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"Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things"



Tino Sehgal

Photo of Tino Sehgal's *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things* (2000) at the New Museum, by "dexter", from Flickr



Photo of Tino Sehgal's *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things* (2000) at the Muzeum Sztuki, by "wrr.", from Flickr



Photo of Tino Sehgal's *Kiss* by "tiloe", from Flickr

PHOTOS FOR TINO

by Ben Davis

The exact form that Tino Sehgal's hotly anticipated show at the Guggenheim Museum will take, Jan. 29-Mar. 10, 2010, is not yet known. One thing that is definitely known, however: No photos will be allowed.

No other artist has made so much out of the seemingly generic museum prohibition against visitors taking photographs of the art in their exhibition galleries. The London-born, Berlin-based artist, renowned for ephemeral choreographic art interventions, is sometimes billed as a "dematerialist" or "immaterialist." Part of what this means is that he does not allow documentation of his work, at any stage, ever. Even the press release has to go out via email only.

In the case of the upcoming Guggenheim show, that press release tells us that Sehgal's "mise-en-scene" will consist of two parts. The ground-floor rotunda will be transformed into "an arena for spectatorship," with "quasi-sculptural choreographed movement." Meanwhile, the Gugg's famous spiraling ramp is to become a platform for "direct interaction" between museum visitors and performers trained by the artist. A casting call was held for children, so perhaps it will resemble his 2007 show at the ICA London, which consisted of visitors interacting with groups of children who were brought in to play in the galleries.

In Sehgal's practice, we are told, "a visitor is no longer only a passive spectator, but one who bears a responsibility to shape and even to contribute to the actual realization of the piece." The description of the show goes on to add, "The work may ask visitors what they think, but, more importantly, it underscores an individual's own agency in the museum environment."

I know, I know: Making fun of press releases is too easy. But all the rhetoric about how Sehgal empowers the viewer is worth taking note of, because it stands in intriguing conflict with the ban on photography. The latter is about denying spectators a mode of relating to their own experience, and, presumably, maintaining the author's monopoly on how it is experienced. Therein lies a contradiction and, in general, when you sense a contradiction, you have arrived at the interesting part.

What is the reason behind the photo prohibition? Those tasked with enforcing it are often tied into knots trying to explain. Sehgal's project for Massimiliano Gioni's lyrical "After Nature" at the New Museum in 2008 was one of the best pieces in that show. At the press preview, I innocently snapped a pic of the work, which consisted of a woman, slowly writhing on the floor at the bottom of the museum's long stairwell. When I used the image to illustrate my [review](#), a New Museum press rep called to request that I take it down, explaining that Tino Sehgal didn't allow images of his work for ecological reasons, as he didn't want to add to pollution by having his work printed. When I pointed out that I wrote for an internet publication, she just fell back on asking me to do it out of respect for the artist.

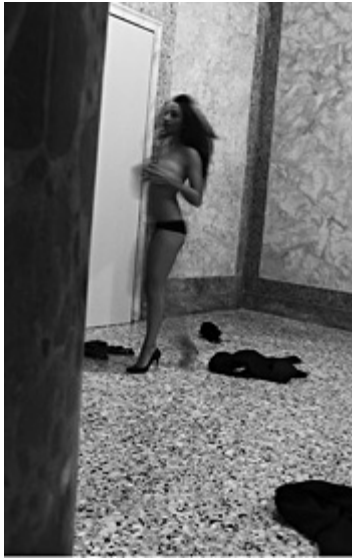


Photo of Tino Sehgal's *Selling Out* (2002), by "m*apotropaico," from Flickr



Photo of Tino Sehgal's *This is So Contemporary* at the Venice Biennale 2005, from www.kopenhagen.dk



Image of Tino Sehgal's *This is So Contemporary* at Milan's Villa Reale, from www.video.vsetkyvideo.sk/sehgal/



YouTube video capturing Tino Sehgal's *This is So Contemporary* at the Venice Biennale 2007

I felt bad at causing a headache for someone who was just doing her job -- but "just because" is not a good enough reason for me (after all, why should an online press release be OK, but not a photo on the internet?) The ban on photographing Tino Sehgal's work seems to me to fall into a gray zone: How far can an artist go towards mandating how viewers interact with his or her works? Van Gogh wanted some very specific framing and display conditions for his paintings, not all of which are always obeyed. Kafka ordered that his writings be burned, and the world is better for having been exposed to them. Would it be OK for Sehgal to insist that people not write about his work? Would it be acceptable for him to say that part of the "concept" of his art was that critics only write good things about it?

