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Making Art Out of an Encounter

By Arthur Lubow (January 15, 2010)



Tino Sehgal, foreground, with his associates in Central Park, across from the Guggenheim Museum.
Credit: Justine Kurland for The New York Times

I first encountered Tino Sehgal's work under ideal conditions: total ignorance. Happening to be in Berlin in 2006 at the time of the city's art biennial, I heard from an art-dealer friend that there was one exhibition not to miss. "I won't tell you anything more," he said, as he walked me to the site and bid me farewell. I trod up a creaking staircase in a building from the turn of the last century and entered a decayed ballroom, its ornate moldings and gilt mirrors testifying to a more glorious past. Lying on the floor, a man and a woman, fully dressed, were embracing languidly. There was no one else in the room. My presence went unacknowledged. In a state of mounting confusion and embarrassment, I stayed until I could stand it no longer, and then I retreated down the staircase. Out on the street, I sighed with relief, because I once again knew where I was.

Had I remained longer, I might have recognized that the two were re-enacting the curved-arm caressing gesture of Rodin's marble statue "The Kiss," as well as poses from other osculatory works, some less widely known but in their own way iconic, like Jeff Koons's ceramic sculpture series "Made in Heaven." And eventually I would have heard one member of the intertwined couple speak these words: "Tino Sehgal. 'Kiss.' 2002." But I didn't need that information for the piece to linger in my memory and arouse my curiosity.

I knew the name of the artist, and I watched for him. Although Sehgal was very busy, thriving in the incubation culture of art fairs and international exhibitions, he did not surface in New York until his inaugural show at the Marian Goodman Gallery in November 2007. This time when I walked into the exhibition space, I had more of an idea of what to expect, but once again I was knocked off-balance. "Welcome to this situation," a group of six people said in unison to greet me, ending with the auditory flourish of a sharp intake of breath; then they slowly backed off, all the while facing me, and froze into unnatural positions. At which point one of the group recited a quotation: "In 1958, somebody said, 'The income that men derive producing things of slight

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consequence is of great consequence.’ ” Jumping off from that statement, the conversationalists — Sehgal refers to them as “interpreters” — began a lively back and forth. Occasionally one of the six might turn to a gallery visitor and utter a compliment or say, “Or what do you think?” and then incorporate that person’s comment into the exchange of words. Mostly they seemed content to natter at high velocity among themselves. It all continued until the moment when a new visitor arrived, an event that acted as a sort of rewind button. “Welcome to this situation,” they chanted again, breathing in and backing off as they had done before and then assuming another stylized stance. A new quotation was dropped and another discussion commenced. Just as in Berlin, I felt a battleground developing in my mind, between a fascinated desire to stay and a disquieted urge to flee.

If you are not a devotee of the cult of contemporary art, especially its Conceptualist cadre, you may feel a whirring sensation beneath your eyelids starting up right about now. Your skepticism isn’t, or shouldn’t be, a matter of “Is this art?” Almost a century has elapsed since Marcel Duchamp acted that one by attaching titles to everyday objects (a urinal, a bicycle wheel) and demonstrating that anything can be art if the artist says it is. Nevertheless, the ineffaceable critical question remains: “Is it *good* art?” Later this month, when Sehgal’s one-man show takes over the Guggenheim Museum’s rotunda for a six-week run, thousands of noninitiates, many no doubt having come to see the Frank Lloyd Wright building without any advance notification of what art exhibitions are on, will be able to decide for themselves.

If the overall response to “This Situation” at the Marian Goodman Gallery is any guide, even some who expect to hate Sehgal’s work will leave enthralled. “I often see shows I don’t like, but this was the only show I’ve ever seen that didn’t like me,” wrote New York magazine’s art critic, Jerry Saltz, judging “This Situation” to be the best exhibition he encountered in 2008. Unlike so much of contemporary art, Sehgal’s art evokes passionate reactions among the unschooled as well as the cognoscenti. Anyone who has seen the onlookers trudging passively through an art museum (all too often the Guggenheim ramp resembles the humane cattle slaughterhouses designed by Temple Grandin) can appreciate the achievement. What fascinates me about Sehgal is that working only with human clay, he can call forth thoughtful and visceral responses from people who remain unmoved by more conventional paintings and sculptures. When I expressed this to him, he laughed at me. “I’m more ambitious than that,” he said. “That’s too little of a game.”

