

# Sehgal

WE WERE THE TALK OF THE TOWN, Tino didn't want recordings, I WAS ALLOWED TO TAKE PICTURES OF THE OUTSIDE OF THE MUSEUM, Espresso 77 in Jackson Heights, O! I WANTED IT, I WANTED IT BADLY, collecting and photographing things, I WANTED MEMENTOS

words JENNIFER ULEMAN

Tino didn't want recordings for any number of reasons, but one was this: a person who makes a recording, and a person who plays it back, even if it's the same person, doesn't experience the piece as it is, in and for itself. He, or she, or they only experience it from the outside, as appearance, as it is for another. But then it isn't the piece any more. The piece is something you, the visitor, made together with us, the interpreters, and the piece is the experience of making the piece and of being in it together. You have to be in the piece in order to see it, or, as people quickly started saying, to do it. Intersubjectivity: this, Tino told a group of us, over wine and paperwork at the museum one night before rehearsals began (plate 1), was the underappreciated thing in which he was most interested here. If you were busy recording the piece, or if you only experienced a recording of the piece, you missed the piece.

The piece, *This Progress*, went roughly like this. You came into the Guggenheim (in New York, in early 2010, the time and place of the piece's second exhibition). As you started up the ramp, a child of seven or eight would approach you and tell you that this was a piece by Tino Sehgal, and ask permission to ask a question, and

if you said OK, you'd be asked what you thought 'progress' was. You'd say some things to the child, and the child would try to make sense of them, maybe asking for an example while you walked, and would then introduce you to a teenager, and tell the teenager what you'd said, more or less. The teenager would take over, walking further on up the spiral ramp with you, asking you to clarify, or offering a response, drawing you out, and you'd walk and talk. Then an adult would interrupt, saying something abrupt and perhaps provocative and perhaps related to the conversation you'd just begun with the teenager, and the teenager (who knew to expect this) would politely introduce you. The adult would try to command your attention, and the teenager would fall away, and you'd carry on, walking and talking, until the adult disappeared behind a column and you were greeted by an older adult, who shook your hand and told you something, an extended reflection or a story, and talked with you some more, and at the end told you the name of the piece. From there you could wander back down, noticing all the people walking and talking, or visit the gift shop, or go to one of the side galleries where there were paintings and sculptures, or you could take the elevator down and do the whole thing again. If you did, you'd have different

conversations with different people - you'd make a different version of the piece.

This was the idea, and it was thrilling, and it worked in ways that were thrilling, but for some of us it posed a kind of problem. I, we, the people for whom a problem was posed, wanted intersubjectivity - O! I wanted it, I wanted it badly, I loved it. But because I loved it so much, I also wanted some way to record it. I wanted mementos. I started collecting and photographing things that weren't the piece, but were evidence of the piece - any and all material, perceptible, spatiotemporal traces and proofs of the piece's being: a talk abstract (not mine, but fellow Kant scholar Des Hogan's) on which I'd scribbled the address for my initial meeting with Tino; the piece of cardboard with the name and phone number of the museum contact (plate 2). I saved copies of all the work-related forms - contracts, releases, tax information, payroll schedule, pay stubs - in an envelope the Guggenheim provided (plate 3). I saved my name tag from the wine-and-paperwork night, and my first-day museum guest pass; I saved my exhibition staff ID. When it got me into other museums as 'other museum staff,' I saved the ticket stubs (plate 4). I took pictures of the coffee/tea service in our break room (plates 5 and 6). I



