

Invisible systems

Some ideas on the work of Tino Sehgal

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Sociologists, historians, economists and political theorists have written on the character of modernity and post-modernity and the transition between these (Bauman, 1998; Beck, 1992; Foucault, 1997; Rose, 1999). The effect of this transition between the forces of production and their impact on identity formation is central to these works. I want to explore what contribution Tino Sehgal's work might make to understanding this transition. His work plays with the idea of means of production, described by the Arts Forum as 'a politicized inquiry into the mutability (changeability) of modes of production'.

I was an interpreter in both two Sehgal pieces at the ICA, London 'This objective of that object' (2004) and 'This Progress' (2006)¹. Visitors expressed strong emotions in and about the pieces. Anger. Irritation. Discomfort. Playfulness. Joy.

Palpable fury, She screamed 'Why won't you look at me! Why won't you talk to me!' (a response that served to activate the piece into conversation). The denial of our gaze - the most urban and modern of the senses (Simmel, 1903).

Visitors were often uncomfortable, sometimes angry, distraught or exasperated at not 'knowing' how to respond to these works. 'I don't know what you expect from me – just tell me whatever it is I am meant to do'.

A discomfort that seemed, for most, to be a positive rupture that created a space to express feelings.

It is this visceral affect of Sehgal's work that I focus on here, examining how the means of production get realized via the systems of relations he creates.

Programming system

I felt like a human google system during 'This objective of that object' (2004). Programming became a useful metaphor to help me think about means of production and understand my experience of being an interpreter. Programming is a mode of production for the digital post-modern economy of knowledge. All be it one that carries all the desires of modernity that birthed it– stability, logic, and certainty.

One connection between Sehgal's work and programming is through the 'near invisibility' of their systems. Like the subterranean structures that shape society that are naturalised into invisibility (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Surveillance systems that look down unseen, sensor technologies secreted away in smoke alarms, automatic doors, and lighting systems. The autonomy and the automatic character of the piece made use of my humanness and my individual knowledge and at the same time it removed degrees of my individuality and my freedom. A 'depersonalised personal system' - like Rachel, the human/cyborg in Blade Runner. It created a constrained space in which to 'be me' in the spaces left open between what was strictly choreographed and rule bound in Sehgal's work. Like a [CSS] style sheet that determines and constrains and leaves the content open. In Sehgal's work the system is simultaneously hidden and present - like programming systems - always there behind a digital representation and unavailable till selecting 'view source'.

I started to think of 'This Progress' through code, a system, a pseudo codeⁱⁱ. This works to strip away the complexity of the piece (and life) - the individuality and humanity of the piece. It exposes the work, literally the labour, behind its smooth appearance. It gets at the system in operation – the hidden hand.

System of interpretation

The system of Sehgal's pieces exposes the structure of relationships and expectations embedded in people's interaction within an institution and society more generally. It strips this down to the ways in which knowledge is produced, established and consumed.

His pieces set up structured relationships between people (interpreters and visitors) that play with artifice and reality. The system of this artifice is revealed through its absence as Frenzel comments in an article on Tino (2005):

“The impression that something is missing makes one wonder more about the framework in which the actions in a Sehgal piece take place than the actions themselves.”

Sehgal's work is a system made of choreographed bodies, time, and space. Semiotic resources that are so naturalised that they drop below the critical radar. Through the configuration of these he produces the artifice of relational structures in his work. This is not to resist the commentary on Sehgal's work as actions and products without material traces. Rather the nearly intangible 'commodification' of human relations and actions (rather than materials) is increasingly *the* means of production of the 21st century.

The system of the gallery space

Sehgal's use of space combined with the absence of an 'art object' exposes the inner workings of the art system and transforms this system itself – knowledge -

into an object for consumption.

'This progress' involved movement through different spaces of the ICA gallery – both public spaces and the private 'staff only' 'no entry' spaces and 'non-places'. The interpreters and visitors moved between gallery space, the private space of internal 'backstage' corridors, the social space of the café, the public space of the galleries and light open winding stairway between the gallery as compared with the angular narrow dark internal stairway of the descent through corridors usually used by staff. The movement across these different spaces produced the ICA as one new space – trespassing and exposing (and therefore breaking) the boundaries that produce the gallery as a space, the artwork and the visitor. Revealing the boundaries that maintain the (economic) system of a gallery and contribute to the system of the art world itself. Sehgal's use of space parallels the shift an object-based economy to a knowledge/service-based economy.

There is a loss of the object. At times the piece 'This progress' almost disappears through its relationship to existing social relations, through its pseudo normality. Some visitors refused its absence. As we walked slowly around the rooms they gazed at the wall, our mutual slow action conjured up imagined art objects. The walls and plasterwork chairs, empty glasses and other objects left over from evening events held in the galleries (although never intended by Sehgal) became an object of art. Others refused the new object: 'There is nothing here! We are in an empty room.' Thus normalizing the presence of two utter strangers talking - one paid, the other paying. Others mourned: 'It would be better if there were things on the wall'.

Clockwork systems

Time is key to the means of production and productivity. Time is a central regulatory force in Sehgal's work that reflects something of the change in technologies of production in 21st century.

