

## DOSSIER

# The Illogic of Sehgal. Performance, Experience and Immaterial Economy in Tino Sehgal's Work

Sehgal no invita a la lógica. Performance, experiencia y economía inmaterial en Tino Sehgal

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### Abstract

Tino Sehgal is one of the most acclaimed artists of recent years. His work consists of situations interpreted by hired performers. Those situations, designed for museums, biennials and galleries around the world, never produce material traces: photographs, objects, scores or contracts of his pieces could not be displayed, published or collected. This paper explores some of the contradictions related to Sehgal's conceptualization of artistic labour, its position in the international art system, and the strategies that he has developed in order to avoid the hegemonic institutional and commercial inertias.

**Key Words:** curating, experience, participation, performance.

### Resumen

Tino Sehgal es uno de los artistas más reconocidos y aclamados de los últimos años. Su obra se concreta en situaciones (performances) que intérpretes contratados desarrollan en museos, bienales y galerías de todo el mundo. Esas situaciones nunca producen restos materiales (fotografías, objetos, partituras, contratos, etc.) que puedan ser exhibidos, publicados o coleccionados. Este artículo explora algunas de las contradicciones derivadas de la concepción del trabajo artístico en Sehgal, de su posición en el sistema internacional del arte, así como de las estrategias que ha desarrollado para tratar de escapar a las inercias institucionales y mercantiles en él dominantes.

**Palabras clave:** comisariado, experiencia, participación, performance.



## 1. Introduction: when art goes by like life

“Later I got more interested in Sehgal, especially when I saw that his primary motto could well be this one: «When art passes by like life». Sehgal suggested that simply by participating in his performance, a person could say he had seen the work. If you think about it, it’s true. When art goes by like life. It sounds perfect” (Enrique Vila-Matas, 2014, p. 54).

It is not really important whether or not the maxim with avant-garde echoes which Vila-Matas attributes to Sehgal actually came out of the artist’s mouth. In effect, one of the goals of his work involves finding a new point of tension in the relationship between the day-to-day and that set of practices, devices and discourses we call art. That is precisely what interests Vila-Matas, who at various points in his novel (conceived of as a narrative of his time with dOCUMENTA 13 in Kassel (2012)) narrates his experience when confronted with Sehgal’s piece *This Variation*: a dark room in which viewers share time, space and situations with performers whose presence can be perceived, but not seen. These situations are fascinating to the writer, who finds in them a pretext for rambling on as to the sources of creativity and the meaning of art. It doesn’t much matter whether or not Vila-Matas’s text reflects the reality of his experience in the German city. Not only because his work is found on the unstable brink between reality and fiction, but also because, inasmuch as it relates to Sehgal, “Just by participating in his performance, one could say that he had seen the piece,” thus discounting the veracity of anything others might have to say about it.

Here lies one of the keys to work created by the artist, who was born in London and lives in Berlin. Supposedly, his constructed situations (which he prefers to call performances) can only be experienced “live.” The piece is comprised only of the simultaneous presence of the bodies of audience members and those of the performers hired by Sehgal. In other words, his performances do not leave behind any material traces that provide access to his work, or that can be exhibited or collected. And the work is not an idea which, as proposed by Weiner, can or cannot be performed. Of course, the “idea” (his way of working, his approach to developing and communicating his projects) is based on his current critical fortune, and on a discursive level which the artist cannot escape, this makes up part of the piece. But the most crucial elements are limited to the exhibition space, where viewers enter into direct contact with his situations. That irreplaceable experience is the piece. Irreplaceable because it cannot be substituted with the information contained in a catalog or by a video or a group of photographs. Sehgal does not document his pieces; therefore, he does not sell photos or videos of his situations, as do many other artists; there are no monographs on his work; and he never includes images in the catalogs of the group shows in which he participates. In the guide for the aforementioned dOCUMENTA 13, the pages which should

be reserved for his piece have disappeared entirely from the volume (Christov-Bakargiev, 2012, pp. 438-439). In all of these ways, Sehgal supports the mythology of attendance that has enveloped performance art since at least the 1960s, and suggests unconventional modes for the exhibition and circulation of art. In this text, my intention is to explore some of the contradictions to come out of Sehgal's concept of artistic work, from his position on the international art scene, as well as the strategies he has developed in order to try to escape mainstream institutional and commercial inertia.

