

**Dorothea von Hantelmann** is Professor of Art and Society at Bard College Berlin. Her main fields of research are contemporary art and theory as well as the history and theory of exhibitions. She is the author of *How to Do Things with Art*, one of the seminal works on performativity within contemporary art; co-editor of *The exhibition. Politics of a Ritual*; and has written on artists such as Daniel Buren, Jeff Koons, Pierre Huyghe, and Tino Sehgal.

**Abstract:**

**Tino Sehgal's work** is realized as actions, as movement and talking; the only material support they require is the human body. His works are presented continuously during the operating hours for the standard duration of an exhibition. They are traded by galleries and sold to collectors who acquire the right to exhibit them and therefore allow the work to become part of museum collections. As art Sehgal's works fulfill all of the parameters of a visual artwork except an essential one, its inanimate materiality. While other artists start from an object, which they lend an event-like quality, Sehgal starts from an ephemeral event, like singing, moving, or speaking lending it an object-like quality.

Sehgal's works are conceived as situations that unfold in time and space. The work *is* the situation including the viewer. Sehgal does not allow visual documentation of his work in order to prevent the translation of situations into a two-dimensional medium, thus preventing documentation from functioning as a kind of surrogate for the work. Oral transmission and bodily memory – traditions that are antithetical to the museum's principle of conserving artifacts – become the essential and constitutive principles, as the transmission of his work relies entirely upon the mode of memorization.

Almost all the titles of these works begin with *This is* which acts not only as a signature of the work but also fulfils an essential performative function which is to constitute these incidents as an artwork. After they have enacted the work, the interpreters, as there is no textual information in the exhibition space, also function as commentators or critics of the work they just embodied.

The simple fact that the visitor triggers the work, that it only exists for her or him for that moment, contains an element of empowerment for the viewer. This "empowerment" is crucial to Sehgal's work. The individual not only perceives and receives, but is an active instance that intervenes into and shapes what is going on. The individual has agency and carries responsibility.

**Dorothea von Hantelmann's text examines** how Tino Sehgal continues the debates of the 1960s regarding the transgression and dissolution of the traditional notion of the artwork by producing works without objects. In the first half of the article, applying a wide-ranging field of theory, she draws parallels to modern dance, minimalism, Fluxus, performance and conceptual art. In particular, she discusses the

relationship between Michael Fried's central postulate that art aspires to transcend its objecthood and Theodor Adorno's opposition to the objectification of a work of art, in the light of the immaterial nature of Tino Sehgal's works. In the course of the article, she describes several of Tino Sehgal's works, placing them in a context that accounts for their critical potential in our age, including the artist's criticism of the distribution system and the dominant production model: the transformation of material into goods, as it is reproduced by visual art.

In the latter half of the text she examines the artwork and its reception as an infinite feedback loop with a fragile and constantly negotiated power relation between the interpreters and the visitors that, to a certain extent is directed by Sehgal's mise-en-scene and dramaturgy.

Finally, she looks at the ritual role of museums as social institutions in the light of the empowered viewer in Tino Sehgal's works, which ultimately transform museums into more social spaces.

This text is Chapter III in Dorothea von Hantelmann's book, *How to Do Things with Art* (Zurich, Dijon: JRP|Ringier, Les Presses du Réel, 2010)

### **Reading guide**

If you want a quick overview of the text, read the passages in bold font. These passages are an abridgement of the key points of the text.

# The Materiality of the Artwork

## Object and situation in the work of Tino Sehgal

By Dorothea von Hantelmann

“I believe that the problem of the object,” Daniel Buren told Seth Siegelaub in a conversation referring to the debates of the 1960s regarding the transgression and dissolution of the traditional notion of the artwork, “is one of the most interesting problems that needs to be faced, but that one cannot solve it by producing a work without objects.”  
(1)

Both theory and practice in the late 1960s put the status of the object and traditional notions of artistic production up for negotiation: *The Anxious Object*, the title of Harold Rosenberg’s book from 1966 indicates the precarious status of the object. In 1973, Lucy Lippard’s radical book *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 - 1972* not only marks the birth of Conceptual Art but argues that “the material is negated.” And finally in 1975 in a new volume of *American Art Since 1900* Barbara Rose entitles a chapters on 70s art “Beyond the Object”.(2) However, today one must conclude that the farewell to the object was rather premature. Buren gets to the core of the artistic and theoretical debates of the 1960s more accurately, when he speaks of a new “economy of means” (3). Apart from a few exceptions, there has never been a “dematerialization” of art. There are very few examples where material support for the art work does not exist. As the artist Robert Barry put it: “We are not really destroying the object, but just expanding the definition, that’s all.” (4)

**However, in the work of Tino Sehgal there are no objects. His work is realised as actions, as movement and talking; the only material support they require is the human body. Often this is the museum guard, who, when one enters the exhibition space, executes a choreography which he then discloses to the viewer as a work of Sehgal. Or it could also be the person who sells the ticket at the entrance, who after the purchase recites a headline from the daily newspaper followed by the title of Sehgal’s piece, *This is new*. At the Frieze Art Fair in London in 2003 at the booth of The Wrong Gallery from New York, Sehgal positioned two children about eight years old, who welcomed entering visitors**

with the words, “Hello. Welcome to the Wrong Gallery. We are showing *This is right* by Tino Sehgal,” and proceeded to enact five of Sehgal’s works to potential buyers, informing them about their prices and edition sizes. At the art fair in Basel one year later, the artist arranged a *pas de deux* of his dealers(5), whom he choreographed to simultaneously cooperate with and compete against each other. They enacted various works to potential buyers, but were restricted to speaking alternately only one word at a time. In order to conduct a conversation with potential buyers, they had to cooperate even to the point of formulating a grammatically correct sentence.

Sehgal’s works give art a new material foundation, but nonetheless claim the status of visual artworks. **His works are presented continuously during the operating hours for the standard duration of an exhibition. They are traded by dealers and sold to collectors who acquire the right to exhibit them and therefore allow the work to become part of museum collections. As art Sehgal’s works fulfill all of the parameters of a visual artwork except an essential one, its inanimate materiality. While other artists start from an object, which they lend an event-like quality, Sehgal starts from an ephemeral event, like singing, moving, or speaking lending it an object-like quality.**

### **Object and situation**

In 2005 the Institute of Contemporary Art in London presented a solo show of two works by Sehgal, including one of his earliest works, titled *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing dan and bruce and other things* which was created in 2000. At the far wall of a vast, long, otherwise empty exhibition space a young woman lying on the floor was moving slowly, into the room and back again. Her body was never still, but in constant movement, changing its *Gestalt* without emphasizing any of the individual movements. The figure seemed introverted, in a strange way, distant or remote, almost as if in a trance. One had the impression that the movements happened without intention, as if body parts were following rather than actively conducting, moving automatically through a sequence without beginning or end, without a center and without the intention to express something specific. The impulse for the movement seemed to stem entirely from the breath, which generated a steady rhythm of contraction and release in the torso, the extremities followed automatically and unintentionally. Approximately every two-and-a-half hours, the dancer

was replaced by a new dancer, who lay down taking the exact position continuing the movement while the first one stood up and left. In this manner the work existed — executed by different dancers (male and female, young and old) — every hour of every day that the museum was open, from the first until the last day of the exhibition.

Nothing in the figure's movements suggested that they were addressing the viewer. Possibly this was one of the reasons that it didn't occur to many visitors that they were seeing a choreography enacted in front of them. The body produced the impression of an object; at certain moments it even appeared as an undefined, anthropomorphic mass. At precisely the same time, this introverted movement gave the dance a sense of self-absorption that made it possible to experience this situation as an artwork. Visitors to the museum reacted in various ways. Some just passed by, others were irritated and a few became confused, even frightened and insecure. Apparently, for many it was not easy to categorize what they were seeing. Visitors often alerted the staff at the front desk that something was wrong. Sometimes they talked directly to the dancer, asking, "Are you all right?" When I saw the work in 2001 at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm,(6) one visitor lifted the dancer and carried her away, explaining that he was a doctor. Other viewers apparently thought that they were looking at an automated doll. Many however, as if to restore the normality of a situation that so obviously did not correspond to the norm of museum experience, inspected the work with the same degree of attention that they give to other pieces in the museum collection. Once a group of schoolchildren began dancing after they read the title of **the work: *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things.***

**The title refers to Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham, who both integrated modalities of dance into their practice after being influenced by the minimal dance of choreographers like Yvonne Rainer and Simone Forti.** Nauman and Graham are mostly cited for employing the moving body in their film and video pieces, thus expanding the media of visual art. *Tony sinking into the floor*, *Face up and Face down* and *Elke allowing the Floor to rise up over her*, *Face up*, both made in 1973, are Nauman's first works where he used actors, whom he instructed to imagine specific situations, like sinking into the floor. *Wall-Floor Positions* (1968) is an early work in which Nauman takes up different positions, each one creating a new configuration between his body, the wall and the floor. In his focus on space, there is a strong connection to Minimal Art, with the decisive difference that Nauman uses the body as both material and medium. These movements were recorded by

Nauman and then shown as a video in exhibition spaces. The camera, which Nauman largely uses in an unreflective manner, becomes an integral component in the work of Graham. *Roll* (1970) is one of a series of films in which Graham experimented with the interplay among camera, gaze and body. Lying on the floor, the artist rolled around his own axis while holding a camera and at the same time was filmed by a second camera, placed on the ground some distance away, thereby generating two film sequences: in one the fixed camera is filmed by the camera held by Graham and in the other the artist is trying to keep his gaze and camera directed towards the fixed camera while he rolls.

Sehgal took stills that had been published from *Roll* and integrated them as movement poses in his own choreography. Like Graham and Nauman, Sehgal refers to the art form of dance and integrates it into the context of visual art, but the way in which this connection is made differs fundamentally from the work of these other artists. Both Nauman and Graham work with elements of dance or movement, but the moving body enters the exhibition space not as a body but as a moving image – a transformation that Graham anticipates and incorporates into the work itself. **In contrast, Sehgal introduces the choreographed body as choreographed body—not as a video image—to the context of visual art. While Graham and Nauman brought dance and choreography into the visual art context by translating it from one medium to another, Sehgal asks how the moving, choreographed body can itself become a work of visual art.**

At one moment in *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things*, the dancer lifts her head and looks in the direction of the viewer, her hands forming a rectangular shape as if she were holding a camera to photograph the viewer, which seems to allude directly to *Roll*, specifically the moment when Graham focuses the camera he is holding on the fixed camera that is standing on the floor. Sehgal's fictive camera generates a similar effect to Graham's actual camera but while Graham sets up a closed circuit between two cameras, Sehgal initiates a closed circuit between the dancer and the viewer. The dancer's pantomime of the camera eye seems to return the gaze of the viewer. Both works experiment with forms of mediatized communication, but Sehgal omits the technology. The extra space between *some* and *thing* in the title, *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things* can be understood programmatically: **The material object is replaced by a situation between two people; while one embodies an artwork, the other observes the embodiment of the work.**

**Sehgal's works are conceived as situations that unfold in time and space. The work is the situation including the viewer. How do they become part of history? Sehgal does not allow visual documentation of his work in order to prevent the translation of situations into a two-dimensional medium, thus preventing documentation from functioning as a kind of surrogate for the work.(7) It is of crucial significance to the work's life if a situational artwork enters history as a memory or as a document.** For him visual illustrations not only reaffirm the two-dimensional image as the dominant historical record of visual art, they reinscribe the work in precisely that mode of permanence and conservation that the work opposes.

