

»I'm dreaming of a white Christmas...«

Tino Sehgal

at the *Kunstverein in Hamburg*

Michel Chevalier

The *Kunstverein in Hamburg* has invited *Venice Biennale German Pavilion* artist Tino Sehgal for a very generously-budgeted untitled solo show "dealing with the theme of progress." [1] A wonderful gift to the *Kunstverein* public, for whom it will be a holiday season fostering much reflection and discussion. Tino Sehgal has found a way of working which is really different. Of a work of his being currently shown at the *Stedelijk Museum* in Amsterdam, he says: "It has nothing to do with the model of production on which our civilization is based." [2] Incredible as his claim may seem, Tino Sehgal produces "products" which are "completely immaterial." [3] Is the Holy Ghost gracing the *Kunstverein* with His presence? Or are artists, once again, able to harness the science of the world beyond nature, metaphysics? At the risk of dampening viewers' surprise, a brief clarification is perhaps in order. Sehgal uses the term 'immaterial' in the sense that, for example, former U.S Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, Antonio Negri, or Newt Gingrich do (although many serious economists usually bracket the term in quotation marks): 'immaterial' labor simply is the production of knowledge, cultural artifacts, services, or communication. So, no marvels of transubstantiation at the *Kunstverein*; the link to a certain religious tradition, and the novelty of Sehgal's approach within the art context, however, are matters further addressed below.

A contextual work

Visitors at the *Kunstverein* are treated to a sort of audience-participation theater/choreography piece, in which they are addressed by various strangers who lead them through (and briefly outside of) the building while engaging them in conversation. There is apparently a large team of people on stand-by, so each visitor or small group can set forth without delay, seven hours a day, six days a week, without prior reservation. In apparent homage to the Charles Dickens classic, *A Christmas Carol*, Sehgal

has thoughtfully arranged the conversation partners according to age. But true to an *art-in-the -everyday* tradition of Happenings and performance works that he is also obviously versed in, the conversation partners have nothing outwardly extraordinary about them. Instead of a Ghost of Christmas Past, Ghost of Christmas Present, and Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, I met a girl about 12, a young woman, a man in his late twenties to early thirties, and a fellow in his sixties.

As in the Dickens classic, one figure appears after the other disappears or turns away. Here, Sehgal uses the architectonic potential of the *Kunstverein* space, setting partition walls slightly apart from each other to create corridors, even using spaces not usually open to the public. In an approach consistent with the economy of minimalism (and unlike the 1960's Happenings of Kaprow, Whitman etc.) no special backdrops, curtains, or props are used. The choreography of the strangers complements the aforementioned surprises with verve. Ecumenical topics were addressed in a friendly, jovial way, yet philosophical, even life-changing, implications were not foreclosed. At several moments, the strangers asked me questions about my past and background, thereby integrating my biography into the work. Things started off with a subtle play of words and actions, the pondering of the word "Fort-schritt" (in German, both "Progress" and "step forward") while physically moving forth into the first empty space. The free and easy deambulation through space untrammelled by the clutter of objects, the exquisite blank walls, the balance between coziness and expanse, the autonomy of the approach...why not say it? celebrate it: a Surprising White Christmas, in store for everyone, despite the mild weather. The contextual aspect of the work does not stop short at the architectonic and seasonal dimensions, however. [4] Tino Sehgal's exhibition is pleasantly calibrated to the needs of those who have weathered the Fall/Winter hectic of the *Berlin, Frieze, FIAC, Cologne*, and *Art Basel Miami* fairs,

not to mention the *Kunstverein's* own "*Editions 2006*" show. Visitors are relieved to be able to rest their eyes a bit, and to NOT talk about art at what is, nonetheless, a *place to be*. One may reflect on this knack young successful artists have to be so in tune with the dispositions of their benefactors and patrons. I first heard of Tino Sehgal when Hamburg gallerist and *Kunstverein* board member Jürgen Vorrath described him as "one of the best political artists."^[5] Sehgal, trained as a political economist, and Vorrath both share the view that markets are "democratic."^[6] Like Vorrath, he puts first things first with regard to his involvement with art. Vorrath: "For me, an artist that I am involved with is an entrepreneur with whom I undertake a business relationship. Whether he's an artist or not, that's something my tax-advisor can decide, as far as I'm concerned."^[7] What music to Vorrath's ears (and, with prices ranging from 8,000 to 40,000 ^[8], for like-minded gallerists) when Sehgal states, matter-of-factly, "My work produces income, but I am not dependent on material things."^[9] Sehgal's theme for this exhibition, "progress," is also in keeping with the preoccupations of *Kunstverein* Director Yilmaz Dziewior. The exhibition immediately preceding the current one was none other than a showcase of "new works from young artists [...]" that refute the idea of a homogeneous and continuous art development in the sense of positive progress."^[10] One could say that this formulation borrows from and updates to the art context the progress-critical and mystical position Walter Benjamin elaborated in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.^[11] What Benjamin criticizes as the "concept of progression through a homogenous empty time," ideologically bound with "the concept of historical progress" is, in Dziewior's formulation, radicalized, more threateningly, into homogenous "art development" (the threat is rhetorically underscored by the logical perplexity it leaves the reader in: just what is a homogenous development supposed to be?). Although Sehgal has expressed sympathy with the idea of technical progress, his work here subtly reminds visitors that the march of time brings age after infancy and youth, that first you go upstairs in the *Kunstverein* but then you go downstairs, thereby suggesting (but is this reading too much into the artist's intentions?) that this idea of cultural (or political) progress is perhaps at odds with our material, bodily, interests. His choice of leaving the entire *Kunstverein* space empty, as an echo of Benjamin's "homogenous empty time" problematization of progress, should not be overlooked, either. Sehgal also brings an attitude which is appropriate to the *Kunstverein* not only in this holiday season, but at this moment in its over-150-year history. With all due respects to the market ("I wouldn't be sitting here today if I hadn't managed to create a link between something you could call 'immaterial' and the market"), Sehgal lays the main stress of his work elsewhere: "To me, art is a celebration, it celebrates people's abilities to alter nature, manufacture things, and to derive a subject-construction from that. [...] it's about the experience and the celebration of abundance. To go on to joy in an affirmative way is something that interests me a lot in my work. To link responsible production with joy, something that isn't ascetic, not protestant."^[12] We all know that the *Kunstverein in Hamburg* has had some turmoil since September, 2005. Conflicts involving the board elections, an invalidated election,^[13] the ethical imbroglio of Dziewior's moonlighting for the *Artist Pension Trust* which resulted in his resignation from said organization,^[14] bad publicity, a failed attempt to change the *Kunstverein's* charter. Sehgal's joyful approach has affinities to Dickens that go beyond subtle references. The art-historian Arnold Hauser has described Dickens' "Gospel of Love" as "an adulterated, sugary *Philosophy of Christmas*," adding: "Dickens is a peace-loving citizen, who accepts the presuppositions of the prevailing capitalistic system without question."^[15] Although it's still early in his career, Sehgal seems well poised to actualize this project. What more could one wish for in an Art Center that needs order and stability? If "peace-loving" and "accepting" are not yet normal dispositions in the art-world, they certainly should be. As TV journalist Markus Peichl aptly put it, while trying to defend attempts by himself and other members of the board to restrict *Kunstverein*-member voting rights: "the main point, in my opinion, is that we would especially like to have people, also at the general assemblies, who are here because they are interested in art, because they are constantly interested in art, and so are here for that reason and aren't coming to voice their opinions and vote; and that should also be the goal."^[16]

