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## *The Question Artist*

*Tino Sehgal's provocative encounters*

By Lauren Collins (July 30, 2012)



*Sehgal outside Tate Modern, in London.*  
Photograph by Gareth McConnell

Tino Sehgal makes what he calls “constructed situations.” He uses the raw materials of voice, language, and movement to build pieces of art. For “This Progress” (2010), he filled the rotunda of the Guggenheim with a corps of “interpreters”—children, teen-agers, baby boomers, octogenarians—who, according to a set of rules devised by Sehgal, engaged each visitor in a conversation, delivering him to progressively older interlocutors as he spiraled up the museum’s ramp. The piece, which made intimates of strangers, was exhilarating. Visitors shared such confidences as “The smaller the diamond, the better the marriage” and “Mr. Hitler ruined my childhood.” Some of them left in tears. (The critic Jerry Saltz pointed out that it was the only work of art he’d ever encountered that could cry back.) “This Progress” reflected Sehgal’s desire to redefine art as the transformation of actions rather than of things. “What my work is about is, Can something that is not an inanimate object be considered valuable?” Sehgal said recently. He is, in a sense, an architect of interaction. His works are collaborations, new builds on human turf.

Before going further, I should acknowledge that there’s a very good chance that Sehgal would quarrel with everything I’ve just said. Talking to him can be like trying to work out a proof. One day, he mentioned that he’d like to know more about novels, which he normally is “not that interested in.” “Summer reading list?” I said, just trying to fill the beat. “No,” he replied. “That’s

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not what I meant.” Interestingness is the categorical imperative of Sehgal’s world. I sometimes pictured him as a Roman emperor, sitting in a box at the Colosseum and pronouncing a bloodied idea “interesting” (it lives!) or “not interesting” (it dies!). The word “thorough” is interesting to Sehgal, as is soccer and telling the truth; less so acting, cell phones, the discourse of reification, and talking about one’s children too much.

Sehgal, who is thirty-six, lives in Berlin with the art historian Dorothea von Hantelmann and their two young sons. The family shuttles between von Hantelmann’s apartment and a shared house that Sehgal has lived in for seventeen years. “I need a little bit of noise around,” he said. “I don’t like this kind of apartment shoebox feeling. It makes me nervous.” His finickiness partly derives from his personality—deliberate, cerebral, goofy yet aloof—but it is also a consequence of the nature of his practice. Like many artists, he is sensitive about the way he is represented in the press; unlike many artists, he is heavily dependent upon the press to represent him. First of all, his art is ephemeral. Moreover, he forbids the creation of any of the by-products—photographs, videos, catalogues, wall text—that normally derive from a work. His pieces leave no physical residue. To see one, you have to either visit the museum or consult a tertiary report. In 2010, the *Times* ran an illicit iPhone photo of “The Kiss,” in which a couple lay entwined on the floor of the Guggenheim, reëncacting romantic postures from the works of such artists as Rodin and Koons. Sehgal accused the paper of being “ungentlemanly, very crass.”

This elusiveness of Sehgal’s work has raised suspicion in some quarters. Members of the art world wonder if they are the dupes of a marketing ploy, while members of the public worry that they are the butts of a complicated joke. At the Venice Biennale in 2005, when Sehgal showed “This Is So Contemporary,” in which a group of guards chant, “Ooooh. This is so contemporary!,” the Harvard art historian Benjamin H. D. Buchloh called bullshit. “Sehgal is the kind of artist who—had he encountered Duchamp’s urinal in 1917—would have proposed to exhibit a kitchen sink the next year, fully convinced that he had become a radical artist overnight,” he wrote. But Sehgal explains his insistence on making art without artifact convincingly, as a “cleaner” iteration of the efforts of such forebears as Yves Klein (who sold empty space for gold), Joseph Kosuth (who reproduced entries from a dictionary), and Robert Barry (who released krypton and xenon into the atmosphere, and once claimed to have transmitted a piece telepathically). He believes that mementos of his work would threaten its purity, which could weaken its effect. “There’s something deeply optimistic in his work,” Hans Ulrich Obrist, the co-director of the Serpentine Gallery, in London, and a close friend of Sehgal’s, said recently. “It believes in change, in the production of reality, and that engagement produces consequences.”

Although he is often mistaken for an ironist, Sehgal is an idealist, who has wedded the anti-materialist impulses of environmentalism to the immaterialist ones of conceptual art. He thinks there is too much stuff in the world. In keeping with his principles, he declines to travel by air. (When he visits America, he takes a boat.) This is akin, in the hyper-peripatetic art world, to a professional skier refusing to use a lift. “I think it’s obvious why, in the twenty-first century,” he said, when I asked him why he avoided planes. He is not against the market—rather, he wants to work within it, to explore the notion of whether it might be able to traffic in something other than material goods. How can we continue to make things, he is asking, once we’ve reached the limits of growth?