As specific situations, Sehgal's works are ephemeral and singular, but structurally repeatable, and *that* is what makes it possible for them to persist. His work transcends the essential distinction between event and permanence. **Oral transmission and bodily memory – traditions that are antithetical to the museum's principle of conserving artifacts – become the essential and constitutive principles, as the transmission of his work relies entirely upon the mode of memorization.** The work persists only via the body, which naturally cannot generate an identical repetition because transmission via memory can never guarantee an identical recreation of a situation. Thus the structure of the artwork always remains open and subject to modification although this does not imply an arbitrary enactment. There is indeed a clearly defined way to execute the work, but, because there is no fixed original, the respective individual way of interpreting it co-defines the work. **Over the years a work of Sehgal can circulate through hundreds of bodies; through those who enact them — but not only the participants but astonishingly, also many visitors react mimetically to Sehgal's works, imitating, impersonating and enacting them as well as telling them to others.** These forms of re-presentation interest Sehgal in contrast to the permanence of the material object and its documentation via images.

*In Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing dan and bruce and other things, Sehgal takes up an art historical discourse, namely the recourse of visual artists to incorporating movement and the idea of intermediality implicit therein. He borrows from a specific aesthetic, which he then transforms into his own, which is precisely not based on a mixture of media but focused on the choreographed body in a medium-specific way. This kind of referencing of historical predecessors serves to illuminate their practice or, in the words of Paul Veyne, their mode of "doing/making". Veyne once wrote about Foucault that*

it was his “most central and original” thesis to have shown that “what is done or made, the object or thing,” can be explained by “what – in a given historical moment – (was understood as) ‘doing/making’.” (8) In this line of thinking the object, the thing or the product recedes behind the act and the mode of production, i.e., behind the practices that generated it, which themselves stem from specific conventions. It is precisely such a perspective that Sehgal puts forth. If one looks at the works of Nauman, Graham and Sehgal on the level of what is represented, they are definitely similar, if not somewhat comparable, in spite of the fact that they are realized in different media. The material-medial level however constitutes an essential difference. Nauman and Graham represent the body by the mediatized image and thereby produce an enduring object; with Sehgal the artwork consists of a choreography, which is temporary, but by virtue of being repeatable achieves durability and the potential to be transmitted. Herein it is not only or not primarily a question of *whether* the event can be integrated into the museum or — more generally — into an “archive” (and thereby obviously changing the cultural imperative of the archive), but rather it is a matter of emphasizing the act of archiving as an event in itself. Jacques Derrida has called such a shift (which he examines mainly in the medium of writing) the transition from the “archived event” to the “event of archiving.” (9) He refers to the late texts of Paul de Man, who proposes to distinguish between an event that has irreversibly taken place and the production of an event in the act of archiving. Derrida emphasizes this act of an actual material inscription, of “something that occurs materially, that leaves a trace on the world, that does something to the world as such.” (10)

Here the notion of history departs from its focus on the temporal and connects with the question of the power to posit, of the power to inscribe, to integrate into an archive. “This value of occurrence,” Derrida writes, “links history not to time, as it usually thought, nor to the temporal process but, according to de Man, to power, to the language of power, and to language as power. Hence the necessity to take into account performativity, which defines precisely the power of language and power as language.” (11) The notion of performativity reappears here: It denotes the act of a temporal, material, societal positing.

In his book *Archive Fever* Derrida traces the etymology of “archive” and gives it a political thrust. (12) The archons of ancient Greece were not only responsible for the preservation of important documents, but also had the power to interpret the law — political leadership and exegesis went hand in hand. (13) Derrida politicizes the problematic of the archive, but not by adding a political dimension to the supposedly neutral archive. The



question of the archive is not a “political question among others. It runs through the whole of the field and in truth determines politics from the bottom as *res publica*. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.” (14)

It is one thing to allow the forgotten, the marginal and the suppressed to be part of the archive, to continuously open it to what it did not have access to. It is something else to claim another mode of archiving for what has been excluded, as **Rebecca Schneider suggests in an essay that another mode of the archival is inherent to the body, to fleeting movements and gestures, to the spoken word. (15) Drawing on Foucault and Friedrich Nietzsche, she speaks of a “counter-memory” that is not only inseparably attached to the body, but also challenges traditional distinctions between absence and presence, being and disappearance, original and mimesis. Sehgal integrates such a “counter-memory” into the hegemonic archival culture of the museum.** He insists on the museum as the context for his works, because as he says “I’m interested in the political efficiency of the museum – it is still one of the main agents of cultural values, and over time, offers a possibility for long term politics. It is a place where one can influence discourse in the future perfect tense: ‘This will have been the past.’”(16) The artist not only acknowledges the museum’s significance for a sustainable, long-lasting existence of art, but also accepts the institution as an instance of generating societal values.

As a counterpart to *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing dan and bruce and other things*, **Sehgal’s Kiss is enacted by two dancers in a close embrace who move very slowly and continuously through different choreographic constellations that draw from images of kissing couples throughout the history of art: At times one may recognize the kiss of Rodin or those of Brancusi and Klimt or a Picasso, at other times the sexual positions of Jeff Koons and Cicciolina and then back to Rodin and so on.** As in *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing dan and bruce and other things*, this work is realized as a continuous, uninterrupted flow of movement. No position is held or especially accentuated, although sometimes one recognizes a figurative scene, which then dissolves once again into something illegible, undefinably anthropomorphic. The work functions as a kind of *boîte-en-valise*. (17) In this reenactment of historical sculptural works as choreographed movements, we find here again an understanding of continuity and duration as the simultaneity of (art) history and the forms of history’s actualization, which is

precisely the modality of the performative — repetition and transformation. In *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing dan and bruce and other things* Sehgal situates his medium in a specific tradition of visual art dealing with dance in the 1960s, while in *Kiss* he refers in his medium to the masterpieces of high culture. At one point in the choreography the dancers recite alternately with their faces averted from the visitor: “Tino Sehgal, *Kiss*, 2002, Fond National d’art contemporain,” orally transmitting the information one would usually find on a label next to the artwork: the name of the artist, the title, the year of its creation and its *provenance*. The choreography repeats, but with the dancers in reversed roles. This work is equally conceived as a loop, and it exists, executed by changing dancers, for the entire duration of the exhibition.

***Kiss and Instead of allowing something to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things* are Sehgal’s most sculptural works, in fact, *Kiss* may be even more clearly perceived as a sculpture as one can move around this “freestanding” work and view it from all sides. The slowness with which the movements are executed in both works adds to their sculptural quality: the near-stasis produces the impression that the work is generating a multiplicity of sculptures, but, unlike a *tableau vivant*, doesn’t statically hold the pose.** It might seem far-fetched to introduce the category of sculpture as a reference to these works. In my view, however, it is precisely because these works which insist on a status as an artwork beyond the material and static object that they establish a dialogue with sculpture, which has over the course of the 20th century, increasingly distanced itself as an art form from its fixation on the material art object. **In contemporary art the term *sculpture* has become unspecific as a categorical designation, as Rosalind Krauss’ term “sculpture in the expanded field” demonstrates, situating sculpture in a wider arena which includes environments and installations.(18)** However, I will employ the term in its historical specificity to highlight the connections to and distinctions from Sehgal’s work. One could say that the work of Sehgal takes on the classical parameters of this art form and twists them: while classical sculpture tries to transcend its own static materiality via the composition and the staging of the human figure, Sehgal’s work is enacted by living bodies presented in an objectlike manner. Thus he touches upon a topic that is essential to sculpture and inscribed into its history from its origins. Sculpture has always been marked by its aspiration to transcend its own material objecthood, an aspiration that is continued in modernity with the attempt to negate the commodity status of the artwork, which was seen to relate to its physical materiality.

## The problem of sculpture with its materiality

Since antiquity the discrepancy between sculpture as a representation of a living human being and its literal materiality as a *thing* made of stone, bronze or plaster is considered a problem of this art form. Pygmalion, who after Ovid is seen as one of the prototypes for the figure of the artist, begs Venus to bring the female object of desire that he made of stone to life. Although painting has had to constantly battle with the allegation of the falseness of the illusion it generates, it does not share the frustration about the lifelessness and material properties of an artwork that evokes the living presence of a figure as an effect, but precisely because of this effect always renders the imprisonment of the figure in the material apparent. **On the one hand, the immobilization, this freezing of human traits in sculpture allows for a greater understanding of the meaning of humanness than one is aware of in real life; on the other hand, it is this very immobility and lifelessness that brings the sculpture close to being nothing more than *mere thing* that limits its capacity for emotional and psychological expression.** (19) The fact of being an object and the wish to transcend its own objectness belong to the essence of sculpture as an art form. In his famous essay on Laocoon, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing poses the question of whether there is an inherent difference between an event and a static object, and what this difference might mean. For Lessing, the essence of sculpture lies in its static character. Unlike a poem, for example, in a visual work of art all of the individual parts are accessible to the viewer at the same moment. He recognizes, however, that sculpture also inherently depends on its distribution as an object in space implying a certain temporality:

“All bodies, however, exist not only in space, but also in time. They continue, and, at any moment of their continuance, may assume a different appearance and stand in different relations. Every one of these momentary appearances and groupings was the result of a preceding, may become the cause of a following, and is therefore the centre of a present action.” (20)

For Lessing this potential of bodies to change within the course of an action crystallizes in the “most fruitful moment and the most fruitful aspect of the moment.” (21) This moment is characterized by having the potential to generate a narrative, i.e., a before and after is inscribed into it.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century custom of viewing sculpture as *tableaux vivants* by torchlight (thereby giving them a ghostly presence), expressed the human desire to overwhelm the limits of the dead medium via illusion. Such a paradoxical quest to appear both alive and quasi-human as well as abstract and ideal is equally inscribed into a normative notion of sculpture just as it is embodied by the ideal, classic sculpture. In his *General Theory of the Fine Arts* (1771-74) Johann George Sulzer leaves no doubt about the fact that sculpture has nothing to offer but dead material which is brought to life quasi-metamorphically by the imagination of the viewer. (22) In a classicist conception of sculpture, the inevitable narrowness of the art form must be compensated for by the imagination of the viewer and yet, at the same time, must satisfy the standard of wholeness and completeness necessary to represent a human figure in order to evoke a corresponding effect in the viewer at the moment of apprehension.

