

frieze

Welcome to this Situation: Tino Sehgal in Berlin

*On the occasion of his two surveys in Amsterdam and Berlin,
two variations on Tino Sehgal*

by Oscar van den Boogaard and Jörg Heiser (September – November 2015) [Translated]

Light triggers a different awareness than darkness. The world that you see is different from the world that you hear, smell and feel. Recently I went to a so-called 'Dark Restaurant' in Berlin, where diners eat in total darkness served by blind and visually-impaired waiters. It was a matter of trust, because I couldn't see what I was putting into my mouth. My senses were acute. I had no idea my taste buds were able to taste in three dimensions. I tried to see with my ears. From the voices around me, I tried to visualize the surrounding people. I learned that you do not need eyes to be able to see with hair-fine precision.

I remember the first time I dared follow men into the park at night. I was curious about where they were going. They dissolved into the darkness, reappearing a little later as vague figures. Standing still, walking behind one another, lighting a cigarette. It was my image of purgatory, a world of searching souls, where the threshold between life and death fades.

In June, at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam I stepped once more into the darkness. This time it was to see *This Variation* (2012–13) by Tino Sehgal, currently exhibited halfway through the museum's year-long survey of the artist's work.

As I entered, my body dissolved into the limitless black. The space dissolved and so did time. I do not know how long it took before I could make out the other bodies' silhouettes. Ten minutes, half an hour? It was as if a day were starting, very slowly: a new day in a new world.

Figures were eating, sat on the ground, standing in the space, leaning against the walls. Who were the interpreters of the work? Who were the spectators?

A 'zoom' sound rose up from the silence. It turned into humming and vocal percussion. A human beatbox. The sound of lips and breathing. The beating heart of the world. Sometimes it died and then it returned again. It was a ceremony. A shamanistic séance. A Dada gathering. Whistling, swelling, shouts.

I had entered *This Variation* by Tino Sehgal once before, at OCUMENTA (13) in 2012. During the first days at Kassel I had felt myself a spectator, but I was absorbed into Tino Sehgal's work as an insider. I suddenly felt how much I had been missing in contemporary art.

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I remember a man's hand taking hold of me and a voice whispering into my ear: 'I'm pickin' up good vibrations, she's giving me excitations (oom bop bop), I'm pickin' up good vibrations (good vibrations, oom bop bop), she's giving me excitations (excitations, oom bop bop), good, good, good, good vibrations (oom bop bop), she's giving me excitations (excitations, oom bop bop), good, good, good, good vibrations (oom bop bop), she's giving me excitations (excitations)'. Other voices joined in – a choir, a row dance – it swelled and became increasingly exuberant. It felt like the dawning of a new era. I had never experienced an artwork that was so impassioned – impassioned by the performers' energy, but also by the energy of the spectators with whom I shared the same experience.

In Amsterdam *This Variation* was a new experience altogether, maybe because the work has evolved since then, but also because I have changed. I stayed longer, for an hour. A couple of hours. The voices were like insects in an oversensitive world. The jungle world of Douanier Rousseau in which every square centimetre is teeming with life. Arousing, physical, close-by. Stories were told about injustice, and personal confidences made about insecurity. 'The income derived from producing things of slight consequence is of great consequence.' The sentences were repeated by various interpreters, inverted, questioned. A whole discussion about things of lesser and greater consequence. A boy said that he always tries to flirt but feels insecure. In the silence that followed, we took our distance from those words, which resonated a while before fading. The interpreters then slowly got going once more; first one, then the others, then all of them. It came in waves, from arduous to ecstatic. Again and again.

From silence to head-banging. And sometimes there was a touch. And at times the light came on for a moment. The eyes of a young woman who was standing close to me were downcast, but suddenly they looked at me, as if it were the first meeting ever in a new world. And then she whispered 'give it to me'. They all cried 'give it to me' and then they repeated the refrain of Madonna's song. I felt as if they were speaking to me. I too have to be generous, to give. One of the interpreters pronounced the title of the piece, the year, and then began a new cycle of silence and waves.

