CARSTEN HÖLLER

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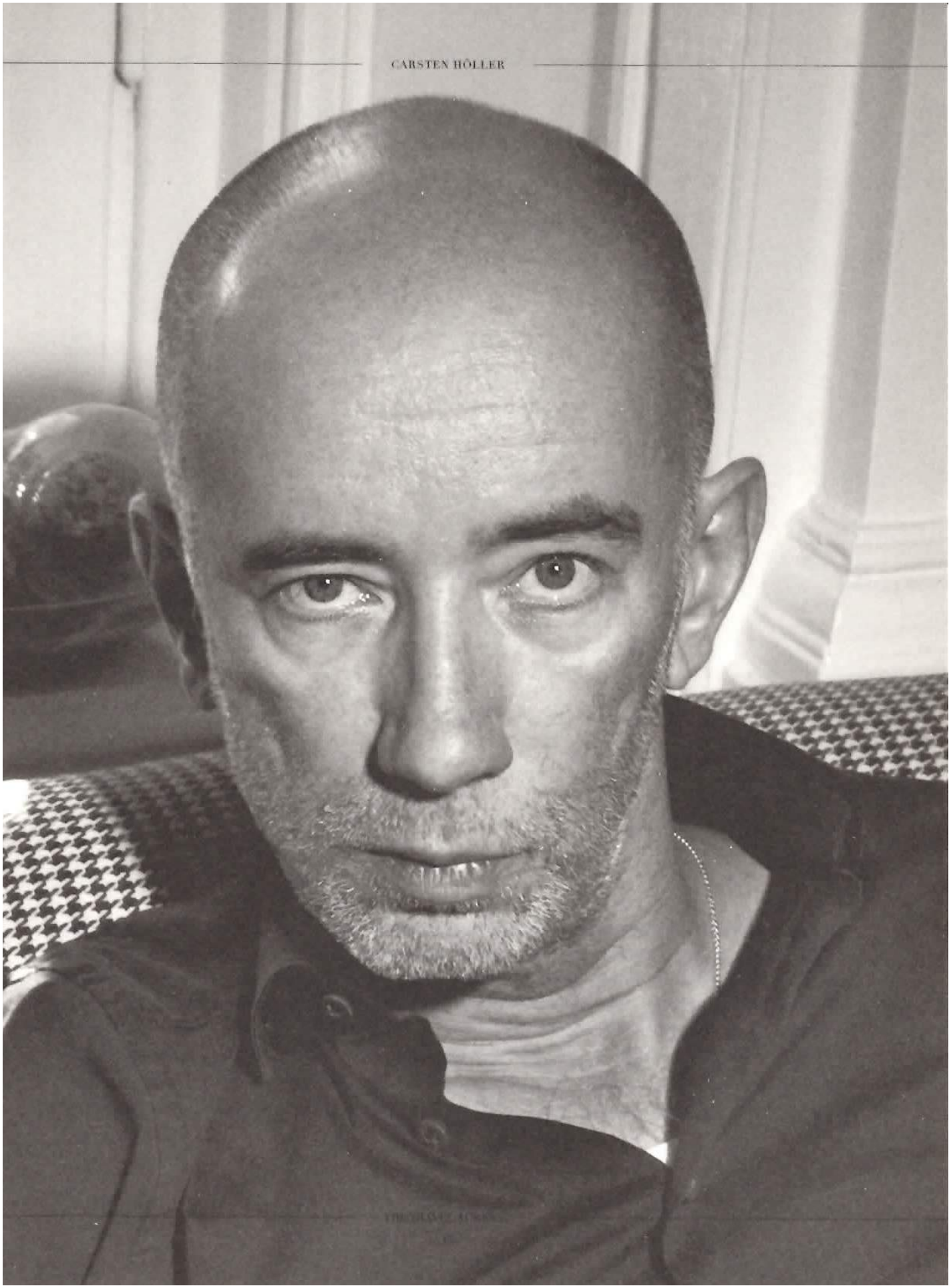

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We met Stolckhom-based artist, Carsten Höller for tea in the ornately appointed lobby of New York's Bowery Hotel where we discussed his spectacular house in Ghana, and the ways in which his artworks re-frame participants relationships to time and space. Holler's works offer an experience, be it through his helix-like slides, which whirl museum-goers through the halls of the Tate Modern, or his hotel beds, allowing visitors to spend the night in the Guggenheim or elevated above reindeer in Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof. Framing participants as the work and relishing the gaps in communication, Höller questions conventions about what art can offer, whom it's for, and how artworks can rethink our social and cultural relationships. A conversation with Carsten Höller is like the work he creates: a shared and generous experience.

