

## *Eccentric's Corner: Immaterial Guy*

*Tino Sehgal wants to sell you... something, sort of.*

By Ross Simonini (November 28, 2018)



Tino Sehgal PROFESSION: Artist of the intangible; creator of "encounters" and "situations."  
CLAIM TO FAME: A visual artist who produces no visual imagery. Photo by Justine Kurland.

A visual artist who uses no materials? Meet Berlin-based Tino Sehgal. Entering a Sehgal exhibition, such as the 2010 "This is Progress" show at the Guggenheim Museum in New York is a one-of-a-kind experience—the *New Yorker* called it a "whatchamacallit"—but one that has captivated the art world from San Francisco to Zurich. The viewer is drawn into cutting-edge conceptual displays. His may be a sensibility attuned specifically to the 21st century. Sehgal wants to get you to think about the place and rewards of objects in your life.

*Your work comprises what you call constructed situations. Just what is a constructed situation?*

I like the word "situation" because you immediately think of people doing something active, together. But you can't really construct a situation because a situation is always so open. So in a way it's a paradox. Most situations we have are constructed by convention, like this one— an interview. Psychotherapy and the Freudian model are highly constructed situations. Lying on the couch, not looking at the therapist, is intended to generate something specific.

*What kind of relationships are you setting up between people in these situations?*

It's an equal distribution of power. The players have an authority because they are the conveyors of this work. But the work also asks the visitor, "What do you think?" So it gives the visitor power.

*Your work recalls the activism and performance art of the '60s.*

## MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

It's a critique of the '60s. By circulating the situations through museums and selling them, I'm critiquing the naive, anti-market romanticism of the '60s.

*Why do you show your work as art, as opposed to theater or dance?*

We as a society measure ourselves by how much we produce. Psychological well-being comes from things. I think they're overrated. I want to bring back the human encounter into places where material things have a prime status. In a museum, you're supposed to look at things and not talk to other people.

*A lot of visitors who encounter your work are confused and don't know what to do. Is this what you want?*

Confusion makes you see things in a different light, and that's good. What am I doing here? But confusion doesn't go very far. I want visitors to be able to act—to encounter each other in a new way and have a meaningful experience. It's intended to generate something that's outside of the everyday.

*Why do you avoid the use of material objects?*

In preindustrial times, the idea of creating something was more related to your personality. Personality was something that you constructed; it's something you had to actively develop and work on. Now personality is something that you *have*. Conversation isn't just a ready-made object.

*Is there a wrong way to interact with your work?*

There are ways that are more or less rewarding, but no wrong way. You can make your own decisions on how to interact. If you're a person who is always trying to find out the rules of a situation, this might not be interesting.

*How do you judge the success of a work?*

Each piece highlights a different form of engagement. Most successful is when something is generated between two people that wouldn't be otherwise generated.

*Is it possible for a visitor not to participate in your work?*

For "This Is Progress" at the Guggenheim, a child asks, "Can I ask you a question?" Only if the visitor says "yes" does it go on. You can always walk away.

*What is progress?*

In the last 200 years, the answer has been very clear: transform nature into products and things we can consume and which will give us a sense of well-being. The more we do that, the happier

## M A R I A N G O O D M A N G A L L E R Y

we will be. I don't think this equation is going to function any longer. That's why it's important to ask this now.

*In the last 50 years, products have become more signifiers of lifestyle than material objects in themselves. Does that mean products are becoming more important or less important?*

That's the central question of our time. Now we're focusing on more immaterial things like our lifestyle, our psychology. Material things are not helpful after a certain degree of saturation. So you turn to other products. I think that therapy is a product that can transform you. But why does it need to be packaged as a product? Why can't I work on myself with my friends and family?

*Why do they need to be products at all?*

We package everything as a product so we can derive income from it. Then we can occupy ourselves with higher-order, psychological, lifestyle things. This is a very new issue. Money still matters but other factors have joined the status game—like how interesting, how meaningful your work is.

*How do you deal with material possessions in your daily life?*

I don't have a car, which is not so unusual in Berlin. Nor do I have a mobile phone. Ten years ago people would say, "Oh, you have to have one." Now they say, "That's great." I'm wary of the spectacle of the "anti." I'm not anti-consumer; it's important to circulate things in the economy.

*How do you impose this sort of thinking with your family?*

I'm not dogmatic, but I do sometimes cringe when I see what my kids are playing with—such as a toy someone gave them. I'm more pro-skateboard than toy car. I would rarely forbid it, though I do try to monitor things. It would not be healthy to control everything. Kids need to be in touch with these things and learn. But my kids are still small, so we'll see what I say in a few years.