## 2. Live, again

“Sehgal, Boston reminded me, rejected the idea that art had a physical expression, that is, that it was a painting, sculpture, artifact, installation, etc, and he was equally disdainful of the idea of a written explanation of his work. Therefore, just as he had already told me, the only way to be able to say one had seen a piece by Sehgal was to see it live” (Enrique Vila-Matas, 2014, p. 55).

In November of 2015, I was able to see the “live” exhibition (this was how it was presented by the museum, curated by Beatrix Ruf and Martijn van Nieuwenhuyzen) by Tino Sehgal at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. *Tino Sehgal. A Year in the Stedelijk* occupied several galleries which were dedicated to the presentation of his oeuvre from January 1<sup>st</sup> to December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2015. The project was designed to be a succession of situations in twelve chapters: each month the number of performances open to the public would vary, all presented within the museum. In other words, every month visitors to the Stedelijk were met with a different retrospective, and only if they visited the museum every month of the year could they “participate” in the complete exhibition. The number of performances presented at the museum increased during the first half of the year, and then slowly decreased during the second half. When I was there, I was able to see only three of the pieces: *This is Propaganda* (2002), *Selling Out* (2002) and *This is Critique* (2008). I will therefore try to refer to the situations I attended at the Stedelijk by drawing on my own memories of the experience, which began to take written shape as I started work on this document in a hotel near the museum, just a few hours after my visit.

The first piece I came upon that morning was a striptease by a young security guard (*Selling Out*). He began to swing his jacket around in the air, with no respect for the large wooden pieces by Carl Andre (*Bloody Angel*, 1985) which stood in the opposite corner of the gallery. After several seconds of confusion, I almost subconsciously turned on the small digital camera I had in my hands. Immediately, the performed looked at me squarely: “No photos.” The young guard continued to take his clothes off in an erotic dance until he was standing in his underpants. In that moment, I noticed that behind me, in the gallery I had just

walked through, there was a second guard. I thought he was probably also part of this piece. I went over and asked him if he was part of the performance. He told me he was part of “This is Critique, Tino Sehgal, 2008,” and then asked me for my thoughts on what I had just seen: “Shocking and a bit embarrassing.” I asked him what kind of training there was for the people who staged Sehgal’s pieces. Visibly uncomfortable, he responded reluctantly that he didn’t know, and that it wasn’t important. I said goodbye and followed a far-off voice announcing the third of the situations. A security guard sang in front of a large monochrome: “This is propaganda, this is propaganda. You know, you know. This is propaganda...”. After listening for a couple of minutes, I left the gallery and continued my tour of the museum. I stopped for lunch in the cafeteria, visited the Zero exhibit and returned to the galleries where Sehgal’s work was on view.

It had been more than an hour and a half, and the performers had rotated out. Once again, I was able to experience the situations live, although there was no question that these were *other* situations. The stripper was now a young woman. I entered the gallery just as she began taking her clothes off. Opposite her, a teenage couple and a middle-aged woman watched the show without blinking. The girl continued to remove her clothing sensually, questioning us with her provocative and suggestive gaze. She threw her bra onto the floor, and right when it seemed she was going to remove her underpants, she stopped to reveal that this was a piece by Tino Sehgal. I turned around to speak with a guard who was standing just a few steps away. I explained that I was an art history professor, that I was quite interested in Sehgal’s work, and I asked her (from my unique point of view) if she could tell me something about how these situations were prepared: how did the performers rehearse, how were they chosen, etc. She told me she thought she shouldn’t speak about it, that she was part of the piece “This is Critique.” I pushed her, and she said it depended on the piece. The performers had been selected through an audition process. She herself was a fine arts student. Sehgal had given them instructions as to how to speak with audience members. I told her I had the impression that her fellow strippers were dancers. Without wanting to reveal too much, she confirmed that some of them were professional strippers, and others had been trained as dancers. Doing her job, as her fellow guard had done before her, she asked me what I had thought of the situation.

