

Immaterial Art

By Dina Ibrahim

During early 2010, the Guggenheim Museum in New York, with its legendary Frank Lloyd Wright building that usually houses some of modern art's defining pieces, was completely void. Why? Tino Sehgal. Visitors walking into the Guggenheim rotunda were immediately confronted by a man and a woman entwined in a changing, slow-motion, amorous embrace. Every so often, the performers struck recognisable erotic poses derived from Courbet, Rodin, Brancusi and Jeff Koons. This was a piece by Tino Sehgal called *Kiss* (2008). Upon entering the rotunda, I immediately felt like an intruder. I felt a mental battleground developing between a fascinated desire to stay and a disquieted urge to flee. Before my thoughts could race any further, a child approached me saying: "This is a piece by Tino Sehgal called *Progress*. Would you like to participate?" Taken aback, I reluctantly agreed. The boy, about 12 years old, then gestured for me to follow him up the rotunda ramps, while asking me at the same time, "what is progress?" Aware of the age of my partner in conversation, I provided a simplistic answer, "progress is moving forward," I said. To my surprise, the young boy asks me to explain further. I still tried to pick my words to deliver an accurate but simple answer. While getting caught up in this struggle, I was suddenly greeted by a girl in her teens and "handed over" by the young boy after he reiterated – to the best of his ability – my definition of progress. The conversation followed on from that point with the teenage girl and I noticed my own definition of progress itself progressing as I, myself, progressed in time and space up the rotunda ramps. This process of handing me over was again repeated with a young man in his 20s and then an elderly man. Upon reaching the top of the rotunda, the conversation about progress has taken as many turns as there are in the spirals of the Lloyd creation. After the elderly man concluded the conversation as we reached the peak of the physical space, I felt unsatisfied with the termination of the conversation and an itch to continue. I went downstairs to the bottom of the rotunda and did it all

again only to experience new social situations created by new conversations with new individuals, unveiling a new definition for progress each time.

That was my first experience with a Tino Sehgal work. A year later I would encounter another work by Sehgal titled *This Situation* (2007) at Dar Al Nadwa Heritage Area in Sharjah, U.A.E., which confronts the visitor with a free-ranging discussion on philosophical issues. Tino Sehgal views this work as a playful salon that not only draws upon 450 years of intellectual history but also uses body postures to allude to famous works of art. As a discursive work travelling through different countries and cultures, Sehgal's "situations" then become a sight for cross-cultural exchange through integrating local participants and visitors, thus speaking an international language. Sehgal's art is made up of social encounters, or "constructed situations", as he calls them (Obrist 2010: 826). What I witnessed (and was part of) that day at the Guggenheim was in fact the artwork. Sehgal experiments with the notion of immaterial art, art that does not manifest itself in any physical form, that rids itself completely of the material object. Sehgal's work, despite being unique in its form and delivery in a contemporary art context, was preceded by the "situation art" of the 1960s and 1970s. However, before being too quick to dismiss Sehgal's immaterial art as a derivative of the conceptual movement of the sixties, a closer analysis highlights fundamental differences that distinguish the two.

One of the central themes of twentieth-century art was the critique of artworks' object status. It reappears periodically, but becomes especially virulent in the late 1960s and 1970s with Fluxus, Performance and Conceptual Art. Both theory and practice in the late 1960s put the status of the object and traditional notions of artistic production up for negotiation. The catalyst for such radical changes must have been prompted by the release of such publications as Michael Fried's *Art and Objecthood* and Theodore Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, 1970. In essence, Fried and Adorno share the same view

on the inevitability of the 'thinghood' of artworks, and yet at the same time it is that which art must always turn against. In other words, the transcendence of objecthood can occur only in negativity. To succeed in being art, art must turn against itself, against its own thinghood, and negotiate this antagonism in its form. However, the unresolved contradiction in the methods of the 1960s and 1970s persisted because, apart from a few exceptions, there has never been a complete "dematerialization" of art. There are very few examples where material support (visual or written documentation) for the art work does not exist. Conceptual artists in the 1960s therefore did not destroy the object, but rather expanded its definition. By contrast, in Tino Sehgal's work, there are no objects. Instead, his works are realised as actions (movement and talking) and the only material support they require is the human body. Sehgal does not allow visual documentation of his work in order to prevent the translation of situations into a two-dimensional medium, thus preventing documentation from functioning as a kind of surrogate for the work. He believes that visual illustrations not only reaffirm the two-dimensional image as the dominant historical record of visual art, but that they reinscribe the work with precisely that mode of permanence and conservation that the work opposes. Sehgal's avoidance of documentation is meant as a corrective to unresolved contradictions of Conceptual and Performance artists. In saying that, both Sehgal and Conceptualists had different motives for ridding their art of the material object. While the Conceptualists' critique of the object was fuelled by the aspiration to keep it apart from the economic sphere - and thus the domain of capitalism - Sehgal adopts a different approach to immaterial art. He believes that in the 1950s in North America and in the 1960s in Europe - exactly at the time the artistic critique of the object status of art was restored - paradigmatic changes occurred to the model of the economy, which served to secure the necessities for survival, enhance quality of life by diminishing lack, and banish the "threats of nature" that made the hegemony of this model of production dubious. For the first time during "civilization", western societies did not face a lack of goods to cover basic needs. At the same time, that model of production, which was supposed to enhance