At any time of day, Sehgal, who is 33, looks as if he has just tumbled out of bed. His tousled hair is innocent of exposure to a brush. His overcoat long ago parted company with its lining. In the six months since we first met, I have usually seen him in the same black jeans, black one-button pullover and white sneakers. My initial impression was that this was a man who was completely careless about his appearance, but I eventually concluded that the scrupulous inattention to wardrobe and grooming was of a piece with his refusal to fly on airplanes (visiting America from his home in Berlin, he travels by ship) or to carry a cellphone. More to the point, this conspicuous avoidance of unnecessary consumption conforms to the credo that underlies his work. Sehgal makes art that does not require the transformation of any materials. He refuses to add objects to a society that he says is overly encumbered with them.

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It's his rigorous devotion to an art that vanishes instantly that Sehgal and his curators emphasize. "There's a purity to his approach," says Catherine Wood, the curator of contemporary art and performance at the Tate Modern in London. "There are a few artists who are making live action that is based in sculpture, but what sets him apart is his purist insistence on the immateriality — or ephemeral materiality — of the work, so it crystallizes and disperses again, so there is no trace left at all." Fifty years ago, Yves Klein sold empty spaces in Paris in return for gold; the buyers received a certificate of ownership. In the conceptual art that flowered in the late 1960s and early '70s, artists like Bruce Nauman, Dan Graham, Vito Acconci, Joan Jonas and Lynda Benglis performed before a camera; the videotape documented that action and became a commodity that could be sold by an art dealer. Around the same time, Michael Asher and Daniel Buren were staging interventions in art museums, removing panels from the building facade or paintings from the wall and calling attention to the change; if you are interested, you can check out the installation photographs. Then and now, the gallery that represents Ian Wilson will sell you the right to have a discussion with the artist; once it has occurred, the conversation is commemorated with a certificate that belongs to you. In their flight from the object-based art market, these Conceptualist and post-Minimalist artists left behind them, like bread crumbs, objects that provided a path back in.

In contrast, Sehgal is an absolutist. He does not allow his pieces to be photographed. They are not explained by wall labels or accompanied by catalogs. No press releases herald the openings of his exhibitions; indeed, there are no official openings, just unceremonious start dates. All of this can engender skepticism, but the aspect of Sehgal's work that his detractors find most irritating is the way the art is sold. First of all, there is the fact that it is sold, just as if it were made of, say, cast bronze: in editions of four to six (with Sehgal retaining an additional "artist's proof") at prices between \$85,000 and \$145,000 apiece. Unlike some of his Conceptualist predecessors, Sehgal is totally unapologetic about the fact that his work is commercially traded. "The market is something you can't be outside of and you can't want to be outside of, if you are doing anything specialized," he told an audience last May at the Museum of Modern Art, which bought "Kiss" in 2008 in a transaction that the museum's director, Glenn Lowry, deemed "one of the most elaborate and difficult acquisitions we have ever made."

As far as money goes, at a museum-discount price of \$70,000 it was a minor MoMA purchase; but Lowry was not overstating the cost of time and energy. Since there can be no written contract, the sale of a Sehgal piece must be conducted orally, with a lawyer or a notary public on hand to witness it. The work is described; the right to install it for an unspecified number of

times under the supervision of Sehgal or one of his representatives is stipulated; and the price is stated. The buyer agrees to certain restrictions, perhaps the most important being the ban on future documentation, which extends to any subsequent transfers of ownership. "If the work gets resold, it has to be done in the same way it was acquired originally," says Jan Mot, who is Sehgal's dealer in Brussels. "If it is not done according to the conditions of the first sale, one could debate whether it was an authentic sale. It's like making a false Tino Sehgal, if you start making documentation and a certificate."

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As he does with all of his exhibitions, Tino Sehgal begins a six-week run at the Guggenheim this month with no official opening and no fanfare. Credit: Justine Kurland for The New York Times

The act of going to a logical extreme can have illuminating results. Yasmil Raymond, who worked at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis for five years before becoming a curator at the Dia Art Foundation in New York, says that the Walker's acquisition of a Sehgal work, "This Objective of That Object," was the most contentious in her time there. In the piece, five interpreters surround a visitor, turn their backs to her and declaim, "The objective of this work is to become the object of a discussion." If the visitor says nothing, the interpreters will eventually crumple to the floor; but a response will reanimate them, and one of them will cry, "A comment, a comment, we have a comment!" And at that, with the visitor's comment as a starting point, a conversation begins. What is curious is that the purchase of the work generated its own passionate discussion. "At the Walker, they have six board meetings a year, and this was the most difficult one I ever was at," Raymond says. "It was the only time someone on the acquisitions committee voted against an acquisition. There was a small insurrection. Three people abstained, and one voted against it. It was a polemical reaction. Then all the other board members had to defend and insist on why they were voting for this. They were really articulate on why the Walker had to acquire the work, about supporting unsafe ideas, on the risk of creativity and artistic practice." It was exactly the kind of conversation Sehgal hopes to provoke.

