

Johnen Galerie

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Tino Sehgal

14.12.2007

Art in Review - New York Times

08.02.08 16:04

The New York Times
nytimes.com

December 14, 2007

Art in Review

By THE NEW YORK TIMES

TINO SEHGAL

This Situation

Marian Goodman

24 West 57th Street

Through Jan. 10

Space can be enlivened and filled with many things, including talk. For proof, spend a little time in "This Situation," the brilliant, challenging performance piece with which Tino Sehgal is making his New York gallery debut.

The work is performed six days a week during gallery hours, by six players whose unscripted discussion is triggered by memorized quotations culled by Mr. Sehgal from three centuries of Western thought. You won't see the same six people every time; they rotate from a group of 30 trained by the artist.

A rising star on the international scene, Mr. Sehgal doesn't make objects, send out announcement cards or dispense news releases, nor does he allow his pieces to be photographed. Being there is the only way to experience his careful structures of words, time, human relations and art-world rituals. At the Frieze Art Fair in London in 2005, whenever people stepped into the otherwise empty booth of the Wrong Gallery, a boy and girl, pacing back and forth, would say: "Hello, welcome to the Wrong Gallery. We are showing 'This Is Right' by Tino Sehgal." They would then proceed to enact five earlier performance pieces available for purchase. (Collectors who buy Mr. Sehgal's art are trained to perform them.)

"This Situation" is more complex. Whenever someone steps into the space at Goodman, the six players break off their conversation, inhale deeply and greet the visitor in unison with "Welcome to 'This Situation.'" Then they walk backward a few steps, one of them tosses out a new quotation, and they're off again.

A kind of time travel unfolds. Each quotation takes us to a different point in intellectual history: Karl Marx's London, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Paris (or Guy Debord's), the United States just after World War II. The players' slow-motion movements and stagy poses migrate too. They evoke Classical sculptures or modern teenagers, Watteau's pleasure seekers or loitering smokers. Occasionally you'll recognize the chatting, reclining party of three at the center of Manet's "Déjeuner sur l'Herbe." Periodically the players also break off and recite, in a round robin, "Tino Sehgal, 'This Situation,' 2007."

The discussion ranges unpredictably across economics, philosophy, social change, child rearing, personal freedom and of course Situationism. Art per se is rarely touched on. There are moments of closure and hopeless disagreement or befuddlement. A visitor may be invited to participate with "What do you think?" -- or more pointed comments, if you happen to be taking notes. But even when it resembles an arcane graduate seminar or a cerebral encounter group, "This Situation" retains an unexpected urgency.

Civilized conversation and its requirements of empathy, honesty, clarity and of course listening are among Mr. Sehgal's subjects here, along with the collective nature of knowledge and problem solving. At certain points the room feels filled with nothing so much as a desperate concern for the state of the world. ROBERTA SMITH

WADE GUYTON

Friedrich Petzel Gallery

537 West 22nd Street, Chelsea