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AUSTRALIA

## MISSED CONNECTION: TINO SEHGAL IN SYDNEY

BY MICHAEL YOUNG



Three of the “interpreters” with John Kaldor, of Kaldor Public Art Projects, after the performance of *This is so contemporary* (2005) at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. As per artist Tino Seghal’s instructions, documentation of the actual event was prohibited. Photo by Michael Young for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

Whether Tino Seghal’s performance pieces are high art or pretentious nonsense hardly matters. Last week at Sydney’s Art Gallery of New South Wales, audiences were enrapt as the Berlin-based artist’s team of performers sang and danced into existence his 2005 work *This is so contemporary* in the vestibule of the gallery.

Dressed as faux gallery attendants, the interpreters—Seghal insists that his performers are “interpreters” engaged in “social interactions”—stood silently, awaiting visitors to whom they could perform their song and dance routine to. “This is so contemporary” was then sung three times, the actual dance, while perhaps best described as under rehearsed and amateur, leaving viewers bemused and highly entertained. Smiles were omnipresent.

After 25 seconds, the “constructed situation” stopped abruptly and the interpreters resumed their initial positions to await the next unsuspecting individuals. This *mise-en-scène* was repeated throughout the day with a roving cast.

*This is so contemporary* is a visual non sequitur. It is a simple work that is predicated on one’s experiencing the unexpected. Approximately 25 seconds pass before the joke wears thin. The work therefore relies on a continuous stream of naïve visitors.

In turns startling, bizarre, confronting, unsettling and silly, the work suggests that life is not just about the mechanics of living but also the bizarre and ridiculous—those situations which can arise and unexpectedly and offer the chance of unanticipated social interaction.

This iteration of *This is so contemporary* was produced by Kaldor Public Art Projects, a not-for-profit arts organization devoted to showcasing works both in Australia and abroad. John Kaldor, the organization’s founder, bought Seghal’s work in 2005 after it premiered at the Venice Biennale.

For his part, the conceptual artist remains an enigma, refusing any visual documentation of his works. He is wary of verbal descriptions, reluctant to give interviews and insistent on having no tangible record of the work exist beyond the actual performance. In addition, he refuses to fly and was therefore unable to attend the event. “It was far too complex to bring him here by boat and train,” Kaldor told *ArtAsiaPacific*.

Beyond the somewhat trite and amateur-seeming performances, look hard and the work does possess a nuanced dimension. Facial expressions play a role and several performers delivered the line “This is so contemporary” with irresistible candor.

Still, some might dismiss Seghal’s work as self-important and look on with indifference. Indeed, if one wanted to criticize *This is so contemporary* one could easily do so based on the notion that it is little more than a one-line, inconsequential joke which quickly runs its course.

*Tino Seghal: This is so contemporary* is on view at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, through February 23, 2014.

Michael Young is a contributing editor at *ArtAsiaPacific*.