Over the course of a career barely a decade long, Sehgal has produced two kinds of art. The earliest works, like "Kiss," are silent and sculptural: a viewer encounters a piece in a museum or gallery just as if it were a marble statue. Sehgal is adamant that he is producing a work of art, not theater: unlike a performance, a Sehgal is on display for the entire time the institution is open, and the human actors are identified no more precisely than as if they were bronze or marble. (They are, however, paid.) But because the piece is formed of people, not of metal or stone, the viewer is aware that, regardless of how absorbed the models seem to be in their activity, at any moment they have the capability of turning their gaze on him — as, indeed, they periodically do in "Kiss." That potential for interaction is explored extensively in Sehgal's second line of work, the "constructed situations" (like "This Situation"), in which the visitor is drawn in and becomes a participant.

Residing in the ether of spoken instructions and ephemeral enactment, these pieces can misleadingly appear to be slapdash or freely improvisatory. In fact, Sehgal supervises his work with painstaking care, in the unremitting state of anxiety of a control freak who has opted to work in an uncontrollable milieu. "These pieces are very delicate," Raymond observes. "The

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human being is such an explosive material. You have to treat it delicately and sometimes put pressure on it. We're dealing with the most fragile of all material — the human mind."

In the Guggenheim show, "Kiss" will be on view on the ground floor, but the main work is a constructed situation that dates from 2006 and has been installed twice in Europe. At Sehgal's insistence, and for the sake of allowing a visitor to experience the piece with something like the Edenic innocence in which I fell upon "Kiss," I won't divulge what happens other than to say that on the spiral ramp of the rotunda, each individual or group will be engaged in conversation by several different interpreters of very different ages. To install the work, Sehgal must enlist the interpreters, train them and, finally, cajole them into showing up regularly and keeping up their enthusiasm.

First comes the recruitment. For older candidates, many of whom are college instructors, Sehgal relied on recommendations and then held lengthy personal interviews during the past year. The younger ones he and his team had to find in casting calls. If you regard Sehgal as a 21st-century sculptor who abjures digging stone out of a ravaged earth, then the interviews that he conducted of grade-school children and teenage college students throughout the city were the ecologically informed equivalent of the scouting missions that Michelangelo made to the marble quarries of Carrara. The small children he sought were between ages 8 and 12, while the teenagers were typically college freshmen. Like the older interpreters, the teenagers would be required to converse in an interesting and intelligent way, but the children had to be able chiefly to encapsulate what they were told in a summary form. They also needed to be outgoing enough to chat readily with strangers. In November, I watched Sehgal, accompanied by a Guggenheim assistant curator and professionals from a New York-based casting agency, interview groups of little kids and teenagers, usually eight at a time.

One sample of children came mostly from St. Ann's School, a private school in Brooklyn. "I'm just going to ask what your name is and how old you are and what you like doing, and then after we're going to play a little game," Sehgal announced, as he would say in pretty much precisely those words at every audition of children. An 8-year-old boy with a piping voice and charming self-possession said, "The last thing I've done is create a litmus solution." An 8-year-old girl favored musical comedy. The others had equally enriching extracurricular activities to report.

Then it was time for the game, which Sehgal explained would begin simply and become more difficult. The game consisted of listening to the answer to a question and then repeating what was said. Taking suggestions for a question from the children, he chose, "What is a stool?"

A young woman from the casting agency said: "A stool is a piece of furniture that has four legs and usually is taller than a chair. You can sit on a stool, and sometimes you can climb on a stool to get something."

The children raised their hands to offer their recaps. Like the blind men around the elephant, they would get different parts of it. Sehgal listened. From those who did not volunteer, he tried to coax a response.

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The game escalated to “What is a computer?” and then “What is a democracy?”

“A democracy is a system of government where the citizens of the country elect their leader,” said another casting agent. “The United States is a democracy. The hope is that in electing a leader, the voice of the people will be heard through that representative. The opposite of a democracy is a dictatorship, where one person has all the say and all the power.”