Historical antecedents?

How should we view Sehgal

's projects in the context of recent art? It seems like audience-participation theater of a very congenial type, something that would have perhaps been called a "happening" back in the sixties or seventies. Sehgal refuses the appellation performance, preferring the term "constructed situation." This term, coupled with "immaterial," raises the temperature a bit. *Russian Constructivists, Internationale Situationniste, Dematerialization of the Art Object*: so many epoch-defining (and collective) undertakings. And here, someone working the conventional solo-artist/museums/galleries format...

Let's take a little step back, and mention at least a few *individual* forerunners.

George Brecht developed *Events* in 1959-62: simple instructions printed on small cards, for one or several performers, which could be carried out in various contexts, and were.

In 1970 David Lamelas examined language as an art form (producing, thereby, a work consisting of statements, whose artistic status was up to debate). *Publication* featured answers to the statements "1. Use of oral and written language as an Art Form. 2. Language can be considered an Art Form. 3. Language cannot be considered an Art Form."

Allan Kaprow's *7 Kinds of Sympathy* from 1976 consisted of simple instructions aimed to "stimulate interpersonal action."

In 1977 André Cadere invited strangers to a private apartment, asking them to participate in a "situation" entitled *Etablir le Désordre*, having imported no elements to the context other than his speech and presence.

Scores of performance and conceptual artists refused to document their work, one participant in Lamelas' *Publication*, Stanley Broun, going so far as refusing any photographic reproduction of his work, producing no catalogues, giving no interviews, and not having photographs of himself published, from the mid-sixties to the present.[17]

In the early to mid '90s Laurie Parsons created so-called *Private Pieces*, undocumented and unconfirmed contributions to exhibitions (e.g. a new bouquet on the table of an assistant working at Dijon's le Consortium every week), her name also not figuring in any of the exhibition programs or materials.[18] Luckily for Sehgal, there are some, other than Vorrath, who are ready to vouch for his radicalism. The *Berlin Biennale* website listing for him features the words:

"Sehgal has continually provoked viewers to consider arts means of production, the art world, the rules that its players follow, and how these issues relate to society at large." [19]

At tad less hot air, and one relevant fact, is to be had from the *Stedelijk Museum* website: "Sehgal wishes to take the dematerialisation (sic) of the art project, as conceptual art believed in it (sic), still a step further. With him, not even a certificate of ownership is forthcoming." [20]

Less mythomaniac and more to the point, thankfully, is the *Villa Warsaw* announcement: "Sehgal transforms actions, not materials, without any filmic or photographic documentation. His work can be acquired when collector, artist, and gallery-owner agree to an oral contract with witnesses." [21] So, let's tally up and see what added-value Sehgal has brought to artistic "praxis." Sehgal, as we see in the above consensus and in his own statements, manages to "generate income" without "material." In plain language (and not necessarily in exact sequential order), he thinks up an audience-participation theater/choreography piece, eventually gives it a title, works with his team of laypeople-actors, has it performed in an art center, museum, gallery, or at a biennial (that will likely, as in the case of the *Kunstverein*, have covered the cost for recruiting and paying the actors), and sells it to an art collector or museum by oral contract with witnesses, his being paid the sum upon legal transfer of ownership. The art collector or museum has the rights to the work and its subsequent "exhibition", and has been provided with "instructions" [22] to this effect, which may in turn be communicated to other museums in the case of a loan.

The oral contract is, near as I can tell, the only added-value in Sehgal's process. Some jurisdictions do not recognize oral contracts, and their validity for high sums has only been established since the 1984 *Texaco vs. Penzoil* case, so it's no surprise collectors would have been unwilling to experiment in the '70s with, say, Lawrence Weiner. But this is actually turning the issue on it's head, in a way. In the case of Sehgal, the oral contract clause is nothing other than a gimmick which deflects attention from the main issues. Obviously, his construct of "immaterial" production is based on the obfuscation of drawings, faxes, notes, schedules, instructions (like most companies, he may have a contract with a document destruction service) and the simple existence of 3000 *Kunstverein* brochures with his name printed on them makes his project far less 'immaterial' than Laurie Simmons' *Private Pieces*, for instance. Following a bifurcated approach, he may

indeed sell thin air, but what he sells to private collectors is not his *production*, the thing that gets reported in the magazines and furnishes him with symbolic capital. What he is selling them is a certain status, like country club membership. His hyperbolic claim that his activity "has nothing to do with the model of production on which our civilization is based" is either a joke or an index of his ignorance of the body of work on cultural and social (re)production in areas as diverse as history, anthropology, and sociology. His collectively corporeal, *non-immaterial*, institution-bound events are, at any rate, indifferentiable from what, in 2006, goes under the name "theater-production." Historical parallels are risky undertakings, yet it's worth asking if, for our current age, these events are not in manifold ways much more conventional, much closer to routine culture-industry forms (such as below-the-line-marketing) than a "Happening" in the '60s that may have resorted to props or costumes, and been photographed, was for *its* time. The historical parallel is warranted because Sehgal and his proponents champion him in Vanguard-Art terms. A passage from a text on his gallery's website as case in point: "Duchamp affirms that only the artist's signature suffices; that it is stronger than the institution. With Buren, the signature is the institution; he has no need to place his signature. Tino Sehgal inscribes himself into this perspective, in producing a third voice, a displacement; a subversion of the historical function of the signature and the readymade."^[23] A very fine example, indeed of what the Art Sociologique collective called the "avantgardist ideology" embodied in "the idealist tradition of artistic genius orchestrated by Marcel Duchamp and supported by the competitive art market."^[24]