**As long as sculpture was embedded in an architectural and ritual context, its meaningfulness was secure but as an object in a museum it lacked this context, making its status problematic. It was in danger of becoming a mere object, a thing.** Baudelaire compared sculpture to a primitive fetish that has been deprived of its magic and can now only evoke the false allure of the commodity.(23) Which order does an artwork belong to that is no longer anchored in religious belief and ritual but merely an object of contemplation? It becomes part of the economic order. For Baudelaire the tension between the ideal of a true work of art whose imaginative force seizes us in the moment of its apprehension and the trivial existence as mere thing or commodity, inherent to the artwork in modernity, is most strongly embodied by sculpture. **Based on the assumption that a convincing sculptural depiction of the human form now relies on the acceptance of its objecthood and no longer on the illusion of transcendence, sculpture of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century emphasizes its own objecthood.** The attempt to be something that it was not, compromised the fundamental qualities of sculpture, or so it was thought. This imperative was so powerful that in his famous essay from 1907 Rainer Maria Rilke, in his ambition to portray Rodin’s oeuvre as a radically modern one, introduced the artist’s sculpture not as figures but as things. (24)

Situated between Rodin's oeuvre and the 1960s the sculpture of modernity brings forth new forms of objecthood that are fundamentally distinct from the monumentalizing tendencies of classical sculpture. This development towards the literalness of the object found its endpoint in American Minimalism. **In their self-referential conception, the Minimal Art objects are simply there, sharing a common space with the viewer. They no longer present an internal structure that can be read as formal equivalent to the human figure or as an embodiment of human subjectivity. Thus, the site of meaning shifts from an inner, formal structure to the common presence of work and beholder generating a kind of "intersubjective drama," which, as we have already seen, is described as "theatrical" by Michael Fried.** Minimal Art, which Fried calls "literalist art," "[...] aspires not to defeat or suspend its own objecthood, but on the contrary to discover and project objecthood as such." (25) In its literal objecthood it seemed to question the assumption that every artwork embodies a formal-aesthetic logic that is different from the material properties of a mere thing, thus producing, as Fried writes, "the risk, even the possibility, of seeing works of art as nothing more than objects [...]". (26) This potential was already implied in the objects of the Dadaists and other avant-gardists, but now that it had arrived at the heart of modernism it apparently was more threatening. Fried therefore declared the project of modernist painting "to defeat or suspend its own objecthood" as the *Leitmotif of Art and Objecthood*, arguing that sculpture should attempt to transcend its objecthood instead of just falling into the literal and exhibiting the inevitable void of meaning. This premise remained central to Fried until he quit art criticism in 1970, which testifies to a consciousness of the fact that the illusion that an artwork is more than the literalness of its material consistence is fragile and — especially in the case of sculpture — constantly endangered.

### **Object- and thinghood (Theodor W. Adorno and Michael Fried)**

Even if Theodor W. Adorno and Michael Fried belong to different generations and intellectual contexts — Adorno, exercised a decisive influence on a politically oriented writing on art, while Fried has been heavily attacked by a critical art history for his adherence to modernism — there is an interesting relationship between Fried's central postulate that art needs to transcend its factual objecthood and Adorno's analysis of the thinghood (*Dinghaftigkeit*) of the artwork in the modern world. (27) From different perspectives, both reflect the modern claim to art's autonomy and the resulting tensions,

from which the artwork cannot escape. “The perennial revolt of art against art has its *fundamentum in re*,”(28) Adorno writes in the *Aesthetic Theory* that he was working on in the 1960s around the same time that Fried published *Art and Objecthood*.

In Adorno’s view, the thinghood of the artwork is inevitable, and at the same time it is that which art must always turn against.

“If it is essential to artworks that they be things, it is no less essential that they negate their own status as things, and thus art turns against art. The totally objectivated artwork would congeal into a mere thing, whereas if it altogether evaded objectivation it would regress to an impotently powerless impulse and flounder in the empirical world.”(29)

Without a doubt there are essential differences between Adorno’s concept of the thinghood of art and the mere objecthood that Fried ascribes to the objects of Minimal Art.

Nonetheless the polarities that Adorno assesses — the artwork as mere “thing” and the dissolution of its thinghood in the “subjective impulse” — parallels Fried’s claim of the literal objecthood of Minimal Art and its unsubstantial, theatrical effects. Fried suggests the existence of a higher plane on which the antagonism between the artistic and the object character can be transcended in the work itself even if only for rare and short moments; as he writes in *Art and Objecthood*, “presentness is grace.”(30) For Adorno this transcendence of objecthood can occur only in negativity. To succeed in being art, art must turn against itself, against its own thinghood, and negotiate this antagonism in its form.

“What appears in artworks and is neither to be separated from their appearance nor to be held simply identical with it – the nonfactual in their facticity – is their spirit. It makes artworks, things among things, something other than thing. Indeed, artworks are only able to become other than thing by becoming a thing, though not through their localization in space and time but only by an immanent process of reification that makes them self-same, self-identical.”(31)

**According to Adorno, the integrity of an artwork lies in its constant aspiration to resist the inevitable process of its own reification. Adorno's reflections on the objecthood of art stem from a Marxist theory of reification. Therein lies an essential difference to the literal objecthood of which Fried speaks. Adorno situates the structural tensions within a larger cultural and societal process of reification to which the artwork is subject.** Both the appearance of an artwork as well as its perception is decisively determined by reification. "Only a philistine and stubborn faith in artists could overlook the complicity of the artwork's thing-character with social reification and thus with its untruth: the fetishization of what is in itself a process as relation between elements." (32) **Adorno is not concerned with the property of the artwork as a physical object, but rather with the societal process that allows it to emerge and makes it perceivable as an artwork, a process through which it is constituted as a commodity.** The only artwork in Adorno's view that can satisfy is the one whose individual moments of sensuous particularity are not related to each other in a unifying manner and thus never become a whole. "This objectivity grants entry exclusively to the *membra disjecta* (orig.) of the world of objects, which only in a state of decomposition becomes commensurable to the law of form." (33) It is not surprising that Adorno finds his examples for this idea of a consequent negation of thinghood predominantly in theater (Beckett) and music – which is, according to Beckett, the "most immaterial of the arts" – as it is difficult for visual art to satisfy the claim of a consistent and sustainable negation of thinghood. Art cannot exit this context of the material object and its commodity status. In every artwork something is materialized and it is only then that it becomes an artwork, but thereby it is also structurally a thing and thus available to the commodity form.

**The critique of the object status of the artwork is one of the central themes of art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It reappears periodically, but it becomes especially virulent in the late 1960s and 1970s with Fluxus, Performance and Conceptual Art. What are the defining features of this critique?** What was achieved, and what made these new art forms fail? The Happening and Fluxus events of the early 1960s tried to replace the object with the processual; Performance Art utilized the body of the artist as material and signifier instead of the object. Conceptual Art, however, carried out the critique of the object within the object itself and thereby led to lasting changes — but also to unresolved contradictions in the critique of the object status of the artwork.

### **Critique of Conceptual Art**

There is no consistent or cohesive model of Conceptual Art. How we understand it today stems from different, sometimes competing approaches. Today four artists are generally considered the protagonists of Conceptual Art: Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner, although one could also add Art & Language and Mel Bochner. Initially Joseph Kosuth and Sol LeWitt were the first artists to call themselves "conceptual artists." Although nowadays LeWitt is not usually seen as a protagonist of Conceptual Art, he was the first one to pin down its essential feature: the idea is more important than the form of its materialization. In 1967 LeWitt published *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, in which he wrote:

"In conceptual art the idea or the concept is the most important aspect of the work. [...] In other forms of art the concept may be changed in the process of execution. [...] When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes the machine that makes the art." (34)

In a larger sense Conceptual Art denotes a diverse set of artistic practices during the 1960s and early 70s that in different ways undertook a rigorous questioning of the parameters that constitute the work of art. Of central concern to my argument here is the critique and the dismantling of the traditional definition of the art object, which Lucy Lippard misleadingly called "dematerialization." A truly dematerialized artwork has never existed and cannot exist, as any artistic utterance has to be mediated by material support. At best one can speak of the altered status of the object's art character, which shifts toward the idea and away from the forms of its material fixation. Materialization can take place via language (as "critical language" as in the works of Lawrence Weiner) or can be site-specific (for example, in the works of Michael Asher, although he never defined himself as a Conceptual artist) or can take the form of documentation (as in the work of Douglas Huebler). The object recedes behind the processes of information or communication for which it is now merely a trigger. This shift is original, and artistically implies a fundamentally new definition of the formal, aesthetic and material properties of art.



**There was always a critical and political aspect that was latently or explicitly inscribed to Conceptual Art. In a broad sense one can speak of a conglomerate of artistic and political anti-establishment attitudes that coalesced in the late 1960s with a politicized cultural criticism. Two aspects are at the center of this critique: the artwork as a privileged aesthetic object and the artwork as commodity.** Both are related yet become effective in different ways. The critique of the primacy of the aesthetic in art is grounded in an intentional self-liquidation and asceticism, a reductionism that emphasizes the similarity of art and non-art and resists any form of (aesthetic) privileging or hierarchy. This attempt has its roots in the utopias of modernity, which believed that the participation of the masses in social production and political life would lead to radically different forms of perception and culture. In 1967 Roland Barthes published two treatises that were highly influential for art criticism, *Death of the Author* and *Birth of the Reader*, which together formulated a critique of the traditional notion of the author. In relation to the work of Lawrence Weiner one can argue that both the negation of the privileged object and the decentering of the position of the author manifested themselves when Weiner wrote in 1967: "Everything is an object. It's just the idea of realizing and accepting that one object is not necessarily better than another." (35) And one of the artist's most quoted statements is: "1. The artist may construct the work. 2. The work may be fabricated. 3. The work need not be built. Each being equal and consistent. With the intent of the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership." (36) By transferring the responsibility for the execution of the work from the artist to the buyer or collector, Weiner decentered the position of the author — at least this was the idea, since such an ambition is contradictory in many ways. **Delegating the execution and thereby also the responsibility for the artwork does not mean that the artist literally gave up the position of the author.** The author of the work is still Lawrence Weiner, as the delegation is part of his intention and therefore ultimately refers back to him. A similar principle holds true of the alleged annihilation of the privileged object: the transformation of the object into language as an (allegedly) direct, critical and democratic form of expression does not equal an abolition of privileges. The artist *cannot* abolish the "privileged artistic object," as it is not the artist who privileges it but rather the gaze upon it and the institutional framing of it. Thus also a work of Lawrence Weiner is a privileged work and not an "object like all others."

In a quintessentially modernist dialectic, Benjamin Buchloh writes that the artwork is "simultaneously the exemplary object of all commodity production and the exceptional object, which denied and resisted the universality of that reign." (37) Behind this dialectic

stands the conviction that the object and the commodity or product status of art are inseparably linked. Because art is an object, it is sellable, and becomes part of a market, circulating inside this market as a commodity. If one inverts this notion — and this idea was of central importance to Conceptual Art — then one can argue that the more immaterial the art, the stronger its resistance against market forces. This uneasiness — uttered latently or explicitly — about the commodity status of the artwork must be seen in the context of the social and economic changes that occurred in the United States in the 1950s and in Europe in the 1960s. In the heyday of economic success, many believed that continuous growth was assured, but it came with a sense of the ever increasing economization of all areas of life. A concern about this economic invasion came not only from real life experiences but from reading politicized theoretical treatises, like Marx's critique of the fetish character of the commodity, in which the principle of exchange is the dominant principle that defines the relations of individuals to each other and from Horkheimer/Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), which outlines a theory of the "culture industry" and which has dominated the New Left's criticism of both art and culture after 1968.