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Sehgal is trained in political economy (Technical University of Berlin, University of Essen) and dance (Folkwang University of the Arts, in Essen), a biographical Googlehack that has yielded a freakish career. “*DANCING ECONOMIST SEHGAL EMPTIES GUGGENHEIM WITH WEIRD NEW SHOW*,” a 2010 Bloomberg headline read. His ambitions are more multinational than mom-and-pop. “He’s the biggest ego I’ve ever seen,” his longtime friend Jens Hoffmann, the director of the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, in San Francisco, told me. “He doesn’t want to be famous, he doesn’t want to make money. I think Tino’s real goal is to be known as someone who has changed the course of art, or maybe something beyond that.”

Sehgal redeems his pretensions by exceeding his ambitions. He was the youngest artist ever to be granted a solo show in the Guggenheim’s rotunda. Last week, “These Associations,” his most complex piece to date, opened at Tate Modern, in London. At any given moment, the piece requires seventy interpreters—some civilians, some professional dancers—who will engage, over the next three months, each of the museum’s estimated million visitors who take them up on the offer. Perhaps it is best thought of as interrogative art, a series of stylized dialogues that cut through the niceties of social interaction, prompting a concentrated exchange of thoughts. It is the thirteenth commission in the Unilever Series, which has allowed such artists as Olafur Eliasson and Ai Weiwei to realize some of their grandest schemes in the museum’s Turbine Hall. “It is one of the most radical works we have ever showed at Tate,” Chris Dercon, the museum’s director, said.

Meanwhile, Sehgal is showing an oceanic new work called “This Variation” at Documenta (13), which runs until September 16th in Kassel, Germany. Bootlegs of the piece, which amounts to a sort of sensory fun house, have been popping up on YouTube. Sehgal seemed uncowed by the prospect of following, in the Turbine Hall, a blockbuster exhibition of Damien Hirst. When I asked him what he thought of that show, he mentioned a Hirst-designed cup-and-saucer set that was available in the Tate Modern gift shop. He said, “I was more interested in the mug.”

The quality of Sehgal’s pieces depends on vast amounts of invisible labor. A year before the Tate opening, Asad Raza, Sehgal’s producer, had moved to London; Sehgal was commuting from Berlin. For months, Raza had prospected amid the film clubs and docent groups and faculty lounges of London, trying to find potential interpreters. “The hardest thing is getting a cross-section of society,” Jessica Morgan, the curator of the Tate show, said. “The idea is that the piece has a sense of the city. It’s supposed to have this texture, so that you don’t feel, if you’re in your fifties, ‘Oh, this is just a bunch of hipsters mucking about in the Turbine Hall.’ ”

By early May, they had enlisted around fifty candidates who fulfilled the criterion of being “profound and measured”—“You want depth, but you don’t want the person to become a spectacle,” Sehgal explained. They were overwhelmingly well educated, and well off. (A truer picture of London might include some underachievers and convenience-store clerks.) One afternoon, a group of them convened in a gray, concrete room at Tate Modern for a rehearsal. People sat in rapt pairs at a series of white tables with low benches. It could have been a speed-dating mixer.

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“O.K., you guys. Talkers stand up,” Sehgal said, speaking over the din. He stood like a pregnant woman, back arched, with his hands on his haunches. At his command, the group members who had been designated to practice speaking switched partners. After several rounds, Sehgal summoned the group together. They had been working with four “prompts,” which were meant to call forth anecdotes that they would deploy in the conversational part of the piece. The prompts required the talkers to discuss moments when they had experienced either a sense of arrival, a sense of belonging, a sense of satisfaction, or a sense of dissatisfaction with themselves.

“‘Satisfied,’ that’s probably the most difficult, yes?” Sehgal began.

A woman replied that she had found “dissatisfaction” problematic, because “you feel like you’re lumbering someone with this issue you’re struggling with.”

“The more detailed it is, the better,” Sehgal said.

Another woman chimed in. “Conversations with people you don’t know are like a little present that you proffer,” she said. “‘Dissatisfaction’ is a gift I don’t want to give.”

Sehgal met the mutiny with patience. Rather than asserting his authority as the artist, he just kept making his argument.

“It’s harder now than it will be when we’re really doing it,” he told the woman. “For instance, I know who you are, so there are social consequences.”

Another interpreter wanted to know whether the stories had to be strictly true.

“There’s no way I can control if you’re going to put in something false, but it’s kind of like this classic thing, that something empirical is always more interesting,” Sehgal said.

