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# Flash Art



Carsten Höller

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SUPPLEMENTO N° 194 A FLASH ART N° 203 APRILE - MAGGIO 1997

# CARSTEN HÖLLER

“MAYBE BECAUSE I CAN SWIM, I DECIDED  
TO LEARN TO FLY.”<sup>1</sup>

Wolf-Günter Thiel

IN THE YEAR 386, St. Augustine wrote, in *This Contra Academicos*, of *Philokalie* as a love of beauty, and philosophy as a love of wisdom, describing them as sister birds. “*Philokalie* sits imprisoned in the cage of the earthly, knowing not whence she comes, while philosophy flies on free pinions to the heavens, recognizes the imprisoned bird as her sister, but is unable to free her. In turn, however, philosophy can be imagined as imprisoned, shut in a conceptual cage whose bars form a grid diagram of the view outside, while *Philokalie* flies off on the wings of her imagination and free perception, having to leave philosophy behind.”<sup>2</sup> These thoughts of St. Augustine’s aren’t being introduced so much to illustrate the 1994 action *Loverfinches*<sup>3</sup> — in which Höller taught a young finch to sing love songs — as to escape a *Pro Katalepsis*.<sup>4</sup>

While Richard Serra, talking about the theme “process and work” in 1981, declared that so-called human values were not at the center of his work, but rather referred to the political arena, Höller seems to be somewhat different, in that human values are at the center of his field of research, or at least they would appear to be, as suggested by the exhibition title “Glück” (Happiness).<sup>5</sup> The artifacts used in the exhibition in Cologne were a series of machines and objects. The catalogue essay states: “Great happiness can, by its nature, only be treated descriptively in an exhibition without producing the state itself, except as a memory. The exhibition ‘Happiness’ isn’t about happiness, rather it is happiness, because the quest for the small happiness is made simpler in a way. The feeling can arise as a consequence of physical stimulation, and thus offer a real context for discursive reflection upon it: not ‘as if,’ or in any kind of symbolic form, but (in)directly.”<sup>6</sup> As I understand it, the exhibition “Happiness” is an “experimental arrangement” which appeals in the most diverse ways to the various senses of man, and thus offers a broad basis for further analyses.

Apparatuses like the flying-machine

that requires activity, alternate with objects like the massage chair, which corresponds to relaxation. Höller is marking out a journey whose individual stages evoke a specific sensual experience. Experience first of all implies impulses and all the things that enter the human consciousness in the course of a lifetime. In its extended sense the concept refers to one’s experience of oneself, one’s predispositions and abilities, virtues and vices, but also ideas and information. Children constantly collect information about their environment. They do this with all their senses. Children enjoy sliding down a light-igloo on a mat, they’re interested in touching the simulated skin of a dolphin, riding on it or imagining flying around the world on the back of a bird. Looking at this exhibition, and not only this one, reveals that the inclination to admit primary impulses declines with age.<sup>7</sup> This saturation leads not to experience but to understanding. Storing information and cross-referencing it with existing information. Adults have accepted the rules of a formalism “which allows you, as on a vast and complex crystal-shaped structure, to reach each segment along the connections from any other section. Syntax, arithmetics, the Aristotelian principles, are such formalisms.”<sup>8</sup> Heinz von Förster puts it like this, “First you think the problem of perception is a physiological one, or a neurological or a neuro-anatomical or a psychological problem; but it is precisely the results of these sciences which repeatedly show that perception is a logical, philosophical, socio-economic, sometimes even a political problem.”<sup>9</sup> In philosophy, experience is the basis for all non-conceptual knowledge of reality. All science must derive from experiences if it is to be sure of itself.

So any observer arguing from a scientific viewpoint would be advised to use the instruments offered by Höller, and to observe the users. Children and unschooled

Right: Glück, 1996.



Video still from "Jenny," 1992. Courtesy Schipper & Krome, Cologne.

visitors do this intensely, and part of the great resonance of the exhibition comes from this. All the senses are addressed, and all the senses experience new things. On the other hand recognition should not stop at mere experience. For scientific purposes, experience must be organized by thought, compared, connected, even corrected, and complemented.