The Brecht *Events* mentioned above, and the more recent *Ikhéa@services* of Jean-Baptiste Farkas, consist of instructions printed on cards or in books, are sold as such, and are never, *never*, originals but *multiples*.^[25] Their performance/activations, as in the case of musical scores, are left to the owners of the books/cards, but are also (unlike public performances of classical music pieces, which require ownership of the score) authorized to non-purchasers, to anyone. Farkas welcomes corrections and updates, and has them printed. Sehgal sells his 'products' in the auratic form of the unique piece, whereby his labor-power as a choreographer/director (as object, as ingredient) is indispensable to the piece's non-evanescent, stable authenticity, most critically at the moment of its premiere in a culturally legitimated location. The "instructions" *Johnen + Schöttle* mentioned to me are, as far as I know, not made public (let alone correctable!!!) and, according to the gallery it is also "better" if, after the purchase, the artist invests the subsequent exhibitions with his labor-power. It is very hard to imagine how this auritized production of unique pieces demonstrating the artist's choreographical craftsmanship is reconcilable with any kind of remotely 'critical', let alone 'subversive', project. Are there other criteria Sehgal's projects could be measured by? If we don't want to focus on added-value, or the inflated terms of his and his gallerist's rhetoric, in what regard is Sehgal at least "keeping pace"? Allan Kaprow wrote about what he called *nontheatrical performance* twenty years ago, stating that they "don't begin with an envelope containing an act (the fantasy) and an audience (those affected by the fantasy)." "By the early sixties", he adds, "the more experimental Happenings and Fluxus events had eliminated not only actors, roles, plots, rehearsals, and repeats but also audience, the single staging area, and the customary block of an hour or so."^[26]

The untitled piece "dealing with the theme of progress" at the *Kunstverein* has nearly all of these things. A participant playing the role of "a stranger" told me about their rehearsals; the roles, as mentioned, were neatly assigned according to the Dickens template, and I was in every way "led on" according to the itinerary. At one point, I suggested my conversation partner and I have a look behind a door, to see the *Kunstverein* workshop. "No. Please follow me" was the terse reply, as I imagine it had been to any wayward sheep before me. When Sehgal says that his actions "only function in the closed-off, ritual space of the museum"^[27] it's hardly clear from which perspective the function-evaluation is taking place. Do they not function for the recipient/spectator? imagine for yourself: would the work at the *Kunstverein* (which, by the way, is not a *museum* but a contemporary art-space) categorically not "function," given the same actors and a *different* location that provided similar corridors, empty space etc.? Or is the function-evaluation taking place from the perspective of Tino Sehgal, his *material* interest in prominence and art-marketability conditioning and foreclosing the activity he pursues under the banner of *immateriality*? If so, we may venture this riddle: how does it come to be that a work apparently devoted to communication is so indifferent to exploring variables which may effect and enrich audience experience (assuming communication goes both ways)? Why is a work that "considers arts means of production" so unreflective with regard to conflicts that may arise that pit the artist's interest against that of (some of) his recipients? Why is his own gimmicky means of production not

taken up as an object for his inquiry? Because, Sehgal's project is bubble-gum! His gallery may very well write "this work opposes certain illusions of what one could call the militant modern avant-garde, whilst nevertheless observing the mechanisms by which the art work is a spectacle destined to sacralise (sic) merchandise." When he tries to sound versed in Marxism by talking 'use-value' this and that, and then talks about 'production and deproduction', it is he, Sehgal, who is under the illusion that he doesn't sound like an idiot.[28] His whole material/immaterial construct is a fig-leaf. Sehgal's pedantic occultation of the material traces that are inevitable to the kind of conventional work he is doing would have been unnecessary if he had heeded the words of the sociologist Emile Durkheim who in 1894 wrote that social facts must be treated like things, adding "we are not saying that social facts are material things, but are things to the same degree that material things are, although in another way." [29] Insofar as his projects are not contained in his mind alone (he says about his work at *Stedelijk*, "It exists in my head, in my body and in the bodies of the people that have seen it"), insofar as they are not axioms or theorems of mathematics, his obstinate description of his work as "completely immaterial" unintentionally reactivates the proverb Duchamp once hoped would no longer be applicable to artists : "bête comme un peintre."

Radical rhetoric and commodity nexuses

Why the bother? Isn't this embarrassing, even for him? A simple answer is that the market needs it (what *it* is, I'll elaborate below). With recent critical heckling about the proliferation of art fairs, 'commercialization', the triumph of 'Flachware' (flatware) and the 'rematerialization of art', one can understand the desire to reestablish credibility.[30] A special insert to Swiss rag *Parkett* (the *Pravda* of the art-market) was titled *(IM)MATERIAL?* in 2004. In it, Nicolas Bourriaud corrals Rikrit Tiravanija, Vanessa Beecroft, and Maurizio Cattelan under his "*Seven notes on the immaterial*" (he had apparently not yet heard of Sehgal