After the dark room came the lit room. I stood face-to-face with the enormous *Cathedra* (1951) by Barnett Newman. The intensity of *Cathedra* arose through the way Newman built up the painting in six separate layers of paint and different kinds of blue pigment. That allowed him to create a deep, richly-varied colour plane that evokes a spatial illusion. After the experience in *This Variation*, I could enter the painting as limitless blue.

With *Cathedra* Newman was referring to the Old Testament: the blue dome of the sky and the throne of God. During the act of painting the spiritually-minded Newman felt connected with higher spheres and the mysteries of life. This can also be said of Sehgal's work. His work has an influence on how you experience reality. It makes you sensitive and alert. It has the power to transform spectators into new people. It has to be continually passed on in order to exist. It shall therefore always be young and alive, in the here and now. Always connected to the commitment and the faith of those who perform it, and fed by their life energy.

—Oscar van den Boogaard. Translated by Kate Christina Mayne.

In 2009 I went to Brussels to see a Tino Sehgal show at Galerie Jan Mot. It was not long after the collapse of Lehman Brothers, and everything was being read as an expression of crisis. This was also my approach to an oeuvre I had been following for around seven years (in the early 2000s, after some time working in contemporary dance, Sehgal had begun realizing his works in an art context). In this case, however, the crisis in question affected the inner dynamic of the work itself: *This is Critique* emulated all of the fundamental critiques of Sehgal's approach, from the charge of luddism (to this day, Sehgal's works may not be photographed or otherwise technically documented) to that of anti-object purism (to this day, there are no objects or even written documents purchased, collected or archived in connection with Sehgal's work).

At the end of June 2015, another seven years have passed and Sehgal is showing five works at Berlin's Martin-Gropius-Bau plus one more as part of the *Foreign Affairs* dance festival at Haus der Berliner Festspiele. These six works cover the spectrum of his oeuvre to date, forming a kind of mid-career survey (this year's overview at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam is showing twelve works over twelve months).

Can a significant development be identified in Sehgal's recent work and how does it relate to developments within society as a whole? I would argue that such a development has taken place and that it is (inversely) related to the rise of social media over the same period and, in turn (dialectically), to the rise of 'live art' in a museum context.

Stepping into the huge emptiness of the central space at the Martin-Gropius-Bau to see a work by Sehgal is a special experience. The atrium is roofed over, but empty and uncluttered like this, it feels like a public square. The first thing I see is *Yet Untitled* (2013), a work for which two to three performers crouch close together on the floor. They move like androids at a tai-chi course, or become a human beatbox, as if their vocal chords and clicking tongues were generating the energy that keeps the androids running. A third interpreter (Sehgal's preferred term) joins them. It's like a relay race without the baton: there is a zone of synchronicity in which the new arrival imitates the others before one of them leaves (a pattern I first saw in Sehgal's 2003 work *Kiss*, in which a couple in ordinary clothes, standing, kneeling or lying down, perform a slow motion, smoothly transitioning sequence of kisses from art history, from Rodin to Brâncuși to Koons). When a girl of maybe eleven joins the relay, there is a moment when four interpreters are involved. Has something gone wrong? A version with four that I've not seen before? Especially now that the other three are now exiting the space one by one, leaving the girl behind on her own.

Standing up, she begins to speak English, moving like a puppet or a rather wooden animation. She is a manga character, she tells us. The penny drops: *Yet Untitled* has segued into another work, *Ann Lee* (2011), Sehgal's contribution to *No Ghost Just a Shell*, a cycle of works initiated by Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe in 1999. The girl says something about her existence as a prefabricated commercial manga figure, and she asks me a question. But I am stubborn and refuse to answer – a sceptical response to unannounced requests to participate, especially where some creative task is concerned (rather than, for example, an altruistic gesture). There is something invasive about it, a suggestion of optionality that masks an obligation. Which is typical of a pervasively neoliberal service and information society. But should this charge be levelled at Sehgal, or would that be a case of shooting the messenger? This is something to which I'll return.

