Sharing Interiority:
Notes on Tino Sehgal's Guggenheim Solo Show

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This paper presents an experiment in creative critical writing by focusing on my engagement—over the span of an entire day—with the two works presented in Tino Sehgal's solo show at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum from January 29 through March 10, 2010. While *Kiss* (2004) is a sculpture-in-motion, performed by a couple of professional dancers, *This Progress* (2007) is a relational installation which takes visitors through a series of conversations with "interpreters" (non-professional, paid actors), hired for this purpose. Structured around subjective retellings of my successive encounters with Sehgal's two pieces, which situate themselves at the intersection between performance and the visual arts, the paper draws on a range of contemporary writings in art and theatre/performance studies in order to highlight both the indebtedness of Sehgal's work to theatrical conventions and its simultaneous departure from, and continuation of, some of the principal tropes of relational aesthetics. Ultimately, these observations give rise to a reflection on the place of the face-to-face encounter within today's generalized drive toward ethically oriented community-formation in the growingly interconnected realms of contemporary art and performance.

Cet article prend la forme d'une tentative d'écriture créative qui a pour objet la visite approfondie (d'une journée complète) que j'ai faite au Musée Solomon R. Guggenheim où Tino Sehgal présentait deux œuvres du 29 janvier au 10 mars 2010. *Kiss* (2004) est une sculpture animée, performée par un couple de

danseurs professionnels. *This Progress* (2007) est une installation relationnelle qui invite les visiteurs à une série de conversations avec des acteurs (*interpreters*) non-professionnels et rétribués, recrutés à cet effet. Mon article est construit à partir de mes rencontres successives et répétées avec ces deux œuvres. Les œuvres de Sehgal se situent au croisement de la performance et des arts visuels. C'est pourquoi je fais appel dans mon approche à des textes contemporains sur l'art, sur les études théâtrales et sur la performance, de façon à mettre au jour ce que le travail de Sehgal doit aux conventions théâtrales. Je montre aussi que l'artiste s'éloigne—tout en les perpétuant—de certaines des principales figures de style de l'esthétique relationnelle. Ces observations débouchent sur une réflexion portant sur la rencontre en face-à-face, qu'on peut situer dans la tendance aujourd'hui généralisée vers un art orienté vers la formation de communautés éthiques et relevant des champs interconnectés de l'art contemporain et de la performance.

A person's life is a succession of fortuitous situations, and even if none of them is exactly the same as another the immense majority of them are so undifferentiated and so dull that they give a definite impression of sameness. As a result, the rare intensely engaging situations found in life only serve to strictly confine and limit that life. We must try to construct situations, that is to say, collective ambiances, ensembles of impressions determining the quality of a moment.

Guy Debord in "Report on the Construction of Situations" (1957)

We write best about those performances we've been privileged to see. But part of the challenge of writing about performance as a public practice, one that circulates extensively and has some social impact, is to make it live well beyond itself, to hold it visually in memory, to evoke it with words, and to share it widely, so that its effects and potential might be known.

Jill Dolan in *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (2005)

On February 28th, 2010, I spent an entire day at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, from opening hours until closing time. I knew what I was coming to see: I was coming to experience Tino Sehgal's *This Progress* (2007), on show in the rotunda, emptied for this purpose, from January 29 through March 10, 2010. I also knew that upon entering the museum I would first be faced with *Kiss* (2004), in the main lobby, below the rotunda. I had come full of expectations after having read a series of reviews of the exhibition. I knew *Kiss* set in scene a couple of dancers lying on the bare floor, intertwined in a slow-moving, seemingly never-ending embrace. And I knew that *This Progress* would have me encounter a series of individuals—actors or "interpreters," as Sehgal likes to call them since he emphatically rejects the labels of both "performance" and "theatricality" for his work—who would engage me in serious discussion of more or less philosophical themes, beginning with "What is progress?" I also knew what was being repeated about Tino Sehgal in the press: his multicultural background (born in London to an Indian father and a German mother, raised primarily in Germany and Paris and presently residing in Berlin), his young age (born in 1976) and rapid rise to fame

> (the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2005 and now the honour of the Guggenheim rotunda). Also, that he had studied dance and economics and that he insisted on the "immateriality" of his artworks, from a strict ban on visual documentation down to the very details of their transactions (a Sehgal piece must be sold or bought in the presence of a notary and by verbal contract only). And I knew what I had come to do: I would try, in the course of the day, and no matter how long, how many attempts it would take me, to engage with his works in *any* way available to me on that very day. I would contemplate *Kiss* and take notes on it until its underlying codes, its mechanics, would become obvious to me. And I would probe the interpreters of *This Progress* until the conventions, and most importantly the limits which hold together and delimitate the piece, would unravel before me. I had never experienced any of Tino Sehgal's "constructed situations" before, so I did not yet know that this would be a difficult, nearly impossible feat to realize.

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Claire Bishop observes in her 2005 review titled "No Pictures, Please" that Sehgal's pieces are "resolutely theatrical in providing viewers with a specific and intensely subjective encounter, a fact that is reflected in the writing on his work to date (for the most part, descriptive anecdotes [...]) and in the work's ability to generate orally disseminated narratives."[1] Whether the label of "theatricality" is ultimately suitable to speak of Sehgal's work or not—a question this paper will not be able to avoid touching on—one would be hard-pressed to find, recent or older, any review or other critically engaged piece of writing pertaining to Sehgal's work which does not begin with an account of the author's personal experience of, or encounter with, which is the more fitting term, the work itself. From this perspective, and following Bishop, Sehgal's works are almost unarguably theatrical: they provoke a desire to recount or narrate, akin only to that experienced in that age-old staple of the

[1] Claire Bishop, "No Pictures, Please." *Artforum* (May 1, 2005), 217.

theatrical, live experience—the drink after the show—which allows spectators to share, discuss, and retell what has just been witnessed or experienced.

This paper presents no exception to these previous engagements with Sehgal's work; going even further, it will embrace the specific nature of the installations by hinging itself on the entirely subjective narrative of that specific Sunday spent in the company of Sehgal's two works and of several hundreds of visitors passing through the Guggenheim, devoting what seemed, in most cases, like an average time of just under an hour to the exploration of the pieces. In the course of that single, randomly selected day, I went through *This Progress* six times. And six times I sat at the bottom of the rotunda in order to jot down my most recent experience with the work, as well as to contemplate the carefully choreographed movements of the sculpture-in-motion of *Kiss*. As Bishop and others have pointed out, one of the major differences—albeit a simplistic one—between Sehgal's installations and "traditional" performance art, lies in the fact that performances oftentimes are unique events,[2] while Sehgal's works are made available continuously throughout museum opening hours for the entire duration of a show.[3]

[2] I am thinking here, for instance, of unique and unrepeatable examples from the "heroic" era of body art such as Chris Burden asking a colleague to shoot at him in *Shoot* (1974) or Barbara T. Smith's *Feed Me* (1973) where the artist offered herself up to visitors' every will, naked in the women's washroom of the Museum of Conceptual Art in San Francisco.

[3] "While theatre usually lends a privileged status to repeating productions, in performance art the stage becomes the scene of one-off performances. This is one of the main characteristics that distinguishes Sehgal's work from performance art. Sehgal is interested in the permanence of repetition. With the idea that his works repeatedly rematerialize and thereby position themselves in the history of art *as* living events, he fundamentally departs from performance art. And by affirming this structural element of the theatre that performance art negates, he moves close to theatre itself," Sandra Umathum, "Given the Tino Sehgal Case: How to Save the Future of a Work of Art That Materializes Only Temporarily," *Theatre Research International* 34.2 (2009).

While other visitors who moved through the exhibition more rapidly, and sometimes more distractedly, may well have dismissed the "looped" aspect of the installations on show, thus equating them to unique performances in their busy tourist-minds, I lingered on and watched as a second couple came to replace the first performers of *Kiss*, before a third couple came to relieve the second ones later in the afternoon. I witnessed minute details in the organization of human exchange within *This Progress* and the rapid turn-over between shifts of interpreters. Above all, through my repetitious engagement with the piece, I personally experienced the similarities and differences arising within each cycle of repetition.