). In the recent past, magazines like *Parkett* and Art Centers like Bourriaud's *Palais de Tokyo* have shown inexhaustible resourcefulness at pasting radical-sounding discourse on commodities and commodity-facilitators: Concept, No Concept, Hardcore, Collective Creativity, Punk, Straight Edge, Zwischen Jesus und Junkie, Mono Dope, kpD, Mai 98, RAF, Partisanen der Utopie, Rebel Art, Never Work, Für die Konstruktion des Unmöglichen, Reality Hackers, Immaterial.[31] When I sat at the podium at the *HfbK* early this year I experienced firsthand how Sehgal's hot air was worth every penny to Jürgen Vorrath as he was under fire for his "artists are entrepreneurs" thesis. It gave him and his toupee a chance to marshall something really radical: politics + immateriality (but still income-generating!). For two minutes, he preached the gospel of Sehgal to all "hobby-artists." [32] Hyperbolic claims of little substance are nothing new in art. The business-as-usual of the market maintains a semblance of autonomy in an environment which owes its existence to autonomy's factual curtailment.[33] Hyperbole is awarded to the compliant as a consolation prize. Ian Burn made the following assessment in 1975: "Today it is surely beyond any doubt that this popular idea of a 'permanent revolution' [...] is a set of empty gestures which threaten none of the market requirements and end up being a sheer celebration of the new individuality, arrogantly and, finally, stupidly set against the idea of sociality." [34]

The sixties and seventies context Burn refers to, however, still saw the market concentrating its docile vanguardians into successive "movements" and slogans (Pop, Op Art, Minimalism, When Attitudes Become Form), each endowed with a life cycle of around five years. The public-sphere identification and promotion of these movements, being dependent on the mass media, was thereby adapted to the general nature of programming at that time. But this was all changing, according to an influential and far-sighted study by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge.[35] The rise of the 'consciousness industry' and of the 'new public spheres of production' were in the process of radically altering work, leisure, communications, and political perspectives. Over thirty years later, we are still living this process. Advanced capitalism brings with it changes in the internal structure of the commodity, which appears in "a specific and coherent accumulation, which constitutes a new use-value and a new body of commodities." [36] The consciousness industry implements a project: "Society must not just be turned into an immense collection of commodities in objective economic terms, but also in a way that can be concretely perceived by the individual. [...] The commodity

becomes, as a sensual-suprasensual thing, a means of transforming articles of use into fantasy products, which do not merely function as the object of consumption but indicate a worldview as well." As a result, "commodity nexuses" can produce an ideological benefit to their producers without being individually purchased as packaged, material, commodities. Their role in social reality, their hidden use-value, goes far beyond the cash register, as they are instrumental in the reorganization of production, the privatization of public space, a culture of 'immediacy', and 'inwardly directed imperialism'.^[37] The "commodity nexuses" are syncretistic, mixing education, entertainment, communication, and information in a way that promotes certain experiences and blocks others. Translating this into the terms developed by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, these nexuses foster and promote "schemes of perception" which are at the basis of mobilization and (the main concern of Kluge and Negt) the *demobilization* of groups.^[38] In the art-world, and for cultural production generally, this has meant a derealizing, post-modernist 'anything goes'. If Ian Burn's account may sound a little dated in 2006, it is because the 'permanent revolution' he mentions has been supplanted by a permanent party (Sehgal's "celebration of abundance"). The imperative of safeguarding "market requirements" is the same as in 1972, however. The supplanting of grandiose 'movements' (they also make such easy targets for uncouth critics) by the principle of eclecticism and simulated openness can very well be masqueraded as a cultural shift implying the "refutation" of "positive progress" it is, in fact, part and parcel of the real positive results the capitalist class has had in maintaining its domination in the West, making ever more *progress* with regard to returns on investment and diminishing tax burdens. The art world can very well have a run with immateriality, just as it will invite Florian Schneider or Bureau d'Études to do the "activist" routine, show Mathieu Laurette's old *money-back* work for a dash of subversion, contract Bernadette Corporation to do away with 'authorship', ask Isabelle Graw and Chantal Mouffe to update Marx, then invite some crazy-collective-you've-never-heard-of to make some mess in the corner. All the while, we'll get a steady stream of flavors-of-the-month providing us with their 'personal visions' in collectible formats, those most endearing among them being promoted from private to the rank of "major" artist. Bourdieu diagnosed a similar period of cultural restoration, in which, following social crises, "political regimes in quest of legitimacy aim[ed] to recreate a consensus around a 'fair middle' eclectic culture": this was the period of academic painting in mid-nineteenth century France.^[39] What, at the most elementary level, are the "commodity complexes" Tino Sehgal belongs to? We have two, the *gallery Johnen + Schöttle* (Cologne) complex and the *gallery Jan Mot* (Brussels) complex. *Johnen + Schöttle* combines Sehgal with an array of object producers. There are even 6 painters who benefit from the extra mention that they use oils (one is an ex-punk and he paints Dee Dee Ramone icons for good measure).

Breakdown: 15 painters, 7 photographers, 5 sculptors, 2 sculptor/painters, 1 video artist, one '60s concept-artist survivor (Dan Graham), and one immaterial artist. That makes 3% immaterial. And lots of latter-day surrealism. We have 26 male artists to choose from, Candida Höfer being the lone woman in the crowd.

Jan Mot is far more advanced, in that he doesn't even have *one* oil painter. He also has two '60s concept-artist survivors (David Lamelas, who has converted to video, and Ian Wilson, who is selling povera sculpture-installations). He also sells works by other vaguely 'post-conceptual' artists like Liam Gillick, who are not on the gallery roster.

Breakdown: 5 photographers, 3 video-artists, 3 video-installation artists, 3 concept artists (one ½ immaterial), 1 object artist (writes name with a ∂!), and one full-time no-photo immaterial artist. No collectives, just solo-acts. 5 of 15 artists are women.

