

Building Something Out of Nothing (or Vice Versa) in Tino Sehgal's *This Progress*

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Tino Sehgal is a Berlin-based artist whose objectless work consists of conversations, short monologues and viewer interactive performance-esque pieces, all aimed at not only challenging viewers expectations for art, but they are also seemingly designed to bring up deeper questions about the production of meaning, objects and materials. In this essay, I will focus on his 2010 piece, *This Progress*, which took place at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. For this work, Sehgal brought nothing to the museum. No *thing*, that is. Instead, he turned the monolithic institution of contemporary art into a place for conversation. He did so by hiring a staff, whom he calls “interpreters,” to engage visitors in conversations about how they define progress. In addition to the absence of objects in this piece, Sehgal explicitly rejected any attempts to document the exhibition, which furthered his own rejection of the production of objects. In this essay, I argue for the connections his work has to its art historical roots and to theories of identity, while also bringing critical attention to his attempts to cultivate presence in art and to the problematic way he uses the resources he employs in place of material objects.

Because Sehgal bars the production of any media-based documentation of the works, clandestine snapshots posted to the internet by visitors and the written accounts of reviewers’ experiences are all that a retrospective analysis by anyone who has not personally experienced the piece, myself included, has to build upon. This matter of difference between direct viewing and reading second-hand accounts of Sehgal’s work is a tricky one that I will address in greater detail later in this paper. For now, however, it is important to simply acknowledge that the historicization of his work depends on the articulations of other people, which leaves the legacy of the work vulnerable to misrepresentation while also potentially increasing the value of experiencing the work first-hand. This is a condition for historicizing and valuing his work that Sehgal himself has constructed.¹ That being said, the description I present of *This Progress* in this

¹ Holland Cotter, “In the Naked Museum: Talking, Thinking, Encountering,” *The New York Times*, 31 Jan. 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/01/arts/design/01tino.html?page>

paper has been shaped from descriptions by other people, most extensively Holland Cotter's review of the exhibition in the *New York Times*.

Cotter begins his description of *This Progress* by stating that upon his ascent up the ramps of the Guggenheim, he was quickly met by his first interpreter, a young child who plainly stated the name of the exhibition. The child then began a conversation with Cotter by asking him to explain his definition of progress. After talking for a short time, the pair was met by the next interpreter, a teenager, to whom the child recounted the first conversation then headed back down the ramp. The teen interpreter used the child's description of their conversation to continue to explore Cotter's ideas of progress by asking clarifying questions. Soon they were met by yet another interpreter, and Cotter was handed off again. This next interpreter was in his twenties or thirties and began their conversation by citing a scientific article that proposed that dinosaurs were actually brightly colored, not colored in the drab earth tones speculative illustrations have typically depicted. Cotter's final conversation of the series was with an older gentleman who spoke of his experience in Bolivia learning of the nostalgia many Bolivians had for the formerly oppressive, but resource rich, Communist regime. This led to an even more complicated discussion about the idea of progress as a singular path and a reliably beneficial process. To end the piece, Cotter's last conversation companion simply stated, "This piece is called 'This Progress'" and departed. As each interpreter within the work was older than the next, and their conversations led them upward toward the top of the museum, the structure of this piece echoed its primary topic of progress. No two conversations within the work were the same, and the openness and ambiguity the question "what is progress" brought up seemed to be of greater importance than its answers. *This Progress*, therefore, frames the idea

of progress to be a subjective one that is perhaps not as determinate or linear as it might appear to be.²