And that’s how Tino Sehgal creates situations that a visitor would never expect to find in a museum: a guard, responsible for keeping the galleries safe and silent, not only sings, but reveals to us that everything we see is propaganda; another takes his clothes off in a space where we can find many nude pictures (almost always of females) but where we couldn’t ever imagine such an arousing situation that never actually excites us; a third party questions us, inviting us to reflect on and verbalize an experience that most of the audience is not at all used to talking about, and is even less accustomed to seeing; all of these in-corporate

the informational panel as an element that interrupts the relationship with artistic objects, that textual information we look for near works of art in order to place them and give order to our experience, and which, at the same time, alters the aesthetic neutrality of the white cube and affirms the artistic value of each piece. The artist has taken great care to capitalize on that experiential element as a sort of signature component. Another difference is thinking that his situations can really go by, indeed, “like life itself.” In fact, they aim to be (and perhaps they are successful) considerably more intelligent, fun and amazing than most moments in our generally tedious quotidian existence.

Despite the fact that the artist does not sell photographs of his work, visitors are not always forbidden to take photos of his situations (although prohibiting photos of the striptease in *Selling Out* does seem logical). I was able to take a shot of *This is Propaganda*, although that image says nothing of the singer’s tone of voice or the discomfort felt by visitors searching for the source of that voice in galleries full of artworks. I could not have taken a photo of the conversation in *This is Critique*; I could only transcribe it. This written piece may be the only document that could possibly come out of my tour of the Stedelijk galleries. A piece that, in an academic framework like the one this magazine belongs to, lends (though I wouldn’t say it possesses) a certain level of truth, which is certainly different from the literary value of Vila-Matas’s novel. In any case, this is a textual document, lacking when it comes to the information we think we obtain from the audiovisual recordings of other performances; deficient, also, with respect to the experiences I had “live”: the cold sweat I felt when ravished by the gaze of a young man stripping off his clothes in front of me, the indescribably strange feeling upon hearing a voice singing in the distance, the impulse that led me to ask the young woman performing in *This is Critique* about how the situations were produced, like the person who tries to reveal a logical mechanism through a magic trick.

Meanwhile, just as Philip Auslander explained in his classic book *Liveness* (1999), experiences we have live (im-mediate, non-mediated) always carry with them a certain level of mediation. The opposition between the live-present, which Sehgal tries to emphasize, and media coverage, which he rejects because of its material nature, is not only ontological, but rather, cultural. In Sehgal, a discursive effort is clear, and interestingly, so is a material effort, requiring the construction of “liveness”.

### **3. Exhibiting and collecting**

Photography has always been, and continues to be, one of the most popular media for exhibiting actions and is, without a doubt, the main source of visual information for learning about the history of performance art. People in the western hemisphere relate to the world through the screens on their mobile phones, and

they can continue to do so with Sehgal's situations, if they so wish. The artist's ban on images does not carry over into gallery receptions, but stands only in regard to the circulation of his work in the art world. After all, if the performance only exists when performed live, it doesn't much matter if viewers take photos that will say little about the experience. It is true that we cannot acquire Sehgal photos in a gallery, flip through them in a catalog or find them on view in a museum. If, since the 1960s, the documentary rhetoric surrounding photography has contributed to a strengthening of the immaterial nature of performance (Albarrán, 2012), if it has even come to be seen as a regular feature of the art form (Auslander, 2006, 2014), the impossibility of capturing Sehgal's work, of recording the immaterial and supposedly irreplaceable nature of the experience put before us, has various consequences in an expositive, commercial and discursive sense.

In 2003, when was not yet 30 years old, and had been on the art scene for scarcely three years, Sehgal imagined what his work might be like in a future retrospective dedicated to his oeuvre, in which there would be no videos, photos, objects or instructions: "I would like to do a solo exhibition in a totally empty museum which at the same time would be full, empty and full since there would be no objects whatsoever, but there would be loads of pieces going on and in each room, so in some sense it would be very conventional". (Obirst, 2003). Twelve years later, the retrospective at the Stedelijk was equally anti-objective, although it was slightly different. The museum was not empty. It was as "full" of artistic objects as it always was. It is true that pieces were performed in its galleries, but it cannot be said that the retrospective was conventional. As stated by Isabel Ruf, director of the Stedelijk since 2014, accommodating Sehgal's work was a challenge for the museum, whose exhibition personnel and collection had to adapt their rhythms for an entire year in order to attend to the needs of the show (Cahier, 2015). The exhibit was not prepared in advance, as is the usual practice for museums. The project took shape throughout the year that Sehgal occupied the Stedelijk galleries. In this respect, Martijn van Nieuwenhuyzen explains:

"We could develop it along the way with Tino and we could every month choose new works by him and with him, and new combinations of works, which could also build on the experience which we had with works during the previous month. So we could develop it quite naturally. It was work in progress, a real dialogue with the artist. For this plan, we found the budget in three months; because of the daring set up, it was generously supported by a couple of funds. It was quite a challenge to organize it" (Kravchuk, 2016).