Plate 1

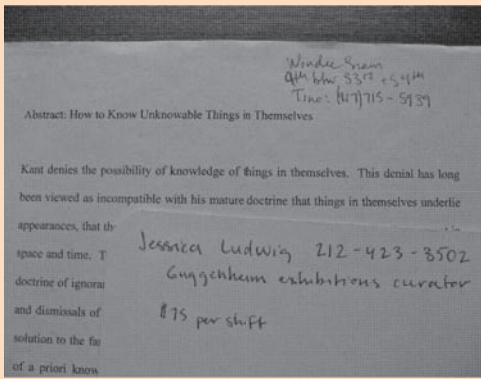


Plate 2

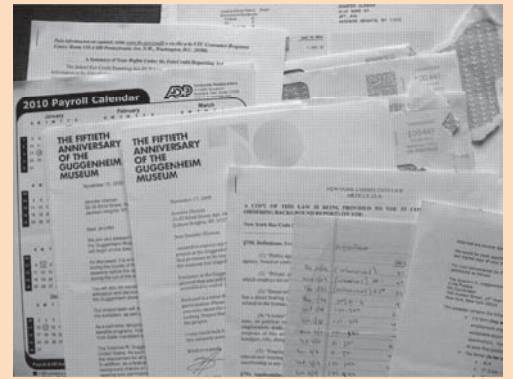


Plate 3



Plate 4

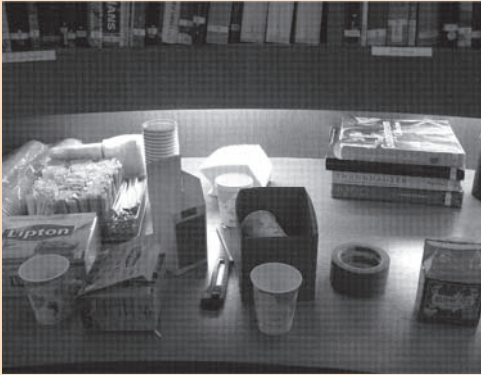


Plate 5



Plate 6

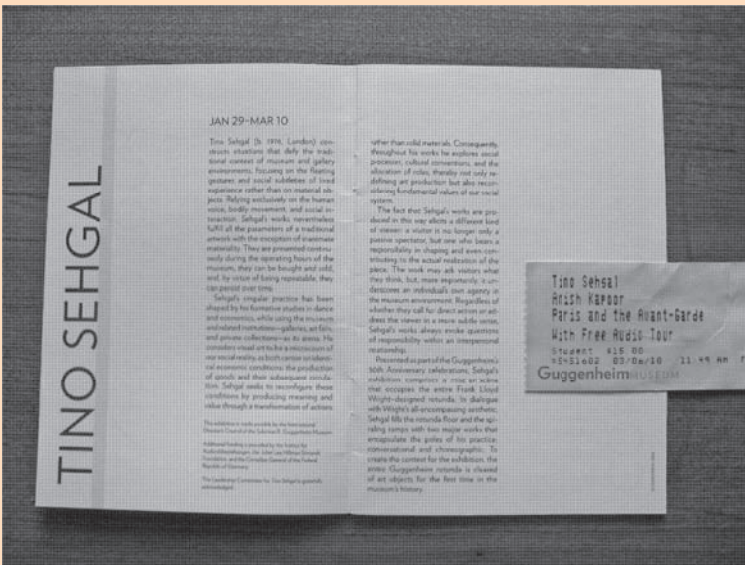


Plate 7



Plate 8



Plate 9



Plate 10

saved the museum exhibition guide. I saved paper copies of reviews and notices in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *New York Magazine* and *Artforum* (plates 7-10). It was, nonetheless and for all my efforts, a thin collection. I was an obsessive fan of something that refused easy scrapbooking.

I was allowed to take pictures of the outside of the museum (plate 11), and of the hallways and staff rooms, but not of the rotunda when the piece was taking place. I could not make sound recordings. Not just me, of course: everyone - visitors, press, museum personnel, all the other interpreters, anyone in the

museum for any reason - could take notes but was prohibited from making any kind of audiovisual recording. (I personally found taking notes impossible during the piece, and I never felt like it afterwards.) A few bootleg pictures and recordings did show up on the web, but they quickly disappeared. There are no catalogues for Tino's shows, no press kits, no brochures, no DVDs (plate 12). Recordings, as per the points noted above, would have defeated Tino's purposes, turning fleeting intersubjective events into permanent public objects. There won't be stills of people at the Guggenheim in 2010

talking about earthquakes or Chatroulette or neighbourhoods in New York or *Avatar* at any Sehgal retrospective; there won't be digital clips to show in art history classes.

For some of us, being in the piece was like being in love; it was being in love. We were in love with the piece and with ourselves and with each other; we were in love with Tino, Louise, Asad, Nico, our exhaustion, the coffee, the stories and the weather (plate 13). We were the talk of the town (plate 14)! But it wasn't just the glamour - it was a true love. We were yearning subjects, we were yearned-



Plate 11

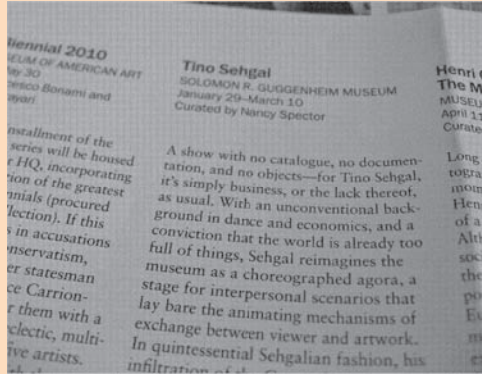


Plate 12



Plate 13



Plate 14



Plate 15



Plate 16



Plate 17



Plate 18

for objects, and we kept losing track of which was which. We had parties (plate 15), and when it was over, we took pictures of the museum and of each other in the museum (plates 16 and 17).

