

YOU HAD TO BE THERE

TINO SEHGAL CREATES AN ART OF RUMOR
AND EVANESCENT MEMORIES



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In 2006, London's Institute of Contemporary Arts held the second in a series of three exhibitions by Tino Sehgal. The Berlin-based artist was quickly becoming a phenomenon with his staged situations, interpreted by "players" he had trained. I remember being welcomed by an uncannily serious little girl at the entrance to the museum. She asked me a question with an answer that seemed entirely obvious *and* very difficult to explain, particularly to a child. I struggled to find the right words with the girl's deep blue eyes fixed on me. I had no idea if she understood what I was trying to say, but she seemed to be taking it in as we walked around the empty lower gallery. All of a sudden, she disappeared. I continued the discussion with a teenage boy, then a grown woman, and lastly an elderly man—with whom I recall starting (what I thought was) a thrilling exchange before he ushered me through the ICA's back door. I found myself on the street, unsettled, as if I had just been awakened.

Whatever it was that happened that day, the experience stuck with me. Four years later, I wrote a short article about it, stating that the question asked by the girl was, "What is art?" That wasn't quite accurate. But, with Sehgal forbidding all documentation of his work—including exhibition catalogues, films, and photographs—I had to rely on memory alone. It was only when I saw his piece *This Progress* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2010, ascending Frank Lloyd Wright's iconic spiraled ramp alongside an inquisitive kid, that I realized it was the same work I had seen in London. I had been wrong. The question was, "What is progress?"

"You are more busy with the question, 'What is art?' than, 'What is progress?'" jokes Sehgal, when I tell him the story over breakfast at the Tate Modern's café in February. "It was more on your mind." The artist is in London to prepare a piece for the museum's behemoth entrance, Turbine Hall, which has, since 2000, hosted a prestigious series of commissions by the likes of Olafur Eliasson, Bruce Nauman, and Carsten Höller. "Tino Sehgal 2012" is on exhibit from July 24 through October 28, but the unwritten rule is that nothing about the piece will be revealed until the opening day. All we know at this stage is that the artist is conducting a series of workshops open to the public—barring journalists—and that those sessions are likely to inform the final work. "The workshop is a way of trying out stuff, entertaining

people a little bit," Sehgal explains. "It's a mixed bag: familiarizing yourself with the piece, meeting people." Yes, some of the participants will end up in the exhibition, but no, Sehgal can't tell me how many or he'll get in trouble with the press office.

In the lead-up to a show, casting interpreters is perhaps Sehgal's biggest job. Organizing workshops is one trick, setting up auditions is another—"only dancers come to the auditions," he says, and he wants a wider pool of talent. In the last decade, Sehgal has worked with various age groups, from kids to the elderly. The players are often required to interact with the public in sophisticated ways. In *This Situation*, first performed in 2007 at the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt, six adults greet the visitors. One of them shares an unattributed quote ("In 1693, somebody said: 'Be dead to the world but diligent in all worldly business.'") and the group begins a conversation, occasionally involving members of the audience ("And what do you think?"). The quotes selected by Sehgal draw on the Western history of ideas, and although the conversation isn't the sole aim of the piece, it calls for exactly the kind of players—writers, academics—who would not necessarily rush to an artist's workshop. The best technique is to find a good interpreter and ask her whom she would recommend, and then continue on from one person to the next, Sehgal tells me. His producer, Asad Raza, has become an expert at following up leads.

Endurance is another part of the equation. The artist demands that his works be presented without pause for eight hours solid, sometimes more, during the venue's opening hours. Teams are replaced, but the piece continues, almost uninterrupted, taking on subtle variations dictated by the practitioners' idiosyncrasies and personal approaches to the project. "You'll have your own version of the work, and it's actually factually different from somebody else's," says Sehgal. Is he ever surprised by the interpretations? Often, but "if I wanted control, I'm in the wrong field." In the doubly titled *This Success* or *This Failure* from 2007, Sehgal goes so far as to let his young accomplices decide for themselves whether the outcome of the piece is positive or negative. Children attempt to coax visitors into what looks like a game, then call it "a success" or "a failure" with stern little voices. Besides guaranteeing what is de facto a constant renewal

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY THIERRY BAL

of the work, this relinquishing of control allows the piece to exist independent of its originator. “At the moment, there is a small show in Gwangju, China, and I have no idea what they are talking about!”

Sehgal was born in London in 1976 to an Indian father and a German mother. He grew up in Düsseldorf and Böblingen, a small town near Stuttgart, on the fifth floor of a building facing an industrial park. The endlessness of the capitalist cycle—making objects in order to purchase more objects—struck him as absurd at a young age. “My father had to flee from what is today Pakistan when he was a child, and he became a manager at IBM,” he once told *W* magazine’s Danielle Stein. “Any item of consumption he would acquire was a direct measurement of his success in life. But that same equation wasn’t going to work for me—I was quite clear about that in my early teens.” The artist felt it was up to his generation to reconsider the act of production (although a blanket critique of consumerism isn’t in the cards: Sehgal’s work is reported to sell for six figures). Those early interests led him to study economics and dance, an eclectic education that enabled him to grapple with systems of exchange while investigating the creative process free from object-making. Sehgal danced with the contemporary choreographer Xavier Le Roy and later signed on with the company Les Ballets C de la B in Ghent, Belgium.