Art historically, *This Progress* emerges out of the discourse of Relational Aesthetics. Following the term Relational Art developed by Nicholas Bourriaud in 1998, Relational Aesthetics describe “a set of practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.”³ Action is an essential material of a Relational work, and any objects available within the work merely serve to facilitate that action. Exchange between the visitor and the work is also significant within Relational works, as a primary objective of these works is to create a social experience for visitors, rather than simply providing an experience limited to looking. Works like Felix Gonzales-Torres’s candy piles in (figure 1) or paper stacks (figure 2), for example, depend on visitors to take the materials of the works with them in order to complete the work. This open dynamic between the work and the visitor dismantles the traditionally passive role of the viewer and the static condition of the artwork. Similarly, Rirkrit Tiravanija’s 1990 piece *Pad Thai* (figure 3) is a work addressing his own identity that consisted of Tiravanija himself cooking for visitors in the Paula Allen Gallery as opposed to staging an exhibition of objects. Tiravanija’s objective was to erase the separation between art and life by turning the gallery into a site for food, enjoyment and interaction.⁴ Both Gonzalez-Torres’s reliance on visitors’ removal of the components of his work and Tiravanija’s dependence on visitors for whom to cook for the full realization of the piece is echoed in

² Jerry Saltz, “How I Made an Art Work Cry,” *New York Magazine*, 7 Feb. 2010, <http://nymag.com/arts/art/reviews/63638/> (accessed 10 Nov. 2013).

³ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002), 131.

⁴ “Collection Online: Rirkrit Tiravanija,” *Guggenheim*.

<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artists/bios/5339> (accessed 26 Nov. 2013).

Sehgal's *This Progress* as the work depends on visitors present in order to have conversations with his interpreters.

This Progress and many instances of Relational Art are also rooted, but not totally compliantly, in Allan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* of 1959 (figure 4), which are about the *idea of interaction* rather than the production of objects.⁵ *Happenings* were unscripted, performance-oriented works designed to engage and confuse viewers' perceptions of whether they were watching a performance or whether they were participating in an event. In so doing, these works were intended to push the division between work and audience toward dissolution, to allow chance to shape the experience of the viewer or visitor, and to be translatable throughout a range of formal and informal settings. Whether *Happenings* were performances or not is endlessly debatable, and the matter of performance is similarly unclear in Sehgal's work.⁶ On one hand, Sehgal himself is said to bristle when his work is referred to as such, and I sympathize with his objection.⁷ Performance not only connotes a scripted, choreographed program designed to enact a specific agenda, but it also often seeks to maintain distance between performer and participant.⁸ Sehgal's projects, however, set out to create direct connection between visitors his interpreters. He does this through conversations for which interpreters were given only guiding principles but the contents of which were largely left to develop naturally.

On the other hand, if *This Progress* is not a performance, then what is it? What is the opposite of performance? Real interaction? Does the fact that the question "what is progress" is

⁵ Nick Montfort and Noah Fruin, *The New Media Reader* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003), 83-88.

⁶ Mariellen R. Sandford, *Happenings and Other Acts* (London: Routledge, 1995), 197.

⁷ Michel Chevalier, "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas... Tino Sehgal at the Kunstverein in Hamburg." *The Thing – Hamburg*. <http://thing-hamburg.de/index.php?id=309> (accessed 24 Nov. 2013).

⁸ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 16.

not generated by the individual asking it but by Sehgal as orchestrator make the ensuing interaction less real? Unfortunately for Sehgal, it seems as though the institutional setting of *This Progress* and its scripted beginning and end keep *This Progress* tethered to performance, even if only by the thinnest hair. That the interactions that occur between the introduction and closing of the work are left to freely develop, however, gives the work a touch of realness that leaves the identity of the work ambiguously floating between the poles of reality and performance.⁹

This liminality between authentic reality and authentic performance conjures Judith Butler's assertions that any claims to authenticity with regard to social and cultural identity are always performative. For Butler, whose work is closely tied to that of Jacques Derrida, identity is not the expression of internally innate and externally classifiable qualities within an individual, but it is rather the product of a process of internalized ideals of identity that are only ever partially copied and expressed.¹⁰ For example, there is no such thing as an authentic *woman* because the idea of woman is based in a fictive, idealized and unattainable model that is continually performed but never perfectly matched. Authenticity in Sehgal's work follows this model Butler has set up in that the definitions of reality and performance do not clearly distinguish the two terms from one another enough to identify a solid line that separates them. It is the flexibility of definition built into this model that is echoed in Sehgal's expansion of *Happenings* beyond just questions of the limits of performance and on to the boundaries of real and authentic identity.

