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By Marten Spangberg

In the beginning was equation

In Spike Jonze's film "Being John Malkovich" the very Malkovich, himself, is offered to look out through his own eyes. To be inside himself as another, checking out not the world but strategies of representation utilised by Malkovich, i.e. himself. The idea for this scene is not particularly new, in its oscillation between Lewis Carroll's dreamscapes and a Cartesian *ergo sum* and back again. What is striking is Jonze's solution to what Mr Malkovich will experience. Perhaps a uncoloured nothingness that can not be represented. The Lacanian real illustrated to its bluntest degree, or could it be some weird – do we dare to say surreal – world where clocks melt, mountains turn into watercolour tornados and all of a suddenly Malkovich's uncle (performed by Robin Williams) turns up behind a tree smilingly saying: "This is also you, John. You have to let go to be able to fly", or some other totally pathetic sentence.

No, Spike Jonze simply lets Malkovich experience an endless flow of Malkovich. Everybody looks like Malkovich. No, everybody is Malkovich in an incessant succession of perfect simulacra. All everybody says is him, all everybody looks at, all everybody listens to, all everybody everybody is, in short, "Malkovich Malkovich!" or "Malkovich? Malkovich". There's nothing more to it. Sorry, but "Malkovich", including some slight shifts in melody and one or other exclamation mark: "Malkovich?"

What happens to the character in the film is not the experience of a real beyond language, nor what is disguised in his unconscious, but a collapse of the signifier, into an unconditional floating. Where we normally can, allow or simply fool ourselves into accepting the this as the this and the that as the that in the equations between signifier and signified, perception and representation, past, presence and future, what Malkovich experiences is the very equation it self, unsolved.

In the work of the German artist Tino Sehgal, trained on the one side as an economist and the other as a dancer, as in the scene with John Malkovich the viewer, or to emphasise a performative framing the spectator, experiences a deviation away from expression, narrative and analysis, at least in respect of form and content, towards modes of negotiation with discursive operations themselves. What Tino Sehgal proposes through his work, always entitled [without title], is a simple enunciation: This is..., where the dotted line can shift from choreography, to action or event, to performance or art, to history or economy, but never into object, or thing. Tino Sehgal insists on the performative art work which as we know offers a critique to any representation economy.

The question proper to Tino Sehgal's work is not, following Michel Foucault's proposal from "The Archaeology of Knowledge" (1972), "what was being said in what was said", but "what is this specific existence that emerges from what is said and nowhere else"¹, where we naturally understand 'said' also as a performative utterance.

The shift in relation to representations is away from statement(s) and its complexity (a shift one must not read as a shift towards didactics) to the function of an utterance operating in a discursive field and its complexity. This, according to Foucault, is a radical break with paradigms of fundamentally dialectical type, and also with logical and pragmatic paradigms, entering, finally, what he calls the paradigm of enunciative functions.

¹ See Michel Foucault: *Archaeology of Knowledge*, (London, 1995), p. 26-30.

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Foucault postulates a discursive unit that can be distinguished from the sign, from the sentence, and from the proposition. With "unit" Foucault means a basic element that one or other methodological mode would reveal. This unit Foucault insists does not exist, but the very non-existence brings to life a mode of existence of signs insofar as they are stated and not insofar as they signify, of sentences insofar as they are stated and not insofar as they are grammatical, of propositions insofar as they are stated and not insofar as they are logical. It is this function of existence of the statement, recognised by the simple fact of having been uttered, that he calls enunciative function. It operates in the discursive field, or should we even say it operates *as* discursive field.²

The enunciation proposed by Tino Sehgal, e.g. in his recent choreographic proposal [without title], where he dances his way through significant style-concepts of 20s century choreography in a kind of encyclopaedic mode of presentation, chronologically correct thus inscribing the material, himself and the audience in the repressive representational organisation of history: "This is choreography!" performs the shift from "what is..." to "nowhere else", understanding that the work is not about this or that, it *is* choreography in the sense that it unfolds choreography itself as discourse, or even not only choreography, but also the ensemble of conventions surrounding it. Tino Sehgal takes choreography beyond representing 'a' discourse; instead the focus of his investment is on the ideology with which he, the performer, as much as the spectator engages in the process of unfolding.

To visual art the enunciative function is closely connected to Marcel Duchamp and the appearance of the readymade. The capacity of the readymade, within the discourse of Thierry De Duve over Michel Foucault, is exactly this slide from signifying/grammatical/logical to stated, or less aggressive - uttered. The readymade emerges out of the transposition into statements of the type "here is..." or "this is...", and it is in this very transposition that the readymade functions, once it is admitted as art. The readymade is an object which does nothing else but show itself without further questions. This statement configures not an analysis of thought as always allegorical in relation to the discourse that it employs, but poses a motivation to state "This is art", and what it says for itself in its particularity, is what it says for the work of art in general.³

Duchamp however didn't turn down the work of art through its enunciative function and its interpretation has not been to outdo methodological artifice. The enunciative condition is valid for the work of art in general. "This is a work of art" is scribbled on everything that is called art and a readymade is nothing but a work of art reduced to this very label and would not have been there if on the one hand it was not valid for every work of art and were not retroactively authorised by all other works of art, may it be what it wants. "To produce a ready made is to show it; to transmit a readymade is to make it change context; to enjoy a readymade is to wonder what it is doing in the museum."⁴

