

Johnen Galerie

THE NEW YORK TIMES
Encountering

In the Naked Museum: Talking, Thinking,

01/02/2010

February 1, 2010
Art Review | Tino Sehgal

In the Naked Museum: Talking, Thinking, Encountering

By [HOLLAND COTTER](#)



If you've ever wanted to see the interior of the [Guggenheim Museum](#) in its pristine state, now's the time. For the solo show of the young European artist Tino Sehgal, the great spiraling rotunda, recently ablaze with Kandinskys, has been cleared out. There isn't a painting in sight.

Yet the space isn't empty. On the rotunda's ground floor, a man and woman entwine in a changing, slow-motion amorous embrace. On the ramps above, people walk and talk in pairs or clusters at a leisurely pace, with new participants periodically joining conversations as others drop away.

Mr. Sehgal's art is made up almost entirely of such balletic tableaux and social encounters. His work has features of theater and dance — he trained as a dancer — but is made for museums, galleries and art fairs, places that depend for their existence on a proliferation of valuable things.

Things are a problem for Mr. Sehgal, who lives in Berlin and studied political economy before he studied dance. He thinks the world has too many of them, that production is ceaseless and technology destructive. His art is a response to these perceived realities as they play out microcosmically in the context of the art industry. His goal is to create a counter-model: to make something (a situation) from virtually nothing (actions, words) and then let that something disappear, leaving no potentially marketable physical trace.

Arranging for disappearance isn't easy in an age of omnipresent recording devices, which explains why the first thing you see at the Guggenheim is a sign forbidding the taking of photographs. This is standard Sehgal practice. But unless you know why, the prohibition comes across as calculatedly tantalizing.

His rule may be unenforceable in this day and age. Still, it turns the museum into a zone of sort-of secrecy. It piques both the voyeur and the skeptic in us. It amps up the star-power mystique surrounding artists, which in Mr. Sehgal's case is considerable. Now 34, he has been having solo shows since his mid-20s and has become a fixture on the international biennial circuit.

When you arrive, though, tensions and doubts tend to dissipate. For one thing, there's practically nothing to see, much less to catch on film. The sensuous pas de deux, titled "Kiss," is in progress. As choreography it will hold no surprises for anyone familiar with contemporary dance. Taken as living sculpture, it has amusing moments: every so often, the performers strike erotic poses derived from Courbet, Rodin, Brancusi and [Jeff Koons](#).

Far more interesting is the element of duration.

Through the run of the show, "Kiss" will be performed every day in the same spot during regular museum hours, from the time the doors open in the morning till they close at night. Each pair of performers — professional dancers rehearsed by Mr. Sehgal — will appear in roughly three-hour shifts, then be seamlessly replaced by another pair. Like a static sculpture, the piece is continually visible, but also constantly moving and changing. When the show ends, it will evaporate.

Mr. Sehgal created "Kiss" and other sculptural pieces like it in the early 2000s. He then moved on to work that makes viewers part of the action. The second of the two Guggenheim pieces, "This Progress," which originated in 2006, is one of these. It is visually far less concentrated than "Kiss" — it is even in some sense invisible — but more embracing and filling.

Johnen Galerie

THE NEW YORK TIMES
Encountering

In the Naked Museum: Talking, Thinking,

01/02/2010

It begins when you walk a short way up the rotunda ramp. A child comes over to greet you. My greeter, a girl of 9 or 10, introduced herself as Giuliana and stated matter-of-factly, "This is a piece by Tino Sehgal." She invited me to follow her and asked if she could ask me a question. "What is progress?" I gave a broad answer, then at her request, a clarifying example. We went further up the ramp.

Soon we were joined by a young man, a teenager, who said his name was Will. Giuliana carefully and accurately paraphrased for him my response to her question and slipped away. I walked on with Will, who commented on my comments on progress, which prompted me to try to refine my initial thoughts. About halfway up the rotunda, Will was replaced by Tom, whom I took to be in his mid-30s and who introduced a new topic.

He had read a scientific report that morning saying that dinosaurs, long envisioned as drab-gray and green, might have been brightly colored, even gaudily striped. We had both, we said, been fascinated by dinosaurs as kids, as was his young son today. And now everyone would have to reimagine them, though artists already had done that. So [Maurice Sendak's](#) "Where the Wild Things Are" turns out to be natural history. Art beats science to the punch.