[*Carsten Höller walks into the hotel with a baby carriage*]

This is your new baby that's six-months old! How has it been traveling with a baby?

The first time we went to Italy; we've also been to Ghana, to France. And here in New York. We've been to Turkey. Usually it goes fine, but sometimes on the plane he has pain in his ears.

How has it changed your relationship to traveling, having a child now?

It's just that it's not as easy because you have to be more conscious.

I'm completely fascinated by the house that you built in Ghana. What attracted you to this area?

It's very hard to answer that question, because it's probably based on some kind of personal feelings. You know, every place feels a little bit different. Some places you never connect to the people that live there. But West Africa, the first time I went to Benin in 1995, I thought it was something that I never really experienced before in the sense that it was very incomprehensible in a way— how they behaved, how it was organized— you know, you just don't get it. At the same time it feels very good for the body. So I started to travel with a friend who was working as a scientist. We started traveling to North Benin, Tova, Ghana, Mali, Senegal, all these countries. And then at another point we met again in Ghana. He's an artist too, Marcel Odenbach, he was teaching there. I came from the Ivory Coast and then we had this idea to build a house, but it was not really a plan, it was more like an idea you have after some beers when you're having a good time together.

[**Laughs**] ***But we have so many ideas after some beers, what made this one come to fruition?***

It's certainly a combination of a lot of things. One is that I didn't do it alone. There were some points where I would have probably just given up and said, "It's too much. It's too much work, it's too much money" if I did it alone. But together you are stronger. And I think the two of us, Marcel and I, we fit together well— it's just mutual. But the question should rather be, "Why not?" Why aren't more people doing this in Ghana, because Ghana is a fantastic country. People are very friendly. It's beautiful. It's close to Cape Coast, which is the former capital, and has a lot of old colonial architecture; it's a UNESCO world heritage site. The region is also famous because it has all of these old slave forts built by Portuguese, Dutch, British, and Danish colonists, you know in order to first export goods and then human beings, so it's a very historically important place. It's also a functioning democracy, which is quite rare in Africa. The economic prospects are good for the country. It's very close to Europe, just a six-hour flight from Frankfurt. There is a lot of reasons to go. So the question is really, "Why not?"

I think that's a fascinating question.

"I had malaria twice, because I didn't take any protection— you can protect yourself and then it's completely safe— but I didn't want to do it. Malaria is actually not a big deal. If you get it, there's perfect medicine."

It's an incredible experience to be a white person amongst only black people. It's really interesting because it makes you realize that you have some kind of ideas about this— being white or being black— very deep down, which you normally don't think about. It comes up in situations when you realize you're actually the only white person. I experienced that when I was in Kinshasa and Congo and we were working on a music thing there, so we were often going to concerts that were attended by thousands of people, sometimes more than a hundred thousand people, and there's not one white person— not one. It's a very peculiar feeling; it's very hard to describe that type of foreignness. But I think instead of trying to overcome it, it's more interesting to experience it.

What is that experience like for you?

I think it makes you a foreigner to yourself, it gives you a certain distance. It's almost like taking you out of your comfortable way of sitting in yourself. This might give you the opportunity to see yourself differently—possibly. I don't know. It sounds big, but maybe it's just very small.

Is this feeling something that you would also want to actively cultivate in your life at home, in Stockholm—this feeling of some sort of discomfort?

Yeah, in some ways I need to suffer, I think. In Stockholm I do suffer. Ghana's totally not about suffering. It's really the opposite; it's really about wellbeing.

Do you find that you also cultivate this situation of discomfort even in an environment where maybe the variables are more comfortable or familiar to you?

Yeah, I think I kind of need that. Because in Ghana I'm very unproductive. It almost scares me, because I'm always doing a lot of things like looking at books, films— whatever I look at. . . and at the end of the day what's happening is that I'm just staring somewhere without doing anything, and maybe thinking about the next meal that I'm going to cook. And if I'm writing down things, like ideas, then, I come home [to Stockholm] and I think, "What crap is this?"

