

Tino Sehgal - Art - New York Times

08.02.08 15:56

The New York Times
nytimes.com

November 25, 2007

ART

You Can't Hold It, but You Can Own It

By [ANNE MIDGETTE](#)

ART can be defined, provocatively, as an intangible quantity that transforms an ordinary object — a urinal, a soup can, an unmade bed — into something worth many times more than its material value. Tino Sehgal seeks to isolate precisely that intangible quantity. His art is completely immaterial; it can be bought and sold without involving any objects whatsoever.

Mr. Sehgal, 31, who lives in Berlin, creates what he calls “staged situations”: interactive experiences that may not even initially declare themselves as works of art. Take “This Is New,” in which an attendant quotes a museumgoer a headline from that day’s papers: only the visitor’s response can trigger an interaction that concludes with the work’s title being spoken. Or “This Success/This Failure,” in which young children at play in an empty room attempt to draw visitors into their games, and after a certain time decide themselves whether the result has been a success or a failure. Or “This Situation,” a more complex piece, with six adult players, which opens at the Marian Goodman Gallery on Friday and is Mr. Sehgal’s first New York show.

Part of the point is to free art from the glut of material overproduction. But Mr. Sehgal, unlike many performance artists, is not protesting the art market itself. His work is specifically conceived to function within the art world’s conventions: it is lent and exhibited, bought and sold. It is sold, in fact — now that Mr. Sehgal is becoming a star in Europe — for five-figure sums.

The only stipulation is that his pieces cannot involve the transformation of any material, in any way. No written instructions, no bill of sale (purchases are conducted orally, in the presence of a notary), no catalogs and (to the dismay of photo editors in the art press) no pictures.

Yes, it is also funny. Mr. Sehgal’s pieces are in part games, governed by detailed rules and rewarding those who play along. Some are deliberately amusing, like “This Is So Contemporary,” in which uniformed museum guards dance around the room singing, “This is so contemporary, contemporary, contemporary,” shown in the German pavilion of the [Venice Biennale](#) in 2005.

Mr. Sehgal, who sports a mop of dark hair and a gentle German accent (his father is Indian, his mother German), said he had not anticipated how the public would react to this piece. Sitting in the narrow library of the Goodman gallery recently, he recalled visitors to the work’s first showing, in France in 2004.

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"This old guy took off his hat," Mr. Sehgal said, "and he started to dance. This is one of the reactions to the piece. People say: 'O.K., whatever this is, I'm dancing too. I'm not going to stand outside.' This kind of joy of life is what the piece is about, or can be about. I think that it makes sense to try and evoke that."

Mr. Sehgal has had solo exhibitions all over Europe, including one at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (where he has a work in the permanent collection) and three at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. The Goodman show is the crest of a wave poised to break over the United States.

This fall "Kiss" — in which a couple in an unbroken embrace recreate kisses from familiar works of art — is on display at the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) in Chicago, and the California College of the Arts is showing "This Is New" at its Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, as the first salvo in a permanent Sehgal exhibition. In December a retrospective of five early pieces will open at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. And in 2009, as part of the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the [Guggenheim Museum's](#) flagship [Frank Lloyd Wright](#) building, Mr. Sehgal will create a new work there.

"There is only one artist in a generation like him," said Jens Hoffmann, the Wattis Institute's director. Mr. Hoffmann, to be sure, is a friend who has played an instrumental role in Mr. Sehgal's career. He was the director of exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Arts when Mr. Sehgal showed there; and it was he who first encouraged Mr. Sehgal, then a choreographer, to show his work in a museum context.

Mr. Sehgal studied dance and economics, but economics came first. He says his touchstone belief is that his generation must "come up with alternatives of producing in different ways": a political rather than an artistic issue. He gradually came to realize, he said, that parliamentary politics "was administrating cultural values, and the real politics would be to work on those cultural values and to bring up new ideas of how things could be done."

"What interested me in dance," he added, "was it was a way of producing something and nothing at the same time."

Its political derivations mean that Mr. Sehgal's influences are as much [John Kenneth Galbraith](#) and Walter Benjamin as Bruce Nauman or Felix Gonzalez-Torres. His literal interpretation of Benjamin's statement that authentic art has its basis in ritual leads him to a somewhat naïve blanket rejection of theater (which he calls "a ritual of antiquity"); he also explicitly distances himself from performance art. Yet artists in those fields, notably Allan Kaprow in some of his later, ephemeral happenings (a term he coined), have done work similar to his.

His new dealer, for one, recognizes Mr. Sehgal's kinship to some of the very traditions he rejects. "He's part of the tradition," Ms. Goodman said, "which he's made his own by the nature of the work."

But Mr. Sehgal's work seems to revel in its own contradictions. It is ephemeral yet fixed;

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intangible yet expensive, because part of his concept is that his interpreters be fairly paid. It is created with extreme, even obsessive rigor, yet it is subject to change, as the only record exists in the minds of those who see it.

“What interests me is the fact that it could be mutable,” said Nancy Spector, chief curator of the Guggenheim. “It is open to any kind of reinterpretation and change. To me that’s very exciting. I don’t know of any other work that allows that to happen as openly and as freely, where it’s part of the intent.”

And while Mr. Sehgal rejects tradition, he is also in dialogue with it. His work is filled with quotations from and allusions to past writers, thinkers and other artists.

Yasmil Raymond, the curator of the Walker show, described a recent visit to the Biennial in Lyon, France, where she did not realize that a piece by Mr. Sehgal was on display. “He had a [Dan Flavin](#), a Larry Bell and a Dan Graham in the corner,” she said. “The minute I entered the space, the guard came in and started stripping. I slowly crawled behind the Dan Graham. I was so embarrassed I didn’t know what to do with myself. I wanted to know the title of the piece, and I had to wait. At the end, when he takes off all this clothing, he says the title and then puts his clothes back on. It was called ‘Selling Out.’”

The point, said Mr. Hoffmann, the curator of Mr. Sehgal’s contribution to the Lyon show, is “Which is more seductive: the objects or this live action?” For some viewers, no doubt, this piece evokes “The Emperor’s New Clothes”: Is there really anything there? But that is part of the point as well. Mr. Sehgal’s art exists, quite literally, only in the eye of the beholder.

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