

Johnen Galerie

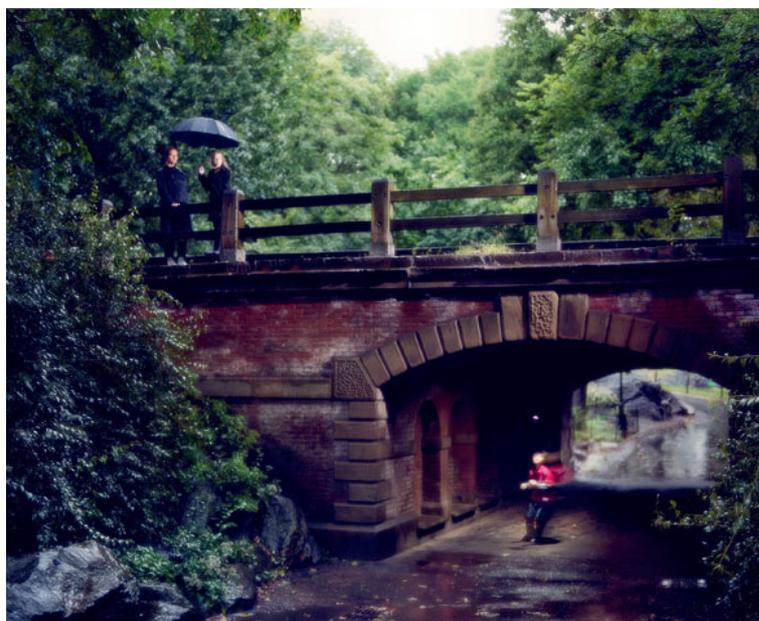
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Tino Sehgal

11/2009

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Art & Design



Tino Sehgal (top left) and the writer in New York's Central Park.

Tino Sehgal

There's too much stuff in the world—that's the contention of Tino Sehgal. So The Berlin-based artist constructs experiences, not objects, that can nevertheless be bought and sold. In advance of his upcoming solo show at the Guggenheim, Sehgal gives an inside look at his unorthodox methods.

By [Danielle Stein](#)

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It's a funny thing, preparing to interview Tino Sehgal. The 33-year-old German, currently a phenomenon in art circles, makes what he likes to call "constructed situations." These include pieces such as *This is propaganda* (2002), in which people dressed as museum guards chant, "This is propaganda/you know/you know," and *This is new* (2003), which requires a museum employee to call out headlines from the day's newspaper. For *This situation*, his first New York show, at the Marian Goodman gallery in 2007, hired players started a conversation by calling out one of 100 prechosen philosophical maxims—for instance, "In 1670, somebody said: 'True eloquence has no use for eloquence.'" They interrupted themselves to announce to new visitors, "Welcome to *This situation*"; to periodically demand of a viewer, "What do you think?"; or to intermittently strike poses from famous works of art.

If it seems Sehgal's intent is to catch his audience off guard, the carefully considered rules he has devised for disseminating his work have had the art world atwitter. Namely, he prohibits any photos, videos or other visual documentation of his pieces. In order to sell his idea and the right to enact it, he engages merely in a verbal contract with the buyer in the presence of a notary.

Arranging an interview with the artist proves no less logistically complex, with its own set of rules. Sehgal insists on traveling from Europe to America by ship (he dislikes airplanes), and during the long trip across the Atlantic he goes phone- and e-mail-silent. He agrees to be photographed for *W* only on the condition that his interviewer also appear in the frame. People who have worked with him warn of his prickliness; he's known to bristle when his pieces are called performances or are compared to theater. (His situations, he likes to point out, shun many conventions of theater, including a strong separation between the audience and the players, and the necessity for specific starting and ending points; his pieces exist from a museum's opening time to its closing, regardless of visitors, just like most other art.) Nancy Spector, chief curator of New York's Guggenheim Museum, where two of Sehgal's pieces will be shown in the rotunda next January through March, repeatedly emphasizes that Sehgal is "sensitive" to his work being described in certain terms.

