybe how the birds sing a little bit louder over there rather than over there, how the flies fly differently, or the mice do different things. There's always a difference, but it's about how you think about that difference.

OLIVIER ZAHM — How was it, sleeping there?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — There was a bed in the middle of the room on a column three-and-a-half meters high, located at the point where all the lines of the space crossed, from one corner to another. On that bed you felt like the master of creation [laughs]. It was really strong.

OLIVIER ZAHM — On top of the world.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Yeah, with all the animals around, the birds above you, the reindeer underneath. At night, the reindeer made sounds they didn't make during the day, roaring, fighting ... so at night you could do all you wanted and had it all just for you, the whole museum.

OLIVIER ZAHM — [laughs] Beautiful, this kind of possibility, this proposition: a common mushroom can become a drug, creating sensations, connecting to traditions, and offering new experiences. Is this a proposition against the world that's being destroyed?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — It's interesting to think about how things were before us. Things that occurred millennia ago and whatever's left from the cultures of that time. There are scholars that say the fly agaric mushroom is an ingredient the Vedic people used to become godlike. Priests could use it to access and present a different reality. We don't do this. We do the opposite. We think everything is fine and what is not can be made better by trying harder. I don't think so.

OLIVIER ZAHM — I'm surprised that you don't use sexuality more in your work, because sex offers access to a different state of mind, too.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Did you see the show at the New Museum about 1993? There were a lot of strange sexual things, in works by Sue Williams, Paul McCarthy... I thought the same when I saw the show. Why don't we do this anymore? How would it look today? In 1993 I did a work where you could hang in the air and have sex after inhaling a specific kind of smell, which worked like a drug. It was called *PEA Love Room*. PEA stood for phenethylamine, which is quite effective when you smell it. It has to be very

Soma, 2010, photo by Attilio Maranzano
courtesy of the artist and Hamburger Bahnhof Museum Für Gegenwart, Berlin, copyright Carsten Höller, 2012

pure, and you have to inhale a lot. The effect is that you like other people more, in every way. Everything becomes sexualized — like in your magazine, in a way. In the '90s you wouldn't be able to do this without risking some kind of reaction.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Actually, it's more difficult now.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Really?

OLIVIER ZAHM — You can't show a man's penis or an open vagina. I do, however, publish pictures in the magazine that I'm not legally authorized to publish anymore.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Are you speaking about the United States or France?

OLIVIER ZAHM — Each country has different laws. But basically, if a country like Japan or the US makes it illegal then you're fucked because it involves global distribution.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — At the same time, we all know that availability has increased to such a dramatic extent. Everything is available. So if you're looking for pictures, you can find them. Not like before. In the '80s it wasn't so easy. You'd have to travel somewhere and know people. Now you can buy or order everything. It's there. Which makes real sex or bodily contact with another person more problematic. It doesn't make it easier to have a synchronized level of excitement.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It's more mental. An ex-girlfriend of mine offers a yoga course called "O for Orgasm" — or, OM, Orgasm Meditation. It's only for women, with men masturbating women. Men bring girls and masturbate them in a certain way so they can orgasm and meditate at the same time.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — So that's available, too. The other day I thought something like this must exist.

OLIVIER ZAHM — I asked her, does it work in reverse? Can a man meditate while receiving a blowjob? She says it's only for women. [laughs]
CARSTEN HÖLLER — For men, it would be a good business, because it's not prostitution. It's yoga, which is kind of clean. Yoga with a happy ending.

OLIVIER ZAHM — I'd be curious if you could develop a work around this kind of sexual sensation.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — I'll think about it. Actually I have already. Duchamp was a master at this. He made highly sexual pieces without them being explicitly sexual.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Yes, with a lot of intellectual distance.

CARSTEN HÖLLER — But nevertheless, his pieces are straightforward, like the cast of the region between a woman's legs in *Female Fig Leaf*.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Another artist obsessed by urine — like you!
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Maybe.

OLIVIER ZAHM — One work of yours that I find very poetic is the birds in a cage. How do you describe them? You also hung birds in cages like a Calder mobile. Do you call them sculptures?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — You mean *Canary Mobile*, which was last shown at the New Museum in New York City. It consists of seven birdcages with one canary in each. If a bird flies up, it makes the cage move up and the mobile changes. I also thought, maybe if one sings very powerfully, that would produce a downward movement in the cage.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Nice.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — There's a work from the early '90s that I'm doing again now. It's a special kind of bird, called a bullfinch in English. This bird is able to learn to whistle a melody perfectly. The male is red, black, and gray with a little white on the wings. It was a tradition in some German villages to train these little birds, which take six to eight months, in isolation, to learn a melody. They would even imitate the errors whistled to them.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You're doing that?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — I found a person who still does it. It was forbidden in the '50s or '60s to take the birds from their nest, because of natural protection laws. But now we're breeding the birds. I chose two love songs: *Longing for Lullabies*, written by Andreas Kleerup, and Bob Dylan's *It's All Over Now, Baby Blue*. A friend of mine, the musician Titiyo, has whistled both melodies on CD. They'll be taken to this man who's going to train them for six to eight months.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Is this an illegal activity?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — No. It's legal because they're bred in captivity. Both *It's All Over Now, Baby Blue* and *Longing for Lullabies* are sad but beautiful love songs. We're going to train these birds to sing one or both. I like the idea of little birds singing a song that doesn't mean anything to them. It's just very touching.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Do you use other animals?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Rosemarie Trockel and I made quite a few pieces with live animals, from pigs to