**In summary, the critique of the equalization of art, object and commodity was fueled by the aspiration to transcend the objecthood of art and keeping it aside from the economic sphere and thus the domain of capitalism. Underlying this aspiration is the utopia of a communication freed from commodity production, of an activity freed from the primacy of economic exchange value. But the unresolved and unresolvable contradictions implicit in such an attitude become apparent when these political positions were confronted with real circumstances, with people's own desires. The critique of the product or commodity status of the work was nourished by the idea of an "outside" position that was neither feasible nor desirable in the long run — not only because artists have to generate income, but because art can only continue over time if the works circulate and persist.**

Additionally, despite its dissociation from theories of taste and aesthetic positions, Conceptual Art ultimately remained on the level of the aesthetic, which led to fundamental artistic changes, but did not change the commodity or product status of art, largely because it assumed a very narrow definition of product. In an aesthetic sense, Conceptual Art does not aspire to live up to standards of taste but nevertheless immediately establishes new standards, which Buchloh calls an "aesthetics of administration," referring to the preference

of Conceptual Art for the forms of expression of bureaucracy. (38) It failed to recognize that anything can be a product, even a mere piece of paper, as long as there is somebody who recognizes value in it. Favourizing the idea does not challenge the commodity status of the artwork in the least. A work —like that of Lawrence Weiner — that can only be bought as a surrogate, namely as a certificate, may render the procedure of acquisition and collecting a bit more complicated, but structurally and literally this work is just as much a commodity as anything else that is traded in the market. There is a kind of elitism in the belief that these products could not be appreciated in value and be validated by the market. History has indeed shown that many Conceptual artists of the 1960s have been surprised by the interest of collectors in their work. **Although Conceptual artists broke with aesthetic conventions — and in that sense maybe weakened their commodity status — the innovation of these works is definitely valued.**

#### **The limits of critique and the power of the factual**

**The achievement of Conceptual Art, lies in having generated – historically and aesthetically – the notion of *art as such* that substantially altered accepted ideas of art. Since art was primarily about the idea, which could basically manifest itself in any medium, suddenly one could be an artist without having to be a painter, sculptor, musician or poet.** But as for a substantial and structural modification of visual art in terms of its relation to the economic, Conceptual Art met its limits. More than any other artistic phenomenon of the late 1960s, Conceptual Art exposed the gap between the ambition to change the way art is interwoven with society and the limitation of such an ambition. From a culturally critical standpoint, Conceptual Art exposed the inner conflict of art between its own ambition and social reality. Such an assessment comes close to the attitude of Buchloh, for whom „it seems obvious, at least from the vantage of the early 1990s, that from its inception Conceptual Art was distinguished by its acute sense of discursive and institutional limitations [...] without aspiring to overcome the mere facticity of these conditions.”(39)

From this perspective the claim for artistic and social impact transforms into an exposition of those circumstances that render a direct intervention and effectiveness of art impossible. Thus there isn't a gap between saying and doing or, in other words, no contradiction between the ambition of art to negate its product status and its ultimate

failure to do so. Rather this tension expresses a dialectic that characterizes the status of the artwork in bourgeois society. An understanding of the commodification of art can be derived from Adorno, for whom culture is deeply embedded in the structure of commodity production, which is on the one hand necessary, because only then does it accrue a certain ideological independence — from the church and the aristocracy — but on the other hand, it makes the art object a mere market commodity deprived of a social function. And art as a “free” aesthetic work has to oppose that status. To this dialectical condition belongs art’s dual character “as both autonomous and fait social”(40), or as Adorno also phrases it, „autonomous structures and social phenomena“(41). According to Adorno, art is not only a “fait social” because of „its mode of production, in which the dialectic of the forces and relations of production is concentrated” and not because its themes are social ones but also “by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position as autonomous art”.(42) Only via critique can an artwork that itself is part of an essentially alienated society transcend society. Art can acquire significance only if it manages to implicitly criticize those conditions from which it cannot escape. The involuntary complicity between art and society urges art towards protest, yet necessitates that any protest immediately becomes choked and fruitless, more a formal gesture than an angry polemic. This limit of critique, which is rendered explicit in Conceptual Art, determines the relation between art and society.

Adorno’s conception of the dialectical relation of art and society derives from the historical approaches that aspired to overcome the tradition of an idealistic separation of artistic and social production in aesthetics. Marx introduces the term “production” for the production of both intellectual and material necessities. His ambition was to overcome the antagonism of the aesthetic and the practical that constituted the core of philosophical idealism. “Religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art, etc., are only particular modes of production, and fall under its general law,” he writes.(43) Marx brought together the force of production and form — i.e. social relations — and marked them as different aspects of one phenomenon.

The specificity of Adorno’s position lies in his attempt to combine an approach, critical of ideology with the concept of art’s autonomy. In Adorno’s view, the artwork exists in a society that does not have an outside, yet the artwork must claim an outside to legitimize itself as art. It needs to create a distance from the sphere of objects, to be a “[thing] of a second order”,(44) a spiritualized version of the commodities it opposes. Since art is inseparably linked to society by its own historical and material preconditions, it can

only gain legitimacy by distancing itself critically from society. The fact that art is embedded in society is unavoidable but nonetheless compromises it. It is a necessary evil that the artwork must overcome via its form and method of signifying. On a level of representation art can claim an outside that it does not and cannot have.

Adorno's theory combines the autonomy of the artwork, i.e., its position outside, with a radical critique of society. But the critique signifies a negative force, which can only materialize in the artwork against what already exists. This negativity is without immediate application or use, because Adorno has a deep mistrust for any immediate pragmatic intention of art.

“It is not only through its manifest practical intentions, but rather through its mere existence – indeed, precisely through its impractical nature – that art manifests a polemic, secretly practical character. This however, cannot be reconciled through the insertion of culture as a category – ‘cultural activities’ – into the totality of prevailing practice as has been done under current conditions with total smoothness.”(45)

Adorno is skeptical of any kind of productive or pragmatic impact of art on a social level, because for him the societal is just a sphere of alienation. Therefore the relation between art and society can only be conceived of as one of negation — but a negation that always remains symbolic and that has to come to terms with its own limitations with respect to its impact on real circumstances **Seen from a theoretical perspective, the relation of art to its own praxis remains a blind spot and a paradox that cannot be overcome. Art is fueled by the ambition to negate or overcome something with which it is and remains inseparably linked on a level of representation. In this regard, there is a connection between the art form of sculpture that attempts to transcend its own materiality and Adorno's postulate that art must strive to negate its own participation in society.** The failure lies in art's inability to extend signification to the level of the factual. In its practice, in its performative effect on the circumstances it criticized, Conceptual Art neither criticized nor weakened but rather further differentiated and elaborated what one culturally and historically understands a commodity to be. And it had a similar effect on the critique of the object. The introduction of certificates (which guarantee the authenticity of the artwork in many examples of

Conceptual Art) has reaffirmed the inevitability of a material fixation when art encounters the museum and the market instead of suspending it.

This perspective becomes apparent when one focuses on the factual, cultural and ethical implications of an aesthetic that is oriented towards the performative dimension of art. The facticity of this now comes to the fore. The point of departure is less the recognition of problematic conditions and circumstances than the way in which these circumstances constantly get produced and reproduced via practices and actions —and by any given artwork. As we have seen in the context of Buren’s works, Judith Butler theorizes this process as “performativity.” Thereby we can understand what an artwork is capable of generating — be it affirmative or towards social change — precisely because of its linkage to social institutions and processes. **What becomes significant and meaningful here is not the representational level of the artwork, not what it claims or signifies, but its factual existence, which becomes the point of departure for artistic agency and positing.**

**To understand the concept of the performative in this way means to focus not only on what an artwork intends to do, but also on its unintended and unreflected effects. The performative emphasizes an artwork’s constitutive effect on precisely those conditions into which it is embedded and by which it exists.** From the perspective of the performative, artworks not only are products of given circumstances, they also contribute to the existence of these very circumstances. Not only is social reality represented in artworks, but they also constitute it both concretely and categorically. Concretely here refers to processes that are initiated by the production and the existence of the artwork; categorically, refers to categories that are intentionally or unintentionally reproduced in the process. Seen from this angle, the artwork is far from powerless; on the contrary — as an integral part of society — it has an inherent agency (which, however, can be directed intentionally only to a limited degree). Via the concept of performativity one can explain how an artwork co-constitutes social reality in its most fundamental parameters (for example, the historical and cultural form taken by the category of the commodity.)

### **Models of an alternative production**

**Sehgal's work has the character of an experiment at the heart of which lies the question of how to create *something* from *nothing*; how to semantically create meaning and create value economic without producing a physical object.** Conceived in order to formulate and circulate an idea of the object, the product and the artefact that does not rely on what Sehgal calls "the transformation of material"(46), he turns to traditional art forms like dance and singing, which generate meaning exclusively via the human body without necessitating the production of a material object. **He confronts media with the context of visual art, a sphere in our society that gives a high — if not the highest — symbolic (and monetary) value and appreciation for the material artifact. The museum in turn offers a ritual stage for this high appreciation. In visual art the object, in the sense of an object of perception and communication, is physical, whereas in dance, song and spoken poetry it constitutes itself *in situ* and *in actu* in the materiality of the body. Sehgal's work revolves around the significance of this difference and its cultural and political implications.**

Sehgal's work evinces an understanding that the relation between art and society begins long before a thematic reference is made and that this relationship does not lie primarily in the employment of specific techniques taken from everyday life —as in collage or montage — for example — but resides first and foremost on a fundamental level — namely, how the artwork is produced, or, in other words, which modes of production are applied in the process. Unwittingly and independent of its content, the visual artwork affirms certain social conventions and traditions via its mode of production, most centrally the common conviction that economic value must exist in a physical object, that only via the process of physical materialization can *nothing* become *something*.(47) Basically one can characterize any work of visual art as affirming this model of production, intentionally or not. One can say that those arts that are bound to physical materials constitute the social sphere that provides this model with an element of transcendence. **This dominant model of production, which is so fundamental to the history of civilization that it almost seems unassailable, is what Sehgal turns against. He differs fundamentally from Conceptual Art and its theoretical references in that he is not concerned with a critique of the market or the commodity status of the artwork. Beyond issues concerning the system of distribution, his critique is aimed at the prevalent model of production: the transformation of material into goods, as it is reproduced by visual art.**

**“In this respect I consider communism and capitalism as two versions of the same model of economy, which only differ in their ideas about distribution. This model would be: the transformation of material or – to use another word – the transformation of ‘nature’ into supply goods in order to decrease supply shortage and to diminish the threats of nature, both of course in order to enhance the quality of life. Both the appearance of excess supply in western societies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as of mankind’s endangering of the specific disposition of ‘nature’ in which human life seems possible, question the hegemony of this mode of production, in which the objecthood of visual art is profoundly inclined.” (48)**

Sehgal’s line of argument is as follows(49): Historically this model of economy served to secure the necessities for survival, enhance quality of life by diminishing lack and, as he puts it, banish the “threats of nature.” But in the 1950s in North America and in the 1960s in Europe — exactly at the time that the artistic critique of the object status of art was challenged — paradigmatic changes occurred that, according to Sehgal, make the hegemony of this model of production dubious. (50) For the first time in the course of civilization, Western societies did not face a lack of goods to cover basic needs, and at the same time it became apparent that a model of production that was supposed to enhance quality of life might actually decrease it in the long run. Over time, the depletion of finite natural resources as well as the emission of harmful substances could result in those modes of production that were designed to solve civilization’s problems will create new ones instead, and thereby no longer enhancing the quality of life but actually worsening it. For Sehgal it therefore becomes problematic to hold on to this model at a time when its historical premises are no longer in place, and especially so in an institution like the museum, which deals with shaping values in the long term. In Sehgal’s view art can therefore not be about somehow weakening the object, and definitely not about replacing it with a certificate or documentation, but rather to literally change the material substance of a visual artwork, which has always followed the model of production that of the transformation natural resources.