That makes between 9 and 18% immaterial, with production ordered along an ironic <---->(auto)biographical polarity, the gallerist making much, in a published interview, of the literary orientation of one young conceptual artist who does work similar to Robert Barry's in blithe, gallery-approved, ignorance of the historical record. How does an artist with such a minority stance generate such hype? Or, to put it differently, if what he's doing is so good, why not galleries that are 100% immaterial? Is Sehgal a loss leader (a product or service sold at a substantial discount in order to generate additional sales)? Or is his position so insubstantial, so dependent on novelty effect, that if there were more than one 'new immaterialist' it would just spoil the show?^[40] Before we go on, a summary. The ingredients to Sehgal's "products" are: audience-participation theater + Brouwn "no pictures" policy (but *sans* "no interviews" policy) + Vanessa Beecroft/Thomas Hirschhorn mobilization of many laypeople payed some shit fee + oral sales contract + instructions only the

owner sees + "immaterial" rhetoric. In a 1969 interview later published in her essential historic survey *Six years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*, Lucy Lippard offered the following perspective on then-ongoing debates: "The artists who are trying to do non-object art are introducing a drastic solution to the problem of artists being bought and sold so easily, along with their art." The developments of that time, taking the lead from fluxus member Henry Flynt, were a response to the "gallery-money-power structure."^[41] The period saw the manifold approaches of idea-, concept-, mail-, earth-, and process-art (also Metzger's auto-destructive-art), independent distribution networks, discussion groups, publications, audio recordings, public interventions (unauthorized, and at times in museums, cf: *Guerilla Art Action Group*), as well as countless evanescent projects which produced nothing close to what was then accepted as an "art form." Contrary to the image presented by all recent surveys that I know, contestation of norms and power structures became even *stronger* after 1972, with the publication of the Ian Burn/MelRamsden-edited *the Fox* and the emergence of groups like the *Black Emergency Cultural Coalition* and *Artists' Meeting for Cultural Change*. Victor Burgin's 1984 assessment makes clear how effective these protagonists were in hitting a nerve and being identified as a threat, despite the many other challenges to the status quo at the time: "The conceptual art of the late 1960s to early 1970s was an affront to the established values, hostility to the newer work being often so intense as to suggest that more than merely aesthetic values were at stake."^[42] As on the political front, the conservative backlash was impending. The firing of *Artforum* editor John Coplans in 1976 set the pace – a result of protests and pressure from galleries (Warhol-gallerist Leo Castelli being especially energetic) and red-baiting diatribes by *New York Times* art critic and future Reagan administration functionary Hilton Kramer.^[43] Against this backdrop, a younger generation of artists obliged when it came to "being bought," developing creative rationales (this was the '80s, after all) like (and often aided by) their colleagues working in the realm of academic "theory."^[44]

The *Stedelijk* public affairs department is 180 degrees off the mark when the museum website flatly states that "Sehgal wishes to take the dematerialisation (sic) of the art project, as conceptual art believed in it (sic), still a step further." Tino Sehgal is working *against* what Lippard and most of the projects falling under the category of dematerialization stood for. He may be discursively and formally mimicking some aspects of their practice, but the alpha and omega of his project is to integrate himself into the state-of-affairs they were trying to undermine.^[45] In turn, by occupying the radical high ground discursively (and with the complicity of the bourgeois media like *die Zeit*), he, Dziewior, and his galleries are producing new kinds of exclusivity and undermining strategies which may arise in opposition to the art market's integrative ambitions. *Sehgal's 'immaterialism' is the antithesis of dematerialization. The historical impetus of the latter was an aversion to and a critique of commodities against a backdrop of capitalism-driven wars; the former is based on an infatuation with 'new' commodities, against a similar backdrop of capitalism-driven wars.*

Networks to the New Pastoral and back again

What, if any, is the sociopolitical orientation crystallized in Sehgal

's work? During my visit, my "interlocutors" accosted me with forthright questions and statements you would not usually experience when first meeting strangers. "What do you think progress means?...what about all this money?...at my age one tries to find moments in which one can experience a little peace..." While talking with my last partner about his grandchildren ("they have no time, always shuttling from one activity or birthday to the next"), the theme of networking came up, it seemingly being a near-existential imperative, at an earlier and earlier age. On my way "out" of the exhibition, having completed the itinerary, I allowed myself to ask a few more direct questions: "If you are not professional actors, how were you selected? Were there 'wanted' ads?" My partner answered, "Oh, friends of friends..." and, after a moment's pause and with wry fatalism: "... I guess you would say, networks." This is, after all, the Art Center in which the first curated show by the current director carried the title *Zusammenhänge herstellen*. After a couple years, there is much to be said that the English translation of the title for the catalogue (*contextualize*) was the wrong one, the other meaning, *making connections*, being far more on the mark. In a 2004 essay, I drew on the study and findings of the sociologists Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello in order to examine how a set of values they label *connectionist*

structures the commonplaces of much recent art criticism and curation, putting it in phase with the new imperatives of *Network Capitalism*.^[46] Since then, networks and capitalism have thrived at the *Kunstverein*. Director Yilmaz Dziewior began working for the *Artist Pension Trust* as a "Curatorial Committee Member".^[47] A supposed "barter based" retirement plan launched in 2004, it lets 'promising' artists offer artworks instead of paying premiums. A collection is built up, and, following the 'rising tide' adage, all trust "team"-members, including non-artist investors in the fund, have a direct financial benefit from the success of any and all other partners. And indeed, *APT* promises to "support the careers of participating artists." *APT* puts the artist into "powerful company," in the words of Michael Lingner. "What is at first a hardly-negligible social benefit for the *embedded artist* who has been rendered 'untouchable' is, from an economic and purely factual point of view, nothing other than the attempt to set up a *cartel* that aims for full market control and the ability to dictate prices."^[48] Many questions arise. Advisors, be they curators of institutions receiving public funding, have a very real power to increase the market value of artists on the 'team'. They are even paid a fee based on a percentage of the sales-income of the artists they have recruited. When and how can it be established that a public or semi-public arts administrator is putting public function behind private financial benefit? The matter would be settled if the curator refrained from exhibiting *APT* artists, staying clear of potential conflicts of interest. Dziewior has, however, exhibited 15 *APT* teammates since the fund was launched in 2004, his (in)famous *Formalismus. Moderne Kunst, heute* exhibition counting 7 of 25 artists in the trust.^[49] Apparently under pressure from the board, Dziewior resigned from the trust this past Fall, but questions about the program Hamburg has been treated to under his mantle remain. What a relief that Tino Sehgal isn't in the *APT* (although both of his *Jochen + Schöttle* gallery-mates who are in the *APT* have also been exhibited by Dziewior)! The *praxis* of his income-generation-without-material-dependency approach is definitely in tune with the *Kunstverein* network, all the same. The website of the *Berlin Biennale* touts Sehgal for having "continually provoked viewers [...] ever since his first work was shown in a visual art context at *Manifesta 4*."^[50] The *Manifesta* is certainly a prestigious location to show your "first work" but checking the *S* section of the *Manifesta 4* catalogue may leave you puzzled: Schabus...Serapionov. Where is Sehgal? Answer: riding Maurizio Cattelan-sidekick Jens Hoffman's coattails. Hoffman pulled then-unknown Sehgal onboard, with the Sehgal project far-more-modestly described as a "juxtaposition of dance and visual art" and as "choreography."^[51] Don't you know? Jens Hoffman was just at the *Kunstverein* last April as *guest curator*, in fact. He was exhibiting winners of the *Neue Kunst in Hamburg* annual 'travel stipend' which he, as juror, had selected. Two of the five winners were *APT* artists, interestingly. Lucky for Dziewior, he hadn't 'curated' the show, so there was an alibi if ethical charges came up. Lingner's article was starting to make rounds, being republished in several major German dailies. It was all sheer coincidence that Dziewior had had the idea of exhibiting the *Neue Kunst in Hamburg* stipend-winners in the *Kunstverein*, for the first time ever, in this fortuitous year that *APT* fared so well. But ho ho ho, that's all old hat! The holiday season is a time for sharing, introspection, and the enjoyment of art. We know that Christmas has generated a form of evanescent church-art, the pastoral tableau of the nativity, a 'constructed situation', in a way, with members of the congregation playing the roles of Mary, Joseph, the Wise-men.

