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Participation and spectatorship in Tino Sehgal's *These Associations*

Antje Hildebrandt

As a visitor to Tate Modern in London in the autumn of 2012 you might have had a curious, and multiple, experience. Upon entering the Tate from the bridge (Ground floor) you could find yourself looking down into the Turbine Hall where a large group of people were shifting around the space playing games. If you were a child, you might immediately recognize a game similar to tag. If you were a person involved with dance, you could perhaps recognize several movement tasks and group dynamic exercises, such as swarming and flocking. If you chose to come down from your birds eye perspective you could find yourself being approached by a person who would tell you a brief story about themselves or their life which, depending on your response, could develop into a longer conversation.

Upon entering the Turbine Hall from the ramp entrance, you could find yourself being almost run over by a group running towards and passing you. Someone might stop and talk to you, breathlessly. If you were to stay for longer than twenty minutes, it is likely that you would have found the group gathering by the bridge, where they would sing a short song; perhaps some words that you could have made out were 'ground', 'nature' and 'technological age'.¹ At other times you might find the group shouting 'electric' three times in a row whilst the light boxes flickered on and off. After that you might follow the group into the west wing of the hall, where you would experience the group

softly singing, whilst they stood or sat in small figurations in an atmospherically dimmed hall.

What I have attempted to describe above is a work called *These Associations* (2012) by British-German artist Tino Sehgal, which was commissioned as the thirteenth, and final, artwork of the Unilever Series and which took place in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall between July and October 2012. During the entire opening hours of the museum, a group of approximately 70 people (the whole project involved more than 250 people) from different age groups and backgrounds, was involved in walking up and down the vast space at different speeds, playing various spatial games with each other, singing extracts of philosophical texts and talking to visitors about themes of belonging, arrival, dissatisfaction and satisfaction with themselves or their admiration for a person.

As one of those 250 people involved in the project *and* as a practice-based researcher, I am in a curious position: both deeply involved and immersed in the work, yet also striving to adopt a critical (distant) point of view. Having been involved in the project since August 2009, as an attendant in several of Sehgal's workshops at Tate Modern and later as a participant in the piece, I am writing here literally from 'inside' the art object. From a methodological position I have the double privilege of 'having been there', not only as an observer, a spectator, a visitor, a viewer or an on-looker *of* the work but also as a participant *in* the work. My 'hybrid' position leads me to write as participant in some sections and as critic in others. This intentional doubling of

perspective seeks to question the very notion of objectivity and stability in artistic practice, and in aesthetic experience more generally. My methodological position is here clearly influenced by and indebted to the performative writings of scholars such as Susan Foster and Peggy Phelan. Stylistically, my writing plays with a variety of visual devices such as italicization for descriptive and performative modes of writing as well as the posing of questions as a textual choreographic strategy to emphasize my subjective experience as participant-observer. Furthermore, the questions relate to the work itself but also to my methodology; thus they function to bring methodology and analysis of the work together.

In this article I take full advantage of the inside/outside perspective, proposing that it is possible to speak critically from *within* the art object. I seek to bring out several paradoxes in *These Associations*, which is Sehgal's largest (both in terms of duration and number of participants) and most ambitious project to date. I do not seek to imply that *These Associations* is representative of Sehgal's entire *oeuvre*, instead I aim to articulate the tensions and contradictions that concern the complex layering of choreographic and conversational strategies that Sehgal deploys in this specific piece.

The central (research) question that Sehgal is concerned with in *These Associations* is the relationship between a group, or collective, and the individual (Searle 2012, par. 7). *How is it possible to move inside a group without losing a sense of one's individuality, or agency? In a society in which we seem to seek a level of individuality over conformism, how can we rethink*

commonality? How can we rethink what it means to belong to a group? How does it feel to sing together, or walk together? Can we find satisfaction and pleasure again in these collective actions without suppressing our own individual sense of being? What does it mean to 'belong'? In today's globalized, highly flexible and mobile society we have to work towards our sense of belonging; it is not something that comes automatically.

French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy addresses the inherent contradictions of community (the 'we') and freedom of the 'I' in *Being Singular Plural* (2000).

The book takes as its premise the thought that there is no Being (Heidegger's *Dasein*) without Being-with (*Mitsein*). To put it differently: whereas for Heidegger Being is essentially a solitary mode, Nancy argues that there is no existence without coexistence. Community comes prior to individual being which is only made possible through shared modes of understanding.

Community is not the end product of a gathering of individuals but its pre-condition.