In recent years, other artists have experimented with new expositive formats, developing strategies for eluding the conventions surrounding retrospectives of mid-career artists. Among these, Bishop has highlighted exhibits featuring the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija (*Retrospective. Tomorrow is Another Fine Day*, 2004-2005), Pierre Huyghe (*Celebration Park*, 2006), Jonathan Monk (*Continuous Project*

*Altered Daily*, 2005) and dancer and choreographer Xavier Le Roy (*Retrospective*, 2011) —with whom Sehgal worked in his early years— as retrospectives that question the re-presentation of projects that are contextual, participative and performance-based. From the will to revisit the meaning of the work without subjecting it to the process of museum dramatization or reconstruction, these artists have found extremely diverse formulas for re-imagining their pieces, in order to bring them into the present as new works (2014a, pp. 103-108). The year of Sehgal follows this same line of research, where the exhibition is not presented as a stable and accumulative entity that preserves finished works of art, but rather as an open and changing medium that allows us to come into contact with projects that are different every time we see them.

At the Stedelijk, as is generally the case, Sehgal's situations were not programmed. They did not begin or end at a specific time, but rather developed throughout the museum's opening hours. Hence, the performance infiltrated the permanent collection, attacking it like a parasite in order to comment on it. Throughout its history, the Dutch center has distinguished itself for maintaining a close flexible relationship with the artists it works with, but also for its capacity to innovate in the conceptualization of its exhibits and to integrate the most groundbreaking practices in its prestigious collection. It is no accident that the Sehgal exhibit can be found in that discursive space. The artist is aware of the institution's historical possibilities and peculiarities, and the strengths of the collection with which he is conducting a dialogue (the choice of the galleries where each situation takes place is not at all coincidental). In the same way, the institution is also interested in achieving heritage status for Sehgal's anti-objective and iconoclastic project, experimenting with new expository devices and acquiring that symbolic capital for its collection.

In 2005, the Stedelijk acquired the piece *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things* (2000), which was chosen to open the Sehgal project in the month of January. That same year, the Tate acquired *This is Propaganda* (2002). The MoMA bought *Kiss* (2003) in 2008 for \$70,000. We mustn't forget that the Amsterdam center has been a pioneering institution when it comes to acquiring conceptual art. In fact, as demonstrated by Sophie Richard, the Stedelijk Museum was, from the late 1960s until the end of the 1970s, the institution which most actively collected conceptual art, with more than 62 such pieces in its collection (2009, p. 215). In 1972, the museum had already invested significant sums of money in work by Huebler, Kosuth, Nauman and Darboven, and from 1972 to 1978, it programmed solo shows by by Dibbets, Gilbert and George, Long, LeWitt, Ryman and Buren (a point of reference for Sehgal). At the time, conceptual practices presented alternative forms for the production, communication and commercialization of art; forms of unconventional objectuality which were immediately adopted by art institutions

and the art market. Sehgal aims to move one step further. In his case, there are no contracts, no receipts, no scores or other documents that make up the piece, which would allow it to be reproduced or make it possible to prove ownership. When an institution acquires one of his pieces, Sehgal gives instructions in person and negotiates conditions face to face with representatives of the museum and his gallery, and a notary, who act as witnesses for the transaction. At that time, the museum receives nothing of a material nature. The sale is also a constructed situation which is consumed through the oral transmission of information during the interaction of bodies, whose memories will conserve the piece in question (Carpenter, 2014). With no records or instructions, Sehgal knows that the passage of time can alter human memory, and as such, the experiential essence of his pieces. What will happen when everyone who was physically present during the transaction has died? How will the piece be adapted to the impermanence of the museum? How will the re-enactment of each situation be orchestrated when Sehgal and the members of his team can no longer supervise the process? It is true that there are numerous textual descriptions of his work, and that the pieces seem relatively simple and easy to recreate. Nevertheless, we must keep in mind that Sehgal carefully selects his performers and that, we can only suppose, the museum will have to be equally as vigilant in the casting process as in the reproduction of the circumstances under which the situation will take place. The artist tacks on an added difficulty, another dilemma on various levels for the re-enactment of performance pieces (Morgan, 2010; Lydiate and McClean, 2011; Estella, 2015). And with that, he takes on the historical beginnings of what it means to work in a museum, entering into the stretches of time that construct institutional identity and test its limits as a mechanism for transforming a work of art into heritage.

