

Mary E Richards (Brunel University)

This progressive production: agency, durability and keeping it contemporary.

A recent rash of exhibitions that work with the documentation of durational and temporal works of art is evidence of both the interest in preserving and in interrogating, the legacy of live/ performance/ art events, and of capitalising on the marketable potential of that history and the documentation associated with the transitory and ephemeral. The material production of art objects or works, and the associated documents and documentation that can be retained and/or exhibited has been viewed as both evidence and commodity. Such evidence has offered a point of access to events and objects we did not witness or experience ourselves, while the art work as product and commodity has been re-evaluated, exchanged or exhibited for its aesthetic, historical, cultural, political, economic, and social worth. Museums and galleries as repositories and exhibitors of artworks have played a crucial and controversial role in both determining the value of work, as well as ensuring that particular cultural products endure. In light of this, Tino Sehgal's methodology is a radical departure in artistic, commercial and durational terms.

Tino Sehgal is a London-born Berlin-based Indo-German conceptual artist, who has made his name creating 'constructed situations'. He has been commissioned by the Tate Modern to produce a work for the Turbine Hall in 2012 as the 13th artwork in the Unilever series, itself inaugurated in 2000. Sehgal made an impact in the early noughties with This is propaganda (2002) where 'interpreters' dressed as museum attendants chanted 'This is propaganda, you know, you know'. 'Interpreters' are designated individuals chosen by Sehgal to embody and play out 'constructed situations' according to his stipulations. Further 'situations' followed, most using the generative 'This is' or 'This' in the title and in 2005 he was selected to represent Germany at the Venice Biennale. This situation (2007) marked his debut in New York at the Marian Goodman Gallery where 'interpreters' engaged museum visitors in philosophical discussion by calling out one of 100 pre-selected statements. This progress (2010) at the Guggenheim, New York cemented his reputation as an artist of international importance. His work proposes a different solution to the challenge of durability.

With the exception of an early work Untitled (2000), where a naked Sehgal danced himself through iconic danceworks of the twentieth century, his work has never been constructed around his own participation, but is a framework 'influenced by games, influenced by instruction based art' (Reza, 2012). So while the participation of interpreters signals a performative element, Sehgal is not a maker of performance art and he would flinch at the very suggestion. Sehgal's approach disentangles his physical presence entirely from the equation. Nor does Sehgal's strategy tie itself to the inherent impossibility of repetition or re-enactment because Sehgal's work asks us to engage in the moment, for that moment alone. The work is a cultural offer; visitors can take it up and shape it through their own engagement in dialogic meaning making, they can watch others do this or they can walk away. Whatever is created has a clearly definable structure for the interpreter, but it is also dependent on a number of variables that are in flux. For instance This progress (2010) starts with a child who asks 'what is progress?' and walks with the visitor as they respond. The visitor is then passed to a teenager, who then passes the visitor onto successively older adults who talk and walk the visitor through the spiralling space of the museum. The encounter will be different for every visitor just as the interpreters at each stage of the journey will change; the interactions that result are never recorded nor any attempt made to replicate them in a pre-determined manner for, according to the artist, that would evacuate the work of its purpose and meaning.

No material evidence of Sehgal's work officially exists 'no document is exchanged, nor are any receipts issued to either the collector or lawyer. The piece is simply traded for cash up front' (Sayej 2006: 20). Sehgal's approach not only rejects the making of material objects as artworks and any record of sales, but he also forbids any documentation of the art process itself. Each time the work is installed, and in theory it can be installed any number of times, it is animated by those he has asked to participate, for an audience of visitors to the museum or gallery who are called upon to engage with a question or conversation. 'I want to bring back the human encounter into places where material things have a prime status. In a museum, you're supposed to look at things and not talk to other people' (Simonini 2011:31). This desire to challenge the reverential and largely silent relationship audiences have with art objects and each other, led to Sehgal's interest in 'constructed situations', a term he borrows from the Situationist International (SI) who first proposed 'participatory events using experimental behaviour to break the

spectacular bind to capitalism' in the late 1950s and 1960s. (Bishop 2006: 96) The SI sought to 'broaden the non-mediocre portion of life, to reduce its empty moments as much as possible' and to transform 'leisure' and its associated acts of consumption, which they condemned as 'an unrivaled instrument for bestializing the proletariat through by-products of mystifying ideology and bourgeois tastes' (Debord 2004: 45). So that rather than feeling a sense of diminishment when faced with 'spectacles' or commodities that emphasize a world and experiences only accessible indirectly or in ways that benefit a ruling culture, the SI invited engagement in constructing situations that would 'incite this spectator into activity by provoking his capacities to revolutionize his own life' (Levin 2004: 371). Thus challenging the individual to reduce or even eliminate the gap between reality and their desires.