Sehgal's ban came up as an example during a recent panel at Art Basel Miami Beach featuring two power-curators, Peter Eleey of the Walker Art Center, and Anthony Huberman of the Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis. Their presentation centered on the notion of "disappearance" in contemporary art, with reference to works that make themselves deliberately inaccessible or involve the artist removing him- or herself from public view. Eleey and Huberman seemed to take the claims about such works at face value, simply dwelling on the contradiction of art that appears in the mode of not appearing. "How are we supposed to relate to these works?" was the endpoint of the talk, not the beginning.

I prefer Claire Bishop's take on Sehgal in an *Artforum* essay of a few years ago, "No Pictures Please." Bishop suggests that rather than representing a way of opting out of the society of the spectacle, Sehgal's prohibition on documentation is actually a canny kind of "viral marketing," a sure-fire way to get attention, to generate buzz and interest. More generally, the prevalence of "disappearance" as a strategy in recent art really just expresses the paradox of the avant-garde artist in an oversaturated world; immersed in a smog of seductive, shocking, jarring, intense images-on-demand, the best way to get attention and give art an aura of specialness again is often to play hard-to-get.

Sehgal is clearly talented. His tableaux often have a diaphanous gravity, an off-handed poetry and a romantic attention to the physical that is entrancing. You could argue, however, that the elaborate prohibitions that he has constructed around the documentation of his work, dipped and deep-fried in a thick batter of theory, represent the most unique thing about the experience. Much is often made about how his works exist as "scores," recreated by different actors, and thus always changing based on the circumstances of their embodiment. But this mode of art-making has been around at least since Fluxus (not to mention the invention of theater!). When the Guggenheim press release informs us that Sehgal's pieces "fulfill all the parameters of a traditional artwork with the exception of its [traditional artworks'] inanimate materiality," you wonder if the author remembers that we just had a performance art biennial in New York. Using "animate material" -- i.e. people -- is quite "traditional" and not at all novel in and of itself. In fact, it has fully entered into the sphere of commercial spectacle and exchange via artists like [Vanessa Beecroft](#). Even Satan Himself, [Damien Hirst](#), just staged a work where he hired identical twins to pose with identical paintings.

And yet there's more to the photo ban than just the sheen of novelty and rigor that it imparts to Sehgal's work. To tease this out, you need to investigate another feature of his practice, the fact that his works are all performed by others. (The only piece that Tino Sehgal performs himself has the same subject as the most viewed YouTube video of all time, Jud Laipply's "Evolution of Dance." In Bishop's



YouTube video capturing *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things* (2000) at the New Museum



YouTube video of museum visitors interacting with Tino Sehgal work



Photo of *Kiss* by Tino Sehgal, by "erineko" on Flickr, with note from *Manhattan Magazine* asking to reproduce it



Comments section of "m*apotropoico"'s Flickr page, featuring demand to remove the image from the web



description: Sehgal "dances for fifty-five minutes in the style of twenty dance aesthetics of the twentieth century.")

In 2008, at a Sehgal show at the Walker Art Center, when I purchased my ticket, the woman behind the desk leaned forward and mumbled, "The clocks in Brooklyn are ticking and in synch; Tino Sehgal, 2008" (or something like that). "What?," I said. She blushed and repeated the phrase, and I realized that it was an artistic intervention. Later on, I watched the same woman repeat the phrase to a disoriented elderly couple. Elsewhere in the galleries, a female security guard warbled the words "this is propaganda" over and over again. A male guard caught my eye and then began to do jumping jacks.

It would be very difficult to say that any of these pseudo-Brechtian interventions "woke me up" in relation to the institution -- their putative justification -- because they are so clearly museum-sanctioned. If you're hip to the rules of the game, they are easy to process; if you're not, like that elderly couple, you are liable to just be irritated. In each case, my reaction to the works at the Walker was *embarrassment* for the person roped into participating. There is a manifest sense of coercion, of actors performing a scenario sketched out for them by some ringmaster (which is not to say Sehgal's subjects are not enjoying themselves -- the *videos* I have glimpsed of guards performing Sehgal's *this is contemporary* certainly seem to be).