[Both Laugh]

So it's more like cleanup. So it's not very productive, in that sense.

Could it be thought of as a different kind of productivity?

Yeah, I think it's a more fundamental kind of productivity. It's not about productivity in terms of that I come up with a beautiful artwork, but it's about productivity in

terms of like what I said about this profound doubt that came more and more out of my work, is certainly directly influenced by having been in West Africa.

It seems like your artworks also deal with this issue of changing our relationship to time and space. Your slides, for example, change the way that we move through a museum, which might typically be slow, serious, and somewhat formal. I love the term "voluptuous panic" that you've used to describe the feeling of going down a slide.

That is a citation from a book by a Roger Caillois, a French writer. It's a book about games, and this is from a chapter about vertigo. It describes vertigo as "a voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind," and I thought that fit perfectly for the slides. That's actually what it is. I think it's a better description for when you go down the slide than for vertigo even.

What, for you, is the relationship between a change in consciousness through hallucinogens and a change in consciousness

through experiencing an artwork? Or what artworks have you made that have changed your consciousness and way of thinking? Is that even something you look for in making artwork?

That's very hard to answer, because you know an artwork cannot really fulfill that. I can answer it like this: I don't believe it can be anymore in an artwork that is representational, in that it's standing there for something that the artist has created which is somehow representing something from the artists' vision or look at the world. But I don't think this is working anymore. I'm not totally against that concept, but I just think that it is completely exhausted. I'm not seeing works anymore that excite me, especially not the ones that are completely finished in a way—in that they only need the viewer as a kind of consumer, but not as an active participant. Now when you talk about active participation it gets a bit slippery, because there are very different ways of participating. I think is not interesting if it's just about you using your hands or whatever in order to connect to the artwork. It's more something like a term we found together with Daniel Birnbaum [director of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm] which is "saturated" or "unsaturated." So there's saturated artwork, which is the bulk of artwork, just like basically artworks that the artist puts out in the world and says look at this, participate with this. But the unsaturated ones could be works that produce a very specific kind of experience, and that's what I'm interested in. It's a specific experience that is not the same for everybody. Specific, in the sense that it's only possible to experience this when you're really exposing yourself as a conscious being through the body to this work.

This is fascinating in terms of what we were talking about in Ghana, and having the actual experience of a place instead of a general concept like "Africa." How did you feel walking around the galleries in Chelsea today and what was that experience like for you?