But dance didn’t fully satisfy his ambitions. In 2001, during a festival at Stockholm’s Moderna Museet, Sehgal performed a choreographic “best of the 20th century” from Isadora Duncan to Vaslav Nijinsky to George Balanchine to Yvonne Rainer. “It was unlike anything I had experienced before,” remembers Jens Hoffmann, the director of San Francisco’s CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, who was in the audience and is now largely credited—together with the ubiquitous Hans Ulrich Obrist—with initiating Sehgal’s rapid rise. The previous year, the artist had produced *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things*, which had a dancer rolling on the floor, enacting a medley of performances by Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham. From the start, Sehgal’s work seemed to court a contemporary-art audience. The big leap came in 2002, when Hoffmann included *Instead of allowing* in his project for Manifesta 4, in Frankfurt. “Sehgal was stuck in the world of choreography and dance, and it seemed that he did not find the type and level of discourse that he was looking for,” Hoffmann tells me. “His work addressed concerns that were very much part of the art context, the economics of production and the question of audience relations, so it seemed right to introduce him to the world of art.”

Sehgal’s practice draws on the legacy of performance, dance, and theater, and yet it resists all of those categories. Unlike most performance pieces, his works do not rely on the artist to execute a singular act, just once; unlike in dance and theater, they are staged in loops for hours on end, allowing visitors to come and go as they please. In *Kiss*, 2002, a man and a woman lie on the floor in a tight embrace. They slowly shift positions, performing a mesmerizing choreography of desire (based, I found out long after first encountering the piece at the 2006 Berlin Biennial, on famous art history kisses from Brancusi to Koons). “Tino Sehgal,” declares one of the interpreters at regular intervals;

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“Kiss,” responds the other. The conventions that govern our interaction with the piece have much to do with the way we traditionally interact with art objects. Just like most sculptures, Sehgal’s *Kiss* is meant to be looked at, circled, absorbed through contemplation. But while Rodin’s *Baiser* can be viewed in one circumambulation, Sehgal’s *Kiss* is constantly moving, and thus constantly redefining the relationship it generates with the viewer. Sehgal’s work demands time from the spectator and a willingness to engage. There are no shortcuts.

At the top of the ramp in the Guggenheim during *This Progress*, I ended up talking feminism with a peppy gray-haired woman. She argued that people in the West were too focused on who does the dishes, when so much remains to be done for women throughout the world. *We* had failed them, she said. This is something I thought about afterward, not in relation to Sehgal’s piece, but in relation to feminism—though always with a certain unease. Can ideas discussed in such a manufactured context be worth anything? To French critic Michel Gauthier, “Sehgal is under no illusion that the exchanges he choreographs bring any critical or theoretical reflection. The discussion is only a way of preventing the reification of the piece, not of producing concept.” Yet I would argue that the conversations experienced in some of Sehgal’s works can—however modestly—genuinely inspire the viewer’s own thinking. If not, then the artist’s practice is reduced to an exercise in dematerialization, the final step in a quest started by Duchamp and his vial of Parisian air (*Air de Paris*, 1919). It also would imply that Sehgal’s pieces are interchangeable, challenging only because of their format, not their content—and that would be selling him short. There must be something to be gained from pausing for a moment to discuss the nature of progress—*especially* with a child. How often does that chance arise? Sehgal’s own view on this is unequivocal: “If the visitor uses the work, that’s the ultimate success,” he says.

Except for my hazy recollections, there is not one trace of my conversations with Sehgal’s players in London and New York. The artist’s refusal to permit any form of documentation illuminates something fundamental in our relationship to art: the accumulation of memories. When photographs or films of artwork are available, those memories often turn into composites of the firsthand and the mediated experience. With Sehgal’s pieces, none of that is possible. Although his players repeatedly perform his works, the experience is unique each time and impossible to replicate. Gauthier sees this here-and-now quality as a clear symptom of the Benjaminian “aura.” But another, perhaps more significant, consequence of this lack of documentation is the negative impact it has had on the work’s circulation. Sehgal’s art can only be represented in language—in Chinese whispers and scholarly articles. And unlike with the legendary performances of Chris Burden or Joseph Beuys, the narration that follows cannot be checked against proofs of the event. That quote I inaccurately reported after Sehgal’s *This Progress* had been published online, and I could have easily edited it when I realized my mistake. But I chose not to, since the basic factual error put into sharp relief a key aspect of Sehgal’s work: its persistence and propagation in the form of a rumor, encrusted with the subjectivity, inaccuracies, and flourishes of those who have passed it on. MP

