



## *Tino Sehgal's art comes to life at Blenheim Palace*

*The performance artist talks about his upcoming installation, a celebration of human contact*

by Peter Aspden (June 30, 2021)



Artist Tino Sehgal, 2013 © Wolfgang Tillmans

The good news regarding my interview with Tino Sehgal, the British-born, Berlin-based artist whose notoriously sense-scrambling work has discombobulated many an art-lover, is that he is there, on screen, on time, and ready, as it turns out, for some hefty philosophical conversation on his new work.

Not to suggest that he is anything but entirely professional in any of his dealings; it is just that I remembered the first time I encountered his work, at the Venice Biennale of 2005, when I entered his installation in the German pavilion to be confronted by three uniformed Biennale security guards who instantly sang happily into my face: “This so contemporary! Contemporary! Contemporary!” Indeed it was, I thought, and marked Sehgal as one to watch.

The following year, in London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts, another installation, another dislocating experience: a nine-year-old girl, who told me her name was Devon, said she wanted to interview me about the concept of progress. Before I could rally my response, she passed me to a youngish man, who passed me to a middle-aged woman, who passed me to an 81-year-old bookish type who had taught physics all his life and wondered, he said a little broken-heartedly, if it had all been worth it.

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Those pieces of work in the early years of the new century, playful and profound, helped establish Sehgal as one of the most liberating figures in a contemporary art world, which was making itself dizzy with newfound commercial success and burgeoning public interest. Sehgal — a former dancer — countered that trend by making work that involved no objects at all, just the unregulated and spontaneous results of random human interaction.

His subsequent shows, at New York's Guggenheim, Tate Modern, the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, have played more extensively with the evanescent dances of strangers. Sehgal's disdain of the object extends to refusing even to publish catalogues for his shows. (I remember asking for one at the ICA show, only to be told that it didn't exist, but I could pay £25 to have a word whispered in my ear by the bookstore assistant, to which I whispered "No, thank you.")

Expect more of the same, on an altogether grander and more sumptuous level, at the 18th-century baroque Blenheim Palace this month when Sehgal's latest piece is unveiled as the latest of the Blenheim Art Foundation's seven-year-old commissioning programme. In terms of dramatic twists, he has some form to live up to. Two years ago, a show from another maverick talent with intent to confound, Maurizio Cattelan, attracted unusually intense tabloid coverage when the artist's 18-karat gold toilet, "America", was stolen, lock, flush and cistern, two days after the show's opening.

Sehgal's installation this year sounds less like a deranged episode of Morse, and more like something that would seem to fit the strange times. A swarm of local residents, specially cast for the project, will interact with visitors in the palace's Capability Brown-designed grounds, in what is described as a "fluid and porous choreography". Could there be a more resonant response to a year-and-a-half of lockdown than a celebration of the warmth of human contact?

"That has been my principle for the last 20 years," Sehgal tells me in a Zoom call from Berlin. (He is of German and Indian parentage.) "But after the first lockdown, even for me, when I had my first meeting with someone, I thought 'Oh my God, I can really feel what's happening here. I can feel the energy of this person, the soul.' I didn't know what it was, I can't put words to it. But I did realise that, more than ever, there has been a deprivation of exactly that which I promote in my work."

Sehgal says he was inspired by the open, natural spaces of Brown's 2,000-acre landscape. "We have had 100 years of the white cube [of the art gallery]. We have spent a lot of time in these white wall spaces. But the older I get, I feel they are quintessentially modern in a not-good way. I saw the park and, not that I know much about landscaping, I thought, 'Here is a master at work'. I had the feeling that I had when I first walked round Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim, and I haven't had since."

He says he regards Brown's work as a kind of "duet" with the planet. "He doesn't stand back and say, 'Nature is perfect, who am I?' He also doesn't say, like French gardening does, 'Humans can do it better.' He says, 'I am part of Earth too. I can enhance, it, I can work with it, but I don't need to reinvent everything, because what the Earth has to offer is already at a pretty high level.'" So his own intervention makes it a trio? "Ha! Yes, you could put it that way."

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Blenheim Palace © Alamy

One of the lovely things about Sehgal's shows, I say, is that they bring a smile to people's faces. Part of the "This so contemporary" show in Venice involved actors offering visitors half of their entrance fee back if they would talk to them about the market economy. I tried to claim my refund, I tell him, but the receptionist told me they had "run out of money".



Blenheim park and gardens, with landscaping by Capability Brown  
© Courtesy of Blenheim Art Foundation

"That was a bit of a fail, then," he says, a little icily. It wasn't part of the show? "No, no, no, no. Sometimes things go wrong." He says he wanted that exhibition to be a "joyous" one. "I am not the most joyous person," he says. "It is not something that comes easily to me."

It is part of Sehgal's broader thesis about the art world that the idea of the lone, impassioned, vision-inspired (and mostly male) artist has pretty much run its course. "Part of visual art's success over the past 200 years is that it has had a certain clarity, because it is individuals expressing themselves in quite simple, short ways." Now, he says, it feels like the time for more fluid and more collaborative ways of describing the "complexity" of the world.

"What is individuality? It is the breaking of rigid bonds. We don't want to be bound by our religion, our parents, our class, because they are holding you back. We have had a couple of hundred years of that. OK, now we can move on. But where do we belong? And where do we move on to?" Hence Sehgal's

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emphasis on discourse, teamwork, and interrogation in his art. “It is a little bit pathetic, to be this star hero,” he says of society’s abiding obsession with individual achievement.

Sehgal’s derision of material objects, and for the excesses of the capitalist economy generally, extends to his business dealings. The sale of his works, which allows museums and even private collectors to install his “situations”, is carried out with no written record of the transaction; the “contract” is reliant on the memory of those present at the sale. And he has placed strict injunctions on photographs and films of his projects.

I ask Sehgal how important it is that he is able to sell his work. “It is very basic. If you do something specialised, that specialised activity does not bring cereal to your table in the morning. If you want to turn that specialised activity into your breakfast, you have to find someone, a couple of people is enough, who are interested in it, and who will pay you for it.

“I feel that people have a lot of cultural reservations against certain marketplaces. On a superficial level, I get that. But that doesn’t say anything about market transactions in itself.”

I ask Sehgal finally about his contribution to a newly published little book, *140 Artists’ Ideas for Planet Earth*, edited by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Kostas Stasinopoulos, which takes the form of a single, unpunctuated sentence: “you are doing all of it”. What does he mean?

“That you are a producer of reality, not just a receiver of reality. When you come to the museum, which is a highly legitimised ritual of western culture, I don’t want to place you as just as a receiver. I want to configure a game where you are also an agent. That’s always a vein in my work: that we as individuals, as consumers, as humans of the world, have power. We, also, decide the course of things.”

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