These Associations can be read as a symbolic and practical example of Nancy's Being-with through its negotiating modes of subjectivity and togetherness. The piece raises the issue of how a 'community' could be seen as pluralist, neither a unified singular group nor a dispersed multitude of individuals. The different modes or models of collectivity were explored in the somewhat forced and artificial singing moments but also in the 'slow walk', in which we, a group of 70 people, had to negotiate two separate sub-tasks: first, to accelerate or decelerate from an extremely slow walk to full-on sprinting, or

vice versa, over the time of 30 minutes, and second, to stay together as a group. The 'slow walk' was an excruciating task for many of the participants including myself. First, one had to give up one's individual agency by sacrificing/compromising one's own sense of timing for the sake of the group's success in the task and then, more often than not and despite enormous efforts, concentration and self-control, the group would still fall apart. *The simple task of walking together becomes a double negative experience since it seems impossible to negotiate the different priorities of the group and oneself.*

One choreographic strategy that was achieved in less explicitly collective manner was called 'triangles'. We had to pick two people with whom we had to stay in a triangle. This created a shifting and changing web, since 'my' two people would also have picked two other people who had picked two other people. Yet another spatial strategy was called 'distance game', in which we had to maximize the space around us by stepping into the space that seemed the most empty. This particular 'game' worked as a network in which I somehow related to these people around me but couldn't fully understand how. In 'cells', a variation of triangles, we made up certain rules for each other (e.g., one person always had to stay behind the other person, etc.) in clusters of four to six people. Often in these cells one person would have more power over the others and was able to manipulate the speed or direction in which the group was moving. *We half-jokingly came up with 'fascist cells', 'communist cells' and 'democratic cells'.*

These choreographic strategies created various forms of group dynamics and often the spatial games did not seem to follow any obvious visible rule, at least from an outside perspective. One day, a man that had been watching us for quite a while, started shouting 'But who is the leader? I want to know who the leader is!'. Of course, the crux of the situation is that there is no single leader and in all of the games, decisions are made collectively within the group and it becomes impossible to pinpoint any particular individual. This seemed unnerving for some visitors, who desperately tried to work out what we were doing. *As in everyday life, we are hardly ever able to fully comprehend the structures that we live in because they are highly complex, confusing and often difficult, if not impossible, to see.* I would argue that what was often expressed as frustration towards the work by visitors, was actually a purposely staged dramaturgy by Sehgal who refused and confused conventional expectations towards 'dance' and 'museum' with this piece.

Looked at from the participant perspective, the spatial 'games' in *These Associations* also point at something slightly different. We seem to live in a society tired of choice, in which we are constantly assessing ourselves in relation to others. *Am I playing the right game? Am I playing the game right? Am I still part of the game? Should I go into this direction or this other?* The notion of self-assessment became increasingly important as we became more acquainted with the nature of the work and took more responsibility for its execution. There was a constant assessment of one's role within the group (*What do I think the group needs right now?*), and an assessment of the visitor (*Does he or she look interested? What kind of thing should I tell*

*him/her? Has he or she been talked to before? If yes, by whom and what would that person have told them? How long have they been here? Are a lot of other people talking at the moment and not enough people playing the game(s), are there too many people talking and not enough people playing the games?). After a long and often exhausting day (both physically and mentally) at Tate Modern it seemed to sink in: *it is tiring to make decisions all the time. There is a tension in the idea of choice: on the one hand a privilege, on the other hand a burden.**

One of the things that surprised me most about the project was that although there seemed to be a deliberate letting go of control by the artist over the work (something that Sehgal himself admitted was necessary), there was never a situation in which things spiralled totally out of control. There were no moments of anarchy, rebellion or chaos within the group, even though it might have looked like that from the outside. I often asked myself why we did not refuse to follow a game or sequence and instead stepped aside or simply lay down on the floor for a while. This seemed not simply a logistical problem. Sehgal very cleverly gave us just enough self-determination that we were happy to play along dutifully within the confines he had set for us. Perhaps, *These Associations* was reflective of the way many people, including myself, currently perceive the world we live in: *we cannot even imagine chaos or anarchy today. We feel paralysed, unable to imagine a future that will give us even the option of opting out. We must participate, we must gather, we must occupy, we must be team players, we must collaborate.* This obedience and loyalty to one individual (the singular artist) by us participants (a group of

more than 250 people) is somewhat ironic and leaves a disappointing aftertaste in my mouth. We had the opportunity to do something ‘different’, or even ‘radical’ (whatever that something might have been), and we missed our chance.

Writer Shane Anderson asks in his Blog entry from December 2012 an intriguing question about Sehgal’s artworks: ‘Is the art world a world in itself or does it spill out on the pavement?’ (2012: par. 5–6). Starting with Anderson’s question, I seek to show how *These Associations* confuses and complicates tensions between authenticity (a contested term) and artificiality. Catherine Wood, Curator of Contemporary Art and Performance at Tate Modern, helps us to unpack the issues when she writes in an article on Sehgal’s previous work (*This objective of that object*, 2004) when it was shown at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in 2005:

The performers never ‘open’ their subjectivity in the manner of, say, Marina Abramović. The self-conscious paranoia induced by Sehgal’s open invitation to probe the boundaries of this work represents a transfer of emotional vulnerability, displacing the revelation of internal subjectivity from the performer to the – perhaps involuntary – spectator who is framed as though onstage. [...] The work operates at the thinnest boundary between art and life, its status as an object resting on the spectator’s understanding of the performative iteration ‘This Is...’. (2005: par. 4–5)

Dorothea von Hantelmann, art historian and author of the only book chapter on Sehgal's work to date, extrapolates in *How to Do Things with Art: The Meaning of Art's Performativity*:

This ...acts as signature but also to frame the situation so it can become a work because the boundaries between interpreter, viewer and artwork are so fluid. It also gives it value and places emphasis on the here and now of the situation and that it matters, it is important.

