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JOE SCANLAN on Tino Sehgal

I CHOOSE to consider writing as a useless labor, apolitical and of little moral significance. Urged on by some base inspiration, I confess I would experience a kind of pleasure at being proved wrong. A guilty pleasure, since it would be at the expense of the victims, those who thought I was right.

For Tino Sehgal, other people's writing on his work would appear to function as notary to the juggernaut that is the artist's career, a kind of amicus brief in which the content is irrelevant so long as its signature achieves the necessary gravitas. All that really matters in this moment of writing, then, is that the proper name, Tino Sehgal, and the proper place, the Guggenheim, be printed in tandem on 220.5 square inches of coated paper within the binding of this issue of *Artforum*. It should also be recorded that the Guggenheim's rotunda and ramp were devoid of inanimate art objects for the duration of the show, the first time in the museum's history that it was both open to the public and "empty." Instead, Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture provided the format for two of Sehgal's choreographic artworks, *This Progress*, 2006, and *Kiss*, 2002. As is always the case with Sehgal's works, both pieces were enacted by amateur actors (Sehgal refers to them as interpreters), willing participants selected through personal referrals and casting calls, carefully rehearsed, and stage-directed throughout the show. Last, it's important that something be printed on the verso and recto of these two pages, including consecutive page numbers in a consistent font, as verification that the pages are authentic, authentic even if they were to become separated from their binding several hundred years from now should some catastrophe befall the Library of Congress. As the writer of this text, I have a lot of leeway. But the one thing I can't do is introduce any doubt—now or forever—that Tino Sehgal had a one-person show at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, in the year 2010.

I liked *This Progress*. *Kiss*, not so much.

What else needs to be written? I have many swift arrows in my quiver that speak to the wise, but for the crowd they need interpreters. The skilled poet is one who knows much through natural gift, but those who have learned their art chatter turbulently, vainly. Saying anything more would mean giving in to the presumption that some kind of extended analysis, reasonable or otherwise, would be useful to our apprehension of Sehgal's work. I doubt that is the case.

It doesn't matter, really, because the point of Sehgal's work isn't our apprehension of it, but its apprehension of us. *Every act is political and, whether one is conscious of it or not, the presentation of one's work—especially* other people *as one's work—is no exception.* For that reason, as someone engaged in a useless activity, allow me to *suspend judgment*; my *present task is not to solve any enigmas, but rather to try to understand what* Sehgal is putting *forth and recognize what* his artworks are *actually proposing.*

Kiss is a durational choreography in which two interpreters performed a slow, tumbling embrace across the circular floor of the museum rotunda. The piece—which I have only ever seen performed by a man and a woman—is by turns torturous, smoldering, and delicate. At loosely predetermined intervals, the performers are at liberty to morph into poses reminiscent of art history's greatest hits of the genre: Bronzino's *Allegory with Venus and Cupid*, 1545; Auguste Rodin's *Kiss*, 1889; Constantin Brancusi's *Kiss*, 1916. The interpreters at the Guggenheim were plainly clothed and virtually oblivious to their audience, and some of them are (or were) actual couples. They worked in three-hour shifts and were paid twenty dollars an hour, plus workers' compensation, if they happened to get injured on the job.

Now, *if the participants* in *Kiss* were *given enough agency within its structure so as to give the impression of being responsible for themselves, then,* from a labor standpoint, Sehgal's artworks are *ethically no different from any other industry in which live human beings are the willing stock in trade: fashion, music, theatre,* reality television. Ultimately I suspect *that one of the fundamental attractions of* "live art" *now, what makes it exceptional even in comparison with everyday commerce, is precisely its license to exploit the good faith of the* general *public for personal profit and notoriety.* If we think it is important for contemporary art to be representative of the social conditions of its production, then Sehgal's use of people as the material of his art is symptomatic of *nothing more than a desire to identify, in a more or less new* way, *with the Prevailing Ideology.*

In *This Progress*, a chain of interpreters—a child, a teenager, an adult, and a senior citizen—accompanied me up the ramp of the Guggenheim while pretending to be interested in my response to the question "What is progress?" Each interpreter, in a different fashion, would listen somewhat carefully to what I was saying and respond in kind before handing me off to the next interpreter. I didn't mind feeling like all but a few of the interpreters were only superficially interested in what I had to say; the balance of attentiveness and detachment felt strangely apt, like making small talk with any person who gets paid to be engaged with us on a daily basis: a cabdriver, a deli owner, a cop. What I didn't like was how rushed the whole experience was. I was disappointed that I was being asked to participate in a conversation with people who seemed to have been instructed not to allow the exchange to become too digressive, too interesting. I thought it should have lasted at least an hour, maybe ninety minutes. It lasted fifteen. Once I reached the top of the museum, the interaction politely but abruptly ended. From there I could either take the elevator down to street level or spiral back down the ramp, passing similarly engaged interpreters and visitors and perhaps wondering how their conversations were going.