#### **4. All that is solid....: economy of presence**

“How can an individual’s full experience be integrated into the productive process if it is not subjected to a sequence of variations on a theme, performances, improvisations? A sequence, a parody of self-realization, that actually marks the full expression of submission. No one is as poor as the man who sees his own narrative as the «presence of another», that is, his own *cash-language*, reduced to a paid position” (Paolo Virno, 2003, pp. 90-91).

The acquisition of Sehgal situations by important museums has created difficulties for the professionals at these institutions. The purchase of his pieces has led to changes in the policies of certain centers (Wood, 2013, p. 133; Carpenter, 2014) and, to be sure, in certain contexts (and now I am thinking specifically of Spain), the incorporation of Sehgal pieces into a public collection could prove to be controversial: What would some members of the media say (or contributors who have been stirred up by these) upon learning that their museum has paid 100,000€



for a piece that consists of... nothing? It might be said that the artist has helped to blaze a new trail along which reference is made to the commercialization of non-objective projects, thus modifying the buying habits of some of the world's greatest museums. Still, nowadays, when the MoMA, Tate, Walker Art Center, Stedelijk, Van Abbemuseum or FRAC Lorraine, among others, have purchased his situations, one might think that the kind of transaction required has been institutionally sanctioned.

What is for sure is that no one can appropriate the world of Sehgal. Unlike a Fluxus or Zaj piece, which can be reproduced by anyone using scores (at least that was the aim of Yoko Ono, Walter Marchetti and La Monte Young), the work of Sehgal could lose its meaning outside of the museums and artistic events with which he (and only he) has negotiated the conditions for production and reception of the situation (1). Only within the museum can his work generate that uncomfortable alienating feeling, which many of his situations can only have in the context of a larger permanent collection. Sehgal takes on some of the Duchampian maxims that were developed in various ways in the framework of the neo-avant-garde: his art is full of double meanings, it is anti-retinal, fun, capable of defying the limits and structures of the system, etc. But at the same time, his practice is much less democratic and horizontal than it might seem. In this sense, it is far from going by like life.

Since the 1960s, artists from all over the world have adopted performance as a basis for a different (non conventional) art economy. These performers, who are committed to the counter-institutional potential of a way of doing things that is supposedly accessible and de-materialized, took refuge in actionism as a final foxhole from which they could resist the complicities of culture and capitalism. That spirit of resistance was further heightened in the 1980s, coinciding with the neo-liberal offensive, when conceptual and performance practices lost their discursive centrality and the foundations for contemporary art were laid. In the context of Spain, as it happens, in the 1980s and 90s, a community of militantly Duchampian performers came together (Fernando Baena, Joan Casellas, Nieves Correa, Nelo Vilar, and Borja Zabaja, among many others, in an extensive heterogeneous group of artists), who tried to put into place an art that ran parallel to the commercial circles they despised and the institutions who ignored them. Within the framework of an almost extemporaneous experimentalism, they saw performance as being non-objective, accessible, open, democratic, participative, unambitious, replete with minimalist expressions that offset the heaviness and grandiosity of the discourses which were so in vogue. Anyone could perform in alternative spaces that lacked visibility, where the value of "artistic quality" was fading. But their art went by like life itself, with the sole objective of transforming it through the conscious actions of the subject who dares to enter into artistic development. This generation of performers (we'll call them the Baena-Zabalas)

shares with Sehgal the will to produce work that is 100% immaterial, although their goals are quite different. The Baena-Zabalas (and like them, many other performers who work elsewhere in the field of self-management) developed a non-objective copyleft practice with anti-capitalist positions: their work could be paid for, but their oeuvre was not for sale. As for Sehgal, he has stated on many occasions that he has no problem with the market economy: “I criticize the mode of production inherent to a material object but not the fact that it can be bought or sold” (Griffin, 2005, p. 218). The artist concludes that actions and situations exist as they are and that these can circulate like market goods (the products of their creators) without needing to leave behind the same sort of trail left by an object. He hereby alters the material foundations of the market economy (Heiser, 2004, p. 102), and he does so in an attempt to elude its technological components (competition based on lowering production costs, the obsolescence which drives consumerism, technophilia, etc), but without claiming head-on criticism of the capitalist system or of the neo-liberal dogmas of progress, growth and the free market (Cattelan, 2005, p. 90).

