

# **TINO SEHGAL AND CHRISTIAN FALSNAES**

## **THE MUSEUM AS A SPACE OF SOCIAL EXCHANGE**

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**PARTICIPATION AND**

**PERFORMANCE**

The museum and the theater, the exhibition hall and the stage – both have been decisive instruments in the invention and education of the modern individual subject. They are mirror-halls of the social emancipation of the bourgeoisie, both platforms of enlightenment and well-established elements of the democratic social model. As a result, from the point of view of 21st century artists, the histories of museum and theater as institutions of bourgeois self-discovery can also be recognized and reflected on a political level. It is only through this historical accord that Duchamp's *Fountain* or Beuys' *Fettecke* function as works of modern art. Equally, performance art is only understandable as resistance to the history of these bourgeois institutions.

It is essential to the works of Tino Sehgal that they systematically refer themselves to the modern museum and theater history. They don't position themselves in resistance, like performance art, and nor do they evade the traditional definition of a work of work – instead they consciously embed themselves within the classic understanding between museum and visitor. And it is precisely from this embedding that they draw their explosive power, because they take viewers seriously, they confront them with contemporary economic, political and social issues. And because they deny visitors the object of aesthetic experience, but instead locate that experience inside them as a transient notion, they make viewers a part of the artistic work. By doing that, the subjective experiences of the individual become superimposed – either in contact with a performer or via a choreographed participation – with a collective perspective in which the visitors participate. Any third party will then find an insight into this exchange or the potential for joint action. Between the trained performers and the rehearsed choreographed elements on the one hand, and the random entrance of the visitors, the unpredictable stream of people, and the surprising constellations of

participation, on the other, there emerges what we may call “social sculpture,” or architectures of interaction, as Tino Sehgal himself calls them. The capital of these works is, apart from the conceptual starting point, the creation of endless possibilities for recharging through the present, through the knowledge and actions of people. Subjective and collective experiences build themselves up in arbitrary constellations, so that visitors often spend several hours inside the works.

This understanding of work and the aesthetic object draws on dance and choreography practice that Tino Sehgal learned from his dance training and experiences in the companies of Jérôme Bel, Xavier Le Roy, and Les Ballets C de la B. In the process, the reality of dance, that is direct physical and mental expression, interpenetrates with choreographic form, the aesthetically fixed work. Tino Sehgal takes the notion of choreographed work from the performance method of the “black box” and transfers it into the “white cube” of museums and galleries. The presence of dance unlocks the possibility of experiencing the present, the possibility of revealing and making effective the entanglement of any subject with the social constructions of time and space. With the choreographed form, he creates conceptual architectures of interaction, which he uses to negotiate with the visitor about whole clusters of issues drawn from the economy, social development, or philosophical research. Issues like progress, the social market economy, or speculative trading in virtual financial capitalism, are either grasped head on or considered on a conceptual level. If you can speculate with the immaterial work of Tino Sehgal through buying and selling, the reality of virtual financial transaction is well-reflected in the artistic practice.

The interactive spaces of communication and experience that Tino Sehgal creates with his works are based on his stubborn insistence on understanding his work as something beyond performance art, documentary theater, or installation. They engage in the traditional concept of art in order to affirm the possibility of critical reflection in structures that are already present. They embed themselves in a historically-established materialism of art in order to affirm the ephemeral within physical and spiritual engagement. They create space for a form of enlightenment that turns one’s body into the starting point for artistic and social experience. To that extent, the work of Tino Sehgal may be the most complete answer to the question: Where is today’s critical art? It considers life itself a higher resource and the starting point for reflection that systematically denies itself the use of material resources so as to plant the seed for new thought and action.

“Performance always played an important part in my work. I think that had its origin in graffiti art, because graffiti is also a very performative way of making art. Because the process and the circumstances in which graffiti happens are just as important as the work itself.” Just as Tino Sehgal transferred choreographed practice into the space of visual art, so Christian Falsnaes brought the energy and dynamism of street art into the context of museums and galleries. In place of a materialized concept of art, performance becomes an experience about process – both for the artist and for the viewer. Falsnaes very consciously plays with the codes of exhibition openings and museum or gallery visits. Thus, in *Existing Things*, in 2010, he made his own body available to the audience as an instrument for painting, in order to create an image, while later he took to the streets to stage a *vernissage* party on the street.

It is this moment of transition from a conventional, established situation into something different or unknown that interests Christian Falsnaes. All the while, questions surrounding the basic conditions of the interaction between artist and audience shift to the focus of his work, increasing from project to project. How far can the performer go to seduce an audience or to convince them to initiate a certain action or development? The performative situations could be described as explorations of the issues of authority and hierarchy. How do you win power over a group? How do you control the dynamic between people when social processes are unexpectedly set in motion? In the production *Syntax Error* (2013), Falsnaes forcibly interrupted a conventional opening address through a group of rioting far-right extremists. Right to the end, the audience remained uncertain whether this was staged or if it really was a violent attack. This playing with fire that can oscillate between manipulation and fascination and switch into violence at any time. “If I look at society, everything functions through orders. All I do is make that visible in my performances, because ordering and obeying are torn from the contexts in which they’re usually accepted.”

In the 2014 production *Justified Beliefs* (ill. p. 172 ff.) there were five pairs of headphones lying on a table that the audience could put on. As soon as a visitor entered the game, he or she followed the simple, but firm instructions that Christian Falsnaes himself gave. These put social pressure on the participants, as they gradually had to relate to each other more and more, a spiral of joint action that became increasingly difficult to escape. The desire to experience a performance becomes the start of an individual and collective experience in which the boundaries of anonymity and intimacy are explored. Many visitors follow the joint orders, because they want to be part of an experience. The fact that prepared

performers mingle with spontaneous visitors in these performative stagings is part of the manipulation of this threshold situation.

In these constellations, Christian Falsnaes discovers that the audience reacts to him in its role in correlation to the role or approach to the performance that he himself chooses to employ in order to gain control or power over a situation. By playing out different approaches, he opens up the interdependencies between action and reaction, between artist performance and audience performance. In his performance piece *Rise* (TC 26:48), which opened the *Vertigo of Reality* exhibition on September 16, 2014 in the Studio at the Akademie der Künste, Christian Falsnaes tested the limits of control and power with approximately 500 spectators, over a period of nearly 60 minutes. The decisive element was the attitude of each individual participant and their decision either to obey the instructions or to back out. As in an experimental situation, Falsnaes played with the sense of obligation and resistance procured by collective action.

The works of Tino Sehgal and Christian Falsnaes take as their cue the conventions of the contemporary art scene – they are unimaginable without them. They need the context of art, with its institutions like museums, biennials and galleries, and their attendant rituals and behavioral codes, in order to unlock a space for social interaction within them. They not only make the visitor a participant in an artistic process, but shift the notion of artistic production to a conceptual, intangible level, which is realized in the visitor alone. But while Christian Falsnaes places himself in the performance tradition, and tests out – and apparently breaks – the limits of the system, Tino Sehgal maintains a traditional concept of a work of art, but one which manifests itself not only through its conceptual idea, but also in the social experience of enlightened attitudes.