It was fun, but I have vastly more rewarding conversations on a daily basis with my wife, Diana Murphy, the executive editor of Metropolis Books. She specializes in publications dedicated to proactive architecture, sustainable design, urban planning, and social activism, by which I mean the exuberant, imperfect, grassroots incrementalism that actual progress entails.

Still, being a fan of Plato and thus well entertained by dialogues about the ideal state of absolute concepts as opposed to our flawed, human versions of them, I went back to the show three times to see whether the experience would be appreciably different. (It was.) On one visit, I had a good conversation with one of the elder interpreters about recent cognitive research into the perception of beauty and the role that nature, as opposed to culture, plays in its designation. In this particular study, the test subjects were shown head shots of eight people and asked whether they thought the people in the images were beautiful. Opinions varied widely. Then pairs of the portraits were merged digitally and the subjects were shown the four new, composite portraits. Opinions started to coalesce but still were varied. Those four images were merged into two, opinions were solicited, and then the two were merged into one. When the final composite was shown to the test group, they agreed unanimously that the face was beautiful. The hypothesis? Digitally merging the faces balanced out the particular quirks and asymmetries that any one subject might have found attractive but another not, resulting in a single image that was neither exceptional nor abhorrent. The deeper theory, though, is that the face seemed beautiful to all the test subjects because their innate biological instincts were drawn to what the composite facial symmetry represented: stability, conformity, lack of disease.

What does this have to do with Tino Sehgal? While many art-world insiders bristle at the aplomb with which Sehgal makes "difficult" art seem easy, pantomiming as he does the critical milestones of the 1970s, many in the throng that saw Sehgal's Guggenheim show were unencumbered by such baggage. They just liked it. Railing against such blithe amnesia, as Benjamin H. D. Buchloh did in these pages in 2005 when Sehgal was a representative to the German pavilion in Venice, only confirms the composite, dialectical perfection of his work. The worse the work is, the better it is. The more trite it is, the more profound it is. The more annoying it is, the more charming it is. And so on. Of all things in the world, `good sense is the most equally distributed, for everybody thinks he is so well supplied with it, that even those most difficult to please in all other matters never desire more of it than they already possess.`

Therein lies the rub.

In the catalogue for "Let's Entertain: Life's Guilty Pleasures," Philippe Vergne's expansive group show at the Walker Art Center in 2000 that investigated the confluence of contemporary art and entertainment, philosopher Richard Shusterman credits no less a snob than T. S. Eliot with saying that the poet "would like to be something of a popular entertainer, but as things are, and as fundamentally they must always be, poetry is not a career, but a mug's game." Eliot, of course, suffered from the self-imposed precepts of originality. By contrast, the liberal recycling of good material is an essential part of the entertainment industry. Familiarity breeds success, from song hooks and sitcom quips to computer animations and period drama. For most of the twentieth century, however, the dizzying speed at which phrases and gestures were assimilated by popular culture was the primary reason such phenomena were not taken seriously. Vergne's show begged to differ with this entrenched, Greenbergian disdain, largely on the premise that pleasure and democracy had replaced difficulty and elitism as yardsticks of important art.

The Few assume to be the *deputies*, but they are often only the *despoilers* of the Many. Consequently, despite the numerous comparisons made between Sehgal and such highfalutin artists as Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, Maurizio Cattelan, Marcel Duchamp, Dan Graham, and Jeff Koons—not to mention Sehgal's mentor, Jérôme Bel—the cultural figure I find most comparable to Sehgal is the traveling salesman/con man Professor Harold Hill in *The Music Man*. In the climactic scene of the 1962 Warner Bros. musical, Hill is forced to put on a concert with the band he has assembled solely for the sake of selling the locals a lot of expensive musical instruments. Having no musical training, and having heard the band himself, Hill fears that his scam will be revealed as soon as the band begins to play. To his great surprise, the townsfolk love the concert—not because of the quality of the music but because it's *their* children who are playing it.

Don't get me wrong—Sehgal is not a con man. Nor does he commit sexual harassment in a public library or try to persuade us that participation in his art will deter intemperate youth from shooting pool. Rather, through his choreographies, he discovers that human beings will cherish any art they've had a hand in creating, no matter how mediocre it is.

The Average. We have been present at the establishment of a new Aesthetic, one that has as much to do with the efficacy of numbers as it does with ho-hum experience. □

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