From a place of ecological awareness, Sehgal (who studied economics) experimented with modes of circulation that were less injurious to the environment, and were consequently more “interesting” for our societies. This is problematic if we take into account that the accumulation model based on the production and commercialization of knowledge (that which Sehgal is selling) is that which sustains current technological and finance-centered capitalism. As we well know, the development of conceptual art in the late 1960s coincided with the emergence of a new mode of accumulation (post-industrial, flexible) in capitalist societies (Alberro, 2003). Conceptual artists, in a way that was more or less conscious, adapted their practice to a new worldwide reality shaped by the revolution of information and communications technologies. It does not seem far-fetched to think that Sehgal’s project is a response to an advanced state (or perhaps it is already final) of that process. Creating something out of nothing, generating meaning and economic value without the need to produce objects (Hantelmann, 2010, p. 151) is quintessential cognitive capitalism. Today, merchandise is not limited to objects; above all, it consists of services, experiences, information and knowledge. Dominant economic centers are not those where goods are assembled in a material fashion, but rather, those where they are designed: “Designed by Apple in California. Assembled in China.” And it may seem naïve to think that the production of knowledge in our finance-centered reality (in Silicon Valley, for example) does not create pollution, it is not connected to the fabrication of material goods, or represents a pathway to salvation from the looming environmental catastrophe.

There is another aspect to Sehgal’s work which has an ambivalent relationship with today’s capitalism: the production of subjectivity. We might

think that Sehgal manages to provide those subjects who agree to interact with his performers with experiences that will help them break free of their passive state (as visitors in a museum), so that they might become more active, aware and even responsible citizens (Hantelmann, 2010, pp. 171-173); and in a certain sense, this is true. However, we mustn't ignore the fact that those situations are generally experiences that are individualized, standardized and administrated within the framework of an institutional structure. If we use dialectics to measure Sehgal's work, it is easy to realize that some of the emancipatory elements that the artist seems to be highlighting, like creativity, the capacity to negotiate unpredictable situations, seemingly material precariousness, and the casual lighthearted nature of his projects, these are key elements in the modes of subjectification found in post-industrial capitalism, determined to turn our lives into a series of productive moments. Hence, the system calls for individuals who are active, creative, avid consumers, able to respond when faced with changing circumstances, and who are even happy despite the vitally precarious state to which they have been condemned by flexibility. Artistic activity seems to lend itself to the kind of worker currently required by capitalism (a nomadic entrepreneur, tirelessly promoting himself) while at the same time its practice contributes to the socialization of its subjects, its public and its visitors, as producer-consumers (Kunst, 2015). From this perspective, the art of Sehgal, like many contemporary practices, also goes by like life, in the worst sense: art = life = labor = art.

Of course, Sehgal is only trying to think up possible ways of experimenting within a museum, which he considers "a place for long-term politics" (Griffin, 2005, p. 219). His work moves between two different dimensions: the symbolic background against which all artistic work is set (this is how things could be done, and from such a vantage point, we might be able to think of them differently) and all aesthetic-factual work (this is how things happen) which takes its form where performers and visitors come together in the galleries of a museum. Meanwhile, his effort to banish the object from its praxis through a policy of immediacy not only requires multiple mediation processes, it also suggests a full series of questions related to material problems: How much do his performers earn for becoming "Sehgals" (©, no pictures); for sharing their time, presence, affection, intelligence, nudity?; for losing their voices while giving life to someone else's work?; are they not assembling a project that will make a profit for the artist (though the numbers may vary) through the use of a copyright? How many trips (it doesn't matter how they were made) did Sehgal take, or his team, in order to negotiate and supervise the year at the Stedelijk? How much energy (calories, kilowatts) have been consumed, and how much pollution (CO2 emissions) were produced in those twelve months? These questions may seem tricky, but they can help us to perceive the material nature of a project built on an immateriality that is supposedly liberating.

