

In the New Museum: Experiencing “Carsten Höller: Experience.”

Anastasiya Chybireva Fender

October 6 2022

The New Museum appears very new indeed. Its clean, sleek exterior, strange shifted box design, monochrome off-white color and lack of identifiable windows provide for a perfectly foreign and largely intriguing character in relation to its closest neighbors in lower Manhattan. The New Museum's neighbors, for the most part, bear the characteristics one most associates with more traditional New York buildings: constructed of old stone, brick and concrete; volumetric arrangements that maximize square footage while minimizing real estate costs; and windows arranged in a regular pattern. The rigid uniformity of these traditional, some might say old style, New York City buildings is what gives the New Museum the right to bear such a title. Despite the statement found in the museum pamphlet about the New Museum's materials' being in "keeping with the commercial character of Bowery," and the "deliberate openness to the building," the museum appears more as a closed off and intentionally alien element of Downtown Manhattan than a structure that fluidly integrates into its context. While its looks may alienate it from its peers, the New Museum's unique design certainly has its benefits. The external appearance of the museum is eccentric and it drives the visitor in; it appeals to one's sense of curiosity and desire to explore the unknown; it beckons in to discover the art concealed inside those strangely stacked volumes.

The New Museum was founded in 1977 by curator Marcia Tucker who had "neither personal resources nor a collection" but had plenty of "resourcefulness" and strong "passion for living culture" (from museum pamphlet). This passion still characterizes the museum today; it embraces the idea that the world and its many cultures are indeed alive and changing with the passing of time. It is this ideology of change that drives the museum to engage the experimental and the controversial contingent of the Art World. It was this ideology that ultimately brought Carsten Höller to the New Museum. Finally, it was this ideology that brought me to view the Carsten Höller through exhibit. Were it not for those beautifully stacked volumes of the New Museum, Höller and I may never have met.

Höller made me reexamine "what I know about myself" (from artist's statement). Carsten Höller is a contemporary German artist, born in Brussels, Belgium, who is concerned

with altering the way in which art is perceived. He works to redefine the experience art can provide by placing the viewer in “influential environments” and forcing the viewer to rediscover his senses through altered ways of common perception. Höller holds a doctorate in agricultural science, specializing in insect sensory perception. It was not until he was in his late twenties that he actually began practicing art. Höller’s artistic career and doctoral research overlap by some fourteen years. This perhaps can explain why Höller’s artistic methodologies are similar in many ways to laboratory experimentation. While visiting his exhibit, I felt more like a subject of scientific research than a passive viewer of art. Höller’s works of art become clandestine experiments, the results of which are the viewers’ experiences.

The fusion of art and science in Höller’s exhibit resonate with the spirit of the New Museum. The mission of the New Museum is to “keep breaking new grounds,” (pamphlet) promoting new ideas, stimulating ongoing experimentation and questioning the nature of contemporary art. Höller’s objectives coincides with the mission of the New Museum in its relentless search for novel answers to the primordial question of ‘what is art?’ Höller answers this question by defining art as a process rather than an artifact; a process of scientific discovery, with the viewer being simultaneously the subject and the researcher; the data point and the conclusion. Unlike a traditional art piece which plays a role of translating the expression of an artistic sensibility, Höller’s art is an act of experimentation and discovery. Höller places his viewer into the very epicenter of his art-making, the viewer becomes a co-creator, a co-artist, a fellow in his artistic research. Höller’s approach is thusly one that shares the glory of his artistic achievement with the viewer. Indeed, the viewer can rightfully regard himself as somewhat of an artist upon visiting a Höller’s exhibit.

Each floor of the exhibition is meant to explore a different general theme within Höller’s work to provide a “carefully choreographed journey through the building and the artist’s oeuvre” (pamphlet). For example the fourth floor concentrated on the exploration of movement, while the second floor dealt with themes of utopian experiences in architectural space. While it is difficult to place where the slide going from the fourth floor gallery to the second floor gallery

lies symbolism of the artist's oeuvre, it certainly created an efficient and exhilarating alternative to the elevator and redefined the circulation of the museum. Perhaps this was just another way that Höller invited the viewer to circumvent the conventional, to experiment, and to frivolously experience the joy of discovering something new.

Before entering the Höller's exhibit, one senses a looming challenge of sedimented preconceptions in regard to art. The exhibit commences with the visitor being required to sign a waiver that releases the museum of any liability for injury or bodily harm that may result from an interaction with a Höller's artwork. The signing ceremony creates an unsettling mood and firmly sets an expectation of something categorically new. Signing the waiver does not only free the New Museum of legal responsibility, it frees the viewer from the possibility of viewing art with any traditional sets of expectations. Thus begins the Höller experience.

The exploration begins in the glass gallery on the ground floor. Inside the gallery one discovers a troop of mushrooms, human height in size and psychedelic in appearance. Each mushroom was composed of the two halves of different mushroom types, one of which was flipped upside-down. Visitors were encouraged to wear 'upside-down glasses,' which distorted one's perception by inverting vision. Wearing these glasses sets an altered perception of reality which, while exciting at first, soon becomes a dizzying experience. After taking a few steps one becomes disoriented and helpless. Security guards in the gallery, used to dealing with dazed and disoriented visitors, emphatically advise to refrain from trying to walk between the mushrooms. Fortunately, unlike in case of ingesting psychedelic mushrooms, all one has to do is take off the glasses to step back into reality.

