

# Tino Sehgal

There was a time in my life when I was interested in trying to answer the question "What is Art?" Although I have long given up trying to find a formula that satisfies me, the nearest I can get is that it is something that sets out to stimulate, visually and intellectually, even if it does not work for me. Over the years I have always made a point of trying to see what is new and what is "in fashion", even in the notoriously fickle and material world where art is traded like any commodity. So with some skepticism I heard of an exhibition in the Guggenheim by a young German artist (born in London in 1976) called Tino Sehgal. At first I thought he might be Jewish and his name was a tarted up version of "Segal". But it turns out his father is of Pakistani origin, and I doubt there are any living Jews left in Pakistan.

His art is described as "Constructed Situations". Human beings pose or interact. In the typically pompous, vapid blurb of the Guggenheim promotion:

Tino Sehgal constructs situations that defy the traditional context of museum and gallery environments, focusing on the fleeting gestures and social subtleties of lived experience rather than on material objects. Relying exclusively on the human voice, bodily movement, and social interaction, Sehgal's works nevertheless fulfill all the parameters of a traditional artwork with the exception of its inanimate materiality. They are presented continuously during the operating hours of the museum, they can be bought and sold, and, by virtue of being repeatable, they can persist over time.

But that puffery did not put me off so I paid me bucks and went in.

On the ground floor of the Rotunda were a young couple dressed casually in jeans, writhing on top of each other in slow motion, rotating, rising and then falling back down, embracing, grinding, and kissing, and occasionally turning to look at the audience. It was supposed to refer to some of the most romantic works of art that have included an embrace. But frankly there was nothing either romantic or appealing about what they were doing. I thought perhaps if I stared back at the artists they might open a conversation with me but they just returned my stare and returned to their writhing.

So I started to walk up the ramp to see what else there was. As I reached the first level this cute little girl, perhaps 8 years old, broke away from a group of other kids and walked up to me and looked me in the eyes and asked so innocently, "What is progress?" For a moment I thought it was a joke. That was some heavy question for an eight-year-old to ask. I smiled back at her cute face. Then it hit me that this was part of the exhibition, or happening, or whatever. So I replied by telling her about physical progress, for example from walking, to the wheel, to railways and cars and jets. But there was moral progress, humans behaving better and more sensitively. She listened

attentively but said nothing and when I got to the next level she disappeared.

As I looked around to see where she had gone, a young man accosted me and asked me where standards of morality come from. I took a second or two to cotton on, then I fell back on my philosophical training and started to enumerate the various theories philosophers had for understanding ethics and I mentioned the religious option too. He seemed interested in arguing, so we argued, quite intensely, until we reached the next level when, once again without any sign or comment, he disappeared.

This time I was ready when a middle-aged lady with her arm in a sling asked me out of the blue whether I ever passed homeless people begging on the street. We talked about whether they were homeless out of choice or circumstances and if they wanted money for food, drugs, or some nefarious activity, and whether even if one did not give money one might just give a friendly sympathetic look. Once again the discussion was intense and challenging. And up we went to the next level and she disappeared on cue.

An older man took over and he talked about how his part of New York had changed so much over the years, with all kinds of new immigrants and different kinds of places of worship, and he asked me if I had noticed how my area had changed. We talked till we got to the top. Before he could go, I asked him what he did and how he got involved in this. He told me that the participants were either involved with art colleges and galleries or were friends of friends. He was a retired academic and he enjoyed his stint though it was tiring talking and walking up the floors for four or five hours a shift. And off he went, as if summoned by some higher unseen authority, to be recycled as it were. I thought of the angels on Jacob's ladder going up and coming down.

I went back down, watching other couples in deep discussion whom I would not have paid any attention to before, and arrived at the bottom to find the writhing couple still writhing. And out I went into the cold winter air and walked back across Central Park to the West Side, thinking about what had happened.

The experience had worked. I was stimulated. I started thinking about the interactions and the issues we discussed and they really had made me think and reconsider some of my views. And I thought that could only be "a good thing". I had enjoyed the experience and benefited from it. If that was Art, so be it. And if it was not, who cares! I had a positive experience. I was made to think! And I wondered if religion and art might not have something in common after all!