“Visual art has always reflected, consciously or not, the latest in technology. From the very beginnings of civilization with the recognition of stones as a tool going hand in hand with cave drawing until the latest in military technology resulting in video or



internet art (...) Basically all visual art works are produced by transformations of material, there are only very few exceptions (Barry's telepathic piece, some of Michael Asher's works)."(51)

Any visual artwork begins with a transformation, a crafting of material; in principle this applies to a Leonardo da Vinci as much as it does to a Marcel Duchamp, a Gerhard Richter or a work of a Lawrence Weiner. Of course their works represent different statements, attitudes, and worldviews, so to speak. But in Sehgal's line of thinking, the choice of a medium already implies a specific relation to society, technology and (technological) progress. He therefore situates political significance and the encounter of art and society on the level of the artistic medium.

To get a better sense of Sehgal's understanding of the political implications of an artistic medium, it is helpful to contrast his position with that of Clement Greenberg, with whom he shares a focus on the factual aspects of an artwork. Coming from Marxism, Greenberg's examination of the artistic medium does indeed have a socio-political dimension. The search for a specific essence of art equaled a "progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium."(52) Because of the inseparable bonds between art and society, it seemed essential to Greenberg to assign a specific realm to the aesthetic experience to art in order to prevent it from deteriorating into kitsch and mere entertainment.

"At first glance the arts might seem to have been in a situation like religion's. Having been denied by the Enlightenment all tasks they could take seriously, they looked as though they were going to be assimilated to entertainment pure and simple, and entertainment itself looked as though it were going to be assimilated, like religion, to therapy. The arts could save themselves from this levelling down only by demonstrating that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other kind of activity. Each art, it turned out, had to perform this demonstration on its own account. What had to be exhibited was not only that which was unique and irreducible in art in general, but also that which was unique and irreducible in each particular art."(53)

This oft-cited passage from his essay “Modernist Painting” clarifies how Greenberg realizes his concept of distinction: he makes the individual aesthetic experience of an artwork dependent on its respective medium. Greenberg reinterprets from the side of an aesthetics of production the claim for the specificity of the art experience. He relates the essence of the art experience to specific material properties and conventions of formation. Greenberg proposes that each respective medium should have to prove that it has something singular and irreplaceable to offer. Thus the artistic medium is not a neutral support and therefore also cannot be filled with just any content. Every medium, irrespective of the content, has a specific meaning of its own, which can be resistant.

Sehgal shares Greenberg’s perspective on the specificity of an artistic medium, but he addresses the underlying question of the relation – both practically and politically – of art and society in a different manner. Greenberg is concerned with the dissociation and distinction of the arts; in this respect his position intersects Adorno’s. But again, Greenberg’s argument takes place on an aesthetic level, which explains why its ability to distinguish is limited, as the history of modern art has shown. How else would one explain that also a Pollock, whom Greenberg regarded so highly, could end up becoming a kitchen poster? Sehgal’s work performs a cultural distinction on another, deeper level. It is realized in the choice of another model of production for the artwork. As Buren did in his later works, Sehgal recognizes a potential for agency in the factual social embeddedness of the artwork, in which there always exists the possibility of marking out an actual difference. His work exhibits this difference concerning the question of how far one’s artwork perpetuates this model of production or substitutes it via another. With Sehgal, as with Buren, an attitude of criticality transforms into construction the proposal of having something else take place. **Instead of formulating a critique of the object character of art as Conceptual Art did, but then to ultimately maintain this object status, or more precisely, to criticize the objecthood of art in order to actually attack its status as a product, by ultimately maintaining both the status as product and as object, Sehgal creates a model of art that does without any physical object.**

**“My point is that dance as well as singing - as traditional artistic media - could be a paradigm for another mode of production which stresses transformation of acts instead of transformation of material, continuous involvement of the present with**

**the past in creating further presents instead of an orientation towards eternity, and simultaneity of production and deproduction instead of economics of growth.” (54)**

**How does he do that? Sehgal’s work materializes as temporary artefacts in the body of the person who enacts them. He stages the becoming-object of actions — not of humans — which by nature do not use what the artist sees as the problematic consequences of the usual mode of production.** He introduces this medium (which from a purely technical standpoint can be described as archaic) not only as “high cultural” (as in *Kiss*) but also as “contemporary.” At the 2005 Venice Biennial Sehgal presented the work *This is so contemporary*, which was enacted by three people. When a visitor entered the exhibition space they danced in a happy, emphatic way around him or her singing in the sing-song style of a nursery rhyme: “Oh, this is so contemporary, contemporary, contemporary. Oh, this is so contemporary, contemporary, contemporary.” The melody was so catchy and the dancing so contagious that quite a few visitors left the German pavilion dancing. In a nearby pavilion I heard a visitor whispering to his neighbor, “and this is not contemporary.”

**These anecdotes demonstrate that the different mode of production of Sehgal’s work generates not only another concept of the artwork but ultimately also another kind of viewer. What started as a focus on the performativity the artwork, of its own coming-into-existence leads to a very specific performative effect on the situation and the viewer.** Any work that is presented at the Venice Biennial stands for what is deemed to be contemporary in art and can claim to be “contemporary,” thereby not only representing an idea of what is contemporary but also fundamentally co-constitutes it. In this respect the title is first and foremost, tautological. But by making explicit, one can even say by exhibiting the performative power of the art institution to define what is contemporary in the work, Sehgal also opens the notion of what is contemporary up for negotiation. “Normally we tend to think of contemporary culture as informed by the latest in contemporary technology [...] and that is how we construct contemporariness. I was interested if we can construct a contemporariness without using contemporary technology or without even making reference to it but using the oldest means possible, just people moving around.” (55) In declaring his medium as contemporary although from a technological perspective that seems improbable, Sehgal makes use of his own power or rather performative power to intervene into the process to define what is the contemporary, a power granted to him as the artist representing the German pavilion. Ultimately, however, the claim he makes via

this work is affirmed only when the visitor confirms the work as being contemporary or something new and culturally valuable. In that moment the work —performatively — generates what it says: “If you are seduced by the thing and you say, ‘This is actually contemporary,’ then this whole structure of ‘contemporary equals informed by contemporary technology’ has broken down...” (56) The artwork is thus a discursive interrelationship of different values, which become concrete through a system of validation and judgements about those values. One might reply that this interrelationship applies to every artwork. Yes, which is why every artwork has a performative dimension that comes into play in exactly this manner. Sehgal’s work, however, actively constructs this process. It renders its own performative power to posit explicit, thereby marking it as a process in which a number of factors (including the visitor) are involved.

This joyful and positive attitude can indeed be taken programmatically. Sehgal employs affirmation to counter an attitude of criticality towards spectacle. There is a spectacular element in the work that the artist can allow precisely because the work’s critical stance resides not in its representation but in its mode of production. In other words, Sehgal can afford a celebratory tone, because he has built his own political stance into the foundation of the social existence of his artwork. Similarly, Buren can allow his work to be decorative, because he has changed the fundamental way the artwork functions and its mode. Thus the critique in the case of both artists shifts from the level of the symbolic or representational to the factual level of construction and production.

### **Positing and empowerment**

**How does Sehgal’s work find its way into the museum? How does it become part of the art world? Does the work enter the market? Which conditions must be given, which conventions adhered to, so that *nothing*—in a physical sense—can become *something* of—economic and symbolic—value?** According to Boris Groys, as we saw in the last chapter, innovation in art always takes place by simultaneously rupturing and continuing traditions, as a “positive and negative adaptation of tradition.” (57) The story of Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917) might have come to a quick end when it was rejected by the Society of Independent Artists, if Duchamp had not, as Thierry de Duve describes in his reconstruction of the “R.

Mutt case,” very strategically launched its entry into art history. (58) He made sure that Alfred Stieglitz photographed it in his characteristic symbolic manner to give the profane object a Buddha-like aesthetic, shifting it from a mere provocation to an artwork, thereby ensuring that the urinal would be judged aesthetically. Duchamp not only “let the viewer complete the image” but by involving Stieglitz, he selected a middleman who, as the former honorary president of the Armory Show, patron of the American avant-garde and well-known artist in his right, had the authority to grant Duchamp’s readymade the status of an artwork. But even the readymade – which probably more than any other object embodies the idea of rupturing artistic conventions – connects to specific aesthetic conventions. On the one hand, it constitutes itself via “aesthetic contrasting,” as Groys formulates, but on the other hand, the readymade can also be connected positively to cultural traditions, via the reference to Buddhist iconography as well as erotic and taboo connotations. Only through this oscillation between positive and negative cultural references could this object have achieved the status of an eminent work of art. According to Groys, “an everyday object without such an aspiration would have no chance to be put in a line with precursors from the past to then make the aesthetic contrast perceivable.” (59) Innovation can thus be understood as an act of re-evaluation and a reassessment in specific value hierarchies. (60) Precisely because an artist like Daniel Buren reverts to the most conventional medium of visual art — painting — it is essential for him to change the rules. In some sense the opposite is true for Sehgal: he has to adhere to certain conventions precisely because he has removed the most fundamental convention of visual art, namely, the material support.

**Sehgal’s work follows the mode of presentation of a conventional visual artwork: it is always present and can be viewed during the all of opening hours of an exhibition from the first to the last day. Of equal importance is the fact that, although the work is a temporary artefact, it can be repeated in another venue, therefore it persists and can be transmitted over time.** It is only because of the adherence to these conventions that this work achieves the status of an artwork, and thereby manages to generate significance in the realm of visual art. In other words, only via the affirmation of the set of conventions to which a visual artwork is usually bound is it possible for Sehgal to negate the most fundamental convention —the material object—and for his work to be relevant as works of visual art. It seems apparent in Sehgal’s work how the performativity of an artwork, its embeddedness in and its production of reality, has become the tool for an artistic statement.

**Finally, it is also essential that the artworks can be bought and sold. The artist works with galleries, who sell the works' rights and instructions to museums and collectors. There exists no material object in these transactions, not even a certificate as a material surrogate for the artwork. Buyer, dealer and artist meet in the office of a notary and agree to the terms of the contract orally. An official whose usual function is to write things down, the notary in this case functions only as a witness and an expert in contractual issues.** Present are also other expert witnesses — curators, critics and/or museum directors — who agree to memorize the contents of the contract in case of a dispute. The contract itself is not unusual. It contains clauses that define the rights and the obligations of the artist and the buyer; for example, the presentation of the work (the artist agrees to brief a person he has authorized on the correct installation of the work and the buyer agrees to show the work in the context of a collection or temporary exhibition for a period of time that is no less than six weeks); prohibition to document the work; the resale of the work (must be through another notarized oral contract); the payment of the persons executing the work (dancers and interpreters) etc. Both parties agree to the contract with a handshake; nothing is written down. The conventions of a sale are adhered to, but Sehgal strips them of their center, the material object. If Daniel Buren, as Pierre Huyghe says, produces “hollowed out objects” by stripping from the object its usual importance, then Sehgal produces “hollowed out conventions”. Since Sehgal takes away their center the objects appear as rules, as cultural agreements that are negotiable and can be fulfilled in a different way.