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When she asks a second question, I do answer. Would you prefer to be too busy, or not busy enough? I reply that I'd rather have slightly too little to do, as it would leave me more headroom to think. But it remains a trick question, as everyone wants both recognition and time for themselves. Which is exactly what Sehgal seems to be saying.

My eye is caught by another girl of roughly the same age, performing similar movements behind a glass door at the far end of the atrium – one of four rooms in which other works are unfolding. I walk across and find myself alone with her and one other visitor. What do two middle-aged men in an otherwise empty room have to do with a girl representing a manga character? I attempt to make out the conceptual guardrail defined by Sehgal in this work, but come up against something more akin to the walls of a conceptual, padded cell.

The same applies in the next room with *This Situation* (2007). Several people, spread around the empty space, talk to each other in English about various current social issues: racism in the United States, same-sex marriage. Mostly just one or two speak at any given time, and each of them could also be a visitor because (and this only really dawns on me later) everyone, whether visitor or interpreter, fits into the sociological category of educated, halfway stylish, international urbanites between 20 and 50. A coincidence perhaps, on this June afternoon in Berlin, during *Foreign Affairs*, a dance festival with a large international audience. Only the fact that some people in the room perform shuffling, slow-motion movements when they aren't speaking gives them away as interpreters. And after a while, all six (two women, four men) suddenly make an announcement in unison: 'Welcome... to... this... situation'. It is like a very short choral work, followed by an emphatic, sigh-like exhalation and a backwards movement. Like a DJ's 'rewind' – that record again, from the top.

After a while, one of the female interpreters addresses a scantily clad pregnant visitor, praising her for not covering up her swelling belly: she tells her she looks like a charismatic goddess, bursting with vigour. *Welcome to this situation*, indeed. Is the comment legitimate or intrusive? This part of the work is clearly not scripted. But others that come across as similarly 'spontaneous' probably are. Sehgal does not disclose the exact source code of the interactions. And I always ask myself: is there a safe somewhere containing secret instruction documents?

After *This Situation*, one is left walking on eggshells, between topicality and banality in the bright light of the white cube. Fittingly, the next room I enter is pitch-dark. My eyes take a while to get used to the gloom. More hearing than seeing, I perceive two bodies executing slow movements on the floor. I withdraw to the far side of the room. By now I can make out other visitors, and in the middle a shimmer of naked skin – this must be a version of *Kiss*. Here, Sehgal stages a third kind of potential embarrassment: with the manga girl, it was the sharp difference of gender and age plus a blurred line between remote control and dialogical freedom; in *This Situation*, it was a blurring of the line between protagonist and observer; and in this new naked-in-the-dark version of *Kiss*, it is the awkwardness suggested by visitors being forced to feel like an anonymous group of peeping toms in someone's front garden at night.

In the fourth and last room, I am met by the smell of fresh, lightly perfumed sweat. The semi-darkness, the humming, dancing bodies, the rhythms – any unease with physical presence or communicative entanglement dissolves as in the best moments of a visit to a nightclub. Except that the dancers are making the beats and tunes themselves. I feel safe in the seemingly endless continuum of *This Variation* (2012) – until suddenly, in a move that certainly did not feature in past iterations of the piece,

all of the dancers and singers run out into the atrium. I follow them and witness an unexpected dramatic high point in Sehgal's oeuvre to date.

The interpreters are in the middle of rolling sideways down the shallow steps to the atrium, reminding me of the scene from Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) where Leonardo di Caprio crawls down a flight of stairs on drugs like a slug under attack. Except that here the soundtrack consists not of grunts and moans, but the throaty rhythmic sounds of a stripped down pop song, until the group spreads out to stand around the space and sing a motif that neatly encapsulates Sehgal's philosophy of body movement and body sound. It is the opening trombone fanfare – *Baaaaa, baba bab, bab, baaaaa!* – from Missy Elliott's first big hit *Sock it 2 Me* from 1997 (sampled by producer Timbaland from the 1968 Delfonics song *Ready or Not Here I Come*). The use of this musical figure in *This Variation* is no coincidence: Missy Elliott, and with her the 1990s, clearly exerted a formative influence on Sehgal.