Sehgal's realization of constructed situations for the 21st century may borrow something from the idealism of the SI, but at the same time he sees his work as a critique of the 'naive, anti-market romanticism of the '60s' (Simonini 2011: 31). Sehgal is happy to sell his work and to make a living from his 'products'; the Museum of Modern Art, New York bought The kiss (2008) for \$70,000 and This progress bought by the Guggenheim, New York would not have cost any less. Sehgal however maintains disaffection with the sort of 'products' that instill a sort of passivity towards the world. For example his choice not to have a mobile phone that, on the one hand allows for instant connectivity, but may result in less effort being made to stick to one's original plans or to have a face-to-face encounter. He would prefer his children to play with a skateboard rather than a toy car (Simonini 2011: 31). With the former, travelling becomes an embodied first-hand experience, with the later; one merely facilitates the journey of another hypothetical traveler.

Sehgal's constructed situations work on the basis that visitors to major galleries like the Guggenheim in New York and the Tate Modern in London constitute 'a flow of people from all around the world who are there to take part in something' (Reza, 2012). Sehgal uses the 'civilizing ritual' of coming to the gallery to engage visitors in practices of the self that raise questions of responsibility and agency; 'to act upon himself, to monitor, test, and transform himself', to question what it means to be an ethical subject with both possibilities and limits (Foucault 1990: 28).

Sehgal's approach isn't as overtly political as the SI – he appears more playful than militant, but this should not lead to an underestimation of the

seriousness of his purpose or the potential impact of his proposition. 'I like the word "situation" because you immediately think of people doing something active, together. But you can't really construct a situation because a situation is always so open. So in a way it's a paradox' (Simonini 2011: 30). It is however, this paradox that is one of the strengths of work that allows for the serendipitous and for long term duration. However, it also raises the question of authorial control. How is the tension between authorial intention and interpreters 'interpretations' managed? Sehgal's producer Asad Reza compares the situation to a game of tennis; on the one hand there are set of clearly defined rules known by all players which determine what must happen and how certain things can be approached. However, players, once they have mastered the rules, can play the game as they wish. One interpreter who 'played' This progress (2010) observed;

Tino made no efforts to mask his fastidiousness, and there was no conceit that what was taking place was "free." Important to me early on, however, was the possibility of variability of duration based on the pace of the visitor's walking and/or the depth of the encounter. If something was happening, I very much wanted for it to be able to happen. And so, early on, when the visitor would stop, I would stop. Sometimes the two revolutions--which generally took six to seven minutes--lasted as long as half an hour. I waited for the censure to arrive, and was prepared to act sanctimoniously when it did--but it did not.

(Interpreter of This progress (2010), 2012)

The interpreter, whose role involves initiating a discussion with a museum visitor about the nature of 'progress', is responsible for maintaining the integrity and flow of his section of the piece. He expresses a degree of agency in the way he operated, which had allowed the engaged visitor to determine the length of the iteration, and in the process gave the interpreter an increased sense of satisfaction. Interpreters for This progress (2010) met each other regularly throughout the six week period the work was installed, they worked twelve hours a week, and many reported that they enjoyed the wide variety of conversations they have shared with museum visitors. Moreover, in an action that may seem at odds with the ethos of no documentation, at least one written record was kept by interpreters and, in the instance reported to The New Yorker, distributed to other interpreters as a log of quotations which noted interesting things that were heard;

“that salamanders change colors for sexual reasons,” “that schools today no longer teach cursive writing,” “that the smaller the diamond, the better the marriage,” “that Mr. Hitler ruined my childhood,” “that if I could time-travel I would go back to college and try to fix the thing I don’t want to talk about,” “that she is the masochist in our relationship,” “that everyone in my family except me has seen a ghost.” (Collins, 2010)