(2010: 180–81, original emphasis)

'This is Tino Sehgal's These Associations'. How many times must I have uttered these six re-assuring, relieving, banal, unsubtle and deeply disturbing words? How quickly can a meaningful and profound encounter with another person be turned into an aesthetic object-experience? How much can I (should I, do I have to) hide behind these words?

The crux of our conversations with visitors, which went straight into the story or subject matter without any form of personal introduction, evolved around one rule only: if the visitor asked anything about the structure, practicalities or logistics of the work or wanted to talk about the concept, context or content of the piece itself, we had to leave. This was perhaps the most difficult and paradoxical moment in the work for both participant and visitor as it produced a rupture, a break in the relationship. In this moment we became acutely aware that we were in an artificial situation; that we were in a museum talking to strangers, engaging with an art object, *doing* the 'art'. This very realization

produced a distancing which we were actually, at the same time, trying to overcome in these private encounters.

A further paradox was the 'off topic' of art in our conversations with visitors, since many of the participants were working in or connected to the cultural sector, perhaps not directly as performers or dancer but as writers, journalists, curators, academics, philosophers, art students, photographers, etc. In our conversations with visitors we had to deny, to some extent, a large part of ourselves by shifting or even concealing part of our identities. Sehgal suggested to us that to talk about art in the space of art has a doubling effect that distracts from the 'real' or 'actual' experience in the here and now (2012: my notes). The piece then risks becoming a self-reflective exercise about the *how* rather than the *what*. Even though I agree to some extent, his theoretical argument does not reconcile the bitter disappointment that always brought us back to the recognition that *we were the artwork* and that there was no escape from the objectification of our experiences in the service of the work.

One could argue that at its roots, the word art comes from artificiality which points towards the artificial nature of any artwork. Yet, in *These Associations* we were encouraged to be ourselves; to tell true, 'authentic' stories and to make each encounter with a visitor into a unique, tailored and meaningful experience for them (and us). The intimacies that we shared with the visitors depended on a degree of anonymity that the context of the artwork provided. *We might feel freer to reveal something about ourselves, something honest,*

to a stranger because we do not feel responsible or have to worry about the consequences afterwards (as you would with a close friend for example).

Since the exchange is artificially embedded into the structural framework of the artwork, it is never clear if we are acting, telling stories or even lies, or if our conversations are genuine and 'true', specific to each visitor or repeated to many.

French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas's idea of ethics as first philosophy might initially appear as a useful way to theorize this confusion and indeed many theorists have done this in relation to participatory art (e.g. Grant Kester in *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* [2004]), as well as contemporary dance (e.g. Abrams 2003). In Lévinas's philosophy the ethical relationship comes first as the other (person) exists prior to the self. At first sight, in *These Associations* the participation of the viewer performs an ethical relationship as he or she is called into existence through the encounter (the dialogue) with the other (performer). This face-to-face encounter might suggest that the viewer has an ethical responsibility towards the performer in the moment of interaction (even if he or she remains silent) as he or she is actively constructing the future identity of the other (performer) and vice versa. However, *These Associations* as an art object actually undermines the Lévinasian obligation to the other. Since we can never fully know whether we are acting or not, we might not have to adhere to any moral 'standards' of recognition and responsibility. This might then be the most useful and productive quality of an artwork: a place where ethics are suspended, a 'playground' to test, push and rethink ideas of self and other.

These Associations then acts as a reminder that we are always performing (not just when we are onstage) and that there is no such thing as a 'true', 'authentic', 'genuine' self.

And still, the most enjoyable experiences for me as a participant in the project were the rare occasions when visitors changed my way of thinking about a particular issue, when they challenged what I had said or disagreed with it, or genuinely and generously offered a point of view or angle that I had not been able to see myself. At its best *These Associations* had the potential to intersect with 'real' life in such a profound and deep way that actual 'real' change was implemented in a person's life, even though we (both visitor and participant) were both fully aware of the artificial frame of the art object and the temporal limits of our encounter.

In conclusion, I have sought to draw out several paradoxes in Tino Sehgal's *These Associations* in order to show some of the complex issues at play in one specific example of his artistic practice. Participating in and thinking about his work has raised, and continues to raise, many questions for me. These questions are relevant to contemporary choreographic practices as they address, indirectly or directly, issues such as the relationship between dance and visual art (particularly participatory and socially engaged art practices), dance in the museum, dance and objecthood, dance and documentation, dance and transmission, social choreography and choreography in the expanded field and as expanded practice. Moreover, *These Associations* brought to the forefront (symbolically and practically) important societal,

political and cultural terms such as individualism, togetherness and collective action. Ultimately, the work asks us how we want to relate to and interact with each other in the world, a question that seems important to consider now more than ever.

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Note

1

Thus we ask now: even if the old rootedness is being lost in this age, may not a new ground and foundation be granted again to man, a foundation and ground out of which man's nature and all his works can flourish in a new way even in the atomic age? (Heidegger [1959] 1966: 53)