



Art

The Talking Lure

In his New York solo debut, global art-world star Tino Sehgal welcomes you to his situation

by Alan Gilbert

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There are no signs inside Marian Goodman's slightly labyrinthine midtown space that point toward artist Tino Sehgal's current "exhibition," *This situation*. There's no information about it at the front desk. Nor is there any material on other unique, socially interactive works that Sehgal has created. But if you wander down the hall to the back of the gallery, you'll find yourself entering a large, empty room where six "players" are engaged in conversation while standing, sitting, and lying on the floor. Audience members—whom the players call "visitors"—are scattered about: sometimes one or two, sometimes more than a dozen. Since both groups are interspersed throughout the room, it's initially difficult to distinguish player from visitor, though it soon becomes clear that the latter are the ones with coats draped over their arms or placed next to them on the ground.

Should you fully enter the room—and some people don't, either out of shyness, the need to move along to another gallery, or holiday shopping—the players will turn as a group and, in droning unison, intone, "Welcome to this situation." Each of the six will then walk backward in a generally clockwise motion, find a new spot to occupy, freeze in a mannered pose, and wait for a fellow player to utter a previously memorized quotation, all of which begin with a date and anonymous author: "In 1693, somebody said: 'Be dead to the world but diligent in all worldly business,'" or, "In 1670, somebody said: 'True eloquence has no use for eloquence.'" Many of the quotations are longer, which makes them difficult to informally transcribe, and Sehgal forbids visual or audio documentation of his work.

The players then spend anywhere from a few minutes to upward of 30 discussing the introduced idea. The afternoon I was there, topics included labor theory, gender relations, the art of conversation, technology, and environmentalism. Occasionally, one of the players will turn to a visitor and ask directly, "What do you think?" If you hang out for a couple hours, or if the room becomes more sparsely populated, you may get asked twice. But in general, interactions circulate primarily among the players. The important exception occurs when a fresh visitor enters the room, as the collective greeting always preempts the discussion at hand, and the subsequent new quotation tends to abruptly shift the focus of the ongoing dialogue—one that will take place for eight hours a day, Monday through Saturday (with different players in four-hour shifts), during the entire six-week run of the exhibition. That's a lot of talking, with nary a traditional—or untraditional—art object to show for it.

Like many Sehgal titles, *This situation* both identifies the piece and literally describes its enactment. At random moments, the players flatly state in round-robin fashion: "Tino Sehgal." "*This situation*." "2007." Previously "shown" in Berlin (where Sehgal lives), it's the first New York City solo exhibition by the young global-art-world star. Much of Sehgal's work combines his earlier studies in dance and political economy. The results are pieces such as *This is good* (2001), which required gallery staff to repeat the title while waving their arms and hopping on one leg; *This success*, also titled *This failure* (2007), in which children played games in a bare gallery, stopping to declare whether or not they thought the work was a success or failure; *This objective of that object* (2004), which featured five people chanting: "The objective of this work is to become the object of a discussion"; and *This is right* (2003), in which two kids describe Sehgal

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pieces available for purchase.

With its refusal to produce a material object or employ self-documentation (no photographs, no videos; the gallery won't even distribute a printed press release!), Sehgal's work might seem to function as an obvious critique of a market-driven art world gone gaga over commodities. Yet Sehgal's work is for sale—though only through an oral transaction made in the presence of a notary. As Sehgal declares in interviews, he's not interested in starving to prove a point. Besides, his interest seems less in overthrowing a system, whether aesthetic or economic, than in undermining it from within—however slowly, i.e., one word, one conversation, one social interaction at a time. But perhaps this form of institutional tectonic-plate-shifting is what's required for fundamental change to take place. Or maybe it's a subtly subversive talking cure for whole ecologies—artistic, human, and natural—damaged by overproduction and material consumption.

Sehgal's privileging of actions and situations over objects has a long history in 20th-century art. Not since the heyday of Conceptualism—and feminism—has an attentiveness to language as social exchange been invested with such power to transform reality. "In 1942, someone said: 'There is freedom only in a situation, and there is a situation only through freedom.' " Some art tries to give too much; most art doesn't give enough. Sehgal's work seduces by proportionally rewarding what audiences put into it. Yes, it's a hectic time of year, but *This situation* warrants an extended visit.