**Sehgal's affirmative relation to the market is decisively different from the critique of the commodity status of the artwork in the 1960s and early 1970s. From Sehgal's perspective, it is not the fact *that* something is sold but *what* is sold that is decisive. Therefore his work is designed to change the nature of the commodity or product but not to attack the commodity status itself. “I am still producing objects not in the material sense of the word, but in the product sense of the word.” (61) Sehgal's works draw attention to the social and cultural processes of exchange, which constitute what we call “the market.” His argument is that precisely because the market is constituted performatively, i.e. via actions like *offering* and *demanding*, in principle the market has an inherent openness within which his work operates. In this respect the market is not the end, but the beginning of agency. Art in particular represents a field that can create a different model for the product, a *progressive* product so to speak, that on the one hand, does not involve the transformation of material but on the other hand, nonetheless fulfills**

what constitutes the historical core of an artwork, offering the collector the possibility of aesthetic experience and social status.

Since 2001, Sehgal has created a number of works that are executed by museum guards (interpreters dressed in the uniform of the museum guard and therefore perceived as guards). According to Sehgal,

**“The guard is an interesting figure, because the guard is the person who watches over objects. So the material objects are creating meaning, while the guard doesn't create meaning. This is a strange relationship, somehow that in this moment these objects become more important than this person. So, what I did was to put meaning into the guard and asked, what if this person, who is anyways there, creates meaning, what is the difference? What does this imply in terms of how one produces things?”(62)**

He begins with the usual situation, the institutionalized exhibition of objects and system of surveillance, and chooses the person, rather than material object as the conveyor of an artwork.

**These works take place in either museum collection galleries or temporary exhibitions, and involve one or more guards.** *This is good*, for example, is a work from 2001 that was also shown at the 2005 Moscow Biennial of Contemporary Art (among other places) and was enacted mainly by older male guards. When a visitor entered the room, the guard suddenly started moving, with straight legs jumping from one foot to the other and simultaneously rotating his outstretched arms like a windmill in front of his body. After a few seconds he stopped and said, “Tino Sehgal, This is good, 2001, Collection Museum Ludwig, Cologne.” **The work *This is propaganda* is enacted by a female guard. When one enters the room, she turns away from the viewer and sings in a high and powerful voice: “This is propaganda, you know, you know, this is propaganda,” then gradually turns back to the visitor and continues to sing the refrain, “you know, you know,” and ends with “Tino Sehgal, This is propaganda, 2002, courtesy Jan Mot Gallery.”** As we have already seen with *Kiss*, Sehgal goes one step further in terms of dematerialization with these works and asks

**the people enacting the work to say the information one would normally find on a label next to the work.** In *This is exchange*, which was also presented at the German pavilion in Venice in 2005, the guard welcomed the visitor with the following sentences: “Hello, my name is .... This is a piece by Tino Sehgal, entitled, This is exchange. This piece is an offer. We offer to pay you half of the amount you paid to enter the museum if you make a short statement about market economy and discuss it with me. Are you interested in this offer?” If one answered in the affirmative, one immediately found oneself in a conversation about market economy. At the end of the conversation the viewer was given a password, which when told to the person at the front desk the person received half of the entrance fee.

**Almost all the titles of these works begin with *This is* which acts not only as a signature of the work but also fulfils an essential performative function which is to constitute these incidents as an artwork.** It gives the work a title, but it is also part of the work, because the title is uttered as part of the work itself. It is precisely because Sehgal’s titles are tautological, that their performative-generative function comes to the fore. “*This is* the most present tense word there is [...] stronger than now,” Michael Snow once wrote about the usage of this term in his films.(63) Sehgal uses “*This is*” as a kind of mimetic trick to communicate the situation and transport the questions of content and meaning into the here and now. They emphasize this situation, place value on what happens at this very moment, in precisely this intersubjective relationship.

**As an assertion *This is* appears in different contexts in the art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a gesture that declares the object as art, it is inscribed into Duchamp’s readymades. “This (urinal) is art” is the statement that accompanies *Fountain*; thus signifying and actually carrying out the performative act of the symbolic transformation of the thing from its primary reality as an object to its secondary reality as a meaningful sign, which is directly linked to the context of art, a museum and a viewer.** The negative version of this gesture is the famous image of a pipe by Magritte. In *The treason of the images* (1948), with the caption “*Ceci n’est pas une pipe*,” Magritte performs the opposite process: he disassembles the sign into its parts, the mental image and the material signifier. In 1972 at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf Marcel Broodthaers brought together these two approaches: he presented an exhibition of 266 representations of eagles taken from art, culture, science, religion, politics, history and advertising; each exhibit had a label inscribed in German, English and French: “This is not a work of art.” In the catalogue Broodthaers wrote that the label “illustrated an idea of Marcel Duchamp and René Magritte” and put an illustration of



the *Fountain* next to a reproduction of Magritte's painting of a pipe.(64) Broodthaers uses the figure of the eagle as a sign that is overdetermined in a double sense — as artwork and as symbol — to pose the question of the relationship between the image, the object, its signification and meaning. Broodthaers also refers to the then little-known essay by Foucault, "This is not a pipe," (65) in which Foucault relates Magritte's pipe painting (or rather another version of it) to a calligram. (66) He traces the confounding discrepancy between representation and signification that characterizes this image back to a calligram that underlies its structure. Synonymous with a "calligraphic image," a calligram suspends the distinction between figurative and linguistic representation and thereby dissolves different systems of signs like text and image, drawing and writing, utterance and figure, giving the depiction the quality of a symbol and writing the spatial dimension of a painted depiction. Its complexity lies in, „to trap things in a double cipher“.(67) "Thus", as Foucault says, "the calligram aspires playfully to efface the oldest oppositions of our alphabetical civilisation: to show and to name; to shape and to say; to reproduce and to articulate; to imitate and to signify; to look and to read."(68) Magritte dissolves the order of sign systems; nonetheless he is concerned with signification, with designation, and not with being. Nobody would seriously claim that the image of a pipe really *is* a pipe. In this respect Magritte's "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" differs from Duchamp's implicit "This is art" and Sehgal's "This is good." For both Duchamp and Sehgal are concerned with showing, even exposing the reality claim of their statement.

**The presentation of Duchamp's readymades in the museum demonstrates that in principle anything can be art. From Sehgal's perspective this *anything* is confined to specific limitations, namely the parameters of physical materiality. The illocutionary (generative) function of "This is good" lies first of all in making that which it designates appear as *something*, in distinguishing *something* from *nothing*. It identifies the incidents as something that has a symbolic, artistic meaning. Its actual content is thus: "This is something"—and not *nothing*.** This is the crucial function of Sehgal's title. Its execution, taking place, is itself a positing.(69) In this we find an affirmation of the "that" (quod) of positing, which was already of significance with respect to Buren. It is first and foremost a matter of the positing "that," of the fact of its positing, of its existence and not of positing "as." Sehgal's work does not refer to reality, but emerges from the transformation of a given situation. The usual painterly or sculptural object of art constitutes itself via an ontological difference to the world of things that surround it. Therefore Adorno speaks of the artwork as a "thing of a second order"(70), marking its ontological difference from an everyday object.

In Sehgal's hands, however, the artwork realizes itself not as an ontological difference but as an ontological shift from an everyday situation to an artwork that temporarily materializes in actions, movements and speech. **The transition between the everyday situation of an exhibition space and the work of art is thus fluid. After they have enacted the work, the interpreters, as there is no textual information in the exhibition space, also function as commentators or critics as they are the only ones available to speak *about* the work they just embodied. The objects of Minimal Art transform the experience of art into an experience of the situation itself, which is potentially endless. In this regard Michael Fried spoke of the "indeterminacy of the situation" and for Sehgal this is even truer, since the works are not only a trigger for the experience of a situation, but can also react to the viewer. There is a reciprocal exchange between work and viewer that has the potential of being truly indeterminate or infinite. But precisely because there are no clear boundaries between work, viewer and situation, there is a necessity for something that delimits the work — and this task is fulfilled by the title.**

Although Sehgal's titles are tautological, they also produce meaning. When the guard says, "This is good," after having enacted the work, it is in principle tautological, since every work of art implicitly maintains this claim and — considering the double meaning of *good*, as a positive evaluation but also in the sense of as a product or commodity — fulfils this status. Nevertheless the situation in which the title is uttered is more complex and in some sense far from tautological, since it is not clear to what the title refers when it is spoken. One can understand it self-referentially (referring to what has just happened); one could also relate it to the art objects in the room. The status of the title is unclear and thereby exposed as a process, in which the institution, the work of art and also the viewer (in her or his judgment) are performatively active by allowing certain values—like *contemporariness*—to be realized. In *This is good*, the title ultimately confronts visitors with their preconceptions, i.e., if he or she attributes the status of an artwork to the movements of the guard or solely to the object next to them. **Through his titles, Sehgal makes explicit the different aspects that his works deal with. *This is propaganda* addresses the political dimension of art, *This is so contemporary* art's power to shape and posit values, and *This is exchange* exhibits the difference between saying and doing.** In fact, *This is exchange* is the most explicit work in terms of Sehgal's consideration of economics and the culture of the market. If the visitor accepts the offer to reimburse half of the entrance fee for a conversation on the market economy, then he or she generates a real product inside the

framework of a work that itself is a product. The fact that the visitor plays an unusually constitutive role is an essential part of the work.

### **Technologies of the self**

One of Sehgal's most complex works to date is *This objective of that object* from 2004, which was shown at London's ICA in 2005 with *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things*. One entered the site of the work through a corridor from which two exhibition spaces branched off on either side, both appearing to be empty. After a short while, however, while still in the corridor, one was suddenly encircled by five people, one of whom blocked the exit to the staircase. One after the other, five people walked backwards towards the visitor from the hidden corners of the spaces and stopped at a distance of about 3 to 4 meters in a circular formation. They all had their backs to the visitor and were breathing heavily and in synchronous rhythm. At first a hardly audible murmur turned to a phrase that was delivered in unison and repeated insistently: "The objective of this work is to become the object of a discussion." The louder this sentence was spoken, the more emphatic it sounded like a demand with increasingly longer pauses between each utterance. This was the prologue of an artwork that aspires to provoke its own commentary. If the visitor does not comment, i.e., if there is no reaction by the visitor, the players collapse after a few minutes. Their voices become weak, as they slowly sink to the floor, and as if with the last breath of their life utter for a last time "the objective ... of this work ... is to become ... the object ... of ... a discussion." That was it, then in silence, the players lie lifeless on the floor. Without a comment, without communication, the artwork has no life force. But as soon as something occurs, even just a visitor clearing her throat, they stand up again and excitedly say: "We have a comment, we have a comment. Who will answer, who will answer?". Then one of them answers "me" or "I will..." which initiates a discussion among them. The players discuss— always remaining in circular formation with their backs to the visitor—the possible meanings and implications of the visitor's comment. As the comments are likely to be different, the discussions differ considerably. One discussion I experienced was initiated by the frequent question: why do the players always remained with their backs turned, which led to a conversation about the cultural significance of eye contact. The sudden ringing of a cell phone, laughing, a comment in a foreign language can be the beginning of another discussion. The players interpret the

visitors' comments in a way that is similar to the way a critic would discuss an artwork. Although visitors are able to influence the course of the discussion by contributing to what is being said or interjecting a comment, they nonetheless never attain a position equal to that of the players in part because of the formal arrangement of the situation. The stratification that Sehgal constructs with this work is a strange mix between a conversation and a sculpture or a social situation and its aesthetic. **The visitors are crucial and constitutive to the work, without their comments the main part could not take place. If no comment is made, the work does not go beyond the invariable prologue. The artwork needs to become the object of the reflection, just as the visitors must become the object of the conversation they witness — it is as if the work of art were holding a mirror to the observer.**