In person, however, Sehgal turns out to be exceedingly gregarious—so much so, in fact, that he feels compelled to acknowledge it several times ("I love talking, as you can probably realize!"). He even looks accessible, in rumpled jeans, his black hair mussed. He has a boyish face, with kind eyes and an easy smile. He is eager to speak plainly about his work and why he favors creating experiences, not objects. "It started when I was 11 or 12," says Sehgal, who lives in Berlin with his girlfriend and their two-year-old son. "Kids are very sensitive to the value system of their parents, and I just felt my parents were attaching too much importance, too much meaning, to things. My father had to flee from what is today Pakistan when he was a child, and he became a manager at IBM, and any item of consumption he would acquire was a direct measurement of his success in life. But that same equation wasn't going to work for me—I was quite clear about that in my early teens."

He was hardly the first adolescent to make that judgment—such youngsters are the stuff the Peace Corps is made of. But Sehgal, who was curious about politics and art at an early age despite what he calls "a very uncultural family background," decided to focus his energy on the twin, seemingly unrelated, studies of political economics and dance. "I felt like our generation has a real issue: There's all this material, these things which we might not really need, which may even be harmful, but we don't know what else to do because we have to make them to generate an income," he says. "This seemed to be quintessentially an economic question, and to be the big question of our generation, so I wanted to study it. And dance was a way to have an activity which was not involved with materials but which produced something and generated an income."

In his 20s, after completing his economics studies at Humboldt University in Germany, Sehgal danced in the companies of French experimental choreographers Jérôme Bel and Xavier Le Roy. He was a choreographer himself, but he yearned to cross over into the art world—where, he felt, the political ideas behind his work would be considered with more gravitas. "I wanted to do dance with the same seriousness as art was done and acknowledged," Sehgal explains, "not with the entertainment factor that is always connected to theater and film."

His first piece, *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things* (2000), draws heavily on his choreography background: It features a single dancer writhing on the floor and incorporating poses from videos by artists Dan Graham and Bruce Nauman. In *Kiss* (2002) a couple continuously enacts a sequence of specific kisses from famous works of art.

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“There’s a sustainability to Tino’s work,” says Spector, who is under strict orders not to reveal which of Sehgal’s pieces will be shown at the Guggenheim; Sehgal wants to retain the element of surprise. “The only thing that’s expended is human energy; it’s this idea of how to make art without any visible trace, without any residue. The themes and concepts in his work change from piece to piece, but this is something that’s fundamental to all of it.”

More recently, Sehgal’s works have grown increasingly interactive. In *This is exchange* (2002) visitors are offered a few dollars to converse with a player about the market economy. “People were like, ‘Okay, I don’t know why this is happening in a museum, but it’s interesting,’” says Sehgal. “One often forgets that even if art is a very successful field in contemporary culture, there are still a lot of people alienated by it. Even if people don’t fully understand where my work is coming from, at least there’s somebody who looks kind of sane standing in front of you and politely engaging with you. People react.”

This situation is Sehgal’s most complex and interactive effort to date. “I’d seen Tino’s work in a number of places, and I thought he was really quite brilliant, but at first I didn’t know quite what to do with it,” says Marian Goodman, who began representing him two years ago. “And then when I saw *This situation*—first in Germany and then in Paris—I felt it was the perfect way to introduce the U.S. to him. One of the joys of the piece is that the conversation is marvelous,” Goodman continues, referring to the discussions among the players—and sometimes the viewers—stemming from the philosophical quotes around which the work is structured. (She notes, though, that the experience of it has varied from country to country—“It was more cerebral in Paris.”) “Tino gets together a group of highly evolved people, but it’s his structuring that gives the work its form. He has carefully prepared the work, and the players are his medium, and how he guides them is important.”