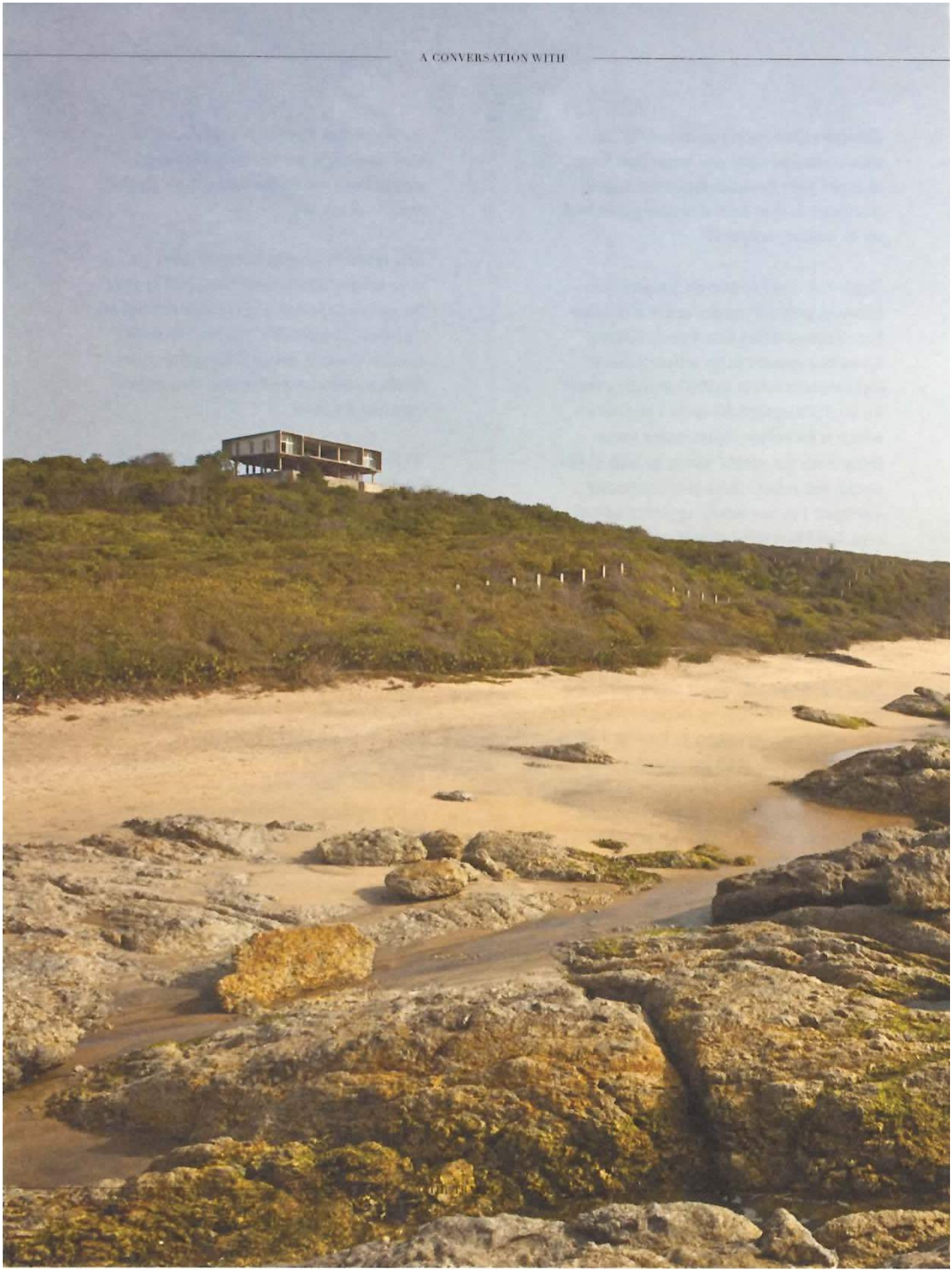
You know I think we are kind of stuck. It's kind of useless in a way. I don't think that's the way to go. It's repetitive. It's always the same. You know, like nice little artworks on the walls that are for sale. It's not a very interesting model.

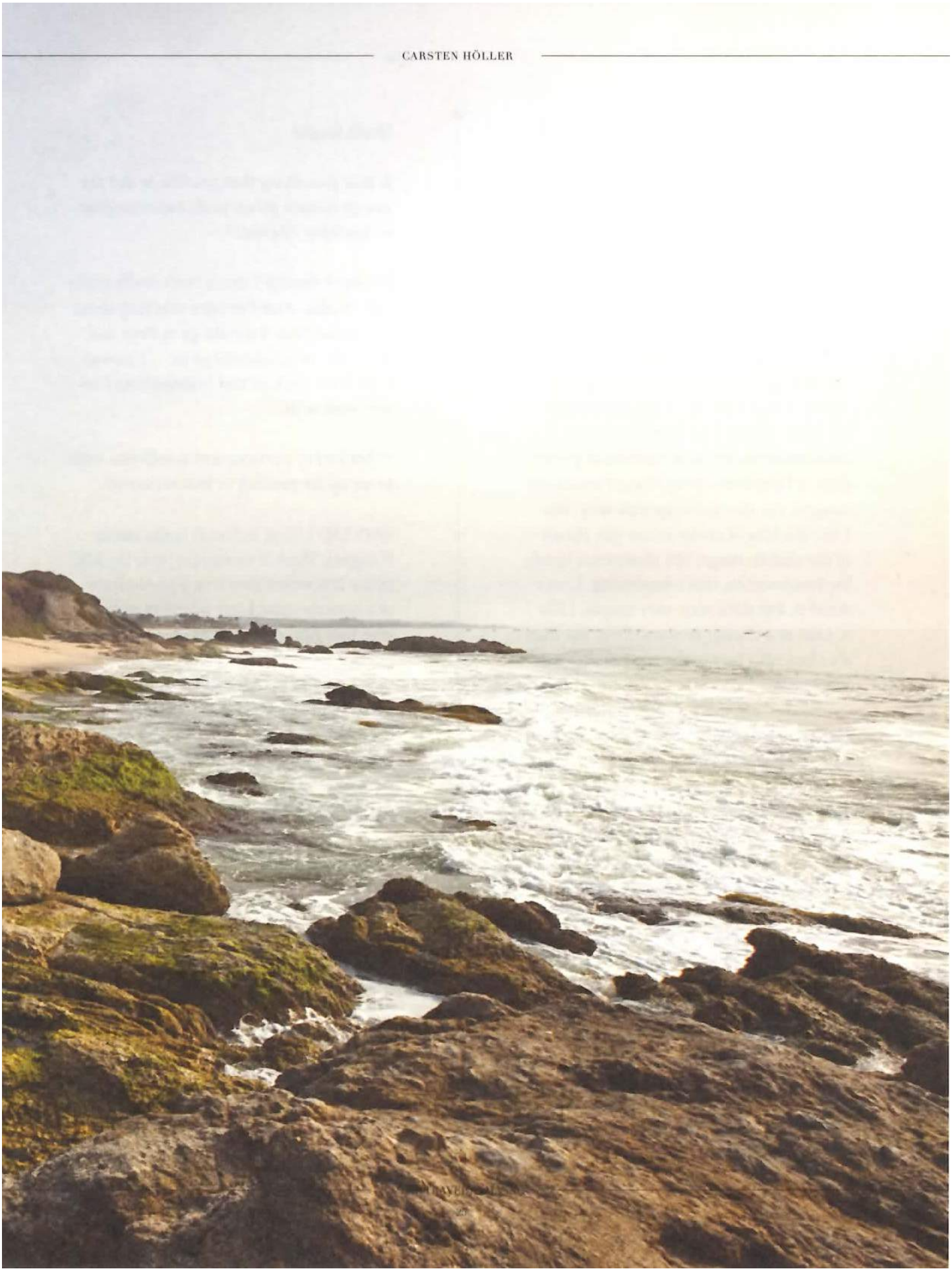
No, it's really not.