As we neared the last stretch of the ramp, Tom handed me over to Bob, who was, like me, in late middle age and who broached another topic. He had just returned from Bulgaria where he had talked with a range of people over 20 about their feelings about the state of their country and lives. He found, he said, a pervasive nostalgia for life under Communism, a yearning for a society that promised to take care of everyone.

As we talked the idea of progress became increasingly complicated, ambiguous in value, simultaneously positive and negative. Is a sensitivity to ambiguity in general more prevalent now, we wondered, than in the 1960s when Bob and I were young? Bob said for his son, who is in his 30s, ambiguity is the rule. Where we had moral heroes, he can find none. I was about to press on with this when Bob stopped and said gently, as if on cue, "The piece is called 'This Progress.'" and walked off. As I made my way alone back down [Frank Lloyd Wright's](#) loopy, utopian ramp I passed other visitors and their guides (or interpreters, to use Mr. Sehgal's preferred term) in conversation. I later learned that a few verbal elements — Bob's closing line and Giuliana's opening questions — were scripted. Everything else was extemporaneous. The interpreters had rehearsed timing with Mr. Sehgal, but otherwise, like the visitors, operated without instructions. No two conversations would ever be the same. The only traces that would remain — I deliberately made no notes until later — would be remembered ideas.

A similarly material-free version of art was, of course, espoused by 1960s Conceptualism, though as Mr. Sehgal has pointed out, it was rarely achieved. Certain early Conceptualists reduced art to the bare minimum — gestures, empty spaces — ostensibly in resistance to a voracious market. But they also documented that work in drawings, photographs and videos, which became market fodder.

Mr. Sehgal's scrupulous avoidance of documentation is meant as a corrective to that dynamic. And he takes the argument further by questioning the political premise on which such Conceptualism was founded.

Resisting the market, he insists, is misguided, always was. After all, artists have to make a living. He contends that the overproduction of material things is the crucial issue, the root source of bad ecology, bad economics and bad values.

For his part he is happy to market his physically impermanent art. He sells the pieces, for prices that reach into six figures, as editions; the sales agreements are oral; only the cash paid in is tangible. He stipulates that he or someone associated with him must oversee the execution of a sold piece.

If unauthorized changes are made, the result will be considered inauthentic, a fake. The edition of "Kiss" at the Guggenheim belongs to the Museum of Modern Art, which means [MoMA](#) alone has the right to execute or loan it. The Guggenheim, which has borrowed it, does not yet own a Sehgal.

To his detractors he is the perfect artist for the present profit-addled art industry. On the one hand, he pontificates about the perils of material production; on the other, he helps keep the money flowing into the market's object-spewing system. And how innovative is his work? It stands on the shoulders of a constellation of influences, from Allan Kaprow, Fluxus and the Judson Dance Theater in the 1960s and '70s to Andrea Fraser and Felix Gonzalez-Torres in the 1980s and '90s. (Mr. Sehgal is young; so is much of his audience, which is unlikely to recognize when new is recycled old. The one form of transience the art industry depends on is the transience of memory.)

I understand those reservations. But against them I set my encounter with the show, organized by Nancy Spector, the museum's deputy director and chief curator; Nat Trotman, associate curator; and Katherine Brinson, assistant curator. I like "Kiss," but just O.K. It's sexy, driven, complete, but radiates a familiar chic.

Johnen Galerie

THE NEW YORK TIMES
Encountering

In the Naked Museum: Talking, Thinking,

01/02/2010

By contrast “This Progress” was awkward, rambling, indeterminate, peppered with doubt and ambiguity. (Why, I began to wonder as I walked and talked and listened, had I answered Giuliana’s question as I did? What would I say if I were asked again?)

Still, at the end, after Bob had disappeared, I felt stirred up, but light and refreshed, the way I sometimes — but not that often — do when I feel that I’ve met art in some very bare-bones way. It really is about life. It really is about communication. It really does have no answers. And it really is addictive. I was primed to go back for more.

“Tino Sehgal” continues through March 10 at the Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street; (212) 423-3500, guggenheim.org.