In a study presented in 2002, Amar Lakel and Tristan Trémeau argue that a *pastoral turn* is taking place within contemporary art itself, in particular in the work of so called 'esthetique relationelle' artists championed by Nicolas Bourriaud. This study has only appeared in French, so I would like to close this review by quoting some passages I have translated: "At its origins, the pastoral is an artistic genre which exalted the virtues of rustic life, with the figure of the shepherd, the poor wretch, the idiot, or the deceived lover, the country decor supposedly being close to 'communal life' and the state-of-nature. This art had resounding success in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, at the time that state-of-nature philosophies were being developed (Locke, Rousseau...). This art was principally addressed to aristocrats and *bourgeois* bent on recovering the 'true values' they had forgotten. These models have now migrated to the figure of the marginal or homeless person, or the immigrant, those through which the will to demonstrate an original community of all men can best achieve its means, thereby reenacting and exhibiting it. As Julian Stallabrass has shown in 1999, in his book that deconstructed the pastoral ideology of Young British Artists (Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Mark Wallinger, Sarah Lucas...), this esthetic is a class position, not only profoundly *bourgeois*, but reactionary in nature: against an elitist art that is distant from the community of men, let us reevaluate the common and the

banal, because it guarantees more authenticity and sincerity, it is supposedly more natural. Going further, we would like to demonstrate that pastoral art has recently developed within forms of *dispositifs* which go beyond this naïveté-themed genre, consolidating it into a real ideological technique. [...] Do not misunderstand us, our point is not to show that sacred catholic art is having a comeback, but rather: that which has always structured catholicism in its pastoral missions also underpins current artistic practices and contemporary exhibitions that lay claim to notions of exchange, mediation, and pacts. [...] The human inhabitants of the little planetary village are called on to communicate in these living pastoral tableaux confectioned by Rirkrit Tiravanija or Jorge Pardo, that spectators can then complete with their own presence. At any rate, someone is waiting for them, the work is available. No Mystery is revealed, they simply have to repeat daily gestures (cook, play, eat, speak, buy, negotiate...), these gestures that are common to us all in their banal universality. [...] In this context, the work of art is conceived like a communication technology, a medium in the poorest sense of the word a means, which is capable of linking up souls that have lost their way in the mazes of thought. Like the shepherd's staff, it is the power *dispositif* which is assigned the task of linking mankind together. A Church of Information and Communication Technologies, it takes hold of the pragmatics of language, theatricalizes the power relations which are imminent in communication, in order to create a new dogma of restorative alliance of the universal community. [...] This ideal of communicational politics makes itself immune against any specificity brought on by a critical position. Taking itself as an object, this ideology guarantees us of the coming of a new communicational self, connected to the free market of network thinking. [...] Accepting this game is accepting the pastoral procedure which binds development of a subjectivity to self-effacement in the norm, self-fulfillment to exhibition to others, the field of possibilities to free market exchange." [52]

January 7, 2007, 5.30 pm: The Kunstverein Working Group visits the Tino Sehgal show.

The author would like to thank Éric Létourneau, Rahel Puffert, and Tobias Still for their helpful comments.

1 Yilmaz Dziewior. Letter to members of the *Kunstverein* in Hamburg, November 2006 (author's translation).

2 www.stedelijk.nl, **Tino Sehgal** 20.10.06 - 10.12.06, Collection presentation around the new acquisition *Instead of allowing some thing to rise up to your face dancing bruce and dan and other things* (2000) by Tino Sehgal.

3 Ibid.

4 This contextuality reminds *Kunstverein* regulars of a previous successful, and sparse, solo presentation in Summer 2001: Cosima von Bonin's installation of a large boat in the upper exhibition space which "thematized", in the words of Kunstverein Director Yilmaz Dziewior "the exhibition location Hamburg as a Harbor-City" (*BRUDER POUL STICHT IN SEE* exhibition brochure) (author's translation).

5 Jürgen Vorrath, roundtable at the *IN DEN RUINEN UNSERER NEUEN SCHLÖSSER?* Symposium, Galerie der HfbK, Hamburg, 30/1/06 (author's notes).