So for the interpreters, this informal means of recording the most striking moments of their exchanges, reflects their desire to share something of their experiences; even if in this instance the document only really evidenced the range of conversational topics the question ‘what is progress?’ elicited. It isn’t clear how closely such record keeping was monitored, if at all, however, what is clear is that a careful selection process was undertaken in the year before the project. In New York, children were chosen on the basis of whether they could follow instructions, whereas adults were chosen on the basis of their ‘interestingness’; a somewhat vague selection criteria (Collins, 2010). In the United Kingdom a different strategy was adopted. Workshops, not explicitly linked to any piece, but offering the opportunity to work with Sehgal, took place in the Turbine Hall gallery and other spaces at regular intervals for over a year before the work was to be installed. These were not framed as activities that specifically connected to his project but as a chance to find out about the artist and his working methods; most participants professed to know very little about Sehgal. The workshop space allowed for a mutual ‘sizing up’ as a range of actions were carried out with other strangers: dancer, photographer, council worker, journalist, retired local resident, student, physicist. Reza later contacted a number of participants, simply asking to meet with them. It was then through these subsequent conversations that interpreters were recruited. There appears to be no readily tangible ‘entry’ requirements, by all accounts workshop participants weren’t aiming for anything beyond sating their curiosity. But what all those recruited have demonstrated is an inquisitiveness and a willingness to engage with the ideas of the project. (Richards, 2011) On a more pragmatic level, the time commitment is not insignificant; interpreters at the Guggenheim contributed approximately thirty-six hours of their time over the six weeks. Interpreters for the London Turbine Hall project have committed to sixteen hours per week from mid July to the end of October even though no-one at the time they agreed to take part, knew exactly what would be asked of them, or indeed exactly how much they would be paid. With this in

mind, it is clear that Sehgal's work ultimately depends on trust, openness and honesty.

The use of interpreters does not however, mean that the artist himself is free. For the Guggenheim exhibition, This progress (2010) Sehgal and Reza were present in the museum every day for the six weeks the work was installed there. This is not atypical, a careful monitoring of any complex art work with 'moving parts' is needed to ensure that things continue to function as intended. Sehgal clearly can never control the specific nature of the encounter between interpreter and visitor that results in a 'co-production of meaning in the moment that cannot be simply repeated ever' but the use of chance operations is nothing new (Reza, 2012). Indeed, using the inherent unpredictability of participants isn't so different from more conventional object-centred art making which has incorporated elements of chance and contingency outside the direct control of the artist. This type of work embraces the uncertainties of the medium or the artist's method to make the art object. Sehgal however, is entirely dependent upon and in control of interpreters in ways that are designed to release the productive potential of both interpreters and the framing concept of the situation. In order to achieve this, a number of things need to be in place. Firstly, the nature of the underlying structure within which the interpreters work is of crucial importance. It must be something that will motivate and maintain interest for the duration of the exhibition; normally a minimum of six weeks. If interpreters are not getting anything out of it, if they get bored, then the work is unlikely to be of interest to a visitor. Secondly, the work requires the specific conditions of a gallery or museum space; a place where visitors have deliberately chosen to come, where they are, in short, primed for an encounter; 'to receive some kind of message from their culture or from the world's culture about what it is to be a contemporary person' (Reza, 2012). Thirdly, the visitor must be willing to connect with a stranger in a two way process of an exchange; something that requires a certain lack of inhibition and a willingness to converse. This is the only object.

Sehgal has a passionate interest in economics which, along with dance, was the focus of his undergraduate studies. He gained an economics degree from Humboldt University, Berlin and he worked with experimental choreographers Jérôme Bel and Xavier Le Roy. In particular, he is concerned with the economics of sustainability in a world, where warnings of the imminence of various forms of ecological catastrophe continue to increase. He has no interest in adding to the sum