Despite the ambiguity around authenticity, this work can certainly be considered performative. *Performative* is not just the descriptive case of *performance*, of course. One definition Butler gives for performativity offers an alternative to an authenticity based in

⁹ Phillip Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," *Journal of Performance in Art* 28, no. 3 (2006): 7.

¹⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 8.

external models. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler describes performativity in the discursive sense as “appear[ing] to produce that which it names, to enact its own referent, to name and to do, to name and to make.”¹¹ The enactment of *This Progress* is *This Progress*. When the title is spoken, the term *this* refers to nothing other than the work that speech is enacting. *Progress* refers to both the progression of the work, and the topic addressed by the work. Ideas have no communicable form without the words chosen to express them. Butler explains that performativity is the result of efforts to iterate, to give form to these ideas, making the explanation of the *This Progress* as an idea based piece even more fitting.

What sets Sehgal’s work apart from its historical roots in *Happenings* is his refusal to allow for any documentation of the work to be produced. In doing this, Sehgal privileges the present above idealization and futurity. “The situative is the core of my work,” he says, “it must be personally participated in.”¹² This takes the art historical roots of *This Progress* even deeper than *Happenings* and into Situationist concerns with the relationship between image and culture. In *Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord expressed concern over the proliferation of an image-based commodity culture as a product of early Twenty-first Century Capitalism, and recognized the isolation that came as a result of the promotion of such shallow investments. Debord’s *spectacle* is not an individual image or a collection of images centralized and looked at, but more complexly, his spectacle is a system of relations between people that are mediated by images, rather than direct, meaningful interaction.¹³ Debord warned that in the image commodity model images would become more important than what they represent, and representations would eventually supplant their meanings all together. On one level, by avoiding the production of more objects to disseminate in the world, Sehgal seems to share

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1993), 70.

¹² Goethe Institut, “Sehgal the Art Revolutionary: The Unbearable Expendability of the Material,” <http://www.goethe.de/uun/bdu/en8471332.htm> (accessed 2 Nov. 2013).

¹³ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 4.

Debord's concerns with a cultural shift toward objects as stand-ins for intimacy and meaningful experience. This is not only legible in the absence of objects within *This Progress*, but also in the prevention of the production of further images in the documentation of the work. By disallowing official image based documentation of his work, Sehgal is preventing the importance of a direct experience of the work from being supplanted by its image.

Sehgal's prevention of documentation is not only a Situationist thing to do, but in its questioning of the value of futurity, it is also a very queer thing to do. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman identifies the preservation of future ideals as a form of what he calls *reproductive futurism*.¹⁴ Reproductive futurism prioritizes social and political ideals set out to preserve a certain kind of future in a way that often limits the present liberties of adult citizens. Queer family and sexual practices are among those liberties he identifies are targeted by political campaigns that claim to be protecting *the Children* and the traditional institution of family. The idealized Child is made to be symbolic of the future, and in claiming to protect the Child, idealized futures are also prioritized.¹⁵ Edelman suggests that queerness and its embrace of narratives alternative to normative standards of reproduction, family and individual development undermines this value system. Such undermining allows present experiences to supersede the preservation of future ideals. Sehgal similarly undermines futurity by preventing the desire to see the work in the future from taking priority over the present experience it creates. In resisting idealization of documentation, Sehgal is choosing to heighten the value of the immediate experience of *This Progress*, enacting a very queer questioning of futurity and placing emphasis on the present.

¹⁴ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 21.

