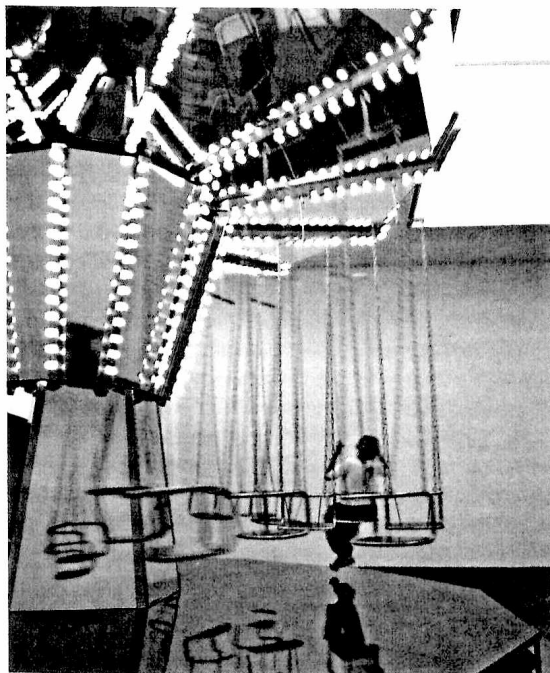


■ Carsten Höller

Gagosian Gallery London September 1 to October 8

Sites of innocence and playful authenticity lie at the heart of Carsten Höller's work. Höller occupies areas which have been historically and culturally claimed as sources of uncontaminated 'truth' – among them childhood (*Children Demonstrate for the Future*, 1991), science (*Punktefilm*, moving images of bouncing white dots, presenting the perceptual research of a noted psychophysicist), animal behaviour (*A House for Pigs and People*, with Rosemarie Trockel, 1997), or hidden recesses of the human mind, accessed through drugs (*Yuguttaplanta*, 1994). Once a research biologist, Höller switched to art in the 80s in order to experiment more freely with notions of perception, behaviour, doubling and disorientation. An air of clinical distance prevails in his exhibitions, wherein highly finished sculptural objects furnish experiments that offer such benefits as chemically-induced love (*PEA*, 1993, a freely available aphrodisiac) and happiness (*Happiness Pills*, 1996); enhanced auditory attention (*Amplified Pavilion*, with Miriam Bäckström, 2005 Venice Biennale

Carsten Höller
Mirror Carousel 2005



Nordic Pavilion), or a gravity-free sensation (*Upside Down Goggles*, 1994/2004, and *Flying Machine*, 1996).

Höller's brand of innocence, though fun-loving in spirit, can wander onto dubious ground, as in his paedophobic series 'Killing Children', 1990-93 (ie *Hard, hard to be a baby*, 1992, a swing perched treacherously on the roof's edge of a high-rise building). It was while viewing one such work with an art critic friend who actually had lost her small daughter in an accident (she didn't collapse in grief or anything, just gave me a deeply disheartened look) that Höller's failure to engage meaningfully with his audience really hit home. His comical devices for murdering children are not funny. His PEA love-drug, as I recall when I tried it, didn't actually work. His perceptual experiments like the one here, in which flickering screens claim to create the effect of three-dimensional motion, produce mostly frustration, leaving viewers with a headache and the persistent wish that the picture would just stop jumping senselessly around.

But it's the subject matter of the film installation that disturbs the most. Höller's three films: *Felix Wazekawa*, *Zimbabwe*, and *Werra Son*, all 2005, present footage of claustrophobic concerts and rehearsals by an all-singing, all-dancing band from Kinshasa, Congo, as they perform the locally popular – and politically charged – 'dance of the parrot'. Set adjacent to the main gallery space, whose theme seems to be 'Fun at the Fair' – a row of colourful, hallucinatory amusement park photographs and the exhibition's overstated pièce de résistance, *Mirror Carousel*, 2005, an elaborately fabricated, wildly expensive-looking monstrosity, oddly reminiscent of a rotating, room-sized, Hollywood make-up mirror – the African performances assume a decidedly awkward position alongside Höller's other 'spaces of innocence'. One is reminded of the short-lived postwar art movement CoBrA, which naively drew together images culled from children, the insane (perhaps replaced in Höller's work with those under the effects of mind-altering drugs) and 'primitivist' African artists in a racially biased, Eurocentric cocktail of liberal-mindedness. Whilst one can almost forgive pre-multicultural CoBrA for its colonial-era reduction of all these to a single level of 'authenticity', one can hardly accept Höller today in the same way. With a third gallery presenting landscape photographs centring on a half-naked male sporting an enormous erection, the bizarre connections being forged between childhood naivety, hypersexuality and contemporary African culture suggest parallels which are uncomfortable at best, offensive at worst.