In the introduction to *Utopia in Performance*, Jill Dolan writes about performance's ability to create moments, which she refers to as "utopian performatives" where, through a shared transfer of affect between and amongst the short-lived community composed of actors and members of the audience, a "soaring sense of hope, possibility, and desire" arises. There is no fixity in this moment; much to the contrary, indeed, it lives from its own fleetingness: "utopian performatives spring from a complex alchemy of form and content, context and location, which take shape in moments of utopia as doings, as process, as never finished gestures toward a potentially better future." Building on this understanding of "utopia as process," Dolan then proceeds to suggest ways in which the utopian performative might be used to "resurrect a belief or faith in the possibility of social change" through its fostering of a sense of community or *communitas*, a term borrowed from Victor Turner.[4] This conception of performance as a potential vehicle for utopia,

[4] " [...] 'exposure to or immersion in communitas seems to be an indispensable human social requirement. People have a real need, and "need" is not for me a "dirty word", to doff the masks, cloaks, apparel, and insignia of status from time to time even if only to don the liberating masks of liminal masquerade.' While Turner's suggestion

understood in terms of process and of possibility rather than finality, is to my mind closely tied to Dolan's admonition to scholars interested in live events to pay particular attention to their writerly engagement with the moment of performance: "part of the challenge of writing about performance as a public practice, one that circulates extensively and has some social impact, is to make it live well beyond itself, to hold it visually in memory, to evoke it with words, and to share it widely, so that its effects and potential might be known."[5] The suggestion is that, in the face of its immateriality and fleetingness, the only tool we have at our disposal in order to preserve something of the utopian potential of performance is our ability to capture it in words, in writing.

This paper aims to function on a range of levels: firstly, it is deeply concerned with the question of how we might write well about works such as Sehgal's, how we might do full justice to the potentialities they open up for us. A work such as *This Progress* leaves a lasting imprint on the viewer, not only because it draws on theatrical conventions and relies on live and direct interaction with a performer (here taken to designate someone, most simply, who performs a given set of actions, with no implication of a judgment on the outcome of that performance), but also because it presents a unique instance wherein as much, if not *more*, is required from the spectator as from the actor. This emancipation of the spectator, to use an expression coined by Jacques Rancière,[6] constitutes, as I will seek to demonstrate in the course of this paper,

seems at first most apt for performers who participate in generating communitas or utopian performatives, perhaps such need describes audiences, too, who might find, in performance, necessary ways to release themselves from the inhibiting restraints of the "as is" for the more liberatory possibilities of the "what if"; that is, a common human need to hope" Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005) 7-8, 9, 21.

[5] Ibid, 9.

[6] "L'émancipation [...] commence quand on remet en question l'opposition entre regarder et agir, quand on comprend que les évidences qui structurent ainsi les

one of the central sites of possible radicalism within Sehgal's work—and one which has received surprisingly little notice in studies of his works so far. Even though art historical writing is growing more concerned with the subjective encounter between theorist and artwork—through the influence, amongst other elements, of the current of relational aesthetics and earlier writings on performance and body art—I propose that a passage through writings on performance such as Dolan's remains most inspirational when it comes to the challenge of how, exactly, to write about fleeting moments of artistic encounters.

A discussion of Sehgal's pieces through the prism of performance studies might contribute to the uncovering of previously unacknowledged dimensions within his work. As a model I am thinking, in particular, of Nicholas Ridout's book *Stage-Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* which opposes moments of "performance"—such as instances of "corpsing" when one performer erupts in often contagious laughter or those slightly off-kilter moments when animals appear on stage—to pure theatricality. He proposes that these instances of performance make apparent the theatre's own "undoing of itself":

> Theatre is a machine that sets out to undo itself. It conceives itself as an apparatus for the production of affect by means of representation, in expectation that the most powerful affects will be obtained at precisely those moments when the machinery appears to break down. This is not just, as we have seen, that the breaking down of the machinery itself is a source of pleasure, although this can be the case, but that the machinery itself only truly appears in its moments of breakdown. Our pleasure is derived, that is to say, from the operation

rapports du dire, du voir et du faire appartiennent elles-mêmes à la structure de la domination et de la sujétion. Elle commence quand on comprend que regarder est aussi une action qui confirme ou transforme cette distribution des positions. Le spectateur [...] observe, il sélectionne, il compare, il interprète" Jacques Rancière, *Le Spectateur émancipé* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2008), 19.

> of the machinery (effective or failing), rather than whatever it is that it is producing.[7]

For Ridout, the purpose of revealing the theatre's machinery results less from a postmodern or deconstructionist drive than it directly aims at identifying the locus of theatrical purpose *within* the fact of machinery itself. Where Ridout argues that the theatre relies on moments of performance for its own undoing to materialize, I argue that undoing and the revelation, or *rendering visible*, of an underlying structure are always already part of Sehgal's relational works such as *This Progress*. Similarly to what Ridout advances about the theatre, the utter transparency of Sehgal's pieces—made particularly apparent through minor glitches or uncertainties of execution[8]—presents a primary source of pleasure for our interaction with them. It is also within this very space of undoing, where the barebone structure of the work is made most apparent, that a version of Dolan's utopian performative might be seen to emerge: even though *This Progress* does not seek, in the same blatant way as many other relational works, to foster a sense of community amongst visitors,

[7] Nicholas Ridout, *Stage-Fright, Animals, and other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 168.

[8] In both *This Progress* and *Kiss* I noticed a great variety of levels of execution between different interpreters. Some children, for instance, were quicker to react, some more outgoing than others. Especially in the execution of *Kiss* I found great differences amongst the three couples I saw in the course of the day: while the first one made all movements of the choreography seem utterly smooth and effortless, the two following couples were a little more shaky, a little less secure in their movements. Also, their gazes seemed less controlled, and when visitors applauded one of the couples at a shift turn-over, the dancers smiled—a gesture which did not tally with the air of otherworldliness demanded by the piece. At first I was irritated by these slips in consistency, but reflecting on them through the course of the day I came to the conclusion that they must be "part of the process"—as so many revelations of human fallibility. It was as if Sehgal were saying: I am imposing a frame, a set of rules or conventions, but it allows for errors and differences, for this, after all, is what human matter is made of.

it nonetheless relies almost exclusively on the potentialities of human interaction.

I am most aware of the fact that I write at a time when interdisciplinary borrowings, especially between relatively recent fields such as performance studies and visual culture or contemporary art studies, have become, to some extent, de rigueur.[9] Trendiness notwithstanding, my suggestion is that to approach Sehgal's work through relational aesthetics primarily—art history's current dominant discourse within which Sehgal might readily insert himself, at first sight at least—would probably yield little more than sterile results: on a basic level a piece such as *This Progress* is unquestionably relational because it establishes the conditions necessary for intersubjective exchanges to occur. Beyond these rather obvious considerations, and taking no account of Sehgal's own reserves on the subject, it might be more useful to clarify the indebtedness of Sehgal's work to earlier forms of performance art in order to participate in a wider debate pertaining to the value of relational aesthetics as a theoretical discourse.[10] Intuitively, however, I am more interested in investigating the indebtedness of Sehgal's works to theatrical conventions rather than those of earlier performance art, strictly speaking. Interestingly, this does contradict a spatiotemporal distinction established by Nicolas

[9] For a case study of the intricacies of interdisciplinarity in performance and visual culture studies, see for instance: Shannon Jackson, "Performing Show and Tell: Disciplines of Visual Culture and Performance Studies," *Journal of Visual Culture* 4.2 (2005).

[10] In a recent talk, Amelia Jones proposed that relational aesthetics, as it is characterized in the writings of Nicolas Bourriaud and Bishop in particular, fails to acknowledge the long history of intersubjectivity at the center of performance or body art from the 1960s onwards and thus misleadingly operates to position relational art as a novelty without precedent. Reference: Amelia Jones, "Performance: Time, Space And 'Cultural Value,'" *Resistances: Inter-disruptions, Counter-conduct, and Compromising Acts*, Org. Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Society and Culture (Concordia University 2010).