Now we were in deeper waters. Most of the children had trouble pronouncing the word “democracy,” and their capacity to recall and regurgitate the disjointed bits of information varied appreciably. With the final question — “What is an abstraction?” — things became more challenging still. Forget about pronunciation or any comprehension of the term. What they came back with was a mixture of things they remembered and things they made up. Those whose recollections outdistanced their imaginations were the preferred ones, so long as they were not incapacitated by shyness.

Afterward Sehgal reviewed the young contestants with his associates, each of whom had written down ratings. He compared the students with ones they had recently seen at the Thurgood Marshall Academy in Harlem, where he found a higher proportion of promising candidates adept at reciting back what they heard.

“The thing about these St. Ann’s kids is they’re socially very able,” he told me. “The Thurgood Marshall kids are put in the world to receive — they are there to pay attention. It’s not that the St. Ann’s kids are not intelligent. They are. They are already in the mind-set of ‘What can I bring into the world out of myself?’ ”

For the Guggenheim exhibition, such qualities would be more appropriate in the teenage interpreters. The artist’s quarrying continued.

As a youth, Sehgal was attracted to the study of dance (how people move) and political economy (how society works). His father, now retired, was an I.B.M. manager from India, his mother a German native and homemaker. Sehgal was born in London and raised primarily in Dusseldorf, Paris and a town close to Stuttgart; he has a younger sister, who grew up to become a philosopher specializing in Alfred North Whitehead. Their father talked with them in English, their mother in German. Sehgal speaks fluent English with a faint German inflection.

When he was an adolescent, Sehgal says, a direct encounter with the political process disenchanting him permanently from parliamentary politics. Friends asked him to speak at a hearing in favor of a transportation initiative in Stuttgart. “I remember seeing the minister of transportation dive and dodge,” he says. “All he could do was administer what the public opinion was, or else he would be voted out in the next election.” If electoral politics could not produce fundamental change, why bother with it? “It’s much more interesting to change the values,” he says. “I was never interested again in parliamentary politics. I became interested in culture.”

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This political awakening strengthened his attraction to dance. Aside from its physical appeal, dance, in his eyes, had the virtue of creating something that disappeared at the moment it was produced. “My work comes out of my experiment with myself,” he says. “As a person in the first world, you’re quite heavy as a person in what you use up. Can I actually solve this for myself? Can I have something to do, keep myself interested and not be somebody who is situated outside society, and can I do this without transforming lots of material?” He moved at age 18 to Berlin, where he studied political economy and dance. After a few years he relocated to Essen, again taking classes in both subjects.

Through friends in Berlin, he became friendly with the experimental choreographer Xavier Le Roy and later with another avant-garde dance artist, Jérôme Bel, who were challenging the preconceptions that audiences brought to dance performances. In 1999, he took a job in Ghent, Belgium, at Les Ballets C. de la B. dance collective. At the same time, he was developing his own work. His first noteworthy piece was called “Twenty Minutes for the Twentieth Century,” in which he performed by himself, naked, on a stage decorated with only a work light, calling up signature movements in 20 styles: Nijinsky, Balanchine, Merce Cunningham, Trisha Brown, down to Xavier Le Roy. (Notwithstanding its title, the piece was approximately 55 minutes long.)

He presented “Twenty Minutes” in a festival at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, where one appreciative spectator was a curator of about the same age, Jens Hoffmann. “Afterward I told him it was like a museum of dance,” Hoffmann recalls. “He said, ‘This is exactly what I was trying to do.’” Sehgal was more of a conceptual artist than a choreographer. “I always felt closer to Marcel Broodthaers than I did to Martha Graham,” he says. He loves the intellectual discourse that surrounds contemporary art; it’s absent from dance criticism. (He carries these preferences into his private life. His partner, Dorothea von Hantelmann, is an art historian who has written extensively about “performativity” in visual art; they have a 2-year-old son, Nalin.) Hoffmann encouraged him to present his work in art venues, not dance theaters.

As a curator of the Manifesta biennial art exhibition in Frankfurt in 2003, Hoffmann brought “Instead of Allowing Some Thing to Rise Up to Your Face Dancing Bruce and Dan and Other Things” (2000), a piece that Sehgal had devised specifically for a contemporary art museum, the S.M.A.K. in Ghent. As its unwieldy title indicates to those in the know, it is a gloss on pieces of conceptual art of the early ’70s by Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham. In those earlier works, the artist or a friend of the artist performs a series of stipulated movements, which are captured on a videotape for display in a gallery or museum. Sehgal selected 16 gestural moments from those videos and asked a performer to stitch them together with slowed-down, unaccented motions. He got the S.M.A.K. to agree to show the work nonstop during museum hours for a week; as one performer’s shift was ending, a successor would appear and writhe alongside him for about half a minute, and then the first one would depart. In a blatant way, human beings were filling the role that sculptures occupy in a museum.