Next, the group prepared to practice a module of the piece that would require them to sing in unison. “Do you remember it?” Sehgal said, as the interpreters began tuning up a strange, mechanical ditty. It went, “Even if the old, the old, rootedness, rootedness, is being lost.” There was something mesmerizing about the chorus. It had the feel of ritual—a post-industrial psalm. Sehgal inquired, “Who are the more confident singers?”

A woman with bicycles on her blouse replied, “Not me, when it’s Heidegger.”

The rehearsal was surprisingly improvisational. Sehgal doesn’t transcribe the texts, lyrics, and steps that make up his pieces, so it is up to him and his interpreters to remember how to do them. “I have this belief that if you have an idea, and you have to write it down to remember it, then it can’t be a great idea,” he said. As nitpicky as he can be, he is open to serendipity. He is aware that the mutations his work undergoes endow it with a sort of sedimentary thickness. “The loss of control is a psychological necessity for me, as an artist,” Sehgal said. I asked Louise

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Höjer, who is managing the piece in Kassel, whether Sehgal's Socratic approach risked authorlessness. "That's the reason I'm here," she said. "When I install a work, I often talk about it in terms of a culture. We have to interpret the rules that Tino gives us and be human within them."

Because it draws from many disciplines, Sehgal's work is difficult to define. His term "constructed situations" comes from the French theorist Guy Debord's 1957 manifesto "Report on the Construction of Situations," which called for the artist to generate moments that would jolt the spectator out of passivity, rendering him the co-creator of a less mediocre life. Hans Ulrich Obrist, borrowing from the artists Gilbert & George, offered the term "living sculpture." When I spoke to Chris Dercon, he referred to Sehgal as a "question artist." He said, "Tino's asking very precise questions, and if you ask precise questions you get precise answers. That's the reason you cannot escape his art." Sehgal's work is a proposition, not a polemic. "The thing about Tino's work is the way it continues to echo afterward," Jessica Morgan said. "You kind of think to yourself, Should I have said thank you?" Sehgal's art demands engagement. Whatever it is, it is art during which you can't check your e-mail.

Sehgal is insistent that his work—even though it is as often heard and felt as it is seen—be categorized as visual art. It riles him when his pieces are referred to as performance; he argues that, unlike traditional theatre and dance, they are shown in a museum, throughout opening hours, and they rely upon the participation of the individual, rather than the passive attention of a crowd. "The concert, the church, the theatre don't really seem to me to be adequate to contemporary society," he said. "In the theatre, you do something one time for eight hundred people, but we might do something eight hundred times for one person."

With their regional accents and bad breath, Sehgal's pieces defy the vogue for monumentalism. "His work brings life back to more human proportion," Marian Goodman, his gallerist, told me. "This is a work by Tino Sehgal," the child who greets a visitor in "This Progress" begins. "May I ask you a question? What is progress?" Sehgal's art resides in the second person. You choose your own adventure.

Sehgal is also aware that the performing arts command less prestige than those which we consider visual art. His abandonment of the theatre has caused, according to the performance critic Claudia La Rocco, "some eye-rolling" in the world of contemporary dance and performance. "I think it's a little disingenuous, if you're relying often on trained dancers and choreographers, to distance yourself from that," La Rocco said. When I mentioned such criticisms to Sehgal, he affirmed without apology his strategic desire to benefit from the clout of the museum. "You send your children to the museum, and that's the official version of who we are, as a society," he said. "It has that power." He continued, "Lady Gaga, she's the most visible human being on the planet, but she wants to be an artist. She asked Klaus"—Klaus Biesenbach, the director of *MOMA PS1*—" 'Is this art, what I'm doing?' And he was like, 'No.' Putting my work in the museum, it's also a political move. Because of this high status of the object in our culture, something has to be a thing. Live efforts are almost marginal. I think dance, for example, is just

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as much a thing, and I want for it to have the same status. I don't want it to be the thing that comes in the evening and is, like, the happy music."

The group at the Tate proceeded into the Turbine Hall, where Sehgal instructed them to assemble against the far wall. Over the course of twenty-five minutes, they were to walk back and forth from one end of the room to the other, as an accelerating mass. "The Turbine Hall was a place for turning fossil fuel into electricity, a place that epitomizes industrialization," Sehgal said. "I'm hoping for the piece to be a kind of meditation on the changes this process has brought about in terms of interpersonal relations." Sehgal's mode of thought is relentlessly teleological. He is a fiend for tectonic shifts in human behavior, sweeping theories that explain the world in several-hundred-year chunks, Ages of. He gave the signal. For almost half an hour, the group moved through the hall, zombielike. Afterward, Sehgal recalled them to the wall, mocking the theatrical stiffness in their movement.