

## Carsten Holler - Half Fiction

*The Institute of Contemporary Arts*

By Eric Ward

March 10, 2003

Art, in any form, is a catalyst for thought, exploration and question. As technology continues on its rapid path of development, and we begin to explore the limits beyond 3D, the audience's desires for a higher level of interaction are genuinely increased as well. Carsten Holler, born in Brussels, Belgium in 1961, was professionally employed as a scientist focusing on insect behaviors before he saw the artistic implications within his work. For the past ten years he has worked independently, and collaborated with many fine artists, in order to redefine the art museum experience as we have traditionally come to expect. Rather than a slow, meandering stroll through square-walled rooms and roped off sculptures, Holler has not only created a colorful and thought-provoking interactive collection, but like technology itself, has gone a giant step further, and made the spectator the subject.

Presenting his first solo United States show, the ICA in Boston is the ideal location for Holler's "Half Fiction". Indirect light, oddly-shaped rooms and hollowed-echoing floors heighten the mysterious shapes and images Holler provides. This particular showing delves into the emotions of doubt, uncertainty and indirectly facing our fears within each developing stage of our lives. Continuously forcing the audience to step outside of the comfort zone allows the show to not only become an experience of awkward perception, but a parallel of passage.



The first installation is the *Choice Corridor*, "a disorienting and gradually darkening passageway that visitors must navigate" with only "non-visual stimuli". When initially entering the piece, the audience encounters a long hallway, dimly lit, narrow and ominous. As one proceeds to the end of the corridor, a u-turn is made, followed by another, before the scene is complete darkness. Darkness only reserved for bedroom sleep. The visitor is constantly aware that this is an art exhibit within a museum, though the quiet, pitch black maze is deafening from the pulse which races as you continue on. At each turn, one cannot tell if it would be better to turn back, or proceed forward, or if in fact one is still even going forward at all. As confusing and stimulating as the structure is, this is in no way a shabby funhouse atmosphere. There is no logical reason for fear, it is an empty hallway within the same museum you entered just moments ago, though Holler successfully moves the audience a step past comfort within minutes. At a last corner, the light becomes visible, and the visitor "moves to the light". A warm security overcomes

you, and you exit unsure why you were so uneasy at all. The museum is again full of viewers, staff and normalcy. It was only the subject, yourself, who created the unnecessary element of fear.

The next piece is *The Forest*. Again, like the previous work, the viewer is placed in a state of slight confusion and disorientation. Though rather than moving on your own, here the visitor wears a pair of glasses which place a small LCD monitor in front of each eye. As the vision plays in front of you, it appears to be a slow walk through a snowy, desolate woods at dusk. As you make your way deeper however, both cameras cross, and continue to diverge in opposite directions. The created visual stimulation leaves the



viewer confused, lost and eager to come back to center. Your brain desperately attempts to make sense of the wandering sight lines, but you cannot bring them back to center. The effectiveness of the engagement is overwhelming. I truly felt a similar feeling as to being hiking and experiencing the momentary adrenaline rush that only comes from possibly being lost.

Perhaps the most invigorating piece is *Light Corner*. The visitor enters the room and immediately feels the intense heat generated from the structure. A free standing corner wall, containing almost 1800 light bulbs flickering at a frequency of 7.8hz, it "synchronizes with the viewer's brain, inducing strong retinal after-images." With eyes closed, the viewer experiences a kaleidoscope of colors, and the body is enveloped in a warming glow...it's as if you are submerged in a techno-chicken egg incubator. Leaving the *Light Corner* room, you have the wearied head ring similar to being on a carnival ride once to many times, yet it is strangely soothing.

Completing the journey begun in the darkness, the visitor's last two stops are *Sphere* and *Slide*. Holler has always been fascinated with travel, whether it be within our minds or in these two instances, physical transportation structures. *Sphere* is a large round structure, isolated, and appears out of place inside the large empty room. Designed with steel and brass, it is industrious, strong and machine, all elements synonymous with vehicles, not typically large round balls. In conjunction, *Slide* is the path back out to the main entrance. Designed to instill a feeling of an out-of-control experience, the two-story structure is the adult version of the encased slides of our neighborhood parks. Ironically, after coming so far and moving past various levels of growth and comfort, rather than closing the exhibit with a final reaffirming experience, Holler brings the viewer full circle, back to childhood and the naivety with which we began.