Following this problematizing of futurity is the matter of presence within *This Progress*. Obviously, Sehgal's refusal of documentation of the work puts emphasis on the present. Emphasis on presence exists more subtly however in the way in which the question, "what is progress?" that sustains the conversations within *This Progress* mimics the use of koan in Zen Buddhism. Koans are short narratives that contain questions used in Zen to reveal unseen areas of confusion or doubt for the Zen student. No exact answers to these questions exist, each student must come up with their own to demonstrate their understanding to their teacher. Like koans, the question "what is progress?" is not about finding a single correct answer, but it is instead about the usefulness of the question as a tool for inquiry and reconnection to the present moment. An example of a common Zen koan is "a monk asked Chao-chou, 'Has a dog Buddha nature or not?' and Chao-Chou said 'Mu'."¹⁶ In asking if the dog has Buddha nature, the monk can loosely be described as asking if a dog has the core of selfhood that is sought after in meditation. The Chao-Chou's reply, "Mu," can be translated as "no," but he is not saying that the dog does not have Buddha nature. Rather, the teacher is telling the monk that in asking such a question, he has missed the point of his own meditation practice, his own life and his own presence. In this light, the answer to the question "what is progress?" also seems to be beside the deeper point of the work. In asking such a question without a definitive answer, the moment of asking and the process of investigation are emphasized over the arrival at an anticipated answer.

Amelia Jones addresses the matter of presence in body-based art (a phrase I am using to avoid calling *This Progress* performance art) in her essay on Marina Abramovic's *The Artist is Present* (figure 5), a work that consisted of Abramovic seated silently at a table with an empty chair across from her open for one visitor at a time to come sit with her. This work is meant to

¹⁶ Robert Aitkin, *The Gateless Barrier* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 1991), 7.

be solely about presence. Jones critiques the ways Abramovic tries to create presence, however, by saying that “the live act both claims and destroys presence; the live act is always already passing and the body in action, understood as an expression of the self, is thus representational.”¹⁷ For Jones, even the expression of intention to be present derails such a possibility. Abramovic’s staged presence within *The Artist is Present* is always, according to Jones, going to miss the mark. Are Sehgal’s attempts at presence through the use of bodies in an exhibition space doomed to the same criticism? I argue that the answer to that is yes and no. In prescribing the duration and the themes for conversation within *This Progress*, the work sets both visitors and interpreters up to have a kind of double awareness within the work. Presence is forfeited here as their attentions are split within the piece by the awareness that they are both participating in a work of art and carrying on a topical conversation with another person. On the other hand, Sehgal does not explicitly state that presence is a major objective in the work like Abramovic does, but rather tries to cultivate it through the structure of the piece. The conversations he stages are meant to be containers within which participants can find presence without knowing they are looking for it, which keeps the expectation for presence from destroying all room for it within the piece.

Another logistical threat to the quality of presence within Sehgal’s work is the process of selling it. How can the present moment be sold?¹⁸ What Sehgal is selling, of course, is not the moment itself, but the container he has created for his kind of presence, and this brings us back in line again with Debord’s problematizing of commodity culture. Upon purchase of a work by either an individual or an institution, only a verbal agreement and a cash transaction take place. In this verbal agreement five stipulations are made:

¹⁷ Amelia Jones, “The Artist is Present,” *The Drama Review* 5, no. 1 (2011): 26.

¹⁸ Anne Midgette, “You Can’t Hold It but You Can Own It,” *The New York Times*, 25 Nov. 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/25/arts/design/25midg.html?adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1381937580-QdHqs0702i+dkGvlaCliXw> (accessed 19 Oct. 2013).

- (1) that the work be installed only by someone whom Sehgal himself has authorized via training and prior collaboration
- (2) that the people enacting the piece be paid an agreed-upon minimum
- (3) 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)
- (4) that the piece not be photographed
- (5) and that if the buyer resells the work, he does so with this same oral contract¹⁹

Through these five points, this work is indeed shaped into a commodity of its own, but in stipulating that reinstallation of the work is done under the supervision of a person authorized by Sehgal himself, he makes efforts to prevent the work from slipping into meaningless reproduction. Time will tell how successful those efforts turn out to be, however, as enforcing this may become difficult as time goes by. Though I believe that an artist should be able to make a living off of his products, whether they are material or conceptual, the six-figure prices Sehgal has sold some of his pieces for is another cause for questioning. The paperless transaction for the sale of an idea sealed with only a handshake and an exchange of cash somehow seems too easy. Some might say the same thing, however, for the one hundred and forty million dollar price a painting by Jackson Pollock was sold for in 2006. In this case the issue of a work seeming “too easy” is one for contemporary art as a whole, not just for Sehgal or Pollock.²⁰ Despite my skepticism around the manner of sale of his works, by keeping objects out of even the sale of his work, it does seem that Sehgal has kept true to his dematerialized intentions.

