

**Tino Sehgal. *Esse est percipi – To be is to be perceived***

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## Tino SEHGAL. *Esse est percipi – To be is to be perceived*<sup>1</sup>

Iris AMIZLEV

In the early spring of 2013, for a period of six weeks, British-born, Berlin-based artist, Tino Sehgal, instigated a variety of emotions in visitors, ranging from delight to trepidation, at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. Whether positive or negative, reactions were rarely indifferent to the two artworks exhibited.

*Kiss*, 2002, is a living embodiment of well-known representations of kisses by Constantin Brancusi, Jeff Koons, Auguste Rodin, among others. Located in the museum's circular entrance hall, visitors noticed a couple performing a loop of slow, fluid and graceful movements. While some perceived a beautiful and sensual artwork, featuring a languid dance that highlighted Sehgal's background in choreography, others were challenged by the enactment of embraces, caresses and passionate kisses.

People generally avoid looking at lovers displaying amorous affection, yet the public here is confronted with an artwork depicting this very intimacy, *live*. A particularly unnerving aspect regarding *Kiss* is that the performers can—and do, occasionally—look back at viewers, thereby acknowledging that their privacy is being invaded (conversely, the lovers are usually completely absorbed in each other, oblivious to their surroundings). Remaining anonymous is not possible: shyness is induced in even the boldest viewers, though the sensation of voyeurism is lessened from distant vantage points (such as from above, looking over the railing on the exhibition level).

Sehgal plays with our conditioning by placing a scene that we normally shun in a museum, within a context designed for observing artworks. This dichotomy generates discomfort for some people as they look at something that makes them uneasy. However, the setting also provides viewers with the unique

opportunity of 'justified' staring, of questioning this innovative art form and of seeing a living artwork that is in constant motion during the museum's opening hours, and will dematerialize at the exhibit's end.

Sehgal conceives his transitory artworks as 'constructed situations,' using people's bodies, as well as their thoughts, voices, language and sound as mediums to create pre-determined and calculated encounters for willing participants. Rather than observing, we activate *This situation* (2007) and can interact with its interpreters.<sup>2</sup>

Upon entering a white-walled gallery, we come across several people talking, some standing, others sitting. Our appearance causes a halt in the conversation and triggers a slow, simultaneous greeting: "Welcome to *This situation*." Once addressed, responses among visitors include curiosity, intrigue, joy, amusement, apprehension and irritation, varying according to one's predisposition; some enter the gallery (many remain at the periphery, though some sit in the empty space in the middle), others hesitate (near the entrance) and several leave (sometimes fleeing) immediately.

The 'hosts' then inhale, walk around the room backwards and pose at the room's periphery, one recites a quote (identified by year rather than author) and a conversation about its meaning ensues. After some time, an interpreter asks one of the visitors what they think. One can respond or ignore the question: it is our choice whether we participate or not.

Since each encounter with *This situation* is different, multiple visits (and/or lengthy exposure) are worthwhile. Elements affecting the outcome of one's experience include the combination of scholars, their eloquence and ease, the presence of other visitors, their—and our—level of interest, comfort and involvement, and the subjects being discussed. (The repertoire of quotes Sehgal has

selected yields recurring discourses: each interpreter memorizes approximately 30 quotes from a wide range of intellectual history, spanning almost 500 years.)

Another advantage is that work's form becomes evident. We notice that there are always six interpreters and that the work functions in a structured sequence, punctuated by the arrival of visitors or an interpreter's decision to change course by inhaling loudly. New quotes and subsequent positions taken transform *This situation* into a living history painting; we even observe poses that make reference to well-known artworks, the most recognizable one being Édouard Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*. Interpreters move slowly and continuously, synchronizing their speech with self-orchestrated routines. There is also the compliment, when a visitor is praised for their attire, demeanour and so on, forcing an automatic exchange as one replies "thank you."

An intricate web of verbalized thought processes, *This situation* is an artwork in constant flux. Within this mutability, we reflect upon existential, epistemological and other thought provoking subjects, questions and concepts beyond our daily repertoire, including whether rocks have feelings and the aesthetics of existence; the habitual language of art does not apply effectively here.

Philosopher George Berkeley's statement, "To be is to be perceived,"<sup>3</sup> figures in the discussion recurrently and can relate to the work's condition—as well as *Kiss* and Sehgal's corpus in general—as a non-material and ephemeral piece, does *This Situation* actually exist? Repeated in the cycle of questions is Berkeley's renowned query about a tree falling in the forest—if no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? Similarly, if no one is in the gallery (whether interpreters and/or visitors), what is the artwork's status? Since viewers activate it, *This situation*

becomes an artwork—*exists*—only when *perceived*, specifically when exhibited. One's engagement is not necessary, though one's presence—triggering the welcome, positions, quotes and conversation—is.

Berkeley's intention to destroy materialism in favour of spiritualism coincides with his beliefs as a bishop, while Sehgal's intangible creations are an alternative to the overabundance in art collections. Since photography is not permitted—the artist opposes traditional means of acquisition or dissemination of information—they do not achieve permanence through visual documentation. Thus, Sehgal's works leave no trace, enduring as memories for those who become involved with them, and the effect of surprise, of happening upon an unexpected situation, reinforces the power of recollection and leaves a lasting impact. ◀

Art historian and independent curator, Iris AMIZLEV specializes in Pop art and Land art. She earned her BA from Concordia and Masters and Ph.D. degrees in Art History from Université de Montréal. Iris Amizlev has worked at the National Gallery of Canada, curating several exhibitions (featuring the artworks of Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Richard Long, Dennis Oppenheim, and others), and also at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (commemorating the 60th anniversary of the *Refus Global*). She has published articles in Canadian art magazines, a catalogue on Bill Vazan and entries for the *Kunstlerlexicon*, and has participated in art-related conferences. Iris Amizlev is currently responsible for the educational program of volunteer guides at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. She lives in Montreal.

### NOTES

1. George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, 1710.
2. Also called players and actors, these carefully selected scholars/professors were hired and trained by Asad Raza, Sehgal's artistic director, for the only bilingual edition of *This situation* to date, acquired by the museum in 2012.
3. Berkeley, *ibid*.