

Interview with Tino Sehgal
Tyler Coburn
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Well-versed in choreography, critical theory and economics, Tino Sehgal creates rule-based situations that address the historical relationship between art institutions and their visitors. His pieces eschew anything that could traditionally be considered an artistic medium (as well as visual documentation and reproduction, for that matter), thriving instead on the contingencies of transient, interpersonal exchange. An ambulatory conversation in *This Progress*; the entreaty for discussion in *This objective of that object*: Sehgal's are surprisingly affective experiences, which illuminate many of our behavioural norms whilst offering new modes of engagement. For his last in a trilogy of annual exhibitions at the ICA, alternatively titled *This Success* or *This Failure*, the London-born, Berlin-based artist relinquished the lower gallery to a group of schoolchildren and invited them to spend each day playing without the aid of objects. *KultureFlash* caught up with the artist to learn more.

This interview was conducted in person at the ICA on 29/01/07.

Tyler Coburn: In recent discussions, you've mentioned a certain anxiety you feel about *This Success* or *This Failure* [on view at the ICA till 04/03/07] because it is somewhat of a departure from your past two shows at the ICA. Whereas the past two were premised on what you called an "action/reaction-based system", the mode of the current piece affords more room for visitors to choose to engage or not engage in the work.

Tino Sehgal: It's not a current mode. It's just a different way of engaging. You are free to interact or not interact, but that's only one way of doing things. This action/reaction model also gives you something specific. It addresses you and it also envelops you. It has different aspects. But I definitely do have a lot of anxiety around this work. Although I just went into the gallery and met these girls who had spent one hour rehearsing a dance that was five minutes long. And I thought, wow. Impressive. So at this moment I'm not as anxious.

TC: When I first went into the show, two girls came up to me and both declared that they thought that the title of the piece was *This Success*. We ended up in a huge circle of about twenty people and the two girls taught us all a series of games. You've commented in the past that you think of the children in *This Success* or *This Failure* as both visitors and interpreters, as you partly developed the piece from the idea of a school tour of a museum. In a similar way, the moment I started playing the game, I became conscious that I was no longer just a visitor; through a voluntary action, I assumed a role somewhere between visitor and interpreter. I became a participant in a series of activities that other visitors were beholding.

TS: I was aware of that, but I hadn't thought of it in those terms. The moment you really start playing then, of course, you are hit by the gaze of other people, which seems to ask, "What's going on here? What is this situation?" But that sense that you actually create the work is even stronger in *This Progress*. The interpreter, first of all, poses a question to you: "What is progress?" Then you walk and talk and play as much of a role constructing the conversation as the interpreter does. And this gives you the freedom to form your own opinion about what "progress" is.

TC: So the visitor is afforded a nuanced sphere of activity. Whereas volition was reduced in *This objective of that object*. When visitors entered the upper gallery of the ICA during your 2005

exhibition, they were confronted by a group of interpreters who chanted, 'The objective of this work is to become the object of a discussion', whilst walking backwards towards them. In this scenario, visitors really only had two choices: if they explicitly commented on or responded to the scenario, the interpreters would begin a verbal discourse that seemed far more like a lecture than a discussion; if they failed to react, the interpreters would wither to the ground. But while visitors may have been less empowered, they were nevertheless put into a position of complicity. As with your other pieces, a visitor's lack of action could itself be consequential. Not participating would lead to one outcome.

TS: That's something I'm politically concerned with. There's no possibility not to act so everything you do, even if it doesn't seem like acting, produces an effect.

TC: You once said that objectification has become a bad word, in the socially understood sense -- that it has come to carry an antagonistic, almost Sartrean association of becoming an object of someone else. In contrast, you stated that what you were interested in was a model of two-way objectification: moving towards something that is not necessarily social equilibrium, but which redefines the ways in which objectification can be constructive. This reminds me of Merleau-Ponty's theory of intersubjectivity, in which sociality is a fundamentally dual state of being both a subject for oneself and an object of others. It strikes me that your model of two-way objectification asks that question in a lived context. The terms of that question are far more complicated in your pieces, however, because they consider how the museum might condition a visitor's broader socio-economic being.

TS: That's the point. What I try to propose is that there's a whole lot to do at this stage. We can't just say, "Oh well, we've fulfilled our basic needs and we now have to invent some new material needs." We have to change the ground we focus on. So I'm interested in this process, but I'm also interested in how it can become commodified. It needs to be commodified -- otherwise, how do we survive? Nobody is interested in farming anymore, so commodification is the only possibility we have. I suggest that we commodify interesting things or just commodify less and then share and participate in the more interesting things.

TC: But if you deliberately intend your pieces to have no visual reproduction, documentation or saleable material, how then are they commodified for visitors?

TS: The reason I don't use sustainable materials or make copies is because I know that the thing-in-itself can be commodified. I can't commodify it, but I can allow it to be. If somebody is interested in acquiring one of my pieces, they can. Museums, for example, could show them for years. It would take a lot of work, but restoring a painting also takes a lot of work.