Bourriaud between the nature of the communities brought forth by works of art on the one hand and the theatre on the other: "[l'art] *resserre l'espace des relations* [contrairement] au théâtre et au cinéma qui regroupent des petites communautés devant des images univoques: en effet, on n'y commente pas en direct ce que l'on voit (le temps de la discussion est renvoyé à l'après-spectacle)."[11] While this paper does not allow sufficient space for a re-assessment of relational aesthetics, I will seek to draw out some of the perspectives from which Sehgal might be seen to participate, or on the contrary to disrupt, relational aesthetics' dominant discourse of the last fifteen-odd years.

Ultimately however, this paper's central hypothesis proposes that, while there is no particular message or directionality encoded within them, the strength of Sehgal's works lies in their greater-than-average openness. Admittedly, it is an openness very much akin to that of many of the artworks flaunted by relational aesthetics theorists. Yet, where many relational artworks, especially those of the 1990s, were limited through the very nature of their structure[12], I argue that a piece such as *This Progress* lets us glimpse, through the very interstices of its fabric—slippages in execution, the utter transparency of its mechanism, the freedoms allotted on either side of its conventions—those very "liberatory possibilities of the 'what if'" which Dolan

[11] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle.* Documents Sur L'art (Dijon: Presses du réel, 2001), 15-16.

[12] Faced with one of Félix González-Torres' *candy spills*, such as *Untitled (Placebo)* (1991), you could choose to take one or several candies, or you could choose not to. Invited to partake in Rirkrit Tiravanija's Thai curry meal in *Untitled (Free)* (1992), you could yet again choose to partake or not. Participation was (and remains) often reduced to its broadest possible definition: to take or not to take, to partake or not to partake. In Sehgal's relational works, as I will show, this distinction remains essential but it does not stop at that—participation branches out into the fabric of the complex intersubjective encounter, intermixing elements of both performance and the everyday.

identifies as the vehicle for the utopian performative. Interestingly, this openness results directly from the solid framing of *This Progress* within rigid sets of quasi-theatrical conventions or, to take a step in the direction of game theory, rules. It is this paradox, and its wider implications in respect to the on-going interpenetration of contemporary art and performance/theatre, which this paper proposes to examine.

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> At 10.30AM I stand in a surprisingly short line in front of the Guggenheim, gazing at a bright blue sky over Central Park. The last Sunday in February in 2010. I am amongst the first visitors to enter, so that when I walk into the main lobby, which has been freed of all clutter for the occasion, there is a very brief moment during which I am alone with them: a man and a woman, both white, dressed in simple clothes, beige and black, grey tight jeans, ballet flats for her. They are utterly engrossed in the action—their action—and do not seem to notice me as they perform their routine of slow embraces and caresses to an invisible, inaudible rhythm. I am immediately struck by the extreme slow-motion of the performance which David Shapiro has termed "impossibly slowed like a Bill Viola video". I do think of Viola too, but I am mostly reminded of Lars von Trier's opening sequence for *Antichrist* (DK, 2009) where, to the heart wrenching soundtrack of Händel's *Lascia Ch'io Pianga*, Charlotte Gainsbourg and Willem Dafoe make love while the couple's young son defenestrates himself in extreme slow motion. For a short instant, alone with this otherworldly couple, so small against the immense white floor space of the Guggenheim's lobby, I almost hear the aria while I marvel at the realization that this is an unprecedented instance—in my personal experience at least—of the video-image made flesh. The plasticity of movement, the mastery over time, both so characteristic of the video image and so present in *Antichrist*'s opening scene, are existing before me, on the bodies of these two dancers, in their carefully choreographed gestures, down to the highly controlled directionality of their respective gazes. The experience is uncanny to say the least, as two parallel sheets of time superpose themselves before me: looking around the lobby, which is now slowly filling with visitors, or down at my own body, I experience *real time*. Looking at the couple of *Kiss*, however, I experience the pure essence of video, in the complete

absence of all technology. I am reminded of Jean-Paul Fargier's essay on Bill Viola's *The Reflecting Pool* (1977-1979) which features a horizontal temporal split alongside the center of the screen:

> Toute image, en vidéo, est une image multiple. Il y a toujours, en vidéo, plus d'une image dans une image. [...] Des temps différents, des modes narratifs opposés, des symboles contradictoires. [...] beaucoup de temps en même temps. Sans oublier le temps réel et le temps ralenti, le direct et le différé. Ce qui rend leur coexistence possible, c'est la multiplicité de l'espace. À chaque temps son créneau. Sa surface d'inscription. Sa bande passante.[13]

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#1: I see them, they are waiting in line behind a row of potted plants, on the first level of the rotunda's ramp. About ten of them, hoarded together and watched over by a teenager who stands out amongst them because of her height: these are the children who have been carefully selected by Sehgal for their interpersonal skills and, above all, for their ability to summarize relatively complex ideas in a short amount of time. I take a deep breath and walk towards them, into the spiral and upwards. Almost instantly, a young girl pounces on me, introduces herself with a handshake, asks me how I am, then says "This is a piece by Tino Sehgal. Would you like to come with me?" I speak and find my voice altered, pronouncing clearly, like in the classroom, my tone slightly condescending (I do not often speak to children). "Can I ask you a question", she says, "What is progress?" I knew what was coming and yet I am taken aback. I gather my thoughts and speak of progress as change, of matter and ideas changing over time, of modernity and the idea of necessary progress. I am unconvinced but she happily ushers me towards a teenage boy, standing in an alcove, to whom she introduces me before summarizing the content of my exposé in a single expeditive sentence. The boy and I are left alone and continue walking up the rotunda. He probes me further on the idea of modernity, and on whether I personally conceive of progress as a necessarily positive development. Whenever I ask him what *he* thinks he remains evasive, answering with "It is generally

[13] Jean-Paul Fargier, *The Reflecting Pool de Bill Viola: Infra Bill Ultra Viola.* Côté Films (Crisnée: Yellow Now, 2005), 27-28.

assumed that..." or "Most people tend to think that.…" We are soon settling into a nice pace, conversationally speaking, when we are suddenly interrupted by a very energetic middle-aged man of South Asian origin. As the younger interpreters, he is very calm, yet he is also more affable and more intent on drawing me into a personal, almost intimate conversation. He starts by stating that he has a problem, something he cannot understand, and maybe I can help. As we begin walking upwards again, he lays out the basis for our conversation (the teenager has introduced us and long since slipped away): more and more Westerners are looking to adopt, or even to find surrogate mothers, outside of the West. How do I feel about this, personally? Does it not seem, well, a little *exploitative*? I feel uneasy, to say the least, and defend myself through indignation: of course it's exploitative, it's ridiculous, one more manifestation of Western deviance. I might have a few unkind words for "Brangelina" and Hollywood's adoption galore in general. Walking upwards, we reach a narrow passageway between the walkway railing and a sort of supportive pillar or column (due to my intense concentration on the conversation, I have hardly noticed the rotunda's bare white walls and niches—a first in the Guggenheim's history since its inauguration in 1959). My interlocutor politely steps aside and lets me pass through the narrow opening first. I am in the middle of a sentence; by the time I finish it and turn around to hear his reaction, I realize he has disappeared. I feel a brief sense of confusion, a vague feeling of resentment toward my interlocutor for his breaking of a social convention. Almost instantly, however, an older man comes up to me, reminds me quite solemnly that this piece by Tino Sehgal is called *This Progress* and introduces himself by his name. He then proceeds to tell me about the death of his father some two weeks ago, which left him with many personal papers to sift through and put into order, and how, in the course of that process, he came to learn that he had a brother he knew nothing about. "Why do you think it is," he asks me, looking me straight in the eye, "that families have so many family-secrets?" And do I have any personal experience with this? I diplomatically ignore the second half of his question, but by now, I am starting to feel at ease within *This Progress*' format of conversation: "Maybe," I suggest, "it has to do with the very composition of the family structure? Maybe secrets are what holds the family unit together, maybe we need them in order to *know* that we are a family?" Finally a decent response—I am quite pleased with this moment of improvisatory brilliance on my part. My interlocutor, too, seems

> pleased: he compliments me on my insight, and so we go on, walking up the remaining curves of the rotunda's ramp at his rather slow pace, mulling over the mysteries of family structures. At the top, he very politely thanks me for my time and conversation, shakes my hand, and recommends I look at the other Guggenheim exhibitions before I leave the museum.