I don't think a gallery is what we need right now. We need to do something about art. It's in very bad shape.

Since we're in a hotel, and you've done many works using the language of hotels, let's talk about those for a bit. How do hotels organize individual and social space in a way that's interesting to you?

I read one book which was influential to me by Erich Maria Remarque, "All Quiet on the Western Front." He was writing about the war, and he was constantly moving with the border. Then he had problems and had to flee to the other side and he ended up in Lisbon. But he only lived in hotel rooms. He described the feeling of living in a hotel





and how it changes your personality and that has deeply influenced me. I thought the idea of not having any belongings—maybe it's even related to how you grew up in some ways, because of course you have to have the money to pay for the hotel—but not to own anything, just to let other people make those decisions for you. Like what your room should look like, and what kinds of sheets there should be, and you can choose one or two types of rooms, but there's only a certain amount of choice. It's very fascinating because it frees you from all these burdens of possession. If I lost everything I have I could still imagine the idea of living with very little. I like the idea of cheap hotels too. Hotels in the middle range, like conference hotels for businessmen, that's depressing. I can't stand it. But if it's very, very simple, I like it. Like in a cloister or something, but then it's often with very bad taste, but that can be good too.

Do you think being in different environments brings something different out in us?

That is the question, but I'm not sure if it's really true. Of course I said at the beginning that I'm a different person in Ghana, but at the end I'm still the same, maybe just stretching a bit of what's inside me. It's more and more like a kind of balance that goes from one side and then to the other side. But the idea to get out of it, like what we said before with hallucinations, that's a different quality there. It's stronger. Travel can never really do this. But the combination between hallucination and travel is of course very good.

[Both laugh]

Is that something that you like to do? Do you go certain places to do hallucinogens, or anything like that?