The sensual perceptions that come from seeing or touching are limited. They can be extended with the use of technology (as they can with naturally or artificially manufactured drugs and intoxicants). One convincing testimony to the wish for an expanded consciousness is the 1993 installation *Pealove*. This installation in a former bank safe consisted of a space where you could have sex under the influence of drugs without touching the floor.<sup>10</sup> This gives visual form to the semantic bipolarity of the term "technology." It subsumes measures, processes and fittings, as well as the rules and tricks of a particular activity. Experience becomes a resource and the

starting-point of a private scientific engagement with mimesis. Here Höller is returning to a tradition begun by three Viennese artist-architect-engineer-designers Laurids, Zamp, and Pinter at the end of the sixties. The group called themselves Haus Rucker Co. According to their "Phy-Psy" manifesto, "Art has been outstripped by a technologized science that has absorbed all the attributes of art: fantasy, dynamism, immediacy, fascination. Reality has beaten imagination." Haus Rucker Co.'s aim was to extend the human senses with the help of technology, and complete the range of their experience. The result of this effort wasn't the (only) thing that counted; what was most important was the way it was achieved, the attempt to complete the extension of human knowledge in a creative sense as well. The total technocracy that George Orwell predicted in his novel *1984*, will only be avoided — in the declared opinion of Haus Rucker Co. — if the artist remains on the trail of "progress" and repeatedly uses art to question the efficient new media. Here opinions are divided between Höller and the group of artists, in that he doesn't, as they do in an almost futurist way, devote himself to faith

in progress. It is Höller's ambition to refer experience to the source of all science, and return it as a primary impulse to the mis-educated viewer. This was particularly clear in 1994, in the exhibition "Du You." Here the artist showed sixteen different machines producing hallucinations in the broadest sense.<sup>11</sup>

In German, the term *Parcours*, or "course" usually refers to the completion of a kind of marked-off obstacle course. In terms of the exhibition this means that from the entrance to the exit a course is marked out with artifacts, and the visitor is intended to use each of the machines in turn. Throughout history humans have made machines, tools, vehicles and weapons. The artist, in Höller's view, is a poet of the machine. The machines are media, machines that he uses either to make experiences possible, or to intensify them. *Mechos*, *mechanè*, and *Macht* (power) are all related. The machines, the art works, consist of parts which are made in reference to their purpose for a whole, and are closely linked and connected to form this whole. It's the connection of *ars*, *artus*, and *arma*. Machines are not only tools and weapons, but also vehicles and metaphors.<sup>12</sup> Gener-

Opposite: top: Glück, 1996; bottom: Floß (Raft), 1995.



Untitled, 1996.  
Courtesy Massimo De Carlo, Milan.

ally speaking, the artifacts, hitherto identified in their various different ways, are distinguished by three constituent features: 1. the art lies in finding or inventing; 2. the working of this invented or found object; 3. an effect that is a) expected by the artist and b) partly surprising.

The individual artifacts each fulfill their own specific tasks, and turn the viewer into a user. So the visitor can modestly remain a viewer and observe the users in action with the machines, or be both of these in turn. This produces a constantly alternating perspective. Höller is concerned with understanding the state of being prone, the momentary loss of control, "amechania," as a constitutive element of the machine. From that point onwards it is a matter of learning "amechanical" art, maneuvering a disintegrating raft, using the impotence of action and passivity as a primary impulse. This image is particularly pertinent in relation to the raft that Höller built in 1995 for the Kwangju Biennial in South Korea. It was a fast, unsteerable raft. When he uses the art, the user ties himself — for the spectator, obviously — to the machine. The mechanics of art reproduces the "amechania" of that which is not experienced, which it is supposed to carry. In this respect the author assumes that in art the symbol differs from

the allegory in that it does not seek to visualize something abstract, but rather to indicate a deeper, more meaningful content or meaning. Höller the allegorist finds machines. He doesn't invent them, he confiscates them. Sometimes he reinterprets them, or integrates them within a specific course. For the user, as artifacts they are a hardware aide-mémoire that enables the viewer to be "informed" — to store information, in this case experiences.

In terms of the course, it simulates a sequence thematizing the object of artistic interest. The exhibition becomes a closed autopoietic system. Autopoiesis as understood by Dirk Baecker who says "the infinity of reflection that is only reflection because and by virtue of the fact that it refers to earlier acts of reflection and later acts of reflection follow on from it."<sup>13</sup> The idea of the course describes a hierarchical network. In it there is no *pars pro toto*. The centers fixed by the artifacts are distributed around the whole network, established by the given architectural situation. Information is generated about the observation and analysis of behavior and communication within these given obstacles. In its diversity, progress through the course changes the viewer and user, it marks what the user experiences and what the viewer takes cognizance of. The experiences of difference are based on this, and they are the basis of the reception of the work. This in turn yields the experience of difference between system and environment, "System differentiation is nothing but the repetition of the difference between system and environment within systems. The overall system uses itself as the environment for its own partial system formations, and, on the level of partial systems, achieves greater improbabilities through intensified filter effects in the face of a finally uncontrollable environment. According to this model, a differentiated system no longer consists simply of a certain number of parts and relationships between them; rather it consists of a greater or smaller number of operationally usable differences between system and environment, each of which reconstructs, at various cross-sections, the overall system as a unit of partial systems and environments. Differentiation is thus treated according to the general pattern of system formation, and the question of which forms and according to which complexity system-differentiation is possible can be connected back to the original difference that constitutes the overall system."<sup>14</sup>