6 For Jürgen Vorrath, see: *IN DEN RUINEN UNSERER NEUEN SCHLÖSSER?* Podium transcription, Kultur & Gespenster (Hamburg) Issue 2, Fall 2006, p 248; for Tino Sehgal, see *Kunst in Futur II* (originally published in DIE ZEIT (Hamburg) 09/06/2005 Nr.24): www.zeit.de/2005/24/Sehgal_2fSloterdijk

7 Kultur & Gespenster, p 242 (author's translation)

8 *Kunst in Futur II*

9 Gabriela Walde, "Dies ist Propaganda": Tino Sehgal, für Deutschland auf der Biennale, DieWelt.de, 19/12/2006: www.welt.de/data/2005/06/10/729929.html (author's translation).

10 Kunstverein in Hamburg, *Spiralen der Erinnerung* exhibition brochure (author's translation).

11 "The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself. [...] History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of 'Jetztzeit'." Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969) p. 261. Martin Jay comments: "Benjamin had been deeply critical of the concept of progress, in both its bourgeois and its socialist guises. Believing that history was more a process of decay than one of development, he hoped for relief only through

messianic intervention, the sudden incursion of what he called *Jetztzeit* or *nunc stans* (mystically fulfilled time) into the empty movements of chronology. This essentially religious hope for ruptures in historical continuity was married to his later Marxism with questionable results." (Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, Berkeley 1984, p. 262.) Contrast also, written in the same period as Benjamin, the following by Antonio Gramsci: "How was the idea of progress born? Does its birth represent a fundamental and epoch-making cultural event? It seems that it does. The birth and the development of the idea of progress correspond to a widespread consciousness that a certain relationship has been reached between society and nature (including in the concept of nature those of chance and "irrationality") such that as a result mankind as a whole is more sure of its future and can conceive "rationally" of plans through which to govern its entire life. [...] The crisis of the idea of progress is not therefore a crisis of the idea itself, but a crisis of the standard bearers of that idea, who have in turn become a part of "nature" to be dominated. In this situation attacks on the idea of progress are very tendentious and interest-motivated." *The Study of Philosophy in: Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), pp. 357-358.

12 *Kunst in Futur II* (author's translation).

13 Michel Chevalier, Cornelia Sollfrank, Nana Petzet, Frank Stühlmeyer, Claudia Reiche, Rahel Puffert: *Praktizierte Kritik an der Institution. Der Fall Kunstverein in Hamburg*, Kulturrisse (Vienna) 5/2006, p62. Online under: igkultur.at/igkultur/kulturrisse/1143541391/1143566427

14 Michael Lingner, *Gewinnwarnung*, in *Texte zur Kunst* Nr. 61, March 2006, pp. 164-168. Online under: ask23.hfbk-hamburg.de/draft/archiv/ml_publicationen/kt06-2.html

15 Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, vol IV (London: Routledge, 1999), pp 118-119.

16 Markus Peichl, statement at *Kunstverein* General Assembly of Members, 27/11/2006 (author's translation). The original statement is as follows: "Es geht uns glaube ich darum, dass wir gerne, auch auf den Mitgliederversammlungen, in erster Linie Leute hätten, die im Kunstverein sind, weil sie Kunst interessiert, weil sie ständig an der Kunst Interesse haben, und weil sie aus diesem Grund da sind, und nicht, weil sie zum Stimmen und Abstimmen kommen, und das soll auch das Ziel sein". The nine members of the *Kunstverein* board of directors are: Stephen Craig, Anna Gudjónsdóttir, Harald Falckenberg, Susanne Hegewisch-Becker, Hans Jochen Pauw, Markus Peichl, Jürgen Vorrath, Claudia Reiche, Hans Jochen Waitz. Of these, only Reiche has publicly taken a stand against the attempt to restrict member's rights.

17 For the sake of brevity I have left out the background of futurist/dada public and art-space interventions, as well as those later groups working exclusively outside of museum spaces, such as High Red Center in Japan and Tucumán Arde in Argentina. For Brecht, see Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999) pp. 168-170. For Lamelas, see Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: the dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972* *Geschichte einer Arbeit* (Kunstverein München und Neue Galerie Graz, 1996), no page number.

18 Kim Levin, *Laurie Parsons*, in: *Kunstforum International*, #125, January 1994, p145.

19 www.berlinbiennale.de/pdf/Tino%20Sehgal.pdf.

20 www.stedelijk.nl

21 www.raster.art.pl/villa/mobile.htm

22 The terms "exhibition" and "instructions" is the wording used by the *gallery Johnen + Schöttle* (Cologne): telephone inquiry 4.45 PM, 22/12/06.

23 Stéphanie Moisdon « moi je dis, moi je dis... », under: www.galeriejanmot.com/tino_sehgal/text.html This text employs the full range of tools that characterize what Natalie Heinrich calls 'ontologizing hermeneutics in art discourse'.

24 Hervé Fisher, *Théorie de l'art sociologique* (1977), available under:

classiques.uqac.ca/contemporains/fischer_herve/theorie_art_sociologique/theorie_art_tdm.html 25

Jean-Baptiste Farkas, *Ikhéa*©services (Brest: Zédélé Editions, 2004) describes services under four categories: Do it yourself (4 services), We do it for you (7 services), Do it yourself or we do it for you (13 services), The collectors have to do it (1 service).

26 Kaprow, p 173.

27 *Kunst in Futur II*

28 *Kunst in Futur II*. Despite the self-denial certain market-compliant artists/writers/curators indulge in, the fact remains: gallery-circuit art is sold as an investment (which is secure and has attractive tax advantages in

many countries). Is Sehgal one of the aforementioned, or is he oblivious of the meaning of 'use value', or both, when he says: "That is also what is interesting about the the art market from an economical perspective. It is in fact the first market where products are being offered which don't even try, anymore, to claim that they have an immediate use-value."? (author's translation).

29 Emile Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1988) p. 77.

30 Some more critical views, to supplement those cited previously: Klaus Honnef, *Kunstbetrieb*, in: *Kunstjahr 2004*, (Regengesburg 2004), pp. 81-87; and Judith Benhamou-Huet, *Art Business : Le marché de l'art ou l'art du marché* (Paris: Assouline, 2001).

31 The recuperation, sublimation, and fetishistic displacement of Constructivism in the West, especially in the '60s, is covered by Hal Foster, *Some Uses and Abuses of Russian Constructivism*, in: *Art into Life* (New York, Rizzoli, 1991).