As has been widely reported, Tino sells his work, but without benefit of a written contract. You buy the rights to mount the piece, but you don't get anything material, not even a piece of paper. The sale is nonetheless a legally binding agreement. Institutions that own Tino Sehgal's include the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, and the Hamburger Bahnhof. Private collectors include Dakis Joannou and Marc and Josée Gensollens. Tino is represented by numerous galleries around the world. They can lease or sell rights to exhibit Tino's pieces (installation and exhibition to be overseen by Tino or one of his trained associates), that is, to have people move and act, often speaking or singing, in space and time in specific, if often also open-ended, ways.

Tino's refusal to create objects was like having a teacher who refuses to give you answers. Of course there are answers, and of course there are objects, and nothing is going to really get rid of either, or anyway of your desire to have them. But refusing to provide them makes something different happen. You could not do the thing, which we so often do, of recording for later playback. You could not plan to look it up again later. In the piece, things had to be then and there, and face-to-face, and then just in memory. You could not halt the piece (though you could bail). You could try to remember details, but the more time you spent thinking about the piece while you were doing it, the less piece, probably, you got. If you asked us questions about the piece, we'd try to turn the conversation away. (My tack was to say, "You can read about it later," as you perhaps are doing now.)

Early on, I took a picture of my copy of the 17 January 2010 *New York Times Magazine* lying open to the spread on Tino ('Making Art Out of an Encounter', by Arthur

Lubow, plate 18). I'd laid it open on a table at my local café, Espresso 77, in Jackson Heights, Queens. It was early afternoon and I was there with my friend Marc, who was also in the piece. It was a week and a half before the opening. We'd drunk tea and eaten things, and I wanted to locate it all in space and time - the article on Tino, the magazine itself, our giddy excitement, the empty plates, the cold tea bags, the light, everything physical that was there. Tino's eschewal of objects made me bring along, as a counterproposal, Leanne Shapton's brilliant book *Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion, and Jewelry* (2009), which is set up like an auction-house catalogue and tells the story of a love affair. It is full of captioned black-and-white pictures of postcards, tchotchkes, matchbooks, travel pillows, rocks, scarves, notes, keychains, ticket stubs, kitchen utensils, books, toiletry kits, photo strips, sunglasses, DVDs and other things accumulated by the couple and all now for sale. It takes a motto from Novalis: 'We seek the absolute everywhere, and only ever find things.'

Novalis is, of course, not quite right. Sometimes we find things that seem to be not only things, but also revelations of or connections to the absolute. As Kant appreciated only late, objects are rarely just objects, just as subjects cannot remain sheer subjects for long. Objects, however inanimate, frequently fail to be inert, and frequently go beyond their materiality. You are eating a tangerine, say, or you are looking at a stone; experiences, meanings, thoughts, recollections, insights even, come to be. Subjects, likewise and for their part, won't stay put for long as sheer subjects, but leave traces, arrangements, rearrangements and expressions in the physical world. Traffic between objects and subjects, between the material and the immaterial, the physical and the mental, if these distinctions even hold, is interminable and unpredictable. The world that is intersubjective - and this is the world I'm interested in too - is made of

objects and subjects that won't stay put or keep to themselves, that constantly move and mean and signify all kinds of things to and through each other.

My efforts to turn Tino's piece into a physical object or even to create a physical record failed, but the piece was and is real. It is real like memories are real, or meanings, or conversations. The piece was and is created and sustained in Tino's conception of it, in the shared making of it, in its retelling and in people's memories of it. The piece, as it was in New York anyway, is just everything that happened and that people remember happening and that people ended up thinking and saying and feeling as a result of what happened at the Guggenheim from 29 January to 10 March 2010, or really a little before, if you count rehearsals and press day, which I do.:

*Jennifer Uleman was an interpreter in Tino Sehgal's This Progress, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, from 29 January to 10 March 2010*

*The Unilever Series: Tino Sehgal is at Tate Modern, London, from 24 July to 28 October*