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As I soon confirmed with a second, very similar passage through *This Progress*, the conventions of the work are quite obvious and rather rigid. They can easily be summarized in formulaic terms, much like an algorithm: entering the walkway from the bottom only (the installation works only when ascending—when descending, or lingering at one or the other level of the rotunda, one is never approached by an interpreter), one first encounters a child, who sets up the terms of the work's "contract," so to speak, sealing them with a handshake. Though unspecified, the engagement seems to entail a readiness to participate in conversation, ideally in *good faith.* Parallel to physical ascension, there is ascension in terms of age (the interpreters get older) and conversational content (interpreters become more and more personal, the topics more and more precise and elaborate). The teenager usually remains rather aloof—condescending as only youths can be, in some cases—and refrains from talking about him or herself in personal terms. The middle-aged adult is always pressing, always expecting some form of assistance, and always disappears in the middle of conversation in that very same spot (watching them from the other side of the rotunda proved quite amusing; how they would lead their unsuspecting visitor to the narrow passageway and give them right of passage, only to run away, literally, and hide in a near-by staircase). Finally, the oldest interlocutor inevitably addresses social or contemporary issues, from the mystery of family secrets to the evolution of women's rights

or the digital revolution. They are always polite and pleasant to a fault, almost familiar in tone, and never fail to offer a concluding handshake and recommendations concerning the remainder of one's visit at the museum.

In *Esthétique relationnelle*, Bourriaud describes the shift in art's spatiotemporal availability in terms of a "contract" between spectator and artwork which needs to be negotiated on a case-by-case basis:

> Un tableau ou une sculpture se caractérisent à priori par leur disponibilité symbolique: en dehors des impossibilités matérielles évidentes (horaires de fermeture des musées, éloignement géographique), une œuvre d'art peut se voir n'importe quand; elle se tient sous le regard, offerte à la curiosité d'un public en théorie universel. Or, l'art contemporain se place souvent sous le signe de la non-disponibilité, en se donnant à voir dans un temps déterminé. L'exemple de la performance est le plus classique: une fois celle-ci effectuée, ne reste qu'une documentation qui ne se confond pas avec l'œuvre elle-même. Ce type de pratique présuppose un contrat avec le regardeur, un "arrangement" dont les clauses ont tendance à se diversifier depuis les années soixante: l'œuvre d'art ne se donne donc plus à consommer dans le cadre d'une temporalité "monumentale" et ouverte pour un public universel, mais elle se déroule dans un temps événementiel, pour une audience *appelée* par l'artiste. En un mot, l'œuvre suscite des rencontres et donne des rendez-vous, gérant sa temporalité propre.[14]

For Bourriaud, the shift in the "availability" of artworks which was ushered in with the site (and time) specific performance artworks of the 1960s leads to a move away from the model of the universally and continuously available artwork which is replaced with that of an event-based encounter between a closer-knit audience and an artwork. By conceiving of his works as loops, however, Sehgal goes against this post-performance model: as my description of *This Progress* hopefully illuminates, the contract which occurs in relation to such a piece does not concern *access* to the work. Instead, I would

[14] Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle*, 29-30.

argue that the terms of the contract signified by the child's introduction at the beginning of *This Progress* are in fact resolutely theatrical in that they address, not our interaction *with* the artwork from an external spectator perspective, but our mode of interaction *within* the space established by the work itself. It is the more specific implications of this shift which we shall now seek to investigate.

In an article for *Tate Etc.*, Ridout argues very specifically for the theatricality of *This Progress*:

> In spite of the effort to cook up an actual live conversation (precisely what so much theatre is always labouring so earnestly to achieve), the set-up depends upon the encounter between the participating objects being, in effect, scripted. It is not the scriptedness as such that makes [*This Progress*] theatrical, however. It is the distance it places between me and myself, the gap between the various versions of my own authenticity that it opens up. I watch myself struggling to respond and wince at my own failure to present a self I am comfortable living with. The distance mediated the encounter at every level. Nothing is ever immediate. We appear only by means of representation, and at a distance. We appear always, that is, as spectators. It is this distance across which representation occurs that makes this experience of Sehgal's work a theatrical one, and which encourages me to consider it in the light of other work currently being made out of theatre.[15]

Thus, for Ridout, it is the fact that we self-consciously watch ourselves interacting with the piece, with the interpreters, the fact that we retain a form of spectatorial distance from the work, which lends *This Progress* its theatricality. Elsewhere in the article he says, "We are in an art gallery, for a start: it is as though our conversation was already pinned up on the wall for inspection." While I do not disagree that *This Progress* leads to a most particular set of affective responses, which are indubitably heavily tinged with

[15] Nicholas Ridout, "You Look Charming—Nicholas Ridout on Art & Theatre," *Tate Etc.* (Autumn 2007), 45.

self-consciousness, I contend that to speak of spectatorial distance in self-reflexive terms is probably not a fruitful approach to understanding the mechanisms at work in Sehgal's piece. This is not to say that the theatrical fourth wall separation between audience and performers does not play a large role in *This Progress*—much to the contrary—but that the exact nature of the separation at play calls for a careful and differentiated analysis in order to be fully unpacked.

In his latest book to date, *Le Spectateur émancipé*, Rancière addresses the question of spectatorship within the arts and the theatre as a possible site for the distribution of the sensible.[16] He begins by countering the widely accepted notion which automatically equates spectatorship with a lack of knowledge on the one hand, and passivity on the other. He then briefly sets up a binary opposition between a theatre which called for increased spectatorial distance (Brecht) and one that sought to efface all distance (Artaud) before, by drawing on the theories of Joseph Jacotot, an early 19th century educator and philosopher, turning to spectatorial relations as understood, in didactic terms, within a teacher/student dialectic:

[16] Elsewhere, Rancière defines the distribution of the sensible in the following terms: "Politics occurs when those who 'have no' time take the time necessary to front up as inhabitants of a common space and demonstrate that their mouths really do emit speech capable of making pronouncements on the common which cannot be reduced to voices signaling pain. This distribution and redistribution of places and identities, this apportioning and reapportioning of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, and of noise and speech constitutes what I call the distribution of the sensible which defines the common of a community, to introduce into it new subjects and objects, to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals" Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004), 25. In the context of artworks, the distribution of the sensible is understood as that common ground, based on a community experience, where participants meet as equals—equals in intelligence, at the very least—and where a sense of political possibility arises (not unlike Dolan's notion of the utopian performative, then).

> C'est la logique même de la relation pédagogique: le rôle dévolu au maître y est de supprimer la distance entre son savoir et l'ignorance de l'ignorant. [...] Dans la logique pédagogique, l'ignorant n'est pas seulement celui qui ignore encore ce que le maître sait. Il est celui qui ne sait pas ce qu'il ignore ni comment le savoir. Le maître, lui, n'est pas seulement celui qui détient le savoir ignoré par l'ignorant. Il est aussi celui qui sait comment faire un objet de savoir, à quel moment et selon quel protocole.[17]

What is the connection between this theory of teaching and the shifts in the organization and conception of spectatorship observed within today's theatre and the arts, asks Rancière. Firstly, it is located in a desire, on the part of both olden days educators and contemporary dramaturges, to bring about a transition from passive to active spectatorship. However, Rancière suggests, the question might as well be inverted: is the desire to reduce distance not precisely what institutes that very distance? Why do we automatically equate spectatorship with passivity, with distance? The emancipation of the spectator begins with a questioning of the opposition between looking and acting. In other terms, spectatorship can be inverted to be understood as always already active, because it always entails acts of choice, focus, comparison—interpretative actions which set it apart from passivity.[18]

The true particularity of a work like *This Progress* can be argued to reside within two simultaneous, yet mutually exclusive, characteristics of the piece. On the one hand, visitors to *This Progress* stand on almost equal footing with the performers, or interpreters, of the work, because they are asked to participate actively in a work whose mechanisms are seemingly laid bare entirely (structurally, any visitor is in a position to observe the children lining up and being prompted by the teenager who watches over them to approach

[17] Jacques Rancière, *Le Spectateur émancipé* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2008), 14.
[18] Ibid, 18-20.

arriving visitors, just as the adult interpreters are easily spotted across levels in the rotunda, lurking in darkened corners and staircases, waiting for their next conversation partner). On the other hand, there remains at the heart of *This Progress* a central conceit which is hinged upon the fact that I, the visitor, am forced to improvise within a set of rules and conventions which have not been explained to me, while my interlocutor follows a script. Therein lies the central inequality of *This Progress* and, in a complexification of Ridout's argument, it is this inequality, this specific distance, which constitutes the bulk of its inherent theatricality.

