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*Artist Tino Sehgal:
‘Human interaction has become much more palpable’*

*As an ‘artist of conversation’ who draws visitors into unexpected situations,
Sehgal is an intriguing choice for Blenheim Palace’s summer exhibition*

by Tim Adams (July 11, 2021)



Tino Sehgal in the grounds of Blenheim Palace, where he hopes visitors will ‘pay attention, take an interest, stop, basically’. Photograph: Antonio Olmos/The Observer

Tino Sehgal’s work is designed to leave no footprint. The London-born German-Indian artist works with voice and movement, but he wants nothing of those conjured moments left behind, beyond memories. Photography and video are outlawed, or at least missing his point. He is the Instagrammer’s nightmare.

He has also created some of the most affecting exhibitions of the past couple of decades. For *The Progress*, he filled the spiral of the Guggenheim gallery in New York with “interpreters” of advancing age, children to octogenarians, who, following a set of rules of his devising, engaged visitors in suddenly intimate conversation. In 2012, at Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall, he populated the vast space with a choreographed shoal of 70 local storytellers, who swept up visitors in waves of movement, or buttonholed them to impart heartfelt secrets. Many people stayed for hours, as if at the party they had always dreamed of. As an artist of conversation, of surprising human engagement, Sehgal, 45, feels like the perfect post-lockdown choice for the annual summer exhibition at the stately gardens of Blenheim Palace.

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I spoke to him last week, via Zoom from the house he is living in at Woodstock, Oxfordshire, and from where he is assembling his show with a troupe of locally recruited “participants”, people of all ages selected, he says, on the basis that they seem “measured and profound, in some way, and enjoy singing”. He is reluctant to describe the detail of what visitors will encounter in Capability Brown’s gardens, except to suggest that it’s a slight departure from his usual methods, because of the tightness of the schedule. “Normally, work of mine will be like the same algorithm running over the whole day – a set of participants following the same kind of protocols in the same place,” he says. “Here, it’s more that the individual works become scenes. They appear for a moment, and then they merge into another work.”



The Tino Sehgal effect at Tate Modern in 2012. Photograph: Tate

Sehgal suggests he was attracted to do this project by the promise of a new, large audience of country house day-trippers. As an “experimental” artist, he says, the danger is always ending up, say, “in a *kunsthalle* in Scandinavia and have 60 people visit per day. At some point, you are like: ‘What am I doing here?’”

He hopes that the work will have something to say about the ways in which we re-emerge into more social worlds. “I think I’ve always been a proponent of, like, the materiality of human interaction,” he suggests. “That it’s something palpable. I have to say it became much more palpable after the lockdowns. I remember my first in-person meetings and I’m like, ‘What is this?’, I can almost feel the kind of energetic exchange between souls that was happening when you actually meet somebody. I thought it reaffirmed what I’m doing.”

He talks about the interactive scenes he creates in terms of algorithms – the rules he establishes that the participants will follow (he refuses any written documentation of those rules; when he sells his work, contracts are only ever verbal agreements of what will be involved). He likens the parameters he creates to the rules of games. “Sports have that kind of balance: very simple rules that allow the whole complexity of life to show itself, like in a tennis match.” Sehgal’s work *This Variation*, for example, involved 12 performers, singing and dancing in the dark. It took him six years to establish the rules that would “make it a game that people might enjoy playing over time”.

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Because otherwise, it would become too chaotic?

“Yes. I mean, for example, in football, the offside rule, it’s like a balancing rule. Without it, the whole thing would probably fall out of balance.”

Speaking of his desire for immateriality, for creating “such stuff as dreams are made on”, I recall reading a little anecdote about Sehgal “cancelling Christmas” when he was a child. Was that the first expression of that impulse?

“It was the 1980s,” he says. “My father had come to Europe from India. When I was like, 11, 12, I understood that for him, you know, every watch or stereo or something he could buy was a measure of the success of this adventure. But the same was never going to hold true for me, because I was born into that world. From my childhood room, the sixth floor on top of a hill, I could look down to the factories of Mercedes-Benz and Hewlett-Packard. And so for me it was a very concrete thing, the degree to which people were involved in the production of goods and then consuming them. I was like: I don’t think this is sustainable. It didn’t seem fair to future generations. And also, it’s not that interesting, either.”

He first studied those rules of capitalist production in detail in an economics degree – and then switched to rule breaking by becoming a dancer. His art was a way of testing that opt-out principle in the world, skipping the rule that suggested art had to be a commodity like everything else. “I was really prepared that it would lead nowhere,” he says. “People told me: that’s never going to work. But then I made one of the fastest careers ever. I was representing Germany at the Venice Biennale in a couple of years. So clearly, documentation wasn’t necessary.”

How, I wonder, will he measure the success of his Blenheim show?

“Just very simply that they will pay attention, take an interest, stop, basically. I mean, a large amount of the visitors, they will not necessarily be coming to see my little undertakings.” He smiles. “So I have to persuade them that what I’m doing is worth their attention.”

- Tino Sehgal is at Blenheim Park and Gardens, Oxfordshire, until 15 August