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*‘Joyous, surprising and wonderfully silly’  
– Tino Sehgal’s Blenheim invasion*

*Noisy snogs on the stairway, people crouching on the grass,  
a lone singer wandering through foliage ... the artist’s latest intervention is  
thrilling, mystifying and offending the palace’s visitors*

by Adrian Searle (July 12, 2021)



Into the trees ... the location of the new artwork, which could not be photographed.  
Photograph: Blenheim Palace / Tino Sehgal

A couple roll across the marble floor of the Great Hall in Blenheim Palace, mouth to mouth, kissing. Somewhere, a clock strikes. Overhead, Sir James Thornhill’s fresco decorates the ceiling. Rather than being wrestled out of the building by security, the couple writhe and roll some more. I’ve seen this kiss before. For all Tino Sehgal’s art historical references (among them Rodin, Gustave Courbet, Jeff Koons and La Cicciolina) a snog is a snog – even when Sehgal staged it in a ruined dancehall on Auguststrasse in Berlin, which Nazi officers had commandeered as a casino during the war. There, I thought of dark times and desperate intimacies. Here, I thought of aristocratic fumbles and upstairs-downstairs shenanigans. Rum lot, the Marlboroughs, the Spencer-Churchills and the rest of them.

At Blenheim, visitors just walk in on Sehgal’s encounters and choreographed situations blindly. Heaven knows what those who come to Blenheim for its history, the baroque architecture, Capability Brown’s landscaping and the palace’s associations with Winston Churchill make of Sehgal’s interventions.

## MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

Wow. Waaa-ow. Wooo. Echoing on the exterior walls of the Great Court, the cries change key as they are redoubled and distorted around the vast pile of Sir John Vanbrugh's English baroque architecture. Visitors – lately disgorged from their charabangs and cars and expecting a tour of the stately rooms and the permanent Winston Churchill exhibition – aren't sure what to make of it all. Some balk, ready to take offence. Others are mystified. Only the little kids seem to go with the flow

Blenheim Palace has been holding contemporary art exhibitions for a number of years now, quite deliberately including works – such as Maurizio Cattelan's gold toilet and the text works of Jenny Holzer – that shake things up a bit (hoping, no doubt, to bring in new audiences as well as the stolid English Heritage crowds). But Sehgal's work isn't signposted in any way. You just come across it. This is one of the pleasures of his interventions here.



Tino Sehgal, on the grounds of Blenheim Palace where he will unveil 'moments of connection' with visitors to the palace. Photograph: Antonio Olmos/The Guardian

Do I hear the cry "Ti-no, Tiii-no"? Louder then more quiet as multiple calls and responses arc into dissonant beats, doo-wops and whoops. The singers have run in and marshalled themselves around the broad sweep of the Great Court, a space big enough for a military parade. Suddenly still as the caryatids on the roof – then feet crunch on gravel as Sehgal's ensemble of 54 local people and his more permanent collaborators change their positions and go through their routines. The high, clear voice of a woman rises, an ululation amid the touristified grandeur. She's joined by a second woman and they shimmy together in the morning sunshine.

On the vast South Lawn, people sit and crouch, facing this way and that on the manicured grass. There's a good quarter acre between each of them. Talk about social distancing. I walk between them and no one meets my eye. This is disturbing. I thought of an Antony Gormley group of sculptures redone as a tableau vivant, and of one of those punishing Marina Abramović exercises. Maybe they're counting the blades of grass. Slowly, the participants leave, one by one. It is as if they have evaporated. I barely see them rise and wander away. Some linger to tell their stories, but I am not approached, and left instead with a strange sense of unease.

## MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

Filled with couplings and disconnections, routines and improvisations, Sehgal's work here combines elements from works he has been developing over the past two decades with situations created specifically for Blenheim. You never see his work the same way twice.



Once captivated, you want to stay all day. ... Blenheim Palace visitors. Photograph: Paul Melling/Alamy

A lone young woman, on one of the winding paths among the dense foliage and little pools in the Secret Garden, sings forlorn love songs and a medley of cheesy hits and show tunes. Alicia Keys' *Girl on Fire* and *I Don't Know How to Love Him* from *Jesus Christ Superstar* feature when I come across her. Are we meant to make eye contact, or applaud, or tiptoe away into the shrubbery, leaving her to her solitary songs? And then she stops and announces that this is *This You*, a 2006 work by Sehgal. She's been singing songs based on the mood she perceives her unwitting audience to be in.

A bloke comes up to me out of nowhere and tells me about climbing various British peaks with his mates. Climbing Snowdon, he reached a point where the path ran out and he was faced with a sheer granite rock-face, exhilarated by the freedom of choosing his own way forward. There is a metaphor about life here but I've been fixated watching his mask inflate and deflate as he talks, and probably miss the point. Later, I hear a woman talking about how she was relentlessly bullied by her brother and how that has affected her adult relationships. I feel like I'm eavesdropping.

Girls are singing nonsense beside a little round pond. Their rum-pum-pums and dum-de-dums, a sort of wordless baroque folderol, is joined, first by the family of ducks in the little pond and then by a child who's sitting with her family on one of the nearby benches. The grownups look bemused. A man joins in, making comical robotic noises, pffzzzts and pops and wah-wah-wahs, that turn into the opening chords of Beethoven's Fifth, replete with jerky video-game sound effects and prog rock variations, all done with his voice and hand gestures, a mad a cappella scat chasing Beethoven's melody to some sort of wayward conclusion. And when he does end, the fountain in the pond suddenly erupts. This is joyous, unexpected, and wonderfully silly. Whatever next? Once captivated, you want to stay all day.

## MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

The Rose Garden is loud with bees, but it is a human hum. Heads appear and disappear among the gloriously scented roses, and a choreography that entertains the flowers. The Beethoven riff, accompanied by clapping, groovy dance moves, boom-cha-cha interruptions and a headbanging girl decorate the 1930s water terraces at the rear of the palace. Its 1891 Willis organ can be heard playing in the library through an open window, as several of Sehgal's participants wade crotch-deep in the different quadrants of the water feature. They lean this way and that, and become as one with the statuary and the duckweed. I want to dive right in, but don't quite dare.

- Tino Sehgal is at Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire, until 15 August.