Within his discussion of the emancipated spectator, Rancière distinguishes between two types of distance, one of them defined by the inherent inequality between audience and performer and the other to be understood as contained within the very fact of performance itself:

> On dira que l'artiste, lui, ne veut pas instruire le spectateur. Il se défend aujourd'hui d'utiliser la scène pour imposer une leçon ou faire passer un message. Il veut seulement produire une forme de conscience, une intensité de sentiment, une énergie pour l'action. Mais il suppose toujours que ce qui sera perçu, ressenti, compris est ce qu'il a mis dans sa dramaturgie ou sa performance. Il présuppose toujours l'identité de la cause et de l'effet. Cette égalité supposée entre la cause et l'effet repose elle-même sur un principe inégalitaire: elle repose sur le privilège que s'octroie le maître, la connaissance de la "bonne" distance et du moyen de la supprimer. Mais c'est là confondre deux distances bien différentes. Il y a la distance entre l'artiste et le spectateur, mais il y a aussi la distance inhérente à la performance elle-même, en tant qu'elle se tient comme un spectacle, une chose autonome, entre l'idée de l'artiste et la sensation ou la compréhension du spectateur. Dans la logique de l'émancipation il y a toujours entre le maître ignorant et l'apprenti émancipé une troisième chose—un livre ou tout autre morceau d'écriture—étrangère à l'un comme a l'autre et à laquelle ils peuvent se référer pour vérifier en commun ce que l'élève a vu, ce qu'il en dit, ce qu'il en pense. Il en va de même pour la performance. Elle n'est pas la transmission du savoir ou du souffle de l'artiste au spectateur. Elle est cette troisième chose dont aucun

> n'est propriétaire, dont aucun ne possède le sens, qui se tient entre eux, écartant toute transmission à l'identique, toute identité de la cause et de l'effet.[19]

This Progress creates a sense of unease because of the inequality between interpreter and spectator. As early as in the encounter with the child, I am already pointed into a specific direction. Questions are being asked of me, and if the quality of the child's performance might matter relatively little, it certainly feels like that of mine does. Does the child's summary of my words present a form of assessment, of evaluation? Does not all summarization comport an element of choice, of judgment? Of course it does. And things do not improve in my meeting with the subsequent string of interpreters. While they hide behind pre-scripted questions and anecdotes, I am caught in the spur of the moment under their friendly, yet evaluating, gaze. For Ridout, it is my appreciation of my own performance which posits me as a spectator.[20]

[19] Ibid, 20-21.

[20] Elsewhere, Ridout returns to his experience of *This Progress* and further clarifies his understanding of the distance the piece creates: "It is the political meaning of the initial encounter that shapes my subsequent understanding of this theatrical event. A gap opens up between who I feel myself to be and who I appear to be in this public encounter. I am other to my own political positions, however sincerely held. In offering them up in this situation, I make myself other, not only to a child, who is a stranger, but also to my friend, and to myself. I find a distance opening up within myself. This distance is what Rancière argues is essential to the continuation of politics, and thus democracy." Though offering some level of clarification, this comment remains problematic on many levels: firstly, there is Ridout's unquestioning equation of Sehgal's piece with a theatrical work, without presenting any prolonged discussion of the exact nature of the work's theatricality. Secondly, Ridout's argument is a political one, dealing with the possibility of true authenticity within an encounter which has been contextualized within the setting of the art gallery (versus the street or the local pub). Unfortunately, he does not revert directly to the writings of Rancière himself, but uses a commentary of Rancière by Peter Hallward to illustrate his point. Thereby, it is difficult to pinpoint which of the many instances of "distance" within Rancière's writings he is referencing. Suffice it to say that, in respect to Sehgal's piece, it is the very nature of the distance observed, felt, and theorized by Ridout on the one hand, and myself on the other, which very much diverges. See

Following Rancière, however, we can take further the question of distance: on a first level, there is the inequality described by Rancière as being inherently part of the teacher/student or artist/spectator dialectic. Even if I am well aware that there are no *right* answers, *per se*, I am still the one who is being put in the position of receiver, of respondent—and who, no matter how savvy a frequenter of contemporary art I am, effectively searches for the *intended meaning* behind the questions. On a second level, however, there is the distance inherent to performance itself, the distance that performance *is*.

This second level of distance is best exemplified in the interplay between *Kiss* and *This Progress* as they were presented in the Guggenheim show. There is, firstly, a spatial argument to be made, within which *Kiss* polarizes attention towards a tiny portion of space within the comparative vastness of the lobby, while *This Progress* is unevenly—and partially invisibly (the idle interpreters waiting in staircases or gazing down at the lobby, the unquantifiable aspect of conversation)—spread out across all levels of the rotunda's ramp. There is a temporal level, also, as is made visible in my intuitive response to *Kiss*: while *This Progress* is concerned with life-cycles and advancing presents, *Kiss* offers us multiple temporalities on a single visual plane. The movements of its choreography repeat themselves over and over at relatively short intervals (I tried to identify the overall length of the loop and was unable to, but it is clearly made up of a very limited amount of discrete gestural units), while the slow-motion sets up a vivid contrast with the flurry of human movement occurring around it (children running, visitors entering and exiting, gesturing animatedly).

Nicholas Ridout, "Performance and Democracy," Tracy Davis (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 20.

Recalling Fargier's essay on Viola, I notice how the presence of the sculpture creates a multiplicity of spaces, not only within the lobby but within the entire museum, resulting in an accrued sense of multiplicity at the level of time too. The temporalities set in scene, and discussed, in *This Progress* are part of a multitude of coexisting sheets of time,[21] and suddenly, it feels like everyone in the space of the museum exists within their own time: clusters of visitors and every single onlooker demarcating herself against the white background of the bare rotunda suddenly appear to exist within their own personal time, but also to represent a unique instance of performance, on display for all the other similarly performing actors present around her to witness. Performance, then, spreads out like a web of intersecting spaces, times, and subjectivities; a web of distances penetrated by the possibility of spectatorship and, within *This Progress*, of a certain degree of interaction. Maybe this is, in a certain way, what a visualization of the distribution of the sensible might look like: a web of interconnected individuals, each caught up in their own time and space, yet all somehow united in a common, and communal, moment.

Thus, *Kiss* offers a potent counter-weight to *This Progress* by reinforcing the sense of spectatorial distance and resulting theatricality previously discussed. Where *This Progress* seems to blur the lines by making me, in effect, a performer, both the subject-matter and execution of *Kiss* position me as an external onlooker, a voyeur in essence. Yet, even *Kiss* complicates those notions to some extent, as it does provide for a level of audience-performer

[21] I use the term "sheets of time" following Gilles Deleuze's use of the term to describe co-existing levels of time within a single cinematic image after the philosophy of Henri Bergson. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2. L'image-temps* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1985). Henri Bergson, *Matière et mémoire: essai sur la relation du corps à l'esprit*, 17. éd. (Paris: 1921).

interaction: at one point, I circled the work and went to stand against a wall *behind* the couple. The woman was straddling the man and, in a highly uncanny moment, she turned her head to look directly at me (there was no one else around), her motions slow, her gaze voluntarily void. In a clear instance of what Ridout refers to as "the embarrassment of direct address,"[22] the mechanics of the performance manifested themselves, reinforcing audience-spectator positions in the process.