And then I must just mention an old joke: "Every time I press the red button," one laboratory rat said to the other, "the guy in the white overalls comes and gives me something to eat."<sup>15</sup>

(Translated from German by Shaun Whiteside)

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#### Notes:

1. Quoted from a statement by Gino de Dominicis in reference to his action "Tentativo di volo."
2. Hannes Böhlinger, "Durch das Nachtmeer: Von der Philosophie zur Kunst," in *Begriffsfelder: Von der Philosophie zur Kunst*, Berlin 1985, p. 91.
- The catalogue of criteria for contemporary and current artistic phenomena developed in the early nineties was particularly generated within the parameters of contextual art. But the keen critics who imagined they had understood the art of the nineties once and for all, are now seeing themselves having their intellectual concept maliciously swept away from them by a flood of phenomena. This unusually violent reaction reveals Höller's work as a significant artistic phenomenon which divides opinion.
3. cf. the exhibition in the Galerie Ars Futura in Zurich, 1994.
4. I am using the rhetorical figure of *Pro Katalepsis* to mean an anticipation of possible objections.
5. cf. Richard Serra, "Statement," in Laszlo Glozer, *Westkunst Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 1939*, exhibition catalogue, Cologne 1981, p. 314.
6. II. Glück/Skop, in *Glück, Carsten Höller*, Cologne, 1996, p. 36. On the occasion of the exhibition "Glück" in the Kunstverein Hamburg, in the Cologne Kunstverein, and the Centraal Museum Utrecht, as well as the exhibition "Skop" in the Vienna Secession.
7. In the "Glück" exhibitions in Hamburg and Cologne many of the visitors were children who were either there with their parents or on a school outing. They saw the exhibitions primarily as adventure playgrounds. Thanks to Udo Kittelmann, the director of the Cologne Kunstverein, for this observation.
8. Heinz von Förster, "Wahrnehmen," in *Ars Elektronica, Philosophien der neuen Technologie*, Linz Ed., Berlin 1989, p. 28.
9. *ibid.* p. 27.
10. cf. "Unfair," Daniel Buchholz, Cologne 1993.
11. The exhibition took place in 1994 at Schipper & Krome.
12. cf. Hannes Böhlinger, "Das Hölzerne Pferd," in *Ars Elektronica, Philosophien der neuen Technologie*, Linz Ed. Berlin 1989, p. 7.
13. Dirk Baecker, "Die Kunst der Unterscheidungen," in *Ars Elektronica, Im Netz der Systeme*, Linz Ed. Berlin 1990, p. 23.
14. Niklas Luhmann, "Soziale Systeme. Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie," 5Aul., Frankfurt am Main 1994, p. 22.
15. II. Glück/Skop, in "Carsten Höller," p. 36.

**Carsten Höller** was born in 1961 in Brussels, Belgium. He lives and works in Cologne. Selected solo shows: 1993: Lukas & Hoffmann, Berlin; Buchholz & Buchholz, Cologne; 1994: Air de Paris, Paris; Schipper & Krome, Cologne; Ars Futura, Zurich; 1995: Theoretical Events, Naples; 1996: Kunstverein, Hamburg; Kunstverein, Cologne, Wiener Secession, Vienna; Espace Jules Verne, Bretigny-sur-Orge (France); Massimo de Carlo, Milan. Selected group shows: 1992: "Tattoo Collection," Air de Paris and Urbi et Orbi, Paris; "240 Minuten," Esther Schipper, Cologne; 1993: Venice Biennale; "Sens et Sentiments," FRAC Languedoc-Roussillon, Montpellier; 1994: "Please Don't Hurt Me," Snoei, Rotterdam and Cabinet, London; "L'Hiver de l'Amour," ARC, Paris; "Winter of Love," PS1, New York; "Cocktail II," Kunstverein, Hamburg; Daniel Buchholz, Cologne; "Rue des Marins," Air de Paris, Nice; "Cloaca Maxima," Museum für Stadtentwässerung, Zurich; "Naked City," Massimo de Carlo, Milan; 1995: "Toys," Jousse Seguin, Paris; "Take Me, I'm Yours," Serpentine Gallery, London; "Vital Use," Museum in Progress, Vienna; "Trust," Tramway, Glasgow; "Moral Maze," le Consortium, Dijon; "How Is Everything?," Wiener Secession, Vienna; Kwangju Biennale, Korea; Biennale de Lyon; 1996: "Traffic," CAPC, Bordeaux; "Drei Jahre," Ars Futura, Zurich; "Berechenbarkeit der Welt," Kunstverein, Bonn; "All of a sudden," Aurel Scheibler, Cologne; "Hermeneutik und..." Sophia Ungers, Cologne; Manifesta 1, Rotterdam; "Comme un Oiseau," Fondation Cartier, Paris.