of accumulated art objects that are the established and central focus of gallery and museum collections and of conservation activity. This attitude, together with his decision to never fly by aeroplane, reinforce the impression that he is committed to living in a way that considers the impact his actions and activities have on the environment. His practice can be seen as a discourse of sustainability. The work is entirely free from being located solely in particular bodies present in a particular place and time, one of the chief limiting factors in other embodied art practices especially those reliant on a singular practitioner. This freedom suggests the work has the ability to endure in ways that exceed what has been attempted in the parallel sphere of performance art where attempts to re-create actions previously undertaken by artists, for the purpose of perpetuating work for new audiences, have resulted in performance re-enactments; a form which has experienced a surge of popularity in recent years as a means of trying on some level to address the issue of 'preservation' and dissemination of temporal and transitory performances and events for example, Jeremy Deller's The Battle of Orgreave (2001), Marina Abramović's Seven Easy Pieces (2005), Yoko Ono's Cut Piece (1964/1965/2003) and Allan Kaprow, 18 Happenings in 6 Parts, (1959/2006). By contrast, a very particular agency is expressed by Sehgal's interpreters, who rather than being seen as hapless pawns in an orchestrated artwork, duped into sacrificing their time and effort into the realization of someone else's artistic vision, see the offer as a gift.

The relationship to Tino was very much flipped. It was us who were in his debt! Here was this structure that he had parleyed his social capital to erect and then he welcomed US to come in and play in such a special place and in such an unusual manner. (Interpreter of This progress (2010), 2012)

Not all interpreters agree. Courtney Bender, for one, observes:

After hundreds of meaningless conversations prompted by questions like these, the desire for a question that gets closer to the bone—that does not operate on the level of our politeness, which runs so deep that we can consider every option, that displays our knowledge, that provides positions that we can inhabit—only intensifies...The procedures of "This progress" create the sense of this desire but they cannot slake it. There must be more than this. (This progress, 2010)

Bender expresses a degree of frustration in wanting a connection of greater profundity, as if an authentic engagement with others was something that the brevity and transitory nature of the exchange could not provide. But equally, perhaps Bender had lost the capacity to enter the situation with requisite spontaneity, and had thus reduced her ability to experience being present, and thus having 'presence', in the moment, with and for the museum visitor. To reiterate, this was not re-enactment; every conversational encounter was designed to be the first and only one. The aim of these live interactive exchanges was to create the conditions for a unique, relevant and thought-provoking conversation. However, Bender's reflection points to the inevitably broad range of expectations and perspectives of individual interpreters who themselves may feel limited in their capacity to remain always primed to be generative and responsive to museum visitors and the stimulus of the piece.

The absence of any authorised documentation beyond the memory of the visitors, the interpreters, the artist, curators and the legal actuaries who witness the verbal agreement to purchase a work in the first place, clearly privileges the transitory and lived exchange between visitor and interpreter. Sehgal's approach goes beyond other conceptual artists' who claim immateriality but have filmed their actions, taken photographs or provided certificates of participation that allow for some record; there are no 'authorised' material traces to lead you back to the event. Indeed, the gift shop in the hosting institution is bereft. Souvenirs as consumable tokens of remembrance are rejected as if to clearly acknowledge that there is no way to return to the past moments shared, and that to hold on to a tangible but fragmentary reminder of what has been, is symptomatic of a pervasive nostalgia and an inability to live the present moment as a complete but fleeting and irretrievable experience. His larger refusal to document his work, and indeed his active but ultimately hopeless efforts to remove unauthorised images and video of his work from the web is a decision antithetical to the shallow but addictive cultural compulsion to record and share multiple elements of personal and borrowed experiences though You Tube, Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter and the plethora of other social media sites; (re)producing and recycling as we increasingly attempt to 'write ourselves into being' through the web (Kreps 2010 :110). Moreover, Sehgal's challenge to the prevalent obsession to evidence and archive our own and every experience, at least partially points to the potential for duration in his approach. In

the artist's objection to de-spatialising technologies which may distort, fix and mis/represent his work, he instead invests in the constant shifts associated with a spatialising practice through which cultural meaning and value are constructed physically and temporally in relation to each new place and space the work is installed, anywhere in the world, allowing the work to be made anew in each conversation. Furthermore, in terms of the work's duration, the work is able to do this, in accordance with the artist's instructions, in any and every gallery or museum it is installed, through and potentially throughout time.