In *Kiss*, the limitations are clear: no one would dare, even dare to consider for the briefest of instants, to address, approach or—heaven forbid!—*touch*, the

[22] "[...] my own focus in this chapter is on the ways in which the continual compromise with [the legacy of the tradition of disruptive, dialogical acts in the theatre] produces affects and predicaments for the audience which are interesting in their own right. It is when direct address arises as a disruption to dominant conditions of spectatorship that it produces the kind of discomfort and embarrassments that will be dealt with here. I should add that these embarrassments are themselves a kind of pleasure." And, following the discussion of a production of *Richard II* during which the actor Samuel West looked straight into Ridout's eyes: "This is a problem of representation, and also, in a certain sense, a problem of ethics. [...] On the one hand, I feel obliged as a responsible and professional theatre-goer to comply with the contract I am being offered. Look for look is the deal. To turn my eyes away from his would be rude, and what's more, a betrayal of my own principles (those Brechtian principles of my youth). I have to return the gaze and hold it for as long as is required. On the other hand I have a resentful feeling that this is not entirely fair. Samuel West will at some point choose to move away, direct his gaze elsewhere, with no sense of obligation to me. I can live with that and I can even award myself some small moral consolation from the fact that I was man enough to look him in the eye, when others visibly shirked their responsibilities and flinched away. But who exactly is making this claim on me? Is it Samuel West or Richard II? When the ethical claim of the face-to-face encounter is deployed in this way, I feel I am entitled to know. And I am embarrassed because at precisely this moment the utter foolishness of the theatrical contract I have been going along with overwhelms me. [...] The whole edifice of theatrical representation collapses and it's my fault for setting it up in the first place, or at least going along with the project. I feel conned and found out at one and the same time. Shame heaped upon shame. Yet the rules of the game prohibit the shame response. By sticking to the contract I have ruled out the downward look, I must face it out, this encounter, blazing and unblushing. I am forbidden the experience of my own embarrassment" Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems*, 70, 87.

sculpture's interpreters. Their slow, trance-like demeanour, the blankness of their gaze, as well as the fact they are performing something so blatantly *difficult*, something which requires intense muscular strength and virtuosity—all of these elements, combined with the sacrosanctity of the Guggenheim as an institution, work not only to position a fourth wall where there is not even a stage, but to hold it firmly in place.[23]

As I have argued earlier, the contract which establishes *This Progress* as a performance goes beyond the negotiation of viewers' spectatorial engagement with the piece. Instead, shaking the child's hand, agreeing to answer her question, such are the unequivocal markers which establish and delimitate the *frame* of the performance which I am about to partake in. However, where "keying," in the terms of Erving Goffman,[24] establishes a performance through external markers such as spatial or ritualistic delimitations or preparations which set the stage, literally speaking, *This Progress* also uses framing at the level of content: as I will now seek to show, in *This Progress*, I know that I am partaking in a performance, not only because I have shaken hands with the child and agreed to answer her question, but also because there are, throughout the piece, limits and markers which guide me along the way, keeping me firmly within the lines of the performance, so to speak.

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[23] Even toddlers instinctively felt the presence of this intransgressible barrier as was made visible in several instances, over the course of the day, when different toddlers would approach the couple dangerously closely yet would remain mesmerized and unable to approach any further (to the relief of nervous sets of parents, tensely waiting some steps away, ready to intervene).

[24] Keying refers to the delimitation of the space of performance through spatial and behavioural codes such as, for instance, the acquisition of tickets to a performance or the positioning of spectators in relation to the stage. See Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974).

#3: Now that I have twice gone through *This Progress*, I feel confident I know the rules well enough to begin trying to probe and upset them. My intention, of course, is to aim for maximum self-reflexivity[25]. "What do *you* think progress is?," I want to ask the child. "How did Mr. Sehgal organize his workshops?," I want to ask the adults, "Did he encourage you to draw from your own experience?." I am also curious about the way in which my own response to the installation might be viewed: "Do people often do several runs in one single day?" (I have not seen anyone else do what I do: walk up and interact, then take the elevator back down and start over). Strangely, however, I am profoundly uneasy. These are the questions I have come to ask. They were readily formed in my mind as soon as I first read about Sehgal and *This Progress*. Now that I am here, however, something prevents me from asking them: as soon as I shake hands with the child, I feel somehow connected, embrigaded, indebted. Every time I renew my contract with the work, I find it impossible to begin probing and rattling at its very structure. Therefore, I have decided upon the following: this time, the third time, I will *not give them anything to work with*, I will do the strict minimum of what is required to keep me in the work. I will walk and I will talk, I will respond and be polite, but I will not give them any opinions, which, really, is what they are after—from the child to the oldest interpreter, all of them require my input in order to be able to work with me. I am curious to see what might happen were this input to fade or fall away entirely.

The child comes up to me; it is a boy. After the usual introductions, he asks his ritual question. I do not have any opinions on progress. Frankly, it is not something I have thought about much. What does he think progress is? He proposes a generic definition, obviously learnt by heart in preparation for difficult cases such as myself. He tries to get me to agree, to commit. I will not cave. This is very interesting, I

[25] This is an intuitive response *This Progress* appears to trigger in many visitors. See for instance David Shapiro's description of his engagement with the work (he was obviously more assertive about it than I was): "Probing these Tino-bots, I learned, in fact, that they are allowed to discuss anything except the piece itself, which, of course, was the aspect that interested me most. I had lots of questions for them: 'Does participation constitute progress?' 'How is this piece a progressive step into the narratives of Modernism and Post-Modernism that the museum seeks to illustrate?' 'What is Tino's idea of progress?' etc. To no avail: Medium self-reflexivity, de rigueur since Manet, was denied" David Shapiro, "Tino Sehgal's Chatroulette: Is This Progress?," *MUSE* March 13 2010.

say, but really, how can we be sure what progress is? How can we even allow ourselves to venture guesses and hypotheses? (My own relativism is killing me, thankfully we reach the teenager—a girl.) Desperate for something to summarize, the boy provides a two-sentence concentrate of his own musings, then disappears. As soon as he is gone, I say to the girl, you know, this is all very nice, but I actually never really said that. She is surprised, caught just a little off-guard: what do you mean, she asks. Well, I told the boy I had no specific thoughts on progress, and what he just told you is what *he* thinks progress is. Oh, she says, with the expression of someone who can't wait to get hold of the little brat at recess to teach him a lesson. But she soon regains composure and as we start walking she asks me to expand on my absence of opinion concerning the notion of progress. Sensing a trap I lapse into monosyllabism. Desperate, she proposes several versions of how people generally view progress. I find them all interesting but can commit to none of them. As our conversation is drying up (I am having a truly terrible time, this is much more taxing than I had imagined), we are interrupted by the adult—a woman. She is Australian and launches into a lengthy reflection on the "right to happiness." I remain stone-faced and decidedly undecided. And this is when it happens: one minute she is talking, gently probing me and trying to get me to voice an opinion, something. And the next one she is gone. She has not even waited for us to reach the spot between railing and pillar where she was supposed to abandon me to the hands of a capable older interpreter; instead she just stops walking and fades away into the crowd behind her. I am so stunned I don't react: I have just been excluded from the work for lack of participation. I look around and feel a deep, sudden sense of isolation: all around me there are groups of people moving up, chatting animatedly to each other. But somehow I cannot tell who is an interpreter and who is not. Though I have just reached my goal—reveal the limitations of *This Progress*—I am deeply dissatisfied with myself, and the only thing I can think of is to return to square one and set the record straight: I am fit to play this game, I am a worthy interlocutor, and I have plenty of thoughts on progress and a host of other topics.