The 1990s was a time when the seeds of the social dynamic that is now flourishing all around us were being sown. The time when the World Wide Web took off and people began using the first digital, still clunky mobile phones and sending electronic messages. The time when the first geek-powered social networks emerged, if still far removed from the powerful dynamics of Facebook and Twitter. The time when hip-hop pioneers like Missy Elliott and Timbaland defined a post-digital, funkily syncopated fluency of body and language that anticipated post-Internet art and dance music subgenres like footwork and grime, as well as suggesting a cyborg-like polyrhythmic fine-tuning between physical movement and technical surroundings that also exerts a pressure towards self-optimization. The time when wars in Iraq and the Balkans established the spectrum of madness (between remote-controlled drones and neighbours murdering each other) that is still raising fundamental questions about how to render social interactions immune to breakdowns of civilization. The time when Jeff Koons performed his relationship with Ilona Staller (Cicciolina) as pornographic art (the Koons poses in *Kiss* are taken from this cycle), thus anticipating the self-marketing strategies of Paris Hilton or Kim Kardashian. The time when Judith Butler published *Bodies That Matter* (1993), demonstrating a way of talking more freely about the connection between physical affect and linguistic constructions, and thus about a rich variety of sexual and gendered identities. And, not least, it was a time when relational aesthetics came to the fore and the Spanish-Swiss choreographer and dancer La Ribot began to sell her short solo choreographies *Piezas Distinguidas* (from 1994) to a small group of collector friends as a comment on the status of dance works in comparison to works of fine art – thus heralding a period in which, during the 2000s, a small number of major museums (including MoMA, Tate Modern and FRAC Lorraine) began to collect substantial amounts of live art.

In Sehgal's work, the spirit of the 1990s makes itself felt as precisely that – a spirit. His art is of today, but without renouncing its origins. This was also a key aspect of the above-described high point at the Martin-Gropius-Bau. As the assembled interpreters of *This Variation*, around twenty of them (I should have counted!), spread out around the atrium, they were joined by the others from *This Situation*, *Yet Untitled* and the two Ann Lee girls, and suddenly there was an operatic moment – *Baaaaa, baba bab, bab, baaaa!* Touching pathos. Like the prisoners' choir in *Nabucco* (1841), or the animals in the forest in *Bambi* (1942). Or like art in the 1990s. Simple and complex, light-hearted and tragic characters proudly gather and fill the stage. One might hold all of this against the work, but it is actually what cements its quality, as the impact is achieved without undue scene shifting or orchestral bombast. Moreover, it is not theatrically expanded or exploited, appearing briefly for a few minutes before the merged ensembles withdraw back into the snail shells of their individual works – leaving only the two protagonists of *Kiss* behind in the atrium (clothed this time) to carry on snogging.

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By intertwining his individual works into a meta-choreography for the first time, Sehgal also incidentally mirrors today's conditions of social networking and endless 'events': a sometimes mundane, sometimes dramatic continuum of mutations and transformations in which the sharply defined work frays apart and begins to dissolve – without Sehgal ever giving up his claim to authorship. He has plenty of experience in hiring interpreters and providing them with sufficient instructions. This ability to create temporary socio-economic structures (economic because these interpreters are paid by the hour), to reflect on technology from electronic music to digitally animated characters without using technology himself, and to capture the zeitgeist without merely aping its language – all of this is often levied against Sehgal as an accusation.

In a recent interview¹, La Ribot complained that 'much contemporary dematerialised art now bases its economy in constantly rotating performers within exhibition spaces in the way that workers used to rotate in shifts in factories, and still do in factories within Asia and Africa, to keep performances visible at all times.' This, she argues, turns people into objects. Apart from the fact that someone should let her know that shift work also still exists outside Africa and Asia, this comparison doesn't apply to Sehgal because his work is only shown during normal museum opening hours, with most individual performers expected to work just a small portion of that time (for *This Progress* at the Guggenheim in 2010, for example, the figure was 12 hours per week²).