quality of life, might actually decrease it in the long run (Von Hantelmann 2010:153). For Sehgal it therefore becomes problematic to hold onto this model at a time when its historical premises are no longer in place, and especially so in an institution like the museum, which deals with shaping values of society. In Sehgal's view art can therefore not be about somehow weakening the object, and definitely not about replacing it with a certificate of documentation, but rather about literally changing the material substance of a visual artwork, which has always followed the model of production of the transformation of natural resources. With that in mind, combined with his dance training, Sehgal was interested in how dance transforms action to obtain a product or artwork as opposed to visual art, which transforms natural resources into a product. Dance then evolved to include a spoken word, actions, and finally arrive at a constructed situation (Obrist 2010: 828). Sehgal's attitude towards the market is another interesting point of difference between himself and Conceptualists. Sehgal's affirmative relation to the market is decisively different from the critique of the commodity status of the artwork in the 1960s and early 1970s. He states that "the market is something you can't be outside of and can't want to be outside of" (Lubow 2010: 26). From Sehgal's perspective, it is not the fact that something is sold but what is sold that is decisive. Therefore his work is designed to change the nature of the commodity or product but not to attack the commodity status itself. "I am still producing objects not in the material sense of the word, but in the product sense of the word" (Von Hantelmann 2010: 159). Sehgal believes it is essential that an artwork can be bought and sold. He works with galleries who sell the work's rights and instructions to museums and collectors. There exists no material object in these transactions, not even a certificate as a material surrogate for the artwork. Buyer, dealer and artist meet in the office of a notary and agree to the terms of the contract orally. He states that he is neither against the idea of a certificate nor of the object but that his work is an experiment in how far one can get if one does not transform material for a change; "Just because something is not material, doesn't always mean that it doesn't exist", he explains. (Griffin 2005: 105). Museums such as the Guggenheim and MoMA in

New York are indeed purchasing his work, which is proof enough of its existence as a commodity, but what gives it the status of visual art? Does the mere fact that it is in a museum make it art? Marcel Duchamp and his *Fountain* (1917) proved that anything can be art if the artist says it is. However, there is more to Sehgal's immaterial art than its mere existence in an art institution or gallery. Firstly, Sehgal's work follows the mode of presentation of a conventional visual artwork in that it is always present and can be viewed during any of the exhibition's opening hours, from the first to the last day. Secondly, and of equal importance, is the fact that, although the work is a temporary artefact, it can be repeated in another venue, therefore it persists and can be transmitted over time. It is, therefore, only because of the adherence to these conventions that his work achieves the status of an artwork and thereby manages to generate significance in the realm of visual art. It is also essential that an artwork be bought and sold which is a characteristic of Sehgal's work. Finally, Sehgal's art also integrates well-known visual art forms, such as dance and movement. Conceptual artists like Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham also work with elements of dance or movement, but the moving body enters the exhibition space not as a body but as a moving image like in Nauman's *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square* (*Square Dance*) (1967-68). In contrast, Sehgal introduces the choreographed body as choreographed body – not as a viewed image – to the context of visual art. That is another fundamental difference between Sehgal's work and Conceptualism. Thus, only via affirming the set of conventions to which a visual artwork is usually bound is it possible for Sehgal to negate the most fundamental convention – the material object – and for his work to be relevant as works of visual arts. Since Sehgal's work assumes a visual arts status, how does it then persist in time despite its physical absence? Because documentation is negated, the work becomes part of history by mode of memorisation. The work persists only via the body, which naturally cannot generate an identical repetition because transmission via memory can never guarantee an identical recreation of a situation. Thus the structure of the artwork always remains open and subject to modification although this does not imply an arbitrary enactment. There is indeed

a clearly defined way to execute the work but because there is no fixed original, the respective individual way of interpreting it co-defines the work. It is these forms of representation that interest Sehgal, rather than the permanent material object and/or its documentation via images (Von Hantelmann 2010: 134). On another note, the work is documented through reviews and publications such as this one, however they act as external factors to the artwork.