**“Normally when you go into an exhibition you are confronted with something. [...] this object [...] represents a certain *Zeitgeist* or a certain culture which our society or our state thinks is worth preserving. In my case [...] the work basically asks the viewer, ‘What do you think?’ and thereby also infers, what you do or what you say matters and will also change the course of this work.”(71)**

**The artwork and its reception are in an infinite feedback loop, with a fragile and constantly negotiated power relation between the players and the visitors that, to a certain extent is directed by Sehgal's mise-en-scene and dramaturgy.** If there were five pairs of eyes directed at them, the visitors would be subjected to a completely different kind of power. The fact that the players are facing the wall is crucial, as it allows the visitors to perceive this formation as something constructed and aesthetic. This spatial configuration creates a kind of equilibrium between those enacting and those visiting. The players know what is to do and the visitors can identify the players. Since the players are always facing the walls and do not have a complete overview of the changing situation; they cannot be aware of things like nonverbal communication between visitors. “It's something between ballet and chess,” one visitor commented, and in fact this work functions like a spatial and formal game that the visitors try to understand and also to control. “The visitors are trying to play a

game on us,” one player said, as a number of visitors drove her into a corner in an attempt to see her face, thereby altering the spatial configuration of the work.

**With respect to this piece, Sehgal says, “In most of my works there is this moment when the visitor can speak with my interpreter and I wanted to integrate this moment, which was always part of the piece for me, really into the piece. [...] I wanted to make it kind of the center of the piece.” (72) And in fact he does give the viewer a share of the responsibility and thereby realizes an ethical dimension to this work, if one understands ethics as “the forming of relations to others and oneself” as Foucault once said, that marks an essential feature of all of Sehgal’s works. The simple fact that the visitor triggers the work, that it only exists for her or him for that moment, contains an element of empowerment for the viewer. This “empowerment” is crucial to Sehgal’s work, which is not only produced in a completely different way but compared to Coleman and Buren, also generates a different kind of viewer. Coleman’s work reflects the dissolution of the ideology of a sovereign, self-determined subject that prevailed in modernity. There is a strong element in Coleman’s work of the viewer being addressed but—as is apparent in *Box*—it is dialectically contrasted with an equally strong element of dissociation, dissolution and almost violent encroachment on the viewer. Almost all of Coleman’s works allegorically circle around the subject. It exists, but only in its disappearance, as a figure that is experiencing its own dissolution. If Coleman stages the figure of the subject in the process of its dissolution, then in Buren’s work the subject is emptied out by the weakening of its counterpart, the object. Buren’s work generates a strong aesthetic experience, but one that remains diffuse, that does not allow for immersion or contemplation, but rather is designed to dissolve that very form of art experience.**

In Sehgal’s work the conception of the subject is different. Precisely because he has changed the parameters of visual art so fundamentally, he can re-address the role of the subject in a positive manner and newly define it. One could say that in *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things* Sehgal reverts to a contemplative form of the work-viewer relationship that seems almost anachronistic. As in a Chardin painting, at least for a certain amount of time one can experience oneself in the immersion represented in this work. In this respect Sehgal comes surprisingly close to what Fried calls “absorption.”(73) Fried takes up a model developed by Denis Diderot for both theater and painting, which presupposed the nonexistence of the viewer in front of the image or of the spectator in theater. The figures involved in a representation or the actors in

a play should not turn outwards. They were to be fully taken up by their actions and interactions. Yet precisely the representation's focus on itself, precisely the negation of the viewer, his or her exclusion from the compositional focus, ultimately involves the viewer even more strongly and more authentically into what is represented. Sehgal utilizes this model like an artistic technique, which allows him to constitute his work as a work of art and its counterpart as an object-viewer. In this way he constitutes a work-beholder relationship that is no longer generated via an object, or as Fried describes it, "epitomized in the object." Herein lies the crucial difference of Sehgal's work. Via a mental and quasi-metaphysical experience of the artwork and the self, Fried's viewer is to be in a "perfect trance of involvement," (74) as he calls it, and should forget that he or she is ultimately standing in front of a profane thing.

"[...] translating literal duration, the actual passage of time as one stands before the canvas, into a purely pictorial effect: as if the very stability and unchangingness of the painted image are perceived by the beholder not as material properties that could not be otherwise but as manifestations of an absorptive state – the image's absorption in itself, so to speak – that only happens to subsist. (75)

Ultimately there always remains a certain stasis inherent to the kind of object-subject relationship construed here. This explains many of the critiques of the artistic approaches of the 1960s and 1970s, which were directed towards activating and opening the parameters of these relationship and thereby generating a more open form of subjectivity. **As there are no material objects in Sehgal's work, and the artwork and beholder are of the same medium, they generate a fluid and active movement between player and visitor that constantly changes with any activity inside this relationship.** When Adorno speaks of artworks that "open their eyes," (76) he means it metaphorically. In Sehgal's work a look can change the entire situation. It can hit the gaze of the viewer who might then look to the floor or turn away. In these moments Sehgal's works are not only eventful, but momentarily they constitute an event. As a philosophical category the *event* is characterized by the occurrence of a situation that cannot be categorized. This is true of Sehgal's work in the moments something occurs that is not preconceived in the given context and that eludes

any existing category of aesthetic experience. Understandings that we all share — every child that walks through a museum knows that this is a place where things stand or hang and are viewed — seem suspended. For a short moment an order that is taken for granted is penetrated by an experience that claims a radical alterity. Gilles Deleuze writes that „Making an event — however small — is the most delicate thing in the world: the opposite of making a drama or making history.“(77) The event can neither be directed intentionally nor reduced to a content. It is a moment of pure singularity, which following Deleuze, belongs to „another dimension than that of denotation, manifestation, or signification.“(78) Such an event only exists for a short and singular moment, in the case of Sehgal’s works it is followed by a search for potential explanations and categorizations. “He has gone crazy,” some visitors said when they encountered the dancing guard. And a woman said to the museum guard who was singing *This is propaganda* and whose voice could be heard throughout the museum, “I could have sworn that you just sang.”

**With Tony Bennett one can understand the museum as a place that contributes to the instantiation of specific *technologies of the self*, which were constitutive for the historical formation of a bourgeois subjectivity. In Sehgal’s work the museum on the one hand becomes the site of an experiment, but on the other hand the experiment is based precisely on those conventions of subject constitution that have always been inscribed into the institution of the museum. Sehgal take up fundamental conventions of self-formation that the museum cultivates and steers them in another direction, as the artist emphasizes:**

**“[...] actually what I am doing is quite media-specific to the exhibition. The exhibition has always been much more about people, that is, visitors, walking through spaces as individuals, being addressed by an art experience as individuals. That is really the innovation of the exhibition, of the public exhibition, without the guided tour. The specificity of an exhibition is that it can single out citizens as individuals and not, let’s say, like cinema still does or theatre has done for thousands of years: address people as ‘the people’. The exhibition has always been much more about individuals and about individuals also seeing each other.”(79)**

**Indeed, the historical and cultural achievement of the museum lies essentially in the fact of having constructed an historical and cultural ritual that serves the formation and self-formation of the citizen.** From this perspective the museum is not only and maybe not even primarily the place for the exhibition of objects. Rather these objects function as tools for a “civilizing ritual” for the individual, as Carol Duncan writes, that aims at the internalization of control and power. The museum is thus not only the place where values and ideologies are represented in artworks. It is equally the place where these values become part of a mental and bodily exercise; where they are and have to be embodied to be at all effective. **For Sehgal this ritual of perception and reception differentiates itself even further, as it is the individual in relation to itself that is addressed in his work – though not only as perceiving and receiving, but as an active instance that intervenes into and shapes what is going on. The individual has agency and carries responsibility; it is engaged in a work of self on the self, so to speak.**

At the beginning of the 1980s Foucault, who had been involved since 1966 in the project of dissolving the modernist ideology of a sovereign, self-determined subject and had worked over decades on the position of the subject in the relation of knowledge and power, took up the question of the subject from a different perspective. He was no longer primarily concerned with a critique of the notion of the subject of enlightenment, but rather with *practices of self*, via which individuals recognize themselves as subjects. In this project he turned to Kant’s essay “What Is Enlightenment?": “The general framework of what I call the ‘Technologies of the Self’ is a question which appeared at the end of the eighteenth century. [...] This question is very different from what we call the traditional philosophical questions: What is the world? What is man? What is truth? What is knowledge? [...] The question, I think, which arises at the end of the eighteenth century is: What are we in our actuality? You will find the formation of this question in a text written by Kant.”(80) Philosophically exemplary, according to Foucault, is Kant’s outline of an ontology of the present, in which he asks what it means to be a responsible and, in a political sense, mature person today. Foucault, however, is interested in the practices or “technologies” of self through which an individual constitutes itself as a moral subject.

„This latter is not simply ‚self-awareness‘ but self-formation as an ‚ethical subject,‘ a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object



of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the percept he will follow, and decides on a certain more of being that will serve as his moral goal. [...] And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself. [...] Moral action is indissociable from these forms of self-activity.” (81)

Foucault is interested in concrete forms of subjectivity as a way of relating to oneself and one's existence. The ethical subject that constitutes itself in experience and shapes itself via practices—the work of the self that the subject carries out—are foregrounded. Foucault focuses on the creative potential of the individual without returning to the notion of the subject of modernity, which is usually linked to the concept of creativity. Rather, he understands creativity from its technical side, as a capacity to appropriate certain techniques and to apply them in specific ways, as the willingness to follow as well as to break rules to formulate new ones. **Sehgal's work also tackles the issue of an ethic that is concerned with practices of self and the resulting process of the differentiation of the self. His work conveys both a sense of power and powerlessness to the visitor as well as a sense of the possibilities and limits of his or her agency. In short: it addresses the viewers as potent and responsible individuals.** What was subtly implied in *Instead of allowing...* becomes more and more clear in subsequent works: the visitor becomes the instance that initiates the taking-place of the work and whose decisions influence and form the course of the work. In this manner the ethical dimension of responding, of responsivity becomes the central element of the work. The fact of being produced differently ultimately generates a different beholder; a visitor who is no longer only a receptive instance, but a figure that shapes and responsibly influences the work. Regardless of whether one feels called to direct action or is addressed in a more subtle sense by a work like *Instead of allowing...*, Sehgal's works always imply questions of responsibility and agency within an intersubjective relation. One is constantly interrogating oneself: Should I watch this person? How do I position myself towards him? Or during the *dying*—the sinking to the floor of the players when there is no comment—in *This objective of that object*: Am I the cause of this? That cannot really be true. Do I have to do something? This work in particular generates a constantly shifting relationship between the players and the visitors, who themselves feel mirrored and somewhat exposed, since their comments becomes the object of a discussion. Not all visitors are comfortable going along with this. One visitor, who experienced this work with me, refused to comment, observing “I don't want to talk about it in this space.”