32 His colleague at *Produzentengalerie*, Harald Rüggeberg, famously, and less charitably, coined the term "Hartz IV Künstler" to denigrate the list of (perhaps, in his view, unmarketable) finalists for a city-financed stipend. No artist on the list was actually "Hartz IV" (the recently downgraded German unemployment benefit program), but the polemic updates a German tradition of rightist thinking that demonized *Sozialfürsorge* (social assistance) as a cultural threat. A most informative and under-appreciated study of this theme, as well as a démontage of one of art theory's main gurus, is Pierre Bourdieu's *L'ontologie politique de Martin Heidegger* (Paris: Minuit, 1988).

33 This curtailment should in no way be understood as a problem. The Russian productivists understood this better than many self-described (and sideline) 'autonomy critics'. The decisive question is to *whose* benefit artistic autonomy is being curtailed. The market curtails it to the benefit of those with bargaining power, the affluent.

34 Ian Burn, 'the Art Market: Affluence and Degradation', in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, ed. *Art in Theory 1900-1990* (London: Blackwell, 1992), p 909.

35 Oscar Negt und Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993). Originally published as *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung: Zur Organisationsanalyse von bürgerlicher und proletarischer Öffentlichkeit* (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1972).

36 Ibid, p 130.

37 Ibid. pp 170-173.

38 Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction* (Paris: Minuit, 1979), p. 559. Kluge and Negt conclude their analysis: "New and essential experiences are gained, but in the process, other rich experiences are blocked that are necessary, for instance, for sustaining as a concrete possibility the notion of the production of social wealth by the producing class itself [the only genuine alternative to capitalism]." *Public Sphere*, p. 94.

39 Bourdieu, *L'institutionnalisation de l'anomie*, in: *Les Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne*, June 1987, p. 8. Perhaps this could be a good label for the innumerable post-Duchamp artists and like-minded curators who strain themselves at amassing objects for presentations that evoke the 'disparate': *Commodity Nexus Surrealism*. A predictable example, complete with gaudiness/irony and derealizing title, naturally, is John Armleder's Bank-sponsored "*Too Much is not Enough*" at the Kunstverein Hannover, on view til 28/1/07.

40 The less-than-enlightened among you who feel 'he's the only one, in a category by himself' are courteously invited to consult www.biennaledeparis.org. This event featured over 100 projects last October, no luxury-commodity producers, and only one bad apple (product sold in a gallery). At the neo-feudal *Frieze Art Fair*, by contrast, one vintage Lamelas conceptual work was sold by Jan Mot to the *Tate*, with much hullabaloo and philanthropic posturing by London's gentry, for £20,000. Plenty of photos on the website. It's easy to whitewash and rewrite history ('romantic conceptualism') if you buy can buy-off and silence the protagonists.

41 *Six years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 8.

42 Victor Burgin, from 'the Absence of presence', in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, ed. *Art in Theory 1900-1990* (London: Blackwell, 1992), p. 1097. *The Fox*, in my view, picked up where the *Internationale Situationniste* left off, combining astute criticism, punk-humored debunking, and an exponentially increasing staff. The article *Don Judd* by Karl Beveridge and Ian Burn (*Fox 2*, New York: Art and Language Foundation,

1975, pp. 127-142) triggered an internal crisis, with *Fox* publisher Joseph Kosuth feeling things were going too far, and *the Fox* folded shortly thereafter. The same issue documents a poster action in New York which featured the message "Artists! Closing the galleries is the best thing that could happen to us." (p. 69). In 2006, after a plethora of *institutional critique* reviews (be they from *Texte zur Kunst* or *eipcp*), these essential documents are still relegated to obscurity, thereby, in my view, blocking any *serious* evaluation of their era what followed it.

43 Paper Tiger TV Video Nr. 58, *Eva Cockcroft Reads: Artforum*, New York, 1984. In the period 1974-1976 Coplans had published writers such as Max Kozloff, Lucy Lippard, Allan Kaprow, and Eva Cockcroft.

44 Timothy Brennan: "I am saying that the ensemble of ethical positions known as theory revolutionary in posture, openly hostile to the American state, and characterized as Marxist by the media is a dissimulated form of the American religion of the middle way. [...] [it's] shortsighted focus on political ontology at the expense of productive relations helps account for its institutional rewards and its notoriety." *Wars of Position* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 9 and 32.

45 Sehgal: "Performance was always about escaping the museum (sic) and the market. I, on the contrary, am trying to work within the market and the museum." *Kunst in Futur II*. Groups like the Art Workers' Coalition argued, *on the contrary*, that museums should open up to work and social groups not represented within the scheme of art market interests. The demand was: access to the museums; and disactivation of markets in their antidemocratic gatekeeper function.

46 *Class War*, in: »target: autonopop« *Zeitschrift* (Hamburg, 2004), pp.14-15. A special focus of this essay was future Kunstverein 'guest theoretician' Diedrich Diederichsen. See, for 'Network Capitalism' Luc Boltanski/Eve Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (Paris. NRF, 1999).

47 aptglobal.org; www.kunstverein.de Before the APT-phase, the Kunstverein had its Galerie Nagel phase.

48 *Gewinnwarnung*, p. 167 (author's translation).

49 His 15 APT teammates were, until last Fall: Markus Amm, Pawel Althamer, Yael Bartana, Martin Boyce, Shannon Bool, Michal Budny, Jason Dodge, Jeanne Faust, Anette Kelm, Jakob Kolding, Jonathan Monk, Helen Mirra, Stefan Müller, Bojan Sarcevic, Dirk Stewen.

50 www.berlinbiennale.de/pdf/Tino%20Sehgal.pdf

51

52 Amar Lakel, Tristan Trémeau, *Le tournant pastoral de l'art contemporain*. Pdf under: jamespinson.chez-alice.fr/downloads/pastoral.pdf (Berkeley: University of California, 1997) p. 186. for Kaprow, see Kaprow, p p 165-167. For Cadere, see Andre Cadere, Lucy Lippard Catalogue: Manifesta 4 (Frankfurt, Hatje Cantz, 2002), p. 73.