Sehgal’s preparation for his exhibitions is long and intense; what looks to be off-the-cuff is usually the result of careful planning. In *This situation*, for instance, which took him approximately two years from conception to installation, Sehgal chooses the quotes the players can use to start their conversations, and the rest is improvised. “But they have specific incentives or rules or attitudes [they are employing],” Sehgal explains. “Like in soccer, there’s a rule structure here, and there’s something else: How are we going to do this in the most elegant way? It’s a game; I am like a coach.”

Asked whether his lack of control while a piece is unfolding in front of viewers causes him anxiety, Sehgal says that after all the preparation, he is happy to let go. Plus, the fact that he’s now operating as a visual artist, rather than in dance, seems to give him comfort. “It’s not such a heightened moment, like if you’re Britney Spears at the MTV awards and you f--- up your dance routine and that’s it,” he says. “If it goes wrong one moment, there were maybe just four people in the space [to witness it], and there’s still seven more weeks to go.”

On the day we meet, Sehgal has spent the morning interviewing potential players for his upcoming Guggenheim show. Finding the right people to execute his work seems to be his biggest challenge. Via research and the recommendations of former collaborators, he seeks out “professional thinkers”—academics or writers with the intellectual chops to have impromptu conversations on everything from philosophy to economics for hours at a time. Unfortunately, he admits, such people aren’t exactly lining up to play his games. “I spend a lot of time trying to convince people to participate,” Sehgal says with an exasperated sigh. “That’s the reality of my life.”

That’s only one of the unique processes central to Sehgal’s art; among the others is how to sell it. (It’s easy to see his work as a statement against the commercial aspect of art, but he is happy to sell his intangible wares; his prices have been reported to be in the five figures.) The conversation that constitutes a Tino Sehgal sale consists of his talking to the buyer (usually a representative from a museum) about five legal stipulations of the purchase: that the work be installed only by someone whom Sehgal himself has authorized via training and prior collaboration; that the people enacting the piece be paid an agreed-upon minimum; that the work be shown over a minimum period of six weeks (in order to avoid seeming more like a theatrical event than an art exhibition); that the piece not be photographed; and that if the buyer resells the work, he does so with this same oral contract. “We discuss these clauses, and then at the end we repeat them and then we shake hands,” Sehgal explains matter-of-factly. For individual collectors, the conversation is slightly tweaked, since such buyers usually perform the works themselves after private instruction by Sehgal, which comes with the purchase. (When asked whether spending so much one-on-one time with individual buyers can become

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tedious, Sehgal concedes that it's not such a problem, since "I don't have that many of them." He adds, "The people who are interested in my work—they're quite far-out." His gallery will say only that his art is in private collections in Europe and North America.)

Sehgal regularly stages his situations in museums; he relishes the unique opportunity to challenge the institutional worship of objects. "The museum is this place where objects are given amazing value, and it seemed interesting to go into this place and not do that," says the artist, who has exhibited at the Tate Britain, the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art. "There's a kind of reworking and reinterpreting of conventions, or setting up new conventions or taking them from a different angle. What people are convinced needs to be blue and only blue, I see as green." And when it's pointed out that some of his pieces can be seen as funny—pieces like *This is so contemporary* (2004), in which players disguised as museum guards suddenly begin dancing and singing, "Oh, this is so contemporary, contemporary, contemporary!"—he is clearly pleased. "That's the queerest thing about *This is so contemporary*; it's like, even when they don't like it, they laugh. It's just kind of infectious, these people dancing around you. You somehow cannot not laugh," Sehgal says before adding, "I take it as a compliment. I am happy that you say [my work can be humorous], but it's not something I aim for."

And yet on certain occasions mischief seems to be precisely his goal. When asked why he insists that the writer of this article appear with him in the photo, Sehgal starts in on several high-minded rationales, among them, "The nature of my work is my subjectivity meshed with other people's subjectivity. So there's a correspondence with that. . . . Even if you write about me, it will reflect on you; everything is a kind of weird collaboration." Finally, though, he arrives at a simpler explanation: "I don't see myself as somebody who looks particularly good in photos," he admits. "And I thought, What you're doing to me, well, why don't I do it to you?"