1. Daniel Buren in conversation with Seth Siegelaub and Michel Claura, *Daniel Buren. Erscheinen, Scheinen, Verschwinden*, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Richter, Düsseldorf, 1996., p. 113.
2. Harold Rosenberg, *The Anxious Object*, Horizon, New York, 1964; Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972*, Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, New York, 1973; Barbara Rose, *American Art since 1900*, Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, New York, 1975.
3. Buren, *Erscheinen, Scheinen, Verschwinden*, p. 112.
4. Interview with Robert Barry, *Recording Conceptual Art*, Alexander Alberro, Patricia Norvell (eds.), University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 2001, p. 90.
5. Jan Mot from the Galerie Jan Mot in Brussels and Jörg Johnen from the Johnen Galerie, Cologne/Berlin, alternating with members of their staff.
6. As part of the exhibition *I'll never let you go*, curated by Panacea/Marten Spangberg, January 31 – February 28, 2001.
7. Concerning the non-documentability/non-documentation and live nature of Sehgal's works, see Sehgal in conversation with Jörg Heiser, *Funky Lesson*, Jörg Heiser (ed.), Revolver, Frankfurt/Main, 2005, p.104f.
8. Quoted from German: Paul Veyne, *Foucault. Die Revolutionierung der Geschichte*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 1992, p. 36f.
9. See Jacques Derrida, "Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2) ('within such limits')", *Material Events. Paul De Man and the afterlife of theory*, Tom Cohen, Barbara Cohen, J. Hillis Miller (eds.), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2001, p. 310.
10. Derrida, "Typewriter Ribbon", p. 320.
11. Derrida, "Typewriter Ribbon", p. 319.
12. See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995.
13. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 2.
14. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 4.
15. Rebecca Schneider, "Archives. Performance Remains", *Performance Research*, 2 (2001), p. 100-108.
16. Tino Sehgal quoted after Claire Bishop, in: Claire Bishop, "No Pictures, Please: The Art of Tino Sehgal," *Artforum*, 5 (2005), p. 217.
17. In 2000 Sehgal created a dance piece as a kind of *boîte-en-valise*. In (untitled) Sehgal literally moves through the history of dance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He dances 20 sequences each of a few minutes length of dance styles that marked this century. Thus his body becomes the site of a retrospective of dance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This theatrical work maintains a similar status in Sehgal's oeuvre to that of Coleman's *GuaiRE*. It testifies of his interest in body to body transmission and alternative forms of archiving and passing on of knowledge.

18. Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, The MIT Press, Cambridge/Mass. and London, 1986, p. 276-290.
19. For an extensive analysis of this argument see Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination. Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist*, Yale University Press, London, 2000.
20. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon. An Essay upon the limits of painting and poetry*, trans. by Ellen Frothingham, Robert Brothers, Boston, 1874, p. 91f.
21. Lessing, *Laocoon*, p. 16.
22. See Johann George Sulzer, *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste*, vol. 1, Olms Verlag, Hildesheim, 1994, p. 292-294.
23. Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, p. 63
24. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Auguste Rodin*, trans. by Daniel Slager, Archipelago Books, New York, 2004, p. 68ff. See also: Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, p. 77ff.
25. Michael Fried, „Art and Objecthood“, *ibid.*, *Art and Objecthood. Essays and Reviews*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1998, p. 151 (The original essay was published in *Artforum*, 5 (1967).
26. Fried, „Objecthood“, p. 160.
27. See also Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination*, p. 199ff.
28. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. and edited by Robert Hullot-Kentor, Continuum, London, 2004, p. 230.
29. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 230.
30. Fried, „Objecthood“, p. 168.
31. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 114.
32. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 130.
33. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 223.
34. Sol LeWitt, „Paragraphs on Conceptual Art“, *Artforum*, 5 (1967), p. 79-84.
35. Conversation with Lawrence Weiner, in: Alberro, Norvell, *Recording Conceptual Art*, p. 109.
36. This is Weiners *Statement of Intent* from 1969 that accounts as a kind of guiding line for the reception of his work.
37. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, „Open Letters, Industrial Poems“, *Broodthaers. Writings, Interviews, Photographs*, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh (ed.), The MIT Press, Cambridge/Mass. and London, 1988, p. 72.
38. See Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, „Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions“, *October*, 55 (1996), p. 105-143.
39. Buchloh, „Conceptual Art 1962-1969“, p. 141.
40. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 6.
41. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 323.

42. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 296.
43. Karl Marx, "Private Property and Communism", in: Economic and Philosophic Manuscript of 1844 (III), *Marx, Karl/Engels, Friedrich: Collected Works*, Volume 3 (1843-1844) Progress Publishers, Moscow; International Publishers Inc., Moscow and New York; Lawrence & Wishart Ltd., London, 1975, p. 297.
44. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 129.
45. Theodor W. Adorno, „Culture and Administration“, Theodor W. Adorno, J. M. Bernstein, *The Culture Industry. Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, Routledge, New York, London, 2008, p. 116.
46. Tino Sehgal in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, in: *Kunstpreis der Böttcherstraße in Bremen 2003*, Kunsthalle Bremen (eds.) Kunsthalle, Bremen, 2003, p. 50-55, in particular p. S. 50.
47. Sehgal's position becomes very clear in the comparison of two works by Marcel Broodthaers and Sehgal. Broodthaers, who was a poet for twenty years before he became an artist, had throughout his lifetime been concerned with the relation between language, objects and their respective reality content. In 1968 he made a work that consisted in covering the words in Mallarmé's *Un coup dès* with black bars, thereby both making them illegible and emphasizing the visual and plastic qualities of the layout and in some sense its objectlike character. Broodthaers gave this work the subtitle *Image*. Sehgal contributed to a publication entitled *Perform* (Jens Hoffmann and Joan Jonas (eds.), Thames & Hudson, London 2005), in which he refers to these works of Mallarmé and Broodthaers. Instead of covering the text he substituted it – using the the same font and layout – with a new one that just like Mallarmé's original could be read on different levels. The main sentence that stretches throughout the pages, reads as follows: "This sentence already performed." The rest of the text that occupies the space between the words of the main sentence documents every step of its own production, i.e. lists the exact quantities of material, resources and energy used for in manufacturing (for the given number of the books edition). These two works mark out the differences between Broodthaers and Sehgal in respect of their positions of the relation between art and societal modes of production. Broodthaers work is intended as a critique of conceptual art and highlights that even language can become a commodity. With Sehgal the focus shifts, it is no longer question of if something can become a commodity or not, but rather that every artwork is already involved in the societal process of transforming natural resources – irrespective of its respective thematics and without utilizing explicitly industrial modes of production.
48. Sehgal in: *I promise it's political*, Dorothea von Hantelmann, Marjorie Jongbloed (eds.), Museum Ludwig Köln, Walther König, Cologne 2002, p. 91.
49. For an extensive elaboration of Sehgal's argumentations, who is a studied economist, see: Sehgal in: *Now What? Artists Write!*, Mark Kremer, Maria Hlavajova, Maria Fletcher (eds.), Revolver, Frankfurt/Main, 2004, p. 166ff.
50. On the influence of John Kenneth Galbraith's book *The Affluent Society*, published in 1958, on art see Robert Hobbs, "Affluence, Taste and the Brokering of Knowledge. Notes on the Social Context of Early Conceptual Art", *Conceptual Art. Theory, Myth, and Practice*, Michael Corris (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 200-222.
51. Sehgal in: *The Next Documenta Should Be Curated by an Artist*, Jens Hoffmann (ed.), Revolver, Frankfurt/Main, 2004, p. 72f.

52. Clement Greenberg, „Towards a newer Laocoon“ (1940), *Pollock and After. The Critical Debate*, Francis Francina (ed.), Routledge, London and New York, 1985, p. 68.
53. Clement Greenberg, „Modernist Painting“ (1960), *Clement Greenberg – The Collected Essays and Criticism. Modernism with a Vengeance*, Volume 4 (1957-1969), John O’Brian (ed.), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1993, p. 86.
54. Sehgal in: *I promise it’s political*, p. 91.
55. Tino Sehgal in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Interviews*, Vol. II, Charta, Milan, 2010, p. 833.
56. Obrist, *Interviews (II)*, p. 833f.
57. From German: Boris Groys, *Über das Neue. Versuch einer Kulturökonomie*, Hanser, Frankfurt/Main, 1999, p. 91
58. See Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, The MIT Press, Cambridge/Mass. and London, 1998, chapter 2.
59. Groys, *Über das Neue*, p. 87.
60. Groys, *Über das Neue*, p. 14.
61. Obrist, *Interviews (II)*, p. 823.
62. “The Objectives of the Object. An Interview with Tino Sehgal by Silvia Sgualdini”, *UOVO* (Turin), 10 (2005), p. 171.
63. Michael Snow in “An Intercontinental Collage, Catsou Roberts and Michael Snow (Interview)”, in: *Michael Snow. Almost Cover to Cover*, Catsou Roberts, Lucy Steeds (eds.), Black Dog, London, 2001, p. 15.
64. *Marcel Broodthaers: Der Adler vom Oligozän bis heute*, Städtische Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, Düsseldorf, 1972, p. 12-15.
65. *Broodthaers: Der Adler*, p. 13; Michel Foucault, *This is not a Pipe*, trans. and edited by James Harkness, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 2008.
66. Foucault, *Pipe*, p. 19ff.
67. Foucault, *Pipe*, p. 20.
68. Foucault, *Pipe*, p. 21.
69. The decisive feature of these titles, so one could summarize with Foucault, is the fact, *that* they take place. Crucial is their “enunciative function”. „the speech act is not what took place just prior to the moment when the statement was made (in the author’s thought or intentions); it is not what might have happened, after the event itself, in its wake, and the consequences that it gave rise to; it is what occurred by the very fact that a statement was made – and precisely this statement (and no other) in specific circumstances.“ Michael Foucault, *Archaeology of knowledge*, trans. by A.M.Sheridan Smith, Routledge, London, New York, 2007, p. 93.
70. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 129.
71. Tino Sehgal in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, 2005 (unpublished manuskript).
72. Tino Sehgal in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, 2005 (unpublished manuskript).

73. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality. Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1988.
74. Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, p. 103f.
75. Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, p. 50.
76. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 86.
77. Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson a.o., Columbia University Press, New York, 1987, p. 66.
78. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. by Mark Lester, Columbia University Press, New York, 1990, p. 52.
79. Tino Sehgal in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, 2005 (unpublished manuscript).
80. Michel Foucault, "The Political Technology of Individuals", *Technologies of the Self. A seminar with Michel Foucault*, Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton (eds.), Tavistock Publications, London, 1988, p. 145.
81. Michel Foucault, "The Use of Pleasure", *ibid.*, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 2, trans. by Robert Hurley, Vintage Books, A Division of Random House Inc., New York, 1990, p. 28. See also: *ibid.*, "The Care Of The Self", *ibid.*, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 3, trans. by Robert Hurley, Penguin Books, New York, 1990.