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#4: I return to the beginning of *This Progress* pumped and ready to prove myself. To the child—a girl—I say that progress is the

movement of matter or ideas through space and time. I make this sound convincing. The teenager, funnily enough, is the only occurrence of a second meeting (usually there are enough interpreters around, and they change at such a high frequency that I never encounter the same person twice). He recognizes me first and laughs. I take this opportunity to ask him if this is common. He says not really and rapidly changes subjects. Back to progress: so am I saying progress necessarily implies a sense of alteration or betterment, he probes. The adult interrupts us, I feel instant sympathy for him, his name is Tobias. He tells me about a nightmare he had when he was four years old, about a man who wanted to attack him and half of the man's face was plunged in darkness while the other was not. He asks me why I think it is that certain childhood memories persist in our memory throughout our adult life while others do not. I welcome the easy turn to psychoanalysis and move into high gear. After enquiring about the nature of the fear provoked by his nightmare (was it the man in himself or the fact his face was oddly divided into two, a dark and a lit-up side?—he says it was the man in himself) I break his question down into two halves: 1) Maybe, I suggest, it is the persistence of memory over time which ensures a continuity of identity in our being. Since our bodies change and almost fully renew themselves over time, maybe memory is a crucial way to retain one's sense of self? Once again, I am pleased with myself, as in my first round. He says my response is fascinating. As to 2) I recall that what he is really asking about is the arbitrariness of memory. I ask him if he has a specific investment in psychoanalysis. He says a little. I suggest he probe further into that direction if he is interested in this sort of thing. We have almost reached the narrow passageway and I feel quite sorry. As we reach it I slow down, slightly, but ultimately he lets me pass in front of him. As I go through the passage I turn around, and catch a glimpse of him almost saying good-bye but not quite, before he turns around and runs away. I am then approached by a very friendly older lady. Again, I feel instant sympathy towards her. She tells me about how she first moved to NYC as a young woman, how difficult it was for her to get her mother to accept that she wanted to be independent. She asks me how I relate to this issue at a time when young women have so many doors open to them. She adds that sometimes it seems to her that, even though women today have so many more opportunities, we still find reasons to complain. I explain to her that with more opportunities come more pressures, and that glass ceilings are still well in place. Then, I tell her that women of my

> generation are very much aware that we would not be where we are without the fights fought by the women of her generation. She looks at me gratefully, but a little incredulously, and says it often seems to her like women my age don't realize the sacrifices previous generations had to go through to secure the rights and opportunities we have today. I assure her that I do realize, as do many of my friends. She's delighted and asks me whether I study art and whether this is my first time at the Guggenheim. I am pleased because it is the first time that I have really allowed myself to bond over shared experiences with one of the interpreters. We part on excellent terms. It is my most successful run through the installation yet, I am in excellent spirits.

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As these accounts of my third and fourth passages through the installation show, *This Progress* is a universe of its own, much like a game, and it provokes, in a willing subject at least, a variety of tactical and affective responses. We do not here have sufficient space to go into a fully-fledged game theoretical analysis of Sehgal's work, though it would certainly yield several interesting observations. Thus, we will content ourselves with a few basic remarks. Firstly, my third passage through the installation demonstrates the presence of *hidden* rules, such as, most importantly, that of participation. Intuitively, I understood that in order to disrupt the mechanics of the piece, I would need to withhold input as much as possible, short of not participating at all. By keeping my participation to the barest minimum (phatic communication, walking along the spiral) I thought I would be allowed to remain in the game and that my interlocutors would supply more input in order to compensate for my own lack thereof. Instead, I was dropped from the game, not for my lack of participation per se (I was taking part, after all, which for other relational artworks is usually more than enough), but for my lack of input, of content-generating conversation, or, to put it more radically, of *risk-taking*. Interestingly, risk-taking is closely tied to an almost Sartrian notion of *good*

faith in *This Progress*. After my fourth and highly successful passage through the installation, I was led to conclude that interpreters could somehow see through me, that they felt and fed off my good intentions, generosity, upbeatness and, yes, authenticity. As Claire Bishop puts it, Sehgal's works "are considered and concise, compelling to watch, and give you back as much as you're willing to put in."[26]

Thus, to say that there is no inherent system of values to *This Progress* would be a gross mistake. Thoughtful participation is rewarded with kindness and appreciation, while introversion results in being abandoned to stand alone, like a boring guest at a cocktail party. In general, a variety of social games are called to mind: from speed-dating and dating in general to the casual-seeming job interview (the level of conversation requires good education and an interest in current affairs, and sparks of intelligence or humour go a long way).

The second reference to game theory, which it seems impossible not to make, is that of outcome. Like a game, I would argue that a passage through *This Progress* yields an end-result of sorts. It might not be verbalized, it might not be quantifiable, but, affectively at least, it is present. As my six different encounters with the work showed, I never arrived at the top of the spiral with the same sentiment. Sometimes I felt most happy, like after a successful job interview or a promising first date. Other times, I felt destabilized, as if I had let myself down, or wasted time on uninteresting people and conversation. Sehgal relentlessly reminds critics and interviewers that his works use "human material" as their medium. With *This Progress*, he has constructed a situation (or the framework for a variety of possible situations) whose outcome can be measured in human terms: success or failure depend on my affective response,

[26] Bishop, "No Pictures, Please," 216.

and the affective response *to me* which I see in the eyes of my interlocutors (human factors were ever-present, each encounter marked by either liking, dislike or indifference). Most of all, and as shown in the comparison between my third and fourth passages through the work, *This Progress* truly is a universe with rules of its own and, as with any other game, the more familiar the player is with the rules and the more adaptable she is to the situation, the higher her chances are to win the game. Maybe the only difference between *This Progress* and actual game theoretical models is that, while it does present the possibility of losing (when I was excluded from the loop of interpreters in my third round, I definitely felt I had lost), it is difficult to define the exact parameters which constitute an instance of winning (those are based on subjective feelings, such as "I was the best version of myself this time" or "what a nice person/good conversation.")

In *Body Art/ Performing the Subject*, Amelia Jones discusses the gender politics behind Vito Acconci's 1972 piece, *Seedbed*, where the performer lay hidden from sight, masturbating under a ramp at Sonnabend Gallery, New York City, and interacted verbally and aurally with visitors walking around in the gallery space above him. She argues that it is Acconci's narcissistic self-involvement with his own masculinity which prompts his desire to engage with spectators: "it is his yearning to cohere himself that inexorably leads him to initiate numerous interpersonal relationships."[27] Jones then goes on to insert this practice within a self/other dialectic which ultimately culminates in solipsistic narcissism, returning Acconci to himself. Of interest to the present discussion is the following statement by Acconci which Jones quotes:

> "Whenever I happen to reach climax, the viewer might pick him or herself out of the crowd; the viewer might want to think: he's done

[27] Amelia Jones, *Body Art / Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 137.

> this for me, he's done this with me, he's done this because of me" [...] Acconci's statement makes clear the narcissism his interest in intersubjective exchange involves: "he's done this *for me*" and so on.[28]

What was only present as an untheorized fantasy in Acconci's mind (the narcissistic imagining of a viewer who would feel him or herself singled out by the artist), becomes the center of Sehgal's piece: if body art was largely about the performer and their body, in *This Progress* the narcissism is clearly displaced onto the visitor and their intellectual and interpersonal skills. Am I being smart enough, perceptive enough, how do I compare with previous visitors, I asked myself. Some visitors, such as a friend of mine who joined me in the course of the afternoon, found it threatening or disagreeable, or the rules of the game too predictable. She found the teenager patronizing and dropped away from the conversation, refusing to advance further into the spiral, making excuses by stopping at a water-fountain on the way (she lost him relatively rapidly).

