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The Child as Art Object in Tino Sehgal's Ann Lee, Ann Lee & Marcel and This Progress -- A Reflection

Antje Hildebrandt

This reflection explores the politics of working with children as art objects through three works by British-German artist Tino Sehgal, Ann Lee (2011), Ann Lee & Marcel (2015) and This Progress (2006). I suggest that Sehgal's practice of integrating children into his art pieces productively complicates my engagement as a spectator with the 'object' encountered and makes me reevaluate how I view children more generally. I focus on my experience of encountering the work as a visitor and I use this approach to think through and analyse the propositions made by the artist through his practice. I use this empirical research method not to make general claims about the work or the role children play within it but to help me think through these three specific instances of subjective aesthetic experience and their affective potentials. In particular, I am interested in the aesthetic, political and ethical issues that may arise for spectators who encounter children in the work as art objects. Thinking through the way children problematize notions of performance in and via (their) performances in these pieces raises important questions. How might one rethink the status of children in society and how can artistic practices that employ children embody a critique of social, cultural and political norms at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

I first encountered Ann Lee at Manchester Art Gallery in 2011 when it was included in '11 Rooms', an exhibition part of the Manchester International Festival curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Klaus Biesenbach. I also encountered an iteration of this piece titled Ann Lee & Marcel (2015) in Paris in November 2016 when it was presented as part of Sehgal's 'Carte Blanche' solo exhibition at Palais de Tokyo. The first instantiation of Ann Lee sees a dozen visitors enter a small white cube that is completely empty. A few minutes later an ethereal pre-pubescent young girl, approximately 13 years old, enters the room. After a brief introduction ('Hello. Nice to see you. My name is Ann Lee') she begins to recite a rehearsed yet seemingly flexible script describing her transition from Japanese manga character -- famously purchased by French artists Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe in 1999 -- to a multidimensional being. Facing the wall of her choice she tells us how she was first two-dimensional (a sketched drawing), then three-dimensional (an animated video)

and how she is now trying to exist in the fourth dimension (in time) with the help of Tino. Her voice is monotonous, her controlled movements robotic yet fluent, her gaze calm and distant, never resting in one place. I saw this piece twice in a row with two different performers, the dramaturgy of the text was different but both times the atmosphere in the space was extremely intense with Ann Lee commanding the attention of her viewers while delivering a confident yet subtle performance. Her movements and speech were slightly mechanic, slow and removed, somewhere between a mature adult, a machine and a child.

As the performance continues, Ann Lee speaks of 'hanging out with Tino, who seems very busy' and then asks the visitors two direct questions, both times addressing one particular visitor who she looks straight into the eye without a flinch. When there is no reaction she calmly repeats the question. 'Would you rather feel too busy or not busy enough?' She has addressed me. Pause. Panic. 'Would you rather feel too busy or not busy enough?' 'I would rather be too busy', I answer and instantly reflect that this is probably the common response most people have given. She asks, 'Why?' I say, 'Because then I don't have time to think so much'. I can feel myself blushing. She says, 'Interesting', and continues with her story without any noticeable reaction. Not often have I felt so embarrassed in front of a teenager. Is it not usually the other way around? Her second question seems even more impossible but this time someone else needs to answer, 'What is the difference between a sign and melancholia?' No response. She repeats the question. After what felt like an eternity someone gives an educated answer, though I cannot remember what exactly was said. Finally, Ann Lee quotes a long complicated passage of philosophical text by Hannah Arendt and then asks the person next to me 'Do you know what it means?' The question every parent loathes is, probably more often than not, denied. She says, 'OK, take care' and slowly exits the room in a calm manner, leaving a bunch of adults bewildered, bemused but also slightly amused.

In the more recent version of Ann Lee & Marcel I find myself sitting on a sloping carpeted floor of what seems to be a space for theatre in the Palais de Tokyo in Paris together with around thirty other visitors, including children, who are free to come and go as they please. This time I am witnessing a dialogue between a girl, Ann Lee, and a boy, Marcel, most likely named after the French conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp, who is regularly quoted in this particular piece. The atmosphere is more relaxed this

time but the children's performance is equally startling. There is something touching in their humility; their performance is humble, wise, mature and knowing. Their neutral demeanour seems simultaneously familiar and yet very strange as both child performers succeed in 'non-performing' 'non-humanness'. Their bodies move in a slow robotic way while they simultaneously appear natural 'like themselves' in performance. At some point Marcel drops on his knees, as if the weight of the world of ideas is crushing down on him, and Ann Lee helps him up again. The piece ends with Marcel asking Ann Lee 'Have you ever been outside? Outside an exhibition space? Never? I'll take you' and he takes her hand in a simple gesture and leads her out of the room, into the world. It is not only but especially in this moment that Sehgal's work reminds me of the thinnest of lines between art and life in which his work exists. Marcel's final series of questions reveal the symbolic meta-narrative of Sehgal's work. There is something unsettling that the work brings forth in terms of the relationship between immaterial and material labour, between labour and leisure, and between children and labour. Both Ann Lee & Marcel and Ann Lee seem to be questioning the apparent 'choice' between continuous labour and precarious labour that working adults have to make in neoliberal capitalist economy, that is, working constantly or not working enough to survive. The character of the child in this piece brings to the surface the relation and distinction between (paid) work and (free) time, as Ann Lee questions the idea of work itself.