Methodically reconstructing, remixing or reinventing choreographies bringing forth the notion of signature in front of accurate or correct, also in respect of negotiations with technical capacity or perfection, wiping out, or minimizing all non performative elements surrounding the dances, Sehgal states over and over again, "This is choreography" onto everything that is called choreography. Tino Sehgal is not producing choreography as readymade but is instead laying out, for a lateral reading of conventions of historicity in choreography and performing art, and more over a critique to the economies playing those conventions of labelling. "To

² See Thierry de Duve: *Echoes of Readymade: Critique of Pure Modernism*, in "The Duchamp Effect" ed. Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon, (New York, 1986), p. 97.

³ *Ibid.* p. 99-100.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 122.

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produce..." in respect of performance is the act of showing. "to transmit", in Sehgal's work is nothing else than "changing context", and to "enjoy..." is all in this case all about wondering what on earth does a piece of choreography signed Martha Graham doing here, now. At the same time the gesture of the work is to turn back to the meaning of those three steps, "show", "transmit" and "enjoy", and what representational frames distinguish our relation to them.

Following Peggy Phelan's now paradigmatic statement from "Unmarked" 1993, "performance becomes itself though disappearance" underlining that performance can not be reproduced and thus not participate in an economy of representations of representations, and in that being an implicit critique to any economy based on reproduction, Tino Sehgal takes another step, out of the strictly ontological, in to the enunciative, becoming media specific. Sehgal comes out on the other side making choreography (performance) that is not about something, which would bring it back to expression, narrative, analysis, not to mention metaphor or allegory – thus dismantling choreography or reintroducing it as abused by language (in the sense of archive) – but that stay on the level of choreography (performance) and in so doing, making the implicit critique an explicit critical position where choreography (performance) offers its own media specificity as a critique of discourse itself. Tino Sehgal's work is not about anything, but about aboutness. This aboutness takes the same and similar shape as Malkovich. It is, "Tino Sehgal Tino Sehgal. Tino Sehgal "Tino Sehgal"? Tino Sehgal."

The aboutness of "Tino Sehgal Tino Sehgal", always presented as that which can only be placed in the archive as negativity - [untitled] – which is not to be mistaken for "without title" or "Without Title", is on a secondary level of critique a way of opening for the very illusion of representation itself.

In Tino Sehgal's work the interested is not embedded in questions of representation in respect of the body and individual identity (the inscription as other will remain outside due the dialectics of transportation), nor of representations of the body and identity as sign (the ontological difference cancels out notions of value), but of the allowance given to represent or be represented in a particular dispositif in which the body performs a specific position.

Conceptually "Tino Sehgal Tino Sehgal..." becomes a critical posture in respect of ontologies of the stage. What is presence? What is the history of a volatile media? But more important it is a "Tino Sehgal Tino Sehgal..." which is a crossed out/over: ~~Tino Sehgal~~. Where the figure signifies choreography as concept, and designates dance as difference. As with Malkovich, Sehgal offers us to experience the equation between perception and representation, between performance and archive, between action and object,

The designated difference offers a relation to the social, thus, the distance of words and events from their truth, which is nonverbal and does not pertain to events. Signification instead proposes interpretation, a certain geography, where there are facts that do not belong to the performative order but require a performative act, non other than interpretation⁵ and this "interpretation" is synonymous to the equation between the performative and the archive. The archive is the extension of a memory which demands visible or material traceable remains. The archive is both the determining capacity of the creation of language and memory and the architecture of the law, or the power over memory. The "performative act, non other than interpretation" is giving access to relations between the archive's *demand that performance disappear* and its need to be constantly reformed, to be kept alive. This endless struggle to

⁵ Ibid.

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grasp, to place performance, as the appearance of material, as “authentic”, and its dependence of repetition, necessarily embodied, and arguably always performative. “This body, given to performance, is arguably not disappeared but resiliently eruptive, remaining through performance /.../ as indiscreet, non-original, relentlessly citational, and remaining⁶.

The politics of the enunciative function in reaching for a universal creates a tendentially empty place, a void which can be filled only by the particular. Through which very emptiness, a series of crucial effects in the structuralisation of social relations is produced.

An episode from the past interests us only inasmuch as it becomes an episode of the present wherein our thoughts, actions, and strategies are decided... What interests us is that ideas be events, that history be at all times a break, a rupture, to be interrogated only from the perspective of the here and now, and only politically.⁷

The illusion of representation captured in Tino Sehgal’s work is that universality is not a speakable language, and its articulation does not imply that an adequate language is available. It means only that when we speak its name, we do not escape our language, although we can - and must - push its limits.

Mårten Spångberg

⁶ See Rebecca Schneider: *Things Seen Once, Seen Again*, non-published paper delivered at the University of Gießen, Germany, 14 April 2000, p. 3-4.

⁷ *Révoltes logiques* collective, “Deux ou trois choses que l’historien ne veut pas savoir,” *Le Mouvement social*, 100 (July-Sept. 1977), quoted in Jacques Rancière: *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, (Sanford, 1991), p. xxi.