silverfishes. Animals are monuments to the incomprehensible. You can't understand *how* they feel, but you see *that* they feel. You see that they have some kind of consciousness. When you have a small child it's a bit the same. How do they define themselves? They clearly know what they want and communicate with you, but how can they know who they are or what they want? There's a reason we don't remember anything from our babyhood, which is so different from what we are now that we couldn't be functional human beings if we carried around the memory of our first three years. Being a baby is as crazy as being an animal.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So what's intriguing about animals is that they have no self-consciousness.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Self-consciousness in animals is a hot topic. Animals like chimpanzees and the other great apes, dolphins, or even gray parrots seem to be conscious of their own existence to a certain extent. If you put a red dot on their forehead and show them a mirror, these animals look in the mirror, see the red dot and try to take it away. They understand it's them — but not a monkey with a tail, or pigeons; they don't respond in the same way. I tried it with my little son, Noah, the other day.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Your little boy!
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Yes. He had a small sticker on his forehead, I showed him the mirror, nothing happened. It's clearly too early!

OLIVIER ZAHM — You like to experiment with children?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — If I could I'd do experiments with them all day long. [laughs]

OLIVIER ZAHM — But you're not trying to kill children in your art installations anymore in this era of politcal correctness.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — No, I gave that up. I thought I would get some really angry reactions to these works, but I didn't. Just very rarely.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You still show them?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — We showed an installation of traps and toxic toys on a pink carpet at the Moderna Museet in Sweden a year or so ago.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Do you get a different reaction to them as opposed to the orange snake?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — It's different, because these *Killing Children* works are meant to be significant. Those were my first "real" works as an artist, from '91 to '93 or '94. I did them when I was a really young artist, but not such a young person. They refer to evolutionary theory, which was a heritage from my science days and to our own childhood memories of that vulnerability and powerlessness and how everything is so...

OLIVIER ZAHM — Dangerous?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — I mean, the moment you understand that there is a "yourself" in your body and that you have control of your life to some extent, it's a traumatizing experience that we all have to somehow deal with.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Were you trying to reconnect or get in touch with a feeling of being a vulnerable child in a dangerous world?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — If only we could unleash these early memories that are blocked. There's a reason why we can't access them.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So is Carsten Höller still a child?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — No, I've failed to become one again, but I would love to access that first time of my life, if there's something left of it. Maybe it's all been erased.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You're still trying to access it? [laughs]
CARSTEN HÖLLER — No, I gave up. But I think it has to do with this incapability of seeing yourself as others see you. I know more about who you are than you know about who you are, even though I've seen you maybe only 15 times in my life.

OLIVIER ZAHM — That's enough.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — [laughs] It's enough. Because there's something very strange about you. [laughs]

OLIVIER ZAHM — I'm not very complicated!
CARSTEN HÖLLER — I think you're very complicated! You can't possibly understand how you are and how you behave in public and how other people see you. It's such a strange thing. Why? Because it's blocked, it's something you shouldn't know... And probably it would be very dangerous if you were able to access this. If I were able to see myself like you see me, maybe I couldn't stand it. Maybe that's what happens to people who commit suicide.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Maybe to block yourself is a form of protection.
CARSTEN HÖLLER — I don't know. Nobody seems to know.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Even though we're in a very different period from the '90s, there's a lot of art production, there's a cultural saturation, an artistic saturation, to take your

Opposite page: *Pea Love Room*, 1993,
ready-mades: sex belts, mattress, cotton sheet, acrylic colour,
vial containing PEA, syringe, glass bowl, needle holder with needle,
dissecting knife blades, and plastic container,
courtesy of the artist, copyright Carsten Höller, 2013

example. Are you still optimistic about the importance of art today?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — I would say I'm optimistic because we have developed this experience we call art. We use it in a way that I find limited and restrictive, but the potential is there. It's a great thing.

My proposition would be to do something that is not based on the lonely artist's talent but on a kind of collective expedition.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Collective expedition?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — To gather together people who want to find the emergency exit out of the situation we're in. I'm writing a book about this.

OLIVIER ZAHM — I'd be part of your expedition. What about the book?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — If I can just sleep again then I will continue writing.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Because of the baby?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Yeah. The book is a novel. There are specialists who meet to discuss the expedition. One is a specialist in hostage-taking and the Stockholm Syndrome as a manifestation of irrational behavior. The expedition wants to get beyond what they call "this logic." It's a collective departure, an expedition to some unknown place.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Do you have a title?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — *The Prison*.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *The Prison*?
CARSTEN HÖLLER — Yes. They want to get out of it.

END