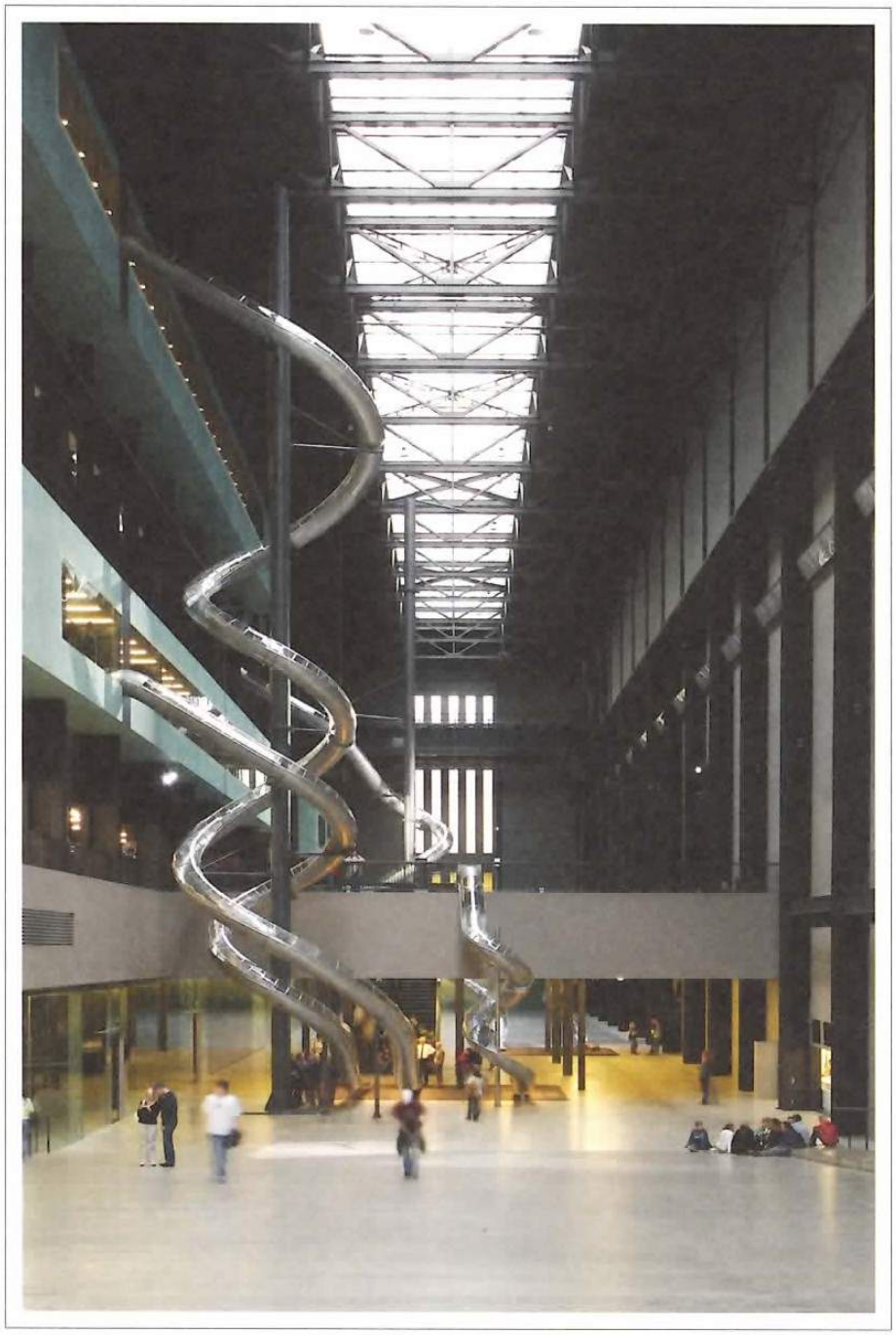
No, but I should. I think that's really, really a good idea. And I've been thinking about that sometimes. I should go to Peru and do Ayahuasca, I should go to. . . I haven't even done LSD, so that is something I really want to do.

What sort of environment would you want to set up for yourself in that scenario?

With LSD I think it doesn't really matter [Laughs]. There is a program from the BBC in the 50s, where they have a guy in front of a camera— just a guy sitting in a chair—who they film and he takes LSD at the beginning. At first he's totally normal and then he starts to speak about the curtain behind the camera that he thinks is so beautiful. And you see the curtain, and it's just this ugly red curtain with stains, and he's elaborating. So maybe it doesn't matter so much with LSD [Laughs].

Do you remember your first feeling of foreignness?

Yes. But I don't know if my mother will read this. . . [Both laugh] I thought my parents were not my real parents. I thought I grew up in a kind of Truman Show. I don't know how old I was, but I think I was quite young when I thought something was wrong with them. And I even hid behind the sofa and they would be sitting there and talking,



"People can spend the night there, and I think I want to make a kind of fog around the bed. I want it to be almost like a magic experience."

and I thought they would reveal their real identity. I thought they were aliens, and in some way they are. Parents are all aliens. It's a common feeling, I believe.