Sehgal's refusal to allow documentation of his work to become one more downloadable file should not however be read as a rejection of new technologies per se. Nor should his temporarily realised art works be interpreted as an anti-capitalist stance against object making as commodity. More accurately, Sehgal's attitude represents an objection to the way our culture gives such weight to the transformation of materials, rather than to the experiential: 'I think that a market economy or capitalism – the system of distribution we live in – is not such a problem: the problem is what circulates within that system. And what circulates has nothing to do with this system of distribution itself, but with a specific culture' (Heiser 2005: 102). That is, while his work is embedded in a form of production that operates within the usual economy of buyer and seller, the artwork in production gives absolute value to the transactional; the direct exchange between individuals who engage with the work. This approach values, prioritises and attempts to protect the lived experience that is the work. Its appeal to interpreters and visitors alike, operates in a way that draws attention to Foucauldian technologies of the self that 'permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality' (Martin 1988:16). An interpreter corroborates;

As one who was born and raised in New York City, part of what was for me so extraordinary is that I tend to be in a Metropolis and Mental Life sort of way very Germanically averse to talking to strangers. Part of what allows New York to work, I figure, is that it affords strangers their space, they afford me mine, and we all get to coexist. To repeatedly, violently, and productively shatter that barrier was for me incredibly life affirming. It would not be hyperbole to say that it somehow re-enchanted the world.

(Interpreter of This progress (2010), 2012)

Sehgal's insistence upon purely verbal contracts that refer to works that are embodied exchanges, places his approach well beyond the conventional archive, even though the pieces themselves are owned and can be loaned by the museum for perpetuity, and selected 'installers' can be asked at any time to set up the work. In the case of This progress (2010) owned by the Guggenheim, there are currently three 'installers' officially recognised by the museum's lawyers as being capable of installing the piece (Reza, 2012). Installers include the artist himself, his producer Asad Reza and another trusted individual who knows and has memorised what the work is and what is required to set it up. In effect the work is embodied in the installers, who are, if you like, the recognised repository of the work. Moreover, these individuals are not the final resting place of Sehgal's artworks; the installers are contractually obliged, at an appropriate moment, to pass their knowledge of the work on to someone younger than themselves; someone who is likely to have demonstrated a sustained commitment to the artist and is willing to ensure the work endures as it was conceived, well beyond the existence of Sehgal or any of the currently designated installers (Reza, 2012). This contingency plan accepts and indeed embraces the social and economic forces of exchange which characterise the market and the museum. His investment and legacy lie in a progressive and progressing product, that is forever contemporary, both within and beyond the archive. He does this with the full awareness that, as with any orally transmitted history, (mis)remembering and forgetting will instigate subtle shifts in the translation and transmutation of the works from person to person through time.

Notes

1. <http://www.arnolfini.org.uk/whatson/events/details/251> accessed 16th February 2012)

References

Bender, Courtney (2011) 'The Secular Temple'

<http://freq.uenci.es/2011/10/20/the-secular-temple/> accessed 2nd March 2012

Bishop, Claire (ed.) (2006) Participation London and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Whitechapel and MIT Press

Collins, Lauren (2010) 'Primal Schmooze' The New Yorker, 22nd March

http://www.newyorker.com/talk/2010/03/22/100322ta_talk_collins accessed 24th

February 2012

Debord, Guy (2004) 'Report on the Construction of Situations and on the Terms of Organization and Action of the International Situationist Tendency', in Tom McDonough (ed. and trans.) Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents, Massachusetts: MIT Press

Foucault, Michel (1990) The History of Sexuality Vol.2 trans. Robert Hurley, New York: Vintage Books

Heiser, Jorg (2005) Funky Lessons Frankfurt am Main: Revolver

Kreps, David (2010) 'My social networking profile: copy, resemblance, or simulacrum? A poststructuralist interpretation of social information systems', European Journal of Information Systems 19:104--115

Levin, Thomas (2004) 'Dismantling the Spectacle: The Cinema of Guy Debord' in Tom McDonough (ed.) Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents, Massachusetts: MIT Press

Martin, Luther et al. (1988) Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault. London: Tavistock

Sajej, Nadja (2006) 'Terms and Conditions: Selling Tino Sehgal' ArtUS 1st October pp20--23

Simonini, Ross (2011) 'Immaterial Guy' Psychology Today July/August pp30--31

Umatham, Sandra (2009) 'Given the Tino Sehgal Case: How to Save the Future of a Work of Art that Materializes Only Temporarily', Theatre Research International, 34 (2): 194--199

Interviews

Reza, Asad Monday 20th February 2012

Richards, Mary Interviews with nine participants from the Turbine Hall workshops September- December 2011

Email

Interpreter *This progress* (2010) email correspondence. Interpreter wishes to remain anonymous, February 2012