For all those who accuse contemporary art of being first and foremost an agent of neoliberal exploitation, the following reminder: it is not only a matter of how (delegated performance, rotating ensembles, etc.), but also of what and why. Rather than working shifts sewing underpants or assembling iPhones, Sehgal's interpreters are taking an active part in the creation of an aesthetic experience that calls precisely these kinds of production into question. With all due respect for La Ribot's achievements as a choreographer, accusing such practices of pandering heavily to the market, while 'in classical Performance Art, it is the artist who defends their work with their body'³, as La Ribot put it, is simply ludicrous – in view of everything from Marina Abramović to *I'm A Celebrity, Get me Out of Here*.

I'm glad Sehgal doesn't appear in his own works, as this allows me to conduct such strange conversations as the one I experienced as part of *This Progress* in June at Haus der Berliner Festspiele without him watching. The work begins with a ten-year-old child emerging from behind a pillar, saying hello, and then walking along slowly beside the visitor, striking up conversation by asking 'What is progress?' What comes to mind? A notion, I say, that led, in the 1950s and 1960s, in both socialist and capitalist countries, to the creation of huge satellite towns on the edges of major cities all over the world, developments that are now viewed as errors of town planning. No sooner have I said this than she hands me over, at the door to the garden, to a seventeen-year-old girl who picks up the theme and asks me what has become of these satellite towns. Well, I say, they've become ghettos for migrants – and we're on to the topic of refugees and Europe. We are just talking about whether the artist group Centre for Political Beauty is offering white German urbanites the opportunity to feel better about themselves without having to actually make an active contribution (the girl tends towards this view) when a man of around forty appears and joins in the discussion. He seems very familiar to me. By now, we are outside, on a typical tree-lined Berlin residential street.

I realize that I don't know the man. It just felt like I did because of the way he came up and started talking. Which he did because we're in the middle of a Sehgal piece. It's a bit like one of those weird dreams in the morning, just before waking up. The girl has dropped back and he steers our conversation towards fundamental questions of whether, faced with the atrocities of the present, it is possible to

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speaking of social progress. I say that Hegel, the philosopher of historical progress, died of cholera in Berlin, at the exact spot on Kupfergraben where Angela Merkel now lives. Clearly, *This Progress* has prompted me to scan my brain for the issue of progress and, in keeping with my profession, to deliver a bit of a lecture. But the man has already darted behind a tree, as if he wanted to vanish into thin air like an imp in the forest. Immediately, an elderly woman appears, telling me how she came to northern West Germany after the war as a child refugee from what is now Poland. Her class teacher, she says, regularly beat children, as if he had to make an example of someone, again and again. I ask her if she thinks he secretly took a sexual pleasure in this. And there I am, just for a change, in a conversation where I'm the one asking the questions. By now, we're back in front of the entrance to the Haus der Berliner Festspiele. Looking to one side, I notice other couples in conversation, lined up in front of us like drying cars slowly rolling out of a carwash, saying their farewells. No, says the elderly woman, the teacher believed he had an obligation to punish the children, that it was his duty.

There is a cheery catharsis in this work, a strange gratification in reproducing a lifecycle over four generations at the same time as discussing progress. Perhaps *This Progress* is a kind of QED within Sehgal's oeuvre: depending on the way the conversation unfolds, and on the personal chemistry of those involved, participation will itself be experienced as progress – or not. Like the ongoing development of society as a whole, this progress can only be as good as the words and actions of those who take an active part in it every single day.

—Jörg Heiser. *Translated by Nicholas Grindell.*

¹ La Ribot interviewed by Teresa Calonje, in Calonje (ed.), *Live Forever. Collecting Live Art* (London: Koenig Books, 2014), p. 28

² See Lauren Collins, *Primal Schmooze. Tino Sehgal's interpreters*, in: *The New Yorker*, 22 March 2010, <http://tinyurl.com/ThisProgress>

³ Interview with La Ribot, *Live Forever*, *ibid.*, p. 33