

## frieze

### Conversation Pieces

Taking part in Tino Sehgal's *These associations*

Four weeks into Tino Sehgal's *These associations* at Tate Modern, a man came up to me in front of Liverpool Street Station in London and said: 'Haven't we talked together in the Turbine Hall?' He looked vaguely familiar. 'It's not impossible,' I replied. 'Shall we pursue our conversation?' he asked, playfully. Before I could think of an answer, he was gone. As one of the participants in Sehgal's piece – the final commission in the Unilever Series – I'd had too many conversations with strangers, even at this early stage in the life of *These associations*, to remember my interlocutors' faces, let alone what we had talked about. But the memory of my encounter with this man gradually returned: where he had stood in the Turbine Hall, his face in semi-darkness; the tentative manner of my approach; what I had opted to relay to him; the halting rhythm of the exchange that ensued; and how, at some stage, he brought up Virginia Woolf's 'moments of being'.

Most of the sanctioned encounters to which *These associations* gave rise took place within the confines of the Turbine Hall and were informed by that setting. Over the course of the project's three-month duration, we got to know that space intimately – its ins and outs, its nooks and crannies – by walking, jogging or running up and down it, sitting, kneeling or lying down on its polished concrete floor, for hours and days on end. We breathed life into it, made it resonate with our voices, animated it with our gestures. Depending on our state of mind, it could feel like a palace or a tomb. For all its intricacies, its different sequences and moods, *These associations* was built around an east–west pendulum movement, a response to the Turbine Hall's division into two distinct, lopsided spaces (one level, one sloping; one leading nowhere, one open-ended) on each side of the bridge, from which the visitors could view our antics at a safe remove.

Although interactions between visitors and participants could occur anywhere in the Turbine Hall, they were much more likely to happen on the east side, which was our domain, rather than on the west side, with its constant stream of visitors, on their way in or out of the building, not giving us the same level of attention. Sehgal told the *Guardian*: 'Attention is the material I work with,' and *These associations* depended on the ability both to give one's attention and to claim it from visitors and participants alike. As a collective of individuals, we first had to learn to be aware

### About this article

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Tino Sehgal, *These associations*, 2012, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London, illustrated by courtroom artist Priscilla Coleman (Sehgal does not give permission for photographic reproduction of his work)

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of one another. Yet the ultimate test of this responsiveness to the group came in moments of apparent anarchy – of ‘free flow’ in the jargon of These associations – introduced fairly late in the game, at a point when we had learned to take cues from one another.

Quite how and when we came together and merged into a collective body, even as new recruits continued to join our ranks, is unclear to me. Although Sehgal and his team knew all of our names (no mean feat when some 300 participants were involved), we were always encouraged to think of ourselves in connection to the group, rather than as separate entities. A pattern was established early on, in the rehearsals that began a few weeks before the piece opened in late July, which for most of us were an introduction to Sehgal’s somewhat unorthodox working methods. His well-known insistence on privileging oral over written modes of transmission has various consequences for the way in which information is absorbed and disseminated: we found ourselves having to memorize things, as if we were back at school; we learned by osmosis, through imitating each other and passing information on; instead of being given a firm set of instructions, we had to work things out for ourselves. We started bonding before we knew it. It happened imperceptibly, seemingly of its own accord, but there were moments in the piece – fairly simple games we played amongst ourselves and which were inscrutable to outsiders – that fostered the group spirit and bonds between individuals alike. (In one of these, we would walk around looking into each other’s eyes until we met the gaze of a person we had chosen to ‘freeze’ us, only to be released again by some other person of our choosing who would ‘unfreeze’ us with his or her gaze.) The group could give energy just as it could sap it. We seemed to experience, sometimes in quick succession, collective feelings of elation, boredom, melancholy, satisfaction and dissatisfaction with ourselves and with the piece.

Which is not to say that we were left to our own devices. Sehgal was often present, pretty much full-time to begin with, usually somewhere inside the Turbine Hall or backstage, sometimes with his two young sons playing nearby or tugging at his clothes. Between shifts and before the museum opened its doors, Sehgal – usually in the company of his producer, Asad Raza – would patiently talk us through the sequences, explaining to us what he had envisioned, giving us no shortage of attention. The artist’s presence in our midst was encouraging but it could equally be debilitating: it took me a while before I could relax into the piece without feeling self-conscious under his watchful eyes.

Where Sehgal did relinquish control was in our personal interactions with the visitors. Every now and then, one of us would peel off from the group to address a visitor, a couple or a small group in a ‘conceit’, before returning to the fold. The

term 'conceit', adopted from the Metaphysical poets, became part of our vocabulary: we would 'give a conceit', 'conceit' someone or, when tired, feel 'conceited out'. Responding to a set of questions we were meant to ask ourselves (such as 'When have I experienced a sense of arrival?'), 'conceits' relied on an initial hook or arresting image to capture the visitor's imagination in an opening gambit and then progressively draw them into the conversation. These moments of intimacy were nodal points in a work conceived as a meditation on the individual in relation to the mass. So long as we did not discuss with the visitors the work itself, and art more generally, which were taboo subjects, what we talked to them about was mostly left to our discretion.

According to Raza, we had been chosen in workshops and by other recruitment methods for certain qualities of openness, subtlety, curiosity towards the other, and the ability to engage in reflective conversation without dominating it. (Rightly or not, it was assumed we could sing, withstand high levels of physical activity and move in a coordinated fashion, which we all got better at over the three months.) Those same qualities were called for in our interlocutors to make for a stimulating exchange. There was a glut of conversations to be had with people from all walks of life in the Turbine Hall, courtesy of Sehgal. I spoke at some length about reading habits to a railway employee who confessed to only having read three books in his entire life. The only reading he ever did was when he picked up discarded newspapers, open on a certain page, en route to the next carriage.

No one would wish to begrudge Sehgal the authorship of the piece; we were, after all, only the human clay he worked with – the most brittle of all artistic materials. And yet there is a sense in which his name, appended to the title, with which we would occasionally regale visitors ("This piece is called *These associations* and it's by Tino Sehgal"), stood for all of our creative efforts on his behalf, not least the visitors' own. Their reactions to the work and, crucially, to the part that they played in the exchanges we initiated with them, could either breathe new life into the piece or make it flag. The potential of *These associations* may not always have been fully realized, dependent as it was on our individual skills at drawing people out and the visitors' willingness to let their guard down and free-associate with us. But whenever the two came together and that rare thing, a connection between people, did occur, the rewards vastly repaid the efforts.

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