Part of the success garnered by Sehgal in the international art market resides in the renewed interest institutions have taken in the experiential poetics that feed the accelerated process of “eventification” in their programs. The sort of delegation proposed by Sehgal is the paradigm of performance found in blockbuster exhibitions like *11-15 Rooms*. In this project, two well-known curators, Klaus Biesenbach and Hans Ulrich Obrist, selected a growing and changing roster of artists who presented outsourced performances in different rooms (Biesenbach and Obrist, 2013, 2014). *11-15 Rooms* is a shifting, showy, standardized, modular and flexible product that can be adapted to extremely different contexts (2). The curators’ trajectories and network of contacts, as well as the prestige of the artists who participated, ensured a high level of dissemination, positive critical reception and impressive visitor numbers. At the press conference for *14 Rooms*, hosted in Basel by the Beyeler Foundation, Theater Basel and Art Basel, with architectural design by Herzog & de Meuron, the fair’s director, Marc Spiegler, clearly explained why it supported practices which would previously have placed them in opposition to the art market. The fair would be interested in the most innovative art, performance pieces would have gained prestige in their artistic discourse, and many creators now carry out updates using new experiential codes. In the same way Basel put its faith in photography and having contributed to its commercial expansion 25 years ago, it now provides visibility for performances that appear to fit into a significant business niche. Against that background, our protagonist has managed to generate a powerful brand image based on being shared by other artists. In some way, his international presence and the aura that enshrouds his work tend to influence any and all choreographic projects even leading to what Bishop calls the “Sehgal effect”: “unfortunately, every instance of dancing in the gallery now looks and feels like a Tino Sehgal, even if the content is wildly different” (2014a, p. 66).

Nevertheless, it seems the artist has not invented anything new. Tracking down the possible antecedents of a given practice (whether it be outsourcing performances or the sale of them through spoken agreement) could be easy and dishonest, so I’m not going to save readers the effort of looking for genealogies where they can insert these projects. In any case, it is clear that Sehgal offers us an attractive product, which is not new, but which seems so, having adapted modes of artistic work that have operated within the system for several decades to the economic dynamics and interests of artistic institutions. In that sense, the lax and inefficient ban on taking photos of his pieces has been interpreted as a promotional strategy (Bishop, 2004, p. 216) or even as “another arbitrary restraint to intensify his visitors’ desire for his work: a pair of velvet handcuffs; a chastity belt” (Davis, 2010). The importance of immediacy in the reception and evaluation of his work and the desire to shift the image as a main informational source grant a new centrality to the narrative of the experience. As Vila-Matas said, the fact that “just

participating in his performance one could say he had seen the piece” generates an attraction for seeing, getting to know, debating (consuming) a product which is immaterial in many ways. Maybe this is where we find one of Sehgal’s principle contributions. His work attaches itself to the narrative in order to question it, it challenges our capacity to put words on an artistic situation, it inspires us to think (without the material reference of an object, an image, a catalog or a document) about that which arises from an encounter between our bodies and the bodies of his performers. It is with good reason that his work has generated loads of critical literature, most of which is based in the telling (always unsatisfactory) of an experience; a phenomenon which I’m afraid the present text has not been able to escape.

## Notes

(1) We might consider the inclusion of Sehgal’s piece *you are already doing all of it* (2002) in the project *do it* by Hans Ulrich Obrist as the exception that proves the rule (Obrist, 2013, p. 350). The page dedicated to Sehgal in this compendium of instructions reproduces the title itself: “you are already doing all of it”.

(2) At the moment, the exhibition series features five installments: *11 Rooms*, Manchester International Festival, Manchester, 2011; *12 Rooms*, Ruhrtriennale, Essen, 2012; *13 Rooms*, Public Art Projects, Sidney, 2013; *14 Rooms*, Art Basel, Basel, 2014; and *15 Rooms*, Long Museum, Shanghai, 2015. Notable artists include Marina Abramovic, Allora/Calzadilla, John Baldessari, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Damien Hirst, Joan Jonas, Roman Ondak, Tino Sehgal and Santiago Sierra.

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## Biography

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