In 'This progress' when too big a gap appeared in the process the system of the piece was ruptured and occasionally it hemorrhaged. In this piece there are different kinds of time and timings. Slow time. Waiting time. Fast time. Interaction time. Connection and transition time. Run out or ending time. These times were created, maintained (or destroyed) by the real time interaction of the ticket sellers, the number and speed of visitors to the gallery and the interpreters. The timing was evaluated within the system: not by a clock. Through calculations and compensations the timing of the system could be refined and measured by physical and visual experiences. If I see interpreter X at point Y I need to go straight to gallery. If I see interpreter X walk through door when I am at X point I need to walk slower than usual.

Through repetition we became part of the system: we made the system. Like little cogs or bits of code. Hard physical work, effort, that produced a tension in the piece between the labor of a modern era and the clean vapor wear product of a

post-modern digital era.

A national newspaper review of 'This progress' commented that when the piece ended the reviewer felt like she 'had been thrown out of a dinner party before the dessert'. Apart from the possibility that such an action might improve some dinner parties, I think the reviewer's comment echoes something of the modularized experience that typifies modern industrialized ideas of time and productivity (a neat complete experience). This stands in tension with post-industrial modes of production – a global celebration of fragmented fluidity (Beck, 1992). I think her disappointment says something of the power of the piece to reveal a desire for art to leave us intact, comforted and full up.

System of Resistance

The behaviour of visitors to the ICA works by Sehgal frequently displayed a curiosity for the system. They wanted to know the rules. Many tried to find the rules by breaking what they thought the rules were (though often these turned out not to be a rule). Like a computer virus or bug in the system, visitors were determined to stress it into shut down. Take it apart and look inside.

In 'This objective of that object' interpreters were regularly chased around the gallery by pairs of visitors who tried to corner them into revealing to their faces (which were not shown through the piece); or some visitors would not leave the space and sat on the floor talking - which effectively meant the piece couldn't easily end.

The same desire to disrupt and explore the system of the work was presented by many visitors to 'This progress'. The piece relies on the visitor talking to the interpreters. Several visitors refused to talk while some would shape all the interaction around one unusual topic (e.g. hair and porridge). The route of the piece was strongly choreographed and constrained for the interpreter whose task it was to seamlessly and effortlessly to move through the space with the visitors – to make them walk the right pace, in the right way – to knowingly create an artifice of free will. Some visitors tried to escape – to go through a different door, to walk really fast or slow.

The desire of visitors to understand, stretch, breakdown, and simultaneously control the system was often furious, wild and frequently playful. A kind of resistance to the system of the piece and the idea of THE SYSTEM more generally. But like all resistance the visitors' behaviours too was a part of the system – absorbed into the piece – their resistance produced the piece. Making the point that the system needs resistance (Foucault, 1997; Nicolas Rose, 1999). It is part of the system itself. There is no position outside of the system. (The best hackers are programmers.)

The rapid need for visitors to establish how to respond within a framework of

uncertain rules, and unable to determine what was scripted artifice or 'genuine' engagement summoned up all the elements of the 'risk-society' of the 21st century (Beck, 1992).

Sehgal's work produces a space that distills a concentration of the affect of the forces Beck, Bauman and others describe. It exposes the system of knowledge production and consumption. It funnels the anxiety, uncertainty, lack, and confusion that many people *feel* in liquid modernity and pours into the pieces. In this way it offers a new way of experiencing and exploring the world: feeling the hidden hand of capitalism.

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ⁱ In 'This objective of that object' five interpreters move into the shape of a circle across the gallery space and chorus a script by Sehgal. At a specified point they react to comments made by the visitor. Throughout the piece the interpreters ensure the visitor cannot see their face. Without a visitor comment the piece has a choreographed ending.

ⁱⁱ **Except of pseudo code**

If Visitor=V; Child Interpreter =C; Teenage Interpreter=T; Adult Interpreter =A; Senior Interpreter=S.

A person enters the ICA

(a) Person purchases day membership

(b) Does not purchase

When (a) person = V

If (a) C leaves seat and approaches V

C speaks: 'This is a work by Tino Sehgal Can I ask you a question?'

If V = No = C returns to seat

If V = yes = C and V to lower gallery (LG)

When in LG C ask V 'What is progress?'

(a) V speaks

(b) V does not speak but follows C

(c) V leaves

If (a) or (b):

1. C listens until V stops

2. If V stops before reach T then C asks question related to response

3. C and V walk diagonally across to door in right hand corner of LG

If (c) C returns to seat

C stops when:

(a) T is walking towards them

(b) Reach door

If (a) C summarises what the V has said to the T

If (b) the C repeats action (1) and (2) until condition (a) filled

T starts to talk to the V about the content of the summary

T escorts V through corridor

Talk 100% = 60% V + 40% T

C returns to seat

T opens door into the café area

(a) V and T walk through the café area talking

(b) proceed up stairs to upper gallery (U)

(c) T escorts V around U – anti-clockwise

(d) T stays on right of V

(e) T stops near entrance to U

(f) When A enters T stops talking

At action (3) A follows T and V

A overhear the V comments

The A walks far enough away not to be seen or sensed by the V