For This Progress, acquired by and installed in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York in 2010, Sehgal emptied Frank Lloyd Wright's famous spiral gallery of all its artwork. The piece starts at the base of the spiral where I am met by an approximately 8-year-old child, who says 'This is a work by Tino Sehgal. May I ask you a question? What is progress?' As we begin our ascent up the spiral ramp we continue our conversation until we are met by a young person/teenager who picks up the conversation. After a while, we are met by a middle-aged adult and finally an older adult who finishes our journey to the highest point in the museum. Conceptually, Sehgal reproduces a life cycle over four generations in this piece as these multiple layers of progression are philosophically laid out through the increasing complexities of the conversations. When I encountered the piece in Paris in 2016, I experienced the work as slightly contrived and rushed (the gallery was extremely busy at the time). The boy who greeted me seemed anxious and stressed, the middle-aged man was trying too hard to be interesting and the older man seemed

disengaged, even bored. The exception was the conversation with the teenager, who engaged me in an open, genuine and honest conversation about his future career options and his worries about the current state of affairs in the world. We talked about how in November 2016 Republican businessman Donald Trump was elected 45th president of the United States and earlier in the summer the British public had voted to leave the European Union after a close referendum. My young conversation partner surprised me; had I expected him to be (stereotypically) condescending, angsty, shy or 'too cool'?

As someone who does not have children of my own and who does not regularly interact with children, neither in my private nor professional life, the experience that Sehgal constructs is doubly strange. Not only am I engaging in the practice of dialogic exchange with a young person but it also feels odd to see the children in this context as themselves and as art object. It might seem as if we were engaging in a social situation (conversing with or at least responding to another person) but Sehgal's pieces keep their distance: they are still art objects existing in their proper context, the museum. Adding to this distance is the fact that the children's performance seems uncanny because they are 'acting' more mature, more knowing, than their adolescent age might suggest. Their precociousness as they imitate adult behaviour makes me conscious of my own age. Their performance reflects back at me a certain idea of adulthood that does not sit comfortably with my own sense of self as adult. There is an unequal power relationship between the visitor and the children -- they know the rules of the game better than I -- and yet there is a feeling of responsibility to be a 'good visitor', to help them do their job, even to please them. Furthermore, when children are involved in performance there is an underlying, if subtle, fear that 'something could go wrong' or that 'things might not go according to plan' as Shannon Jackson so eloquently points out:

[T]he perception of children's social vulnerability can be appropriated for all kinds of political ends, ranging from the sentimental to the curious to the outraged ... the child is riveting because of her potential to destroy the aesthetic frame; in her phenomenological presence and her social unpredictability, she is a walking threat to the divide between art and life. That heightened potential for catastrophe in turns makes any controlled execution

on her part all the more striking; there is a particular kind of incredulity that comes when a child hits her mark. (Jackson 2011: 240--1)

Indeed, trying to find out what is 'real' and what is staged, when the children are performing (as themselves or a character) and when they are not, adds to the intriguing and at times absurd nature of Sehgal's works. As a visitor, the crux seems to be that I perform myself as a person in the context of an art gallery and an institution, coming to take part in the work, and that I know myself better through this encounter with the object. This conscious entanglement of object and subject lies at the very heart of Sehgal's practice and comes to the forefront in his work with children who appear not as passive (art) objects to be looked at but as active participating subjects to engage with and to be taken seriously as members of society. Rather than perceiving the children and young people as vulnerable, fragile or innocent, their presence in these pieces reinstates their capability to shape the art object as they play a key part in how the work is not just produced but also received.

The art object is not the child, but that which is created in the space between child and adult as they bring 'it' into being. As a visitor I found that Sehgal's art objects, and in particular these three works, challenged me to rethink my perception of children and young people as my encounters with them triggered a range of complex affects, including uncanniness, discomfort and alienation as well as playfulness, intimacy, amusement and surprise. Sehgal's pieces expose structures of power as well as making children visible, literally, as they appear outside the educational, theatrical or (in my case) community dance context. But the children in Sehgal's work are not simply used as raw materials. The more the works progress, the more it becomes clear that they are co-creators in Sehgal's overall dramaturgy. I propose that his pieces elicit, even demand, alternative modes of engagement and perception in the child performer to adult spectator relationship. The works discussed in this reflection point towards the fact that the transition from childhood to adulthood is not a linear process but rather a degree of difference, a continuous spectrum, which cannot be so clearly defined and distinguished. The children and young people who I encountered in Sehgal's works remind me simultaneously of the past and the future, and so they carry with them the very real and, at the same time, abstract aesthetic and political potential of that which was and that which is yet to come.

Sehgal's practice has, up until now, mostly been discussed in terms of its ephemeral and immaterial nature, since he refuses to document his pieces (see Hantelmann 2010; Richards 2012). It has also been theorized in terms of the relationship between visitor and artwork that his pieces elicit, which circulate as works of art to be bought and sold on the art market (see Paramana 2014; Pape et al. 2014; Hildebrandt 2015). As Sehgal frequently casts children to execute and interpret his pieces, the important role that they play in his artistic practice requires further critical investigation.

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