If Höller's exhibitions are meant to offer liberating occasions to bridge the 'perceptual gaps' of a broad gallery-going

RACHEL GARFIELD

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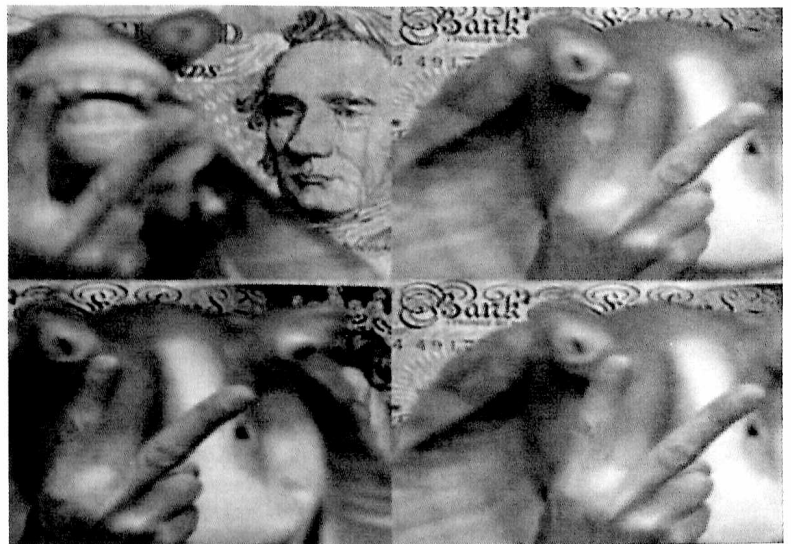
audience, why do they feel mostly like an in-joke aimed at a small group of like-minded, firmly established artists enjoying the spoils of success, with 'meaningful content' assured only by its framing within the confines of 'interactive', 'relational' art? At the 2003 Venice Biennale, Höller's work for the group show 'Utopia Station' consisted of removing all the wall-labels – a gesture toying with 'authorlessness' and creating a kind of we-are-a-family interchangeability among his artist cronies, but above all belittling the needs of an earnest art public desiring simply to distinguish the work of one artist from the next. Looking at Höller's appropriated photographic piece (reproduced in the current show's catalogue), *Group Photo*, 1996, a portrait of some 25 unsmiling artists who participated in the now-cultish 'Traffic' exhibition (CAPC Bordeaux, 1996), one senses that Höller's predominant concern in his work is to confirm membership in this desirable, exclusive group. The ordinary visitor to the Gagosian gallery can take a free spin on Höller's gleaming, overdesigned carousel, but any lasting offer of kinship or meaning evaporates once the ride – too slow and self-conscious really to be much fun anyway – is over. ■

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■ Oliver Payne & Nick Relph

Serpentine Gallery London September 6 to October 2

'Oliver Payne & Nick Relph' is the first exhibition in the UK to be solely given over to these two highly-celebrated artists. It takes the form of a retrospective of their work to date, a showing of seven video pieces, ranging from their trilogy *The Essential Selection*, 1999-2001, to *Sonic the Warhol*, 2005, a work which the duo were still editing on the day of the show's private view. This last-minute mixing of images seems appropriate given that Payne & Relph's practice purports to examine contemporary popular or alternative culture, as opposed to that produced by multinational corporations, the latter a 'culture' that is in any case stolen from the very people to whom it is eventually resold. Writing in the show's catalogue, Rochelle Steiner reports that Payne & Relph 'generate ideas by wandering through high-street shops ... They actively critique what they find – all the while participating in the cultural phenomena on which they comment.' Observing that it is 'not



Oliver Payne & Nick Relph
Mixtape 2002
video still

uncommon to see them with Starbucks coffee cups', Steiner does not, however, appear too sure about the type of critique these artists actually enact. It is a telling ambivalence that is entirely, if inadvertently, pertinent to the work on show.

Payne & Relph take their imagery from numerous sources, shooting it themselves or borrowing found footage of both an amateur and a professional kind. *Jungle*, 2001, for example, includes an interview about a UFO sighting, images of a pro-hunting rally and snatches of a fake battle between stiffly poised, anachronistically-clad armoured men. These and other snippets are stitched together to make a collage of pictures connoting a strata of extremes such as the marginal and the mainstream, the individual and the crowd. The footage in this and other of their works is occasionally very engaging but Payne & Relph consistently fail to address the clichés they record, not least the problem of their own selection of what are already-overdone subjects within would-be radical art.

Stereotype and cliché are also the mainstay of the artists' speech and of the captions in their films. The language they employ in the exhibition publication is that of the vulgar second-year graphics student who thinks that swearing and the constant use of unsubstantiated generalities are natural, unsullied forms. 'Everything is so accessible now', remarks Payne, '... so you can become

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