object is a kind of plastic drawing. Möller emphasized individual folds by stretching long rubber bands between them, thus combining an “expensive” with a “cheap” materiality, conveying a sense of weightlessness and free association—a page of unwritten poetry that is both fragile and indestructible.

—Jens Asthoff
Translated from German by Nathaniel McBride.

OSTEND, BELGIUM
Carsten Höller
MU.ZEE

The Belgian-German artist Carsten Höller is best known for large-scale installations that invite the viewer to participate in or activate them. But his recent exhibition “Videoretrospective with Two Lightmachines” showed another side of his work. The complex and layered show started with Light Wall IV, 2007. LED lamps went rapidly on and off, accompanied by hard stereophonic sounds of clicking, thus evoking a disorienting stroboscopic effect. According to the artist, this disconcerting welcome was intended to put the visitor in a dreamy mood that would allow her to comprehend reality in a different way—but it achieved more of a sense of irritation.

After this false start, the rest of the exhibition seemed to possess a reassuring stillness—although appearances can be deceptive. Fara Fara, 2014, which Höller created with Swedish filmmaker Måns Månsson, was the first immersive installation and screening in an exhibition consisting of nearly thirty videos, which were sometimes poetic, often provocative or funny, but always captivating. In Lingala, “fara fara” means “face-to-face” and refers to a musical event extremely popular in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, best described as a battle between two bands playing together on two different stages in a musical marathon that can go on for hours. The band that performs the longest is the winner. Höller filmed a fara fara between bands led by megastar leaders Koffi Olomide and Werrason. The famous yet controversial singer Papa Wemba—he was convicted of human trafficking—acts as a narrator and introduces and comments (in song) on both bands. Through the simple but effective trick of placing the same kind of plastic chairs in front of the screen that we see in the scenes on video, Höller succeeds in making the viewer a participant of this fascinating spectacle. But in an accompanying exhibition guide we read that the subtitles that purport to translate Papa Wemba’s words say something different from what he is actually singing. Thus Fara Fara becomes a metaphor for miscommunication between Africa and the West as well as an exciting visual and musical experience.

Quite different was the most recent installation, Double Neon Elevator, 2016. Here we see some kind of cage with green neon lights like horizontal bars flashing rhythmically on and off to create the illusion of movement. Standing in this box of light, one experienced a fascinating feeling of going up or down—a sort of full-body trompe l’œil.

A room containing three works from the 1990s best showed how cleverly subversive and humorous Höller can be. Jenny Happy, 1993, is a performative video installation in which a young woman in a white dress on a swing looks at a weird black-and-white video of a naked man and woman making love in a clumsy way, sometimes with almost mechanical movements. The couple are drinking vermouth; after a while they begin to loosen up and slowly start to dance. The film gradually goes into color, and the couple seem to have red eyes. According to an accompanying text, the woman on the swing in front of the screen had red eyes, too (thanks to tinted contact lenses), though I could not see this. But the combination of the surreal screened scene, watched by a live performer who was watched by us, created an uncanny sense of dislocation.

Projected just beside Jenny Happy was Punktefilm (Dot Film), 1998, an animation in which twenty-four white moving dots in a black void gradually come together to suggest an outline of a dancing couple. One dot after the other vanishes in the void until there is only dark nothingness. But it was One Minute of Doubt, 1999, that best showed Höller’s brilliantly obtuse attitude toward things. In a car labeled The Laboratory of Doubt, the artist drives in circles around an intersection as other cars pass in all directions, while a big loudspeaker on the roof of the car issues instructions to “spread the doubt.” Less spectacular than Höller’s installations, his video work has the same power to confuse and enchant.