“When I saw the visitors’ reaction, I was clear that this was it,” Sehgal says. “Their reactions were so much stronger than I expected. They couldn’t believe it was a person. They thought it had to be a robot or a puppet. There was such an expectation that in a museum something must be an object.”

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Once he decided to transform choreographic material into sculpture, Sehgal needed to find a way to keep a piece going continuously. The silent interpreters in the early works perform in a loop, and the only visible connecting hinge occurs at a shift change, when one actor relieves another. That was relatively simple.

With “This Is Good” (2001), the first of his constructed situations, each new arrival of a visitor triggers an activity of limited duration; it is as if the piece were a kinetic sculpture powered by a push button. When someone enters the gallery, a guard begins windmilling his arms and hopping from one leg to the other and then says: “Tino Sehgal. ‘This Is Good.’ 2001.” Calling attention to the usually unnoticed employees in a museum, the piece plays off Sehgal’s mission to make people, not objects, the material of his work. But the payoff is limited. Things got more interesting with “This Is Exchange” (2003), in which the visitor is enlisted as a co-producer of the piece. At the entrance to the museum, a ticket taker asks the visitor to engage in a conversation about the market economy; after five minutes, if a ticket buyer who agreed to the request is still gamely playing along, she receives a partial refund of the admission fee. For many visitors, especially those who argued that they detested the market economy, it came as an unsettling surprise to receive this reminder that whatever their opinion of it, they were nonetheless immersed in it. Which, of course, was one of Sehgal’s aims.

Although Sehgal sells pieces to private collectors, his work seems to function best in a museum or a gallery, where its subtraction of a material object is made visible by the institutional surroundings that give shape to his void. “My work definitely needs this framing as art, and the stronger this framing is,” he says, “the more works of mine are possible.” Because the activity in his work is so close to the routines of everyday life, he has found ways to emphasize its artificiality. One signature device is the removal of all emphases in movement; his interpreters proceed in a slow trancelike state. “The most important thing is you don’t see an accent,” he said at a “Kiss” rehearsal I attended. “In everyday life, basically, in whatever we do there is an accent. Here, there is a continuous flow.”

Eliminating the object has opened a seemingly limitless number of possibilities for Sehgal. At the C.C.A. Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in San Francisco, Jens Hoffmann, who became the director in 2006, has been presenting an ongoing series of Sehgal pieces. Usually visitors to this small contemporary art museum realize fairly soon that they are in the presence of a Sehgal work. But not always. In one piece, a visitor would arrive to find the museum apparently empty of all people. “Once when a person thought there were no guards around, he started stealing catalogs,” Hoffmann recalls. “The guard came up and said: ‘Would you please put the books back? This is a piece by Tino Sehgal.’ ”

Is it possible to be both playful and profound? Sehgal is wagering yes. The moral earnestness that underlies his work would be ponderous if unleavened by humor; the games would be just child’s sport if they did not illuminate serious matters. The mixture can confuse people. At a meeting that Sehgal, on one of his human-quarrying forays, held last May with the administrators of a Harlem after-school program, he was pressed to explain what he aimed to accomplish in the Guggenheim piece. “The real deal is what happens there,” he said. “The real deal is the conversation.” For an educator who was trying to wean children from the cycle of

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poverty, this was palpably an unsatisfactory answer. He asked Sehgal again what was his goal. "It's a structure to have a conversation about people's values," Sehgal said.

A little later in the discussion, the man returned to his theme. "So I guess you're saying your ambition is to change perception," he said. "Is that correct?" And this time, Sehgal took the bait.

"That's a very simple way of saying what I'm doing," he said. "For the last two or three hundred years in human society, we have been very focused on the earth. We have been transforming the materials of the earth, and the museum has developed also over the last two or three hundred years as a temple of objects made from the earth. I'm the guy who comes in and says: 'I'm bored with that. I don't think it's that interesting, and it's not sustainable.' Inside this temple of objects, I refocus attention to human relations."

This time the man nodded in understanding, with an expression I recognized. He was seeing things from another perspective, as he participated in a conversation within a framework constructed by Tino Sehgal.