This matter of dematerialization brings up another important question, not about its sale but about its contents. If Sehgal’s work isn’t made of any materials, then what does Sehgal use to make it perceivable? The answer to that I want to focus on is human labor. In *This Progress*, his interpreters are doing the work that creates the piece, and in showing up to the container

¹⁹ Danielle Stein, “Tino Sehgal,” *WMagazine*, Nov. 2009, http://www.wmagazine.com/culture/art-and-design/2009/11/tino_sehgal/ (accessed 19 Oct. 2013).

²⁰ Carol Vogel, “Pollock is Sold Possibly for Record Price,” *New York Times*, 2 Nov. 2006, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/02/arts/design/02drip.html?_r=0 (accessed 13 Nov. 2013)

that has been created, visitors are doing the work that completes it. In one sense, the bodies of the interpreters and visitors are the objects of the work. This can be true with a reading of objects as points of focus within a work that facilitate deeper analysis of the work's contents and contexts, and without which a work would be imperceptible as anything to be considered at all. In a much deeper sense, the bodies within *This Progress* are not just objects put in place to create a point of focus, however. They are also perceiving subjects themselves who interact with one another, and who are affected by the work as much as they contribute to its effects. Conversations of mutual exchange within *This Progress* render both parties objects of focus and subjects of the event, making the interpreters and the visitors both the work's objects and its subjects.

Jones similarly addresses the mutual objectivity and subjectivity of the figure in Gustav Courbet's *The Origin of the World* through Merleau-Ponty's ideas of *chiasmus* and *reciprocity*. Chiasmus is the interrelationality between viewing subject and the object viewed,²¹ and reciprocity is chiasmus taken a step further to point out that the subject and object positions effect and define each other.²² Within the idea of reciprocity, both subject and object are equal creators of meaning within a work, and they define one another through their interaction. Within *This Progress*, statements made by one participant shape the statements made by the other, and as each of their statements shape the identity of the participants themselves, one is always part of shaping the other. Jones also recognizes the reciprocity between subject and object within a work of art as a matter of identity within the work, and what *This Progress* then does is make it possible to read a work of art that is not about the representation of a particular identity, but for a work to be about the formation of identity itself.

²¹ Amelia Jones, "Meaning, Identity and Embodiment: The Uses of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology in Art History," in *Art and Thought*, ed. Dana Arnold and Margaret Iverson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 74.

²² *Ibid*, 78.

In conclusion, Tino Sehgal's work *This Progress* is one that is both generative and problematic. It brought together concerns of Relational Aesthetics, Fluxus, Situationist ideology and contemporary thinkers on identity while cultivating new possibilities for interaction and contemplation within a work independent of physical objects or lasting histories. In refusing dependence on objects in an art context, Sehgal made it clear that, with the right container, conversations can become works of contemporary art that catalyze deeper appreciations of presence and incite critical investigations of object-obsessed commodity culture. By deliberately preventing the work to continue through documentation, he has made even the documentation of a work a contributing factor to its meaning. Despite the important theoretical questions this work raises, Sehgal's efforts toward presence also made obvious the challenges that halt the possibility of achieving true presence within a staged situation.

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Figure 1. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in LA)*, 1990.



Figure 2. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Loverboy)*, 1990.



Figure 3. Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Pad Thai*, 1990.



Figure 4. Allan Kaprow, *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, 1959.



Figure 5. Marina Abramovic, *The Artist is Present*, 2010.