What really makes Sehgal's work stand out in relation to the history of performance is that, while the tradition of "happenings" was identified as countercultural and, in theory at least, anti-commodity, Sehgal wholly identifies with the museum and the market. While commentators tend to dwell on the perceived radical difficulty of buying and selling his immaterial "gestures," the focus should actually be on the fact that he has made the answer to this problem so simple: Unlike other performance artists, Sehgal has fully thought through the problem of trading in a non-object-based economy -- you buy the "rights" to stage a Sehgal, certified in the presence of a notary public. The fact that his background is in economics often comes up in critical debates about Sehgal; he sees commodification as all-pervasive and inevitable, and his medium -- performance -- expresses his comfort with that fact, not a questioning of it: "The reason I don't use solid materials or make copies is because I know that the thing-in-itself can be commodified."

As for his relation to the museum, in an *interview* with Tyler Coburn, Sehgal speaks articulately about his practice in relationship to a very sophisticated theory of the art institution as a space for subject constitution. The classical museum, he notes, was a place where citizens learned to be passive observers, respectful, disciplined subjects of the state who obeyed the rules. In our contemporary society, however, Sehgal tells us (in a delightful bit of econ-speak) that the center of power has moved to the "demand side," i.e. the consumer, which implies that the desired subject is more active, constructing and seeking out an identity. Sehgal thus pitches his practice as updating the viewer's relationship to the museum for the contemporary era: His works are infinitely different, depending on who participates, but also take place within a "frame" of rules that he provides, in much the same way that the ideal contemporary subject has the perception of free choice but is ultimately docile and accepts the options he or she is given. It is striking to hear an artist cheerfully admit that his work disciplines viewers for their roles as modern-day consumers.

How does this aspect of his work relate to the photo ban? If you think about it, Sehgal's identification with power, submitting his viewers to arbitrary constraints, also accounts for a certain lurking erotics of his

Results for "Tino Sehgal" on Flickr, as of Jan. 13, 2010

work. Sehgal is into light bondage; a whiff of brainy sadism runs through his oeuvre. Sometimes this undercurrent is more abstract and theoretical, as with his work involving children. His piece for the 2003 Frieze Art Fair, *This is right*, involved using kids as props to debase sacred ideas of esthetics, having them describe art they didn't understand and parrot art-theory terms. With regard to his 2007 work at the ICA London, critic Tom Morton took [note](#) of the "darker corners" of the project, which had schoolchildren play in the gallery, but required that they judge their games for visitors, declaring their activities a "success" or a "failure." The "binary phrasing" of *This Success/This Failure*, as the work was called, "replicates the language of embedded power, and invites them [the children] to also use it to judge themselves," Morton tells us.

Often, however, the perverse dimension is closer to the surface. For *This objective of that object*, also staged at the ICA, the artist had the five "interpreters" of his score stand around, withholding face-to-face contact with visitors, and engaging in circular theoretical discussions with each other, denying the satisfaction of a direct response to any question they might be asked. In Bishop's description, this was a "quasi-cultish assembly," conveying an "overwhelming sense of exclusion." For Sehgal's more lyrical and openly erotic work *Kiss*, a couple kisses in the galleries, but are required to submit this intimate act to successive poses given by classical works of art. In "After Nature," the slow writhing of the model in the piece represents movements cited from [Bruce Nauman](#) and [Dan Graham](#) pieces. Isolated, they become ambiguous signifiers of both pleasure and pain mingled.

When you strip away the theoretical contrivances, Sehgal's perverse temperament, finally, seems to me to be the real underlying explanation for his ban on photography. It is a hollow, theatrical prohibition, of course -- there can be no real effective way to forbid documenting Sehgal's work; images of his projects are available online in various forums, including [Flickr](#) and [YouTube](#). The urge and ability to photograph is so all-pervasive that Sehgal's prohibition on pictures really can only be another arbitrary restraint to intensify his visitors' desire for his work: a pair of velvet handcuffs; a chastity belt. The mandate to enforce his ban is simply a further piece of the "score" for his elaborate "mis-en-scene" itself, drafting a limitless network of guards, museum officials, journalists and ordinary visitors to play out the rules of his game.

This game, of course, becomes more difficult the more famous Sehgal becomes, and the Guggenheim show is his most high-profile spectacle yet. We shall see what kind of masochistic "subjects" contemporary New Yorkers make with regard to this museum show. You want to take photos of "Tino Sehgal," don't you?

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*. He can be reached at bdavis@artnet.com