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> #6: I have decided to go through it one last time. The museum is closing soon, the crowds of the afternoon have left already. The friend I did my fifth run-through with is spending the remaining time with Anish Kapoor's awe-inspiring *Memory* (2008) which fills up an entire room on level four. I am sorry to go through *This Progress* for the last time, yet I also feel as though I have learned and experienced all I had come for—and more. There is only that nagging hope for more self-reflexivity which still haunts me. This time around, I decide to aim for maximum level transparency.
>
> The child greets me and I lay my cards on the table: notebook in hand, I tell her this is the sixth time I am experiencing the work today. Can you believe this, I ask her. She says no and looks utterly worried. "So what do you think of that," I ask, "Someone going through so many times in one single day?" She looks increasingly worried. A pause. "What is progress?," she asks. "Well, I have been

[28] Ibid

coming up with definitions to this all day long, so forgive me if I am a little tired," I respond. "How about: progress is me making my way through *This Progress* six times in a row, trying to come up with new definitions each time?" We reach the teenager and the child starts with the consecrated formula "I have learnt that progress is... going through *This Progress* itself ... hum... and six times!" The teenager is in no mood for lame attempts at self-reflexive jokes with the piece. He manages to steer the discussion towards Einstein's relativity theory, futures and pasts which precede and follow each other and collide, and sci-fi novels I have never heard of. I am tired. An adult woman interrupts, I hardly pay attention to her and give her just enough input so as not to get myself excluded again. I am caught up in wondering how to get her to speak about the piece itself. I wonder who she is, how she got hired, how much she gets paid, whether she enjoys it or not, and most of all, whether she came up with the platitudes she is currently throwing my way herself (something about activism and its power to change the world). Thankfully we soon reach the infamous gap between railing and pillar, I pass through, she's gone. An older gentleman steps up to me, he seems tired too, I am worried he might not make it up the rest of the ramp. He starts by telling me about how he finds that, with age, he no longer enjoys contemporary fiction and returns, more and more, to the classics. I nod in empathy and say I have heard that, indeed, as one grows older, one returns to the "real values, the good stuff." Maybe it has something to do with not wanting to lose time over mediocre things, people, and art, I inquire. He seems surprised, and agrees. I begin to wonder whether their surprise is feigned or genuine, whether they really meet shallow twenty-somethings only or whether I truly present an exception within my own age-group. We continue speaking. Now he is talking about the loss of culture in our society, how people my age no longer read the classics, how everything is going down the drain. But in a pleasant way, not bitterly. I nod in agreement, and add to his examples by speaking about how, with the corporatization of the university, people don't receive a general education anymore—everything has to yield results, to lead to a degree which then leads to real employment opportunities, etc. And then, in another moment of improvisatory creativity on my part, I launch into a little speech on the loss of interiority in our society, how it's all about communication and never about contemplation and internal life. He seems genuinely impressed, and in a different, more natural-sounding voice, asks me how it is I have come to think this

> way. We have reached the top now, the museum is almost empty, and we are still talking. He asks me "What happened in your life, how did you know you had to develop your interiority?" I laugh and say it comes from spending too much time with people older than myself. He warmly shakes my hand and wishes me all the best.

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This paper is traversed with an undercurrent of references to recent writings in performance studies which seek to pose affect as both an alternative and a solution to theoretical impasses (such as deconstruction, for instance)[29] and a possible site of manifestation for theatre's (or art's, for that matter) capacity to raise political awareness. In most of these writings, the argument goes something like this: if the artistic experience relies primarily on the face-to-face encounter between artwork and viewer, or audience and spectator, it also holds the power to effectively generate a sense of community, through shared moments of affect (Dolan) or of both affect and beauty (James Thompson).[30] And, once *communitas* has been established, toward increased political awareness ("increased sensitization to the other," in Thompson's terms). At the end of his chapter on the emancipated spectator, Rancière goes as far as to tie together the rise of mixed-media or interarts practices with the political potential of the emancipated spectator's artistic experience, rooted yet again in community:

> Ces histoires de frontières à traverser et de redistributions des rôles à brouiller rencontrent en effet l'actualité de l'art contemporain où toutes les compétences artistiques spécifiques tendent à sortir de leur domaine propre et à échanger leurs places et leurs pouvoirs. Nous

[29] See Clare Hemmings, "Invoking Affect," *Cultural Studies* 19.5 (2005): 549.

[30] See particularly Chapter 6 "About Face: Disturbing the Fabric of the Sensible" for a discussion of the transition from the ethics of the face-to-face encounter (Lévinas, Deleuze) toward raised participation and political awareness within the space of the community in James Thompson, *Performance Affects: Applied Theatre and the End of Effect* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

> avons aujourd'hui du théâtre sans paroles et de la dance parlée; des installations et des performances en guise d'œuvres plastiques; des projections vidéo transformées en cycles de fresques; des photographies traitées en tableaux vivants ou peintures d'histoire; de la sculpture métamorphosée en show multimédia, et autres combinaisons. [...] [On peut comprendre ce mélange des genres d'une manière] qui ne vise plus l'amplification des effets mais la remise en cause du rapport cause-effet lui-même et du jeu des présuppositions qui soutient la logique de l'abrutissement. Face à l'hyper-théâtre qui veut transformer la représentation en présence et la passivité en activité, elle propose à l'inverse de révoquer le privilège de vitalité et de puissance communautaire accordé à la scène théâtrale pour la remettre sur un pied d'égalité avec la narration d'une histoire, la lecture d'un livre ou le regard posé sur une image. [...] Une communauté émancipée est une communauté de conteurs et de traducteurs. [...] Congédier les fantasmes du verbe fait chair et du spectateur rendu actif, savoir que les mots sont seulement des mots et les spectacles seulement des spectacles peut nous aider à mieux comprendre comment les mots et les images, les histoires et les performances peuvent changer quelque chose au monde où nous vivons.[31]

In this passage, Rancière suggests that the hybridism of genres across the arts points not so much to an extreme engagement with the potential of all of these arts grouped together (a sort of *Übergesammtkunstwerk*), but return us to the inherent potential contained within the singular face-to-face encounter with a book, an image or a story. An emancipated community, Rancière suggests—thus making the leap from emancipated spectator to *communitas*—comprises a community of storytellers and translators. In other words, it is made up of individuals, each of them living, experiencing, and creating *on their own time*, but who remain interconnected and caught up in the exchanges and shifts of power defined by the distribution of the sensible. And it is herein that Rancière cautiously locates the potential for social change: not forgetting that

[31] Rancière, *Le Spectateur émancipé*, 27-29

"words are only words," he insists that it is through our honest appreciation of this fact (that words really *are only* words), that the power of words and images, story-telling and performance, might best be understood.

Beyond the notes I jotted down on the spot, my six passages through *This Progress* remain etched in my memory—not only the content of the conversations, or the demands of interacting more or less intensely with twenty-three strangers in the course of a single day, or of following ideas through and putting myself into a sort of trance of critical analysis, but also the Guggenheim's white emptiness, the constant noise of tourist-chatter which filled the rotunda, the relentless loop of *Kiss*, the beautiful winter-day which I saw unfold through the windows of the museum café whenever I took a coffee break.… Later I joked that surveillance tapes of the day were littered with images of myself—clad in a dark winter-coat, notebook in hand—haunting the installation and spending long, contemplative stretches of time before *Kiss*. In a way, Sehgal's works had given rise to a derivative, unofficial performance on February 28th—a performance captured on tape in a striking instance of involuntary documentation.

In *Playing the Waves: Lars von Trier's Game Cinema*, Jan Simons writes that "the open-endedness of a game does not mean that its outcome is completely undetermined or random. The rules of a game not only specify the moves players can or cannot make, but also what outcomes a game can or cannot have."[32] *This Progress* is characterized by a tight framing of limitations imposed on the participating spectator/visitor. These limitations are, at times, exhausting; but, as I experienced throughout my engagement with the work, they also hold the potential to make true intersubjective communication

[32] Jan Simons, *Playing the Waves: Lars von Trier's Game Cinema*. Film Culture in Transition (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 189.

possible, even if only for brief instants of authenticity. Even if authenticity remains a largely unattainable ideal, it is as fleeting and elusive as the promise of heightened social consciousness called forth by Dolan's utopian performative. Where many contemporary relational artworks still privilege the making of community at all costs—as void of meaning and intentionality as the unifying elements of that community might be—Tino Sehgal's *This Progress* proposes, as in the imagination of Rancière, to refocus itself on the potentiality of the face-to-face encounter. It serves not as a mere vehicle in the quest for *communitas*, as in the writings of Thompson, but in and of itself as a site where intellectual possibility—the sharing of *interiority*, as it were—continually makes and un-makes itself within a large web of branching-out interactions and wider horizons of possibility.

The construction of situations begins beyond the ruins of the modern spectacle. It's easy to see how much the very principle of the spectacle -- nonintervention -- is linked to the alienation of the old world. Conversely, the most pertinent revolutionary experiments in culture have sought to break the spectators' psychological identification with the hero so as to draw them into activity by provoking their capacity to revolutionize their own lives. The situation is thus designed to be lived by its constructors.

Guy Debord in "Report on the Construction of Situations" (1957)

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