The synergy between the New Museum and Höller occurred not only on an ideological level but on a physical one as well. 'The 'Slide' piece ran from the fourth to the third floor right through the floor plate literally fusing of the art piece and the building's architecture. Such a dramatically intimate union signified a high level of collaboration between the museum and the artist for the sake of creating one powerful experience. The interior of the museum reflected the desire for structural transparency. Structural steelwork was exposed, unadorned and

unscreened. Beams and girders, metal deck, steel joints and connections were all bare and completely visible. In a sense it was a totally utilitarian space, abandoning all avoidable interior design elements. It was reminiscent of a chemistry laboratory, drawing further the parallel between Höller's art work and scientific discovery. The lighting of the galleries was evenly distributed. The shifted-box design of the building created slivers of light in the ceiling of each gallery. Thus sunlight was able to reach each even the lowest floor of the museum. Halogen lights were installed in the ceiling where artwork required additional illumination. The fourth floor exhibit contained a slowly revolving 'Mirror Carousel' (2005) made out of highly reflective material. The lights of the carousel reflected all around the room at a rather lethargic pace, creating, a very surreal festive scene as though somebody had decided to record everything in slow motion. In contrast, the second floor gallery was completely unlit except a bit of light emanating from the art piece 'Double Light Corner' (2011), which was composed of a diagonal array of halogen lamps wrapped around the wall approximately 4 feet off the ground. The lights on the left and right side of the room flashed in an alternating fashion, disorienting the viewer. It had a desynchronizing effect that altered the perception of time. It feels as if when being in the dark side of the room, one has to wait for the lights to come back on before life can carry on. This thought-provoking experiment in non-continuous life causes one to ponder on connection between time, light and space.

The same gallery features a fish tank which the viewer could experience from underneath while lying on a bench with the head inserted into the special opening below. The flashing lights of the nearby artwork give a very jolly appearance to the underwater world. Also, the second floor gallery featured a herd of neon colored animals resting on the smooth concrete floor. This piece, called 'Animal Group' (2011) was composed of a Dolphin, Hippopotamus, Crocodile, Orangutan, Rhinoceros, Reindeer and Walrus. Their bright color and soft, matte texture contrasted with the grey, hard and glossy concrete floor. This juxtaposition of textures was rather delightful. Another component of the second floor was a series of small rooms where visitors could engage in various forms of experimentation. For example, one of

the rooms had a desk where one could experience a “rabbit jumping on the skin.” The rabbit was produced by slight electric current running through the viewer’s body. In another room the viewer could place a vibrator to his arm and hold his nose to experience the ‘elongation of the nose’ or ‘shortening of the nose,’ depending on to which side of the arm the vibrations were applied. In total, there were about six rooms with different experiments. Each room was painted black and held nothing within except for the piece it featured.

Light plays an interesting role in the overall architecture of the New Museum. Aside from the glass façade of the first floor, the only natural light sources inside the building are the liminal areas created by the shifted-box design. Within each gallery, this unique method of illumination creates a very pleasant and soft glow emanating from the edge of the ceiling. Because of the varying relationships between the individual boxes that comprised the building, a specific nuance was given to each gallery. Viewed from the exterior, the shifted-box design allowed light to radiate from the building at night making it seem as if the museum concealed some large mysterious glowing object. It was almost as if the building were beckoning one to come and discover the source of this secret glow. For the time being, this glowing mystery revealed itself to be the ‘Höller Experience.’

In MoMA, for instance, a very slight reveal separates the floor from the walls, suggesting that the walls and ceiling are a series of planes that hang weightlessly in space. Such a reading implies a conceptual lack of gravity and therefore takes the gallery away from the physical world. The floor of the New Museum is also separated from the wall by a reveal. But unlike in MoMA, where the wall steps away from the floor, appearing to hang over it, in the New Museum the floor steps a fraction of an inch away from the wall implying the presence of gravity. This difference can be explained by the description given by O’Doherty. The gallery is being gradually infiltrated with consciousness, “gallery walls become the ground, its floor a pedestal, its corners vortices, its ceiling a frozen sky” (O’Doherty, 2000: 331). The galleries of the New Museum do not present an abstract assembly of floating planes – they have weight and gather consciousness. The ceiling becomes the sky captured behind the opaque glass on

the setback areas. The floor that steps from the wall reads as a pedestal due to the reveal detail. "No longer confined to a zone around the artwork, and impregnated now with the memory of art, the new space pushed gently against its confining box" (O'Doherty, 2000: 322). Thus, the entire space of the gallery becomes infiltrated with art. Gallery space itself acts as an art of an experience devised for measuring the time between other experiences. Space itself is meant to inspire. Space of the New Museum itself translates into the experience of art in perfect synergy with Höller's wondrous exhibit-lab.

Bibliography

Brian O'Doherty.(2000). Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space. University of California Press.

Carsten Höller. (October 26 2011- January 22 2012). "Carsten Höller: Experience" Exhibit. New Museum.