Now that you're a father, how are you dealing with this?

I was suggesting to use a Skinner Box, but [my wife] wouldn't allow it.

What is that?

B.F. Skinner. In the 50s he designed a box that you put children in which is climate controled, and has paper on the ground so they don't need diapers, so the child sits in a perfect little environment and you can still play with them. He actually raised his two daughters like this. You should check it out. It's spooky, but interesting. Of course, I'm joking. . .

Where are you staying now?

Lafayette House. It's like a hotel, but it's pretending not to be one.

Do you have plans for more hotel projects, and could this be an ongoing project to have hotels in museums?

Absolutely. So now the bed that was in "Soma" [exhibition at Hamburger Bahnhof], we've changed this one. . . The idea was there from the beginning, but there was no more money. We changed it so now it's a real elevator bed. It goes all the way down, and then you can push the button next to you and then it goes up three-and-a-half meters. It's quite high. And it goes up and makes a screw motion. It's showing now in Vienna. People can spend the night there, and I think I want to make a kind of fog around the bed. I want it to be almost like a magic experience. Like you go up in the fog in which there's a lot of smells in, and then you get up into a bunch of canary birds which are flying around free, many of them. So I want this to be almost like a religious experience.

It sounds like an experiential form of surrealism.

Yes, but it's all fake. It's basically just a kind of machine. Also the bed is a big machine, the elevator is kind of like a [scissor lift], so it's an illusion machine. I don't mind that you see that it's an illusion machine. Not at all. Because here, this hotel for example [the Bowery Hotel] they try to— it's a very specific sort of New York style, or maybe you can also see it in the Chateau Marmont in Los Angeles or something, but especially here and also the restaurants— it's very well done, but it's a reference to something which doesn't really exist because it's a mixture between Moroccan, French and old English. It's taking it and putting it together as if it made sense, and it's almost like a set.

Yes, definitely. It's a total set. But it's in complete denial that it's a set, and doesn't want

to be perceived as that, because there's no evidence of a building that existed before. In some way the project of this room is to deny that there was any before, and to give the feeling that this room was always here.

Yes, it's very well done. The thing is, this style— it's expanding, with all these restaurants, bakeries, hotels—it's taking over the city. It's becoming a dominant style, and then it's getting really dangerous in a way.

It's also very strange, because it's an obsession with a time when things were hand made, or right before the turn of the century, when it went from things being produced by hand to industrially produced. What's interesting in New York then, is that these hand-made, or worn looking elements are being industrially repeated everywhere, to the point where it starts to become hard to find environments that are not designed like this— that are not replicating this replication.

Yes, it's very interesting. It started after the Philippe Starck style. It was the next thing. And this one doesn't even have a name, as far as I know.

Just quickly back to your house in Ghana. How was the architecture of it affected by the location where it was built, and what did you want out of the experience of the house?

We're both not real architects. Marcel studied architecture, but he never really practiced. And I have a little bit of experience from artworks. But somehow we thought, we can do this. We wanted to make it very simple, but at the same time in a clever way and we wanted a house that looks like an unfinished construction site, because plenty of houses in Ghana actually do. So we are using just local materials, concrete and wood, that's what Ghanaians do too. Very often, the process of constructing a house in Ghana takes a long time, because people need to earn the money in the meantime to continue building. So there's a lot of half-finished houses and they are kind of beautiful, if you understand the aesthetics of it. We wanted the front of the house to look half finished, which is also maybe the idea of minimalist architecture, but minimalist architecture is more finished. We wanted it dirtier— not so Japanese-like. On a part of the house the concrete is visible, it's cast concrete. But we didn't want to get a surface like Todao Ando has, you know very slick and beautiful, so we did the opposite: we asked for used plywood sheets to make casts, because they are already a bit deformed. Also because it was done by hand and not by a machine, there were some holes that produce a very specific beauty. Other things we thought about were the aspects of temperature regulation and mosquitoes, that's why it's built on stilts, we wanted a breeze all the time. And because we had ten years to build it, we could really reflect on it constantly, and we've changed a lot. But it's productive time; it's not lost time. You can't just build a house. I think it's not only a commitment, but also a responsibility. You're taking a piece of earth and building a house on it. ⬩