Sehgal's work is always conducted from memory by individuals other than himself (interpreters, as he calls them); so how does he ensure the authenticity of the work? And more importantly, where is Sehgal in his work? Sehgal addresses this point by saying that his works play strongly on the idea of knocking out the subjectivity of the interpreter. "I speak as Tino Sehgal through someone else. But basically it is just the classical relation of interpreting somebody else's work: those who do the work are a medium, a channel for my subjectivity but at the same time, their subjectivity also plays a part in how they interpret it. It is important that my subjectivity does not totally overshadow theirs" (Griffin 2005: 104). That is to say that Sehgal is the structure of the work whereas the interpreters are its manifestations. If an interpreter was to do something different than what they and Sehgal had agreed on, then the work is no longer present; it becomes a 'fake Sehgal'. If such an art form can be replicated by anyone anywhere, then why does Sehgal still insist on situating his work in a museum context? The reason is not only to confirm the work's visual art status but also due to Sehgal's belief in the museum as a ritual space. Unlike cinema or theatre, which treats the viewers as a collective, the exhibition has always been about the individual experience. The museum is not only the place for the exhibition of objects; rather these objects function as tools for a "civilizing ritual" for the individual. For Sehgal, it is the individual who is addressed in his work – though not only as perceiving and receiving, but as an active instance that intervenes into and shapes what is going on. The individual has agency and carries responsibility; they are engaged in a work of self on the self (Von Hantelmann 2010: 171). Arthur Lubow adds that Sehgal's "work seems to function best in a museum or a gallery, where its subtraction of a material object is

made visible by the institutional surroundings that gives shape to his void” (2010: 28).

Just as Sehgal’s work can be compared to 1960s Conceptualism, elements of works such as *Kiss* can be likened to sculpture. *Kiss* comprises a couple re-enacting poses from well-known art historical works of art continuously for extended periods of time. *Kiss* may be perceived as a sculpture as one can move around this “freestanding” work and view it from all sides. The slowness with which the movements are executed adds to the sculptural qualities. This gives the impression that the work is generating multiplicity of sculptures, but, unlike a *tableau vivant*, it does not statically hold the pose. It is precisely because such works as *Kiss* insist on asserting a status as an artwork beyond the material and static object, that they establish a dialogue with sculpture, which, over the course of the twentieth century, increasingly distanced itself as an art form from its fixation on the material art object. In contemporary art the term “sculpture” has become unspecific as a categorical designation. However, I employ the term in its historical specificity to highlight the connections to, and distinctions from, Sehgal’s work. One could say that the work of Sehgal takes on the classical parameters of this art form and twists them. Sehgal’s work is enacted by living bodies presented in an object-like manner. Thus, he touches upon a topic that is essential to sculpture and inscribed into its history from its origins. Sculpture has always been marked by its aspirations to transcend its own material objecthood, an aspiration that is continued in modernity with the attempt to negate the commodity status of the artwork, which was seen to relate to its physical materiality (Von Hantelmann 2010: 138).

Unlike sculpture, immaterial art resides in the bodies and voices of the people who execute it: in its reception, in memory, and in the time and space it occupies. It is more about dematerialisation than conceptual closure. It is close to dance, acting, speech, or song, and yet it is clearly concerned with the art context, with its modes of production, circulation/mediation and consumption, with art’s history and concepts. In a world where our endless search for authenticity is no longer found in the material object and social value increasingly becomes the new currency, immaterial art is on the rise.

About the Author

Dina Ibrahim is a curator and writer currently based in Dubai. She previously held various positions in a number of international art museums including the Guggenheim in New York and Queensland Art Gallery in Australia, and currently holds the title of exhibitions coordinator at The Third Line in Dubai orchestrating all aspect of exhibition development in the space. She contributes to numerous international art publications such as ArtAsiaPacific, ArteEast, Whitewall, ArtLink, and Frieze. Dina obtained an Art History degree from the University of Queensland in Australia where she graduated with honors and is currently pursuing her thesis in cross-cultural curating with a focus on contemporary Middle Eastern Art.

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