—Jos Van den Bergh

AMSTERDAM
Dustin Yellin
GRIMM

Opening during Amsterdam’s busy annual Art Weekend in November, Dustin Yellin’s marvelous exhibition “10 Parts” seemed to draw the biggest crowd. Swarms of happy viewers spent hours pressing their noses to the glass surfaces of Yellin’s aquarium-like sculptures, reminding me of kids staring dreamily into an Apple-store window. Buried within each massive, light-filled, transparent block—a fat sandwich of thirty-one sheets of half-inch-thick glass—were thousands of tiny pictures extracted from encyclopedias, science manuals, magazines. These cutout images are typically one-half to two inches tall, and most depict living or moving things: jellyfish, hot-air balloons, birds (geese, blue jays, cranes, hawks), skiers, pool toys, foot soldiers, tigers, blizzards, computer screens. There are Lilliputian surfers, bears (grizzly and polar), Greek gods and goddesses, Canadian Mounties, monks, mushrooms, mollusks. The title work, 10 Parts, 2015–16, was a twenty-foot-long sequence of ten of these multilayered glass blocks arranged in a row, on metal supports. Together they form a long, flowing, foaming wave that finally cascades into a tumultuous, splashing waterfall, the whole shrouded in a sparkling mist skillfully painted across the layers of glass. The rushing “water” is filled with countless fantastic, miniature vignettes: sea monsters attacked by kamikaze planes; pirate ships sailing through clouds of acrobatic dollar bills; minuscule bathing beauties tumbling in a whirlpool of iridescent fish and military personnel.
It felt biblical, like a Great Flood sweeping through every medium—from collage to photography, readymade to animation. The work is unmistakably painterly: Tiny flecks of acrylic add detail to the intricate scenes, and Yellin’s interest in the eroticized figure groups populating Hieronymus Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights, 1490–1500, was palpable. Yet the overall effect of the blocks—each weighing about half a ton—was powerfully sculptural. And the everyday labor of their making must have entailed untold hours of effort, as many assistants with X-Acto knives patiently traced the outlines of each itty-bitty paper picture as if drawing it. They then meticulously set in place each infinitesimal fragment with tweezers before gluing the whole into this magical three-dimensional eternity, like insects fossilized in amber. While admiring Yellin’s limitless imagination and technical wizardry, I also began to think that the artist, having orchestrated this colossal collaborative feat nearly two years in the making, must be one of the world’s great managers. For Gaston Bachelard in The Poetics of Space (1957), the miniature world is a dominated world. Perhaps driving the crowd’s openmouthed fascination with Yellin’s art was the latent pleasure of control over so many small things: the ability to occupy a divine vantage point while enjoying an overwhelming sense of discovery and wonder.

Coinciding with “10 Parts” was the Stedelijk Museum’s presentation of Jordan Wolfson’s extraordinary Colored Sculpture, 2016—weirdly also about control, if on opposite terms. Wolfson’s supersize animatronic puppet is manipulated via an elaborate structure of computer-programmed pulleys, scaffolds, and chains. We watch in silent dread as this grimacing figure is dragged, flung, and repeatedly slammed to the floor—relentlessly at the mercy of cruel gravity. In contrast, Yellin’s universe seems gravityless: a floating Eden abounding in pleasure. Yellin’s fixed world is silent, vastly populated, and impossible to absorb all at once, while Wolfson’s Pinocchio-like dummy is isolated in every way: an emaciated giant forced into a joyless, earsplitting dance. Both exhibitions were unforgettable, but Yellin’s crowd was smiling.

—Gilda Williams

**ZURICH**

**Douglas Gordon**

**GALERIE EVA PRESENHUBER**

Douglas Gordon’s recent multichannel video installation *I Had Nowhere to Go*, 2016, unfolds in unrelenting darkness. The only relief comes from several images and flashes of color that appear for varying lengths of time on the large screen, two small floor-mounted monitors, and mirrors scattered around the gallery walls. This space is dominated instead by the sound of a foreigner reading, in English, dated passages in no particular order. The words ricochet off the metallic-looking walls until the voice goes silent. Suddenly a clatter of bullets and explosions flares up. There are also less spectacular sounds: a halfheartedly incanted song, a kind of humming, a note repeated only to fade away. As one wanders in and around the room, one’s own reflection also eerily appears in mirrors sometimes replaced by shards of reflected pictures.

With these simple but highly effective means, Gordon has conceived a work of art that goes beyond cinema as we know it. If a forerunner for such a bleak environment can be singled out, it might be Joseph Beuys’s *Hinter dem Knochen wird gezählt—Schmerzraum (One Counts Behind the Bone—Pain Room)*, 1983. The work’s most immediate cinematic precursors, however, hail from North America: works by Jonas Mekas, Michael Snow, and Andy Warhol, above all. Mekas is the voice we hear reading selections from diaries that span the years 1944 to 1953. They detail the hardships the Lithuanian poet underwent as a displaced person who after slipping away from an enforced labor camp in Germany was shuttled from one refugee camp to another. Though he reached New York in October 1949, his life there was initially no picnic. Almost half a century later, Mekas published the diaries under the title *I Had Nowhere to Go* (1991). By chance the book landed in Gordon’s hands. Years went by. Recently, Gordon contacted Mekas, asking if he might use certain passages as the basis for a film. That movie, also titled *I Had Nowhere to Go* (2016), quietly premiered this past year at the Locarno Film Festival in Switzerland.

Endurance is one of the paramount themes of the installation—which requires ninety-eight minutes to experience in full—and not just in terms not just of stamina but of perseverance. The longer one lingers within the space, the clearer it becomes that the most loaded images are harbored in the dark cavity of the mind. With this work, Gordon makes memory images become active; he brings them for a split second into optical reach as something that tangibly survives. Many of these fleeting appearances are dominated by the preparation of food, so essential to human continuance. Scenes featuring a captive gorilla also come into view only to die away. Representative of one of the oldest extant ancestors of man, this complacent ape seems to embody a certain acquiescence, a disposition all but alien to Mekas and those of his ilk. Rather than seek the relative security of commercial filmmaking, Mekas held out for his own brand of diaristic cinema. Softly he tells us: “Saturday, we finally got our own Bolex 16. We have been doing a lot of filming... with our own last miserable pennies in the few minutes we have available.”