TC: I'm struck by the fact that you think of the pieces as things-in-themselves. I had always thought you used "this" in so many of your titles to critique the metaphysical idea of "thisness": that a given thing can have an atemporal essentiality, a state of being a thing-in-itself.

TS: Yet there's always a new "this" in the piece. That's why I chose it: it's always indexical of something else. The structure is still the same structure; the concept is still the same concept. But there's an element of difference inscribed into this repetition.

TC: Infinitely repeating, infinitely nonidentical "this." It's how Judith Butler talks about identity: a constantly repeating assertion of "I", such that the same unit repeats but, like your pieces, this unit is temporally materialised and thus necessarily changes.

TS: It's quite complicated. What you called "infinitely nonidentical" is encompassed by a frame that stays identical. There are elements that always remain the same. This Success or This Failure looks different at the ICA than it did in Austria, because the children wear school uniforms, have non-Caucasian ethnic backgrounds and do completely different things. But at the end of the day, there's still the same agenda: a whole lot of kids between eight and ten playing games without foreign objects. There's an element of situating inside of the piece and at the same time there's an external stability. That's why I could say the piece is one thing.

TC: You once said that the museum introduces visitors to their role within the market economy. Can you elaborate on this?

TS: It's very simple, actually. 250 years ago, in economic terms, we were in a society under the premise of lack, meaning the supply side had the power. Today we are in an affluent society, where the demand side has the power. The political sphere is now less important than the economic sphere in creating and producing reality and we, as consumers, are at our most powerful. That's why there is so much advertising, consumer polling and market research. Now, the museum is the place where citizenship is reflected when the individual walks through. The notion of the individual is celebrated through the works of its artists. In its classical form, the museum views you as a subject. There was a democratic process that constructed culture and when you entered the museum, you received this culture, just as you would receive orders from the king. I don't think that's the case in our society. We are constantly constructing culture. So when you enter my work, you are also constructing it.

TC: I think that really comes across. Someone recently asked why you didn't set This Success or This Failure in a neutral space or in a school. It strikes me that it's necessary for you to develop your pieces in the museum context because they address the very outmoded way the museum communicates or teaches ideology. It seems further necessary because -- as you said in a recent interview with Helen Sumpter -- you intend your pieces to present more accurate "social mirrors" to how we are developing as consumers and as citizens than the one the museum traditionally offers.

TS: I wouldn't go so far as to say "very outmoded." I would say, "slightly outmoded." I do think that the exhibition format is the most contemporary format we have, because it addresses the individual. No other ritual in any other culture addresses the individual. That's something completely Western, completely innovative and quite young -- only 250 years old.

TC: How do you think that the museum, as an institution, has shifted since its inception? And to what extent does your work reflect that change?

TS: I think that the museum was quite important from its beginning, but when it was newer, there was more experimentation. The exhibition format came out of this period. But the museum has definitely become more and more important since then and there's an economics to why this is so. It's easy enough to say, "What are the major buildings being built today?" They're not churches, they're not cinemas, they're not carparks. They're museums. When, at other times, we focused on churches, today we focus on museums. Obviously, the museum must be the ritual space of our time.

TC: There's something interesting in This Success or This Failure, following what you're saying. I think it would be very easy for many visitors to correlate the children in this piece with those on a school trip to a museum, as you intended. The sight of children in museums, for me, is always one of the more poignant and transparent instances of institutional rules exerting themselves,

because the thing a child least wants to do is stand still and be quiet, but in a museum that's all they're allowed to do. And what I liked about this piece is that it doesn't propose a rule-less system -- your pieces always have their own sets of rules -- but rather employs rules that afford an environment inclusive of a child's typical behaviour and somewhat contrary to the behaviour a museum would normally demand. So in the piece, this behavioural discrepancy can function like a "social mirror" that reflects back on us and makes us realise the extent to which we as visitors have adopted, unconsciously even, a certain mode of behaviour within the museum space.

TS: There's a tradition to that. If you look into the writings of 18th- and 19th-century British social reformists, there was a belief -- which relates to Foucault's concept of governmentality -- that the museum was a machine to shape behaviour. These authors don't write one word about art-objects. They talk about the effect the museum has on shaping the lower class. It's all about what the museum should do, practically -- you can't let people of the lower class in freely without a guided tour, for example, because they'll get drunk. With *This Success or This Failure* and Carsten Holler's slides at the Turbine Hall, we've come full-circle. We are now so civilised and so contained that we can actually afford ourselves the luxury of being loud and of having these kinds of experiences in a museum setting. So I think that both his and my pieces are a celebration of this point in time.

TC: So it's a positive thing that we're so civilised that we can afford to have these experiences in museums?

TS: I think so. These governmental forces are so deeply embedded in us that we can afford to let go.